

ERIC ALAN WESTFALL



*The Rake,*  
*the Rogue*  
*and the Roué*

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## THE RAKE, THE ROGUE AND THE ROUÉ

By Eric Alan Westfall

### 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.

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# THE RAKE, THE ROGUE AND THE ROUÉ

By Eric Alan Westfall

## Photo Description

He's blond, with his hair à la Brutus. He's broad-shouldered. He's beautiful. He's a Regency rake in a cutaway coat, cravat with stickpin, waistcoat and undoubtedly very tight inexpressibles (certainly golden-furred beneath all that), standing in a ballroom with golden pillars, lit by hundreds of candles in glittering gold-and-crystal candelabra and chandeliers. He doesn't yet know who's heading toward him, or his eager expression might not be so... eager.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*He is spending this entire night dodging his mother, marriage-minded nitwits and the mothers of the "nitwits". Why he agreed to come to this ball he doesn't know, it's not like he's ever going to marry. Then they showed up, both of them. Together. He doesn't understand it, they hate each other. He is best friends with both but he pulled back from each relationship because he couldn't stand the bickering and snide comments when one found out he had plans with the other. He's lusted after both but never been able to choose between them. How have they managed to arrive together and why are they both staring at him?*

*Author,*

*I would love all three to become lovers. Enemies to lovers and friends to lovers please. M/M/M HEA is a must. I would love a regency setting but I don't mind if it's historical or fantasy or sci-fi. No BDSM please but everything else goes.*

*Thank you and good luck,*

*Anna*

## Story Info

**Genre:** historical, alternate history

**Tags:** Regency, ménage, a wee tad kinky, humorous, a whole lot of loving going on, Dock sex, poetry, ned-bangers and neddy boys, a glorious happily ever after.

**Content Warnings:** A brief description of wartime sex between a woman and several men, which may or may not have been rape; the off-stage beating of a man and use of a banger-stick on him; remembered abuse of a minor. Certain other aspects of this story may trigger strong emotions

**Word Count:** 150,177

Acknowledgements

**A Hearty Round of Cyber-Appraise to:**

**Anna, Captain of the Triple-R** (not to be confused with Triple-X) **Team**, for this incredible prompt. She inspired a novel! And for that I owe her an enormous debt of gratitude.

(Please note that the Triple-X Team is hard at work on the movie. Casting suggestions are welcomed.)

**Beta Readers (Without Whom Nothing Good Would Ever Get Done):**

Lilia Ford, author extraordinaire, for her usual superb beta help, and especially at the last minute for some final quick looks at the latest bits.

Alexis Woods, whose sharp eye caught so very much that needed to be caught, and who provided some of that last-minute help, too.

Kimosumiko, who has a most excellent eye for detail and whose enthusiasm for the story and the characters, encouraged me to keep on going and get this done, and who also agreed to help with some almost-eve-of-submission checking.

Jay D. Clark, who provided thoughtful analysis and suggestions, and wow! revisions to the “fog-fading beach” paragraph in the “Another England” scene that starts this all off.

AR Noble, who took on a humongous task when the book was nearly done, despite having a life of her own and her own writing, and as usual was marvelously helpful with her insights.

*But please remember, if I did not adopt their suggestions, as with other authors, “The fault, dear readers, is not in our betas, but in ourselves...”*

**Cover Design:**

The marvelously, *marvelously* talented Enny Kraft.



You can contact her at: <http://ennykraft.weebly.com/>

**Many thanks to the Team Anna Cheerleaders (in alphabetical order):**

Aislinn

A.J.

Bookworm

Cari

Dawn

Donna

Elizabeta

Eloreen

Gabbo

Gabrielle ~ Bhlack Benehvolence ~

Irish Smurfette

Kelly

Kenike

Leslie

Lisa ~ Books Are My Drug ~

Mandy\*readsobsessively\*

Neyjour

Penumbra

Teresa

Tina

Verity

Vicktor

Vivian

**And though sometimes they're last to be acknowledged, perhaps, they're far, *far* from least:**

The moderators, editors, formatters, proofreaders, and all those whose functions I don't know, without whose superb volunteer efforts none of these writing events could ever be.

A particularly special thanks to Raevyn for the vast undertaking of editing so very many words, and all those commas! And to Sue for having the courage to format it all.

Mercy buckets! mesdames and monsooers.

# **THE RAKE, THE ROGUE AND THE ROUÉ**

**By Eric Alan Westfall**

## ANOTHER ENGLAND

### **For want of a nail...**

But... what if the nail had not been lost?

What if...

On a fog-fading beach on the English side of the Channel, three men stood apart from the baker's dozen who waited impatiently for the three to be done. Four kept the oars of the not-quite-beached jolly boat ready for a rapid departure, a fifth stood knee-deep in the surf, a thick, muscular arm keeping the bow steady. The sixth, the fugitive's loyal companion, was already in the boat. Numbers seven through thirteen formed a ragged arc around the landing site, two watching the boat and the trio, the rest with their backs to the water, weapons raised, watching and listening for any who might have followed.

Two of the trio spoke quietly a few feet away from the third. The third was a fox harrowed by the hounds after the disaster at Worcester, hunted across England, but now escape was imminent. At least once he took the requisite steps into the water, then clambered into the stern as elegantly as an exhausted, wounded man might climb, so that he could be rowed quickly to the ship that would spirit him away to France and safety. The other two would stay behind, waiting to serve again at need. Of all there, only these three were certain there *would* be a need, though not soon.

But before that wait could begin with a departure, there was a question that had been asked, but not answered. The fugitive became impatient, demanding a response with an insistence borne of entitlement. The taller of the pair turned to face the third, bent slightly forward, spread his hands in a smaller, tighter version of a formal bow to higher rank. Straightened.

Major Charles Alexander Beaumont, eldest son of Baron Weston, looked once more to his left at Captain Edward Matthews, second son of a London innkeeper, paused, and found something in the other's expression that brought a glimmer of a smile to the edge of his lips. The captain nodded so briefly it

might have been missed, but the third man, the fugitive who watched and waited, did not miss either the smile or the nod.

The major, who had faced each moment of that battle, and every moment of the escape, without hesitation, hesitated then. He inhaled slowly, and then let the breath flow out. He looked once more to the man beside him, and answered the question. "I am a friend of Edward's... a *special* friend of Edward's, and I should prefer not to die because of whom I love."

That was *not* the answer the fugitive expected... not when the usual response to that offer was a request for honors, title, wealth, land, a boon for some future need. Unusual, indeed, but in his eyes, not unreasonable at all. He nodded.

The pair swept him another bow, formal, deep, with all the requisite flourishes protocol required, expressing appreciation of a promise made, but without the slightest hint of obsequiousness. To the watchers, however, it was merely the major and the captain bending their upper bodies forward a degree or two, perhaps a little farther than before, their heads briefly down, their eyes perhaps contemplating sand, salt water, perhaps a trio of ruined boots, before becoming upright again.

As the oars pulled deep and swift to get the jolly boat to the ship, the shore component of the baker's dozen scattered to the winds. The major and the captain mounted, rode, but stopped their horses at the top of the slope leading down to the beach, watching and waiting to be certain the sails bellied out and the wind carried him away. When the ship began to move, so did they.

And then there were none.

But what if... in the glorious days not long after 29 May 1660, Charles II kept his promise?

What if... in the heady days of the Restoration, when the King could do no wrong, he persuaded Parliament to end the death penalty for sodomy, and repeal the laws themselves?

What if... a century and a half later, there was: another England?

\*\*\*\*\*

## PROLOGUE

I open the chest I brought here from London. Doing so was foolish, perhaps. Sentimental, certainly. All qualities the world does not customarily ascribe to me.

I carefully remove them; sort them all. Then sort them again into several stacks.

I sit back for a moment. The light linen robe falls open. Given the Mediterranean heat, even at night, I am naked beneath it. Should anyone be watching me, however unlikely that might be, both in view of who our hosts are, and the discretion for which their servants are undoubtedly well-compensated, they might notice a slight, satisfied smile cross my lips. My cock twitches, just a little. Remembered happiness? Anticipation? Although the latter should be impossible, considering...

Very well. The smile is more definite now, and with more than a little hint of pride. Anticipation it is.

I pick up the glass of white wine, take a sip. Extraordinary. Our hosts own a small German vineyard, which has been producing wine, without interruption, since 1453. Always in very limited quantities, which sell now, on the rare occasions when a bottle comes on the market, for a price as extraordinary as its taste. They were incredibly generous in sharing, though frankly I am the only one of us with the palate to truly appreciate it. Excluding our hosts, of course.

First stack.

I pick up the first. Slowly unfold the decades-old creases. Move the candelabra closer. Another sip.

I begin to read.

\*\*\*\*\*

**HERE AND NOW**  
**(1816)**

## ***PEREGRINE***

*Friday, 6 September 1816*

*Nearing midnight*

*Alderson House, London*

The bastards. One of them could have said yes. I bloody well deserve the finest mouth or the tightest, most talented arse in England, hell, in the whole bloody Empire, for what I'm going through tonight. Damn my meddling, matchmaking Mama.

Although, come to think of it, I couldn't really call either of them the best in England or the Empire when there were so many men still available (or persuadable) for *discreet* sampling. My cock twitched at the fantasy of its white, blue-veined thickness sliding between the slender, muscular (just like Michel's), red-brown cheeks of some maharajah—nothing but the best for me—in Bombay, or Calcutta. Perhaps in his very own palace while his guards... watched?

Or a brawny, wide-shouldered seaman on his knees in my cabin, as the ship raced through smooth waters ahead of a strong wind, beneath a brilliant cloudless sky. His own cock out, stroking himself, as I hold his head and fuck his mouth, looking down on the thick mat of red-brown hair on his chest (just like Rory's), inhaling the scents of wind and water, the almost squalid tropical air of the cabin, the remains of my dinner on the small table, a wisp of my fading cologne, the heavy sweat rising from him in waves, mingling with the memory of the rum and tobacco on his breath before my hands on his shoulders gave him the hint he was there to suck and not kiss. My cock starting to move faster...

*Fuck!*

I forced my awareness back to the here and now and away from the fantasies. I would have to save the maharajah or the sailor for later use with my inordinately skillful hand.

Bastards.

I naturally did not have to look downward to be aware of the consequences of my imaginings.

The motto of the Earls of Glenhaven is "What we have, we hold." It should more accurately be, "What we have, we display." My momentary lapse of

concentration left me *displaying* far too much. Although these inexpressibles were designed for display, and I do make a formidable display even without my errant thoughts, I needed to focus on something other than maharajahs, sailors, or other cock standing thoughts.

Ah. Mama's display. Indeed, that would do it.

She absolutely glittered beside me as we made our way to the next marriageable chit she'd chosen. So much glitter I wondered why the guests weren't holding up their hands to shade their eyes from the light refracting off the famous—infernal?—Glenhaven Diamonds. Complete with a capital “D,” of course. The tiara, the necklace with multiple strands of progressively larger diamonds, and a twenty-carat teardrop hanging down where most other women would have chosen to display a remarkably deep décolletage. She had no need to have her gown descend to that level. Even a son may objectively recognize the fact that his mother had a quite remarkable figure for her age. For *any* age. Young debutantes, nearly flat-chested or not, hated her on sight for a variety of reasons. What woman would not hate another woman with everything—looks, figure, wealth, *those* Diamonds, plus a remarkably handsome and rakish son? Perhaps most of all because they instinctively knew they were each a single small candle to my mother's chandelier, and even in the aggregate could never outshine her. But they hid it well as they attempted to gain her interest, her patronage... and an introduction to me.

Add in the earrings that dangled diamonds, and a bracelet three diamonds wide in staggered rows, each stone set in a tiny cup of gold, clasped around the pale ivory of her gloves. Plus the brooch that provided the only vivid color in her ensemble: a square ruby the color of spouting blood, though none dared make that comparison aloud, backed in gold, surrounded by yet more diamonds.

The Glenhaven Diamonds—jewels that were by inviolate tradition given to the new bride the day the heir wed. “Look, my dears,” she was silently saying. “These can be yours if you get my son to put his head into a parson's noose and then quickly draw it tight before he wriggles away.”

Ah. The diamond distraction worked. Except for a mid-walk plump up at the realization I should have been imagining *Rory's* arse, large, hairy, and eager to be pounded, and *Michel's* delectable lips and his ability to swallow me to the root. But more diamond thoughts ended that.

We had arrived.



“Dearest Peregrine,” my dearest *annoying* Mama said to me, “let me present to you Countess Carmody, my dearest bosom bow, and of course her daughter, Lady Camilla. You remember her from the Halliwell rout, do you not?”

Mama and I were, of course, the only members of this little quartet who were aware of the verbal stiletto that threatened my throat to ensure a proper response. As a quite experienced rake—not, naturally, England’s *premier* rake, a title that belonged to Weston, whom I saw propping up a wall a while back—I effortlessly did what comes naturally to those who have adopted rakehood as a way of life. Or have had it thrust upon them.

I lied.

Most charmingly, of course, as I am known for my charm in settings such as this. “But of course, Mama. So very good to see you again, Lady Camilla. I am quite looking forward to this. Shall we?”

I held out my arm, and Lady Camilla delicately placed her palm on my wrist. We started toward the ballroom floor.

We had gone only a few steps through the throng when I heard two voices, only one of which I knew.

You hear, *overhear*, cannot *help* but hear, such a wide variety of things as you move about in the close quarters that are the *raison d’être* of any hostess desirous of being awarded the accolade of having her ball declared a sad crush. A laugh, a sigh, a brief moment of... political insight or infighting, a bit of gossip, business information that might be valuable if you could only have heard *all* of it, an understanding of the latest fashion or fashion failure, whose horse is sure to win at Ascot. You cannot, of course, simply stop and listen avidly and obviously to whatever tidbit intrigued you, and so you learn to let nearly all of it flow past, the words as indistinguishable as the voice of a single wave as the surf rolls in.

But sometimes the words are a single wave that threatens to knock you off your feet. Like the almost-whispered, harsh words thrust into my ears as we paused to let another couple pass, and then we were beyond the speakers. I stiffened briefly, and refrained from looking at the young miss beside me. The words were such that if she heard them she likely would not understand; if she understood she could not acknowledge that understanding without branding herself irredeemably fast, and quite possibly a slut.

That bastard Beckwith, in deliberate, ugly delight: “The b-b-bangers did their job on that cocksucking molly boy.”

An unknown, younger voice, mocking. "I h-heard he was b-b-badly hurt."

Quiet, vicious, *satisfied* laughter from those two voices, and at least one other, cut off by our moving on and the rise of other voices around us.

Christ. Surely they didn't mean...

No. I could not go there. Not now.

My concentration had to be on enduring the rest of Mama's plotting and planning for the marital demise of her son.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain my marital *virgo intacta*. Everyone knew Father had not married until just after his thirtieth birthday. Mine was approaching. Everyone, therefore, *knew* with the utter certainty attributable only to gossip with no factual foundation whatsoever, that I intended to honor my father by following in his footsteps.

My danger was compounded by the fact that last week Father confided, in strictest confidence, to three of his closest friends, one of whom was the Arch-gossip of Canterbury, financial information he should never have had access to. He reminded them of the nine days' wonder—about his *dear* Aunt Agatha's overly generous bequest to me for my eighteenth birthday. About how I had initially indulged in foolish spending, as what eighteen-year-old would not? But then, so his tale went, I repented of my sinful ways, and though my rakish days were not yet done, I nevertheless managed to increase my inheritance to £125,430. A precise figure my solicitor, or someone in his office, or Butterworth, my man of business, would deeply regret disclosing. Considering that men of the ton are no more capable of maintaining their solemnly sworn-to secrecy than a woman with a story like that, the news had already run rampant in London, and the length and breadth of England was next.

Heir to Glenhaven. Five thousand a year from the Somerville title. And all that lovely gold from Aunt Agatha. I was the prime target of the Little Season, and matters could only get worse when the Season itself opened next spring.

Mama was particularly devious this evening. No matter her cajoling or outright bullying, she knew I would not voluntarily arrive early enough to personally add my name to the dance cards of the innocent and possibly virginal misses who, shark-like, hunted their husbandly prey with an eye toward marital devourment. Normally, I arrived late, and as the diamonds of the first, second, third, et cetera, waters already had their cards filled, my pre-escape duty-dances could be quickly done with a grateful wallflower or two.

Tonight, however, having secured my promise to arrive no later than nine-thirty, and knowing I honored my word once it was extorted from me, Mama had outdone herself. With either advance knowledge of the Duchess's musical choices, or simply quick action after an early arrival, Mama put my name down on the appropriate line of the dance cards for the young ladies she selected for me.

As efficient as Wellington himself in planning out this evening's campaign, she also allowed for sufficient time for deadly dull conversations, and wending one's way through the crush so she could deliver prey to the next predator. Her personal delivery of my person was due to the same certainty felt by a gambler throwing his own loaded dice, that I had not previously been introduced to any of them. It would be a social solecism of the highest order for me to introduce myself to the delicate young spiders eager to begin spinning webs around their prey. Thus Mama's necessity. Despite my name, I felt more like a tiny bird being introduced to a falcon, or being offered to a series of them in sequence.

I had danced with the simpering Miss Simpson, the boring Belinda, and Lady Flora, who chose to honor her name with a flower scent that eliminated any other odor within a radius of several yards. Although the latter was a consummation devoutly to be wished, given the apparent belief of some members of the ton that inviting soap and water for a visit is at best an annual event. There was the dreary Drusilla. The excitable Evangeline who giggled or tittered at the end of nearly every sentence, whether hers or mine.

And then...

The young lady tripped over her own feet just as we took our position. Ah. I was to dance with the *clumsy* Lady Camilla. Fortunately, it was a country dance which I could do in my sleep.

I naturally maintained my mask of polite interest as we trod the boards and she trod my feet, with occasional appropriate murmurings on inconsequential matters. I was, however, mentally exploring alternatives to my hand for evening's end, and carefully avoiding thinking about the overheard words.

I had heard of a recently opened, extremely select molly house. Guests wore half masks to signal they intended to have their mouths used, or full masks to signal their cocks or arses would be in play. Unlike other brothels, the wares were displayed naked, but with strict limitations on pre-purchase sampling. I could live with such a restriction, certain in the knowledge that I would find a mouth or an arse, or both, that I could enjoy for an hour or so.

Not that I was entirely sure I wanted to make the effort. For a reason I did not comprehend, it all seemed not as much *fun* as it used to be. Before it became visible, I carefully quelled the inner shudder at the sudden thought that at *twenty-nine*, I was bored with the effort required to discover a discreet man I could briefly use and quickly discard. Though the reality was it had been months since I made the effort. Indeed, I was even experiencing ennui over the endless round of routs and balls and Venetian breakfasts at mid-afternoon, and racing and fencing and gambling.

*Dear God, was I bored with being a rake?*

No, I assured myself. It was merely that I hadn't had Rory's arse or Michel's mouth in far too long, so in their absence over the summer, I had necessarily taken matters into my own hand. Discreetly, even if, regrettably, literally.

Discretion, of course, being not only the better part of valour, but the better part of one's reputation in these trying times. Particularly given the general low opinion of the ton about men who indulge in *these* depravities. And the increasingly vocal, increasingly ugly opinions about neddy boys (though we are of all ages), and the acts taken and contemplated against them. Against *us*, since I am a piece of that continent, a part of that main, though my Edwardian vices are of necessity safely hidden, except from the few who indulge with me.

Safely hidden from Father, as well. Thankfully, he has believed for a dozen years now that what he saw and stopped when he caught me with the head groom's son, who, at seventeen, was only slightly less experienced than I, was just first-time, *only-time*, experimentation.

I found myself drowning in those memories while my body went on with the polite performance.

Father had sounded... reasonable. He was calm, stern but not enraged, as he told young Tom, once he had gotten himself tidy and tucked away (since he had been stroking his own cock while on his knees sucking mine), to go find his father and older brother and wait with them in the main hall. He had taken me, my own cock back in hiding as well, to his library. The only sign that there was a storm in the making, a monumental storm, was the grip on my upper arm. A grip that left bruises in the shape of his thick fingers, but the pain from those was ultimately inconsequential, compared to later pain.

When he let me go, he looked at me for a while, before finally speaking. It was the voice he used when he wanted to make utterly certain that he would be obeyed and not challenged, the voice of one of his irrevocable decisions.

“A man will, after all, put his cock in just about any warm and willing hole if he has no other options available. From now on, however, you *will* find other options or confine yourself to the attentions of your fist. You will under no circumstances again experiment in this depraved fashion. Your first time—and it was your first time, was it not?”

He waited for my nod, then waited again until I realized a “Yes, sir” was also required, and offered up the lie.

“Very well. That was then your *last* venture, as well, into *that* type of perversion.”

Everything about him in that moment said that there were other categories of perversions in which it would be acceptable for me to indulge. *Manly* perversions. It was some years before I learned that the word “perversion” included an extraordinary range of activities that he and the men of the ton considered within the bounds of what was “acceptable.” Only this... what I had done... was beyond the pale. At least to him and his circle of friends, and it necessarily followed, his own “bosom bow,” the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The rest of my lesson on the subject of acceptable and unacceptable perversions was, unlike Gaul, divided into only two parts.

The first consisted of being made to watch while young Tom was forced to lay face down on the gleaming marble of the entrance hall, where the blood could more easily be washed up. To watch while his father and brother were compelled to hold a boy, a young man, whose only fault lay in allowing himself to be... persuaded... in place so that he could be flogged by my father into howling, raw-voiced terror, before collapsing into unconsciousness with a bloody back that would certainly leave deep and ugly scars, if the wounds did not become infected and cause his death. To watch as Father allowed “old Tom,” who had served the Woodhalls since well before young Tom and I were born within a month of each other, and young Tom’s older brother Richard, to carry him off. But not before informing the two who were conscious that they were discharged without references, as he would not allow the risk of further corruption of his family or the others who served the earldom.

And like a coward, I did nothing to stop him. No matter how well I later came to understand that there was nothing I could have done that would have stopped or even lessened the whipping, I have never lost that shame.

The second part was my own beating. Not quite fully clothed. The fine linen shirt I had been wearing was drawn up to my waist; my buttocks and upper

thighs were covered by thin cotton drawers, and the rest of my legs were covered with a linen sheet. The fabric provided the slightest cushion for the blows, and he wielded the canes—two broke over the course of the lesson—with a skill I had had no idea he possessed. The fabric was intended to reduce the risk of breaking the skin, as it would not do for the Glenhaven heir to be scarred. Of course, had he chosen to give me scars, no man of the ton would have challenged him on it, any more than they would have had he chosen to beat or scar Mama for some imagined infraction. Though I think if he had done the latter, I would have killed him.

Equally of course, I could not keep my internal vow not to break, not to scream or cry or plead. Although I believe I held out for a remarkable length of time before my first cry. A few minutes... moments? ...aeons? ...later I gave way completely.

I finished as he intended I would, as he lashed blow after blow after blow until there was no question he had achieved his goal. I was a voice-gone, red-faced, red-eyed, sobbing, groveling mess, my back, buttocks, thighs and calves crisscrossed with a deliberate pattern of welts and bruises that kept me sleeping on my stomach for several weeks. He allowed me one day in bed, and then I was required to resume my normal activities, fully dressed, no matter the pain inflicted by even so little pressure as clothes upon my skin.

I wondered then, but never aloud, what my “lesson” would have been like had he known that young Tom and I had been “experimenting” for more than a year before we got careless and caught. That young Tom really liked a good rogering, which I was very good at supplying. That had he walked in two minutes earlier he would have found his oldest son, that sodomite abomination, on his knees cheerfully swallowing young Tom’s prodigious gift of hot seed.

I even wondered as I lay on my belly all those silent, painful hours, how long I would have survived had he known the full tale. Mama had done her duty well, providing him with two spares in my younger brothers. Accidents, I had thought, could so easily happen during a hunt, though there was always the risk I might only break something other than my neck. In my mind, I had plotted my own demise. Decided, after considering and discarding various stratagems, that there was far more certainty with a mysterious poacher who happened to venture into the Home Wood, shot recklessly, and then, quite naturally in fear of his life, disappeared from the face of the earth upon realizing all that blood on the ground and the still, still body belonged to the Glenhaven heir.

Father rarely gave second chances. Never a third. I already had my second chance. And if he learned today how he had been lied to all these years, his fury would know no bounds. Would he do it himself in a fit of rage, confident that the House of Lords would understand the justifiable homicide of a sodomite heir and acquit him? Or would he resort to a pair, a trio, a quartet of bandits to cry "Stand and deliver!" as I rode or drove through Hounslow Heath, followed by a pair, a trio, a quartet of bullets to ensure I never again stood or delivered anything?

I blinked, realizing the music was drawing to a close. That slog through the Slough of Despond at least worked better than a contemplation of Mama's diamonds. Indeed, those memories were more the cause of an inglorious retreat, much like Napoleon's from Russia. There was no further display during the dancing, nor as I escorted Clumsy Camilla back to the sidelines.

How odd to have those memories surface now, and with such clarity and... vigor. I pushed it all away and vowed no more fantasies this night, no more depressing memories of why my life was the way it was.

I would instead rejoice and remind myself that with the end of this set I was free at last. Thank God. If, of course, He should by some remote chance actually exist. If not, then I neither gained nor lost as a result of that tiny prayer.

The next dance was the one preceding supper, and even Mama had not had the nerve to make that choice for me, as it would send a signal of great particularity if I were seen dancing with a young woman and then escorting her to supper.

First, I would tender my regrets to Carmody *mère et fille* for the loss of their enchanting company, but a prior engagement prevented me from further enjoyment. *Je suis désolé*, I would assure them, and whether they actually understood or not, they would simper, and with a perhaps none-too-subtle nudge, the girl would awkwardly flutter her eyelashes at me. Second, the same lie to Mama, who of course knew the truth, accompanied by a careful kiss to her cheek. Then on to freedom. I knew the route I would take to the footman who could call for my carriage, manfully walking without a limp, so as not to call attention to my latest wound in the marital wars.

Except...

Stone walls may not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage, but the stentorian voice of the Duchess of Alderson's butler certainly succeeded. I had just finished bowing over Miss Carmody's hand, had not even managed a complete

*désolé*, when Dodsworth, hours after the proper time for guests to be announced, announced Ruaidhri Fearghas MacLean, Master of Strathairn.

I did not allow my inner glee to escape into visibility, lest I give the wrong impression to the Carmody mother and daughter. Clearly, after fobbing me off with an excuse I had more than a little difficulty believing, Rory had changed his mind. Now I could feast on his hairy arse, and give him a little rougher fuck than usual for making me believe I would have to use my hands tonight. I could...

I could turn slightly, and as others had, look to the top of the staircase.

Bloody hell. Bloody, bloody hell.

He stood there, looking out but not down at the crowd. And he was in full regalia. The black jacket. The dark red waistcoat. The flawless cravat with a ruby stud. And the Strathairn kilt, all black and dark red, with accents of vivid, burnt gold. The sporran. The plaid across his left shoulder and down his back to just above his knees. The well-displayed, very hairy, lower thighs and knees. The thick socks, with the edges rolled, and the *sgian-dubh* in its sheath, tucked inside the right sock. Rory keeps *his* dagger extremely sharp on both edges. Shiny black shoes.

He only wore the regalia when he wanted to shock, or when he was angry, as if wearing the kilt and everything else made it easier to unleash his infamous Scots temper. He was expressionless, as he reached up and ran his right hand through his thick, wavy, far-more-bright-red than brown, shoulder-length hair, unbound in a *fuck you* to fashion. I would have wagered a pony he was furious, but there was no one about with whom I could make a bet like that, despite the propensity of the haut ton to wager on such intriguing subjects as which raindrop would first reach the bottom of the window. Angry about what, I had no idea. But I had seen these moods before, and managed to bring him out of them. The kilt would also make it so much easier to get what I wanted, what he clearly wanted as well, or he would not have shown up. Just a quick flip, and...

Double bloody hell. The display that had rapidly begun moving in the direction of extremely visible at the sound of Rory's name, once again went into full retreat.

Dodsworth's voice had rung out again. This time with a flawless French accent.

*“Je vous présente le très honorable, Michel Louis Arsenault, le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci.”*



Michel joined Rory, standing next to him, not touching, naturally, nor were they looking at each other.

But here at the same damned time?

Bloody, fucking, *buggering hell!*

My gaping was carefully internal. For many of the rest of the ton, this shattering of an established pattern was also more than sufficient to shatter their carefully cultivated façades of cultured boredom, which only made their gapes all the more noticeable.

Christ, but they were beautiful together.

Together. I firmly quenched that occasional fantasy that chose now to rise up again. The one about being released from my oaths, and the togetherness at the top of the stairs not being two but three. Although in the fantasy the togetherness was in a much more secluded *elsewhere*. Except that any possibility for togetherness died last December.

Wait. *Together*.

There was nothing about either stance or stare that suggested surprise. This arrival was not happenstance, but prepared. Which meant they had to have talked. Surely...

No.

They might have talked, they *had* to have talked for this to have happened. But they would never have talked about that night. Very well. Perhaps a little, but not a lot. Not in detail. Those *details* were too bloody personal for either or both to go blathering on about them.

The thought that they might have, no matter how panic-inducing, was nothing more than an unpleasant, gut-churning phantasm, as realistic as any vision born of an opium pipe. *That* conversation was simply outside of the realm of possibility. For safety's sake, I offered up to the possibly there, possibly not, deity who presumably governed possibilities, a quick prayer that that was so, and would remain so forever. Amen.

Rory was, if not angry, upset. Michel was more difficult to read, but he was a book I had read and re-read numerous times, and if he was not thoroughly memorized, he was close to it.

Michel was... languid, there at the top of the stairs. And when he is most languid, he is most lethal.

Unlike Rory, he did not dress a particular way when he was angry. He was always at the topmost point of elegant, seemingly effortlessly at the peak to which everyone else merely aspired. Impeccable black tailcoat, black inexpressibles, white satin waistcoat embroidered with silver thread, blindingly white shirt and cravat tied in his very own Sansouci design, with expensive (of course) lace on his cravat and at his cuffs. An ebony cane with a jewel-encrusted globe at the top. A style reminiscent of the excesses of our fathers and grandfathers before the turn of the century, which should have been, and for anyone else would have been, unfashionable here and now.

Except... Michel set his own style and be damned to the ton, the Crown, the world. When you are an exceedingly handsome French *vicomte*, with an outrageous English fortune at your ready disposal, unlike the usual impoverished noble French émigré, far greater eccentricities than lace would be not merely overlooked, but occasionally actively emulated.

He had his favorite stickpin, a shimmering blue sapphire circled with diamonds in his cravat. A sapphire stud in his left ear. The blue of the stones matched the blue of his eyes, which even at this distance I could see were as cold and hard as the gems. That mane of straight, light brown hair was tied carefully back. Thin Roman nose in a pale face. Full, definitely not sucking tonight, lips clamped tight to my discerning eye... how could I not be discerning when I had experienced those lips so very often this last year and more, though not nearly often enough. To others, less-experienced others, and so had they all better be less-experienced with that mouth, his lips were merely firmly set, and he was not smiling.

But angry? Oh, yes. Very.

And Rory's anger should have been increasing by not one, but *several* orders of magnitude because of Michel's cavalier breach of their presumably unspoken agreement. It had to have been unspoken, an understanding arrived at without words, since to the best of the ton's knowledge, and certainly to the best of mine, which was a degree of knowledge the ton could never possess, they had not said one word to each other for... two days less than nine months now. A span remarkably easy to calculate, at least for me. By the terms of that agreement, Michel should have left. His staying should have resulted in *something*. Something other than that *posing* to make the point to all of us of what they were *not* doing.

I was definitely not the only one wondering.

I definitely *was* the only one who worried.

They *never* went to the same events. If they did, they did not both stay. Whoever arrived first claimed the field. The second arrival, if not advised at the door so he never entered at all, would, as soon as he learned, turn and leave without a bow to the host or hostess, without explanation or apology. Offensive, and highly so, in most instances, but with these two, so customary these past nine months that the rudeness was overlooked.

But there they were. Side by side. Arriving as nearly simultaneously as made no matter. Neither ceding to the other; neither leaving. They stood there, *posed* there, damn them, a short while longer, before looking down the stairs at all who unabashedly stared up at them.

The silence could not last, of course, not with this topic to discuss. But only voices broke it, a crack here, a crack there. Someone clearly instructed the orchestra *not* to begin the supper dance, debutante dance cards filled with their supper prey's names, notwithstanding. Nothing would be allowed to distract from whatever was about to unfold.

So the murmurings began as, still side by side, they strolled down the staircase. A carefully restrained stroll that was blatantly a deliberate alternative to a stomping march down the steps, followed by a long-strided march through the crowd that gave way in a Red Sea parting that perhaps only Prinny normally experienced. Heads began to turn, of course, at the realization that Rory and Michel had a specific goal.

The murmurs rose to a not quite feeding frenzy as everyone, every bloody one, realized they were walking toward me. Who else? The likelihood of their destination being Mama, or the Carmody pair, or any of the mirror-duplicates of tonnish blandness and interchangeability that were nearby, was infinitesimal.

Their facial façades had acquired tiny cracks as well, whether intentional or not. And the avid watchers now realized that they were not happy.

Before they were a third of the way to their goal, Mama neatly drew me away, much to the Carmodys' carefully concealed, but not quite carefully enough, chagrin. Not, of course, out of some o'erweening maternal concern for my wellbeing, a tigress moving to protect her cub or something. Rather, Mama wanted to be sure that only she could dine out, if Mama would ever do something quite so vulgar as dining out, on the story of what was about to happen.

When a prime tale is near, Mama quickly grabs it before it can escape, drops it in her reticule, removes it later for whatever polishing it might require, and then she makes very good use of it.

We watched the forces of doom, or so I was suddenly certain they were, approaching. At the approximate halfway mark, Mama muttered, “My dear Agatha, you were so very astute, but I do not believe you quite expected... *this*.”

Mama's mutterings are of a varied nature. Some are incomprehensible to lesser minds, and when queried, she will merely wave it off with an, “Oh, never mind. It was nothing, nothing at all,” and refuse to say anything more. As this mutter was indeed entirely incomprehensible to my lesser mind, I asked no questions.

She put her hand on my arm, which naturally drew my attention to her and momentarily away from the imminent end of my life as I knew it. She did not mutter at all, but said in a rather arch tone, “Mucking about with chickens again, my dear? Shoving them here, there, elsewhere?”

I responded with an astute, “Huh?”

She patted my arm, and this time did gesture in the direction of impending doom. “They're coming home to roost right now, dear boy. Quite rapidly. And most unhappily.”

She needn't have sounded so pleased. And then, of course, my unnatural Mama naturally did not move away as they stopped in front of us.

True, I had broken part of our unspoken agreement. The fucked understanding that arose when they decided—just before? during? just after? that fucking duel—that they were no longer friends, and I refused to take sides and choose one over the other. I told them I had been friends with both of them, one for nearly forever, one for only a few months, but they were each too good a friend for me to suddenly end my association with one. I very pointedly, albeit separately, told them how unfair it was of them to put me in that position.

I naturally refrained from explaining that since I was fucking Rory's arse with some degree of regularity, and exploring Michel's mouth and throat with nearly the same frequency, without either knowing about the other—each having *demande*d that I conceal from the other what we were doing—I was not about to pick one hole and abandon the other.

I had watched them so often this past year, sometimes when they were aware; sometimes when I saw one of them by chance, and they did not see me. Such a wide variety of thoughts and emotions. I had seen their faces when we hunted, gambled, got very, *very* drunk. I had seen their faces distorted with passion, almost slack in sated aftermath. Tonight, though... tonight, the careful

lack of expression they had reacquired, the one that allowed a display of only the merest modicum necessary for the illusion of polite enjoyment, said there was so much more going on than that breach.

I was so fucked.

Rory bowed over mother's hand, said, "Good evening, my lady." He was so thoroughly angry that a brogue slipped in on the "guid evenin'," but was snatched away and replaced with tonnish English again for the last two words.

"Dear boy," she said, patting his cheek and causing him to flush, "so very nice to see you again. And both of you. *Together*. It seems like old times."

Rory's flush was sliding toward anger, and away from the genuine warmth of her words. She truly liked these two reprobates, though I doubt she would if she knew the truth about them and what they, or rather we, were truly like.

It was Michel's turn next. A most elegant bow, an actual brief kiss on the soft satin of her elbow-length gloves. "Lady Glenhaven, I truly don't know why you bother wearing the Diamonds." And we could all hear that damned capital "D." "No one can possibly see them against your radiance."

And no one but Michel could have made that sentence sound sincere, even believable. But he did, and it was Mama's turn to blush rosily.

"My lady, do you think we might... *borrow*... your son?"

Neither of them had yet actually looked at me. Nor did Mama when she replied, "But of course, my dears." She tilted her head to look at Rory, then back to Michel. "Will he miss the supper?"

The midnight supper at any ball given by the Dowager Duchess of Alderson, much less this particular one each year, was renowned throughout the ton.

"Alas, my lady, I fear he will. But Strathairn and I will make sure he has something to eat. It may not be to his liking... quite... but I am sure he will swallow it all down."

Mama ignored the brief sound emanating from the direction of Rory. Had there been wolves in England it might have been one of them snarling.

"Well, then, bring him back safe and sound."

Michel, the spokesman, assured her that I would indeed be returned safely, but with a Gallic shrug expressed uncertainty over my soundness.

It was Mama's turn for a little shrug. "Well, do the best you can, my dears. I have every confidence you will treat him precisely as you ought."

Precisely what I was afraid of. I watched her turn and walk away, desperately wishing I was a little boy once again, able to call out to her retreating back to come back, come back and not leave me in this wild ton forest where there were lions and tigers and bears...

Oh, my.

They looked at me.

Oh, my. Doubled. Tripled.

Michel said, "I think the Duke's library will suit us quite well. At least for now. Is that acceptable?"

Cold, cold, cold. So very cold I doubted I would ever get warm again.

Rory stepped in a little closer, and though he was shorter than me he had a mountain's mass at that moment. I definitely did not want him to avalanche on me. And there was that wolf noise again, before he leaned in closer still, and softly said, "Or ah kin juist grab yer baws, squeeze, 'n' pull ye alang. Dae ye ken?"

I kenned my options well, indeed. Walking along, smiling, pretending all was well—though that pretense was an entirely normal one at any ton event—knowing I was on a tumbril, heading for a visit with Madame la Guillotine. Or letting out a high-pitched squeal of agony as my balls were crushed, and I was forced to walk to the guillotine with everyone watching even more avidly, the men wincing away in manly commiseration, thanking the good Lord it was my balls and not theirs being damaged. The women would, of course, be utterly shocked at such a crude masculine display, but would watch even more avidly, though careful not to do anything so vulgar as directly stare.

Discretion is also the better part of pain in the bollocks. We walked, smiled, and nodded, and the focus of the other guests on the three of us faded as it became clear nothing more was going to occur in public.

We found the Duke's library easily. We had been there often for a snifter of His Grace's excellent brandy, often accompanied by an equally excellent cigar. Alderson treated the younger generation well. Or at least those of us regularly in his favor.

I sat where I was told. Rory sat opposite me, spread his legs wide, his feet flat on the floor, the kilt unfortunately drooping to hide what I knew so well.

Michel stood with his back against the door. I had not heard the sound of it being locked.

We sat in silence. I refused to break it.

I looked at each of them.

Wondered if they wondered, as I did: *How in the bloody hell had we got from back there to here?*

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**GETTING FROM THERE**  
**(1815 – 1816)**



**MICHEL**

*Thursday, 29 June 1815*

*6:30 p.m.*

*Maison de Vidal-Sansouci*

*London*

*and*

*Friday, 30 June 1815*

*3:40 a.m.*

*The Ivory Turner*

*London*

Enough is enough. I can't go on, I won't go on any more this way.

Enough is bloody enough.

I was, I admitted to myself but never anyone else, addicted to cock. And as I stared at myself in the center of the three angled cheval mirrors, looking right, looking left, I was admiring the trio of images of a dedicated, extraordinarily talented, deep-throating-*par-excellence* cocksucker.

Henri had done an excellent job, as he always did. It was why he was paid so very much. Though I believe that his keeping of my secrets is more from long friendship, than the salary no other noble would be likely to match, not even for a valet of his talents.

His smirk as I waved away the smalls was, though subtle, not at all hidden. After all these years, he recognized that signal for what it was.

He shook his head when I waved him forward with the fawn pantaloons he had selected. "*Non, Monsieur.*"

I had long ago given up remonstrating with him for referring to me with a title reserved for long-gone French royalty.

He tilted his head, his eyes examining me. I had on the shirt he had selected, no cravat, of course, and my stockings. I was otherwise naked, naturally. He had, after all, seen me in all conceivable combinations of dress and undress in the range between fully clothed and fully naked. There was nothing lustful in his gaze, nor had there ever been. He was not interested in my cock, nor I in

his, nor had either of us ever had so much as a twitch of an inclination in that direction. It would have destroyed a fine relationship.

He shook his head again, sighed, and said, with that degree of asperity that long-employed servant-friends are authorized by some unwritten law of nature to use on exasperating employers, "Now, if *Monsieur* had but deigned to share his plans for the evening, and the night, and the morning, with me, a more appropriate selection of dress could have been made. I think... yes, the shirt will not do. Off with it. And the stockings."

Much put upon, he finished with, "We will begin again."

One does not argue with the valet to whom one has entrusted one's social standing insofar as that standing is based on what one wears at any given moment. I was suitably meek and mild, a veritable innocent child accepting earned chastisement, as I pulled the shirt off over my head, sat down on the bed, untied and pulled off my stockings, and stood up again, thoroughly naked.

"It was," I said in my own defense, "a spur of the moment decision."

"Say rather, a sperm of the moment decision, *Monsieur*. If one is mounting a campaign for cock, planning is far better than improvisation, *mais hélas*, *Monsieur* has not always chosen to make use of the grey matter within his skull to do so. Fortunately for *Monsieur*, when he has these starts, I have learned my own lesson and have *un excellent plan B à la main*."

He left the room carrying the rejected fawn pantaloons. I ridiculously wondered, perhaps as a result of the Armagnac I had been sipping without having eaten since an unusually early breakfast, whether they felt dejected over being rejected, and having to miss an outing.

I was indeed fortunate that Henri not only had a plan B at hand, but had exercised his own grey matter so that I was quite certain that if necessary he could produce alternative plans all the way through *zed* if I needed them.

He returned with an entirely acceptable Plan B. A crisply starched pale-ivory shirt, two carefully starched lengths of linen in matching ivory, as he knew I never required more than two to tie my cravat correctly, black stockings, a black waistcoat with subtly intricate designs in thin ivory thread, black pantaloons, and a black tailcoat. And no smalls.

I took the stockings from him, sat to put them on as he laid everything out, and stood again. He came close, leaned in, sniffed, and, retreating, shook his

head. Asperity returned. "Wash, *Monsieur*. That scent simply will not do, what with the *unexpected change in plans*."

As instructed, I went over to the basin and although the water was not the temperature I would have preferred, grabbed up the unscented soap Henri had procured, washed my face, neck, shoulders, and armpits, and patted myself dry. Henri firmly believed that soap should not scent a man, but rather his scent should be his own, just *enhanced* at times by the proper application of the proper cologne.

Thanks to Henri's marvelous nose, I had acquired an immense collection of colognes for all occasions. Had I had to make my own selection, I would undoubtedly have sniffed a few at random, found one I liked and splashed some on. Henri opened the glass doors to the tall cabinet with the vast array of bottles collected on the glass shelves, tilted his head *just so*, in his signature way of concentrating, pointed a forefinger, paused, pointed again and picked up a bottle.

He brought it back and handed it to me. "Just a little dab will do for you, *Monsieur*. Too much, and they will follow you home, like homeless dogs eager for a bone. Unless... you have a particular cock in mind and would *prefer* that it followed you home?"

"Cock in general."

I was not about to reveal that I had a *most* particular cock in mind, as I did not want to endure the embarrassment if all did not go well. I tipped the bottle on my fingertip several times, dabbed a little here, a little there, and just to provoke him, put the final dab right at the base of my cock.

Having organized Plan B, it ran smoothly, and I was quickly dressed. Henri had once explained that black was best for a cock campaign. Lighter colors not only tended to *display* one's interest rather vividly if one lost control, especially if that loss of control was accompanied by leakage that so very visibly stained. Black, however, could hide a multitude of sins, including both stains of the cock-leaking variety and stains of the splashed seed variety, if the latter were thinned with an application of spit and smeared enough to be absorbed. Knee-stains as well.

And the tailcoat Henri had selected was perfect for cock campaigning. Although it appeared to be of the variety other men of wealth wore, a coat that was so molded to one's body it had to be put on with the vigorous assistance of a valet and then it kept one's posture erect and almost immobile, *this*

marvelously designed coat had a secret. Flexibility. If, for example, one simply wanted to bend over and suck, instead of dropping to one or both knees, this was the ideal coat.

I planned on needing that flexibility. I glanced at the longcase clock. Six thirty. The carriage would not be around until seven. I glanced at what remained of the Armagnac. Dinner would be soon enough, and really, how wasteful to let it just sit there and... go bad.

I carried it down to the library, picked up the last book I had been reading, sat down. Closed the book. Tilted my head back against the chair.

I refused to allow myself any uncertainty about tonight.

My addiction is kept well under control, as I do not intend to be forced out into the open before the ton and ruined, for all that there is nothing illegal in what I choose to do with my mouth and other men's cocks, or vice versa.

I cannot say I have *always* been addicted, as there were years at a time when I didn't think of cock at all. Nor can I say I recall a specific day when I noticed, and noted, "*Quelle surprise! Je t'adore la bite!*"

It was more of a gradual recognition. There was, for example, Marie, the chambermaid slut who was never terminated because she was servicing both the butler and the housekeeper, his wife, presumably without either knowing what the other was up to. When you see her getting fucked in a stairwell by one of the footmen, and you are paying more attention to the prick than where it was going, you might be addicted to cock. When you see the butler, a man who clearly believed in equal opportunity fucking, fucking the mouth of the steward's oldest son the day before he left for university, and you get hard, you might be addicted to cock. When you are constantly alert for ways to put yourself in a position to observe cocks that are out in the air for any reason at all, you might be addicted to cock. When you see nothing more than the bulge between a man's legs and you wish someone, anyone at all, perhaps even you, would rip the fabric off and expose the flesh that made the bulge to the light, you might be addicted to cock. And when, by careful connivance you watch the butler, an old, flabby man endowed with a powerful prick because of both its size and the position he held in the Vidal-Sansouci household, fuck the mouth of another man who had no choice but to do the best he could, and you not only get hard, but wished that mouth was yours, disgusting though the man was, you not merely might be, but most assuredly were, addicted to cock.

I might not have had this brand of education had my parents lived, or had I had a guardian other than the man my parents so foolishly entrusted me to.

They had escaped the Terror, Father having seen and correctly interpreted the writing on the wall, well ahead of the actual visitation of horrors and the ascension of *Madame la Guillotine* to the preeminent entertainment of Paris. Over months, he slowly, secretly moved most of his liquid wealth to London, accelerating the transfers once the decision to leave France was actually made. When they crossed the Channel they had only the dirty, worn peasant clothing they wore, a folder of documents carried next to Father's skin, and a fortune in jewels broken from their settings, concealed in the pillow that made Maman look more pregnant than she actually was.

In my first eight years, my definitely cock-addiction-free years, I had neither the opportunity nor the desire for any of the education I later received. Father built La Belle Maison, invested wisely, bought businesses, sent out his wealth to be fruitful and multiply, and it did, several times over. And then there was a ridiculous carriage accident in a storm. My mother was carrying the child who would have been my younger brother or sister. None of the three survived.

Enter my guardian. Or rather, he entered the scene long enough to assert his rights under my father's will, and then left to enjoy London on my money. I was not some impoverished *émigré*, beaten and starved or allowed to run wholly wild. He could siphon off some of the funds, as he very cleverly did, but he had no access to the bulk of my wealth, just a large measure of the significant income.

He visited once a year, but otherwise absented himself from the estate. I had all the requisite tutors, and a library my guardian never, most fortunately for me, realized was as extensive as it was. I educated myself on many matters I think he would have preferred I did not, had I been so stupid as to let him know what I was doing.

I was a precocious little *vicomte*. Voracious, as well, when it came to reading. Business. Law. Languages. History. I found, too, my father's private notes about wealth, and its growth and management. I also acquired the observational education about all things, or at least very many things, cockical, as I coined the word.

At fourteen, when I knew with absolutely certainty that I was, and forever would be, addicted to cock, though I had yet to do anything with any prick other than my own, my guardian decided to visit. And stay. And stay. Taking control of the household. Of my life.

Until he died.

Unexpectedly.

Messily.

And was replaced, by some miracle granted by a God I had ceased believing in, with Hubert Fallon.

On first hearing that so very English name, I expected a stolid, John Bull type of man, stocky, plain, English to the core, provincial, no-nonsense, ready to take me in hand and make me the model of an English viscount. I was, however, French at heart, at soul, no matter my birth, and would not surrender that willingly. Nothing more would be taken from me I had sworn, unless *I*, and I alone, chose to surrender it.

He had done me the courtesy of writing ahead, announcing his expected arrival date and time. Given the vagaries of travel, something I understood only through books as I had not traveled outside the estate myself since my parents died, he surprisingly arrived slightly ahead of time. When he was announced, I was sitting behind my father's desk, in my father's chair, dressed in the best clothes I could muster, as my prior guardian had not felt it necessary to provide an extensive wardrobe for me—what use would I have had for it, when I went nowhere?—though my money served *him* excellently well for that purpose.

Hubert Fallon was nothing like my imaginings.

He was tall, exceedingly slender, almost excruciatingly thin, dressed quietly in clothes that were superbly tailored, of the finest fabric. A bony, narrow face, sharp cheekbones, a prominent nose. Greying hair, starting to recede in a widow's peak he made no effort to hide. Long-fingered hands. A subtle stickpin in his cravat, which I later learned was an exquisitely cut diamond, expensive but without ostentation. His only other jewelry was a rectangular emerald, set in gold, on his right hand.

He stopped inside the door, looked around, looked at me, and then... *posed*... for just a moment. It was unquestionably a pose, and not merely a man who was simply pausing and observing the occupant and contents of a room. He turned his head to the butler, who was hovering and looking everywhere but at me. Hubert, for so he became to me, looked at Wilson, and told him he could leave, as he had things well in hand and would take it from there.

He watched Wilson leave, shutting the door behind himself. He turned and looked again at me.

"He took orders from me," Hubert said in his quiet tenor. "You are his employer; you are *M. le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci*. An employee takes orders from no one but his employer, or one authorized to speak for his employer.

That will have to be corrected, or he will have to go. Now stand up. Oh, do stop looking at me like an angry pup. You are presently somewhat bark, and little enough of that, and no bite at all. That, too, will be changed.

“I am your guardian for the next few years, or for the next few moments if we cannot find a way to get along. I want to see what I have to work with. So, *M. le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci*, will you do me the great honor of standing up and coming from behind that rather impressive desk? Your father's, I take it. His chair, undoubtedly. Excellent positioning for a potentially unpleasant interview.”

He paused as I stayed seated, but only because I was somewhat stunned by the nearly inexorable force of nature that was Hubert.

I finally did as he asked. We stood a few feet apart, in another silence. “You will, I believe, be fairly tall when you have your full growth. Was your father tall?”

“As tall as the tree-tops to a child looking up at him. I doubt any surge of growth will achieve that height. He died when I was eight. *Maman*, as well. Surely you knew this?”

He waved away his knowledge, or lack thereof. He raised his right arm, extended his hand, pointed his forefinger down, with the other three curled under, and twirled his finger, giving me to understand I was to turn.

“Will a simple turn suffice, or do you prefer a pirouette? I am not sure I have the skill or grace to perform the latter successfully, but in the interests of amity, I am willing to try, *mon cher gardien*.”

He smiled at my mockery, and twirled his finger again. “If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly.”

Still not moving, I said, “Murder? *Moi*?” I clasped my hand to my chest, more than a little dramatically, finding myself... *enjoying* myself, as I had not in a long, long time.

“I suspect, *mon cher enfant*, that if we engage ourselves together on this journey, that murder will inevitably be contemplated. On both our parts. I simply referred to the speed with which this decision ought to be made, as there is no reason for prolonging the process. But part of that process is the simple turn you offered, as I have no desire to see you fall on your arse attempting a pirouette. Especially not in *those* shoes.

“You implicitly offered the word of *M. le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci* when you offered the turn. Does *M. le vicomte* honor his word?”

I stiffened at the words that might have been an insult, but which I discerned were not. So I turned. In a clearly “creeps in this petty pace” manner, so that there was a real potential that I might not finish until the morrow. Eventually I did, to be faced with thin lips, sternly compressed. And a twinkle in his grey eyes.

“Whoever had the dressing of you, should be shot. No, no, better yet... he should be drawn and quartered, and then forced to wear this... this... I have no words for it... *in public*. He would die of humiliation, and thus save your lordship the cost of bullet and powder.”

“I believe I should prefer the bullet, as I had the ‘dressing’ of me. Shall I ring for Wilson to bring a brace of pistols, in case the first should misfire? And would you prefer to put me out of my misery, or shall I do it myself?”

“I think, your lordship, I would prefer to *prolong* your misery. Let us say, until you are eighteen?”

For the first time since he entered the room, indeed, for the first time in more time than I could actually recall, I smiled. And it was a genuine smile. There was no darkness in this man. And as I realized that, I realized another thing as well. He was a friend of Edward's!

My father had acquired a good part of his library from a bookseller, who in turn acquired libraries from heirs of owners who had died, or who had suffered financial reverses and had had to sell off. There were some exquisite and exceedingly valuable first editions lurking about on the shelves, which had thankfully survived years of inattention. I had not, of course, drawn the attention of anyone to their existence once I found them and realized what they were. A first edition, worth a thousand pounds or more, sitting in a library that had never been catalogued, could vanish so very easily. A multitude of them, even more readily.

And amongst the first editions, and the fine books, and the ordinary books, and the books of no worth at all other than to sit on a shelf and look handsome, was the handwritten journal, unsigned, undated though I suspected it was nearly a century old, of a friend of Edward's. He undoubtedly thought only he would ever see the words he penned, and so he was honest to a fault in his descriptions of all he had seen, said, heard, done, with, to and about other men, though I found no fault with his honesty, given the length and breadth—an intentional



word choice—of the education he supplied of yet more things cockical than I had imagined. When I finished it the first time, the first of many readings, I wondered if he had had some marvelous plan to ensure that when he died, his journal in essence died with him, a ceremonial burial, a reverent or irreverent fireplace toss. Or perhaps it was to be conveyed in strictest confidence to the man he loved, the third of three in a long life, and that plan, as the Scottish poet had once so eloquently put it, just went fucking *agley*. Or had he simply believed he would still have time to create that plan and arrange for it to be set in motion on his death?

There were two parts of the journal that leapt to my mind as my so very odd interview with Hubert was in progress. The first was the part where he related what little was known of the man named Edward, and the *special* friend of Edward's, and the king who kept his word, and of how that phrase was at first known only to those men who loved men. Eventually it fell into public use, and gave birth to the most-often-contemptuous term, though that depended primarily on who was voicing it, of "neddy boy."

The second was his description of a certain "ned-sense," which he was certain all friends of Edward's innately possessed. It was the ability to recognize another friend of Edward's without a word being said, though words could change reasonable certainty to absolute assurance. And it was the ability to recognize the difference between a true friend of Edward's and a man who was merely making use of one for his own convenience.

I had contemplated the men who had provided me with my observational education, and reached certain conclusions about them. But those were all well after the fact. The journal was talking more of the application of ned-sense on a first meeting.

Hubert was my first. Everything my ancestor-in-spirit had written made sudden, complete sense, and when my virgin-no-longer ned-sense said "Yes!" I nearly destroyed it all by blurting out, "Are you a friend of Edward's?"

Losing one's virginity, of any type, is not always a thing of beauty, a joy to be remembered forever and relived with fondness and smiles. It was sometimes a thing better forgotten, interred deep within, and never looked at again. I could attest to that, though I never would.

Hubert became very still. Statue still. His face was wiped clean of the amusement and animation. "That is not a question one asks in polite society, *M. le vicomte*. Especially not in public."

He wasn't angry, nor was he exuding the type of glacial cold I later became adept at using to depress pretensions. But the warmth *was* gone.

That moment was, in fact, my first accurate use of a ned-sense of unparalleled accuracy. Not that I had any formal affirmation of my accuracy that day. What I had was an overwhelming joy on finding someone else like myself, which was promptly crushed by his words, plus a thorough bewilderment. Public? There were only two of us, alone in *my* library. How was that public?

I knew I had not masked my dismay at his response; it would be years before I achieved that level of control. But I asked him those four words anyway.

"Two matters, my lord. The issue of 'public.' Is the door locked?"

"I... I don't know."

"If you are where anyone may intrude on you at any time, with or without a modicum of warning, you are in public, not private. And so you should *always* consider yourself to be."

I could only sputter at him. "But this is my home, *my* library, the door is closed, the..."

He held up a hand to silence me. "May we sit?"

My father, had he been alive, would have blistered me somehow, whether on my bottom with his hand, or by words, for my rudeness. Once I stood, Hubert, as someone of lower rank, since he was announced without a title, could not sit until I offered him a chair and sat myself. An almost-twinkle became almost visible as he watched me realize my *faux pas*. And then my dilemma as to where to sit.

"If I may, my lord, I suggest those." He gestured to two very deep and comfortable wing-backed chairs by the fireplace. I had a sudden flash of winter memory. Papa in one chair, reading, his glasses having slid down to the tip of his nose. *Maman* in the other, doing some intricately exquisite embroidery. I was on the floor, playing with toys in front of, but never *too* near, the brilliant red-gold-yellow-orange of the fire.

I nodded, and as we sat, he gestured toward the chair in front of the desk, subtly not designed for the same degree of comfort as others in the room. "I assume I was to sit there?"

“Yes.”

“Good thinking. Always think of position, and placement, and power, in everything you do. Though most will not speak of it aloud, that is a ‘supplicant’s chair.’ It is far less comfortable than the visibly *powerful* chair behind the desk. I have even known some who have shortened the legs on that chair. Not enough that the person sitting down on it feels as though he is dropping to a child’s seat. But just enough so that the average person will have to look *up* at whoever is across from him, and will feel suitably, subtly *diminished* by having to do so.”

He crossed his right leg over his left, elbows on the arms of the chair, and steepled his hands. His expression became, not stern as though he was angry, but solemn, to emphasize the seriousness of what he was about to say. I was to become very familiar with that expression.

“Someone told you about friends of Edward’s?”

I shrugged. *Someone* had, but he was long dead.

“And about what is called ‘ned-sense’?”

I hesitated, nodded.

“I won’t ask you who supplied that knowledge. But I will ask you this, and I expect a truthful answer. Were you *forced* to acquire that knowledge?”

*That* knowledge was not acquired through force at all, and so I was most truthful when I said, “No.”

Some part of him relaxed.

“Very well, then. Let me explain a little further. Most friends of Edward’s, if not all, have an innate ned-sense, a nearly instinctive recognition that *this* man is a friend of Edward’s while *that* man most assuredly is not. With some, it is extraordinarily accurate, with others erratic, and with others so small it might as well not be there at all. For obvious reasons, no scientific studies have been done, but I firmly believe there is nothing whatsoever mystical about ned-sense. It is simply the ability to read and recognize very subtle signs that friends of Edward’s, ah, *exude*, perhaps, without conscious thought.

“But even if you have the most superb ned-sense in the history of mankind, and I assure you, there have always been friends of Edward’s *throughout* the history of mankind, you do not ask that question in public. *Ever*. There may some day, some far off day not in your lifetime or mine, where asking that

question will not be offensive, or potentially so. And if you should, inadvertently, *blurt* the question out in what might have been public but was not, still, you should not expect anyone to answer you. Not without some overt confirmation on his part of the correctness of your perception.”

I could so easily have been humiliated for what I had done; yet he was gentle with me. For six years, no one had been gentle with me, and some had been far, far less than that. I burst into tears, and Hubert was immediately up and out of the chair and over to me, understanding my need. He knelt partially beside, partially in front of my chair, held out his arms, enfolded me in them, and held me until I regained control of myself, with much sniffing and snuffling and apologies for dampening his coat and cravat.

When I was done, and pushed back, he let me go. Took both of my hands in his and squeezed them lightly and released. Went back to his chair. Ignored the wrinkles and damp spots on his clothes.

“Well, *M. le vicomte*, shall we?”

“*En avant*, Mr. Fallon, *en avant*.”

Thus began my education with Hubert about life, and manners, and society, and love and all things Edwardian and cockical. Though it took me a while to *completely* understand that no matter the explicitness with which he was willing to discuss matters of sex, and how to get it, and how to get over the eventual loss of it at the end of a bad relationship, he did so with the grace and love of a father raising a son.

I doubted that my real father, had he lived, could have provided, or indeed would even have been willing or able to provide, so excellent an education on that which made me, me.

Besides that great service, he did me the equally great service of introducing me to Henri, then twenty-nine to my nearly fifteen, as a “possible candidate for the position of valet.” He smiled when he said it, because he knew I had recognized Henri as a friend of Edward’s, and thus my ongoing hesitance about agreeing to hire a valet was eliminated.

I am sure that Henri has had a sex life during the years he has worked for me, but I have never known any of the men with whom he might have been involved. As for me, my cock, wondrous though it was, and is, and evermore shall be, was to him nothing more than a more-troublesome-than-the-others appendage on a body about which he had to acquire intimate knowledge in

order to perform his job. It was also an appendage that I was required to take firmly in hand and deal with as necessary.

Hubert left shortly before my nineteenth birthday, to help someone else I was always sure, explaining that as at that point I merely wanted him around, but did not in fact need him to be there, he could do more good elsewhere.

I raised my glass in a silent toast to Hubert, who, I had heard, had most regrettably died last year, and to that most astute of planners, Henri. I downed the last of the liquor, and headed to the door as the clock chimed seven.

Hours later, *many* hours later, I was ready to howl with frustration. Nothing had gone as I had planned. Yes, I had picked Peregrine up in a carriage I had purchased for the occasion, an *intimate* carriage which required its passengers to sit more closely together than was customary. Yes, our thighs pressed together with not quite absolute necessity, but there was no Edwardian pressure or slight movement by him to overtly signal interest. And I could not rub up against him like a dog humping his leg, no matter how much my cock felt that would be a most marvelous feeling.

Dinner. An appearance at a musicale. A ball. Another ball. A brief stop at a brothel at which I managed to convince him with remarkable ease that there really wasn't a tit or cunt on display that he was interested in. A hell where he slammed down several glasses of brandy, lost a thousand at hazard and regained double at faro. Another hell where we only stayed long enough to look and sneer, though not visibly so, and then, finally, the Ivory Turner.

Old, but not ancient. Faded semi-elegance, but without the stench of desperation of the worst hells. A varied clientele, from drunkards who yet retained enough money for one last chance to destroy themselves, to those who gambled neither more nor less than they could afford to lose, to the occasional vastly wealthy guests who would make other choices of venue if they were bent on putting their fortunes at risk.

As rakes of the first order, vastly wealthy (me) and reasonably wealthy (Peregrine, who had not yet inherited the earldom and the even greater wealth that went with it), we were welcomed with open arms. By the proprietor who was so well aware that in the long run the house always wins. By the croupiers and dealers who knew our reputation for generosity, win or lose. By the harlots who hoped to acquire some of that generosity as well, as we were known for not always requiring cocks in cunts before the coins were shared. Though both of us had done the cock-and-cunt route often enough that no one eyed us askance if we did not on a particular occasion.

I knew I was doing it so that I could remain hidden, distasteful though it was and requiring an extraordinary degree of acting and concentration on my part. Fortunately, harlots neither expect nor require protestations of love, or fervent desire, just enough interest for a creditable performance by the customer, so that they may consider their coins were earned.

I just was not certain, not absolutely certain, that on those occasions Peregrine was doing the same thing. My ned-sense, with its unfailing accuracy, assured me that he was. But there had been nothing, at least between Peregrine and me, of those overt signals to confirm what my ned-sense told me. And Hubert had repeatedly pointed out the necessity of some degree of overtiness.

A man your ned-sense says is a friend, who looks at your cock and up at you and licks his lips, is overt. A man who, in passing you in an only reasonably crowded room *accidentally* brushes the back of his hand against your groin, and lets his knuckles linger for just that extra second, instead of snatching his hand away as if he had finger-tipped a poker just removed from a fireplace, is overt. A man who in a publicly “private” spot popular with friends, displays his erect cock for your visual delight, is being overt.

The clock in the main room had discordantly chimed three a while ago. “Now or never” was of course not accurate, as if I failed to make the effort now, I would still make the effort sometime.

I stood carefully erect, wobbling only slightly, and slurring only a little more than that. “My lord viscount!”

Peregrine straightened as well, a somewhat lop-sided grin on his face. I peered at him. Yes. Disguised, how could he not be after all we both had consumed, but alert. There would be no taking advantage, no claim of being so drunk as to have no memory, no knowledge of what was done. If, in fact, it *was* done.

“Yes, my lord vicomte?”

“I need to piss.”

He waved his arm, splattering the last little bit of wine in his glass, which luckily missed everything except the already-filthy floor, and declaimed, “And so do we all, all need to piss!”

Damn him. But fortunately for my intentions, there were only smiles or complete disregard.

“And where shall we piss, my lord vicomte?”

The proprietor started toward us, perhaps envisioning a pissing contest then and there, but my palm stopped him.

“In the, ah, the pisserie!”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Is that Frog for privy?”

I nodded. “Most excellently Froggish. With a delicate sauce for the legs.”

He wagged an unsteady finger at me. “Ah, ah, ah. No pissing on my leg. Down your own, of course, if you can’t aim.”

Haversham looked up from his cards and snarled, “Just bloody well go piss elsewhere, and let the rest of us do what we’re here for.” He slapped a card on the table.

Thus admonished, I took my cue to leave, waving Peregrine to follow. He staggered only a little on his first step, and proclaimed, “Lead on, MacDuff, and damned be him that first cries, ‘Hold, I’ve pissed enough!’”

When I glanced back after that bit of outrageousness, I saw a twinkle in Peregrine’s eyes. My cock lurched.

Six bloody hours. More. And never a moment of privacy. Never a moment of overt confirmation in response to the looks and touches... the always readily explained away touches. Fuck this shite.

My ned-sense was *right*. Had been right for years. I had wanted to suck his cock the first time I saw it as he undressed for bed when we shared a room at university. But I could not, would not, take the kind of risk with a beginning friendship by making my interest in the mighty Peregrine prick known. Nor with a moving-right-along friendship. Nor with a close friendship. And one with so damnably frequent opportunities to see his cock over all these years.

Enough was more than bloody enough.

I had ostensibly *wandered* away a while ago as Peregrine made a start at hazard. Looking for a place that might provide a bit of privacy is wandering with intent. I found it. I gambled then that the small storage room was unoccupied. We were almost there when Peregrine stopped and said, “This ain’t the way to the pisserie.”

His tone wasn’t belligerent, but more of an “I’m not as dumb as blonds look, you know” variety.

“But you’re going to follow me anyway.”

“But of course. I would follow my best friend to the ends of the earth. I would even follow him to a pisserie, if he knew where it was, and if he did not, I would willingly wander with him as we searched and searched and searched to find a place to piss our weary, full pricks.” He snickered at me, the twit.

“Very well, then, walk... No, I think not. You will do something obscene with ‘this way.’ Just follow.”

The proprietor clearly did little to protect his corridors and rooms from wandering patrons, probably based on the well-founded belief that there would be little to nothing at all worth stealing.

Except for a few minutes of privacy.

A minute or so later we arrived at the door. I turned, looked at him, and said, “Stay.”

He gave me a tiny “woof!” in reply. I was not quite sure if it was accompanied by a wink.

I twisted the handle, opened the door inward. Peered inside. Still empty. In the dim light from the hall, I could see the almost-to-a-stub candle in its holder, which I had noticed on my reconnaissance. The hell with it. True friends of Edward's don't need light to find a cock and suck it, not as long as they know the cock is there. Or to be realistic, that there is even the slightest possibility a cock will be in range.

I turned to look at him, but didn't have far to go. He had moved closer. I stepped back and out of the way, grabbed his right shoulder with my left hand, turned him, shifted my hand to between his shoulder blades and shoved. The stumble forward, finishing beyond the arc of the door, was somewhat suspicious, as if he might have been cooperating. Absurd. Yes, absurd.

My turn to enter the room, step to my left, use my right to grab the edge of the door and shut it, while my left hand reached out and grabbed Peregrine's right shoulder. Anchored by that grasp, I pulled him toward me, put my right hand on his other shoulder, and leading with my left, spun him round and slammed him... but a very quiet, delicate slam... against the door.

I moved in on him until there was, perhaps, the thickness of a gentleman's card between his lips and mine, between our chests, between our cocks.

I could have stopped. Could have pulled back. Could have laughed off each moment up to that moment as a drunken game, a joke gone awry.



I chose to be that stupid, stupid, arrogant, egotistical wastrel who wagered his home, his family, his fortune, his future, on the turn of a single card at baccarat. Or any of the other games where wagers like that might happen.

I ignored every precept Hubert had instilled in me. Every Edwardian precept I had lived by all these years so that I could feed my addiction from time to time without risking all.

Our breaths mingled, but we still did not touch.

“You are a friend of Edward’s, best and only friend.” There was not the slightest hint of a question in my words. “*I am a friend of Edward’s.*”

Though I could not see it in the darkness, I could *hear* his lips lift at the edges in that tiny, private smile of his. He made me wait, the bastard shite-head, unmoving, before he said, “And your point is?”

My point *was*... his mouth against mine, every inch of me against him, there in the demanding, *urgent* darkness. He opened his mouth to mine, with no hesitation at all. The *bastard*. Had he but given me a hint of confirmation... Wasted years of cock stands being brought to glorious softening. I would mourn my... his... our... losses later.

I raped his mouth with my tongue, and he raped me right back, proving the adage that it is not possible to rape the willing. I dropped my hands to his placket, paused to swat his hands away from mine. Lifted my head away from his.

“No time, you lying shite. *My decision, my choice.*”

He smiled that darkness-hidden smile, murmured into my mouth as he returned the ardor and claimed my lips, tongue, teeth, and every bit of flesh inside my mouth, as his. All that was a loan, of course. Very short term. Extremely short when the term was bare minutes.

His cock freed, he whimpered in my mouth as I stroked him. I could make him spew his seed with all the force of a lightning strike setting an ancient oak to torch and raging flame, just with my hands. My mouth was better, even in the short time available.

I pulled back, dropped spit and thick drool from our mouth-ravaging on my palm, applied it to the length and breadth of his jutting cock. It was as impressive as I had always dreamed it was.

“Eight and a half inches,” I whispered as I reluctantly surrendered his mouth and dropped to my knees, confident in the effectiveness of Henri’s Plan B

taking care of anything on the floor. I was equally confident in the accuracy of my assessment of length. I was rarely wrong, and then only by the merest part of an inch.

“Eight guineas, eleven shillings, I’ll have you know,” he whispered back.

Bloody hell. Trust Peregrine to arrive at a system of measurement by money: one-inch diameter gold coins.

And then neither of us were thinking, much less talking about inches or coins or anything else as I lapped at his slit, inhaled the liquid streaming from it, and then swallowed him to the root. And sniffed.

Christ. It was, my mind insisted, nothing more than the scent of a man who had bathed many hours earlier, then gone through an evening attending ton events where people were pressed together in near immobility, generating enormous heat and seas of sweat they tried to hide with advance applications of excessive colognes and perfumes. Sweat, *ordinary sweat*, my logical mind insisted.

*More!* the cock-addicted friend inside me insisted. And it was. A scent that was uniquely Peregrine.

I swallowed my moan as I swallowed, massaging his cock with my throat, then pulling back to lick and slurp and lap at his slit, wanking the base of his cock with my fist, my lips pressing against forefinger and thumb as I moved my head and mouth in circles, before setting my fingers free and taking him all the way in again. I allowed him to begin thrusting his hips, fucking my mouth quickly since there was clearly no time for my customary finesse.

My fingers cupped his hips, my thumbs resting on the joiner of thigh and groin and all was fucking well, when he decided to grab my hair. That came to an immediate stop, as did my sucking, when I dug my thumbs into him. The pain made him gasp... far too loudly under the circumstances... and he held quite still.

He quickly understood my message: He could fuck with my hair or he could fuck my mouth, not both. I was *not* going to return to gaming after having just “taken a piss,” and to all the friends, acquaintances and strangers throughout the hell who would see me, looking as though someone had run his hands through my still-perfectly-ordered hair, and thoroughly disheveled it as I sucked that “someone’s” cock.

Peregrine's hands lifted away with alacrity and I could tell from the briefly hesitant movements as he resumed mouth fucking that he was not quite sure where to place them. He eventually chose flat against the door.

As I began cooperating, very vigorously, with that long, wide cock pushing in and out of my throat, his breathing became ragged, and he moaned, bit it off, and then, in a harsh whisper, said, "Christ, Michel. So fucking good. *Un cocksucker par ex... par ex... Oh, fuck!*"

And then he was spewing all that warm and wonderful seed down my throat. I pulled away but not off so that I could savor the taste. But not for long. I cleaned him up, and rocked back on my heels in preparation for standing up.

"Hand," he whispered. I reached out, somehow unerringly found it in the dark, gripped and allowed his strength to help me up. Most politely—Peregrine was clearly a courteous friend of Edward's who believed in reciprocity—his hand lowered to my crotch and found my hardened cock. I could feel him start to bend...

"Another time. Too long."

He gave a soft little chuckle, indicating his understanding that I was not referring to the length of my cock and his possible inability to accommodate it were he to start sucking, but rather that we could not afford to be gone too long at the "pisserie." He squeezed and released, and then put himself back together.

A friend of Edward's with both a cock addiction and the talent to earn a good living at it had he chosen that route, does not always get to release his own seed. And frequently, as at that moment, he is sucking in a place where reappearing with a cock stand might well be noticed and not in a pleasant way. The accomplished cock addict therefore has developed a way to quickly go from standing to at ease.

My method was extraordinarily effective.

Great-great Aunt Angelique.

I never knew why Father chose to bring her portrait to England, particularly since looking at it terrified me. He always said, when I asked about her, "One day, when you are older." But then, of course, he died.

There is nothing angelic about her. She might have modeled for Caravaggio's *Medusa*, except that Medusa was beautiful compared to my ancestress. She was all three of Macbeth's witches combined into a single horror. If her face was not sufficient for softening, just a hint of a mental image

of her naked accomplished the task between the tick and the tock of any decent clock.

Peregrine turned toward the door, his shoulder brushing me. I put my right hand on his right forearm. He stopped. "Your word."

He stiffened, as if he had been insulted. But then relaxed. He knew what I meant; he had as much at risk as I. "And yours."

Two words of honor given that what we had done would not be spoken of to anyone.

"Another time?" he asked.

"My very dear, could you possibly imagine that there would *not* be another time?"

"No. I don't think I could imagine that."

He turned the handle, stepped quickly into the hall. Coughed. I followed him.

He grinned, somewhat ruefully. "Ah, do you, by some chance, actually know where the, ah, pisserie is?"

I pretended shock. "My dear Peregrine, a good friend of Edward's *always* knows where the pisserie is, if for no other reason than that where the pisserie is there are pricks, and where there are pricks, there are always possibilities. I fear your education is sadly lacking."

"Indeed, I think it must be."

"Well, if you will put yourself entirely in my hand, I believe I can make your education quite stimulating."

He choked back a little laugh, and then waved me on. We left to piss, and there turned out to be no possibilities there other than ours, and we had taken enough risks for one evening.

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## ***RORY***

*Saturday, 8 July 1815*

*Late morning*

*Earl of Glenhaven's Estate*

*Hampshire*

*A path near the boundary*

It was the best of pisses; it was the worst of pisses.

I could have just walked to the edge of the grassy embankment when I finished the fuck, and pissed into the water idling by, but despite where my cock had just been, accompanied as its presence had been by a reasonable amount of almost fully believable verbal encouragement, it appeared that having to watch me piss was embarrassing. So instead of seeing whether I could actually get my piss to go over the stream and into the woods, I walked, still naked, through the bushes, until I was out of sight and on the path.

Where I was, of course, fully in sight of anyone who might be walking down it. After all, the mere fact that there *was* a path indicated someone, or several someones, used it with some regularity. Bugger them all if seeing a naked Scot offended.

It was the kind of needing to piss where you know it is going to be long and satisfying, a pleasurable occurrence ranking somewhere between an average wank, or a really good one where you are shouting out your fantasy fuck's name as you spurt, or perhaps as enjoyable as a fairly good, but not really something to brag about, fuck or suck. I decided to try for a personal distance record, took hold of my still half-hard cock, which actually makes for better aiming, aimed and fired.

The stream admirably arced up and away, and started a preliminary puddle in the dirt. I was planning on perhaps a miniature swamp by the time I was empty. It was entirely *not* my fault that his cough, that politely pointed attention-getter I later became exceptionally familiar with, startled me, caused me to spin around, and piss on the pants of the tall, blond-furred demigod.

Which was how I met Peregrine James Woodhall, Viscount Somerville. The *fully-clothed* Viscount Somerville, though what he wore was far less than and far from his London standards.

I fully admit I had imagined that, often—the far less clothes, at least—after I came upon him by chance, legs spread, placket down, and a glorious cock out and pissing against a hedge in a fortunately not-too-dark part of Vauxhall Gardens. I might have stayed in the shadows, in hopes of a piss evolving into a wank, but we both heard voices approaching and quickly went our separate ways. My spying was, with equal fortune, not discerned.

And there he stood, still with far too many clothes on, but I could settle for what I was given, since I well knew it could never be anything more.

He had on a well-worn shirt, sleeves rolled up past his elbows to show me strong, tanned forearms and a light brushing of gold hair. The shirt was open at his throat—deliberately? uncaringly?—showing off the thick fur of slightly darker gold that rose in the vee to just below his collarbone. Braces. Loose breeches that would have looked more at home on one of his gardeners. Stockings, one starting to sag. Low-heeled, scuffed leather shoes.

Golden hair I recalled seeing usually brushed à la Brutus when I had seen him in passing at a hell, but tousled now. Sea-blue eyes. A nose that was merely a nose, not one of the aristocratic or aquiline or Roman varieties, a functional nose that fit his face and neither attracted nor detracted. A wide mouth... all the better to suck you with, my dear? ...with the lower lip just a bit more plump. A definite distraction and attraction.

I knew what he saw, of course. I have seen myself in the most-excellently-clear tall mirror on which I spent money I could really not afford at the time. Sometimes I have positioned it to watch myself driving my thick, oiled cock into the arse of a man I could trust to be in my home, trust to keep his secret and my own. Most assuredly not a neddy boy who fucked or sucked for coin. Sometimes—far less often than I would like—I watched myself receiving the hammering in the hole. Sometimes, I just watched myself, naked, candles providing warm, flickering illumination as I wanked myself furiously until I seeded the mirror in great blobs. And licked it all off.

What he saw was a naked, wet Scot. I could hardly be anything other than Scottish, given the green of my eyes and the brilliant red of my hair. My thick, everywhere hair. Wet, not merely damp, as I tend to sweat a lot during sex, outdoors on a warm day in early summer; hell, actually I tend to sweat a lot anyway.

A naked, wet Scot, almost hard, cock in hand, pissing.

Begin as you mean to go on. While I did re-aim, so that I was merely pissing *by* him and not *on* him, it was close enough that a few drops splashed

on those well-worn shoes. He didn't murmur, mutter, or jerk away. Just stood there, waiting.

I finished, squeezed the last couple of drops out, shook properly, and let my cock fall. Not that it fell very far.

I looked up at him, smiled, held out my hand... the aiming and squeezing and shaking hand... and opened my mouth.

“Rooooooooooooooooory!” The voice came from where I had left the body it went with. Every man knows that tone of name. It means “I want to get fucked again.”

“I'm Rory. As you heard.” I grinned at my... oh so briefly and only in a here-and-gone fantasy... demigod.

He looked down at my hand. I was almost certain that there was a quick look, a quick survey of all that hair on my chest, circling my large nipples, and the broad band that marched down my belly and wound up in the brighter flame of curls over, under and around my cock and balls. An *approving*, perhaps even *interested* glance, but it was cut off so quickly I decided it was my imagination.

It could only be my imagination. Only that and nothing more. Never more.

He looked up at my face. “Somerville.”

His voice was neither cold nor warm. I stared back at him, hand still out, suddenly determined to wait him out. Although men know that the bare hand that they are about to shake might quite recently have been... aiming, squeezing, shaking, perhaps even wiping... or have been somewhere else entirely, as long as they have not seen the activity there is no hesitation. But here, he not merely knew, he had *seen*.

He accepted the challenge, and with a sudden grin, shifted the pail he was carrying from his right hand to his left, to join the fishing rod, shook my hand without rushing, and when he released it, did not wipe his palm and fingers on his pants. Not even the wet part.

Before the pause could become actually awkward, as we seemed to have been handling the whole naked Scotsman, fully dressed Englishman, meeting in the woods, situation rather well, my name was repeated. This time the tone said, “If I'm not going to get fucked *right now*, I'm bloody well leaving and going to find someone who will.”

“*Dinnae fash yersel', lassie,*” I called out, without looking away from him. “*Ah will be richt thare.*”

I winked at Somerville. Spoke a little more softly, and in the flawless aristocratic English I had so arduously and eagerly learned. “I *am* Scots, and speaking as if I might never have left the Highlands does seem to make them all the more eager for me to have my wee, wicked way with them.” I deliberately did not look down at myself and up again as I finished. “Well, perhaps not so ‘wee,’ but most assuredly wicked.”

“And you couldn’t find any place better for your... wee, or not so wee... wicked ways than trespassing on Glenhaven land?”

His voice had a kind of smoky note, like the single malt whisky my father so excellently and illegally distills, thereby avoiding the damned Sassenach excise taxes and bringing much-needed money into the falling-down castle’s coffers. Not that much of it stays there for very long. And if that voice was a pair of hands, I’d want them rubbing and stroking and grasping me, whether gently or roughly or anywhere in between.

*Och, weel, th’heel wi’ it.*

I let myself get fully hard, and with feigned indifference, peeled my skin back to let the broad, weeping knob show. Then dropped my hand, as if what I’d done was an unconscious act, perhaps related to what one might call the harlot behind the hedge. A man eager to get back to fucking and not caring who might know it.

But not so eager as to prevent me from taunting him. Or trying to. On the off chance that what I thought I had seen before was not my imagination after all.

I spread my arms wide, looked around. “I don’t see it.”

From the tiniest bit of grimness in his face, I was fairly sure he was making sure he did not look at my cock. At least, not directly. “Don’t see what?”

I smirked. Turned to my left slowly. Not so slowly as to be *unduly* blatant about what I was doing, but slowly enough for him to get a good look at how thick my cock is when viewed from the side, and then my back, and the muscular, broad, tight, white arse. With my legs spread a little wider, my red-furred, long toes digging into the ground, purely for balance of course, I put my hands on my knees and leaned forward as far as I could without falling. Looked right and left as if I was peering under bushes. Ignored the way my large balls hung so visibly down between my thighs, as if I were unaware they were even there. And then there was the itch in my arse that just had to be scratched, and



momentarily one cheek was pulled so if he was watching carefully he might have had a glimpse of my talented pucker, circled with thick red hair.

Straightening up, left again to complete the turn. Still slow enough to give him ample time to get his eyes up and away from where I wanted them, and if they had indeed been there, I would never know.

He surprised me. When I was facing him again he was looking down at my rampant cock, which meant, if his head had been in that position moments earlier, he had also been looking at my un-rampant, but very willing hole. He looked slowly up, his eyes taking their time, caressing my belly hair, and rubbing the swirls between my nipples. Did he see my nipples harden beneath the fur?

And then he was finally looking again into my eyes. And there was... nothing there. It had all been my overly active imagination. He simply stood there, looking at me. Waiting. Clearly waiting.

Waiting for what?

Oh. Bloody hell. An answer. I licked my suddenly parched lips, and found the words. "No sign."

"Ah." He tilted his head back and down again, and I wanted nothing more than to cross to him and lick the long line of his throat to see if he was as delicious as I expected he would be.

Somerville gifted me only with a small smile, though a larger one was in his eyes. "The sign identifying Glenhaven land. The sign advising would-be trespassers that if they want to find out whether there is life after death they should enter. That sign?"

I limited myself to a nod.

"It must have fallen down. I shall go find it, and you can get on with your..." He waved his right hand in a way that encompassed my only slightly softening cock and the woman impatiently out of sight. If she was even there.

"But what about your fishing?"

He looked at me with the English version of *The bludy heel wi' it* in his expression. "You're fucking where I was going fishing."

"Uh, we can..."

He shook his head. "Don't bother. Another time."

“Another time?”

A slight pause. “Another time.” He turned abruptly and went back along the path.

Another time.

Another time... to go fishing?

Another time... for something else?

My no-longer-interested cock heaved a sigh of relief when I arrived at the spot where I had left whatever-her-name-was, along with the blanket and the scattered bits and heaps of our clothes. The relief at the absence of whatever-her-name-was instantly vanished with the realization the blanket and my clothes were gone.

Mostly gone. My boots were standing upright, toes toward the stream. They were completely full of water. The current was not swift enough to carry *everything* away. Just my smalls, pants, stockings, shirt, cravat and jacket. I doubted, though, that the money in my jacket was actually *with* my jacket. Indeed, it was undoubtedly safe and dry. The blanket was caught on a root about twenty feet downstream, and with only a moderate amount of cursing—at the tart, life, the stone that hid itself in the grass for the sole purpose of hurling itself against my toe and sending me stumbling into the cold water, but most particularly golden gods who teased and taunted and weren't truly interested in sex with a hairy Scot—I managed to retrieve it.

I gathered the dripping wool about me, grateful for the heat of the day, but more grateful, in view of the moderately long walk back to Eckley's house, that my feet were not the delicate ones of the mostly effete English.

I used the walk to polish the tale of my meeting Somerville, the loss of the tart, the loss of my clothes, and the nearly naked walk. Edited out the aching, leaking erection and the lusting after an unattainable man who was most assuredly not interested in a sodomite of the Scottish persuasion. It was a story on which I could dine out for quite some time, particularly as I was inviting laughter at my own expense in this less-than-Shakespearean comedy of errors. And when it eventually appeared the tale was on the verge of becoming stale, I would acquire something new to maintain my reputation as a rogue with a fair bit of wit. Maintain, too, my entrée into the homes and clubs where wagers could be found. Even though none of those homes or clubs were in the truly rarified strata where dukes and duchesses and the likes of Somerville and his father roamed.

And if the tale should reach Somerville, as it undoubtedly would work its way up to the heights inhabited by him and his ilk, given how much men gossip, or to use more masculine terms, share a tale over a pint of ale, it will not serve him ill, as the stigma would all be on the lewd, naked Scot who pissed on Somerville's perfectly pressed pantaloons. As men are not noticeable for the accuracy of their tales, particularly when confided over multiple ales, undoubtedly Somerville would have been strolling along in clothes appropriate for a royal ball, when the lewd Scot leaped from hiding, and pissed, pissed, pissed.

So. A way to profit from the afternoon's events.

But still...

But still...

Another time?

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## *PEREGRINE*

*Saturday, 8 July 1815*

*The same path, a little later*

Fucker.

Scottish scum shite. Standing there, flaunting himself.

How the bloody hell had I managed not to rip my breeches open and shove my cock, with or without a drop of spit to ease the way, into his taunting hole?

I paused once I was around the curve and out of his sight, presuming he'd stayed there, hard and leaking, or left as soon as my back was turned. He would not have watched me go; he had no reason to. He was clearly not a friend of Edward's, for all of that displayed hardness and leakage.

He was more like that damned officer from the British Heavy Brigades, last week at Antoine's. The major, a hero of Waterloo to hear him tell it, was safely returned by the grace of God and his own prowess. Perhaps a truth, perhaps only in his own mind, since the men who could say him nay had apparently all died in the counter-slaughter that followed their illusory victory over d'Erlon's Corps. Major something. Ah. Major Lord Whitney.

I had just completed a bout with Antoine himself, holding my own, and even managing two touches that he did not allow for teaching purposes. As a member in good standing, I had access to the bathing room he maintained for those who could afford the deliberately exorbitant, weeding out the chaff, monthly fees. I stripped off my fencing clothes, left them to be cleaned and stored away until I came back, picked up a towel and cloth from the stack beside the door, tucked it around my waist, grabbed a sliver of soap from the bowl, and walked in.

To find myself face to cock, so to speak, with the major. The sweaty and quite naked and quite aroused major. Nakedness in a changing room or a bathing room used by a group of men after exercise, such as fencing here or boxing at Gentleman Jackson's, was, of course, nothing out of the ordinary. Even the occasional erection, or near-erection, was ignored so long as you did not draw attention to it, so long as you treated it as the momentary result of a random thought, and it quickly softened away.

The major was telling the tale, however, not of Waterloo, but of the Battle of Vitoria, and of a see-nor-ee-tuh he had had after the defeat of the French. He

was already into the story, so I had no way to tell if the encounter was consensual with a lady, purchased from a whore, or merely an after-the-victory rape. Men talk of their conquests often, and repeatedly, especially in their cups. Men get hard from the telling or the hearing. Nothing unusual there.

The unusualness was in the combination of the storyteller, location, the listeners, and the sex-soaked atmosphere of the room.

The major was standing next to a tub, his towel draped around his neck. He was short, stocky, hairy, well-muscled, his cock jutting straight out from his body. An impressive cock, perhaps the largest I had ever seen. Certainly the largest one hard.

There were four listeners nearby, all hard themselves, two fully on display, two obvious behind the towels wrapped around the cock-owners' waists. No one was wanking, at least none of the standing men. The listener in the tub was trying to be subtle, but it is hard, as it were, to wank submersed in a tub, no matter how gentle the stroking, without making waves. There were waves.

One of the servants, who would normally have left the room after adding water to a tub, was being carefully unobtrusive in a corner, two large, empty buckets at his feet, his hands covering his crotch.

I stood frozen, knowing that walking to an available tub would break the spell this crude tale had woven in the room. The major told his obscenity-laced story with the most intimate details of his repeated use of the woman's mouth, and cunt and arse. Had I been interested in women that way, I am sure I would have been as hard as the rest, and like all but the one in the tub, barely restraining myself from simply grabbing my cock and wanking as he talked, be damned to where we were.

I was starting to turn away, to simply return to the changing room, dress and leave, when my name was called.

"Somerville! Have we offended you?"

I recognized the bastard who spoke. I berated myself for not noticing sooner that the man with the huge belly, his nether regions fortunately towel-clad, was Beckwith. Had I done so, I could have left immediately and avoided the now-imminent confrontation. Unfortunately, his voice, as offensive as both his personality and politics, was loud enough that I could not pretend not to have heard.

I turned back to find, not surprisingly, that the major had stopped speaking and everyone was looking at me. I looked directly at Beckwith and lifted my

right eyebrow in inquiry. It is a talent I have. I use it to irritate Beckwith, who cannot duplicate it, when I am forced to endure his company for any undue length of time, with my definition of “undue” being any amount of time in excess of that necessary to nod my head to acknowledge his presence and then pass him by.

I waited him out.

“Such an... *arousing*... tale, would you not agree?” His voice oozed slime.

I wondered where he was going with this. Nowhere good, of course.

“Obviously.” I gave him the single word, without mockery. Though what had been “obvious” before was rapidly becoming much less so for the listeners. The major was unaffected. He found *Beckwith*, or what Beckwith had to say, sexually stimulating? Or perhaps his now internal monologue was at work.

“But perhaps...” Beckwith paused as if trying to find the words to say something delicately. But as he had no skill with delicacy, barely an acquaintanceship with it, he went with vulgarity. “Perhaps a friendly cock stand over a tale of a cunning cunt does not... interest you?”

Damn. Politics again, aided by an innate personal dislike.

Beckwith was a baronet who yearned for public position and influence, for which his late wife's substantial wealth was not quite enough to achieve his goal. He had aligned himself with a group of peers and members of Commons at work to reinstate not only the laws against sodomy, but the death penalty for conviction as well. He and his bosom beau, the Bishop of Harwell, had become, for all practical purposes, the public face of the crusade for a new reformation.

The seven reinstatement attempts since 1660 had obviously not succeeded. Undoubtedly because beloved Charles (to those neddy boys acquainted with history) or “*that king*” (to the reformers who refused to say his name), had ensured that the only way to enact another sodomy ban was by secret ballot. And changing the secret ballot provision could only be done by secret ballot as well.

Secret ballots were virtually unheard of in Parliament, and never used in elections to the Commons. Beloved, *brilliant* Charles. The hypocrites in the Houses—the secret sodomites and men who wanted to continue enjoying the occasional dip of their wick in a man's holes without fear of hanging—could take a vigorous public stand on the side of righteousness and God's holy word, as handed down by the Bishop and his like, decrying the perversions which

were causing a deterioration in the moral fiber of the nation. Then vote... secretly... against the bill.

These “reformationists,” as they called themselves, were working more slowly than their predecessors, building a public perception that London was in danger of becoming the new Sodom or Gomorrah, and the contempt and hatred directed toward friends of Edward’s was on the rise. Even an accusation could be nearly as destructive as being caught with a cock in your mouth. Or worse, up your arse.

Ignoring the bastard, or professing a profound love for cunt, and just walking away was not an option. *Whatever* happened after those words would be casually dropped into every single conversation over after-dinner port that night, and several nights thereafter. Men are the most prolific gossips in the world, preferring blatant vulgarity and cock-warming lasciviousness over anything mild or merely crude.

The port-driven tale, twisted beyond any bounds of truth, would then have reached the women of the ton. They would not blanch or swoon over the lewd words whispered into their “delicate” ears. They would refine the tale, smooth its rough edges, shape it, sharpen it, and set it free to circulate in the cesspits of general ton gossip. And as women far exceed the cock-adorned sex in tongue-viciousness, by several orders of magnitude, it would not be long before a man muttered over dice, a woman whispered behind a fan, how terrible it was that the son and heir of the Earl of Glenhaven, that pillar of the Established Church, should turn out to be a neddy boy.

I did not see that I had much choice but to do other than what I did, though as I began I was uncertain whether I could do it at all.

I ignored Beckwith. I ignored them all. All but the major. Dropped the cloth and soap on the floor, pulled the towel from around my waist and wrapped it around my neck as a mirror to the major. Paid no attention to who did, did not, look at my cock and bollocks.

“I do not know what your young *señorita*—” pronounced correctly, of course “—looked like, as I seem to have arrived at the tail of the tale. But I am sure she was beautiful enough to get you hard and eager... get your men hard and eager as well? Did you share her with them?”

It did not matter in that time and place whether he had or not. That he *might* was more than enough for the cocks that had begun to go soft, to become painfully erect again.

There are dark desires in every man, no matter how buried, that with the right spur will be launched into the front of his mind. The desire to see a group of men use a woman's willing holes one after the other, or darker yet, to imagine her raped by all of them. To imagine joining in or just watching and wanking. And perhaps shamefully imagine it was a man, not a woman, being brutally fucked, brutally raped.

*That* was the darkness that got them hard again. The darkness I had to use. I took that darkness, that cock-drooling lust, and wove a tapestry of words.

I did not let him answer.

"I rather think you did, but only after you had her first." I hardened my voice, hardened my cock as well with imaginings I would never dare disclose. "How many, major? Two? Three? Five? A dozen? But only her cunt or her mouth, because her arse was reserved for you.

"If I had been there that day, when my men were done, I would have pulled her up, positioned her like a bitch, got behind her. Worked her bruised nipples, twisting and pulling to make her moan. I would have thrust my cock in her cunt, got it wet and slick with all that seed that had only just begun to leak. Slicked my fingers there as well, then used one or two, no more, on her arse. I'd have slowly pushed my knob inside while helpful men held her, then shoved in balls deep, fucked her arse hard and fast, spewing seed until it spurting out around the flesh of my cock, and then drained like an unstopped bota bag turned upside down, once I pulled out."

I stopped talking. There was no sound in the room except the sounds that men make when they are so aroused their balls are frantic with demands to seed and *seed now!*... but knowing they could not, dare not.

I have had my fair share of women's tits and asses and cunts. Well, to be honest, I had probably had rather less than whatever my fair share was, or might or should or could or would have been, had anyone been counting so that an adequate division of shares could be made. But the imagining that had made me hard had been of a man. No particular shape, features or even cock size; it was just enough to imagine that he was *mine*.

I stood there and let them see my cock stand... a thing of beauty if I say so myself, but unfortunately, it will never be a joy forever to anyone. Certainly not to the wife I would eventually have, though I would put that day off until I was old. Weston was old. Thirty-eight? Forty? And still unwed. I would emulate



him. But I knew the day Father beat me so thoroughly and so well, that I would never have a man to have and hold for forever. Nor ever that one day more.

And when the silence might have been broken by one of them, might have fallen apart had someone moved, I broke it myself.

“All of you, so *enthused* by my story.” My voice was vicious and low and pitched so that those in the room had to strain to hear it, and whoever might have been listening at the door would have to just wonder what I said. “You’re a bunch of boys at Eton or Harrow, just bigger, older, fatter, hairier. Boys in a circle, wagering precious desserts on who can shoot farthest, and which poor sod will shoot first, when the prize is earned by being last. A wager, gentlemen? Twenty pounds says Beckwith will be *first* among you.”

I stared them down. “No takers? Sadly, I have no time to waste watching men trying to relive their schoolboy days.”

I looked at Beckwith. “You want all the friends of Edward’s to hang on a gibbet and burn in hell afterwards, yet here you are, displaying your cock stand to these men.” I deliberately looked at his prick and curled my lip. “Such a *mighty* display, too.”

My cock had softened enough that I could wrap the towel around my waist again. “Good day, gentlemen.”

As I headed back into the changing room, I did not acknowledge the servant whose pants were gloriously stained with seed; I assumed he would spill water on himself in just a moment to solve that potential embarrassment.

Some of them would be wanking later, I knew, just as I did in the privy, quickly and efficiently, once more imagining that phantom man who gave up his arse and his mouth so willingly—I refused to let myself say lovingly, even in the silence of my mind—before I dressed and left. Carefully avoiding the thought that I had turned innate dislike into active enmity.

Christ.

As that memory faded away, I realized how hard my cock was, how much it hurt. Hardness and hurt had nothing to do with my tall tale, but with the fact that as I relived it, the man whose fuck I had described in feminine terms, the man I’d wanked to in that privy, was not some vague image, merely male and nothing more, with readily available holes. He now had a face. Rory’s. And he was not being shared because he was mine. *Mine!*

Christ!

I stepped off the path, pushing through bushes, circled around a tree with a wide enough trunk to hide me. Ripped my cock out. Leaned forward, my bare forearm resting on the rough bark, my forehead on my arm, looking down at my angled body, at the eagerness of my cock, and wanked myself. A fast and furious six to the images of Rory's lush, powerful arse being pounded ruthlessly, furiously, by my cock, and then I spent myself all too quickly in spurts against the wood.

I stood there for a moment, gasping. Berating myself for my thoughts, for the wanking, for the stupidity of wanting a man who had just left a whore's hole shortly before he pissed on me and who was heading back to her holes when I walked away from him.

Stupid, stupid man. And I did not mean Rory for his love of women.

Later that afternoon, I compounded my stupidity by deciding to accept after all the invitation Sir John Eckley had extended, to feel free to join a small house party of friends he had invited to get away from the capital's still overwhelming celebrations of Waterloo. I had never before accepted his invitation, given that we did not move at all in the same circles in the city. He still kept extending them, since he probably suspected that not to do so might in some way cause offense to my father. And causing offense to my father, however slight, was not something anyone with any sense ever knowingly did.

I insisted to myself, though my self was paying little attention, that I had had enough solitude, now that the latest unpleasantness with Father was ended. At least for now. Mama would want me to stay for a while, and so I would. But I needed the company of men, though not men whose arses or mouths were available for a good rogering. Men with whom I could relax, drink, play cards, gamble, tell outlandish tales that were most assuredly untrue—do some of the rakish things I do so very well at a males-only house party.

I was not going to Eckley's because that was the most logical place for the Scot to have come from. Absolutely not.

So I rode over to his estate, where I was tormented by Rory's presence for the remainder of the day, and over dinner, and well into an evening of drinking and gambling over cards.

I lost several hundred to him.

That night, after one final wank to an imagining of my cock driving into that wide Scots mouth repeatedly until his lips were swollen, and his face as red with lust as his hair, I put him out of my mind. I would not see him in town.

As pleasant as Sir John was, a bluff, hearty baronet of what is described as sound English stock, sensible, plain-spoken, who enjoyed occasional trips to the capital for some never-to-excess gambling, and perhaps a bit of discreet wenching on the side, Lady Eckley having brought coins rather than beauty to the marriage, our circles did not overlap. He and his friends or acquaintances, and I did not know which Rory was, were at the edge, slightly beyond the edge, of the group that comprised the Upper Ten Thousand. We would therefore not meet in my usual haunts, and I certainly would not seek him out.

Nor he me.

And as I put him out of my mind, I refused to wonder why I had said “another time” to him. Or what it meant.

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## ***RORY***

*Sunday, 20 August 1815*

*Well past midnight*

*The Dock*

*London*

I smelled. Not the good, clean smell of having worked in a field on a spring day. Not the smell of leather and weather, or sweat after a hunt. Not the smell of a bout at Antoine's or a round in the ring at Gentleman Jackson's. Not even the smell of *private* sex. I smelled of sex on the Dock.

The riverbanks of the Thames are crammed with countless wharves for the ships that carry the trade that is the life-blood of the Empire. There are so many ships that it is said you could go the London length of the river without ever touching water, just by walking from ship to ship to ship.

So many ships, so much overcrowding, so much delay in offloading and loading, that we, or rather the government, just spent nearly six million pounds to complete the London Docks this year, to provide added shipping capacity. But of all the docks, with all their names, only one was referred to as just "the Dock."

With a capital D.

If you are a man who lusts for the heart-thumping thrill of an unknown man sucking your cock, fucking your arse, or the reverse, nothing leisurely or gentle, always hurried, almost frantic; if you are a man who *needs* that extra tension sizzling throughout your body as you get close, closer, *closer*, that always-present fear that you will be caught, your secret revealed, yourself made known for the disgusting pervert you have so recently been assured by Beckwith and the Church that you are, you choose the Dock.

True, there are other public places where you might hold the head of the man you chose, the man who chose you, the man you paid for the use of his mouth, the man who paid you and made you feel he was desperate for your cock when you know bloody well any cock at all would have done. One particularly dark walkway in Vauxhall. Certain public privies. Certain out of the way areas, behind bushes, along trails, in the parks.

But there is no place for public sex that is as gut-churning as the Dock. And while in most other places, the risk of being observed is mostly minimal if you seed quickly, observation on the Dock is a near certainty.

There are almost always watchers and wankers, sometimes watching just far enough away to be sure they can see everything you are doing, or enough to satisfy their lust, but still not so close that you might see them clearly. Sometimes they are bolder, moving within touching distance, perhaps for a better view, perhaps hoping to be asked to join. They are the watchers and wankers who explosively seed just as you and the one, two, three, however many others are sexing with you, seed as well. If they're lucky, or perhaps just very skilled, in the timing of their strokes.

If you want privacy for your fucking or sucking or arse-eating or whatever your particular perversion might be, you do not choose the Dock.

I chose the Dock tonight. Dressed in the rough, tattered clothes I keep for such special occasions as Dock fucking. Though not the kind of fucking I wanted but so rarely got.

My clothes were dirtier than before, and they had already been very dirty indeed, the knees in particular, when I finished sucking the toff who was still dressed in the clothes he had worn to some ton affair or other. We were on the outermost edges of the Dock area, where such attire was reasonably safe. Far enough in for enough shadows to hide the quick suck or fuck; not so far in as to invite a beating and robbery. The Dock is, after all, not only a place for friends of Edward's to play, and prey upon each other, but to be preyed upon as well.

After he frantically tucked himself away, and turned and almost ran, while still buttoning the placket, I moved farther into the darkness of the Dock. I found another man. Another man of the ton, though he wouldn't think the brutish Scot would know, and indeed, I didn't know him by name and probably wouldn't recognize him later, if by chance I ran across him at some tonnish affair—to which I was unlikely to be invited in any event, as my life is spent on the fringe of the ton. The fringe where all rogues—the men who survive by their wits, their charm, and their gambling skills—live and play.

What he wanted was a rough fuck. Not what I wanted, but what I was definitely capable of giving. A neddy boy must do what a neddy boy must do, if he wants to seed well, or even reasonably well. My cock is not long, a respectable almost six inches, but as gasps and grunts and whines and moans have often told me, remarkably thick.

I made him bend over a barrel, his pants and smalls at his ankles; made him use his own spit to wet his hole and stretch it; smeared my copious precome around the knob and shaft of my cock to join my spit in slicking myself up.

Pressed myself against his arsehole, feeling the flesh give way a little, only a little, asked if he was sure, and when he nodded, shoved hard, and punched through.

He gave a most satisfactory cut-off howl, perhaps wondering if he had splintered the edge of the barrel he was gripping so tightly, and then I pushed all the way in. He was too tight, hot, eager to want gentleness; hell, he would not be on the Dock if he wanted gentleness. He hesitated only a moment before fully cooperating with the assault on his channel. I had worked up a good, steady rhythm, almost every stroke going over that special little bump inside that made him, like every man not actually being raped, moan in accelerating pleasure, when I felt the hand on my rump.

I had been aware of the watchers and wankers, of course. I always was. I even paused between plunges to give them an opportunity to see how widely my cock was spreading him. I am *proud* of my damned cock. After all, if you can be proud because you are handsome, well-born, talented, whatever facet of you that you had no part in creating, you can be cock-proud as well.

I turned my head to look up at him but only saw a shadowy outline. Another ton bastard, though. He smelled... *clean*... somehow beneath the scents of the Dock and its filth and the men who added to that filth. Not someone who made my cock wither and retreat, so I let him find pleasure in touching me, while I pleased myself with the well-fucked hole providing a temporary home for my cock.

He moved behind me, long fingers caressing my arse, two of them pressing into my hole. He reached around as if to undo my pants and bring them down but a growled "No!" from me stopped that. He sighed and moved around to my right side. I didn't stop him from reaching between the man I was fucking and me, to fondle his balls, my balls, to caress my well-slicked cock. He inhaled sharply when he felt it, curled his fingers around it so that for a moment I was fucking his hand as I fucked the arse.

His voice was low, and as rough as my fuck; the kind of whisper a man uses when he doesn't want his own voice to be too easily recognized.

"I'll imagine you've got a hairy arse. Imagine what it would feel like if I ate it out, buried my tongue inside, making you squirm and whine like a slut. Imagine slicking your hole up with the oil I have in a little vial in my pocket. Imagine slicking myself up with it as well."

He was bent over, his left arm stretched out so his left hand could work my arse, his fingers pressing and caressing my hole. His knob briefly brushed my cheek.

“Imagine, with me, the feel of my cock pressing into your hole, spreading you wider than you’ve ever felt before. Then pushing inside you swiftly, balls-deep on a single thrust, the way you just used him. Would you howl for me, let it all out instead of holding it in?”

I was so aroused I actually turned my head, twisted my torso as if I might bend awkwardly over, so he could fuck my mouth while my cock was in the barrel-man’s hole. But the prick taunted me. He scraped his finger over the weeping slit, put it up to my mouth, let me suck it in, tasting the slickness and his at least clean-for-now flesh, not that cleanliness lasts long on the Dock. He pulled the finger slowly out. “Oh, no, my friend. I won’t use your mouth. Not now, mayhap later. But imagine my cock far up inside you, fucking you until you’re begging for me to let you seed. Imagine that!”

My flesh tingled where we touched, the watcher-wanker and me. I wondered whether he felt that odd... *connection*. And then it was too late to wonder anything more except for the most momentary of wonderings of whether this seeding would be what I wanted, needed, to satisfy the urges that had brought me to the Dock.

As it turned out, it was not.

The barrel-holding man began to moan louder, to fist his own cock faster, until he shouted to let the Dock know he was coming as he spattered seed against the wood and his arse clamped down on me. I forced him open again with a last few brutal strokes of my own, refusing to signal my own coming other than with the grunt I can never refrain from making. It was enough for my watcher-wanker as well, because I felt the side of my face being splattered with drop after drop after drop of thick, hot seed.

We paused, panting. Then the man who had so badly needed a fuck began struggling. Yet another who comes and runs. I pulled my cock out of his arse, letting it slowly begin its droop back to normalcy, stepped back to allow the barrel-fucked man to make his escape. If there had been any other watchers, they were gone. It was just the two of us. I turned toward my watcher-wanker, feeling his cooling seed sliding down my cheeks, one drop dangling from my nose in imminent danger of making a mess of the ground, until his finger reached out, scooped it up, and then inserted it into his mouth. I gulped when

his lips tightened on it, and as he so obviously cleaned it and slowly pulled it out, his left hand moved to my cock.

We turned, then, and it was just enough to see each other's face in the dim light.

Fuck me! (Please, Lord!)

Somerville.

He stilled as well, obviously recognizing me. Realizing, perhaps, that he had an actual memory, if he had not chosen to somehow wipe it away, of my arse, how hairy it is, what my hole is like. He had had no need to imagine that at all.

Then a slow smile spread across his lips. He had not yet moved his left hand from my cock. I could not help beginning to plump up just from his hand holding me, not even stroking. I was certainly helped along by that cock-stand-making finger, joined by a second, touching my cheek, scooping up more of his seed, and then holding them in front of my lips. I opened my mouth and took them in, demonstrating my not inconsiderable sucking skills on his fingers.

He pushed both fingers in, testing my gag reflex. I passed the test. His smile broadened. My cock stiffened. It was his own voice, that plummy *Somerville* tonnish voice that softly said, elongating my name in a mockery of what he'd heard that earlier summer's day, "Rory, you are such a pervert."

He took his fingers out of my mouth, so very slowly, and I knew he was hardening again as well, though I did not look down to verify my certainty.

I smiled back at him. "I but hold the mirror up to thy nature, m'lord."

He blinked at that. Then stilled his face. Ah. He had not expected the rude, crude, lewd Scot, who flaunted his cock and balls and arse on pastoral pathways, who fucked a man over a barrel, skillfully sucked fingers, and came deliciously well from imagining all that he had asked me to imagine, to be able to mangle the Bard.

I handed him back my best Scottish smirk.

A scream is a definite killer of cock stands.

Particularly a scream of terror like that one was. It was followed by a loud cry of "*Ned-bangers! Ne—*" But the voice was cut off in mid-word.

Because he was running? Because it was cut off for him? But at least the man, whoever he was, had not run away in silence, but had attempted to warn everyone else. The shouts continued for a while as unknown voices spread the



warning, even to those whose location might be safe from the predators. Or perhaps not, because voices calling out in the darkness could not tell us where the bangers were, where they had been.

Cocks having retreated to the safety of trousers, buttons buttoned, Somerville and I sensibly decided to move elsewhere, wherever that elsewhere might be, for the second round of sex we both knew was inevitable. But what should have been a reasonably rapid stroll, designed to achieve that elsewhere goal without drawing undue attention to ourselves, unraveled with the loud “Oi!” after we turned the first corner.

There were three of them halfway down the block. The largest, in the center, was the one who had hailed us. They began sauntering toward us, neither moving too quickly, nor too slowly, but just right to create the illusion of casualness and just-looking-for-a-cocksucker friendliness.

“Whatcher lookin’ for, mates? Mebbe we got it right here.” He groped his crotch and leered.

There are times when honor... Stand your ground! Never surrender! Charge uphill into the cannon fire! ...is sheer stupidity. Neither Somerville nor I were stupid. Though running would be a swirling cape enticing the bull to charge in hopes of gouging our guts, we had no choice.

We turned and ran and the three followed. We raced through the dark, the near-dark, twisting, turning, sliding through shadows, hurling ourselves past light, never quite gaining enough ground to elude them. I suddenly realized I knew where we were. Up ahead was a building under construction.

A quick decision. “Fuck this shite. Can you get rid of one?”

The blessed man didn’t waste breath on anything other than a well-panted, mocking, “Aye!”

I sped up, and he kept pace. We needed to gain a little, just a little, on our pursuers.

No time to pause and plan, and so my plan consisted of a chin-tilt forward and leftward as we ran side by side, six words and the oddly confident hope that he would understand and go along.

“Building. Left. Go right. Any weapon.”

We made it to the ancient office building leaning over the street, turned left around it, out of sight of the hounds for a moment. I ran straight ahead, Somerville twisted right into the deeper shadows of the site, and then I stopped.

Turned. Faced the three pursuers who raced around the corner, stumbled to a halt, puffing like Trevithick's Catch-Me-Who-Can, and stared at me. Greedily.

Not a greed for sex, though. I knew that particular greedy look all too well.

I made my voice softer, gentler, more consistent with a nancy-boy who was easily afraid despite his obviously not slender and tiny build. Hunched a bit, a spurious cringe to help disguise my height and weight and reach. "Wh-what do you want?"

"Where's your mate?" The biggest was apparently not entirely stupid, but hopefully just stupid enough.

"He... he's, uh, over there." I tilted my head directly to my left, to shadows where a box, where *something*, created an appearance that *might* be a man hiding, or just a place for a man to hide. "P-p-please don't hurt us. We-we'll..." I let my voice trail away.

"Just a coupla neddy boys, lookin' for cock to suck, aincha? We got three good ones for ya 'ere. Suck us good 'n' ain't no one'll get 'urt."

"O... okay."

I had to gamble on my speed and sheer desperation. I dropped as if eager, now, to be of use to the approaching predators. My left knee went into the filth, though, and my right leg went back as if it had slipped in the muck. Which tilted me so that I was leaning with one palm flat against a cobblestone, bracing myself for a launch against the nearest. There was only a second, two, three, before they realized I was not actually getting on my knees, but I could not move until the time was right, or when I had no time at all to do anything but move. Would they be...

*Yes!* They *were* that stupid. And I had an odd confidence in Somerville.

They moved toward me, big man in the lead, reaching inside his pants to haul his cock out. Assuming, probably, that the frightened molly boy on his knees wouldn't notice that his other hand was out of sight. The one to his left had a hidden hand, as well. I thought the one on the right might have both hands visible but could not be certain, as he trailed just a little.

Just little enough.

Somerville stepped out from the shadows.

Two voices overlapped. The left-hand banger, groping his crotch, saying, "Me next, Bill." The right-hand banger's "Fuck 'im, Bill."

I felt no regret for what we were, I hoped and nearly prayed, about to do to them. If Somerville's aim were true.

It was.

Somerville's hands gripped a long, thick piece of wood, which he drew up and toward his left shoulder as he twisted his body left as well, and then like some reverse bat on a frighteningly odd cricket pitch, swung right in a backhand stroke propelled by the full weight of his body.

The *thud!*—as the wood met the right-hand man's upper back and knocked him flat—was so loud in the silence that for such a brief slice of time seemed to be a prelude to sex. To be followed, of course, by the banging these men had always intended to give us, with fists and boots and the varied clubs, held in the hidden hands, that had come to be known as banger-sticks.

They had not expected resistance. Startled, the standing two stupidly turned right to look. I launched myself out of the muck, and slanted to my right. Left foot. Right. A partial third as the left-hand man began to twist back toward me. Too late, too late. Weight on my left leg, arms out for brief balance, with all the skills honed by playing football with a bigger, meaner older brother and his equally big and vicious friends, I kicked the fucking-with-no-one-tonight bastard in his balls.

Two down. The shrill scream and groin-grabbing hands as left-hand man dropped brought the big man's attention back to me. A moment of hesitation. A flicker of worry over the unarmed man in front of him, and the board-armed man behind him. He made his choice.

Yanked a knife from somewhere, moved toward me, circling to his right, my left, where he could keep an eye on Somerville, and where his friend might be able to grab me if I stupidly forgot he was there and allowed him to get behind me, temporarily fallen or not.

I was not that stupid. I stopped the circling by standing still when we were both in a position to keep an eye on the other three in our little tableau. The two fallen bangers and Somerville.

Somerville... the fucking idiot! ...was paying far too much attention to me and the man with the knife. The man he had hit was beginning to struggle up.

"Arse-wipe!" I shouted, without taking my eyes off the eyes of the knife-man.

Fortunately, Somerville understood that he was the arse-wipe in question, turned, and slammed the board down, this time on the back of the man's head. Dead or merely disabled was unimportant, so long as he stayed down.

He did.

And then to prove he wasn't a total arse-wipe, Somerville strolled over to the ball-bashed banger, and whacked his head as well.

Two against one. Except it wasn't. The big one was mine. It didn't matter what he had intended for me. What mattered was what he had intended to do to something, *someone*, who was inexplicably mine. So I said the word aloud, to both of them, but I doubted the Englishman understood the double meaning. Somerville understood enough, though, that he stopped the stalking that would have brought him in close. Possibly close enough to help me, or close enough to get in my way and hurt the pair of us.

We danced, knife-man and I. Twists and turns, stomps and taps; the long muscled arm with the long fat knife at the end jabbing out, and my body dancing back and away. An arcing forehand slice at my neck, me tilting back, knees bending, barely keeping from over-balancing and falling on my arse. A backhand try to rip open my belly, an almost tonnish bow forward that moved my belly away so only my shirt was ripped.

And then I fell.

An awkward fall, to end it all. Or so he thought.

I might... I think... fight fairly if ever I were stupid enough to agree to a duel or force one on someone else, but otherwise? The only reason to fight is to win. Which is why I used a sweep of my left arm to throw a fistful of slimy muck up and into his face, as I rose and brought my right arm down in an arc that placed my hand around his knife-hand wrist, and pulled so his own momentum swung him around, off-balance, so I could give him his fair turn on the ground.

I snapped his wrist as I brought him down.

He howled the other kind of howl I enjoy. The howl of a man I've hurt because he intended to hurt me or mine. *Somerville is mine!* I safely howled inside my head. I stepped back.

An injured animal is still both an animal and injured, and if it can move at all is still capable of wreaking havoc.

I put my right arm out, palm up, not looking away from the man who glared up at me while he cradled his flopping wrist in his other hand.

“Arse-wipe.”

That could be my new favorite word. Part of a special language known only to me and Somerville—a man who unquestionably readily understood arse-wipish. Spoke it fluently, indeed, as he moved closer and put the board into my hand. And immediately backed out of range so if I had to use it he was not only out of the way, but could keep an eye on the other two.

What a fucking team!

Yes. Definitely. A *fucking* team, though just not quite yet.

There was one more thing to do before that. A possibly stupid, possibly reckless idea to implement, but no one has ever known me to hold back when I am truly angry. I used that same disguising half-whisper Somerville had used to make me seed so hard and so well, a little deeper, since I am a baritone to his tenor, bits and pieces of brogue and Cockney tossed in. But not a tonnish tone in the lot.

“Ye dinna know who ye fooked wi’, did ye, mon? Me mate ’n’ me, yeah, we’re neddy boys. Or maybe, jest maybe, we’re just friends o’ some friends of Edward’s. Either way, we took ye down, ’n’ ’urt ye bad.

“’N’ that’s what’s gonna happen again, t’ all ye bangers. See, we’re part o’ the Friends of Edward Society. Foes of men like you buggerin’ barstards. ’N’ we’re gonna fight ye when ye come after us. When ye ’urt one of us, ye ’urt all of us, and we’re fookin’ gonna ’urt ye back.”

I tilted my head toward Somerville and back. “Me mate, ’ere? ’E’s a founder of the Society, ’e is. Meanest man-fooker in the whole fookin’ valley, too. Bugger me, but if ye’d been fightin’ ’im, ye’d be bleedin’ out right now, besides havin’ some serious broken bones t’ go along w’ yer gutted belly, ’stead a that limp wrist there.

“But we’re gonna let ye off kind of easy-like. So ye kin let yer pals know that when they try this shite again, they’re never gonna know if it’s just some random neddy boy they kin actually ’urt, or one of yer foes that’s gonna fook you up ’n’ fook you down, ’n’ leave you cryin’ and beggin’ for mercy y’ ain’t never gonna get.

“And if you *do* ’urt one of us, ’urt any friend of Edward’s at all, at all, we’ll ’unt ye down, ’n’ after we’ve fooked ye up, we’ll find yer friends, find yer family, ’n’ fuck w’ ’em one way or another or lots o’ ways.

“Are ye gettin’ the message from yer foes, shite-head? We’re mad as ’ell, ’n’ we ain’t fookin’ takin’ it anymore.” I raised my voice and roared at him. “Now get the fook outa here!”

The shite-head did as he was told, with no qualms about leaving his still unconscious friends behind.

I tossed the wood away and turned to look at Somerville, who looked at the downed men and then at me.

“You idiot. You bloody idiot. Look at their sizes. We could have outrun them.” He paused as remembered reality set in. “Uh, somehow.”

“Wee lads. Better to punish them.”

“But what if that wood had not been there? What if I hadn’t been able to stop the third one? What if...”

I could not help the laughter that erupted from me. “Bugger what-if, m’lord. It didn’t happen.”

His frown became more stern. “And what the fuck was all that shite about a Friends of Edward Society?”

“And why not have one? An army of neddy boys in frilly dresses or dripping chains, or just plain clothes, wielding fans or whips, or wooden pricks, or fists or knives or boots or pistols. We could march down St. James’s Street, make our bow in front of the bow window at White’s. And shout as we march, ‘We’re mad as ’ell, ’n’ we ain’t fuckin’ takin’ it anymore.’”

I stopped. Realized that the idea wasn’t quite as funny, quite as outrageous as I had thought when I conceived it in a moment of rage. Reality, as ever, had a way of settling in, sitting heavily down, on my odd starts. A Friends of Edward Society had as much reality as a dream born of an opium pipe.

I was starting to come down from the almost drunken exuberance of all that had happened: the sex, recognizing Somerville, the chase, the fight, the win, the braggadocio after. I needed... something. Something more to keep that feeling for just a while longer.

What I needed was a good fuck. The kind of fuck *I* needed, not the fuck someone else needed or wanted.

“Fuck me, Somerville. Here and now, fuck me fuckin’ arse. I need yer cock inside me.”

Somerville looked at me in shock. I knew men like him well. The stuffy Englishmen who fucked other men in mostly discreet places, hidden away with little to no chance of being discovered. And even in their excursions to the Dock—and this was most certainly not *Somerville's* first foray into Dock fucking, with his carefully ordinary, carefully just a little threadbare attire, his hair dirtied to dull down the gleaming gold, his face a bit scruffy—these stuffy, timid little men, little, at least, in mind and soul if not in body, would still be as discreet as possible. They would venture only as far into the maw of the Dock as needed to find the right cock or hand or hole, drawing as little attention as possible to themselves while they got the sex they craved.

Right then, it was *him* I craved. Him I would have. I wanted what he'd promised me back there, before the fun began, when he played with my arse, played with my mind. I wanted it here, wanted it now, not in a few minutes, not later, in some *safer* spot.

"Afraid, *Englishman*?" I made the word an insult. "Fer all yer braggin' back there—" and I tipped my head in a vaguely "back there" sort of direction—"it's a wee Sassenach willy y' have, ain't it? So ye just make up stories t' get yer cock goin', 'n' yer balls hummin', all that imaginin' the shite y' ain't never gonna do, ain't never gonna have. Just to make yerself seed."

His fists clenched, and he glared, but the bastard didn't move. Fine, if I couldn't get a fuck, another fight would do just as well to drain me.

"Aw, poor, poor toff. Yer real problem is y' can't get a cock stand to fuck someone else, just when yer own arse is bein' used?" I groped my hardening prick through the cloth, reminded him of its size. "C'mon, then, give up yer arse, 'n' I'll give y' a poundin' like y' never 'ad before."

He couldn't literally tower over me, of course. He was only a few inches taller, but just then something *shifted*, and he was all ninety feet of the Tower of London. His voice dropped, became as rough as a blacksmith's callused hand. "Turn around. Against the wall."

Impressive. But he wouldn't have me that easily. "Oh..."

He cut off the mocking words I had intended. "Two guineas wide?"

It was my turn to be shocked. What the bloody...

"Your cock, Rory, your cock. That thing down between your legs, above your bollocks? Two guineas wide, perhaps a little more? Perhaps a little less?"

Fucking English aristocrats, measuring everything in golden guineas, they couldn't just use inches like the rest of us. I wondered just how many two-

guinea cocks he had had in hand, in width *or* value, to be able to estimate that well, just from grasping mine while I fucked.

“Aye. So?”

He stepped closer, only a bit of his anger gone. “Mine’s only a guinea and ten shillings wide, perhaps a few pence more. But more than eight guineas long, *Scotsman*.”

I had not realized until just then that our mutual fluency in arse-wipish included both my ability to snort a snort that indicated a strong disbelief, even a disparagement, of an arrogant lord’s bragging, and his ability to translate it into daily English.

“Care to measure it? Hell, we could write the wager in the betting book at White’s: ‘Lord S—wagers 8 guineas to one that his cock, when properly measured, is not less than eight and one-half inches in length.’”

His voice was softer, heading toward the tone he’d used on me back there. I shivered, hoped he didn’t see it, was sure he had.

“Ever had eight guineas and ten or eleven shillings up inside your arse, *Scotsman*?”

Actually, no. But I wasn’t about to let him know. Nonchalant. That was the tone to take. “Nine a couple of times. A handsome ten guineas and a shilling or three, once.”

He had moved in until he was up close and very personal. A fine Tower of London, indeed. Making me feel, not small, or frail, but smaller, and definitely no longer in control. If ever I had been, in fact.

“Liar.” There was a smile in his voice now; he paused. “You know this is consummate idiocy, do you not?” When I opened my mouth to acknowledge that truth, the hand that wasn’t on my weeping cock pressed my lips shut. “There are other places for a fuck as quick as this will have to be. Bloody hell, if we kept quiet, I could fuck you in an enormous soft bed in my home, but... that’s not what you need.”

How did he know that this fuck was more of a necessity than the wanting of plain lust?

His breath was gentle on my face as he leaned in further still. “The wall. Now!”

I was going to obey. I just needed a short delay. My hand reached out to his crotch, to test the eight guineas, ten or eleven shillings boast. He batted my



hand away. Shrugged. "Changed your mind about getting fucked? Your loss. I'm not interested in your hand."

He started to turn away.

Liar. However reluctant, however unlike himself this was, this here, this now, he was *interested*. But I couldn't take the chance of being wrong and having him walk away.

Though his walking away, not seeing him again, would be the inevitable result of tonight in any event. I was as like to win the 2000 Guineas on a plough horse, as meeting him by chance in the second and third tiers of the ton where I survived. As for the other... He did not know anything of me other than my looks and first name. And that I was, at a minimum, an acquaintance, or an acquaintance of an acquaintance, of Sir John. That he would actively hunt for me, sans hounds, sans scent save for the scents of sex and seed, was equally improbable.

I caught his left wrist; he stopped his turn, looked back over his shoulder.

"Nor your mouth."

Arrogant fucking Englishman.

I was too proud to grovel; I never begged.

I did both in a single word. "Please."

The banger whose bollocks I had banged, and I smiled at the rhythm of that thought, moaned. There was no way I would allow him to deprive me of what I so desperately desired, so oddly needed.

I loosed my grip on Somerville's wrist, stalked over to where the banger lay, still half curled. Leaned over, grabbed his thick, filthy hair with my left hand, raised his head and his upper body and before he could cry out too much, smashed his jaw with my fist. I let him go, and he dropped. I think his head might have bounced. No one asked me if I cared; I did not volunteer an answer. I stood up, shaking my hand.

Somerville looked at me. Licked his lips—good if it was because of lust; bad if it was because he was getting nervous and stuffy again. I tried tipping the balance toward lust.

"Your cock as big as you said?"

He nodded. Smirked. "But right now you don't really care if that's braggadocio or not, do you? Just so it's up inside you. And soon."

I ignored those home truths.

“Then what are you waiting for?” I wanted him to see a nonchalant, don't-really-care-if-you-do, don't-really-care-if-you-don't, but-if-you-do-let's-do-it walk to the wall. What he saw was a quick few steps of the bloody-hell-fuck-me-now variety. And then I was fumbling... *fumbling?* ...with buttons and snaps before shoving pants, no smalls, down to my ankles. I leaned forward and braced myself, palms flat, the dirt and grit pressing in. Christ, I was in for some serious humiliation if he laughed and walked away, or just walked.

He did walk.

In the right direction.

I inhaled, a sharp little gasp when his hands cupped my cheeks, squeezed, rubbed; his thumbs spread me apart a little.

“I never knew how much I liked a hairy arse before,” he whispered.

“We don't have time for admiration, arse-wipe, though it *is* an arse worthy of extensive admiration. It's also worthy of a nice hard fuck, here and now.”

He chuckled. Silence, then, his fingers still spreading me as I felt him change position, drop to his knees?

“Oh, fuck.” The words were a soft moan as his tongue touched the edges of my hole. Then I wasn't communicating with words, just moans and other noises as his tongue licked and lapped, and a wet thumb pushed inside while he did it. Withdrew. Repeated. Repeated. Repeated. Cool air for a moment as his thumbs let go, and his palms kept me spread, then hot, hot, *hot* air as his lips circled my entrance, and his tongue went inside. I relaxed my muscles, let him get deep, remarkably deep.

I could seed from wanking while being tongue-fucked, though it had been years since I had had the chance. If this was what he wanted...

I dropped my right hand to my cock, which was followed by an odd sound arising from the vicinity of my arse. It is difficult to speak intelligibly when your tongue is buried inside another man's arsehole, doing incredible things to the sensitive flesh inside. Unless, of course, you are fluent in arse-wipish. And to anyone fluent in arse-wipish, that odd sound said, “You fucking wank and seed and I will break your fucking wrist, and then not fuck you.”

I briefly thanked my imaginary God for our mutual fluency and pressed flesh again to the wall, in a not quite holy palmer's kiss.

It had been a long time since I had been fucked, and with the best will in the world, and the deity knew I had the best fucking will in the fucking universe at that moment, I was still tight, and getting his cock inside with just his spit and whatever precome he might have, was going to be bloody difficult. And bloody painful.

But a friend of Edward's must do what a friend of Edward's must do, when the issue is a cock knocking at the hole of that friend of Edward's, demanding entrance. *Immediate* entrance.

A motto I lived by. When I had the chance. As now.

The humid, summer, Thames-infused Dock air still felt cool on my hole when he moved away, stood up.

“Against the wall.”

I almost spoke, almost asked, “What?”

But then I played out the sequence in my head that would result from my asking the question: What. Against the wall. But why. Another threat not to fuck me, whether or not the threat was made in words. My giving in.

I eliminated the dialogue and let him have his way. Straightened slightly. Shuffled the three steps forward needed to have the leaking tip of my cock touching the wall. Tiny pieces of grit acted like miniature pins, pressing against the tender flesh. Especially the thousand and one pieces that were trying to work their way inside my slit. I vowed to thereafter be extremely careful what I wished for. Although if this fuck was as good as I hoped it might be, that vow would naturally go by the wayside, as virtually all vows that men make do.

There was no hand, or mouth, or tongue, or cock on my arse just then. There was only an arse-wipish silence that told me “all the way.” I kept my sigh equally silent, and hobbled the last little bit, reaching down to use my fingertip to guide my cock beneath my flopping shirt, so that when I was pressed against the wall, my right cheek flat, my cock was between my belly and the wall, but at least covered by cloth. Thin, worn cloth that easily tore. Better than nothing at all, though not by very much.

Somerville stepped in again. I felt a wide, blunt knob rubbing my hole. Suppressed the sigh for the pain to come. But that touch was replaced by another touch. A fingertip. Slick with oil. Wiping around the edge, then pushing slowly in. I sighed.

I hadn't realized I was speaking arse-wipish.

“Thought me a liar, *Scotsman*?”

Liar? About... Oh.

“Sassenachs so often are, *m’lord*.”

The sigh was replaced by a moan when the second slick finger joined the first, and went in and deep, and touched that bump inside.

“Three, I think.”

I whimpered as the two fingers stroked and stroked. Managed to gasp, “Three is my favorite number.”

The third went in with a grunt and a groan and a whimper and a hint of whine. He twisted and turned the three, oiling me up, stretching me, thrusting more roughly, turning the hint into full-on whine that conveyed in arse-wipish, “More, please, *more*.”

“I thought you had a different favorite number. A *new* favorite number.”

My slit was oozing steadily, his fingers were wreaking havoc with my innards and my outards, if there was such a word and he wanted to talk mathematics?

The fucking bastard.

Oh.

“Next... oh, shit... next to eight guineas, ten...” A sharp thrust and a *gasp!* “Eleven... bastard... *eleven fucking shillings*.”

And then he ended his torture.

And began a new one.

With his cock.

He bent his legs to get in place, his knees and inner thighs searing my skin, and then he pressed... and pushed... and I opened up as if I’d just slid one of my polished wooden pricks out of my arse and was stuffing a newer, larger, well-oiled one, all the way in.

Buried to his balls, we stopped breathing. I was more alive than I had ever been before, in this dangerous, dirty place, and prayed he felt the same, or even a sliver of the same. His chest pressed against me, mine against the wall, we returned to the land of the breathing, and he began fucking me. I could not possibly have worked a hand between my body and the wall to grab my cock,

but I knew there was no need. He picked up speed, dancing with the danger, and I ground my arse to help him get there, help me get there. With that kind of wealth of cock up inside me, using me, punching over that brilliant little bump on every damned stroke, me squeezing my arse muscles every time he pulled out, relaxing to let him in, it took no time at all for us both to lose our customary English in favor of arse-wipish grunts and moans that an expert linguist could have translated as... "Fuck, oh shit, oh fuck, yes, do that, that's right, oh fuck-fuck-fuck, I'm *coming!*"

I felt scorching hot seed coating my channel, felt my own scorching hot seed smearing my belly, soaking into my shirt.

And then, all too damned soon, it was over. We stood in place, gasping for the breath we'd lost again.

He slowly slid his cock out of me, backed away. My confident, unfazed move away from the wall was more stagger and stumble than step. Still hobbled by my pants, I nevertheless turned, looked at the cock that had fucked me so very briefly. So *very* fucking well.

I reached out. He let me caress his low-hanging bollocks, roll them in my fingers. Lift his not quite soft cock, but then, I had no way of knowing how far that wealth of flesh would normally retreat. Not, I thought, with no basis at all for my certainty, to as little as a guinea or two of display. In inexpressibles, on display in his own milieu, he'd flaunt at least four guineas. Perhaps even an ostentatious five.

It was his turn to inhale in surprise, not quite enough for a gasp, when I bent forward and opened my mouth, and sucked his oiled, seed-slimed cock all the way down. Cleaning him well with a talented tongue he would never get to know again, for all the obvious reasons, was the least I could do for the pleasures just given. And the future wanking pleasure with each remembrance.

When I was done, I stretched my hands down, pulled my pants up above my knees, enough to make walking a little easier, and then hobbled, waddled over to left-hand man on the ground.

"Knife," I said to Somerville, and held my hand out.

"No!" Not a denial that he had one; I expected him to and had berated myself during my dance with possible death for not having brought my dirk with me. Instead, a refusal.

I was unreasonably hurt by his instant belief that what I intended for the knife was murder, but then, what did Somerville actually know of me other

than a cock-and-arse-flaunting meeting on a path, getting him involved in battling bangers instead of sensibly eluding them, somehow, and then insisting on a royal fuck? Though the image of Prinny and my arse being that intimate made me want to cast up my accounts.

There was apparently enough light for him to see, or at least sense, my offended glare. Technically, he had offended my honor, and I could have called him out for it, though explaining the circumstances that led to the challenge would have been outrageously embarrassing. He realized his mistake and had the grace to apologize before he walked over and handed me the blade.

I pushed aside the rough jacket the banger wore, grabbed a fistful of shirt, and sawed that chunk off. I handed the knife back to Somerville and said, "Gie us a shoolder, mukker."

His fluency in arse-wipe was clearly helping him to translate a deliberately thick brogue. He took a step closer, let me put my left hand on his shoulder for balance as I leaned forward, and then with the banger's shirt shard, thoroughly wiped my arse.

Somerville choked back a laugh.

I mock-glared again. "I am not about to make a mess of the inside of my britches," I told him in my most mocking tonnish tone. "Of course, a really *fine* buggerer, after a bloody brilliant bugging like that, would have completed his task and removed the residue himself, tongue in cheek."

I was rewarded with a quiet laugh, and, "Another time."

That phrase again. But there was no reason to believe it now, as I had not believed it then. Tonight was mere happenstance. And men, after all, say numerous things after a good fuck—or indeed any fuck at all that has resulted in them seeding—things that they neither mean nor have any intention of doing: *That was brilliant. Never been fucked, sucked, like that before. We must do this again. I don't want this to end here.*

But here it was ending.

Almost. There was one more thing I needed to do. "I need to piss."

A sigh. "Of course you do. Do you always piss in public?"

"Do *you* always piss in private privies?"

He waved a hand at the wall. "Piss away, and then, let's... well, piss off."

I had a better idea. A much better idea. A step back, a turn, another step. I held my cock steady. Made ready. Aimed. Fired.

“Jesus!”

Ah, I had shocked Somerville back to stuffiness, and prayer. At least he hadn't blurted out my name. Shocked the banger into awakening yet again, too, as the hot piss flowed steadily out and down, onto his face, into his hair, over his neck and then, to share the liquid golden wealth, generously down his body.

My voice was rough and growly again. “Wouldn't move, if I was you. Ye fooked w' t' wrong pair o' neddy boys, see? We're members o' the Friends o' Edward Society, we are. Talk t' yer friend about us. T' one wi' the knife 'n' the broke wrist 'n' all. 'Oo ran off 'n' left yer both be'ind. 'E knows.”

I finished pissing, pressed his head flat again with the sole of my boot, using him for balance as I did myself back up. “Now, ye'll stay jest like ye are until we're gone. But first, me friend, 'ere, 'e 'as t' piss, too.”

The body under my boot shuddered.

“Naw. Me friend, 'e's all 'oity-toity, loik. Loiks t' boldly piss where no man 'as pissed before. 'N' you, well, you been pissed. Well-pissed, if I do say so m'self, as shouldn't.”

I'd dared him, but knew he wouldn't do it. And if ever I saw him again, though I knew I wouldn't, I'd tease him quietly about his cowardly ways.

Somerville surprised me. Glared at me with enough heat that I should have been instantly charred. He'd done himself up while I pissed, but he got his cock out again, stalked briskly over to the right-hand man whose back and head he had thoroughly whacked, and proceeded to piss him with equal thoroughness. He turned back to me as he buttoned himself up again.

Ah. Arse-wipish can also be a language of signs. As in the thumb jerk that clearly said, “Now that you've been well-fucked and had your fun, shall we get the bloody hell out of here?”

I grinned at him and gave the right-hand banger a friendly kick in the side as we walked away. We strolled casually, as triumphant members of the Friends of Edward Society would do, not scuttling away in cockroach fear of light. It was only when we were around the corner, out of sight, and well away, that we began to run, as silently as we could, and then when we were certain we were beyond their hearing, laughing and gasping in exhilaration as we ran and ran and ran further still.

All too soon, we approached the edges of civilization, along with the approaching dawn. Time to part. Time for that inevitable, frequently awkward, after-fuck moment of decision that all men must face: To lie, or not to lie, that was always the question.

Lying generally won.

We stood in a fading shadow beside a building. I opened my mouth to get my lies in first, as it would hurt less, since I wanted so much more, with no reason that I could see for why that wanting should be.

Somerville held up his hand. Shook his head. "No, don't."

I wrinkled my brow at him, which was as close as I could get to that fucking one-eyebrow-lift thing so many of the ton seemed able to do.

He hesitated, gnawed at his lip with perfect teeth, released it. "Will you give me a truthful answer?"

False bravado underlay my words. "Depends on the question, doesn't it?"

"Damn it, Rory! Your word of honor you will answer me truthfully."

If it was that important... I gave it.

"Do you want to meet again?"

I could swear I heard "The Hallelujah Chorus" rising in the background over London along with the sun, accompanied by the faint sounds of Handel whirling in his grave so rapidly he was a veritable underground cyclone. I managed a quiet, dignified, "Of course." At least that was the way it sounded inside my head. I was afraid that aloud it told him how desperately grateful I was for the question; since it was one I never would have had the courage to ask him.

He smiled at me. Fuck the sun. Golden Somerville, dirty, disheveled and all, was ample light.

He held out his hand. "Peregrine James Woodhall, Viscount Somerville. My friends call me... Somerville."

I gave him a firm handshake, albeit with a probably piss-, cum-, dirt- and grit-stained palm, which did not put him off in the slightest. "Ruaidhri Fearghas MacLean. My father is Viscount Strathairn, and alas, I am merely a second son. My friends call me... *Mr. MacLean*."

"And are we friends now, *Mr. MacLean*?"



“Indeed we are, Somerville. Friends with, I believe, certain, ah, *benefits*, which need exploring.”

“An in-depth exploration is warranted, don't you agree?”

“The more depth the better, quite frankly.”

And still we clasped hands, far longer than anyone could possibly deem socially acceptable, grinning somewhat stupidly at each other, until at last, with mutual reluctance, we finally let go.

“Friday next, the twenty-fifth, I believe. White's. Ten o'clock?”

This was to be a *public* friendship as well? Men who fucked men, where the fucker and the fucked were not admitted neddy boys, and who would dare in these days to make that admission, avoided each other in public, lest their secret be inadvertently let out. I would most certainly never betray this trust, and disclose Somerville. Of course, that meant for any future public excursions with this man, I would have to figure out some way to bind my cock down and hold it there, since the mere thought of Somerville's touch, much less the anticipation of the feel of his mouth or his cock, would now always be enough to launch a display that would be disastrous if anyone should notice that it inevitably and only occurred in his presence.

I was eager to agree, but had to confirm what he already undoubtedly knew. “I'm not a member.”

“I am.” *And they'll fucking well let in anyone I tell them to let in, second son of a Scottish viscount or not*, was what I heard in a faint remnant of silent arse-wipe.

“Then, of course.”

We smiled again, and with no awkwardness at all, went our separate ways.

The fucking “Hallelujah Chorus” *was* being sung that morning. I heard it. Sang with it. Ignored the stares from passers-by as I returned to my lodgings.

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## *PEREGRINE*

*Wednesday, 6 September 1815*

*Late Evening*

*Alderson House*

*London*

I did this to myself.

*Why did I do this to myself?*

I could have invited Rory to another ball, another rout, a quiet dinner where an extra man was needed. So many options now that the Little Season was officially launched by the Duchess of Alderson's Birthday Ball. Instead, I had to show off the fact that not only did I have one of the coveted invitations, but I was able to get one for an unknown Scotsman, second son of an unknown (at least to the ton, and after all, what the ton did not know was not worth the knowing) Scottish viscount, merely for the asking.

We were more than mere friends, Rory had said, he and I were friends with *benefits*, though he had been thinking of the mutual benefits of available cock and arse and mouth. One benefit of my friendship, though, was entrée for him into the upper echelons of the *haute monde*.

Originally, I had been thinking of extending carefully selected invitations to events where these two would be unlikely to meet. Which was, now that I actually *thought*, a rather stupid line of thought. Michel has his own entrée everywhere. No one would dare bar their doors to him. I suspect not even Prinny, indulging himself in one of his infamous pets, would do so.

Perhaps he would be ill. Yes. A sudden attack of the plague, of the not quite 1348 variety, just enough to lay him low for tonight. Or a broken carriage wheel, preventing him from... No. He had already returned to the city; he sent a note round earlier. I could perhaps...

I could perhaps...

My dithering was interrupted by Mama's touch on my sleeve. "A bit blue devilled, my dear?"

Mama having, for quite obvious reasons, known me all my life, discerned my dithering, as others did not, but mistook the meaning. She patted my arm. I looked down at her. Thank God she was not wearing the Diamonds. The dearth

of Diamonds did not mean a dearth of debutantes, however, merely that her focus was not *entirely* on my deplorable marital status. "I have just the thing to lift your spirits, my dear."

She could lift my spirits with a measure or three of blue ruin. Or a small fire in Michel's bedroom, with so much smoke before it was put out he had nothing he could wear. I would have accepted even a modest lightning strike that frightened his horses and sent the carriage careening out of the city again.

But Mama's definition of spirit-lifting and mine were patently leagues upon leagues apart. "I have someone I want you to meet."

Of course she did. And I could not escape by pleading the necessity of introducing my friend around, since Rory had abandoned me to find a chamber pot to piss away the ale we had been imbibing earlier and the champagne punch since our arrival. I should have gone with him, but for the fact I might have actually seen his cock as he pissed, and he mine, and looking at each other's cocks, out in the open, so to speak, would have had an inevitable effect. It was not an effect to be displayed in a room where other men were likely to walk in at any moment, pull out their pricks, and begin pissing in a nearby chamber pot.

Ah, well, he would find me.

We were approaching a man and a woman from behind. Such carefully matched glossy black hair, presumably naturally curly if his was any indication, although hers was piled up, in a style appropriate for a young miss, with long, carefully selected curls down her cheeks to set off whatever beauty she might have. Of modest height, slender, they dressed in not *quite* the first stare but close enough that most would not notice, or noticing, care. I certainly did not care.

A few moments of diplomatic chatter, some truth about finding my friend who had clearly gone lost in the fray, or some serviceable lie, and then back to Rory, back to dithering, back to deciding what to do if... *when*... Michel made his appearance.

"Anthea, my dear, I have brought my dear boy to meet you."

"Dear" I am, to her and no other. A boy, most assuredly not. But if I were to remind her that I was a grown man of twenty-eight, on the downward slide to thirty, *she* would remind me that she remembered me in nappies, and wrinkle her nose at the obviously odious memory.

The pair turned around at her voice and I found myself gob-smacked by *two* of the most beautiful young ladies it had ever been my pleasure to admire. Even

when the only use I ever have for such young ladies is admiration. From afar. From far, far, far afar.

The one on my left was wearing an elegant white gown appropriate for young virgins going up on the auction block known as the Marriage Mart. The slut on my right was wearing black pantaloons that went with the black tailcoat, off-white waistcoat, perfectly folded cravat. And a waistcoat. How had the two of them managed to get in, much less have their masquerade escape notice this long? *And* convince my astute mother...

My *astute* mother. Who was never *convinced* of anything.

Bloody hell, I was an idiot. I blamed Michel for distracting me by not being dead and staying away until well after the resurrection.

I took a discreet glance down to confirm my idiocy—a glance which turned out to be not discreet at all. When I raised my eyes from black superfine that most assuredly covered a cock and balls... friends of Edward's know these things... I found the young *man* glaring at me.

His face and manner were all that were proper for the Alderson Ball and a young woman and her *brother* being introduced to the Glenhaven heir. The glare was in his eyes just long enough for him to be sure I saw. If looks could kill? That look was a long, painful, *slow* death, which would make the death of a thousand cuts seem instantaneous.

Then there was a moment of something other than rage before he blinked and was *all* graciousness.

It took a vast deal of control to look away from his face voluntarily and attend to his sister. He was so very slender, delicate pale skin that would burn with just a hint of sun, thick, curling eyelashes that were longer than his sister's, large, brilliantly blue eyes, an almost heart-shaped face. Take him to the right molly house; sit him down and apply subtle cosmetics, stand him up and fit him with haute couture, with or without padding for bosoms, and he would be... already was... more beautiful than his sister.

Except... he would be exceedingly out of place in that fantastical molly house. My ned-sense seemed to have gone on holiday since this... *thing* began with Rory, and this... *thing* went on with Michel. It returned briefly to confirm that the young man was indeed no friend of Edward's.

And *that* was that "other thing" I had so briefly seen. He believed I had assumed him to be not just a friend of Edward's, but one of Edward's rather

more flamboyant friends, and now fully expected the disdain, or possibly worse, from me that he had so clearly experienced so many times before.

That would not happen.

But first, his sister. Actually, these introductions to Lady Anthea Bennington and Lord Andrew Bennington were something of a tease on the part of Mama.

Of me, not them. She knew quite well I would never consider a barely-out-of-the-schoolroom miss for a wife. Knew as well that I would also be courteous, and briefly attentive to a shy young lady, after which I would extend my regrets for my inability to talk longer, and take my leave without having given offense. Being seen as the recipient of even modest attentions from the Glenhaven heir was often enough a prelude to the interest of other men. Men who might actually be in the market for a wife.

Lady Anthea could be scarce eighteen, and Bennington, who could be readily mocked as younger, and undoubtedly had been, was, if one was alert, clearly older. Twenty-one, I was fairly sure. His introduction and mine were finished off with a somewhat abrupt mutual head-nod and a near-simultaneous “Bennington!” “S-Somerville!”

I turned to his sister, and said, “Dear Lady Anthea, I must beg a boon. Do you think you might grant me one?”

She blinked those startling black lashes over the same brilliantly blue eyes. Nothing like an older man putting her on the spot by asking her to agree to something in advance of knowing what it was. I smiled at her, which for some reason she found reassuring. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that Bennington's opinion was rather less so. Very much less so.

“I... of course, my lord.”

The violins were beginning to scrape and whine in anticipation of being put into harness and trotted out for a somewhat more melodic use. “I should very much like you to be, well, quite mean to someone. A gentleman. Except that I don't know who he might be.”

This time her eyes widened, and she became clearly flustered, though no words popped out.

“You see, I really think we should dance, you and I. But with your dance card already full, I am certain, the only way we could do that is if you were to

be very, very mean to whatever gentleman has his name down next. But if we scratch his name out, and put mine in, then all's well."

I smiled at her again, and she hesitantly smiled back. Opened her mouth to speak, and young as she was, she was undoubtedly going to be unfortunately truthful and tell me that she had few or no entries at all on her card. They were new in town; they were not attached to powerful ton allies, and even having achieved an introduction to Mama, though I was quite sure they had never plotted that occasion, the men would not have flocked to her side to place their names on her card.

I prevented that awful disclosure quite simply. I gently took the card from her hand, along with the tiny attached pencil, though without looking at it. "I tell you what, Lady Anthea. Let your brother do the scribbling out and the scribbling in. He's a most excellent scribbler, is he not? Taught you everything you know about scribbling?"

The girl *gurgled* at me. A genuine, happy little *gurgle*. She was delightful. Never for me for numerous reasons, but still... delightful.

"He did, my lord, he did."

"Well, then, we must leave him to it. And let him bear the brunt of the explanation to your disappointed gentleman."

I handed the dance card and pencil to him, to find that the glare was gone and he was looking up at me with a genuine smile. He knew that there was no name inscribed on her card for the upcoming minuet. He knew that I knew. And he was grateful for my remarkably neat— if I did say so myself, as shouldn't, but if I didn't who would?—avoidance of the necessity of her having to tell me so.

As she placed her hand on my arm, I glanced over at Mama and grinned smugly at her stunned expression. Though only she and I could see the grin or the stun.

As we moved toward our place I noticed Rory, on his way back from pissing, where his cock had been on plumping-up dis... Damn it.

He saw me as well, and nodded when I tilted my head toward the groaning table. I suspected he thought I was wanting him to feed well, to keep his strength up for the *rigors* ahead. Except I had this odd certainty that events would unfold so that, because of my stupidity, I would end the evening with no *rigors* at all. Merely rigid with unrequited lust.

I ripped my thoughts away from Rory and firmly focused on ensuring that Lady Anthea enjoyed this dance. That she was seen to enjoy the dance. And for her benefit, that a rake such as I was seen to be enjoying her company.

Beauty. Grace. A *gurgle* of all things. Wit. With a little help from Mama, which I would impulsively ensure, and the occasional assistance from me, she would do well in the Little Season. And with that behind her, far better in the Season next spring. If marriage was her goal, and what young thing did not have her heart and talons set on achieving it, she could well be wed by the time the ton scattered to the country for the best (or worst) part of the summer. It was even conceivable, though extraordinarily unlikely, that she might even marry for love.

As the music slid to a close, she curtsayed most elegantly, I bowed most elegantly, and rising, tucked her hand in the crook of my arm to escort her back to her brother.

I had managed to forget for those moments of banter, and the length of the dance, my dilemma.

I was slapped in the face with it halfway back.

Dodsworth announced him in his usual flawless French. I have repeatedly explained to Dodsworth that Michel... why the *hell* couldn't his parents have named him plain Michael Lewis with *English* pronunciations? ...is as English as I am. He was bloody *born* here.

So it does not fucking matter if his parents were French; if his title was French; if he was raised by servants who were mostly French and stubbornly spoke only that language. When you are born on English soil you are a bloody Englishman. But even though he speaks English like the fucking English aristocrat he is, he long ago decided to add just a breath, just the merest hint of a French accent. Suddenly he became oh so *très tragique*, oh so *très intéressant*, the young French viscount who barely escaped the Terror with his life, veritably plucked from the tumbril itself.

I despaired for the future of England and Empire. Would the inability of these young debutantes, and even their mothers, to perform the most simple of mathematical calculations, be passed down to future generations? Depriving the Crown of men of science, men of the navy who could navigate by something other than dead reckoning, future chancellors of the exchequer who could actually correctly count?

Had that fantastic tale been true, Michel would be in his late thirties or early forties at the moment. He and I are the same age. The story is simply a remarkable pile of bullshit he has never bothered to shovel away with the truth.

Dodsworth's announcement drove home the point with the sureness of a sharp blade that God did indeed have it in for me more than was customary for Him. Michel did not get a tiny stain on his cuff while dining with friends, a stain invisible to all but him, necessitating that he go home and spend hours changing into a different flawless outfit. Thereby giving Rory and me time to enjoy ourselves and leave before Michel arrived.

Dodsworth had done his duty, and dumped me into my deep dilemma.

What words does one use, other than the most banal of banalities, to introduce the man you fuck insufficiently often to the man who sucks you with equally insufficient oftenness? When neither is aware of what the other does to, or with, one? With me.

I had considered hiding, and on some other occasion learning with "surprise" of his presence, and expressing deep regret we had missed each other. Useless. Since this "thing" began with each of them, I could find either in any crowd; they had each become the north to which my compass cock pointed. And I wondered if they had that same certainty.

But perhaps if Rory could eat just a while longer, I might...

No. Of course not. How had I forgotten God's displeasure?

Rory was on his way back to our little grouping of two Glenhavens and two Benningtons, following a servant bearing a tray with five champagne flutes and a dish with a selection of small pastries. He was, unknowingly, on a converging, but fortunately not a collision course with Michel. Who arrived first.

As Michel and I were the tallest of our quintet, we could carefully glance at each other over their heads, and I could respond to the eyebrow that asked three questions in rapid succession: What are you up to? How soon can we reasonably leave so that I can suck your cock all the way down to your hairs? My, my, my, isn't the little one *pretty*?

This was the aristocratic version of the arse-wipish Rory I had had such fun with. My replies were short: Nothing. Not bloody soon. Pay attention, you French *cul essayez*, he's not a friend of Edward's.



I rather thought I preferred the Dock version of the language. The results were so much more exhilarating.

I had enough time before Rory's arrival to make the introductions of Anthea and Bennington.

Michel blinked. Blinked again. Caught my eye over Bennington's head, gave me a nod so tiny it might well never have happened. His vaunted ned-sense... the one he had been vaunting ever since he used that ability as the basis for assaulting my mouth in that hallway and then my cock in the room we fell into... was again functioning properly.

Then Rory was upon us. He absorbed the fact we were no longer four but five, and looked at me. I quickly decided to fuck protocol, as by rights he should have been presented first to Michel, as the highest ranking unknown-to-Rory nobleman present. But I was not going to leave him and the poor servant hanging there while introductions plodded precisely along.

"You have already met my mother."

Rory smiled at her, said, "Lady Glenhaven," and handed her a glass. She took a small sip and her eyes sparkled with amusement at the complications that had ensued from her teasing.

Fine. Anthea next, Michel could just bloody wait and berate me later... oh, wait, there wasn't going to be a later for us. At least not tonight. The dear girl rosily blushed as Rory air-kissed the back of her hand, and blushed again when he offered her a "wee sip" of truly fine champagne. She shook her head, which solved the paltry dilemma of too few drinks, and he handed a glass to Bennington following their introduction. Then it was time for the introduction I least desired.

Formality was the way to get safely through the ordeal of introducing my two fuck-friends to one another. The lesser title, or no title at all, is presented to the higher rank.

"*M'sieur le vicomte*, may I present Mr. MacLean. His father is Viscount Strathairn. Mr. MacLean, may..."

Michel fucked my mind. Shocked Mama. Insulted Bennington. Went right over the head of Anthea.

*Formalité, toujours formalité.* I mocked him once that he had the motto embroidered on his smalls.

He interrupted the formalities, held out his hand to Rory, and said, “Michel, to my friends.”

The bastard *never* used his first name in public. I was Somerville. He was Vidal, having graciously agreed that Vidal-Sansouci could be shortened. Rory should have been “MacLean” at best. And it should have been only after an appropriate term of increasing friendship, as the ton viewed friendship among men—drinking, driving, gambling, boxing, shooting, hunting, all the manly pursuits in exclusively masculine company (the frequently present whores and courtesans and mistresses naturally not counting)—a period of at least a year, more likely several, before Michel thawed enough to bestow the privilege of using his first name. But only in private.

Had *I* not been stupid enough to extend this invitation to Rory, I could have, with a modicum of luck and a maximum of careful planning, maintained my two *fucking* friendships... well, one fucking, one sucking... entirely separate from each other.

Had Michel not suddenly gone all touched in the head and instead maintained the austere distance he customarily maintained with anyone not in our stratum of the ton, I might still have had a chance of distinct friendships and never the twain would meet. Or at least, only rarely.

I recognized the extended hand, in that instant before Rory replied and took it, for precisely what it was.

The hand of doom.

There was an almost imperceptible pause before Rory destroyed what little remained of a correct introduction by saying, “Ruaidhri Fearghas MacLean, *monsieur le vicomte*. Ah... Rory to my friends.”

The handshake was brisk, formal, and entirely appropriate for the setting. But though Michel let Rory's hand drop, he did not drop the subject he had introduced. “And are we to be friends, then?”

Rory looked up at him, gave Michel a very slight smile, and tested the waters. With Scots. “Ah cannae sae, m'laird, nae wi' certainty. Efter a', isnae it th' crustiest o' th' upper crust wha mak's tha' decision?”

I did not gasp or inhale, just held my breath at that bit of audacity. Mama was, I thought, more amused than confused, for she knew Michel well. The poor Benningtons were just plain... an unfortunate word to apply to that pair... confused.

I did not think Rory knew, and although he may have heard could not fully have appreciated, how very lethal Michel can be. But the lethal blade was amazingly sheathed and not in Rory, as Michel responded with a jest, and Scots teasing of his own. And then I was being asked if I concurred with Michel's comment that we three should become good friends.

My stance was stiff, but for every wrong reason. And hopefully, my moment of lemonish sourness was not visible. The three of us. Fucking friends! Except, well, we would not be *fucking* friends. We would be friends who did the things together that male friends did in our society. Which would leave me even less private time to spend with each of them, doing the kind of things that *fucking* friends do in private. Or semi-private. As in the jointly stupid exhilaration of Michel sucking my cock behind some bushes in Hyde Park one afternoon.

And then Michel awakened to the insult he had dealt young Bennington. Offering the friendship of a first name on a first meeting with a bloody *Scot* who was in fact outranked by everyone in this small group. Including me in that charmed circle of friends, while implicitly excluding Bennington from those *masculine* ranks. He might as well have skewered the boy with the thin blade in his cane and been done with it. From the look on Bennington's face, which his lack of town bronze made him entirely unable to hide, Michel had done just that.

And Rory had, even though unwittingly, helped.

I saw Bennington struggling to regain control, to come up with words that would enable him to get his sister away from the humiliation, away where he could presumably pray that we four would not tell and retell the tale until the ton knew.

"We are, indeed, all of us, friends," I said. And silently to Michel, *You fucking idiot.*

Everyone turned toward me, but I kept my eyes on Bennington, so that he saw, so that *hopefully* he saw, there had been no mockery in that word. "And I believe I know what these friends need right now."

I looked at Mama. "May I beg a boon of *you* this time, Mama?"

The light laughter that accompanied her again-teasing, "But of course, my boy, my *dearest* boy," eased the strain. Four muscle-tensed males relaxed just a little bit. "There is, though, just one thing..."

“There is *always* just one thing, my *dearest* Mama.”

“Well, of course there is.” She winked at Lady Anthea and gave her a smile that brought the girl back from the turbulent seas of an almost-disastrous evening and into calm waters again. “You must always remember, Lady Anthea, that when a man asks you a favor, you must be sure he repays you. At the very least, threefold.”

My own laughter was luckily genuine. How I loved my mother. “And when the favor is provided by one’s, ah, *dearest* Mama, the exchange rate is quite considerably higher, and not at all in favor of the son.”

Bennington’s shoulders relaxed a little more, but the pain was still there.

“Would you be so kind, Mama, as to return Lady Anthea to her parents?”

I looked over to Lady Anthea. “Please take no offense, Lady Anthea. But I propose that these three reprobate newfound friends... and yes, yes, I am sure you are utterly shocked to learn that your much-adored older brother is himself not only a reprobate, but one who has friends such as we... step away to blow a cloud.”

Crinkled brow again. Ah. She did not know the phrase. “We’re going to step away from the delightful presence of two such beautiful women, to indulge in the attractions of fine cigars. Something we may not properly do here.”

Her brow contracted, and then: “But...”

*Someone* must educate this child in the fine art of never, ever, under any circumstances, saying the first thing that comes to your mind, most particularly if that first thing should, unfortunately, be the truth. I was certain she was about to say, “But Andrew does not smoke,” thereby costing me all the ground I had gained, and humiliating her brother with the devastating effect that only a sibling can sometimes achieve, however unintentionally.

God briefly decided to be nice and nudged Mama to interrupt her. “Yes, my dear. *But*, indeed. I am sure your own Mama has said what a vile habit it is, but after all, they are merely men, and what can mere women do with them? A brother, a son, their friends—” and oh what a subtle, subtle emphasis my marvelous Mama placed on that last word “—it is a conspiracy against the finer sensibilities of women, and we must just bear up under it.”

Wisely, we *mere men* said nothing at all to such pronouncements of wisdom.

Mama gathered her charge up to polite bows from Rory and Michel, and a rather bewildered bow from Bennington. As they turned to leave, my words were just loud enough for the ladies to hear. Mama would appreciate them, though once again, they would pass Lady Anthea by.

“Do you know, my friends, I rather think we might find the best cigars, and perhaps even better brandy, in the Duke’s library.”

Mama, being so very awake on all suits as she was, would undoubtedly work into the conversation with Bennington *père et la mère*, that their son was enjoying some (unspokenly) masculine refreshments with his newfound friends, three of the most (unspokenly) masculine men of the ton. And in the Duke’s library, no less. Perhaps even with the Duke himself. And if she was the merest hint of a touch too loud, so that a few guests nearby heard all... and would of course proceed to tell all... why that was no more than merest happenstance.

I led them to the Duke’s library, where the brandy was exquisitely fine and the cigars as much so. I wondered, too, how long his cache of undoubtedly smuggled brandy would last, now that the war was over and cross-Channel trade was, if not precisely free given excise taxes, at least legal again.

I decided that before the night was over, I would, in the company of my old best friend (Michel) and my new best friend (Rory), consume an astonishingly sense-dulling amount of liquor. I rather hoped it would not be in the company of our new young friend, particularly if the drinking became more private than public, such as Michel’s library or my own. It would do him great harm if it ever became known that we three were friends of Edward’s. Bloody hell, if even one of us were, by *force majeure*, or otherwise, forced out of hiding, the boy could be destroyed in the ton.

That outing was unlikely to happen, unlikely in the extreme, as we three had been so very careful for so very long to do what we had to do to keep our secret. I need not discuss the point with either or both to know we all intended to keep it that way. But intentions do *gang* fucking *agley*, as Rory might say. Napoleon, after all, had no intention of losing at Waterloo. So we would repay our debt to Bennington with whatever benefits our *public* friendship might provide.

It had become necessary to consume an astonishing amount of alcohol tonight in the company of my two best friends. Plus Bennington. I would, therefore, *publicly* pass well beyond the merely mellow into the realm of the

disgustingly disguised, though hopefully not so much so that I would shoot the cat. At least, not until I got home. Alone. The one time I did so was entirely humiliating. Particularly as Michel was there. And he has, since then, taken every reasonable or unreasonable opportunity to remind me of it.

Once home, my undoubtedly disordered clothes stripped away, my nightshirt donned, I would wait until my valet was safely away before bashing my head severely against the wall of the bedroom. Naturally, I would not want him to become alarmed at the sounds of my stupidity.

It seemed a most reasonable plan for the remainder of this God-most-definitely-forsaken night.

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## *MICHEL*

*Thursday, 7 September 1815*

*Near dawn*

*Maison de Vidal-Sansouci*

*London*

I am, of course, a fool, but at least I did not make my foolishness *completely* known tonight.

Peregrine looked thoroughly shocked when I offered my first name to his friend, and he would be appalled to know that I knew, as he has such faith in his ability to be virtually impassive in all but the most extraordinary circumstances when among the ton. Although my offer could, perhaps, be considered extraordinary.

How does the English Bible put it? A haughty spirit goes before a fall? And there are few spirits in the ton more haughty than mine. Particularly when it comes to the efficacy of my ned-sense.

Efficacy? Bloody hell, until this Scotsman came along I was convinced of my infallibility in recognizing a friend of Edward's. Even though I did not always act on that awareness.

As I made my way down the stairs, my cock quietly, with utmost certainty, pointing me in Peregrine's direction, I noticed a brawny, red-haired man who could not possibly be anything other than Scots, stepping out of the room where Her Grace served the vast array of refreshments set out on groaning tables. There was *something* about him which did not scream, but subtly said, "I, too, am one of Edward's friends." My reason for attending was Peregrine, so I shifted my attention back in that direction, though I kept in mind the possibility that if I were to see the Scotsman on another occasion, I might explore the depth of that friendship. It was not as if Peregrine and I had pledged our troth, nor agreed to exclusivity. Yet... even the thought felt somehow wrong.

Occasionally, when my ned-sense has advised me that someone is a friend of Edward's, I try to figure out what subtle sign triggered the recognition. Most often it is the eyes, a certain *softness*, a hint almost of femininity, that seems customary with all of Edward's friends, no matter how overtly or blatantly masculine they look, act, walk and sound. So when I realized the Scotsman was walking toward us, I tried to find the particular *something* about the broad man

with the thick, wavy, unfashionably long hair, and the shadowy hint of a beard on his clean-shaven face that said *Edward* to me.

There was certainly nothing overt in the way he responded to Peregrine and Lady Glenhaven, as he arrived with champagne and pastries clearly intended for a smaller-by-one group. No blatant Edwardian tones or glances when he was introduced to the exceedingly young, exceedingly pretty brother and sister. Surely a friend of Edward's could not have prevented a moment's *appreciative* reaction to the extraordinary beauty of young Bennington, before applying his ned-sense and realizing that this young lord only got cock stands for women.

Granted, *I* had not bothered to apply my ned-sense at all before placing Bennington firmly in the Edwardian camp, and simply assumed. For which I was soundly, albeit silently, berated by Peregrine, and only then realized my error.

I saw nothing Edwardian at all about the Scot. But my arrogance kept me absolutely certain even in the absence of evidence.

To everyone else present, he was undoubtedly nothing more than a powerful, ruggedly handsome, potentially—or most likely, probably—rude and crude Scotsman.

While he was approaching and I could see more clearly the breadth of that chest, the thickness of his thighs, the comfortable bulge in his crotch, though no one would have caught the flicker of my eyes down and up again, I felt my own cock wanting to lengthen and put on a rutting display. *That* I retained control of. What I did not rein sufficiently in, indeed, did not rein in at all, was my suddenly rampant imagination as he joined us.

*I* was a friend of Edward's. *Peregrine* was a friend of Edward's. My papal ned-sense assured me that so was the Scot. The pretty lad was not a part of the painting in my head, a most graphic painting indeed. In oils. Not the quick slashing lines of the caricaturist, nor the softer hues of watercolors. These were life-like colors in all their brilliant reality.

For the first time in my life, I found myself painting a picture in my head of what sex might be like among three friends of Edward's. A series of paintings, actually, to be studied later, at leisure, cock in hand. Which prick would go where and when. Which mouth. Which arse. Two pleasuring one in rotating turns of being the center. Three in complex tandem. One... one of *us*, not some random inchoate man whose features in a wank fantasy are never clear... being the focus until all were done and sated. And then another would be center,



when we had recovered in such a rapid span. And then the third, with the other two making very sure he had no less pleasure because he was last.

I could not, of course, simply ask him if he would like to fuck my mouth. That approach had worked with Peregrine, but then I had known him far longer. No matter the certainty my ned-sense allowed, I nevertheless had to be more *certain* than that before I put it to the touch with the Scot.

The introduction irritated me, which is in all likelihood why I did what I did. Everything Peregrine did had to be done so very bloody *comme il faut*. Including, on occasion, fucking my mouth. So it was something of a shock that he disregarded propriety by making me wait for the introduction to the red-haired Scot.

I was, of course, perfectly polite and exquisitely proper to the Bennington pair. And perhaps my temporary belief in the young lord's intimate friendship with Edward, solely based on how beautiful he was, should have alerted me that my ned-sense was in serious disarray. But it did not.

And so I fucked with Peregrine's mind, and perhaps Mr. MacLean's perception of me, by offering him my first name and my hand, instead of staying with my title and the usual arrogant acknowledging nod at which I excel.

Friends accept each other as they are, not as we or others wish or would prefer them to be. So he tested me. In a way, his "upper crust" mockery, which brought instant silence to our small group, was correct. To shift the metaphors, he did not swim in the waters in which Peregrine and I swam, the deepest, shark-filled waters of the ton. His manner, but for that mockery, was impeccable. His clothes, however, while acceptable, did not bear the subtle signs, the *je ne sais quoi* that bespoke the excellence of the bespoke, and most expensive, tailors. He must swim somewhere in these seas for Peregrine to have met him, but only, I thought, in the shallows. Yet here he was, poised to join us in the deeps.

I was not the social arbiter of a Brummell, nor someone who could destroy with a disparaging remark, but with the right words right then I could have sent him back to the shallows and left Peregrine's friendship to be mine alone. Bennington could be easily excluded from that closer friendship, since he had no interest in Peregrine's cock or arse, or mine. But I was so certain that we three shared that other friendship that I laughed, instead, at his Scottish mockery.

“Rory, I think it is such a *braw, bricht, moonlicht nicht t’nicht* that we have no choice except to be friends, we three.”

Rory laughed at my mangled Scots. I looked at my best friend, standing there with that pole of offended propriety up his arse, and asked, “You concur, do you not?”

There was the tiniest flicker of lemonness to his expression which I attributed to the pole, before he smiled, and agreed.

It was only then I realized what I had just done. What my unthinking lust had just done. It was so apparent to Peregrine and me, who had both been in the ton for years, to Rory who was clearly new to the ton but an experienced man of the world, and even, I was sure, to Lady Glenhaven, that I had mortally insulted Bennington. And not in any way by which he could save face by calling me out.

Fuck me.

I most unusually froze and could think of nothing to say that could even approach making things right.

And then Peregrine did find the way. Cleverly, quietly, with ease and light banter, Lady Glenhaven adding her own right notes to achieve a remarkable harmony. Within minutes, Lady Glenhaven and Lady Anthea were off to spread the word of Bennington’s warm welcome into the masculine camaraderie of three men of the ton, two prominent, one not, but Bennington’s newness would not let him know that.

We followed Peregrine’s lead toward the Duke’s library, and my wayward mind filled with contemplation about how I might yet salvage my earlier plans for the outcome of this evening, or at least, as those original plans had been modified by the introduction of Rory into the blend. I could not prevent my mind from conjuring up a remarkably *clear* image of me servicing their cocks, one after the other.

Whether I should, even if we three became private, say anything then. Whether it was best to first broach with Peregrine the subject of Rory’s friendship with Edward. And whether Peregrine might decide to put paid to his somewhat priggish tendencies in order for the three of us to become fast fuck-friends. I could get a great deal of enjoyment out of sucking both their cocks, alternating between them as they stood side by side. Perhaps persuading them, though they were patently men who fucked and only fucked when it came to

arse play, that a finger in each of their holes, gliding over their glands as I deep throated them in turn, would make fucking my mouth all the more enjoyable.

Damn and bloody hell. I wrenched my mind away from those thoughts and the inevitable display that would go with them. Bennington and I found ourselves side by side, following Peregrine and Rory. When we reached the privacy of the hallways, I knew that while I could say nothing, and let Peregrine essentially smooth matters over, I owed it to Bennington and my own sense of *amour-propre*, to make the effort.

I waved the other two on, receiving a don't-fuck-this-up glare from Peregrine.

Bennington clearly was reluctant to stop and equally clearly wanted nothing at all to do with me, since I had precipitated his embarrassment, but the rules of the ton gave him no choice.

"My lord," I said quietly, though no one was in sight, "I owe you an apology, and I do, indeed, apologize. I have no excuse to offer for insulting you, and doing so was not my intent."

A more experienced man would not have blurted out a nearly anguished, "But *why?*"

"I have no good reason at all. It was a jest at the expense of Lord Somerville, gone disastrously awry." I paused. He was due at least some portion of the truth. "I have, you see, a reputation for strict formality; I am *never* on a first name basis with anyone in public, much less someone to whom I have just been introduced. So, I far too rapidly, and with no rational thought at all, conceived a mockery of my good friend Somerville's own steadfast propriety. And ended mocking you."

Hurting him, actually. A most painful strike at his mind and soul, made worse by what I should have understood the moment I realized he was not a friend of Edward's. Understood before then. A man that beautiful, who had undoubtedly been that beautiful as he grew up, had been teased and tormented a good part of his life, and from the reaction when I applied a verbal whip to a still-open wound, had never been protected from the torment, nor ever fully recovered from it.

"I sincerely regret what happened. And if you are willing to accept this offer: my friends call me Michel." I held out my hand to him.

He paused, unaware that even in these circumstances, that pause was in effect an insult, albeit a very mild one in comparison to my own to him. And

then he held out his hand. "My friends call me An... drew." His handshake was strong, though not of the proving-a-point sort.

He was probably about to say "Andy," but undoubtedly felt that would make him appear less than a man.

"Well, Andrew, we must still abide by the rules. So although we have cried friends, 'Michel' and 'Andrew' must be saved for privacy."

His smile was really quite wonderful. "Of course... Michel."

"Very well, then, Andrew, let us dare the ducal lair and see if the brandy and cigars are indeed as fine as we have been promised."

I led the way to the library. For whatever reason, although I was certain the reason had nothing whatsoever to do with any Edwardian friendship, the Duke had taken a liking to Peregrine some years prior and had given him leave to sample his brandy and cigars, even in his absence. Apparently, that leave extended to the invitation to us.

The Duke, however, was there when we arrived. He had obviously made a successful escape from the glitter of Her Grace's ball-giving brilliance, and was comfortably ensconced in a deep chair, a snifter on the table at his side, his feet up on an ottoman of dark red leather, his head tilted back, blowing a cloud himself just as Bennington and I walked in. The duke's cloud, however, was not merely an exhalation of blue-grey smoke that went hither and yon, but rather three precise circles, the third inside the second inside the first. They hovered there, as he and we four admired his artistry, and then with a wave of his hand, he dispelled them into near invisibility.

He smiled broadly. "Somerville, you young scamp. Making your escape from Matilda's marauding horde out there, are you? And these three... the chits are laying siege at *their* gates as well?"

It was an explanation that would do well enough, as we would indeed be besieged were we to remain at the ball much longer. Or at least, truth be told, Peregrine and I would, given our respective ranks and the certain wealth of Somerville now, Glenhaven wealth to follow, and my own wealth. Bennington might be besieged as well, given the at least reasonable Bennington wealth shown by the combination of clothing that was clearly bespoke, and that indefinable aura of being *accustomed* to it, as compared to the men, and women, who clothed themselves elegantly, but were unlikely to have even a chipped chamber pot to piss in. Rory, however... well, once he was known as a second son, and once women's eyes on his clothes and their ears on

investigatory gossip confirmed he did not possess the funds needed to be an eligible parti, he would be relegated to invitations based on his entertainment value or on the sudden need for another man to balance the numbers at a dinner.

“May we find refuge here, Your Grace, from the hounds of hell?” Peregrine paused. “Her Grace, of course, not being anything so mundane as a member of the pack, but perhaps, Field Mistress?”

The Duke chortled. Took a sip and set the glass down. “Has my dear gel sounded the ‘View, Halloo!’ yet?”

The Duke and Duchess had to be in their eighties, had been married for centuries it seemed, and he still viewed her as the “dear girl” of their long, *long*-forgotten youth? Or perhaps, not so very forgotten after all. I deeply regretted I would never have that. Certainly not with a woman, as I had no intention of marrying. Should any distant relatives have survived the Terror, and the torching of the Chateau de Vidal-Sansouci, on my death they would inherit a bankrupt title, as my wealth was not entailed and a fair number of organizations would be quite surprised by my will. Nor, with equal certainty, would there ever be a man in my life, who at the Duke’s age would smile fondly and refer to my equally aged self as his “dear boy.”

I mentally gave myself a shake and returned my attention to what was happening.

“Not yet, Your Grace, not yet,” Peregrine replied.

“It’s well you are here, then. This is the start of the meet, you know, and she’ll set the bitch pack loose on you soon enough. And Matilda knows every single covert in London, and throughout England, I don’t doubt.”

His Grace’s smile was decidedly wicked. “But you are safe here. For a time. Bide a while, recoup your strength and your will to live, with refreshments. And then you must open that door, and once more unto...” He genially waved to indicate the vast, ravening hordes we would be “unto” at the end of our respite, since as usual, Her Grace’s birthday ball was the saddest of sad crushes.

Peregrine gave a false sigh that we all knew was teasingly false. “Truth, Your Grace, truth, indeed. But in the ducking and dodging and weaving to get to this... so very *elegant*... den, I have mislaid my manners. Allow me to present my fellow foxes.”

Following the introductions, another hand wave from the duke gave Peregrine the office to act as substitute host in locating sniffers, pouring

generously at His Grace's urging ("You must be generous, dear boy, far more generous than *that*, if you are to stiffen your sinews, and summon up the, ah, *blood...*"), passing the glasses round, and then offering each of us a selection from the intricately carved humidor.

Bennington hesitated when it was his turn. He was experiencing heights of the masculine ton he was perhaps not really equipped to handle so soon, but he did not want to appear unmanly by refusing. Yet we all saw that he either had no experience smoking a cigar and thus could easily be humiliated once again by losing his tobacco virginity in such a venue and possibly entertaining us with loud, racking coughs, or he had had an experience and disliked it intensely. Even if the latter were so, it would be impolite to explain that the experience of smoking *these* cigars would be utterly unlike whatever far less expensive brand he had previously smoked. Nor that he might even enjoy it.

The Duke noticed. "Not a smoker, lad? No matter, no matter. To quote dear Oliver, 'Pray be under no constraint in this house. This is Liberty-hall, my lords. You may do just as you please here.' Indeed, we'll have no airs and graces at all, at all."

I wondered how much brandy he had imbibed before we arrived.

The Duke smiled broadly at us, clearly pleased with his pun. "Except, of course, for at least one Grace. Two if darling Matilda comes waltzing in. Ah. Bennington, my lad, whilst these three are gathering their spills and lighting their cigars, perhaps you'd lock the door? That won't stop my good lady, of course, but at least it will give us slight warning."

Bennington did as he was asked with alacrity; we other three took our turns at the fireplace, and returned to the seats the duke had designated.

Some time passed in comfortable quiet, and before the air became too blue and heavy, Peregrine rose, went to the door to the balcony and opened it slightly, pausing a moment to look out.

"Alas," said the duke, "no escaping your fate that way, young sirs. The earth below is too far for gallant leaping. The ivy adorning the wall is too weak for even Bennington's weight, and MacLean here would put one foot on it and come crashing down, undoubtedly denting the ground on his arrival."

We laughed at the thought of so perilous an escape.

"And that tree is not at all close enough for a good leap and a climb down."

He smiled at us again, his thoughts briefly inward. “Matilda planned it that way, you know.”

Our faces showed our lack of comprehension, and dawning amusement, or bemusement, at least.

“Well before your time, lads. It was at a Christmas ball, I believe. Young... well, the name doesn't really matter, and I only tease him about it in private these days... Lord X, let us say, was being hunted very carefully, even cleverly, by a bosom bow of Matilda's. The bosom bow had a daughter of unparalleled perfection, of course.

“So as so many had done before, he sought temporary refuge here from the, if I may say, mischievous machinations of my Matilda. Unlike the others, who had had the fortitude to drink up and go back to face their fates, or who, perhaps, lacked his desperation, Lord X conceived an audacious plan to escape from the den where all believed him trapped.”

Another healthy sip, another puff that drifted toward the open door, as the earlier accumulation was doing. Peregrine leaned against the door frame, and Bennington relaxed in his chair, comfortable now in this *friendly* place. The Scot was seated either far too close for my comfort or not close enough. We all leaned forward, an indication of interest not really because our raconteur was, after all, the *Duke of Alderson*, but because he told the tale well.

“It was glorious, lads. Gloriously conceived, gloriously executed. He threw open the doors, took a few steps back, raced forward, leaped onto the railing, pushed off, and flew through the air toward the welcoming arms of the tree.

“I had, of course, bestirred myself from this chair's predecessor, and proceeded apace to the balcony, where I was just in time to witness the dénouement... the joining of hands and the so-convenient limb. Unfortunately, the dear lad had not taken into account the ice from the previous night's storm. He slipped from limb to limb, flailing about, before dropping to the ground and breaking his leg.”

We broke into more quiet laughter at the image, and His Grace joined us.

“Now, did I not have an obligation to a Higher Power—” and here the duke rolled his eyes toward the door and tilted his head there and back to indicate precisely to *which* Higher Power he was referring “—I'd have sent the servants down, had them summon a physician to his home and spirited him there. As it was, the servants went down, the lad went up, to a bedroom here, a physician was summoned, and would you believe it? By the merest of mere chances, and

nothing more, of course, the young gel, who was the cause of these acrobatic wonders, just *happened* to be in the back hallway when he was brought in.

“And for the next several weeks, while he was laid up in bed, and for a week when he was on crutches, unable to leave for the privacy and, ah, *security* of his own home and servants, because the physician, too, answered only to a Higher Power, the young gel, suitably chaperoned, visited him regularly. They were, of course eventually married. Just a few months later at St. George’s.”

He blew another set of rings within rings, and took a next-to-the last swallow of the brandy. Set the snifter down. “The moral of this tale, young lads, is to simply surrender once dear Matilda has you in her marital sights. God knows, I did. But then, the surrender has led to such a wonderful journey since.”

He fell silent.

It was Peregrine who broke the silence. “Your Grace? The tree?”

He looked up from his reverie. “Oh, yes. The tree. The next day Matilda had the tree cut down. Punishment, she said, for having dared to hurt our young friend. And then she very graciously allowed the tree you now see to be planted. Far enough away that no one would be foolish enough to try to repeat that leap, close enough to *eventually* offer some shade again.”

Peregrine came back from the balcony, with a wicked grin on his face. One I knew well. He braced himself, lifted his glass, and looked around. We understood our part and all stood up, braced as well, glasses lifted.

Then, with all the solemnity of a toast to the King, he said, “Gentlemen! I give you Her Grace, the Duchess of Alderson. God save our gracious... duchess!”

The duke lifted his glass as well, and we swallowed the last of our brandy. Peregrine saved the moment afterward, as glasses were lowered, from any awkwardness.

“Your Grace, I believe it would be perhaps wise to forego the throwing of the glasses in the fireplace?”

The duke’s eyes twinkled. “I believe you are quite right, Somerville. A certain, ah, Higher Power would be distressed, ah, most *vigorously* distressed should anything voluntarily happen to glasses from that set. You might say she would be quite, ah, *snippish* about the situation.”



“And none here would intentionally distress a Higher Power,” Peregrine replied.

The duke nodded his agreement.

“Alas, Your Grace, I fear we have tarried nearly too long. I think we must boldly go onto the field of battle, rather than act the foxes and scurry through the underbrush in a frantic attempt to escape.”

“But since you are not the chief prey this evening, you will in a little while beat a strategic retreat?”

“Indeed, Your Grace.”

“Where does one retreat to these days?”

My wayward mind came up with the ideal response. The three of us, after we had done as little of our social duties as we could get away with, and with young Bennington having been politely persuaded to rejoin his family, would retire to my house for a convivial remainder of the evening, with cards and fine wine and conversation. Where I might explore my ned-sense certainty of the Scot, and perhaps discern whether my sudden visions of three cocks, three arses, three mouths, three pairs of hands, were as fine in fact as my envisionings. Sucking both of them. Having one suck me, while the other worked my balls. Yes. I could imagine that.

But all good imaginings must come to an end. Sometimes shatteringly so.

It was the damned, damnable Scot who spoke first. Fortuitously preventing what would have been a most imprudent suggestion on my part.

“My lords, I suggest we retreat to Annabella’s, to sample the delights there. The newest one, especially.”

Peregrine’s eyes widened slightly and then retreated to normality—the only sign of surprise he chose to display. Annabella’s was currently the most popular brothel in the city, catering only to the most distinguished of tastes and men. And those tastes did not include the perversions engaged in by friends of Edward’s.

“An *especially* fine delight?” the duke asked.

“Oh, indeed, Your Grace. While I have no personal knowledge, ah, *yet*, I have heard she is quite the comely thing. Sufficiently unspoiled that you can imagine her *quite* unspoiled, even if not quite virginal, it is said.”

His Grace smiled. "Firm smooth tits, has she?"

"Aye, Your Grace. A nice double-handful."

"And...?"

"Slender waist, plump arse. *Real* blonde hair, both above and below, it is said by those who are presumed to know."

"And a tight little quim, I daresay?"

I must have signaled my surprise in some way. Poor Bennington was bright red with his mouth open. The Duke chose to glare at me, and spoke sharply. "I am old, *M'sieur le vicomte*, not *dead*." He sighed. "And I am entirely faithful to my dearest Matilda."

He sighed again, more deeply. "As I must, young gentlemen, as I must ever be. For you see, I can never be quite sure that I have found all the exceedingly sharp, ah, *pruning* shears she has hidden about this vast pile. In case she has a sudden desire to *snip* something, she has informed me."

He allowed us to enjoy the jest with him. I joined in the smiles and was, of course, quite believable. I am quite the extraordinary actor when I want to... or must... be.

As we left the library to rejoin the fray, I briefly imagined myself the Pope, in far-off Roman splendor, experiencing a *crise de nerfs* on learning that he was not, in fact, as infallible as he had so oft proclaimed himself to be.

The rest of the night was as shattering to my foolish, no, my *stupid* hopes and fantasies, as any night could ever be.

I had to listen to him fuck the slut, and endure her shouted screams of ecstasy, which oddly sounded not entirely feigned and paid-for.

The night ended not quite an hour ago as I came up the steps to the door of *ma maison*, the door opened by Deville, the second footman, whose turn it was to wait up for me. I told him to lock up and go to bed, and after Henri helped divest me of my clothes, and into the nightshirt I divested myself of as soon as he was gone, I gave him strict instructions not to disturb me until I rang for him.

Leaving me alone in bed, naked, stroking my stupidly fantasizing cock. The cock whose imaginings alternated between Peregrine fucking my face, holding my head in place with his usual careful regard to ensure my hair had not been disturbed when we were done, lest we be disclosed, and images of a cock I had

never seen, was unlikely ever to see, my head immobilized by ten thick, callused fingers and thumbs with no regard at all for appearances afterward.

I was sure there had been no padding, so that Scottish bulge was surely an indication of a *thick* prick. And it was, my mind decided, a wide, *wide* cock that even my talented mouth might have trouble surrounding. Rory could—would, I decided—be more forceful more often, had there been any possibility of an “often” at all, than Peregrine. He would *fuck* my skull, not merely acquiesce in having his cock sucked, forcing me to accept every inch of girth and length, pushing down into my gullet, ruthlessly using me as I occasionally wanted, needed, to be used. Until at last he cannon-blasted hot shots of semen so deep I could not taste him at all.

Yes!

I could imagine that.

And I did.

Each and every thrust of Rory's prick matching each and every stroke of my hand, until, with my feet braced, my hips arched up, I came when he did, my own seed splattering my face, my throat, my chest, and final dribbles onto my belly.

I collapsed onto my bed. Collapsed into sleep.

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## ***RORY***

*Thursday, 7 September 1815*

*Near dawn*

*Rory's Lodgings*

*London*

I panicked.

I was *right* to panic, though. That flare of lust when Michel... no, no more Michel, only Vidal... gave me leave to use his name was stupid. Extraordinarily stupid, especially given that I was one of the few friends of Edward's with no functioning ned-sense whatsoever. Although I had never really needed it, as the men I had sex with generally made their interest known to me.

The Dock, of course, presented no problems at all, in knowing. The men who went there, to fuck or be fucked, suck or be sucked, to do all the other things that men do with cocks and mouths, arses and hands, with fingers and fists, and objects of wood and metal and leather, were *de facto* friends of Edward's. No ned-sense was required.

Outside of the Dock, the men who offered themselves undoubtedly possessed an accurate ned-sense, knowing despite nothing overt from me, that if they dropped, or offered to drop to their knees, I'd fill their mouths with cock, and equally so if the offer was for a bared arse. Still other times, at random, pissing in a privy, perhaps, my cock getting hard for no reason at all, doing nothing more than displaying it, to the frequent gulp of the man beside me, and an offer to "help with that." At times, the gulping man will get hard as well, hesitantly showing himself to me, and when I look and silently admire, but make no move, he becomes nervous, babbles in that "just us men here" idiot tone that that "just happens sometimes." And even if I agree that "it does, indeed," he covers himself back up and scurries away. I always hoped he would wank later, thinking of me, and berate himself for what he had missed.

I repressed the wanting that sought to surge up and shout "fuck now!" when Michel... *Vidal!* ...and I shook hands.

I repressed the thoughts of the three of us... together.

I had been with two men before. Three other men, as well. I knew what the possibilities were.

Four men together is not as intimate as three. Oh, there is definitely something which gets your shaft up and makes it stay that way when there are four, but it seems more... automaton-like... more taking turns in a careful sequence. You usually wind up in pairs, side by side, fucking, and even the scents and smells of sex, the feel of the sweaty flesh of the pair beside you rubbing up against you as you fuck or are fucked, doesn't really change what is happening from two men having sex, while watching and being aroused by and arousing in turn, two other men having sex in the same place.

Although there was that one time... John was on his back, my cock inside his arse. Someone whose name I don't think I ever knew was over John on all fours, devouring John's cock while John devoured his. And behind the nameless man was a slender, almost delicate molly boy who often went by the name of Pauline, brutally fucking the nameless one's arse with an amazingly splendid prick. Whenever I saw him erect I wondered how he could possibly remain standing, without all that weight tilting him forward and down. So there was a certain... intimacy that one time with four. But not the intimacy of just three.

Three men seemed to be, *were* more intimate. It could, of course, be two pleasuring each other, the third watching, wanking, perhaps caressing but never quite joining in. That had happened in a way similar to the Dock and my meeting with Peregrine. The three fingers in my arse kept perfect time with my thrusts into the man who kept begging me to fuck him harder. But there was that one time, and only that one time, with two men I had never seen before, and never saw again.

A park where, I had heard, and other men had obviously heard as well, that friends of Edward's might be found, hard and waiting and wanting. A park with trails, and thick bushes, and clearings. A park where three men might, with a glance, a stare, my rampant erection, a hand fondling the owner's cock, reaching out to fondle the obvious slenderness of the man beside him, suddenly find themselves abandoning what little good sense they had remaining after being there in the first place, and stripping themselves naked in a clearing.

We kissed, caressed, stroked, tugged, fondled, twisted, turned, nipped, bit, suckled, moved and turned in a twisted tangle that made our sweat soak up bits of dirt and leaves, tiny twigs and rocks, ignoring them all for the greater sensations we shared, until we ended where it seemed we somehow knew we would inevitably be. My cock was inside one man's arse, not easily arriving there, but with the dint of sweat and swearing and spit and precome, we

managed to get it where it needed to be. The third man, whose prick was indeed slender and some six or so guineas long, as Peregrine would say today, was in the mouth of the man on all fours. And slender cock and I were awkwardly bent over the body we shared, kissing, twisting, hurting the other's nipples, all in the good cause of getting a release as best we possibly could.

Whoever says that three men in that position can seed simultaneously lies. The man between triggered the avalanche, furiously wanking until he spewed, grunting around the cock in his mouth, his arse muscles clamping down on me. I moaned into the mouth attached to mine as I unloaded and a moment later, thin dick moaned as well, coming into a warm and welcoming mouth. Gasping, we pulled away from each other, fell to our backs, and with none of the customary post-fuck haste, subsided into a brief, thoroughly sated haze.

The man who had been in the middle, still in the middle as we lay there, reached out and his palms rubbed our sweaty thighs. And then with a fond pat, he used our thighs to brace himself, leverage his legs under, and stand. We followed suit, slender prick and I, gathering clothes that had commingled wildly in the rapid disrobing, figuring out which item belonged to whom, carefully reassembling ourselves into some semblance of order.

Dressed, we stood there. By unspoken mutual agreement, we moved together, shared one more trio kiss, and then three gentle, individual kisses. With fond smiles, we nodded and went our separate ways, thin prick and I sharing a trail for a short time.

Through it all, no word was said. None were needed.

It had been glorious.

It would have been even more glorious, perhaps heart-stopping, world-stopping glorious if it were to have happened with Peregrine and me and Michel... Vidal, damn it!

But the lightning of mutual attraction between men of the ton, an attraction that could last for more than one furtive moment of sex followed by public pretense of never having met, was unlikely to happen twice. At least not to me. And most definitely not with Michel Arsenault, *le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci*, whose name and rank I could in fact perfectly pronounce but would probably never admit the ability to do so.

Despite my fevered imaginings, Vidal was most definitely not a friend of Edward's. The succession of affairs with opera dancers and actresses, only the best of the best, since he came on the town. The string of mistresses who left

when he tired of them, pleased and proud of his attention, ever-satisfied with his gifts during and at the ending of the relationship. His current mistress in the snug little house on Howard Street.

This was *not* a friend of Edward's, not a man hiding cock-lust behind a *façade* of cunt-devotion, no matter the instant lust that had assaulted me on being introduced. I would have preferred making my excuses, feigning sudden illness, recalling with equal suddenness a prior engagement I could not in good conscience be late for. But I could not offend Peregrine that way, nor Lady Glenhaven, who had greeted me with genuine warmth.

Nor could I risk the loss of Peregrine's friendship, his patronage, by offending an obviously close friend with hints that my mouth and arse were available if he wanted to indulge, nor would my cock say no to the idea of using any hole he might offer. Then, too, such an offer might pose a risk of a duel at dawn that I would have no way to get out of other than by fleeing the country.

I never intended this outcome when Peregrine and I fucked on the Dock, but now that he has provided it... needs must when the purse-strings drive. The play up here in the upper air of the ton is deeper. Some, perhaps even most of it, beyond the limits of my purse. The extremely modest, one might almost say penurious, quarterly allowance from the Laird, who allowed only his heir to address him familiarly, and most certainly not his wastrel son, could be stretched only so far. And that "so far" to which it could be prudently stretched was not a pleasant life.

Gambling met, or did not meet, the rest of my needs, as the turn of a card, a flip of the dice, might decide. So while the risks were proportionately greater up here, the urge, the *pressure* from inside yourself, from the men with whom you gambled, from the watchers who were as equally gleeful to be present at great gains as they were at devastating loss, to continue gambling, no matter the odds, would also be greater, and thus more dangerous.

So far, I had not succumbed, and vowed I never would, to the lure of believing, while I was winning, that God or some ancient deity was on my side, directing the play so that I was, in that place and in that time, invincible and could not lose. Until, of course, I wagered all on one more round of piquet, one more roll of the hazard dice. At which point, the deity or demon would walk away, around the table to select another poor fool to kiss and caress and whisper urgings in his ear... as I lost it all.

I would never allow that to happen. Never place myself in the position of having to shoot myself because I had incurred debts of honor I could not honor.

So it was that I *needed* Peregrine. Needed, wanted him for the sex we had. For the burgeoning genuine friendship. For the purely, or impurely, financial gains that might be had if I gambled wisely and well, and knew when to hold my cards, when to fold, and when the risk of going on was reasonable for the possible result.

That meant I could not, under any circumstances, risk damaging my friendship with Peregrine by assaulting Vidal right there in the ballroom, throwing him down on the floor, ripping his pantaloons and smalls, although I doubt the man was wearing any of the latter, down to his ankles, turning him over, pulling him back up to all fours, spitting on my cock and then fucking balls-deep into him.

Vidal was *not* a friend of Edward's, and unless and until he proved otherwise, perhaps by his falling to his knees, pulling my cock out and swallowing it to the root... yet another of those consummations devoutly to be wished but which will never happen... Vidal is safe from my attentions. And so that Peregrine would also be safe from any hint that I could possibly be anything other than a most-assuredly *non*-friend of Edward's, I decided as we finished the banter about the three of us being friends... in that moment between the banter and the realization of what Vidal and I had done to Bennington, and how we had pulled Peregrine in on the harm as well... that I would devise some clever way to ensure Vidal's belief in my non-friend status.

The friendship extended by the Duke, the beyond excellent cigars and brandy, the Duke's story, the genuine laughter of five who were friends for at least the length of time they were in that place, lulled me into letting down my guard. Instead of social pretense while I thought of something else, such as the perfect way to convince Vidal without being obvious, I simply *enjoyed* myself.

No good enjoyment goes unpunished.

Which led to the panic when I realized our refuge time, as the Duke had put it, was about to end.

A blurt is to rational thought as shooting yourself in the foot is to hitting the wafer at which you were aiming. And so I blurted out the suggestion that we all go to Annabella's.

And had no choice but to follow through on it, given the Duke's delight and his bawdy commentary.



After we left the library, we four scattered to do what we had to do at the ball, though as Peregrine's guest I would have to stick to his side, and inwardly bemoan the lack of cock-sticking-inside in the night ahead. Inside of me, that is. But before we did, I perforce had to set a time for our meeting at Annabella's. I made sure to include Bennington in the planning, but in passing, offered him a way out by telling him that we would, of course, understand if his commitments that evening to his sister and his family prevented him from joining us.

The "us" encompassing Peregrine as well, unfortunately, but I could not do other than drag him into the mess I had made. Fortunately, I believe, Bennington did not come to Annabella's. Unfortunately, all three of us did. Not one of us had an accident resulting at least in a torn thumbnail, which would have sufficed as an excuse for all of us to aid our injured friend and forego whatever phantom delights Annabella's might have to offer.

I have fucked women before. Would undoubtedly be compelled to do so in the future. They were easy to find and use when my cock informed me in no uncertain terms that it needed a hole, having grown tired of my fist, or of being fucked between a pair of pillows and thereby rubbed a little raw, when no man was available. And when I was not in the mood for the effort necessary to disguise myself for a trip to the Dock.

And so we wound up with "Angel," as she called herself. Or perhaps Annabella, if there was indeed actually an Annabella, gave her the name.

And she was all that I had heard and described in the library. Except for the "blonde below," as there was nothing there to compare with the hair above. She was also far more expensive than I had anticipated. True, I would in most circumstances have gone with a still-exquisite, but less-expensive whore, but having made such a point of "admiring" this Angel back in the library, on finding her "at leisure," I had little choice but to offer her my poor self. With "poor," of course, being the operative word following the offer.

Peregrine had been to my lodgings briefly, and he was astute enough to recognize the general state of my finances. He generously offered me a "Welcome to London" gift and paid her. Angel's eyes widened at the thickness of the folded bills, and more so at their denominations. Thankfully, the Crown had begun issuing banknotes in 1799, as Peregrine would have walked tilted grotesquely to the left had he had to carry the equivalent value in a purse-full of gold guineas.

She must have given some sort of a signal too subtle for me to catch, which brought over two of her sisters before the currency could be put away.

Peregrine offered to pay for one for Vidal, and overrode his demurrer with an airy, “But after all, my dear Vidal, what are friends for but to give other friends gifts?”

His eyes also made clear to the trio that while he was ready to pay the asking price for Angel, the other two, who were clean, well-groomed, scantily clad, and quite attractive, were lesser lights in the constellation, and as such commanded lesser compensation as well. Once that was resolved to his satisfaction, Angel and the other, whose name I never learned, led us away. Peregrine, the bloody, fucking bastard managed to elude the trap laid by the third whore, and do so in so very charming a manner that no one there could have conceived of the possibility of how ruthlessly he pounded my arse that night at the Dock. And since.

The bitches took us to adjoining rooms.

That perforce put me on my mettle, and required that I give Angel one of my more rigorous and vigorous cunt-fucking performances. For as the Bard has said, so were they all, all *performances*.

And if my cock got hard a little more rapidly after she disrobed, because of an image of Peregrine's thickness, oiled and leaking, nudging at my hole, so be it. And if I was able to stay hard because of the imagining that the cock I saw beneath Vidal's inexpressibles was only slightly thicker when hard, but *much* longer than Peregrine's or mine, working its way deep into my throat as I sucked him, so be it. And if I was able to fuck her far more ruthlessly than I had ever fucked a woman before, sending her into a series of orgasms which were, curiously enough, most believable, accompanied by loud, wall-piercing, gasps and screams and moans, and cries of “My lord”—although I preferred to believe she was calling on me, rather than the Deity—so be it.

I suppose it was the traditional spirit of competitiveness between sisters, sisters in harlotry or not, that led to similar sounds starting to emerge from Vidal's room. But he and his ride were late to the race, and never quite caught up.

As for tightness?

That quim was to tightness as a child's toy yacht being sailed on the Serpentine would be to HMS *Caledonia*, under full sail and heading into battle with the French, all one hundred twenty of her guns run out and ready.

I would not, however, be so crass, though I can be incredibly crass at times, as to go back to the Duke and destroy his imaginings with a dose of reality.

On the other side of the so very thin wall, which at least shut out the more modest noises that occur in the aftermath of sex, the Frenchman was undoubtedly doing as I was doing. Pulling out, cleaning ourselves, with or without a little help from our harlots, putting on clothes so that we were both presentable and dressed as reasonably close to the way we had been on arrival, as the circumstances allowed. We then emerged from our rooms. At the same bloody time.

That fucking non-friend Vidal naturally made a great show of kissing his whore good-bye, which necessitated my instant emulation. At this stage of the contest, I ceded the laurel to Vidal. Fucking a woman is possible. Having her suck my cock is also possible, though I have yet to meet a woman who can do so with any degree of skill remotely comparable to the mouth of a good man, and so are they all, all good men who suck my cock for free. Putting my mouth on a woman, except, perhaps, quite, *quite* briefly on a tit, is as enjoyable as eating broccoli.

I *loathe* broccoli.

Luckily, whores of either sex do not expect their temporary employers to be one whit concerned for their well-being or enjoyment during the term of the contract, whether that term is for a minute or less before the man too-eagerly spends in her mouth or some other hole, or the longer term of a mistress. The “responsive” moans from Angel were, this time, discernibly false, though she was quite skillful at them.

Peregrine watched us as we came down the steps, jostling one another with bumps that, had the stairway been long enough, would have escalated into some sort of violence. When we reached the bottom, Peregrine made some mocking remarks which were not well received on either of our parts.

Thereafter, having been required to endure additional pointed jocularities from him with an *appearance* of good order, we adjourned to a nearby tavern where we consumed multiple flagons of surprisingly well-brewed ale apiece, as men do not go home to their beds immediately after fucking at a brothel. Rather, they demonstrate their continued manliness by that consumption. I much prefer the clarity of friends of Edward's. We suck, we fuck, we seed, we go. Neither asks or even cares to know the destination.

But I was still achingly hard when I only somewhat staggered up the stairs and into my rooms. It was not, most definitely was not, a full-blown stagger.

I stripped, dropping boots, stockings, pantaloons and everything else wherever they might fall.

Fell naked onto my bed, on my back. Commanded my recalcitrant cock to obey and go to sleep. He of course ignored the command and would not let me sleep, insinuating brilliantly clear images in my head of what the three of us might have done in a bed, on the Dock, *in a fucking field!* had Vidal been even a non-friend who was merely curious and willing to experiment.

And then my cock fucked with my other head. Giving me images of what Michel... and I gave in to my *cock's* command to use the name I in reality wanted to use... might look like naked. What he might look like to my eyes if I were on my knees or in some other position that enabled me to take that long, slender prick all the way into my throat, trying to reach my belly, as I looked up at him. Or his face as he thrust his cock rapidly into my hole, each inward thrust rubbing that bump.

We decided, my cock and I, that that was the image to work with. Michel over me; the consummate, always-collected hedonist, losing all control because of my arse, his pale skin flushing, his entire body becoming wet with sweat, and the more he fucked, the more drops of that sweat, thick with his scent, fell to sizzle on my skin as he fucked and fucked.

Yes!

I could imagine that.

And I did.

Each and every thrust of Michel's imagined cock in my hole matching each and every stroke of my hand, until, with my feet braced, my hips arched up, I came when he spilled rope after rope after rope of seed deep inside me, my own seed splattering my face, my throat, my chest, and final dribbles onto my belly.

I collapsed onto my bed. Collapsed into sleep.

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## ***PEREGRINE***

*Friday, 6 October 1815*

*Before the curtain*

*Glenhaven Box*

*Covent Garden Theatre*

*London*

It is no wonder that there is a paucity of good deeds in this country. They are so regularly punished.

One has only to examine the list of my recent good deeds and the punishments meted out for them to ascertain that truth. And there is no rational explanation for why I should be punished for doing something *good*.

Perhaps there is something, after all, to those foreign chaps who believe that when you die you are reincarnated as a flea or a mouse or a horse or something if you have not been sufficiently good in your lifetime. Or you can come back as a man, and then atone for the sins of all your past lives. I think I should have been better off as a flea. At least my life would have been a short and merry one had I found the right dog.

I can only conclude that whatever crimes I committed in some past life, none of which I can recall, must have been truly heinous, as nothing I have done in *this* life could possibly warrant... all this.

I let Michel suck my cock on 30th June, although if I were to be honest, and if I am to whine about good deeds and punishment, honesty seems unfortunately appropriate, it was rather more mouth fucking than allowed cock sucking. I would have given him a remarkably fine wank immediately afterward, but under the circumstances he understandably declined. He has sucked my cock since then, an act he obviously enjoys with all the (occasional) lip-smacking appreciation of a gourmand for fine food, and which he does so very well. Like the excellent good fellow I am, I have reciprocated every time. *Every time*. While I admit I do not have his skills, I am no slipshod sucker of cocks myself.

So why have I been punished with this utterly irrational jealousy about the other men who have perhaps had more of him than I have had? Who have, perhaps, been able to run their fingers through his hair, without having to worry that its sudden disarray will disclose what we have been doing; who have been

able to gather it into their fists to hold his head tight and look down to watch their cocks gliding in and out of his mouth, watching those slender lips and the long tongue perform a certain twist and swirl on your knob that leaves you gasping. The other men among the ton he might be sucking in secret as he does me. I have found myself watching the men he talks to, the men he interacts with on a basis other than the merest nod of recognition. And even the latter are suspect. I have discarded the obvious impossibilities like Beckwith and his ilk, the too old, the too infirm, and all the other men of the “too” categories whose cocks would never enjoy the glory of Michel’s mouth. And after all the discards, I have found myself consumed by curiosity about which of the remaining group it is. Merely some of them? Or is he more of a whore, and sucks them all?

I fucked Rory on 20th August. Fucked him hard, fucked him well through the fucking wall. Made him seed so hard he nearly collapsed when I pulled out. That has to count as a good deed. As do each of the too-few fucks since, which, although none have quite reached the heights of the first one... a defeat I can turn to victory if we could ever find the quietude and a private bedroom where we could be both vigorous and loud... have certainly been *good* fucks.

I have on two prior occasions had fuck-friends. Briefly. We fucked or sucked, we cleaned up, we parted. That is all Rory and Michel are, I have told myself repeatedly, but have discovered I have not been listening at all. If I had been listening to myself there would not have been that Michel-style jealousy about Rory. That same wondering and nearly hating the men, however many, however few, who have been there before me. The men who are fucking him now when I am not.

And surely a good deed which was done quite unintentionally should not be repaid with the worst punishment of all. Yet so hath God decreed.

I stupidly invited Rory to the Alderson Ball, resulting in the necessity of introducing one fuck-friend to another. The punishments were later, much later, when I had forgotten the possibility of the other boot not merely dropping, but stomping on me.

First my back was punished when, in the flurry of leaving Annabella’s, Rory grabbed me at a moment when we were out of sight of everyone else, yanked me into a corner, slammed me against a wall and growled at me, his English rapidly sliding away, “Not a word to your fucking French friend about me, about fucking *us*, Peregrine. D’ye ken? Ah will hae yer wuid oan it.”

It took me a moment to translate that last sentence, as I had consumed rather more wine than perhaps I ought, while waiting for the pair to finish their competitive fucking upstairs. I nodded to show I agreed. A careful nod, as a vigorous one would have sent my head spinning even more than it already was after the grab and slam. The way he used his grasp on my lapels to shake me indicated he needed something more than a head movement. I gave up a brief, silent prayer that I would not cast up my accounts, and when that prayer... and *only* that prayer was answered... I gave him my word aloud.

Then he grabbed my head, pulled it down, kissed me briefly but fiercely, lifted his head away before giving me the slightest chance to kiss him back, took a careful step away so we were no longer cock-pressed against one another, and with the flat of his hand patted my chest, crushing what little lift was left in my cravat. "Guid laddie," he whispered and sauntered away and out the door.

The guardian of the gate, a mountainous former boxer resplendent in the surprisingly tame livery of the house, came back after having had to escort out some clients who had overstayed their welcome. He was immaculate, though I doubted the guests could say the same as I heard the start of some rather loud bumps and thumps, as of someone falling or possibly being hurled down the steps, before Rory took advantage of his absence to assault me.

My head was hurt next. Michel walked into the foyer, shaking out the ruffles of lace around his wrists. He saw me and said, "We really must talk, *mon ami*."

I opened my mouth merely to agree, but his glare was of the "not here, you fucking idiot" variety so I clamped it shut. We walked to the bottom of the steps to await Michel's carriage. Rory was nowhere in sight, which puzzled me until I heard him. Pissing. Just around the corner of the house. I have, of course, pissed beside or near other men in other places from time to time. It is inevitable, and men tend not to consider whipping out their cocks and letting loose as an impropriety in virtually any location. Rory pisses louder and longer than any of those men. If there were an Ascot-equivalent for pissing, Rory would win.

"Where's your friend?"

"Pissing."

Michel cocked his head, noted the sound, and gave a little nod. And then grabbed my arm, yanked me into the darkness next to the stairs and pushed me

in the direction of the wall, where the back of my head promptly collided with a protruding brick. He leaned in close, his lips so near mine we might have wrongly been mistaken for being engaged in a kiss. Thankfully, the deep shadow prevented anyone from making that mistake. "You will say nothing, whatsoever, about me, about *us*, to your rude Scots friend."

I briefly wondered what it was about the men in my life that had generated this sudden propensity among them for grabbing my lapels and shaking me. France imitated Scotland and did so. I had learned my minutes-earlier lesson well, as I was a quick study, and told him aloud in the same careful whisper that I would not.

I did *not* sound at all like an offended school boy when I reminded him that I had already given him my word, the night he first sucked my prick.

He patted my cheek, and softly said, "Reinforcement, dear boy, reinforcement. Sometimes reinforcement is required to be sure a lesson has been properly learned."

I had a vague feeling that I was in some way being compared to a puppy who needed reminding with a rump-swat not to piddle in the house. But before I could quite formulate that thought into a coherent sentence, he, too, stepped slightly away.

He pressed his palm against my chest to finish the demolition of whatever remained of my cravat, and said, "You do understand, I hope, that you have just given me your word. If you break your word, I will find it necessary to rather less than gently remove that pole of propriety you keep up your arse, and replace it with the sword from my cane. Or better yet, I will borrow the claymore the Scot undoubtedly lugs from place to place and use that. *Est-ce clair, mon ami?*"

We just had time for me to assure him that I was most "*clair*," indeed, when the sound of Rory's piss at long last ended.

"I would kiss you, dear boy, quite quickly of course, here in the shadows and out of sight of anyone. But as you will not take even the most modest of risks of being caught in 'public' impropriety, this will have to suffice." He put his hand again to my cheek, his palm cool against my flushed warmth, stroked his thumb lightly across my lips... and was several steps away from me as Rory came back around the corner.

*I do not have a propriety pole up my arse, you shite-head! I wanted to shout at him. I can be most... most... impropriety indeed. I let you suck my cock in*



*Hyde Park! And I just kissed Rory, up there, in the entranceway where it was even more dangerous! So how proprietary... propitious... a paragon of impropriety was...* I realized that even inside my head I had lost control of the English language, and so kept the foolish words locked behind my lips. Most especially the Rory-related words.

I kept quiet during the carriage ride to Rory's lodgings. Kept quiet in non-response to the parting, don't-fuck-this-up glare Rory gave me after alighting, while Michel's head was turned away. Kept quiet during the ride to Somerville House.

Kept quiet when, as I reached for the latch on the door, Michel put his hand on my sleeve. His "I am sorry, my friend," was a shock. I had expected a Michel-style variation on Rory's theme of glare and warning.

I looked back at him. Waited, knowing there was more.

He spoke softly, so that his driver could not overhear. "You have as much to lose as I if word of our being friends of Edward's were set loose among the ton. It would be, how you Ahn-glaze say eet, *un teegrey* among ze chickens?"

His fractured Anglo-French at least made me smile.

"I like your friend, Peregrine. Reluctantly, I admit, but I do like him. And while he has not voiced approval of the bangers, or disapproval of *us*—" a light squeeze to my arm let me know he meant friends of Edward's and not a literal "us" as in Michel and me—"—a man so aggressively *male* is likely to hold those opinions, even if not expressing them yet."

I took a step out onto thin ice. *Exceedingly* thin ice. So thin it began cracking immediately, the icy water starting to rise past the soles of my boots. "You don't think he might be... acting?"

He blinked at that. Then laughed. "*Posing?* Pretending not to be Edwardian at all? No one acts that well."

Michel did. His mistress, the opera dancers, the others. I acted, though not to his extent. But I could not make that argument.

He paused, shook his head. "No, *mon ami*, you did not hear him fuck. That was no act."

*Yes! It was a bloody act!*

I retreated off the ice to the safety of the shore. I offered him my most nonchalant shrug, as if this part of the conversation had just been a bit of whimsy. "You were there; I was not. I concede your point."

“Good. We have no need of problems like that.”

Well, of course we had a need, and I was the only one who knew it. We could have major problems like who got fucked first, or sucked second. Who was going to seed in what position. Where we could go, we three, so we could fuck as loudly as we wished.

I had no choice except to agree with each of them, because I was prevented from telling either of them the truth about the other's relationship with me: that we were all, are all, devout fellows who worshipped at the altar of cock, in the multitude of positions the endlessly inventive friends of Edward's could devise. And wasn't that exceedingly odd, that a member of the ton would feel odd about being unable to tell the truth?

But God and Michel had not been quite through with me that morning as I yearned to escape his carriage. There was still more shite to shovel on my head, as Michel let me know that he understood Rory was my friend; that he would make every effort to become a friend of Rory's as well, and that he even thought the three of us could become quite good friends.

And God said, “So let it be written.” And so it was fucking done.

Damn Him.

We became friends. Good friends. Best friends. We were the very model of a modern major enema: The friend-shite just poured out of us and splattered everywhere.

The splattering about part of the punishment truly began a week later, when I mentioned to Michel that I was leaving for Doncaster the next morning for the St Leger Stakes. I suggested he might care to join me. Two days there in a well-sprung carriage, sharing a room at the inn en route as friends inevitably do, the same at a superb inn near the race course. Drinking and gambling our way through the race on Saturday, 16th September. No travel, of course, on Sunday. Then two days back. Six days of private fuck-friendship. He smiled broadly as he accepted. I was confident that great minds thought alike and our cocks were in perfect harmony.

Except...

That night, as the three of us sat down to a quiet game of whist-for-the-impecunious, at only a shilling a point, and waited for our fourth to arrive, Michel casually mentioned that he had asked Rory to accompany us.

Fortunately, I was not drinking anything at just that moment or whatever it was would have been spewed across them. I naturally nodded and expressed my joy.

Later, during a brief break between rubbers, the purpose of which was to piss away the alcohol we had consumed in order to make room for more to begin the cycle again, I whispered to him, "Six days of sucking, *mon* fucking asshole *ami*. You just gave up six days of sucking fun."

The bastard actually looked hurt, which was, of course, quite deliberate, as Michel never displays emotions he does not want seen. "I thought it was a good way to become better friends. You did say you wanted that to happen."

Like fuck I did. He had entirely rewritten the script of the events at Alderson House. Good, better, best friends? It was the thing I least wanted to happen. What I *wanted*, what I bloody well *needed*, was that my fuck-friends remain *my* fuck-friends, given their bans on truth, and that the two of them become the best of nodding acquaintances and nothing more.

I could hear God laughing as I lied and most believably thanked Michel for a most excellent idea, and inwardly swore again at the realization that with all the coming and going of the journey, there would certainly be no seeding at all. At least not in Michel's mouth or in my own, since we would be in the same carriage and of necessity sharing the same room that I had ensured would be comfortable for two sharing a bed, but now would be crowded with three.

Chuffy arrived, and we began playing. For all his apparent vagueness and air of eternal distraction—all too frequently his name must be called several times to wrest his attention away from whatever he was contemplating—he is a very talented whist player. I was most grateful when the luck of the draw made him my partner.

We won the first rubbers, trouncing Rory and Michel soundly, with two successive wins to claim each rubber. The trouncing was rather odd, as Michel was generally a fine player, and Rory, a man who lived by his wits and wagering, of necessity needed to be rather better than merely "fine." They seemed... distracted for some reason.

I have always been in favor of an opponent's distraction allowing me to win whatever the competition happened to be.

The deal had returned to me. Michel had cut, Chuffy was shuffling the second deck in preparation for the next game, and I had just dealt the first card to Rory, when a very nervous footman in Chuffy's livery was escorted to the table. And then just stood there.

“Yes, Frank?” Chuffy asked, setting the shuffled deck to Rory’s left, as required. I paused in the deal, and we all gave our attention to the footman.

The footman squirmed a little before saying, “Uh, I, uh, have a message, well, from her ladyship.”

Chuffy smiled and held out his hand.

“Uh, well—” he looked at the three of us and then couldn’t quite manage to look his master in the eye. “Uh, she, well, her ladyship, that is, said I was to tell you direct, and, and, well, she made me repeat it back to her to be sure I could, uh, I could say it to you right.”

He stopped and then nearly wailed, “But I *can’t*, your lordship. It ain’t right!”

Chuffy let out a sharp bark of laughter and a knowing, *smug* smile. He waved a hand at us. “It’s quite all right, Frank. These are my friends. And besides, you can’t go wrong doing what my good lady tells you to do.”

Flushed, perspiring, Frank inhaled sharply and then let it all out in a rush worthy of the end of a close-run Derby. “M-m-m’lady says to say, to say, ‘This is all your damned fault, Chuffy Penworth, you lumpish lout, so you better get your worthless bloody arse home right now.’”

The poor footman looked as though he might well wet himself, and both Chuffy and I erupted into loud roars of laughter. Michel looked puzzled for a moment and then smiled. Rory had the look of a man who has not been let in on a joke about which everyone else is laughing, and who is not pleased with that state of affairs.

Chuffy got himself under control and took pity on Rory. “Marianne, my good lady, is a most delicate creature, you see. How did you describe her, Somerville, when we first saw her?”

As if the arse, good friend arse that he was, did not precisely recall every instant of that event, so that he could on numerous occasions since, regale us all with the most fine of details. He just enjoyed hearing others say the words, apt as they so clearly were then, and remain so today.

“A dainty fairy princess,” I drawled.

“Indeed, indeed!” He did a fair imitation, for those who did not know him well, of a man whose faulty recollection had just been admirably refreshed.

“And so she is, MacLean, so she is. But when she is *enceinte*, she is, how shall I put this, she is—”

“Oh, do let me, Chuffy. If you once get started we shall be here the entire remainder of the night listening to your encomiums, and you shall never get your bloody arse home.”

I looked at Rory. “When Lady Penworth is in a delicate way, she is more of a tigress who can take down an entire herd of fleeing antelope with a single swipe of her claws. And when that tigress roars, it behooves a good husband to do precisely as he is bid. Of course, if he does that, then when he fails to do a particular something more, which, by all that is sacred and holy, he *should* have known he was supposed to do, it is ‘Off with his head!’”

I paused, realizing... Laughed again as I turned my head toward Chuffy. “Oh, my friend, you are truly in for it, are not you not? How deep is the shite in which you stand?”

“Chest-high, and rising rapidly, I do believe.” He waved Frank off toward the door and rose. “Well, my friends, I must away. Our third, you see. Early again. And so I will be faulted for not having paid the Oracle at Delphi enough to ensure an *accurate* prophecy, so that I might be at home when she first needed me.”

I laughed again. “Needed? Say rather, needed as a target. Gentlemen, Lady Penworth, whether with a pillow, a vase or words is as accurate an archer as that Robin of the Hood fellow, able to hit dead center every time! And this dainty princess, when she begs her dearest Chuffy to hold her hand and help her through the pain, then proceeds to squeeze him in such a fashion that were he less manly he would yelp and moan from the agony of it. Better yet are the times when she needs first his one hand and then the other, so that when at last she sets him free, he finds himself unable to do anything at all with either hand! For days.

“Pity his poor valet who then must not only dress him, but hold his cock while pissing, to keep his aim accurate, and must wipe his arse after shitting!”

The three of us were, by then, drawing the attention of the room from laughing so hard at poor Chuffy, who just flushed even more, but took it all in good part. It was my turn to wave him away, and with a brief nod, he left us.

When at last we calmed, and I, for one, wiped my eyes, we paused to decide whether to seek another fourth, or decide on other entertainments.

I had not realized young Bennington was nearby until he somewhat diffidently said, “M-may I s-sit in?”

As we were still in the same positions, the unshuffled remains of the previous game unmoved, the deck at Rory's left so that he could hand it to me for the cut and then begin to deal, we could hardly make some excuse to either leave, or to exclude him. Especially since it was only a week since the various meetings of 6th September. And more especially since the card tables filled virtually every available space in the Earl of Brookshire's card room, which meant our words might easily be overheard by any of a dozen men who cared to listen. Shunning Bennington, or being perceived to do so, would undo whatever good we might have accomplished for him at Alderson House.

And since we each, without saying it aloud, undoubtedly felt our debt for his initial humiliation that night was not yet marked "paid in full," murmurs of agreement and sheer delight immediately rose from the three of us.

I suggested he partner me, since that was where the open chair was; no one objected.

God, that cunning deity, then proceeded to lull me into complacency, into feeling that I was perhaps being rewarded after all for my good deeds in turning around a disaster. It turned out Bennington was an extraordinary whist player. While Rory and Michel won the first game of the initial rubber, which was based more on the distribution of the cards than skill, since sometimes there is nothing you can do with the hand you have received, we won the next two.

Michel and Rory finally realized that their lack of concentration was making them look foolish, and they began playing with their customary skill.

It was not enough. Bennington was flawless. Focused, precise, remembering what had been played, calculating the odds of who had what in his hand, he clearly led the two of us to victories in three rubbers. We decided to take a short break, letting the others know the table was still taken, then stepped outside to inhale some early fall night air.

We had just closed the terrace doors, walked over to the railing, with Rory and Michel pulling out cigars, when God started pissing on me.

Just a slight trickle at first, like rather smelly raindrops that kept falling on my head.

Rory said, "Well, lad, do you have any plans for the next six days or so?"

Then a slightly stronger flow.

"None, sir."

“Lad, lad, none of this ‘sir’ shite. We’re friends here, are we not? It’s Rory, lad, Rory.” That word from anyone else would have caused hedgehog bristling, but the boy... and compared to the jaded three of us, he was still a boy... understood there was no condescension. Just affection. *Manly* affection.

Rory nodded, clapped a large hand on Bennington’s shoulder with perhaps a little more force than was precisely required, making the “lad” stagger, and said, “Well then, how about giving his *vicomte*-ship here and me a chance to win back some of the losses you’ve inflicted on us? We’re leaving for Doncaster and the St Leger Stakes in the morning. Just think how many rubbers we can get in!”

*Après Rory, le déluge. Un déluge de pisse.*

“That’s all right with you, isn’t it, Peregrine, my lad?” Rory was an equal opportunity ladder.

*No, it’s not all right, you fucking shite. I had six days of sucking sex planned, with the occasional wank thrown in, all right and tight. And then Michel fucks it up with the invitation to you. Three of us crowded into a room reserved for two. And two of you don’t know that all of three of us are friends of Edward’s. But at least with you two, I could maneuver some bloody separate private time for a desperately quick wank or suck, which would still be infinitely better than my hand on myself. And the worst that could happen would be that your bloody secrets will be out, and then we could all get on with sex together. Only with Bennington along there’s going to be no fucking privacy at all for anything, much less cock stands! And likely at this venture, no fucking room at the fucking inns except four of us together. In a single fucking room, you fucking shite!*

Screaming inside your head races by far more rapidly than it ever could aloud, because attempting it aloud would result in words tripping over the tongue, rather than running trippingly upon it. There was, therefore, no discernible lapse of time between Rory’s question and my feigned but nevertheless believable enthusiasm for the idea.

We decided on Michel’s barouche, as the original plan of using my curricule and no driver, groom or footman, was patently impossible with four instead of two. The required driver and footman would be Michel’s, of course. As this debacle was all his fault, it was only fair that he should bear a good part of the increased costs involved in the trip.

Several hours prior to Michel's arrival at Somerville House with the other two, I had sent John on ahead, with a well-filled, well-hidden purse, to arrange for a second good room at each of the inns on the way, followed by as short a rest as possible, and then on to Doncaster to the Golden Hart to make the same arrangements.

Michel's cook and mine had made ample food for the first stage of the journey. There was a sufficiency of liquids to imbibe. It was, in fact, an enjoyable time that day, with conversation, travel whist, other games for penny stakes, books to read, quiet enjoyment of the passing scenery, and the laughter of friends.

And balls that I felt certain had turned quite blue in the agony of no release, as I had deliberately not wanked for three days, so as to make the start of six days of sex with Michel even more pleasurable. Or at least so my balls appeared on the briefest of examinations when I stepped out of sight behind a tree at one of our stops. Stops that were far too short for even the most rapid of wanks.

The respite ended, the deluge returned when we arrived at the first inn. There was no room. Or rather, no separate room available. John had, I am sure, done his most persuasive best and would have suggested the unusually large additional largesse that would have been bestowed on the innkeeper had he accommodated us. With much bowing, and scraping, and protestations of vast sorrow, we were informed that our choices were for two of us to sleep in the carriage; in the stable itself, or the four of us could crowd into the original room intended for two.

The innkeeper could provide a trundle bed and blankets for the fourth to sleep on the floor, if that was our choice. That *was* our inevitable choice. No wanking. Close quarters. Drawing straws for who would sleep where, which left Rory and me on the bed, Michel on the trundle and Bennington on the pallet. Morning cock stands that, under the circumstances, could hardly be hidden, but which were vigorously ignored.

A lack of decent sleep made the next day's journey slightly more difficult, but still enjoyable. At the next inn, God held back the flow enough to allow us the originally reserved room, and the adjacent much, much smaller second room, with the connecting door. The second room also had a much, much narrower bed, which Rory's width would have filled entirely. There was no trundle available. Michel and Bennington, as the thinnest and smallest of the quartet somehow managed the second bed. Rory and I took the original bed.



Naturally nothing happened, despite my inner fist-shaking at the heavens and raging threats of creative vengeance on the Most High, like not believing in Him anymore, or not going to church, though He undoubtedly dismissed that threat for the puerile attempt it was, as I had stopped church-going many years earlier. There was, after all, that connecting door which might open at any moment, and in any event, we were too tired to think of anything we might do in the dark, much less act on any thought.

John welcomed us on our arrival at the Golden Hart the next morning. We were in ample time to refresh ourselves in our rooms, and make our way to the course for the race.

Our room. Singular. Though this time the innkeeper had been generous with the provision of *two* lumpy trundle beds.

I contemplated another round of fist-shouting and fist-raising at God, though this time out loud. I contemplated venting my fury by pissing right back at him.

But then, pissing at God is like pissing up a rope. The one pissing is the only one who gets wet and smelly.

Friends that go to the races together stay together. And stay together. And stay together. We met others of the ton, vast numbers of them, since the St Leger is one of the premier races in the country. We ate and drank and gambled; we cheered enthusiastically for the winner, Filho da Puta, and promptly spent our winnings. When we finally stumbled in well past one in the morning on Sunday, 17th September, the straws decreed that Bennington and I would share the bed, while Michel and Rory were relegated to the trundles.

We could, of course, not travel on Sunday, so that was a day of leisure. Renting hacks for a ride in the countryside, informal races with chance-met acquaintances, or games of chance. Even quietude by a stream for a while.

The two day return trip was quieter, of course, and the piss-punishment from on high let up. We were able to get as decent a pair of beds as the inns boasted, allowing for better sleep. But no wanking. By that time, I was in such constant pain with two such very fuckable and suckable men being constantly nearby and untouchable, that I half prayed for a new production of *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, so I could play Mephistopheles and walk around declaiming, "Why this is hell, nor am I out of it."

We arrived in London late on 19th September. I devoutly hoped that Rory and Michel were in as much agony as I was from that many days without anything at all.

We each had a variety of things to do after nearly a week's absence. By an exchange of notes, we agreed to use the Somerville box tonight for a production of *Love's Labours Lost*. The footman had just brought the champagne and poured a glass for each of us. Mine was at my lips, the marvelous liquid trickling down when Michel looked up from the sheet we had each been handed on arrival, but to which I had paid no attention.

"Gentlemen!" he said with some degree of excitement. "You should read this. Mr. Kean is going to do a revival of *Dr. Faustus*. It opens next week. We must definitely see it."

I choked on the champagne and it took much pounding of my back to stop the coughing. Michel threatened to take his carriage and go home to change because of the amount of champagne I had spewed on him, leaving us stranded. But it was an empty threat. He wanted to see the production as much as we did.

All those good deeds. And they *were* good deeds. Yet still I have been, am being punished. And the greatest punishment of all is that Rory and Michel are indeed becoming as good friends to each other as they are to me.

I do not have a good feeling about what will happen if Michel learns I know just how fuckable Rory's arse is, and Rory learns I know how fuckable Michel's mouth is.

I *want* to tell the truth, and devil take the hind-most, except that I have no choice but silence.

This is indeed hell, nor am I out of it.

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## ***RORY***

*Thursday, 26 October 1815*

*Beside a stream*

*Sussex, England*

I had never had friends before. Not true friends. Second sons who mostly live by wits and wagers rarely do, I imagine.

And now I had two. Two and a half, actually.

Peregrine and Michel formed the two; Bennington the half.

And it was killing me. Though most would, I think, conclude that that was a reasonable end for someone who was not only a sodomite but quite out of his mind. Well beyond merely touched in the head or off my chump. A prime candidate for Bedlam instead.

Why the bloody hell do men always have their cocks out?

And if they're not out, they're flaunting them, putting their dangly bits on bloody display!

We're out hunting, and the hounds lose the scent, so we're milling around, waiting for the start, and someone has to take a shite. He has the common decency to step behind a tree or at large bush, or even a moderate one, so long as at least his lower parts are out of view. But if you're on horseback, talking with Lord this or that while you wait, and one of you decides a piss is necessary, and dismounts to do just that, the other one inevitably realizes draining is an excellent idea. But instead of choosing *another* tree, the second pisser joins the first, hauls his prick out and starts watering as well. And keeps right on talking.

Or you're on foot, in a group, grouse hunting in the Highlands, and one of the beaters decides he needs to piss, and once he's paused and pulled his prick out, the need spreads like the bloody plague, and pretty soon you have every man there in a long bloody line of pricks out and spraying.

Or you're at a tavern, and instead of a nice private *one bloody hole* privy, there are two or even three, and if the latter, you aim very, very carefully when you're pissing the middle hole while the other two are occupied. And the men are glancing at your cock.

Or you're at a ball, and the host... or far more likely, the hostess... has decided that too much time spent pissing out all the champagne and highly fortified punch they have so kindly provided, is too little time spent being a target for the marriage-minded misses. Standing too long in line for a piss, slows the process down. So a room is provided, far enough away that the smells will not affect the overwhelming odors of the ball itself, and lined with chamber pots. The most I have ever seen personally was eight.

I would swear, if anyone were around at this moment to hear me swear, that the man who placed those eight pots was a devout friend of Edward's, who enjoyed watching men piss, though he could not personally be there during the ball to watch, enjoyed imagining it all with cock in hand. The usual arrangement would be pots decorously arranged around the walls of the room, so you could piss staring at the wall in pretended privacy, only flickering your eyes right and down, left and down, because you, of necessity, had to twist your neck back and forth to relieve some built-up muscle strain from all that strenuous dancing and standing and walking and talking, and of course, purely by chance, *happened* to glance at the cocks of the men beside you.

Instead, they were in the bloody *center* of the room. Two rows of four neatly marching away from the door. Eight men pissing, while the waiting ones lounged against the walls. Or stood in the hall with the door open to be sure when a piss pot became available.

The man who invented party piss pots had to have made a bloody fortune. There were earthenware ones for those who could not afford the top of the line. Or fine porcelain, carefully fired and exquisitely painted, frequently with images of *faux* Greek men, naked, of course, and most likely fucking or sucking in pairs and trios and more, which was acceptable because that was, after all, not *Edwardian* in the least, but was *art* and *historical*, and only men would see it so the supposed delicate sensibilities of women would not be affected. Or the pots that night. Metal, intricately carved, perhaps three feet tall, with a wide lip designed to minimize splashing and encourage the liquid to go where it was intended to go, a narrow neck flaring out to a wider body, and a sturdy base. Equally sturdy handles. It would, of course, take two fairly sturdy men to lift, carry and empty a full one, but the size meant they could be emptied far less frequently than the ordinary chamber pot in one's home. Men piss a *lot* at parties.

So we stood facing each other as we pissed. The pots were far enough apart that if you were a bit off in your aim you would not automatically splatter the man opposite you.

And there were no stiff-neck-need-to-stretch motions. We simply checked each other out. Seven other cocks at a time to compare, for better or for worse, to your own. Or if you were a friend of Edward's, to your ideal prick.

It is a thing men do, something innate, and not the least bit Edwardian, unless one is Edwardian one's self, and then one does the checking with vastly more avidity.

Fox hunting, grouse hunting, getting drunk at a tavern, pissing at a party.

Pricks to the right of me, pricks to the left of me, and not a one to suck. Or shove in my bloody arse.

Except one. Peregrine's. No need to check his prick when we are pissing side by side, or just near. I know that prick so well. The problem... the *great* problem... is that Michel and his marvelously long, slender cock were likely to be there as well. He usually was. Next to me, so of course I look, and he looked back. Or not by my side but just close enough that I would not be noticed as doing anything even vaguely Edwardian, nothing that screamed "neddy boy looking at our pricks!" when I looked at him. As I inevitably did.

And damn it all, the man *looked back*.

His prick, and the man attached to it, might as well be opium to a man who is desperately in need of a smoke.

For a reason I think I know, but which I refuse to acknowledge, much less admit aloud, Peregrine is the only cock in my life just now. He should be enough, but he is not. I am like a child who wants what he wants when he wants it, even when he knows he cannot have it, will never have it.

And what I want... is Peregrine.

*And Michel.*

I have tried to tell myself that these pissing moments have significance, that Michel is signaling interest, and then that illusion is shattered as he talks crudely, as men so often do, of his mistress's mouth or cunt, or excuses himself from our gathering to be with her. And her tits. And her cunt.

Bitch.

I have never enjoyed a man's company more than theirs, save for Peregrine's. Save for Michel. I look forward to the things we three do together. And if I am not getting fucked by Peregrine that night, or sucking him, or him sucking me, then I drop onto my bed, all too often after far too much whisky,

and wank to alternating imaginings of Peregrine's long fat inches up my arse, or Michel's even longer slender inches punching my hole.

I proved my theory today. Yet again. The four of us were on the way back from a marvelous mill, at which we all backed the wrong man, and lost twenty quid each. I blame that on Peregrine. He picked the one on whom we bet. The man was large, and beefy, with hands like hams, and nicknamed "Bruiser." Only Bruiser's hands were indeed like hams, all soft and easily squashed. His opponent had smaller hands, but from their effect on Bruiser's body, and ultimately his jaw, were modeled after the steel or whatever magic metal made up Thor's Hammer.

We'd stopped at an inn, filled our saddlebags with food, attached baskets with carefully wrapped jugs of ale, and after an impromptu race in the crisp sunshine... which Bennington won by a length, as the young lord rides with all the skill of an Ascot-winning jockey... stopped by a stream to refresh ourselves. We ate, we drank, we sat with our backs against a tree trunk or removed a coat, and stretched out on the ground, hands behind a head. Cigars for the three of us; Bennington still declining. Peregrine checked his watch, and in a regretful tone announced we would have to leave if we were to reach London in time for all the entertainments to which we each were committed tonight.

Bennington, Vidal and I respectively groaned, moaned and muttered, but Peregrine was adamant. It was an appropriate time for a test.

I announced a need to piss, rose from my tree, walked to the stream, and the House, by unanimous consent, passed a motion to piss. Peregrine to my right. Vidal to my left, taking, I was sure, an inordinately long time to get his prick out, stretching it just a bit too long to emphasize its length. Beyond him, Bennington, at whom I most carefully did not glance.

Prick to the right of me. A flaunting, taunting prick's prick to the left of me. Another unsuckable prick to *his* left.

As Mephistopheles so wisely said, "This is hell. Nor am I out of it."

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**MICHEL**

*Tuesday, 14 November 1815*

*Mid-afternoon*

*Changing room*

*Valeron Fencing Salon*

*London*

We acquired a name.

Unfortunately, the “we” that had acquired the name was not the royal and imperial “we” to indicate a name bestowed solely on me. That I could have endured with more equanimity.

The caricaturists have christened us “The Rake, the Rogue and the Roué.”

I am, of course, the roué. The other two could certainly not aspire to that level of hedonism, or more accurately, apparent hedonism, accompanied as it is by real grace, style and wit. But seven words can be more readily written as three, and thus, when a scandalmonger wishes to describe our activities, we have become “the Three R’s.” As in, “the Three R’s graced the home of Lord and Lady S—for a Venetian breakfast.” Or, “the Three R’s dined al fresco with a hundred or so of the closest friends of the Dowager Countess of N—.” Or more recently yet, “the Three R’s were seen at Gentleman Jackson’s on Bond Street, Monday last, challenging each other to bouts of fisticuffs, in which, unfortunately, the third R received a bloodied nose. One has heard that it was the second R whose fist accomplished the feat. After which the infamous sporting trio repaired to the Daffy Club to consume quantities of blue ruin in order to ease the pain of fingers and nose.”

Fortunately for the Scottish “middle R,” he did not break my nose. A friend of Edward’s is inherently vain about *something* about himself, more often about his person than about some skill he possesses. A Roman nose, fine eyes, an excellent physique, an enormous cock, a tight arse. I have more to be vain about than most, save, perhaps, Peregrine. So had the Scot ruined my features that way, I would have found some way to equally ruin him. Though with features as rugged and rough-hewn as his, that would be like trying to “ruin” granite. Who could possibly notice?

And still, I wonder if the red stubble on his face would give me a delicious burn if he woke in my bed some morning, nibbling my nipples, licking and

nipping as he worked his way down to my cock, making my toes curl as he learned to swallow all of me, then, still with my cock in his mouth, kicking off the covers, turning, lifting himself, coming down so his knees straddled my shoulders, his hand briefly down between his legs to guide his cock into my mouth.

One of the more salacious artists depicted a fantasy visit of the Three R's to Annabella's. In it, we were surrounded by a bevy of blowsy tarts, with enormous tits and bigger hips, wearing flimsy gowns that barely covered their cunts, while their nipples threatened to pierce the fabric. Each of us was fully clothed, but visibly hard. The Scotsman's cock was covered by his kilt but appeared long and fat, pointed at the mouth of a kneeling harlot. Peregrine's depiction was reasonably accurate, as his left hand cupped his balls and circled his cock to emphasize the length and breadth straining against the fabric, while his right forefinger was poised between his whore's breasts, ready to rip the gown away. The artist could not possibly have been a friend of Edward's, or he would have done justice to the depiction of the length of my cock down the leg of my pantaloons. With my left hand I was peering through a quizzing glass... an affectation I have affected on only one occasion... at the enormously deep valley between the breasts of a slut who, had she been real, would have outweighed me by at least three stone, while with my right, my walking stick was starting to lift the hem of her skirt, as if it might test the waters, as it were.

This is bloody ridiculous. Outrageous. Stupendously stupid. Inordinately idiotic.

I go everywhere it seems, all the time, with the man I have, and the more I have him the more I want him, and with the man I cannot and never will have, yet still I want.

I have become a Ruth with no Naomi, but rather a Peregrine and a Rory. I might as well be trailing them in the streets, or following them about at entertainments, preemptively weeping in case I do something to offend them. *Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee. For whither thou goest, to hounds or hells, to routs or races, to shooting or sailing, to fishing or fencing, or all the places wheresoever thou might go, there will I go as well.*

I even have this odd dream from time to time—mostly at night, but occasionally it will simply strike me, as it did just now—of the three of us, living together. Pathetic. Absolutely pathetic. But still, a part of me secretly whispers to them, *Where thou lodgest, there will I lodge as well.*



The door slammed open, and I lifted my head and shoulders from their slump as a loud and boisterous herd of men came through. It was, of course, only the Scotsman. He was followed by Peregrine and several more of our friends and acquaintances, who were, in the aggregate, nowhere near as large, as Brobdingnagian *large* in body, voice and *presence* as the Scot.

Not surprisingly, as the Three R's did everything together—one was suggested a fortnight past that the White Cockerel should install a three-hole privy just for our use—Peregrine dropped his arse on the bench to my right, and the Scot to my left. They peeled the sweat-stained shirts they were wearing over their heads. I held my breath as they did, and then carefully and slowly breathed through my mouth. I would not, I *would not* inhale their scents. Bad enough when it was one or the other, but together! Bloody hell, they were as intoxicating as a bottle of my favorite Armagnac.

My resolution lasted for just a *single* mouth breath. On my second breath, I breathed in through my nose and struggled not to shudder. Then the fucking bastard shite-head Scot raised his arm and casually scratched his pit. His right arm. All I had to do was turn a little to my left, dip my head a little, and I could have buried my nose in the thick, surprisingly straight red hair. And then mouthed my way over to that far-too-close large nipple.

The bastard did it to taunt me, I was sure. But that did not make me sure enough to take either the bull by the horn or the nipple by the teeth. Even were we private.

I reined in my rampant cock, or rather the cock that begged me to let him *be* rampant, got up and walked to the long table which contained ewers of water, wide, shallow bowls, a bit of plain soap (no expensive scents here despite the fees we paid), and a towel for a quick wash-up. I bent over, scooped up a double handful of the water I had just poured, and was about to apply it to my face when I recognized who was now beside me.

I had no need to look. I could have had my eyes shut and known that Peregrine was to my right, and Rory to his. Oddly enough, more often than not, we were in this arrangement. Peregrine was, not precisely, our center, though he was the first of the R's, and he was also the original common link between us. But for our mutual friendship with Peregrine, Rory, no, *the damned Scot!*, and I would not have met. Or become a member of the Three R's.

We were joined by the rest of the group, momentarily quiet as we splashed about, washed and dried ourselves, and then quickly went to the tall, slender,

built-in closets where we stored our street clothes. I looked carefully neither right nor left as I dressed, avoiding temptation, though I well knew that the reality was that since last June Peregrine's... *and the bloody Scot's*... were the only cocks I craved.

I sighed and didn't care who heard. How had these bastards known which closet was mine? I had been out in the salon, warming up, when they arrived. Yet there they were, Peregrine with his clothes in the closet to my right, and the Scot beyond him. We had made no plans for after the lessons, so I planned on making my escape.

I should have known better.

I was shrugging into my jacket when the Scot leaped up on the bench, almost over-balancing, and shouted, "Friends, English, countrymen, lend me your ears."

With a friendly bit of mocking laughter the room quieted down.

"I will now declaim a verse I wrote my very self."

A general moan was heard throughout the land, or at least the changing room.

Rory stage-coughed.

"There once was a young man from Wales,  
Whose money was tied up in bales.  
More wine! he did cry as he dined.  
More wine! with each vowel he signed.  
And his money now fits in two pails."

A combination groan and laugh was the general response.

"So you won well?" a voice called out.

"Aye, aye. Ye cannae *ken* how weel ah won." More smiles at the deliberately overdone brogue.

"We shall repair to the White Cockerel, and with ale I'll regale you with my tale. And of course invite mine host to prepare the Earl of Sandwich's sandwich for which the Cockerel is so justly famous. And not a farthing's cost to any of you. A treat, I say! A palpable treat!"

Beneath the general shouts of approval, as men of any rank do not generally reject free food and ale, I muttered, "A twit, I say, a palpable twit!"

"Did you say something?" Peregrine asked, turning to look at me.

“No.” I was uncharacteristically sullen. He just twinkled back at me. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Enjoying what?”

And of course I had nothing to say. What could I have said? “Are you enjoying my pain because, besides yours, there’s *another* cock I desperately want to suck, and he’s your damned friend, and he’s not bloody Edwardian at all?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

Peregrine clapped my shoulder with his right hand and pulled me along. I joined the rest of the rats following the red-headed Scots piper.

As I walked in the door of the tavern I became absolutely certain. I was in hell, and I had no idea when, if ever, I was getting out.

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## ***RORY***

*Thursday, 7 December 1815*

*10:35 p.m.*

*Rory's Lodgings*

*London*

He looked at me as if I was out of my fucking mind. That went well with his barely not shouting “Are you out of your fucking mind?” as he barged through the door I had forgotten to lock. I suspected he would not have bothered to slow down had he found it locked.

“You’re engaged to duel *Michel* tomorrow bloody morning?”

He held his hand up, palm out, apparently thinking I intended to say something. I had no such intention.

“Did you really think your seconds would keep so marvelous a tale secret? I don’t know whether Billingsworth reached White’s first, or Chatham at Watier’s, but the story spread from the clubs faster than the Great Fire. When I got to White’s to stop the lies, I was ready to call the clunch out myself, but he convinced me you had, indeed, asked him to be your second. *In a duel with fucking Michel!*”

The last words were shouted, and I couldn’t prevent a wince. I had been drinking steadily since I got back. Drinking steadily before as well, though not at the after rate. That’s why it happened. I was drunk. There couldn’t have been any other reason.

“What the fuck happened, you asshole?”

Peregrine was in my face, his fists bunching my shirt, as he did sometimes when he was about to kiss me fiercely. Kissing, however, clearly wasn’t on.

What could I say to him?

That we had been drinking and dicing since late afternoon, Michel and I? That it was, in fact, *Peregrine’s* fault, since it would have been the three of us had Peregrine not chosen to give in to his father’s demand for an appearance at the family home, and had there been three of us, what happened could never have happened.

I looked at the anger in his eyes, and the hurt and the fear for me, and the caring we had never expressed aloud. We began as more than merely fuck-

friends, that night at the Dock, when he held out his hand and introduced himself. How or why that could have been, I still do not know. But happen it did. And if I wanted still more, I had destroyed all chance of that, whether I lived or died in a bit less than eight hours.

Friends of Edward's fucked, but did not love. Or at least none had that I had ever heard of. And even if it were possible, a man did not grow to love another man who fought a duel with his best friend, and at worst, killed him, or at best, was wounded and survived himself.

So what could I say to explain?

That I was drunk? Though not so drunk I did not know what I was doing. That there we were, face to face, unexpectedly intimate? That I did what I had sworn I would never do? That I *kissed* Michel? That he kissed me back, for just the tiniest part of a second? That he pulled away, his cool, always-controlled face well beyond control, letting me know the utter horror and disgust he felt at what I had done?

That I quickly accused *him* of forcing himself on me, as he accused me, our words of blame leaping out simultaneously, then more words piled upon more words as we scrambled to reject what had happened. And more words still, until we reached an insurmountably high mountain's peak and paused, and had nowhere else to go but down. Down and down to an agreement to meet. At six a.m. tomorrow. That I needed a second and Billingsworth was the first man I saw that I knew after I left the tavern hall where the... incident... occurred?

No. There was nothing I could... or would... say to Peregrine.

Except: "Let it go, Somerville."

He shook me, looked as though he might shove me against the wall, and rather than fuck me through it, beat me through it. Then he paused, and let me go. Stepped back. Took a huge breath. "Since when are you so formal with your best friend, Rory? Your *other* best friend?"

Soft, soft. I could not speak loudly for some reason. "Since he became an interfering arsehole."

I hated the look of concern on his face as he asked the inevitable. "Why?"

"He impugned my honor. I could not tolerate that. Will not."

"I asked, you idiot. Asked why this was happening. No one knew. Hell, there wasn't even any speculation, and you know how men will speculate given

even a hint of a basis for doing so. So... what? You were alone? Just the two of you?"

I was surprised he did not ask the obvious question as to why we were alone, but he passed that over.

I nodded, lifted the glass and tilted my head back for another long swallow. "There was no one there... when it happened."

"When *what*..." He paused to take a breath again, exhaled the air slowly. "Then if no one saw, you can let it go. No one knows, will ever know."

"I will know."

I had offended my... other... best friend in the most abominable manner possible. He had the right to satisfaction. I would not insult him by deloping, but I could not apologize. I also would not seek to kill him. I had no way of knowing whether he would feel the same way.

"You could be dead tomorrow. Both of you."

As if I did not know that.

Peregrine moved in again. This time he hesitantly opened his arms, and I stepped into them. He was enough taller that for all the fact I outweighed him by at least two stone, and was far stronger, if crude, brute strength was the issue, I felt warm and safe. I wondered whether, feared, actually, that perhaps this was the last time I would know his warmth and safety.

"What can I do, Rory?" His breath was soft against my ear.

I could have asked him to fuck me. He loved that; *I* loved that. But I needed something more than what we had had so often, no matter how marvelous it was.

"Let me fuck you."

The sharp inhalation that sucked the air away from my ear wasn't really a gasp. But he still went still, did not even breathe for a moment.

He let the breath out, slowly, carefully. "But you've never..."

True. I had *never*. Never fucked him. Never mentioned how much it would arouse me to have done so at least once. More than once. Until that night at the Dock, I had rarely been fucked. Mostly because while I am not taller than most men, I am generally broader, heavier, stronger than others. I suspect that even had I been less hairy, had I been lightly furred in red like the golden hair on

Peregrine's chest and belly, or hairless like the sleek, smooth pale muscles on Michel... no, on *Vidal's* slender, wiry frame, the result would still have been the same. Once I was naked most of Edward's friends would do as all of them had always done: get on their backs, get on all fours, and offer up their arses for my use.

Mouth offers were comparatively few, but there had been those who had swallowed quite well.

But none of them had ever asked me what *I* wanted. They simply assumed, and in their assumptions there was a sense that if I contradicted that belief I would somehow be lessened in their eyes. A *man* who looked as I looked might suck, and suck well. It was, after all, almost a requirement for being a full-fledged friend of Edward's. But he would never get fucked.

And so I went along, and when the need could not be appeased by my own fingers or what was locked in a small chest, there was always the Dock. Where you could generally find what you needed, though even there it was difficult.

I had gone along, too, with Peregrine's assumption that all I wanted, needed, was the kind of rogering he could give me, whether rough or gentle or somewhere between the two. I would not let him assume now.

The silence drew out after his almost-sentence died away. Drew out and out and I could not quite believe how much that hurt. That all the while I was starting to believe, eventually believed, that what we shared was something more than just the perfect mating of cock and arse, I was in reality nothing more than a convenient hole. A hole he could safely use and avoid the risks of Dock-hunting. A *whore's* hole he paid for not with cash or jewelry, but with entrée into his world so far above the rest of us, and casual gifts of "Let me get that" when it was time to pay for what we ate or drank when on the town.

My body stiffened as my cock didn't, and I stepped back, forcing his arms away. Completed my movement by putting my hands on his chest and shoving him. He stumbled, nearly fell, then righted himself.

"Get out, you bastard. Get the fuck out."

His mouth dropped open, farther than that I had ever seen it, even when he was sucking my cock. And my cock requires a *wide* open mouth. "Rory..."

He looked as if he intended to step forward, to hold me again, or something else, but stopped when I snatched up the decanter and carefully threw it over his left shoulder so that it smashed against the wall. It shattered and spewed

glass and whisky back in our direction before gravity took over and liquid and shards and slivers glittering in the candlelight fell to the thin carpet. Fortunately the decanter was nearly empty, because I hate to waste whisky, even whisky as bad as that. Also fortunately, I had more where that came from, since I could not afford anything finer.

My poor falcon... no, he was not merely no longer, he had never actually been, *my* falcon... froze. In mid-flight, as it were.

I kept my voice low, though the lack of response to the breaking decanter reasonably well indicated the men whose rooms were on either side of mine were out getting themselves drunk elsewhere. Or gambling or whoring or whatever they were of a mind to do. "Get. The. Fuck. Out."

He held up his hands as if he was surrendering and about to retreat. And then he surrendered something I never expected.

"I've never been fucked."

It was my turn for my mouth to drop open in shock. Widely. Wide enough that my jaw made a popping sound, and I wondered if all neddy boys compared the width to which a mouth dropped open in surprise to the size of cock needed to fill that opening.

Based on that standard of measurement, I could have been swallowing someone's fist just then. Although preferably only with someone with hands like Michel. Long, slender fingers about which I had often wondered. Wondered what they would feel like around my cock, brushing my lips with a single fingertip, rolling my bollocks, then one, two, three of them entering my hole, stretching me. Four, even?

"Never?"

He flushed, a deeper red, somehow, than when he was above me, my legs on his shoulders, or spread wide with knees hooked over his elbows, or curling around his waist, as he pounded me into a screaming explosion. The rake who won races, shooting matches, boxing rounds, a night of high-stakes piquet or whist, with quiet aplomb, or perhaps a modicum of a satisfied smile. Bloody hell, the rake was *embarrassed*.

I collapsed into my chair, looked up and grinned.

"You're a virgin," I said, just to be very sure we were both clear on what had suddenly become far more important than my possible death. Or Michel's, by some God damned mistake of mine.



“And you take it up the arse, so what?” he snarled.

I smiled back at him, spread my legs so he could see the way my cock was eagerly staining the dressing robe I wore over nothing at all. Leaking more rapidly than usual. But then, I had never had a virgin before.

“So do I get to fuck your virgin arse, since, you know, I might die tomorrow and never have the chance again?” I gave him the most pathetic, pity poor, poor me tone and expression I could find in my repertoire of mockery. But I had gone too far.

“You might die and you think this is some sort of fucking joke? You fucking bastard!” The always-controlled rake erupted in fury and launched himself at me.

I managed to get my hands up in time to prevent myself from being throttled, but we still went over backwards as the chair collapsed from our not inconsiderable dual weight.

It was not a real battle. Not in the sense of actually trying to significantly hurt or at a minimum, moderately maim each other. It was the kind of battle men use to express feelings we're too fucking cowardly to say aloud. Such as the fact that Peregrine and I felt something for each other after all, beyond the sex, and we had difficulty accepting that tomorrow all possibilities might end. Forever.

We realized at the same moment what we were really doing, though not soon enough to have prevented a bruise on my shoulder and another where he gripped my wrist... the left one, for even in the midst of the struggle, I realized he was making sure he did nothing to harm my right arm, my right hand. The arm and hand that would have to wield the pistol in only a few hours. It had not all gone his way, of course. As my gift to him, he would have what would, I felt, be one of my finer black eyes. Large and eventually brilliantly colorful against his fair skin.

He was on top of me when we stopped the struggle. I could feel that thick rod pressing through the cloth against my own naked cock, since the robe had become twisted and tangled about me, leaving me bare down there.

He half-glared, half-gently smiled down at me. “I could fuck you now. Set my cock free, toss your legs up, spit on my cock, spit on your hole and just shove in until my balls slapped against your arse. And you'd let me.”

Bastard. Fucking bastard. He was right. I sagged, the tension of the fight draining out of me. I'd take whatever he was willing to give me.

And then he released his grip on my wrist and used four fingers to stroke my face from cheek to chin. "I will be very upset if you use *me* that way."

He smiled, and in a soft falsetto gave me back a far more powerfully pathetic, pitiful me than I had been able to provide him... complete with those thick eyelashes batting like a maiden luring in her prey. "You will be gentle with me, won't you? My lord?"

I grabbed his head with both hands, pulled him down into a bruising kiss. Released his swollen-lipped mouth eventually. "You have far too many clothes on. And while I could, an' I would, had we but world enough and time, I'd take you over there, bent over that straight-backed chair, just bared enough to get my cock in."

He did not quite leap away from me, but did get up quickly and carefully, avoiding the knee to my bollocks he might so easily have dealt me in hopes of incapacitating me for just long enough. Except, for all his distress he would never so dishonor me by doing anything intentional, even *accidentally* intentional that would cause me to miss my appointment.

I followed him upright, though I took the farther route to the opposite side of the bed from where he stood. He had on boots; he could deal with the shattered glass. It was, after all, entirely his fault there was glass on the floor; it had nothing to do with me. He stopped when his footstep *crunched*.

"You have a broom?"

I was naked, erect, one knee on the edge of the bed. I let my expression show what I thought of that insanity. He was obsessing about neatness at a time like this?

"I'm not going to allow you to risk slicing your feet and perhaps missing your meeting."

A friend, indeed. I nodded toward the armoire that held my clothes. An old broom leaned behind it, frail with age. He grabbed it up, and briskly, efficiently, swept all the bits and pieces of glass that offered up tiny flashes in the candlelight past the edge of the carpet and against the baseboard. He didn't look at me, just stood there with his head down, as if entranced by dust and liquor-dampened carpet and glittering glass, as he said, "Tomorrow... tomorrow when you're... done, and both of you... *both of you, God damn it! do you understand?* ...go home, you can finish cleaning the mess up. Be damned if I'll be your servant more than this."

"I understand." My own voice was soft, and I could not keep it from shaking, just a little. "And I'll understand, too, if you've changed..."

He shook himself, shook off what had gripped him a moment ago, turned, looked at me. Began to undress.

"Do you know why I've never been fucked?"

He was as efficient in undressing as he generally was in all things. Jacket struggled out of, as I was in no mood to play the valet, and instead enjoyed the sight, and dropped on a chair. Waistcoat and cravat next, then his shirt. I so rarely had a chance to see Peregrine naked. He was only halfway there, but it was more than enough to increase the flow of clear, thick liquid from my cock. I idly smeared it around my knob as I watched. I loved those tight golden curls, so much softer than the wiry red on my own chest, rising up to the hollow of his throat in a flat-topped pyramid shape, spreading out below the base, to right and left, the top stroke of a "T" that emphasized surprisingly large, and highly sensitive, nipples. Then the vertical stroke went down and down in a wide swath, a veritable trail to the treasure still hidden by his damnable pantaloons.

"I..." I shut my mouth very quickly. *I don't have all night, you know*, as a means of encouraging far more rapid nakedness, would have been such an incredibly stupid remark that he undoubtedly would have just dressed again and walked away.

"This is why," he said, grabbing his cock through the cloth, adjusting it so that its long, wide length was clearly visible. Oh, yes, a definite treasure. Eight guineas, indeed, though in that one moment of drunken measurement, I placed the value on his cock-length as eight guineas, *thirteen* shillings, nine pence. Peregrine tended to undervalue himself.

He flopped on the chair and awkwardly tugged off his boots. Fortunately they were of the variety that did not require assistance. Stockings next, after a quick check to make sure there were no bits of glass nearby. They made a small crumpled heap beside him as he stood again, unbuttoned, pushed pants and smalls to the floor and stepped out of them.

Had I been a remotely prayerful man, at that moment I would have thanked God for His decision to gift Peregrine not only with the substantial guineas of length and width, but hair down there the color of a freshly minted guinea, brighter even than the hair on his head, and matching the thick gold in his pits.

He stood still, letting me admire his golden beauty with its occasional hints of reddish flame. The palest of white for his cock, never sun-kissed, fine blue

veins tracing his girth. He grabbed his cock, stroked it almost angrily, which brought my attention back up to his face. He was not looking at me, but rather at his cock, as if were something he somewhat disliked.

He looked up and our eyes met. “The very first boy I had, and I was only a boy myself, took one look at my cock, which was not even fully grown at that point, and offered his mouth or his arse, preferably both in short sequence, for my use. The men I have met have continued to drop to their knees, or present their arses. So I have graciously accepted the given gift, and no one has ever questioned whether I wanted, or even contemplated, anything else.”

He paused. Then began again. “I... *contemplated*... not often, I admit, if it would be as pleasurable for me to have a cock in my arse, as it clearly was for the men I was fucking. And despite my obvious knowledge that an arse can open up to allow this prick inside and enjoy every fucking guinea of it, I wondered if, perhaps, my own arse was different, too tight, too inflexible after all the years of no use at all except for shitting, to get a cock inside without pain I was unwilling to endure. It seemed safer to just contemplate and do nothing.”

I smiled at him. Kept stroking as I did. “I, ah, *contemplated* your arse, too, from time to time. Usually on those nights when we had either not been together for anything at all, or had been together but only in public. Sometimes I even... *contemplated*... fiercely enough in the middle of the day that I had to find some quick privacy for an even quicker wank.”

I chuckled. “You have cost me more than one handkerchief, you know, with your fucking and my wanking. I could wipe myself clean, both cock and arse, squeeze out the last drops so I would not stain my clothes with residue, but then, I could hardly return a damp, seed-smelling square of even cheap linen to my pocket, could I?”

He laughed.

“Are you enjoying the image of me littering London with the aftermath of my Peregrine-laden imaginings?” I asked.

He nodded.

I understood now, of course. How could I not? When I had often bemoaned the fact that so many men, nearly *every* man, did the same to me. Though if my cock was part of the reason for the on-the-knees position, it was because, I was smugly aware, that in the valuation stakes—and I so enjoyed this game of measuring in inch-diameter coins—though my length was far shorter than Peregrine’s, my prick was a *full* two guineas wide. Most assuredly not the

penny short of Peregrine's insistence that I was merely... *merely!* ...one guinea, twenty shillings, eleven pence.

He came closer, stood over me on the bed, looked down at my reddish-purple cock with its bulging veins and gulped. Although he had stroked me to completion before, even sucked me to that goal as well, opening your mouth is merely a matter of will. For your mouth is under authority, and you may say to your mouth "open," and as Luke might have said had he been of this bent, it openeth. But your arse is a stubborn beast. It requires far more training than we had time for to make that tightly clenched muscle open, or even relax just a little, on command.

And Peregrine, my bold, brave falcon, was about to squawk, and flap away in terror. But training a falcon requires that you start with the proper lure. I had the perfect one.

"Coward."

His entire body became as rigid as his cock, and if he had snapped his head up to look at me just a little bit harder, it would have snapped right off. His words were spoken with the precision that is a prelude to violence. "What did you just say?"

I didn't reply immediately. I lifted my right hand, spat twice in it, brought it back to my cock knob, where I had it join the flow of precome and then slid my palm and curled fingers down my cock to slime it up. He *almost* kept eye contact. *Almost.*

I gave him my very best smug smile, the one reserved for the man who is lusting after your cock but doesn't want to admit it. Gave him, too, a wee bit of Robbie. "An' will ye run noo, laddie, an' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain for promis'd joy?"

He blinked, and stared, and blinked again. And then he laughed and the tension drained away. "I did promise your cock joy, did I not?"

"In a manner of speaking." I stroked myself several times, pinched one nipple. He had stopped looking in my eyes, focusing on what was far more important. "It depends on whether you are a good virgin or a bad virgin."

That got him looking at me again. "What?"

"Are ye a good virgin, so good 'n' tight ye don't relax a'tall, a'tall and snip me cock off when ye clamp down on me? Or are ye t' kind o' virgin who's so

vurra, vurra good when he's good, but when 'tis time t' be bad, he's vurra, vurra bad indeed?"

"Bad, I think. So bad that perhaps our next time, I can entice you with, 'Once more unto my breach, dear Rory, once more, an' close my English hole up with Scottish cock.'"

I gave him the groan that deserved. And then we slid away from jests and into the serious business of initiating a new and hopefully glorious relationship between my cock and his arse.

My lodgings were not meant for fucking, much less the truly vigorous fucking I was most interested in at just that moment, as the bed was narrow and the mattress thin, entirely in keeping with the amount I paid for the two rooms. And while the lodgers on either side of me and across the hall appeared to be gone, given the lack of response to our earlier... *enthusiasm*... they could still return at any time. None of us kept precise hours. So this, unfortunately, would have to be as rapid a fuck as his arse would allow.

I got off the bed, and pulled him into a kiss, my right hand on the back of his head, bringing it down to my level, while my left hand rubbed his cock. Time was short, but there was always time enough for a kiss, especially with this man.

I broke it off. Gave him one last chance as I asked, "Are you sure?"

He thrust his cock at me, backed away, cockily... how else for Peregrine? ...stepped over to the bed, bent, braced both his hands, and looked over his shoulder with a wicked grin, followed by a slight waggling of his arse.

Cock tease.

But cock teasers eventually get their *comeuppance*, as Peregrine was about to.

I turned away from him, went to the armoire, retrieved the intricately carved chest, set it on the stand beside the bed, removed the key from the drawer, put it in the lock, twisted. We both heard the tiny *click!* in the still room. But there truly was no time for what was inside, not for proper use. I sighed and turned the key back. Quickly put the chest away.

Peregrine's eyebrow asked "what the fuck?" and I shrugged.

"Another time," I said unthinkingly.

We winced at that, a wince we could not conceal. There might be no time for another time, after time passed beyond six in the morning. But then again, there might.

“A promise,” I said. He nodded agreement, and we carefully avoided letting the other see our knowledge of the truth that I might have no choice about keeping that promise.

“Spread your arse for me, Peregrine.”

“Uh... what? How?”

I sighed a loud and long-suffering sigh that clearly said, “Virgins!” Followed by a grunt in arse-wipish which clearly conveyed, “With your fingers, arse-wipe, with your fingers.”

Peregrine then reached behind himself with both hands, clasped those well-muscled cheeks and pulled them apart. Were I Buddhist, I would say I had achieved nirvana at the sight of that oh-so-tightly clenched, bright pink hole, surrounded by a fine dusting of light golden hair, almost invisible against the whiteness of his skin.

Nirvana vanished in an instant, however, when he lost his balance and fell forward, his left knee slipping on the edge of the bed, his right knee landing firmly, so he twisted and found himself with one banged knee on the floor, accompanied by his left hand for balance.

I refused to laugh. At least, not a lot.

I had never seen every inch of Peregrine flush a rich, rosy pink. It was quite beautiful. If I had not already been hard to the near-breaking point, that would have finished the job of making me so.

He got up, more than a little awkwardly, glared at me over his shoulder and got into position again. This time on all fours on the bed, his knees and part of his shins well-placed, the rest of his legs hanging over. He balanced himself with his forehead on the far side of the bed, as it was not at all wide, and spread himself once more.

But there was no time for admiration, for delicacy, for spending minutes, eons, on my own knees licking his arse and fingering it until my tongue was fucking it readily. I took out the stopper on the small bottle of oil I had intended to use for one last wank, regardless of the meaning of “last,” and coated my fingers with it. Holding the bottle in my dry left hand, I leaned close enough to

be sure of my aim, and drizzled oil on his hole. It could not have been cold, but still he shuddered.

I used the tip of my forefinger to caress the edges of his entrance, spiral down to its center, caress and press. "Shall I warn you when I am about to enter?"

His "yes" was muffled, but I understood it. Naturally, I ignored it, and in the interests of time, pushed my finger all the way in.

"You fucker!" he yelped.

I was more than a little smug as I pulled it almost all the way out and pushed back in, and replied, "Not yet, Peregrine. Not just yet. A one finger fuck does not a full fuck make, you know."

I knew where his gland was, of course. A man who has fingered and fucked as often as I over a lifetime, knows these things, and knows them well. But I wanted to tease him for just a little while.

"Arse-wipe!" he grunted back. It was fast becoming my second-favorite endearment.

I pulled entirely out, but left the tip resting on his center. He could not feel my second finger, curved, and with its tip pressed on the nail of my forefinger. I asked him whether he wanted two, with or without a warning. When he was silent, I nudged him slightly. "Well?"

His sigh was practiced long-suffering. "You bloody well know that whatever I say, you'll bloody well do what you want. So can we get on with this, or shall I just leave and practice on myself later?"

"Well, since you asked so nicely..." I slid my second finger quickly forward as I pushed, letting it briefly lead the way and open up the passage for the pair of them. Peregrine's grunt was loud this time, and he abruptly released his hands, dropped them to the bed and recklessly clenched my well-worn sheets. I thought I heard one tear, the bastard.

But I was nice. As I spread my fingers to a side-by-side push, I guided them to and over his bump, and curled over it, and pulled them back. I hoped that after tomorrow morning I would have the chance to hear that kind of moan from him again. I repeated the in-and-out strokes, moving my fingers together, apart, up, down, twisting, and his breathing became just a bit more ragged.

"Three now, Peregrine," I whispered as I braced my weight on my left hand beside his knee. "I'm going to fuck you with three fingers. That won't be



enough to get you really ready, not for the full two fucking guineas and not a bloody pence less.”

He remembered as well as I, and this time his groan carried a bit of mockery, but then I made a triangle shape of the ends of my first three fingers, second finger of course pointing the way, and I pushed inside. Straight in, shoving the walls out to their, just for that moment but definitely not forever, capacity. Then another spread so three fingers in a neat row marched in and out to the tune I was playing on his body. A tune whose tempo was increasing as the fingers bobbed and weaved, ducked and dodged and played with his hot flesh. I yanked them out and greedily listened to his loud whine and his whimpered, “No.”

Four fingers then, an almost square, two and three on top, one and four below. Before his hole could slam shut, I shoved them deep. Another march began, the four marchers spreading out so that they were not *quite* touching each other. A more elaborate march, with an even more rapid rhythm, near-acrobatic turns and twists, his breath more ragged with each in and out thrust, his fists clenching and unclenching and tearing more holes in my poor sheets.

I pulled my fingers out, poured oil on my cock, used my right hand to slick myself up. Pushed four fingers halfway in again. I rotated my hand back and forth as a queen might rotate her wrist to wave to her subjects from a royal carriage. Peregrine *liked* being treated like royalty.

“Slow and easy, or fast and hard? Your choice.”

“Liar.”

“Would I lie to you? No, don't answer. We both know I would. But not now, because if you choose the second, it *will* hurt. I remember my first time, and though I was willing, I wasn't given the choice, and he chose the second one for me. I thought for a moment there was a knife slicing up inside me, the pain was so sharp. So I have no personal knowledge which is ultimately better.”

“Truth?”

“Truth.”

“Well, fuck.” He then grunted and moaned again, as I had not stopped playing with his hole. He grabbed my almost-not-there pillow, folded it up, and shoved his face into it. I had to interpret the arse-wipish sounds to understand he wanted it fast and hard.

“As you wish.”

And I did as he asked. Took out my fingers, pressed my knob against the fluttering opening, and shoved with as much strength as my hips could give, and broke past the ring, spread him even further with the thickest part of my shaft, and felt his channel collapse around the base of my cock, sobbing with gratitude for the slight bit of relief, since I was not quite as wide there.

I had, of course, lied to him. As arrogant as I am about my size, four fingers wide is about three guineas' worth of width, and that is not me. If it were, I think I'd rarely get a mouth or arse to fuck; they'd be too frightened of the damage I might do.

Peregrine howled into the pillow. A manly howl, I'm sure, though muffled by the fabric and feathers. Not at all a girlish shriek. I was nice enough to give him a moment's respite, a moment to get used to having something that thick where no prick had boldly or otherwise gone before. And then I fucked him.

His arse fought me, at first, an inevitable response to so unfamiliar an invader. But then he relaxed, and as he relaxed I sped up. As I pounded harder and harder, I reached around, slicked up his cock with my oily hand, commanded him to wank himself. As he did, as I did, Peregrine began a conversation with my pillow.

Entirely one-sided, of course, because though we assumed the men in the rooms around were gone, we could not be sure. And so silence was needed. *Near* silence.

I was fortunately so very fluent in arse-wipish I could readily translate every word of the conversation. I clearly heard him say, "Oh, Christ, Rory, oh God, that feels so good. Didn't know... expect... can't, oh fuck oh fuck, yes right there... no you bloody arsehole shite-head bastard you don't fucking slow down. Yes. Yes yes yes yes, faster, oh God, faster, harder, harder, *harder!*"

I gave him precisely what he asked for because that is the kind of fuck-friend I am, and far too soon I could feel his muscles clenching around me and releasing, over and over as he spewed seed far and wide across my bed. I joyfully joined in the spewing.

I collapsed on top of him, but braced my hands on the mattress so it was not a literal collapse. We panted and gasped and began the process of gathering enough air so that we could actually breathe again. And though I had no desire whatsoever to do so, I knew, as he knew, that this had to end. I slowly and carefully pulled out of him. Knee-walked a bit backwards, put one foot on the floor and then the other, stood.

Peregrine turned over, sprawled ungracefully on the bed, his head almost falling off the other side. He slowly lifted it, looked at me and grinned a grin of utter delight.

I quickly and carefully painted a wonderfully executed oil of him inside my head. This was what I would carry with me in the morning.

He looked around and I realized it was for a cloth. "Bloody hell, Peregrine, just use the sheet. You've ripped it to rags as it is."

The grin got wider, and then he stood, pulled the sheet off the bed, and thoroughly wiped his hand, his cock, his balls, between his legs and his arse. He let it drop in a heap on the bed.

"I... I'm sorry, but I have to go."

He walked over to his clothes, and as he grabbed them up, beginning to almost rush into donning them again, it occurred to me there might be a reason for such speed. I felt a fool for not having realized it sooner. "Are you going to see him?"

Peregrine at least did me the courtesy of not pretending he had no idea what I was talking about. "I have to."

As much as I wished to shout a denial of those three words, to argue with them, I could not. I would not, *could* not, be persuaded to apologize for the wrong I had done. It was too great an offense. But if I were in Peregrine's shoes, though given the size of his feet I would flop about in them, I would try the other duelist as well. I did not think it likely that he would succeed.

Before he made the attempt, however, there was something important he had to do first. And so I told him. "Fine. I understand. But you will go home and bathe and change before you do."

"Don't be ridiculous! It's—" He looked about for a clock, realized there was none, scrambled in the pile of clothes until he found his watch, and flipped it open. "It's 11:27, Rory. I have no time for a side trip, since if I have no more success with him than I have had with you... *success in calling this bloody stupid duel off, you arsehole!* ...he will need time to rest. As you do now." He set his watch down, resumed dressing.

"You gave me your word."

"I... *what?*" He stopped with his pantaloons almost up his thighs. "What are you talking about?"

“You promised me you would not tell Michel about us. You gave your word.”

“And I’m fucking not going to fucking tell him anything,” he snarled back, and yanked the fabric over his hips.

“Go there as you are, and you will.”

“Explain this simply, Rory. I seem to be not yet out of leading strings and have no knowledge of the world at all.” His words were moderate; his tone was anything but.

“You might as well *be* in leading strings, if you can’t see this. Michel has a *mistress*, arse-wipe. He has had a string of them, and other women besides. He is no stranger to the smells of sex, and of seed leaking from a hole, even though that hole is more probably a woman’s cunt than her arse. He is going to ask if you have been to see me and probably rag at you for coming here first. You bloody well *know* he will.

“And he is astute enough... and you also bloody well *know* he is... that, knowing where you have just been, and smelling the smells he would smell if you go there as you are, he will put two and twelve together and inevitably arrive at fourteen. Fourteen being the knowledge that you have gone directly from my lodgings to his bloody mansion, bloody reeking of sex, which would bloody well mean you’d had bloody fucking sex with me!”

I might have been shouting on that last bit. Fairly loudly, in fact. I finished more quietly. “You will agree, will you not, that your word not to disclose that you and I are friends of Edward’s, who are fuck-friends as well, includes not only not disclosing those facts by actual words, but also not disclosing them with a wink and a nod, and perhaps a little nudge, too?”

He slumped, straightened. “I see. Yes.” He held his palm out to me in his customary stop-right-there gesture. “And before you ask, yes, my word on that, as well. And now I need to piss.”

I nodded toward the door to the much smaller second room where I kept the chamber pot. He politely closed the door behind himself, as if I had not seen and heard him pissing numerous times before. I used the sheet to wipe myself off too, and dropped it on the floor, as it would have no more use on the bed, not tonight, and perhaps never. I padded over to the chair, picked up his watch. It was a beautiful thing. From his grandfather on his mother’s side. He often mentioned, when we had “watch matches” in a dispute over what time it was,

the superb accuracy of his own, when compared to the “lesser” timepieces that Michel and I sported.

Despite his pride, the time looked wrong to me. I stepped to the nightstand, picked up my own watch, compared the two, and corrected his. Flipped it shut again, and put it where it had been.

When he came back, I was sitting on the bed, one arse cheek partly in one of the numerous wet spots he had created. I could feel the hairs on my arse absorbing his seed. I watched him dress, and reassemble himself at least reasonably well; enough so, at least, that if his departure from the building were observed, it would only lead to the conclusion that the condition of his dress was due to drinking and not having had sex in lodgings where only men resided.

Our last kiss... forever? for the night? just until “another time?” ...was short, and gentle.

And then he was gone.

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**MICHEL**

Friday, 8 December 1815

12:57 a.m.

*Maison de Vidal-Sansouci*

London

Mercier opened the library door to let him in, then closed it quietly as he left. I could tell by Peregrine's stance in the slight shadows across the room, motionless, tense, that he already knew. I wondered which of our so-called friends had rushed to find him, to be the first to let him know that shortly after six tomorrow morning, *this* morning now, he might be minus one or even both—and that has been known to happen—of his best friends.

And now he had come to try to dissuade me. Although not with any apparent urgency since he simply stood there and stared at me. The Meissen clock on the mantel chimed and my eyes flicked to it.

One a.m.?

Unless Peregrine had been somewhere unexpected, so that the search for him was long, if he was concerned he should have been here some time ago. At least three hours. So why...

*Le bâtard, le dieu maudit bâtard!*

I forced myself to take just a sip of the Armagnac, a vast contrast to the gulps that had gone before. A ploy for time to help me keep my temper. *Hélas, pour les bonnes intentions qui pavent le chemin de l'enfer.*

My good intentions went up in a puff of infernal smoke, and he clearly heard the puff and understood its source. "You went to see him first."

"What?"

"You know about the duel." He understood I was not asking a question and confirmed it with a nod. "Why?"

"Why, what?"

As he might have said, he damn fucking well knew what I meant, and so I told the fucking bastard. "*Vous savez sacrément bien ce que je veux dire, vous maudit chien.*"

It took him a moment to work that out. I watched the slow dawn of translated enlightenment and cut off the imminent words. "You have known for hours. You have known *me* for years, have been my friend since university, and yet you go to *ce chien d'un bâtard* Scotsman *first*?"

"This is ridiculous. You may perhaps be dead tomorrow morning, shot by my *other* best friend, and you are concerned about why I saw Rory first? I'll tell you why. I... I... tossed a fucking sovereign in the air, a street rat grabbed it before it hit my palm, plucked it right out of the fucking air. And ran. So by the time I lost the little bastard in London streets that are, I swear to God, designed to permit, hell, *encourage*, thieves to escape, I was closer to Rory's lodging than fucking Mayfair."

He ran his hands through his hair, tousling it even more than it had been when he walked in. "What the fuck does it matter anyway?"

He stamped over to the desk, grabbed up the glass and the bottle, poured a generous portion, slammed the bottle back down, and tossed the liqueur back.

As a good friend of many years' standing, as I had just reminded him, I had a duty not to refrain from smirking when he gasped, choked, and made a face of utter disgust. Like the face of...

No. I would not go there.

"Why did you just give me that shite?"

"You didn't ask. You took. Accept the consequences of your decision."

As I had accepted the consequences of mine.

He put his palms flat on the desk, leaned toward me, his face coming fully into the candlelight. I kept my eyebrows down. Someone had hit him. Hard. Good. He deserved it.

"Michel, my friend, *mon très bon, mon meilleur ami*, you cannot do this. You *must not* do this."

I looked up at him, refusing to ask, though at any other time I would have mocked him for it, demanded the full tale of the blow with a minimum of roundaboutation. I made my eyes cold. "Has the Scotsman..."

"Your *friend* has a name, Michel. It's Rory."

"As I started to say, has *the Scotsman* agreed to apologize?"

Peregrine slumped, pulled back from the desk, dropped into the nearest chair. "No."

“Then there is nothing to be done.” I gave him my most Gallic shrug, perfect after a lifetime of practice.

“*You* could apologize. Even if you didn’t do anything wrong, you could apologize and this could be over.”

“I have nothing to apologize for. I will not lie.”

I had *everything* to apologize for. And I just lied.

I could not, would not, give Peregrine an even greater cause for disgust with me than the duel itself. I could not tell him how I had betrayed our friendship, both his and Rory’s. But...

We had been drinking, Rory and I. Not enough to use that as a valid excuse for what I did, but we were only a little disguised, not even half seas over, but enough that our balance was not quite what it ought to have been. So when I stumbled in that empty hallway that led to the privy, and would have fallen, Rory grabbed me just as I grabbed for him, which upset our balance, twisted us about, caused a little dance of stumbling steps, and we bumped heads.

Stood there. He only held onto me, and I to him, *for balance*. Only that and nothing more. But we were close, not nose-tip-touching close, but still, close, and I saw... *thought* I saw... *wanted* to see... *something* in his eyes. So I kissed him. And for the merest fragment of a shard of time so small I could not comprehend how to measure it, I thought he kissed me back. Only he pulled away and I pulled away, my control gone as my own face became the mirror for the horror I saw in his.

His horror at my assault on my friend, my horror at the realization of what I had done and how unwelcome it was. But I could not face admitting my error, so I attacked instead. A technique I have honed since childhood.

“Why did you do that?” *Je m’accuse, je m’accuse, oh mon cher ami, je accusé à tort d’échapper à la vérité.*

I could not admit the truth, so I accused my best friend to escape that truth, when I should have just taken the more cowardly part and turned away. But he said the same words to me.

I denied.

He denied.

Words began to pile upon words, in harsh whispers, piling up until one final word... his? mine? ...began the avalanche that left us agreeing to meet.



“There is no way I can...” He stopped as he saw from my face that there was, indeed, no way that he “could” whatever his next words might have been. Persuade me to relent? After he had failed with R... with the Scotsman? He sighed. “I should go, then.”

He rose from the chair and looked at me as though he wanted to say something else, but could not, or chose not to, find the words. He turned, but I stopped his departure. Perhaps he “could,” after all. “No.”

He turned back, watched me rise, come around the desk. Stand before him. Close to him. The kind of closeness we had often shared; the kind of closeness that was a prelude to... something else.

Something I needed just then. Only... not what I had always wanted or needed before.

“Please. Stay with me. Just... a little while. Not... not the rest of the night, not until it is time to... time to go.”

“Michel, I...”

I put a finger to his lips. “No, my dear, I understand. It would not be fair to”—I was tempted to say “that Scotsman” again, but could not find it in my heart to do so—“Rory, or even to me, to have you go from here to there. Because you *are* going to be there, are you not? Even if I do not wish you to?”

His face acquired that peculiar *Peregrine* look. If ever a follower of Dr. Johnson publishes an illustrated dictionary, an image of Peregrine, with that particular mulish expression, will be beside the word “stubborn.”

“Your seconds are honor-bound to make one last attempt to reconcile the two of you before you fire your fucking pistols and each do your damndest to destroy yourselves and destroy my heart. I am even more honor-bound than they to make one more effort to change your minds. At *least* one more time. And to be there no matter the outcome.”

He put his hands on my arms, just below my shoulders, squeezed slightly. And began speaking rapidly. “You know, if I told Rory, about—well, us—he would understand, I am sure, and then he wouldn’t want, well...”

“To kill me?”

“He doesn’t want to now!” His voice was sharp and angry, and he squeezed a little harder and shook me, as if the shaking would jumble my thoughts and rearrange them into the order that he would prefer.

A tiny part of me unwound at that truth. Peregrine is fully capable of social lies, possesses a positive skill at them, as they are a necessity to survive the ton. But he would never lie to me about something like this. So, at six I would only be at risk of unintended death. I vowed the same for Rory... that bloody Scotsman.

“Please, Michel, let me tell him.”

I shook my head and moved in the rest of the way, knowing he would put his arms around me, as indeed he did. So I only said, to the side of his head, “You gave your word.”

“But...”

“Your word of honor, Peregrine. You *gave* your *word* of *honor*. I don't release you from it.”

“Fuck!” The word was heartfelt, and angry, and resigned.

“Well, since you brought the subject up, and something else is, ah, up...” It heartened me that even at a moment like this, cocks could get stiff. Even if only out of desperation or a shiver of this-might-be-the-last.

“Yes.”

“But you don't even know what I have in mind.”

“My cock, your mouth, so we'll each have something to remember of the other, even if it turns out the memory will only last a few more hours?”

Words are ever ready at my fingertips or lips, whether writing or speaking, so I had no idea why I struggled just then for words. Perhaps because I knew that what I had to say was purely selfish, and a manipulation of a long friendship to serve no purpose other than my own.

“Ah, well, it's just... Peregrine, we've never fucked.”

He grinned at me and ground his risen cock against mine. “Because you've always acted like a skittish horse, dancing away at the lightest touch. Bloody hell, my friend, after the first few times when you clamped your fingers around my wrist and squeezed hard enough I thought I might never have the use of it again, just because I brushed your hole, I finally understood your message.”

You would be skittish, too, if your first time was rape. And multiple times thereafter, until at last you screwed your courage to the sticking-place, and with a loaded pistol—because you were smart and could find a book in your father's library that taught you how to do just that—threatened the bastard. And when

he mocked you, and came at you, you screwed your courage to the *shooting-place*.

When they found you, you were shaking, terrified, crying like the child you had once been but would never be again, babbling carefully, carefully about the horrible accident and “I never meant” over and over again. You were believed. Just as you knew you would not have been believed had you ever accused such a fine and lordly man of so foul a deed.

But none of this was anything I could say to Peregrine. Nor anyone else. So I danced skittishly away once again, by using my left hand to stroke that marvelously long and thick cock, and my right to reach behind him and caress and then squeeze his arse.

His eyes widened. Message received.

And not happily so.

A good man, a *fine* man, a *noble* man would suck as he had always sucked, be sucked or stroked in return, and enjoy both thoroughly, as he always had.

But I might die tomorrow, whether the Scotsman intended my death or not. I discovered I was neither good, nor fine, nor noble after all. Not that I had ever truly believed myself to be any of the three.

“I’ve...” He hesitated, flushed.

I’ve... what? Never been fucked? He was a virgin? And there was no way I could ask him that, lest he ask me in return if, because of all my refusals, I was a virgin as well. If he asked, I would lie, and I do not want a part of our possible last talk to be lies.

“You’ve what, my dear?”

“I’ve... only been fucked once before.”

Not *quite* a virgin, but *mon Dieu*, his so very, very *beau cul* must be tight. My slit oozed.

I would, of course, not *deliberately* manipulate him by hinting at the duel. Which was, of course, a lie, but at least it was only to myself. I could live, as it were, with that.

“Would you allow me the honor of being second, then? Considering...” I looked away, as if too embarrassed to mention the obvious.

Peregrine snorted. “Considering that you might be dead in the morning even if both of you lackwits just try to maim instead of murder, did you really

believe you could *manipulate* me into giving up my arse, instead of just asking?"

Well, fuck. I was indeed so very non-good, non-fine, non-noble.

The bastard laughed at me. "You succeeded."

"Then for obvious, non-manipulative reasons, let us not waste any time."

We undressed quickly, as we so rarely had had the opportunity to do these past months. Naked in each other's presence on numerous occasions, of course, how could we not be? But never as now, never just the two of us, with time enough for I... lust, even though there were constraints on that time.

We admired each other's faces, bodies, cocks, balls, chests, thighs, arms, until we both realized that we were doing was *memorizing*. It was a moment for mutual flushes.

He asked, his voice somewhat gruff, "Back or belly?"

"I, ah, I want to see you."

"I'd like that." He got into my bed, laid on his back, his legs spread, knees bent, his strong feet planted on the mattress. He rose up on his left elbow, reached between his legs with his right hand and began to caress his hole. Shoved his first finger just a little way in.

*Ma putain de Dieu.*

I turned away from the bed, went to the cabinet where I kept the oil that went so well with cock-stroking. It should be even better for this.

I came back to the bed, holding the capped bottle, and stupidly said the obvious. "I have some oil. Let me..."

"No!" He looked surprised at the sharpness of his tone. "I mean, I, ah, let me. Do it for you. Get myself ready for your prick."

He pulled his finger out, then squirmed around to gather several pillows so he could brace his head and raise his shoulders a bit off the bed. But first he took the oil from me, moved to his knees before me, carefully drizzled some of it the length of my prick, and then while he ravaged my mouth, his right hand ravaged my cock. When I was moaning in his mouth, he pulled away. Drizzled oil on his right hand, handed the bottle back to me.

Smug bastard. I quickly put the bottle down on the nightstand.

He carefully got back onto his back, reached down to start fingering himself, and then raised his legs slowly, moving his knees toward his shoulders.

I watched him rub his golden-furred hole, push his finger in just to the first knuckle, and then quickly all the way. He winced.

Tight. Yes. Dear God, yes. I oozed more, and used it to add to the slickness of the oil coating me, stroking only lightly so as to avoid disaster.

A few strokes in and out and then he added a second finger. Which brought a grimace, quickly suppressed. He began working his opening, stretching, twisting his fingers, his hand, flesh gleaming in the candlelight.

“You like watching me finger-fuck myself, don’t you, Michel?”

I jerked my eyes up from where they had been mesmerized into immobility. At the blaze in his eyes, I could only nod.

He worked his hole as he taunted me. “You’re good at *imagining*, aren’t you, *mon cher* Michel? Have you lain in this bed, *imagining*? Imagining that long, long, *long* cock of yours going where my fingers are right now? But further, of course, *much* further. So much deeper inside me than any man has ever been before?”

Peregrine moaned and used *three* fingers on himself. I moaned with him.

But there was no way my cock was as wide as three of his large fingers, whether side by side as they plunged in and out, or triangled as he twisted. We both knew it. So why...

“Almost there, Michel, almost there. Just about stretched enough so my hole will open up when you push that fat mushroom knob in, and then I’ll clamp down on your shaft so tight you’ll never get out again. You’ll never *want* to get out of my hole.”

We were both breathing heavily when he yanked his fingers out, and I stupidly stared at that glorious hole as if *I* were a virgin who had no fucking idea what to do with it.

Peregrine patently agreed with my assessment of myself. “Are you going to fuck me, or am I going to fuck myself with my right hand and stroke off with my left?”

I shook myself out of my bemused adoration, and got up on the bed. With the same ease as if we had practiced this a thousand times, his right leg went into the crook of my left arm as I rested my palm on the bed, he held his left leg up, and we both watched as I nudged his nearly closed hole with my knob. Then we inhaled and held our breath as I pushed. It slipped in. The knob and a bit of shaft.

And... *holy Mary Mother of fucking God!* as one of my Catholic fucks once blurted out... he wasn't jesting about the tightness of his hole and the way his muscles clamped down on me. He groaned, winced as I thrust my hips forward, and then grinned wickedly at me as he made himself relax, and I slid in. All the bloody way in.

I have so rarely fucked, and the last time was so very long ago, I hadn't truly been certain what to expect if Peregrine said "yes." I had not expected *this*, though. The heat, the tightness, the look on Peregrine's face, the rising joy as I slid back out and then in again. I could get used to this. Well, if I survived the meeting.

So in case I did not survive, this was going to be one bloody brilliant fuck.

And it was.

By the time I seeded his bowels with a quantity I was sure I would be unable to replace for several weeks, if not months, his chin, and chest and belly were streaked with his own spend, and we were an exhausted, sweating, stinking pair of ecstatically satisfied men.

Who unfortunately had another reality to face than the joy we had just shared. In just a few hours.

The joy faded from our faces almost simultaneously. I slowly withdrew, and his legs collapsed to the bed on either side of my kneeling form. Our smiles were far different than they had been such a short while earlier.

I rose up, leaned forward, braced my hands beside his shoulders and brought my head down for a gentle kiss. When I lifted my head, I said, "*Mon cher ami...*"

He blinked, nodded.

We did that awkward dance that well-sexed men do, until he was up and off the bed, and I was seated on the edge.

I watched as he stepped into the bathing room in my suite, to quickly wash up, or at least enough to get the worst of the oil and sweat and seed off his body and out of his arse. I would have preferred to just stay where I was, barely not-collapsing backwards into immediate sleep, but there was one more thing I had to do. And I only had a short time in which to do it.

I got out of bed, padded quickly to my dresser, yanked out a handkerchief, well, *merde!* it would have to be one my finest I would choose to permanently

stain, and quickly moved to where he had dropped his vest on the floor. With cloth-covered fingers, I pulled his watch out, and flicked it open.

My eyes widened. So the Scotsman cared at least as much as I did. I made my own adjustments, sent a brief prayer winging upward to a deity who might, if He truly was as loving as some said, forgive my lapses and grant me the tiny prayer that our deceptions would not be discovered.

I put the watch back, and was again sitting on the edge of the bed, still naked, when Peregrine returned. I watched him get dressed, though he made no effort to clothe himself as if he were doing anything other than returning from... *someone's*... bed to his own home.

We looked at each other from across the room, memorizing again. Then he crossed to me, leaned forward, kissed me lightly on the lips. "Until morning."

I blinked and hoped I was not lying. "Until morning."

He left and the room, my house, my life, felt empty.

I eased myself backwards, ignoring the wet spots, the damp spots, the oily spots. Put my arm across my eyes to shut out what remained of the candlelight. The rest would gutter soon enough and give me darkness.

Now I lay me down but not to sleep.

Is there a Lord, my soul to keep?

I doubt there is, and so won't pray,

Although I hope I'll live this day.

My mocking smile mocked only me. I closed my eyes.

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## *PEREGRINE*

*Friday, 8 December 1815*

*6:06 a.m.*

*A clearing in the woods*

*By the river Thames*

I sat atop Horatio, peered through the swirling snow that would have been so heavy that by the time the time for the duel arrived, the duel would have to be called off. Except what I peered at was the aftermath of carnage...

At the brilliant red sprays and pools of blood at the separate ends of the straight line that had linked the duelists, staining the already snow-covered ground. At two kneeling men, who had to the exorbitantly paid physicians, bent over the bodies on the ground, their torsos twisting and turning as if they were performing some life-saving function instead of verifying the presence of a corpse. At two men, the fucking bastard seconds who had failed to stop this, staring down at the pair on the ground next to each of them. At the man whose goddamned count had started their back-to-back and away march.

I think, had I had a brace of pistols, I would have made use of them just then. The seconds, first, for their failure to stop the duel. A quick reload, and the physicians second, for their failure to bring them back. Another reload. A single shot for the fool who counted out the cadence that killed them both.

And the last for me. Without these two, what was the point?

*I was too late!*

As my particular pair of bastard shite-heads had intended.

Damn them both.

Rory had handed me my watch, having pretended a moment's renewed admiration of it. Michel had pointed out where it had fucking "fallen" from my waistcoat when I undressed. They each had set my watch back, knowing my tendency to be fifteen to thirty minutes early for any appointment. An earliness they knew would be strictly adhered to for an engagement of this nature.

If by some odd chance they survived, I was going to kill them. Not immediately, of course. A truly effective killing based on these grounds... grounds *any* nobleman would both understand and vigorously applaud... could only, in honor, be done when the victims were once more hale and hearty.



If either or both were dead, I would somehow manage a resurrection without a three-day waiting period, so that I could have the pleasure of killing them here and now.

With all these plans unfolding in my head, I nudged Horatio and guided him forward. I brought him to a stop halfway between the bodies lying on the ground. If they were both alive, I declined to give one the opportunity to gloat because I had chosen to check his well-being first, and the other the opportunity to inflict unholy hell upon me because of that choice.

I was at that moment as neutral as the Congress of Vienna had made the restored Switzerland only a few days before Waterloo. *Neutralité, toujours la neutralité*. The Swiss motto and mine own.

I was cold, and wet, because I'd chosen to ride and forgotten a hat. Even if they survived I'd probably catch pleurisy and die from that. It would serve them right. I sat and waited.

And waited.

And waited yet more.

I was becoming a snow statue. They would ignore me, remove the bodies, remove themselves, and leave frozen me behind.

I had, from time to time in my life, wondered how a man with no honor would feel, *knowing* he had no honor. Particularly if he had knowingly betrayed that honor.

On the ride to this small, oval clearing that had no name, but was conveniently screened from the Thames by a row of tall trees, close-set, and thick bushes, and accessible from the road out of London only by a twisty path through a forest, I decided to become that man and learn how it felt. I had decided that I would, rather than let this duel go forward, break my word of honor and tell each man the truth about what the other meant to me, and me to him. And how we had been expressing that caring.

Remarkable how the imminence of death and two desperate, for all we know, we may never meet again, fucks focuses the mind and the heart and the soul on what is truly important. I was no Lovelace to risk my love for the honor of risking war and death; I had, instead, intended to lose my honor and risk the loss of love, rather than run the risk of love's loss through death.

I wondered if any part of my upset, my anger, was because I had been upstaged and my great and glorious gesture negated. But I could not be that petty.

Could I?

No. I could not.

And damn them for taking so bloody long to let me know what had happened to *my* men.

Farrell, one of the physicians, finally made his way to me after first walking to the other end of the dueling ground and consulting with his colleague about the other... body... other man.

“It is most odd, my lord...” His voice trailed off.

*Odd how? That they both died? Both survived? Only one did?*

“The, ah, gentlemen each shot the other’s shoulder. The arm that was not holding the pistol. With, ah, intent, I believe.”

“And did they both survive this mutual feat of marksmanship?”

“Oh!” He started. Realized that the man, who had paid the exorbitant sum to him to be there in case of need, might want to know if his money had been well-spent.

“Yes, my lord,” he then hastened to reassure me. “They will not, of course, be able to use their injured arms for some weeks, but if they follow our instructions, and if the wounds do not become infected, an unfortunate possibility naturally, they will regain full use.”

I allowed myself the smallest slump. They could not in honor delope, and so they had each come up with the same solution to do the other the minimum amount of damage. Accompanied by significant pain, of course, to be sure their respective points had been adequately made.

I straightened, raised my voice so I could be heard by everyone. “I’ve tossed a bloody guinea, you pair of watch-fucking bastards, so I’m going to see the Scot first. You give me or each other any shite about this, and you’ll answer to me. And it won’t be pleasant.”

I looked down at the obviously shocked Farrell, waited while he gathered his wits enough to point me in the right direction, wheeled Horatio and went to the duo of Dr. Carruth and Rory, who struggled to his feet.

I greeted him with all the love I was capable of giving him. “You look like shite, you bastard.”

I had succeeded in shocking a “my lord!” out of Dr. Carruth as well.

“I have no sympathy for this idiot, doctor. Or the idiot at the other end of the field. This idiot, however, is coming to Somerville House.”

Rory was nearly as white as the snow, his shoulder heavily bandaged and his arm already in a sling, but still he argued. “I will be...”

I overrode him. “You won’t be. You have no valet. You have no servants. You’re bloody lucky he chose that arm because at least you’ll be able to hold your prick and aim your piss, and wipe. But that’s about it. Shut your gob.”

His eyes widened, but he shut his gob. I put two fingers to my lips and whistled a loud, piercing two-tone signal that told Michael, the driver of one of the two carriages I had sent for the doctors to use, that he was needed. I waited until he brought it down from where they had been waiting, out of range and nearer the tree line. Gave him his instructions, followed by a glare at Rory that demanded compliance. He nodded.

He glared again, at only me, of course, when Michael helped him into the carriage. Stubborn Scot, not wanting to admit that after all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours or so, he might be somewhat shaky on his pins and actually, bloody *need* help.

I left them, started Horatio toward Michel, and gave a large wave to Thomas, the other driver, directing him to my destination. I pulled Horatio up, swung down and dropped the reins, knowing he would stay. Michel was on his feet as well, as shakily so as Rory.

He looked at me and said aloud, with a somewhat wobbly eyebrow raise, “Second...”

I interrupted. “If the next word was intended to be ‘choice,’ with or without a question mark, I suggest you rethink and select another word. Or better yet, perhaps just say nothing at all.”

He said nothing at all.

“Good.” I looked over my shoulder. Michael was pulling away, Rory’s horse tied to the rear of the carriage. I looked again at Michel.

“Mr. MacLean will be staying with me until he is sufficiently recovered to function on his own. While there are many things a man may do with only one hand, there are even more he cannot. You have servants and the estimable Henri. Although you may, if you wish, accept my hospitality as well. And Henri, of course.”

“No.” He swayed, and while I wanted to reach out, to support him, pull him close and tell him what a damned fool he was and how damned glad I was for his survival, I let Farrell take hold of his good arm. As Michel generally disdained any show of personal weakness, I was surprised he allowed it.

He took a deep breath, stood as straight as pain and strain would allow. Looked at me with hollow eyes. “You need to make a choice.”

Damn him. *Damn him.*

“We can discuss matters later.” *When you have calmed down enough to be rational.*

“There is nothing to *discuss*, my lord. I will not voluntarily be in that man’s presence again...”

“Honor has been satisfied, *M. le vicomte*. You can both put it past you.”

“No. And no, again. If I see him I will cut him. So you must make a choice of friendships.”

“No.” My voice was as cold as the snow about us. I had no choice but to make it so.

It was the wound and the shock that made his mouth drop open, as otherwise he would have controlled himself so that no reaction was visible.

I gathered myself. I could do this. I had to do this. I refused to lose one of my best friends by *my* choice. And if a part of me niggled, and wondered whether my refusal to choose was because I wanted to continue having Rory’s arse and Michel’s mouth when I and they wanted and we could find the time and a place, that niggling part of me was undoubtedly right. In part. But these men were more to me than convenient holes. Not that I was willing to examine too closely precisely what that “more” might be.

“*You* will have to choose.” I paused, thinking. “And Rory as well, as I will preempt any attempt on his part to do what you have just done and give him the same choice. You are *both* my friends. Better friends than I ever envisioned, especially these last months. I won’t give that up.”

He looked at me, and his eyes said what his mouth could not, since there were others around us. “You won’t give up my mouth.”

I stared at him, made sure he saw all that I, too, could not say aloud. That I wanted his mouth, of course. That I wanted to continue what we had. *All* that we had had. That I would not voluntarily surrender any of that. That I would

not surrender my friendship with Rory any more than I would surrender my friendship with him.

His eyes told me his decision, but I had to make him say it.

“Your choice, *M. le vicomte*. Do we stay friends as we have been these many months, or friends just as we were all the years before, or do we part ways here and now... of *your* choice?”

His “Damn you, Peregrine,” was more muttered than aloud, but aloud he said, “*Amitié, toujours l’amitié... salaud.*”

Bastard I was, not by birth, but occasional inclination. This being one of them.

I confirmed my bastardy by asking, “And will you accept the hospitality of my home, as you recover?”

His lifted eyebrow unmistakably said, in our perhaps *special* eyebrow-speak, “*Baiser votre hospitalité!*” while his voice said, “I must regretfully decline.”

I regretted that as well. I did not really think he would accept, and had he accepted, I did not really think we could have found the privacy, given my other guest, for him to *baiser* my arse. Though on additional thought, that particular *baiser* should probably wait until he returned the favor with his own arse, slender, muscular, as I had on occasion seen, and undoubtedly tight, as I so often imagined.

Thomas opened the carriage door, and as I put my hand on Michel’s un-shot elbow to steady him, he did a marvelously precise Rory imitation.

“Are you less of a man than *our* friend, Rory? *He* was not too proud to accept a moment of help from a friend.” Or rather, a friend’s coachman, but I wasn’t about to explain that distinction.

Michel subsided and let me help him get settled. He didn’t mutter at all when I pulled the heavy blanket over his lap, and manfully, so very *manfully* tucked it in. With not the slightest bit of Edwardian flare or care.

I watched Michel being driven away, then turned to thank the seconds and the physicians and the man who had counted out the paces, for their service in this most regrettable incident. I let them know that a paid-for repast had been laid on for them at a nearby inn. I did not bother asking for their silence about all this.

The physicians would undoubtedly forget their hefty bribes once word had spread, thus freeing them, in their minds, to add their mites to the gossip. That the tale would be told was inevitable. The men my foolish friends had chosen as seconds had not kept the fact of the duel quiet except for as long as it took them to reach the first man or group of men they wished to tell. All of this would be circulating among the ton within the hour.

I remounted Horatio, and started away.

I had thought, occasionally, over the last few months that I was in hell.

*That* had been a picnic before the Pearly Gates compared to now.

*This* was hell, and I had no idea when, if ever, I would be out of it.

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## *PEREGRINE*

*Wednesday, 7 February 1816*

*Early evening*

*White's*

*London*

“Good afternoon, George.” I handed my hat, coat and gloves to the porter. “Or is it evening? I am never quite sure at what time to change greetings.”

The porter favored me with a slight smile. “Good to see you, m’lord. And I am sure that whatever you decide is the correct greeting will inevitably be so.”

In other mouths, that last sentence might have been far-from-subtle arse kissing, perhaps even arsehole lapping. Between George and me, it was simply a gentle joke.

“Anyone about?”

He knew, of course, that I meant anyone I might particularly know, or my particular friends. Which these days seemed to be primarily Michel and Rory. Albeit *separate* friends.

Michel was unlikely this early. As for Rory, well, Rory had just left me. Or rather, left Somerville House to return to his lodgings, having pronounced himself fit to live on his own.

“A bit thin on the ground, m’lord. What with the weather and all.”

The weather being the remnants of a snowstorm that had, perhaps for all of five minutes, turned London beautifully white, after which it degraded into what was now left. Filthy piles of not-yet-melted snow that had been shoveled up. Patches of nearly invisible ice. Temperatures neither cold enough for a solid freeze, nor warm enough for a good rain. Dark grey clouds that cut off what little sunlight there might have been and seemed to be hovering just over the buildings, looking as though they might crash down on us if they acquired just a bit more weight.

Thoroughly depressing. Made more so by Rory’s departure. The house felt empty without him.

I decided to see what the menu was like. I could naturally have had a sumptuous meal at home, with every delicacy I might wish for. But I was in no

mood to dine alone. And even though I might technically dine alone if no acquaintances were here, I was still not *quite* alone. There were always members here, eating and drinking.

“Thank you, George.” I handed him a florin. “I think I’ll settle in for now with a copy of the *Times*. Perhaps you might send Daniel along with a brandy?”

“Of course, m’lord.” There was a sudden, somewhat muffled shout of laughter. “Ah. Pardon, m’lord. My wits were indeed wandering. The Four Dukes are in the morning room.”

The ton so loved naming things. Any four dukes might gather at any time for some reason or other, but whenever these gathered, no matter how many others of their rank might be around, they were the “Four Dukes”: Alderson, Stoneleigh, Rutherford and Bellmore.

“They sound... merry.”

George permitted himself another smile. “A celebration of some sort, I believe.”

I naturally wondered what the Four Dukes might jointly have cause to celebrate, or perhaps it was only one of them, and the others were “assisting.” None of my business, of course.

I nodded to George and headed toward the stairs. I naturally looked at the open morning room door as I started by, and was immediately seen by Alderson. He let loose an apparently delighted smile. He beckoned with the hand holding a half-full (half-empty?) flute of presumably fine champagne... as if the club would serve anything else... being careful, of course, not to waste any of it by over-zealous beckoning.

“My dear boy! Come join us! Your ship has come in!”

Three such emphatic sentences, only the first two of which were comprehensible. It would be rude to decline, so I accepted the invitation. As I turned toward the entrance and began walking, I caught the last word of a sentence, which resulted in a “Huzzah!” and Alderson raising his glass as if a toast had been made, and tossing back the remainder.

I could have sworn that that word was “Agatha.”

As it turned out, I heard correctly.

When I entered the room, Stoneleigh was standing, with his back against the mantel; Rutherford was seated in a comfortable chair—no chair in White’s



would have the temerity to be anything other than comfortable—and Bellmore was picking up a still-sealed bottle of champagne, and struggling just a bit with the cork.

He saw me and smiled as well. “Young hands, my boy, young hands. If you don’t mind?” He waggled the champagne bottle a bit, and I understood two things. First, that he wished my assistance in opening it, thus saving the time required for a bell-pull and waiting on a servant to arrive, and second, he... and the rest... had already imbibed quite a bit. That latter understanding was undoubtedly assisted by the two dead bottles on the table.

I nodded, went over and took the bottle, and then with an expertise born of a good decade of experience, though not an expertise to match the accumulated *many* decades of champagne-opening skill in that room, popped the cork. As expected, given that little struggle and the waggle which followed, the pressure was higher than it might otherwise have been and so the cork had a gun-shot sound and spewed an extra bit.

I was immediately joined by four tipsy dukes, or rather, three visibly tipsy dukes. Stoneleigh’s expression and stance permitted no certain conclusions one way or the other, but given the circumstantial evidence standing... or slightly wobbling... about me, I would have said, if asked, that he was at least a bit on the go. They held out flutes for filling. Rutherford had two, one of which he handed to me.

Alderson lifted his glass again. To me. I blinked. “To *The Angry Agatha’s* safe arrival home.”

I lifted the flute and drank the damned thing dry. What in the bloody hell?

“Your Grace?”

Alderson beamed. “You had not heard the news yet? Another bloody storm at sea kept them from coming up the Channel to London, so they docked at Plymouth a few days ago, after being reported lost some months back in a typhoon in the Indian Ocean. Lloyd’s has, of course, covered our investments, and the loss of the ship itself, which will clearly be repaid, but the profits were not insured. Only minor damage to the cargo, my boy, and so only minor damage to our profits. And yours.”

Profits? Ship? Agatha? I barely knew where to start, so I chose the latter. “The, uh, *angry* Agatha? *My* great-aunt Agatha?”

Alderson nodded, took a sip. “Your Uncle Matthew, great-uncle, I should say, was a fine man. He always said that when his Agatha was angry she was

fearless and fast in dealing with whatever had aroused her ire. The ship was originally christened with another name that I've quite forgotten, but after the travails of that first voyage, he renamed her. Agatha was quite pleased, you know."

"Your Grace, I, ah, I have no idea what you're talking about."

A Duke cannot, of course, look gob-smacked. It would not be at all fitting or proper. But if it *were* fitting and proper, that would have been an apt description of his expression.

"The *Agatha* and the other four ships are part of the Mayhew Company. *Your* company? Part of your inheritance?"

My visible confusion had turned what might have been statements into questions.

"Your Grace," I looked quickly at the other three who seemed equally puzzled. "Your Graces, the only inheritance I received from Great-Aunt Agatha was shortly after my eighteenth birthday."

"But you're thirty now," Alderson said.

"Respectfully, Your Grace, not yet. Not until 23rd November."

"Oh." All the elation and celebration left him. "Oh, dear. I assumed... *we* assumed..."

Stoneleigh's voice was decidedly stone-like. A family trait one might say, as his son, the Marquess of Ireton, was known with less than affection as "the Iron Marquess." "Speak for yourself, and your own assumptions, Henry. Leave me out of it."

Alderson sighed heavily. "My dear boy, I guess I am, as they say, in for penny, in for a bloody great fortune." He sighed again, gestured for me to sit. I pulled a chair away from the table and sat. He did as well.

"*I* assumed—" and he gave a small glare at the other dukes, "that you were thirty, you had your inheritance and you were simply being quiet about it. And that you had known you would not be getting it until you were thirty. Or so we—" another glare, "*I* understood from Agatha's solicitors."

"Mr. Brumley?"

"Lord, no, boy. He's been dead these nine or ten years. A Mr., ah, Mr. Wainwright."

“I...” I changed what I was about to say. I stood up, bowed to him, turned and swept a bow to the others.

“Your Graces, you have... given me much to think on. I hope you will pardon me, while I go and do just that.”

Alderson nodded.

Somewhat unsteady on my feet, though most assuredly not from a single glass of champagne, I returned to the entry hall, advised George I would not be staying after all, and properly attired, had him call for my carriage.

*What bloody inheritance?*

\*\*\*\*

## ***PEREGRINE***

*Thursday, 8 February 1816*

*9:00 a.m.*

*Offices of Bainbridge & Brumley, Solicitors  
London*

“I should like to see a Mr. Wainwright.” The porter had, of course, for a modest gratuity, already informed me which office was his and when he had arrived that morning.

The clerk at the tall desk, who had obviously not heard me come in, shot to his feet as if he had been shot, and his stool tumbled backwards hitting the floor with that gunshot sound. He flushed and did not immediately bend to retrieve the fallen stool.

He was roughly my height, my age. Already-thinning, light brown hair, and rather ordinary features. The type of man one would see and then the moment your eyes were off him, forget what he looked like. He was shabbily dressed, though his clothes were neat, and as clean as could reasonably be expected of a man who wielded quill and ink all day, hunched over that desk.

He straightened a little. “I apologize...”

His voice trailed off, clearly asking for a name. For all his non-descript appearance, he had the courage to ask, instead of immediately using “my lord” and starting to fawn.

“Viscount Somerville. There *is* a Mr. Wainwright here, is there not?”

“Yes, my lord. Have you an appointment?”

“Do you recognize my name, Mr...” My turn to ask.

“Hamilton, my lord. And I do.”

“Then do I look like someone who *needs* an appointment?”

“Uh, no, my lord.”

“Announce me, then.” I looked at the door he was effectively blocking. I would have to go through him to get to it.

He held himself very still, and it was obvious, at least to me, that he was forcing himself *not* to look at the door.

I was certain he did not realize that when he answered affirmatively when I asked whether there was a Mr. Wainwright “here,” he had essentially admitted that Mr. Wainwright was, indeed, “here.” And since he was not plainly visible in this room, and had not left the building, he was most logically behind the door at which Hamilton would not look.

Which meant that the next words from his mouth were going to be a lie. They were.

“I regret, my lord, that Mr. Wainwright is not, ah, available. Perhaps if you would care to come back?”

“Set up an appointment... perhaps?”

He very nearly sighed in relief. “Just so, my lord.”

His relief was so very short-lived. “And do you have the authority to make an appointment for Mr. Wainwright? One where I could be assured that upon my arrival he would be here to greet me, with open arms, as it were?”

“No, my lord.”

“I rather thought not.” There were two other clerks in the room, though neither had a desk quite so “fine” as that used by Mr. Hamilton, nor quite so tall. Lesser clerks. Both avidly watching and listening, while trying to appear engrossed in their work and entirely unaware.

“You, there!” I pointed a finger at the unfortunate one who just that moment happened to look directly at me. “What’s your name?”

“Uh, Jamie, my lord?” His voice was a questioning squeak.

“Is the office of the late Mr. Brumley nearby, Jamie?”

He grimaced, and hesitantly tilted his head toward the door behind which Mr. Wainwright was *not*.

“And is there a living Mr. Bainbridge, then?”

“Yes, my lord?”

“Is he in?”

“No, my lord?”

I almost asked him if he could find someone who could answer his questions and then convey the responses to me, but I held my peace.

“Does his office have chairs that are more comfortable than *these*?” I gestured toward the two extremely *uncomfortable*-looking, straight-backed

wooden chairs which were obviously intended to be used by anyone waiting to be allowed into the august presence of Mr. Wainwright. Supplicant's chairs, albeit of the preliminary variety. Intended to reinforce the importance of Mr. Wainwright and the comparative unimportance of those who had to wait for him. Inside, he would have another supplicant's chair. More comfortable and welcoming, but still a supplicant's chair.

That dog would most certainly not hunt.

Jamie had an anguished look on his face but finally nodded.

"Very well, then. You and..." I pointed at another of the young gentlemen who with equal squeakiness identified himself as possibly John. "Go to Mr. Bainbridge's office and return with his most comfortable chair, being most careful not to chip, scratch or dent it on the way."

Jamie wailed, "But my lord!"

I gave him a quite frosty eyebrow-lift, which naturally silenced him. "Now. If Mr. Bainbridge is in, you will explain that Lord Somerville requires the use of his best chair, even if his thin or fat bottom should happen to be in it upon your arrival. If he is not there, you will simply pick it up and bring it here.

"You will then procure some tea from Mr. Bainbridge's private cache, and begin the brewing process. If he has a decent service, and porcelain cups and saucers, bring those along as well."

I looked around. There really wasn't an acceptable table on which to place any of that. "Oh, and you might as well bring a table. I'm sure he can spare one for a while."

They simply stood there. "You can, of course, decline to do as I ask, and I will then depart. Leaving the pair of you, and perhaps Mr. Hamilton as well, to explain to Mr. Bainbridge, and to Mr. Wainwright should he ever return, precisely why it was that Viscount Somerville decided to take his business elsewhere."

Ah. Clearly not an explanation in which the two young men had any desire to participate. They did their best imitation of discreet cannonballs and departed.

I had, of course, removed my hat and gloves upon entering the building. I turned the hat upside down, deposited my gloves and held it out to Mr. Hamilton. He gingerly took it. "Deposit that somewhere dirt-free, Mr.

Hamilton, if you would be so kind. And, ah, be aware that any cleaning costs that might become necessary will not quietly be charged to my account.”

He gulped. “Yes, my lord.”

“Now, as I am going to be here quite some time...” I let my voice trail away as we had done earlier, and he took the bait.

“*Some* time, my lord?”

“Oh, yes.” I raised my voice. “I had nothing planned for the day, really. So I can simply sit here and while away the hours, communing with the flowers... if there were any to be had, of course. Rather sparse on the flower front, as it were.”

I looked around at what was essentially a drab workroom despite the comparatively fine panels on the wall and the crown molding.

“I also am beginning to think it likely I might become bored despite the scintillating conversation I anticipate with the three of you. Should that happen, I can send my driver on a quick jaunt to Hatchard’s to pick up a book or two.

“And I am sure, Mr. Hamilton, that you share my concern that should I have to visit the necessary, why that would be just the time Mr. Wainwright might nip right in and nip right out again. So in that inevitable event, a plight that comes to all mankind when enough tea is consumed, I shall have my coachman or groom take my place. And should Mr. Wainwright by some chance return, he will ensure that Mr. Wainwright understands that when *I* return I will want to see him. Even if the meeting will most likely be a very short one.”

I took off my greatcoat and handed it to Mr. Hamilton. He carefully hung it on the coatrack just outside the... empty... office, and with equal care deposited my hat on a stack of ledgers over which he had placed his very own handkerchief. Unused, one could but hope.

I was unnerving poor Mr. Hamilton, and regretted the necessity for doing so. “Do pick up your stool and sit, Mr. Hamilton. Go on about your business. I can quite amuse myself for however long it may take.”

However long it might take for the chamber pot in Wainwright’s office to be filled to overflowing, as I was reasonably certain that was all he had. The offices were too old to have a private water closet.

I was prepared to be a Sphinx, waiting patiently for someone to try to pass by, but should that be Mr. Wainwright, the only riddle to be answered would be how he could convince me to stay with this firm.

Patience, however, has never been one of my prime virtues, though my virtues are, of course, manifold. That virtue was sorely tested as time crept in its petty pace, or something. I had boldly asserted my willingness to stay until Wainwright actually arrived, or, as I was certain, decided to shed his cocoon and butterfly out to me. Therefore, I could not show my actual impatience by checking my watch every time a minute passed and I was sure it was at least an hour.

So I waited. And waited. Drank the bloody tea. Bainbridge was clearly a cheap bastard as the quality was abysmal, barely flavoring the water, and deeply bitter. The porcelain tea set was exquisite, though, in keeping with the image of urbane elegance he clearly wished to portray. I doubted he ever offered any visitor a sip of that muck.

Eventually I stood and ostentatiously checked my watch. Only an hour had elapsed. "Does your employer usually arrive so very late, Mr. Hamilton?"

He could not quite keep his eyes from looking to his left, as if he might turn toward the door, but he resisted, looked at me, and licked his lips before speaking. He really was no good at lying, and once again, he was about to utter one.

"He, ah, often meets clients at... ah, their, ah homes or offices, my lord. A, uh, service of the firm."

I had never met the man, but a man who would use those particular supplicant chairs instead of providing a decent waiting area, especially when the firm had a reputation for handling the affairs of quite a few wealthy individuals or families, was *not* a man who did anything other than require clients to come to him. Though I felt certain he would make an exception for the Four Dukes.

Sometimes a really loud noise can frighten a fox out of its hole. Mere noise would not do that here, but accompanied by...

I raised my voice, and began a definitely one-sided conversation with John. I then dragged Jamie in, and in a fairly short time had them as comfortable as they could be when talking to a nobleman, and even laughing. And getting no work done at all. Hamilton diligently kept his head down, scritch-scratching away with his quill, though from time to time I saw a lip quiver that looked like an incipient laugh, ruthlessly suppressed.

I raised my bet.



"I say, gentlemen, look at the time." I flicked open my watch and showed the face around, as if they could actually see from where they sat. "It's nearly noon!"

It was, of course, nearly eleven, but I was unwilling to allow myself to be confused by facts.

"Jamie, my lad, nip downstairs and have my groom come right up. I shall send my carriage over to the White Cockerel for some ale and sandwiches, and on the way back, he'll stop by Gunter's for some pastries for dessert. Such hard-working chaps as you deserve a break and a good lunch. A most relaxing, *long* break. I am sure Mr. Wainwright won't mind."

These were not men who could afford the prices of the White Cockerel. Nor could they ever expect to taste anything from Gunter's. They were desperate with longing and agonizing over what might happen if they agreed. I was a fucking bastard for doing this to them, and I would find a way to make it right.

"But my lord..." was the faint protest from John.

"Bugger it. I'm starvin'," from Jamie stopped the protest.

He darted out, and I briefly heard him clattering down the stairs. An uneasy quiet descended. I deliberately looked at Wainwright's door, and then back at the clerks. Still nothing.

Had I been wrong?

"Mr. Hamilton, is it possible that Mr. Wainwright might have returned by some other entrance?" A rat hole, perhaps? "Would you be so kind as to check?"

"Ah, your lordship, there is no other entrance, so it would be pointless."

And would risk exposing the charade.

It was indeed a charade, then, as the porter had also told me, for another coin, that Hamilton had arrived before Wainwright. So Hamilton knew, though he tried his best to protect his shite-head employer. He shrugged.

I let it go. And kept my voice loud enough to be heard through that bloody door.

"Do you know, Mr. Hamilton, I think it would be unfair just for Mr. Wainwright's clerks to enjoy this break. John, why don't you go to the others in the building, and see if they would care to sample a White Cockerel meal and a

Gunter's dessert. And assure them that Viscount Somerville will ensure that there are no, ah, repercussions for joining me in my early luncheon."

John's eyes widened, and then he grinned. What a day he was having. He quickly turned and left. That left only Mr. Hamilton and me in the outer office, and a coward hiding behind the door.

Would he really let me stop all work for the firm for several hours? Be held accountable by other employers, if there were any besides the firm in this building, for *their* work stoppage?

He would not.

The door to the office opened and Wainwright appeared, carrying a handful of papers, calling out Hamilton's name and *appearing* not to notice me. And then he did.

Notice me. Notice the no-work-going-on office. "Mr. Hamilton," he said in his best shocked-employer, outraged voice, "what is the meaning of this?"

Mr. Wainwright should never tread the boards. Rather than an Edmund Kean holding center stage, his acting talent at best qualified him to hold a spear, or a pike, or some weapon, in the back row of a group of soldiers. At the farthest possible distance from the pit. In utter silence.

My shock at his shock was better than his shock at the state of his office. Though I humbly admit I am no Kean, I would have at minimum qualified, I thought, for a role with some significant number of lines and time on stage.

"Are you Gerald Wainwright?"

The shite had the nerve to allow an expression to cross his face that indicated his surprise that I was so ill-informed as to not recognize him.

"I am." He opened his mouth to continue, wisely shut it instead of letting out the incipient, "And you are?"

"Somerville." I did not move to extend my hand to him. He had forfeited any conceivable courtesy from me. "I wish to have a word, or perhaps several with you. Now, if that is convenient."

My tone told him I didn't give a bloody fuck whether it was convenient for him, as it was convenient for me.

"But of course, my lord." He gestured toward the open door.

As I went in I casually sniffed. *Eau de pot de la chambre*, indeed. He had attempted to hide it by splashing some cologne around but only succeeded in

his own mind. He rounded his desk and did a repeat of the door gesture, this time toward the... yes, the *slightly* more comfortable... supplicant's chair.

Not bloody likely.

"I think not."

He looked truly shocked that time. "My lord?"

"A rather uncomfortable-looking chair, I think. Mr. Bainbridge's will do, just fine."

I walked back to the door and called out to Jamie and John for a repeat of their recently acquired chair-moving expertise. Looking extremely nervous, and with repeated glances toward Wainwright, they carefully carried the rather luxurious chair into the office. I bestirred myself enough to move the supplicant's chair out of the way. The two clerks hurried back to their desks.

I sat in Bainbridge's chair, and then it was my turn to wave at him, to "sit, sit, sit."

He did so. There was a moment of silence during which we each assessed the other.

I knew what he saw. An arrogant blond lord rakehell, dressed extraordinarily well, fine as five pence indeed.

What I saw: A man who, as he grew into manhood and looked into a mirror, realized he had no choice but to become a solicitor. He was a weasel of a man with narrow features, a sharp nose, thin lips, and a precise little mustache he undoubtedly thought was dashing. Slickly pomaded dark hair receding in a deep widow's peak. He was dressed well, but the kind of "well" that is just a hair beyond the boundaries of good taste. And he had not enough taste to recognize he had o'erstepped that boundary.

I ended the silence. "Tell me about my inheritance."

"Nothing has changed since the firm's last report to you, my lord, other than interest on the money in the Funds. I can have..."

"Mr. Wainwright, please. I blackmailed your clerks into doing my bidding by the simple expedient of threatening to take my business elsewhere and leaving them to explain that their refusal to do as I asked was the reason. Oh, and some judicious bribery with food and ale.

"So let me be most direct in my blackmail of you. If you don't open your budget about what the Four Dukes are quite certain is an inheritance from

Great-Aunt Agatha that I know nothing about, I shall be forced to take my business elsewhere. Immediately. And seek advice as to my legal recourse.”

“There is no inheritance.”

I let my expression show my opinion of that answer. “Let us try this again, in a more roundabout manner. There *is* a Mayhew Company, is there not?”

“Yes.”

“Which first belonged to my great-uncle Matthew, and upon his death, to Great-Aunt Agatha?”

“Yes.”

“At least some of its assets consist of trading ships, one of which has only just returned from a long journey to the Orient, having been reported sunk in a typhoon.”

“Yes.”

“That ship is called *The Angry Agatha*.”

“It is, my lord.”

“Well, then?”

“Well, then, what, my lord?”

The bastard was enjoying this far too much. But short of seeing how easy it would be to squeeze that thin little neck and perhaps snap it—self-satisfying, naturally, but ultimately self-defeating—I appeared to have virtually no leverage. I had no fulcrum with which to move a teacup, much less the world.

“The Four Dukes are under the impression that an unknown-to-me inheritance is to become mine upon my thirtieth birthday this coming November.”

“Alas, my lord, I fear I cannot be held accountable for the, ah, impressions of even such illustrious personages as the Four Dukes.”

“They are mistaken?”

“They are, my lord.”

“And there is no additional inheritance which will be turned over to me on my thirtieth birthday?”

“Quite so, my lord.”

“But then, even if there were such an inheritance, but you were for some reason forbidden to mention it before time, you would say the same, would you not?”

“My lord, if I had such instructions, that would be quite true. But I assure your lordship, that there is no inheritance scheduled to be given to you on, or even before, your thirtieth birthday. And certainly not afterward.”

“You are certain?”

“Quite, my lord. Do you wish my word of honor upon it?”

Not when I was still uncertain he knew the meaning of the phrase, though that was not something I could actually say to him.

“No, no, Mr. Wainwright. Nothing so formal will be required. But still... have you any idea how the Four Dukes might have come to this misperception of reality?”

“Alas, my lord, I am not...”

“Yes, yes. I understand you are not responsible for the thoughts of others. Very well. I thank you for your time.”

I stood up, walked to the door. Did a partial imitation of Michel by turning back and saying, “Just one thing more, Mr. Wainwright.”

“Yes, my lord?”

“I have unfortunately somewhat... disrupted, shall we say? ...your office today. I plan to make good to the men out there, and elsewhere in the building, on my promise of a meal from the White Cockerel and dessert from Gunter's. The time taken to *enjoy* that meal, and perhaps even a significant portion of the remainder of the day are likely to be lost in terms of their productivity. So, shall we say a hundred?”

He thought it over. Not with quite as blank a façade as he undoubtedly believed he possessed. He was calculating whether he might increase the amount and, if so, by how much. Going along with me, and ensuring my swift departure so he could claim responsibility for having *persuaded* me to honor so rash a promise to men entirely undeserving of my beneficence, as he most certainly viewed them all, would be as advantageous as a likely modest increase in my offer.

“That would be most generous of you, my lord.”

*It was indeed generous. Overly so.* But then, I can afford such whims as these.

“Then take it from my account, and make a proper notation in your next report.”

I nodded and this time actually left his office. I walked toward Hamilton, who rose on hearing the door open, stepped over to the rack, lifted off my greatcoat, and then held it up for me to put it on. An unlooked for courtesy, and there was not the slightest servility in his stance. When it was shrugged on and adjusted to my satisfaction, I accepted my hat and gloves.

“You will all have your luncheon,” I murmured. “And if there are any, ah, difficulties, arising from this morning, I am sure you or a note can find your way to Somerville House.”

His bland “But, of course, my lord” told me that no matter the consequences he would not be telling tales out of school to me.

I left the building, and drove to the White Cockerel and Gunter's to make the arrangements necessary to honor *my* word.

Then on to Manton's to meet Michel and see which of us was best today in culping wafers. Tuesday, Manton's, Michel. Thursday, Manton's, Rory. It had become something of a habit since they recovered from their mutual wounds. I missed the days when it was the three of us. Hell, even with young Bennington around. Laughing, joking, making outrageous challenges.

*Damn them.*

How could they not miss what we had had together?

I brooded all the way there, but shrugged off most of my melancholic air as I walked in.

Michel was standing in the hall, patently impatient about my slight lateness. I looked at my friend, at the mouth which I could not put to the use for which it was definitely divinely destined, at the expression which said he knew precisely what I was thinking, and my melancholy vanished.

Except for a second's wondering precisely what it was that still troubled me about Wainwright and his words. And whether I had been told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

I doubted it.

But I could do nothing about it just then. So I started in on Michel.

“You look a wee bit fashed the noo, as a certain Scotsman I know might say.” I actually had no idea *what* Rory might say, but the words sounded almost right, and would annoy Michel in any event. “Over-indulgence last night, perhaps? You might find yourself missing the wafers entirely or getting turned about and shooting off the ear of someone adjacent to us. Perhaps this should be postponed until you are more yourself?”

“Bugger off, *M. le vicomte*.”

I smiled. He smiled. The game was on.

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## *MICHEL*

*Saturday, 23 March 1816*

*Early evening*

*Maison de Vidal-Sansouci*

*London*

Peregrine stood in front of me, resting his arse on my desk, and grinning widely. He handed me a piece of paper somewhat raggedly cut out from that scandal sheet, *Ton Tales*. The edition of 21st March.

We have learned that on 14th March, a gang of deviants commonly referred to as “neddy boys,” brutally assaulted Lord C—and Mr. J—. Although they fought valiantly, the gentlemen were eventually vanquished, and then subjected by their tormentors to the most humiliating depravities. Their injuries, alas, were most painful, and must remain *private*. *Private*, indeed. But we wonder if it would be indelicate to wonder just why these pillars of the ton were at that particular dock at that time of the morning? Well after one of the clock, we have been told. However, we suspect that those reasons are *private* as well. Although we might speculate on such *private* matters, or even investigate them, we feel that such *private* matters should naturally remain *private*.

I looked at it, and handed the snippet of gossip-mongering back to him. “Why do you persist in reading this trash? And in paying for it? The price is outrageous for the quality of what one receives.”

“And how would you know the price? Or the comparative value?”

Fortunately, I am excellent at dissembling. “I hear things. People confide in me, bemoan rash financial decisions. Ask my advice on making sound financial decisions.”

Unfortunately, Peregrine has acquired, it seems, an even greater skill at peering through my dissembling to the heart of the matter, since we became... whatever it is we became to each other as of last summer... than he had before. He just *looked* at me in that “Oh? Really?” way he has, and I gave in. “Very well. I subscribe. I read.”



“Ha!”

I smiled. “Ha, indeed.”

He waved the scrap of paper. “And so with all these people who talk to you, give you advice, seek your advice, do any of them, perchance, from time to time *tell* you things?”

“Such as what?”

“Well, it’s so bloody obvious who they are. Lord Carswell and his odious friend Jackson. Jackson has been out and about since then, but not Carswell. And the only place likely to have been the site of an altercation with neddy boys would be the Dock. *Why* they were at the Dock is obvious. Neither is a friend of Edward’s, but they’re of the same ilk as Beckwith’s crowd... any hole when a cock is standing.”

I started laughing.

“Alright. What’s so bloody funny?”

“You haven’t heard.”

“Heard what?”

“What all that ‘private’ means.”

He snarled, which just made me laugh harder. “Come on, Peregrine, certainly you can figure out what ‘private’ means when the subject is the Dock and neddy boys.”

Dawn shattered the dimness that was Peregrine’s mind at that moment. He smiled broadly. “It couldn’t have happened to a nicer man. But why would getting a punch or a kick in the bollocks keep him in hiding this long?”

“No punch. No kick.” I laughed again. “A... *bite!*”

He was so surprised he went directly past his usual gob-smacked look into totally blank. And then he shuddered, and moved his hands to his groin as if to protect himself. Precisely my reaction when I first heard the tale. Indeed, that would be the undoubted response of any man on hearing it.

Finally realizing there were neither sharks nor shark-like neddy boys near his own prick and bollocks, Peregrine relaxed. “Do we know...”

“Oh, of course, my dear. The redhead...”

“*What?*”

As much as I would have liked to have led him on even further, which is why I phrased it the way I did, and as much as I disliked the Scotsman... and I did... dislike him—*didn't I?* Yes. Of course I did. “Not *that* redhead.”

Peregrine's sigh was deeply relieved.

“Does anyone know who...”

I shook my head. “A great deal of speculation, but all anyone claims to be certain of is that it was a redhead who was, ah, in a position to... bite. Considering the general accuracy of Dock-based gossip, combined with Carswell's absence from the ton, I think it's probable the bite occurred, but I'm not certain about the biter.”

He nodded, and then we were both still.

Damn.

Nine months and still we have these awkward moments. We don't... can't... live together. I can't wake Peregrine up with his cock in my mouth. He can't just get the urge to suck me in the middle of dining, dismiss the servants, yank the lower half of my clothes down or off with a fine disregard for buttons and rips, and then suck me to a cock-pleasing seeding before he fucks my mouth. So we must... arrange matters. Regiment them. Make a bloody fucking *appointment* to seed.

At times I have been tempted to suggest that we simply say “Fuck England!” and leave for... somewhere. Anywhere. Italy, perhaps. I have a villa in Tuscany, and if it didn't satisfy us, we could buy another, better one. I have more than enough money to permit us to live for several lifetimes, nearly as extravagantly as the Tsar of All the Russias. Or live just a single lifetime with vastly *more* extravagance than that.

But Peregrine would never agree. I doubt he would care about the separation from his father, but Lady Glenhaven... oh, yes. And he would care about the damned Scot, too.

*Hell!*

But I allowed none of this to show on my face.

Peregrine walked over to me, stroked my cheek with one finger. “Have you... ever been to the Dock?”

I decided, the night before the duel, that if I survived, I would not lie to Peregrine, or at the very least, avoid lying whenever possible. Fortunately, he

has never directly asked me what I think about the Scotsman. Should he do so, I will be forced to lie. I cannot confess my ongoing attraction to a man so definitely not a friend of Edward's. A man who could never reciprocate.

This, though, I could be honest about. But first: "Have you?"

"I asked you first."

I chortled at the child-like snap-back. I so enjoyed making Peregrine blush. Whether a little or a lot.

"I have." His breath hitched. "You?"

His "yes" was almost a whisper. His right thumb caressed my lower lip. I opened my mouth and let it slide in, nipped it a little with my teeth, the way I so rarely got to do to his nipples. He always enjoyed that.

He stilled. "Have you... Since..."

Not bloody likely. But I could not say it that way to him. That would surrender too much control. But I could truthfully tell him "no." So I opened my mouth, let his thumb slide wetly out, and did.

"Neither have I."

We both shed a little apprehension about... us.

"Had we met at the Dock... before... would you..." He swallowed loudly. "Would you have been... a *slut* for me?"

How could he doubt it? I worked his trousers open, pulled out his engorged prick. So little time just now... cocksucking and no bollocks-licking would have to suffice. I licked the droplets seeping out of him. I, of course, have not spoken to Peregrine's valet, but I wonder if he is as upset with his master as Henri is with me. This... whatever it is between us... has severely restricted their ability to dress us to be a credit to them, and continue their distinguished reputations amongst the ever-competing valets of the nobility. We now only wear dark pantaloons, or breeches for an Almack's evening, since light colors make stains from seed or leakage highly visible.

I swallowed him whole, then pulled away, leaving him momentarily gleaming wet and shining in the candlelight. I breathed on his knob, teased the tip with my tongue. Looked up at him. "How would you have taken... *used*... your slut if you had met me on the Dock?"

Peregrine has become an expert—of necessity, he *had* to become an expert—in holding my head and fucking my mouth without disarranging my

hair, my cravat, or my clothing, so that when he is finished with me and I with him, I am not in disarray. And a quick application of ice, or a chilled drink to my mouth, and whatever well-fucked look my lips might have simply disappears.

I regretted making that request almost instantly.

Not because of what Peregrine said. In a quiet, rough, *raw* voice that could not be heard beyond a foot or so from us, certainly not beyond my library's locked doors, he set the scene of almost perfect darkness, dim lighting, the scents and tastes and touches of near-degradation, our own scents and looks in the dirty, disguising clothes we wore to visit a place so dangerous to our lives, to our reputations. The fear of discovery that added a spice that turned an ordinary meal of seed into the finest of gourmet dining. The extra pounding of hearts in chests as we sexed in public. The urgency of "get done, get gone, get done, get gone!" warring in our heads with the desire to make the experience last. The panicked pause when someone approached, muscles suddenly held tight like a racehorse just before the starting flag is dropped, both ready to *run!* The relaxation on realizing it is just another neddy boy who wants to watch and wank, or add his own prick, and mouth, and arse to the action. Or a Dock-worker, one of the non-Edwardian men who use the Dock to sate the lusts they won't truly admit to themselves, hesitantly hoping he'll be lucky enough to be allowed a turn at the mouth or arse being so willingly, flagrantly used in front of him.

The fantasy he created... and who knew Peregrine could be so filthily eloquent? ...was so arousing to both of us that he let loose his seed far more quickly than either of us desired, and he stood over me, panting heavily, his softening cock in my mouth as I licked it clean.

The regret was for none of that, but was for the fact I had not known how desperately I would want to set my own steadily flowing cock free and pump my seed out without a care as to where it sprayed, at the same time I was swallowing his.

As he tucked himself back in, and buttoned himself up, I told him what a bastard shite-head he was. He grinned and let me know he was ready to fall to his knees if I wished. Though he knew bloody well that when we were taking a risk like this in my home, there was usually no possibility of *both* of us seeding. Too much time spent behind locked doors, no matter how titillating that time might be to Henri, who unquestionably bloody well knew what we were doing,

though the rest of my servants did not, might generate questions. Particularly if there was a pattern to these cocksucking events.

Peregrine gave me a mocking eyebrow-lift as I stood, noticing how very visibly distended my pantaloons were. But I had my ever-effective solution at hand. I had paid a goodly sum to have the portrait of Great-Great-Aunt Angelique at La Belle Maison duplicated in precise detail, in near-miniature, set in a plain wooden frame. I walked to my desk, opened the drawer where I kept it as a form of anti-cock stand talisman, and looked at it.

I was soft in an instant.

Peregrine looked over my shoulder and shuddered artistically. “Gadzooks!” he mocked. “No wonder you are so shriveled.”

I closed the drawer, then punched his shoulder. He winced in theatrical agony. As we left, I wondered if... when... he would ever notice that the new chair I purchased some months back, the one in which I sat just moments ago, and only that chair, was *precisely* the right height for me to sit so that Peregrine could fuck my mouth.

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## *PEREGRINE*

*Tuesday, 9 April 1816*

*10:30 p.m.*

*Library, Somerville House*

*London*

I am so very tired of all this.

Not tired of what I have with Rory, what I have with Michel, though I *am* tired of the breach between them, and of the two secrets I must maintain because I so foolishly gave my word.

But what I am tired of most of all is *the* secret.

And all I have done since my eighteenth birthday to protect that secret.

Michel is away for some urgent problem at one of his estates that his steward cannot deal with on his own. Rory is off hunting foxes and other things with several of our friends, including young Bennington.

So I am alone and maudlin in my library.

I have wondered before, wonder now, how my life would have gone on had Wilfrid Brumley not arrived, unannounced, at Glenhaven Hall, quite late on what Mama later described the next afternoon—after the meeting that changed all—as a “dark and stormy night.” I asked her how a December night, or indeed any other night, could possibly be anything other than dark, considering the absence of the sun from the scene.

She shrugged and said, “Well, my dear, it *was* snowing at the time, with vigorous winds blowing all about, and it *was* dark, without a bit of moon, so what I said was quite accurate.”

She paused, and then said with a little gleam, “Do you know, I rather think that phrase of mine would be an *excellent* first line for a novel.”

She lifted her head, staring into some unknown distance, and sonorously declaimed, “It was a dark... and stormy... night.”

She quite spoiled the effect with a giggle. “I think I shall pen a note to Mrs. Radcliffe, and suggest she use it. It would be quite fitting for one of her romantal novels, don’t you think?”

“Having never had the, ah, *pleasure*, of reading one, I defer to your expertise.”

“As well you should, as well you should,” she said, and patted my hand, as we sat side by side on a sofa in her sitting room. She became more serious, then. “Do you have any ideas about what you might do with Agatha’s gift?”

I did, oddly enough. But the ideas were most definitely not something a man of eighteen could ever share with his mother.

I met Wilfrid Brumley in the front parlor the morning after his arrival. At my age, he seemed older than God Himself as he informed me of the bequest. While I was gaping, my mother was fanning herself, and my father was glaring. Mr. Brumley explained that she intended to present the gift herself on my birthday, but as she died three days prior to that happy event, the members of the firm took it upon themselves to slightly delay the presentation in order to address the other circumstances created by her passing. He did not elaborate on that latter point.

While I noted the oddity of his tone on “circumstances,” I was naturally focused on the hundred thousand to which I so unexpectedly had unfettered access; money that could not be withheld on a father’s whim.

Father had been unsurprisingly furious at what he perceived to be his aunt’s deliberate humiliation of him by not giving him control over the funds, to dole out or not, most likely not, as he chose. Until, of course, I was of an age suitable to manage it on my own. Somewhere around my thirtieth birthday, undoubtedly. Perhaps later.

So when Mama asked about my plans, I did what any good and loving son would do in the same circumstances. I lied. Proclaimed my utter lack of ideas. How overwhelmed I was by such generosity (true), that I would have to carefully think on it before making any decisions (false).

I have never been sure that Mama actually believed me.

Father’s fury over the “slight” became even greater when he realized, on viewing, or being told of, some of the *ostentatious* results of my spending, just how quickly the money was going out. All to implement the plan I started to formulate when I realized Mr. Brumley’s presence was not some odd May game. The plan that was only half-formed when I kept it secret from Mama, and fully formed by the time I fell asleep on my first night as a *very* wealthy man.

The following months, more than six before I was satisfied, served to provide me with the solid foundation for reputation I needed to acquire. Thus the women. And wild parties. Then wilder ones still until the last major one ranked as a full-blown orgy. At which I was, indeed, blown in an unlit corridor by a man I never identified but who was remarkably skilled at swallowing... everything.

A few more parties which were progressively, but not noticeably so, milder. A few more extravagant expenditures. A few more fucks with women paid well enough to keep their mouths shut if my performance was not as skilled as they perhaps expected. But then, when you are desperately imagining a man's mouth or arse around your cock, as opposed to the reality of a woman's cunt, just to keep yourself hard, your performance will not be as skilled as it would if you had reality beneath you instead of your imaginings.

I thus demonstrated to my father, clearly and unequivocally, that I had repented of my sinful and perverted ways. And had gone on, in quite glorious and ostentatious fashion, to embrace the many and varied *acceptable* perversions permitted to the men of my class.

A man who likes men, who likes a man's hands on his body, a man's mouth or arse surrounding his cock, cannot repent what he did not choose, and does not refrain from repeating those perversions except by an exercise of will far greater than any I was willing, or perhaps even capable, of exercising. A man in that position simply becomes discreet. And if my hand was exercised far more than any alternative method of setting loose my seed, for I never sowed where it might be fertile; if I then relied on my imagination far more than on action, that was the way I knew it had to be. The only way it could ever be.

As it had been. Until now. Until the beginnings with Rory and Michel.

Until I began to dream, only to have those dreams die in a duel that did not kill anything else.

Despite my certainty that those dreams might come true if Rory and Michel knew the truth about each other, I have no certainty whatsoever about the outcome if learning the truth was not based on one of them releasing me from my word. All it would take is one. But just as Rory furiously forbade me to go to Michel the night before the duel, reeking of our sex and thus risking inadvertent breach of my word, harping at either or both of them to release me poses a similar risk.



And what compounds my annoyance is that if my bastard shite-heads had just left my fucking watch alone so that I arrived early at the clearing, I *would* have said “fuck it all!” that morning. I would have dragged their arses away from seconds and doctors, and politely, calmly, in a caring tone of voice, whisper-shouted at them, “I’m fed up with this shite, you arseholes. You’re both fucking friends of fucking Edward’s, and I’m bloody tired of separate, secret sex, when we could be fucking and sucking together. Now call this bloody stupid duel off, and let’s go find a bed somewhere.”

That would have worked. I know it would.

And I have imagined so many times since then, cock in hand, what we three might have done in that bedroom.

I was not so drunk that my cock could not stand, so I stroked, and imagined, and drank, and imagined more. Imagined, in particular, fucking Rory on his side, with my right leg up and over his, while long and lean Michel eased that vastly valuable cock into my arse. And as we set seed free in my imaginings, I set my own seed free into my palm. God forbid the servants should *know* from stains or damp spots what I have been doing in my own library.

I drank some more and eventually staggered upstairs to bed. As I fell into it, I vowed I would make an appearance or three in public over the next few days of their absence, lest I appear to be brooding over that fact.

I kept my vow.

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## ***PEREGRINE***

*Wednesday, 10 April 1816*

*11:45 p.m.*

*Almack's*

*London*

“I’m not going to marry you, you know.”

A known rake, making an appearance at Almack’s, that den of matrimonial iniquity, must be dressed in full ton armor: clothes, attitude and a set of the mind both alert to, and standing fast against, the slightest hint of a lurking parson’s noose. Once properly armored, even while twirling some young lady, delightful or otherwise, around the dance floor in a somewhat sedate waltz, a rake should be impervious to marriage-related surprises.

I was well-armored. Experienced in the use of my armor. And I discovered I was not at all impervious to the marital shock of Lady Anthea blithely announcing her intent to marry me. I bloody well nearly stopped dancing and dragged her to the side to demand, politely, what the bloody hell she was talking about. I would probably have done so, despite the inevitability of thereby initiating a series of collisions amongst the other dancers, except that I realized I had misheard her words. There was a “not” most definitely in that sentence.

The safety of the “not” that would not knot any noose around my neck enabled me to dance on. Though I looked down at her and whispered, mockingly, “I am, of course, quite, *quite* devastated that you will never be my own. I am not sure how I shall bear up under the devastation of the loss.”

Oh, she had so delightfully matured these past months. Gaining her own form of town bronze, becoming more assured; making friends even among the debutantes who were her chief competitors in the beauty and marriage sweepstakes; learning to flirt, from subtlety to a form of *almost*-outlandishness peculiarly and *innocently* her own, which never crossed the line that would bring down the wrath of the ton on her gorgeous head.

She twinkled up at me. “Perhaps... wine, women and song would help you survive the loss?”

Oh, what a daring minx she was. Yet I not merely suspected but was entirely certain that this type of teasing was something she reserved for the

three members of the former Three R's. As we were now occasionally referred to. Two *different* sets of "Two R's" did not have the same *panache*.

Lady Anthea would never make a remark like that to anyone else, as those words could so readily be perceived as proof she was fast, not demure and virgin. I naturally could not explain that it would be wine, *men*, and the occasional bawdy song while thoroughly in my cups, that would help me get over my loss.

Last night there was only wine in my library, certainly no man to make my cock stand except in my imaginings, and I didn't do any singing that I could recall.

The music drew to a close, and I escorted her to the table with the, by now, very tepid punch and dried food items, that even in their original state could never have been described as edible, much less delicacies.

As she put a cup to her lips, I said, "Do you know, Lady Anthea, I must be getting old far more rapidly than I had thought, as I seem to have acquired—or is that *lost*?—a most lamentable memory. I was not aware we had discussed matrimony. And I would certainly never offer for you without having your father's consent first. Or did I?"

"Well, you *are* fairly old, so it is entirely understandable you might be forgetful at times," said the young lady of not-that-much-over eighteen to a man on the downhill slope to thirty.

"Has some wicked fairy or other substituted *you* for the real Lady Anthea? The real Lady Anthea is shy, demure, not at all outspoken. Why, she would never say *boo!* to a goose! Although I have always wondered why one would ever *want* to say *boo!* to a goose, since doing so would simply set the goose off in a tizzy. And geese in a tizzy are dangerous."

She took another sip, and then sighed. "I guess I am being a silly goose, but... I just thought you might have heard something. So I wanted to, well, reassure you."

"Heard what?"

Another sigh, this one a little more forlorn. "Mother has decided that since the Three... uh, since you, and Lord Vidal and Mr. MacLean have all been so nice to the family, and to me, that there is some sort of... competition going on between you. For me.

“She has also decided that as a second son, Mr. MacLean is not eligible, and for reasons she has not confided in me, while Lord Vidal is acceptable, *you* are the one I should marry. And she has, well, been, ah, *hinting* to her friends that something is in the offing. Between us. You and me.”

I could not give her a hug in public, nor even in private, so I hoped that my voice would convey what my arms were not permitted. “No one has said anything to me, Lady Anthea. And if Mama has heard of this, and knowing Mama, she undoubtedly has, and *if* she believed there were anything to it, or that I could be forced, willy-nilly, into something, she would have both alerted me *and* taken care of it. So we will both have to bear up under the strain of this, ah, tragic loss.”

Tension that she had carefully managed to hide drained out of her. “Well, my lord, you are certainly not the *worst* of choices. If I had to choose just now.”

“I am so relieved to know that I am the best of a bad lot. So who in this ‘lot’ of yours are worse than me?”

“Lord Beckwith.” And her voice went completely flat.

I froze, and I could not really help that my voice held some of that frost. “Indeed. I quite agree. The worst of the lot, I suspect, no matter which members of the ton make up the rest of the lot.”

*That bastard. He would get Lady Anthea over my dead and bleeding body. Or his dead and bleeding body.* I could live with that. On the Continent, if I had to.

“But do you know, my dear,” I said, replacing the frost with genuine warmth, “I think you should stop worrying yourself about him. It will never happen. Although be very sure you are never alone with him, no matter what story he might tell you, no matter how believable a tale he offers, if that tale could even lead to the slightest possibility of being in private with the man. And with him, I suggest it is far safer to simply assume that *any* tale he tells you that would result in your leaving a room full of people, even if, in theory, he is escorting you to another room full of people, is meant to entice you into being alone with him. Thereby forcing a marriage.”

“Are you... are you really that sure?”

It did not matter if she was asking whether I was sure about Beckwith or sure she would never marry him. I was positive either way. “I am. And I give you my word of honor, my dear. You won’t be marrying Beckwith.”

She looked happy again. And then she looked inward, and smiled. A really extraordinary, extraordinary smile. Not at all for me. But it had to be for *someone*.

“So. You have rejected my desperate suit out of hand, leaving me to tear my hair and go off in despair and write bad, sad poetry. You have quite properly rejected Lord Beckwith. You clearly won’t give the time of day to *most* of your other suitors, but that smile... that smile was for someone *special*. Who most certainly is not me.”

Her blush was that gentle rose that went so well with her fair skin. It accented the look of a young lady who was fairly certain she was in love, and with the right man, but not *utterly* certain of him or herself. “Lord Ramsey.” And she blushed again.

The name was not that of a man who ran in the same circles that I did, which was a step in the right direction for Lady Anthea. “Is he here tonight?”

She nodded.

“Do you recall how your brother scribbled for you the night we met? Mortally wounding the man who had been on your dance card before Bennington scribbled him out and scribbled me in?”

She looked like she was considering telling me the awful “truth” about that night, but I wagged my finger at her, and she closed her mouth.

“Is he on your card?”

“No.” Her voice made it clear the omission was her mother’s... responsibility.

“Very well, then. Since I have my name down for another dance, let us scribble me out and scribble him in.”

“But my mother...”

Another finger waggle silenced her, indicating quite clearly that all would be well if she would only put her trust in me. She handed me her card, and I did the requisite scribbling. “Now. I suppose if I were to look about for the young man whose expression combined great sorrow with a fierce glare at me, I would be looking at Lord Ramsey?”

She was torn between not wanting to admit that I was right, and giggling. The little giggle won. As I returned her card and casually shifted to look about, I discovered I was nearly right. Lord, save me from another innocent on the

town. Well, I had already done my good deed for the next decade with Bennington, so Bennington could repay me by assisting his sister. A task I would set him on as soon as he and Rory and the others returned from their kill-fest in the wilds of... I couldn't quite remember.

I held out my left arm, and she placed her hand in the crook of my elbow. I led her over to the man who might possibly be "her" young man, though as whoever "they" are say, only time would tell the truth of that tale. I held out my hand to him. "Ramsey. Somerville."

I both reminded him who he was as he had an uncertain look about him and identified myself. He looked at my hand very carefully, as if considering whether it might be a cobra about to attack him, but not for long enough to be insulting. He shook it with surprising strength for one as nervous and slightly out of his depth as he appeared to be.

"Ramsey, I would appreciate it if you would do me a great favor this evening." I then paused, so that the silence and the necessities of ton manners compelled him to commit himself without knowing who, for example, he might be required to assassinate.

"Of course, my lord."

"I have just now received a most urgent message, which unfortunately requires me to leave immediately." I paused to let them get used to the inordinately large rapper I had just told—one about which they would have to act as if they believed it—when everyone in the bloody room knew I had been approached by no one at all, much less anyone carrying an "urgent" message for me.

"I have expressed my regrets to dear Lady Anthea, but I won't be able to join her in the next dance. May I deputize you to take my place?" I looked away so as to avoid being burnt by all that brilliantly rising sunlight.

"Of course, only if *you* agree, Lady Anthea," I said, naturally ignoring who had been plotting with whom, and the scribbling already done.

She most artfully expressed her regret that I was so unexpectedly called away, and her demure acceptance of my proposal. Of course, she had to get a slight dig in at her hopeful swain. "That is, if *you* are willing to dance with me."

The artful baggage thus got him to fall all over himself reassuring her of his supreme joy, the honor, couldn't ask for anything finer to happen, and so on and so on. *Ad nauseum*. God save me from the requited or unrequited love of young men and women.

God, grant me the *requited* love of two not-so-young men. Though God had patently not been listening for a *long* time.

I put that thought aside, left them to their tender staring, and went to Lady Bennington. By the time I advised her of the change of plans, Ramsey and my erstwhile dance partner were on the floor, where a mother could do nothing about it without drawing unwanted attention to herself and her daughter. She didn't believe my rapper any more than the other two did, but then she wasn't really required to *believe*... just to *pretend* that she did.

After mutual not-quite-true, not-quite-false assurances of mutual respect and admiration, I made my escape.

I walked a little way down the street to my carriage, got in, rapped the roof to get started, and leaned back, frowning.

Beckwith and Lady Anthea?

*Not fucking likely.*

My promise was impulsively rash, possibly stupid. I had no *right* to interfere in her life, nor in her father's decisions about her life. Perhaps Lord Bennington was caring enough to let her marry for love, if that was what was between her and Ramsey. Or perhaps he was a typical ton father, marrying his daughter off for bloodlines, or wealth, or political or social alliances, or land, or in the right circumstances, all of those. And if he was *that* type of father, Beckwith might be able to persuade him.

Going directly to Lord Bennington and slandering Beckwith by telling the truth was simply not in the cards. And I had no idea whether young Bennington would be any more receptive to my inserting myself into this family matter.

But still...

But still... something had to be done.

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## ***RORY***

*Saturday, 13 April 1816*

*Late morning*

*Earl of Glenhaven's Estate*

*Hampshire*

*A clearing near a particularly fine fishing spot*

“Bugger the bishop.”

I stopped undressing and looked at Peregrine. He was already naked, having become remarkably adept at getting that way, considering how rarely we were able to enjoy a naked fuck. I stood with my shirt in my hand, admiring the view. He had planted his rump on a large stump, our fishing equipment behind it, and was leaning forward, his left forearm on his thigh, his left hand dangling over his knee. Oddly enough, his upper body was twisted so that his right elbow rested on his left thigh; his arm was angled up and out, with his hand folded palm down, fingers almost level, pointing toward his shoulder. His chin rested on his knuckles and the back of his right hand.

With the mild spring sunlight draped over him, he... *glowed*. And as usual, was unaware of just how very beautiful he was. I wished I had the talent of that French artist, Prude-something, so I could paint a picture of him as he was just then, thinking so intently. Or perhaps his magnificence should be preserved in life-sized bronze. Where is an artist or a sculptor when you need one?

But his thinking and my admiring were not accomplishing what we were here for. Not that a *little* time couldn't be used for teasing.

“I didn't realize you liked that kind of pretending.”

“Uh... what?” He raised his head to look at me, dropped his right arm, so his palm was resting on his right knee. He naturally gave in to his Edwardian instincts, and spread his legs, inviting me to look and enjoy. I declined the invitation. Mostly. Slightly.

Not at all.

But I pulled my attention away to go on with the tease as I stripped for him.

“We *could* do that, if you wished.”

“If I wished what? What are you blathering on about?”



I balanced on one foot, then the other, pulling off my stockings, tossing them out of the way. “Buggering bishops, of course. Your idea. Only... do you really think I have enough bishopness in me to be any good in the role? As I would be the one being buggered, of course. And we don't have any... what are they, vestments? ...about, and a bishop should really have vestments while he's being buggered, shouldn't he, so you know it's a bishop you're buggering and not just some naked man who's offering his arse up to you? Or what's the bloody buggering point?”

By the end of all that, I was naked, hard, leaking. “So... what kind of bishop-like position do you want me in? If it's kneeling, that's just going to get your cock sucked, not my arse fucked.”

“I do not want to bugger bishops!”

We were fortunately far enough out in the country that that shout was unlikely to be heard.

I can be *so* superbly dim-witted at times. “But that's what you said. Unless... is that the name of some new position you want to try? Or a game of chance, perhaps?”

I loved making him grit his teeth. “Not you, you bloody idiot. I was talking about the Bishop of Harwell!”

I also loved getting him to lose his oh-so-English, nothing-whatsoever-fazes-me lack of expression. I took things a notch upward. I dropped my mouth open as widely as was appropriate for portraying shock (my cocksucking mouth-opening was naturally wider than that). “You want to bloody fuck the Bishop of Harwell?” I shuddered artistically, which made my cock wiggle back and forth, which distracted him just a mite.

He started to snap back and finally realized I was giving him my best dense Rory imitation. “Bastard.”

I gave him “Shite-head” right back. We both grinned, but then his face settled into solemnity.

Well, damn. We clearly had to clear the air or this clearing was clearly not going to enjoy any fucking.

“So why *do* you want to bugger this bishop?” I held my hand up to stop any outburst. “So to speak.”

“I heard his sermon last Sunday.”

Peregrine in a church? And the Lord had not smote... smited? ...the walls with bolts of lightning, or opened the earth to swallow him up? "So? I agree, listening to most sermons is more than sufficient reason to shoot the one preaching, or yourself, if the agony is great enough."

"The sermon was about us."

"*What?*" It was my turn to shout.

"Not *us*, us, Rory. It was about friends of Edward's. About our degenerate ways, that led to the depraved attack of a horde of unknown neddy boys on two innocent pillars of the ton. Carswell and Jackson... *innocent!* Then on to the great danger we pose to the moral fabric of the nation. The even greater danger we are to children... *children*, Rory. How we are a rising plague which must be burned out before it can destroy the country. And then he urged everyone to support the efforts of Lord Beckwith to make the abominable sin of sodomy a secular, *hanging* offense, once again, to correct a gross error made in the licentious and lewd days of the early Restoration. But until that mistake can be corrected, neddy boys must be taught their place. Forcefully.

"God damn it, Rory, that fucking bishop *blessed* the bangers, encouraged them to go out and *hurt* us, perhaps even kill us, all couched in pious language that he could use to deny any such charge."

He sighed again. A lost, forlorn sigh. "And there's nothing we can bloody do about it."

Other than fight back, as we had fought at the Dock... if we were attacked. But if the bangers were roving about in packs of rabid dogs, neddy boys *were* going to be hurt. Perhaps die.

Not exactly one of the subjects I anticipated for today. Indeed, I'd been thinking more along the lines of a great deal of silence unless whimpers, moans, whines and the other interesting noises associated with superb fucking were heard.

Which brought up two questions I decided needed to be answered so we could get back to, actually, *get to*, my arse being fucked. What in the bloody hell he was doing in a church and why in the even more bloody hell we were talking about this now. So I asked him.

He looked sheepish. "Last Saturday was a quasi-regular fatherly inquisition on the nature of my life, my only somewhat reformed ways, just how much of my inheritance I had wasted on riotous living. The usual. But then he went off

on a new tangent and demanded that I accompany him to services at St. Aethelstan's the next morning. For the good of my immortal soul. Most unfortunately, Mama came into the room about that time, and her expression put paid to the set-down I was about to administer to him.

"Having given my word, I showed up on his doorstep the next morning, at precisely the time demanded, so that my lateness was one battle we could avoid. Only Mama did not go with us. Indeed, there were no women in the church. Just a hundred or so men filling the vastly uncomfortable, cushion-less ancient wooden pews. Some of the most influential men of the ton. Some who wanted to be. Beckwith, obviously. Though from his mostly concealed glares at me, he did not for one instant believe I was there as an actual or potential new reformationist."

He smiled at me, knowing my thoughts on him and church and the high potential for lightning strikes or earthquakes. Which was just as likely for me. And damned Vidal.

"As for what brought this all up... you did."

"I what?"

"You asked me how my visit with my father went. So it's your fault."

"That was *small talk*, Peregrine. Which means casual conversation on utterly unimportant matters, as you are so apparently unaware. I could have asked you how the damned weather was. If you'd had a good shit this morning. You could have bloody well just said 'Fine!' to any of those questions, and gone on from there. You didn't have to bog us down in cock-limping talk about something you already know we can do nothing about right now. Particularly since there aren't any bangers around about to attack us."

"But..."

I cut him off. Peregrine has a reasonably fine sense of the ridiculous, so that's what I went with. Ridiculous. And ridicule.

"Do you see any bangers about?" I waved my arms in the general direction of the enormous bushes and thick trees that hid us from anyone walking on the path—the same pissing path of last year's fond and somewhat *wet* memories.

"Or perhaps they're hiding? Waiting to leap upon us when we're distracted by cocks in holes? Like your bloody damned cock riding up my arse like you promised me, you bastard shite-head! Perhaps they'll come if we call them, and we can get it over with and get on with the fucking."

I raised my voice, and gave my best *loud* impression of proper kitten-calling, while turning in a circle and making beckoning gestures. “Here, bangers, bangers, bangers! Here, bangers, bangers, bangers!”

Ridiculous ridicule worked. Peregrine laughed.

I stopped twirling, walked over to him, stood between his spread legs. Began stroking my cock. “Now, just so we are clear on all this. How was your visit with your father?”

Peregrine choked, took his eyes away from my hardening prick, and looked up at me. He saw the “Well?” expression on my face and said, “Fine.”

“How is the weather today?”

“Ah, fine.”

“And did you have a good shit this morning?”

“F-f-f-fine,” he managed before letting loose the laughter.

I put paid to *that* by bending a bit, grabbing his ears and hauling his wide open mouth down onto my prick, and then working it into his throat. Once I was sure I had his complete attention, I said, “This is what’s going to happen. First, we’re both going to forget all this shite, forget anything other than us, here and now. Acceptable?”

I used his ear-handles to nod his head up and down in agreement. Damn, but that felt nice on my cock. Then I eased my cock back, let him get some additional air and slid it back in again.

“Second, I’m going to fuck your face until I seed your throat, to take the edge off. Is that acceptable, as well?”

I received a vigorous arse-wipish yes-grunt in reply.

“Once you’ve cleaned my prick properly, I’m going to suck your cock for a while until I’m hard again. And probably work several spit-slicked fingers up your arse to rub you inside while I do. But you’re not going to seed from that, are you?”

I gave his head a negative side-to-side move so he wouldn’t waste any of his strength. I wanted to be sure he had more than enough for the kind of fucking I wanted, needed, deserved.

“And then, once I’m ready... I won’t make you wait more than a minute or three... I’m going to get down on all fours, you’re going to tongue-fuck my

arse until it's as loose as it's going to get from just your tongue, then you're going to spit-slime your cock and shove it in. Balls-deep. After which you will provide me with a bloody brilliant fucking! Acceptable?"

Peregrine combined a vigorous up and down head motion, with expert licks and slurps on my cock, plus a dry but invigorating finger forcefully up my arse, bollocks fondling, and an eloquent arse-wipish moan that even a beginning student of the language would understand meant, "Yes, dear God, fucking bloody yes!"

So it was written and so it was done. And by the time a lightly sunburned Peregrine, his back and arse deliciously pink, and I realized it was time to return, the tally was: Fucks 4, Fish 0.

Once back, we naturally bemoaned the loss of all the fish that got away.

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## MICHEL

2 May 1816

11:45 p.m.

Card room, White's

London

“Did you know there is a Friends of Edward Society in Paris?” Bennington asked as he laid down the ten of hearts and took the trick. “Just like the one in London. They modeled it after the one here.”

When Peregrine is surprised by what he is told, at a time when he is eating or drinking, those near him are in danger of needing to have their garments cleaned. It was a close call this time, but though he choked on the brandy he had just sipped, he managed to clamp his hand over his mouth, turn fiery red, and keep it all in. Why Bennington's words should be so shocking I had no idea, and if I decided it was truly important I would question him later.

We held up play to allow him to recover. Bennington led a spade, and Peregrine asked in what I knew to be a falsely casual tone, “Surely that's just some rumor?”

“Oh, no. Palmer and Biggles, the best of good chums, just returned from Paris. It's all the talk. It's called, uh, *Les Amis de la Société Edward*, uh, pardon my French—” he said as he somewhat mangled the pronunciation. “And their motto is, uh...”

I had heard the stories going round London, of course, so I assumed the French motto would be the same. I supplied him with the words. “*Nous sommes fous comme l'enfer, et nous ne sommes pas putain de prendre plus*. We're mad as hell and we're not fucking taking it anymore.”

Bennington collected the trick. “Thank you, Vidal. I would have mangled that even more than trying to say the Society's name. Anyway, the tale is that the French have their own, ah, bangers, and the neddy boys are fighting back. Winning, too, more often than not. They even have groups of neddy boys patrolling areas that are, ah, *popular* with those men.”

He led another spade. “Although I have often wondered, well, not really *often*, since I really hadn't thought about it before hearing all the tales here about the bangers and the neddy boys fighting back, why are they called ‘boys?’ They're men.”

"They're called neddy boys because that's what they are called," Peregrine snapped. "It is what they have always been called. From time immemorial or something. But forget names. What is this about patrolling?"

He waved away Bennington's attempt to answer.

"No, no, the idea is ridiculous. Absurd. Neddy boys in gowns and wigs, tottering around in high-heeled slippers, pounding at the bangers with beaded purses or fans adorned with gaudy, paste jewels?" Peregrine's voice was harsh and he took a large gulp to finish off his brandy. He held the glass up. The excellent waiter for our table immediately noticed and brought him another. Peregrine finally noticed that the trick was ours and took it.

Bennington was thoughtful as he waited for the trick to finish and the next play to begin. "Actually, no. They wear dominos, and sturdy clothes and carry short clubs to protect themselves. And others. They wear masks, too. I suppose they don't want their identities to be known over there any more than a neddy boy would here."

"They're not..."

I kicked Peregrine's shin, not-quite-fatally wounding my own foot in the process, and he shut up. I feared he was about to explain that "neddy boy" was an offensive term, an insult, and that the proper phrasing was "a friend of Edward's." Which would have led to questions about how he was suddenly so well-versed in what neddy boys thought to be slanderous, when moments earlier he virtually disclaimed all knowledge of their history.

Apparently Bennington had not heard the remark I cut off, as he collected the last trick and began noting the points on a tally card. He and Chuffy were winning. One rubber apiece, and we were in the second game of the third rubber, battling for this evening's championship. Peregrine and I were going to lose if a miracle did not occur. Chuffy's bragging would be bloody unbearable.

Peregrine abruptly changed the subject. To a topic I could not quite believe he had any interest in. "How is Lady Anthea these days? Has she met anyone special?"

Peregrine interested in the marital aspirations of a young lady he barely... Well, no. Now that I thought of it, since last September we have all seen her not infrequently, talked with her at least briefly, and often, but not always, danced with her at least once. But still... surely this inquiry went beyond the boundaries of a public acquaintance and into private matters.

I half-expected Bennington to evade answering, but his reaction was, instead, simply... odd.

“Actually, she has. A Lord Ramsey. Not someone I think you might know, Somerville.”

“And yet, as it happens, I do. A fine young man. Fine family. If I had any belief your parents would listen to me, I would commend him most highly as a possible son-in-law. Have they met him?”

He had moved from a mild marital inquiry into promoting a specific marital prospect. What in the bloody hell was going on?

Bennington nodded. Another oddity was that there was an underlying tenseness in his face, in the set of his shoulders, as he talked about his sister's potential happiness.

“They have, Somerville. And though it will not be officially announced just yet, they have decided he would make... an *acceptable* husband for her, though he is not precisely what our parents would have preferred. There was another suitor...”

Bennington paused, and looked at Peregrine, and *something* passed between them. Had I not been watching closely, I would not have seen the nearly invisible nod that Peregrine gave. The type of nod that says “you're welcome.”

Bennington realized that having started on the tale, he might as well conclude it. “There was, as I said another suitor. Though frankly, if I were the father of a hopeful daughter, I would call him more of a *bidder*. He kept offering increasing amounts as a settlement, as though he was at an auction to purchase goods off a ship newly arrived from the Indies, its holds filled with treasure. The final ‘bid’ was not insubstantial, but Father declined. I cannot say I *persuaded* him to allow Anthea to wed where her heart is, but I think what I had to say might have, ah, tipped the balance of the scales.”

“So it was you who cost Beckwith his bride?” Viscount Wolsey asked. His voice was jarring, since we had not noticed him, nor realized he was listening to our conversation.

“Eavesdropping, Wolsey? Again?” said Peregrine. “Our private conversation doesn't concern you. I suggest you move along.”

“Or what?”

“Or...” Peregrine was starting to rise, when Bennington interrupted him.



“Thank you, Somerville. But... *I have this.*”

And at Bennington's tone, Peregrine relaxed back into his chair. The boy... the young man... had matured admirably these past months.

Bennington shifted slightly in his chair so he could look at Wolsey more directly. The movement was a subtle insult, as though the conversation was of insufficient importance for him to bother standing up. Even looking up at the older man, there was nothing subservient about Bennington.

“Now, I believe you had a question for me? S-something about Lord Beckwith and his bride?”

“No need for a question. You've admitted it.”

“Admitted what?” Bland puzzlement, striving for enlightenment. Most effective.

“That you cost Beckwith his bride.” Wolsey, whose temper was never far away, was starting to let it loose.

“Yet I don't believe I ever mentioned a n-n-name. Did I mention a name?” He looked around at the three of us, who dutifully acknowledged no name had been mentioned. We ignored the slight stutter as we always did whenever it surfaced.

“You are a close friend of Lord Beckwith's, are you not?”

Wolsey responded with a curt nod.

“S-s-...” He stopped, held his breath, inhaled. “So... since I named no names, are *you* admitting that your good friend, Lord Beckwith, was, ah, engaged in the business of buying a bride, and his bid was unsuccessful? That he could not woo and win a young lady on his own, but had to resort to purchase?”

Wolsey's flush was of the angry variety, but he had enough control to look around and realize how many men were now watching... and listening... thanks to him. “Of course not.”

“Ah. Then, there was a simple misunderstanding. You, ah, *misheard*, perhaps?”

If Wolsey clenched his jaw any tighter, he might well lose some teeth. He looked as though it pained him to say “Yes,” and it undoubtedly did. He turned and walked away.

Bennington took a *very* deep breath, and turned back to face Chuffy, ignoring the general buzz of conversation that started up when that little scene was through.

“Now, where were we?” Bennington asked.

“I haven't the foggiest notion,” Peregrine said. “In fact, Vidal, let's simply concede the game. They bloody well would have won anyway.”

I agreed, and with a raised hand, a look, and a circled finger, signaled our waiter for another round. Peregrine picked up the deck to his left, set it to his right, picked it up again after Bennington's cut and began to deal. I began shuffling the deck from the conceded game.

We looked at each other momentarily during the dealing and shuffling, and having known each other so long, could easily see that we were both thinking the same thing. A conclusion and a question. Bennington had made an enemy tonight, though he had technically named no names. Was he strong enough to handle that enmity?

We continued playing and three rubbers later, Peregrine and I remained soundly defeated. We duly paid our princely debts of honor: fifteen shillings each.

As we each went our separate ways, after a final flurry of bragging about brilliant play, and bemoaning abandonment by luck, Peregrine and I “found” ourselves side by side, waiting for our carriages.

“What can we do?”

Peregrine shrugged. “Nothing, I'm afraid. We can't act as his protectors and impugn his manhood.”

“So we... what? Watch and wait? And hope we can intercede if we are needed?”

Peregrine nodded. Our carriages were arriving, and suddenly I wanted something more out of this night than the pleasure of being with friends, something to take away the taste of danger, and substitute... another taste.

“Ride with me.”

Only he saw my quick glance down to his “display” and up again. He grinned and nodded.

We sent his carriage home, and I told my driver to take us to the Golden Deck. A gaming hell chosen solely because even at this time of night it was nearly a half hour's drive.

It was more than ample time, with the curtains carefully drawn, for two friends of Edward's to use an enclosed carriage for the purposes for which it had been designed. The first part of the drive was spent with me on my knees, despite the cramped space, Peregrine's fingers untying the ribbon that held my hair back, then threading his fingers through it to get a good grip on my head. He was almost ruthless, my Peregrine, holding my head, not immobile, but as mobile as he wished me to be, as he fucked and fucked and fucked my throat, until he finally seeded me.

Then it was my turn to disregard appearances and dishevel the sun-bright blond hair I could see so clearly in my imaginings, but not at all in the darkness, as I far more gently guided Peregrine's cocksucking. He was not all that experienced, I learned after that first night of getting his cock into my mouth, but since then he has learned to swallow every inch... every guinea? ...of me. He practices in private, he says, but not on cocks. Zucchini, he claims. Pickles, I believe.

Some other day I will be able to fuck his face as vigorously as he now uses mine. Not because of some sort of payback, but rather because of the thrill of that kind of control. I don't often crave it, preferring to be the one controlled, at least in terms of sucking cock. But I found myself craving it with him. And since he was the only cock in my life, other than my own, I would have to train him for it. A process he and I would both enjoy.

Not far from our destination I seeded him, and seeded him so well a bit of my seed dripped out of the side of his mouth onto my thumb. I pulled my cock slowly out, and he sucked my thumb back in to get the last of his reward for a job superbly done.

I was, of course, most apologetic to my driver for making him drive all this way only to tell him we had changed our minds about gambling, and he would need to take Viscount Somerville home and then me.

We spent *that* drive in the dark as well, kissing, caressing, fondling softened cocks until they re-hardened, and by the time we were a few blocks from Somerville House, I made him explode again, only this time, in my mouth, where I could taste him.

*A most enjoyable time was had by all.*

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## *PEREGRINE*

*23 May 1816*

*10:45 a.m.*

*Somerville House*

*London*

It is a scientific truth that all bad things happen in groups of three.

The “bad things” on this occasion were letters.

Unless I recognize the handwriting on the envelope, or recognize from its size and shape that it is an invitation, I have begun to dread the delivery of the post.

The first was Bennington's hurried, almost illegible note—does no one train young gentlemen any more to write a clear hand?—from last Saturday, begging off from an excursion to a mill. He and his family were returning to the country for the summer, slightly earlier than they had originally planned. He had, it seemed, been attacked by bangers who had mistaken him for a neddy boy, and “had your good friend and mine, Mr. MacLean” not been there, by pure happenstance, of course, he might have been seriously injured. However, I was not to concern myself. His injuries were minor, but his mama was making a fuss over him, and he thought it best not to deny her the opportunity. They would, he assured me, return to England in late summer. But definitely in time for the Birthday Ball at Alderson House.

Happenstance, my arse. And Rory had said nothing to me about it. Though I had not seen him since, and whatever he had to say about the attack, it was probably better not to put the words on paper. Except that Rory's letter of two days ago said nothing whatsoever about Bennington or the attack.

Instead, he regretted to inform me, by the time I saw his letter he would be on his way to Scotland and Castle Strathairn. His brother had died an alcohol-induced death. He was riding in a hunt, too drunk to recognize that neither he nor his mount were in any condition, after a long day of riding and drinking, to safely jump a stone wall. Even if there had not been a twenty-foot drop behind it. His horse died on one side of the wall, and after his fall, Malcolm, the Master of Strathairn, died on the other side.

Which happened on 25th April. I had to re-read the date to be sure I had read correctly. His father had waited three weeks and more before sending

word to let Rory know he was now the heir? Except it was Donal, the steward, who had written. Rory whined at me about the nearly impossible task of reading Donal's crossed pages, while ignoring the difficulties he was giving me. As Donal had been with the family for some years and was not one to panic, Rory concluded that when Donal urged him to come home as rapidly as may be to deal with Strathairn, the situation there was in some way dire.

He was, he said, deeply sorry to have to leave England. His return was uncertain. Perhaps by the Alderson Ball in September. He was, most sincerely, Ruaidhri Fearghas MacLean, Master of Strathairn.

Michel's note was shortest of all.

Dear Peregrine,

There are matters I need to think about, in a venue far quieter than London. And it has been some time since I have visited my estates and properties in person. It will perforce be somewhat of a zigzag journey, which will end at La Belle Maison. I will return in August, I believe, depending on what I find at the properties. In any event, certainly by the Alderson Ball.

With best wishes for a most enjoyable summer, I am,

Most sincerely yours,

Michel

Damn! And damn, and damn again.

I had no way of knowing when Michel was going to zig or zag in any particular direction, or even where all his estates or properties were, and thus no way of following him, or catching up with him. I could, of course, journey north and do a Viola imitation: build a willow cabin outside the gates of La Belle Maison. If I only had willows and knew how to build a cabin.

Or I could find out where Castle Strathairn was and go there.

Both alternatives seemed somewhat... excessive... just to get a marvelous suck and a magnificent fuck.

My right hand was certainly going to get a vast amount of use these next few months.

And it did.

## ***RORY***

*20 August 1816*

*Nearing 2:00 a.m.*

*Castle Strathairn*

*Highlands, Scotland*

This has to stop.

I could have been fucked by Colin any time these past three months.

I could have been fucking with Laird McDowell's younger brother, who is a fine strong laddie with a fine strong prick that could fit in my arse perfectly.

And I turned them down.

Damn Peregrine.

Damn Michel.

Every cock stand is caused by one of them. Or with increasing frequency, both of them. Or the imaginings of the three of us. Of what we could do together, or to, or with, or for each other.

I need to apologize to him. Grovel, if necessary. Tell him the truth about me. Persuade him that he and I can be friends. That we can be the Three R's again. And that I will not assault him anymore.

Yes!

I went to the door, opened it with barely a pull. I was still unused to the ease with which it opened, but then, this was the bedroom assigned to the Master of Strathairn. The doors of the room for the second son—and until Malcolm's death, no second son in the past century or more had ever become Master—opened only with difficulty and much howling of hinges. I bellowed, "Donal!"

And then for good measure, bellowed it twice more.

Donal was old, hard of hearing, though I thought he heard far more than he let us believe, and looked as though a breeze off the loch would waft him away. He was also quite probably the strongest man in the Castle. Not a man anyone crossed more than once. My "once" was when I was ten. My arsehole still tightens with the remembered terror of that spanking. Although I don't recall what I did to merit the punishment, I am certain I never did it again. Nor anything else that might put me at risk of a repeat.

He glared at me when he finally arrived. “Aye?”

It was not his somewhat pleasant, but never remotely servant-like “Aye”—which was the closest he came to friendliness. This was closer to the “Aye” which was actually a “nay” that indicated you were on the verge of his severe displeasure.

The longcase clock in the hallway bonged—with ear-aching loudness—twice. Bloody hell. It was gone two in the morning. And old men, even *strong* old men, need at least some sleep.

Damn.

Yet I couldn't apologize, as Donal considered apologies a sign of weakness. And will I, nill I, I was now the Master. So I looked up at him—even wizened he was taller than me—and said, “I'm returning to London. Have my things packed, and the carriage ready at ten. I'll need a hundred in ready money. Transfer... five hundred to my account at Strode's Bank.”

The bank officials would undoubtedly be reeling with shock at the size of the deposit. Father's quarterly allowance for the spare heir only *aspired* to the status of being a pittance.

“And when will you be back?”

That gave me pause. I couldn't exactly tell him that it wouldn't be until Peregrine had fucked me through every flat or vertical surface that we could find in a location that afforded even a slight bit of privacy, or fucked me bent over just about anything, and then not until I was sated. Until I somehow persuaded a man who disliked men having sex with each other, that we could nevertheless be strictly hands-off, mouth-off, cock-off friends. I opted for what I hoped was a Masterful, “I don't bloody know.”

That got me another glare, but at least no argument. I had wrested control of the family's finances away from Strathairn not long after I got here. Neal, the man whose cock might have been regularly pounding my arse, had I not been so stupidly faithful to a man who had never sworn anything at all to me, much less faithfulness, turned out to be unusually talented at business. And as the brother of a laird with two bonny, strapping sons of his own, he did not have much to do with his life. He eagerly accepted my offer, and over the past three months we had put the Strathairns back on the road to financial stability. And on the road to making Strathairn Aged the best, and therefore best-selling, whisky in Scotland. Bloody hell, in England, Wales, Ireland, and the rest of the bloody damned Empire.

Neal could take care of matters in my absence, and contact me when something required my specific decision. I decided that if I could trust him with my arse, though I had not let him have it, for reasons unrelated to trust, I could trust him with my money. It seemed eminently logical reasoning at the time, though the reasoning may have been fueled by a bottle or three of the Aged. Still, my “logic” had been proven right.

Father, still in mourning for the ever-drunk, sports-mad, wenching-mad son so much like himself, would not notice my absence, nor care if perchance he noticed. Not so long as he had sufficient money and sufficient whisky for his needs. His new “allowance,” though none would call it that in his presence, was more than ample for his needs. And if one of those needs happened to be drinking himself to death, then I would give him a fine funeral, one the Highlands would long remember. And I would mourn him properly, as well. At least a little.

I closed the door carefully after Donal left. Rested my head against it. For all my brave words to myself I actually had no idea whether the courage actually existed to do any of it. Whether I would... or ever could... take that kind of risk.

But I knew I had the courage for at least one thing. I would leave for London as I said.

And so I did.

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**MICHEL**

20 August 1816

Noon

*La Belle Maison*

*Northern England*

Enough is enough.

Enough is *bloody* enough.

Again.

“*Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose,*” I solemnly informed my tidy, bare desk.

Fourteen months later, I am in nearly the same position I was then. Just with a *different* man. One whose cock I am nearly desperate to suck, who is so much more than a prick I need to fill my mouth. A different man who is no friend of Edward’s and whom I almost-mortally insulted by attacking him.

I expect I will have to grovel. How could I not? But if I explain to him that although I am, indeed, a *very* good friend of Edward’s, I am nevertheless a grown man, in control of himself. So he and I can be friends. That despite the separation of these past months, we three can be the Three R’s again. And I will give him my solemn oath that I will never assault him again.

At least not physically. My mind will remain perfectly free to assault him in my imaginings. Often. And often and often. Which in turn will undoubtedly result in an over-muscling of my left hand and arm from even more frequent stroking, since with the resurrection of the Three R’s I will once again have only infrequent opportunities to suck Peregrine and seed as I do.

This must be resolved.

I shattered my servants’ image of me as the ever-calm, ever-controlled vicomte, by shoving open the door to my office and letting it slam against the wall, and then running up the stairs, shouting for Henri.

When I got to my suite, and slammed the door open, though with far less effect since there was nothing for it to bang, he was waiting for me. Looking displeased. “You bellowed, my lord?” Both his tone and the “my lord” address confirmed his displeasure with me. Perhaps for my disdain for decorum.

“I bellowed, indeed, Henri. Pack. We are going back to London.”

He did not react with so much as a blink. He just turned away and muttered, “*Il est temp.*”

“Did you say something, Henri?”

He turned around to look at me. “I merely muttered something to myself, my lord. Had I wished to address you directly on the topic covered by my mutter, I would quite naturally have just spoken up, and said, ‘It’s about bloody damned time.’ But as it was, I merely muttered. To myself.”

And then, with that infinite patience of the employee so very much put-upon by his exasperating employer, he asked if he was free to continue with his assigned tasks.

I graciously agreed that he was. So long as his tasks were finished rapidly enough for the two of us to leave at first light. The other servants who had come up from London with me could return at a more leisurely pace. And haul back all the baggage that I had deemed essential for a sojourn here.

That brought him to another halt. “You are going to drive, my lord?”

“I am.”

“All the way to London?”

“All the way to London. I am, after all, a notable whip.”

“With a reputation.”

One carriage accident. *One*. And it is thrown in your face forever! Although the carriage was a total loss, Henri and I recovered nicely. He doesn’t even limp any more.

Before I could even hope to mount a defense, he somewhat changed the topic. “Are we going back to London because of a particular cock, or just... cocks in general, since you haven’t had any but your own for so very long?”

“Actually... *two* cocks. And, of course, the men attached to them.”

“Ah.” Henri nodded. “Then may I suggest, *Monsieur*, that it would be preferable to travel in a manner most likely to get you there with your cock intact and capable of standing? As you may recall, from the last, ah, *incident*, of you driving at speed, that excruciating pain is not conducive to cock standing.

“I recommend that George drive us. Most humbly recommend, of course.”

Humble? Henri? Ha!

But he was, of course, correct. As he so often is. And when he deems it necessary, reminds me of that fact.

I was, however, the master of all I surveyed, the captain of this ship, as it were. *I* would decide the manner of travel.

George drove us to London.

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## ***RORY***

*Thursday, 5 September 1816*

*Rory's Lodgings*

*London*

“Open up, Scotsman!”

The loud voice was accompanied by an equally loud banging on my door.

Shite! I was having a perfectly good, perfectly rotten imagining of impossibilities, where the Frenchman and Peregrine and I were all friends again, and the kiss that evening had been welcome rather than abhorred, and we were on the Dock, with them taking turns fucking my arse while others watched and wanked, and we wouldn't let them join. I wasn't close, I wasn't even close to being close, but my cock stand was more than up for the outcome.

There was another fist-hammer dropping on the door, though this one sounded more frustrated than furious.

Fucking fantasy wrecker. I kept my mouth shut, breathed carefully, though even with doors and walls as thin as those I lived within, he couldn't have heard.

There was silence, and I thought, hoped, he'd given up and gone, but the Frenchman was too stubborn.

His voice was soft enough that a man who quickly padded from the bed to the door, and was separated from the hallway speaker by the not-thick-at-all wood, could hear, but not his neighbors, who may or may not have been home just then.

“Sco... Rory. I know you're in there. The porter said you were, and I paid him enough he wouldn't lie. I'll say it once, but I won't beg. Please.”

I turned the key, which was readily heard, stepped back enough to pull the door wide and stepped forward so he couldn't come in without going through me. The light from the lantern in the hallway, and the candles I lit were enough for us to see each other. His eyes widened, and the ever-confident, ever-urbane, so very fuckable mouth dropped open. My eyes widened as well, but I managed to keep my own very fuckable mouth closed.

He had seen me naked before, though not often. Seen my cock, though only when pissing or briefly in a changing room. All purely innocent, ordinary

happenings among men of the ton who boxed, and wrestled, and fenced, and hunted, and raced together often. Purely innocent except for my less than innocent thoughts about what my cock could and should have been doing to and with him, or better yet, with Peregrine participating. Though not always. Some of the imaginings were just the two of us. Imaginings I had always had to sternly rein in before my cock displayed its pointed, leaking interest.

He had not seen me hard before, though, my prick thrust boldly out, and angled slightly up. He had not seen how very thick it was when standing, nor what it looked like lightly gleaming from the thin coating of oil I had been using as I stroked.

He saw it then.

What I saw was a man who, if we had still been friends, I would have taunted about going from impeccable to not-peccable-at-all. His gorgeous light brown hair was hanging loose, disheveled as if he had been running his hands through it. No cravat! He had actually appeared in public—and traipsing across London from his bloody great mansion to my lodgings, even late at night where he was unlikely to be noticed unless he had arrived in his bloody great carriage with the bloody coat of arms on it, counted as public—with his shirt open at the throat, his beautifully pale, hairless skin visible. A waistcoat with a button unbuttoned. A wrinkled jacket.

We stayed silent. My still-hard cock and I made no move to step aside and let him in. I was indeed a pervert if I could maintain a cock stand in circumstances like these.

In honor of the sensibilities of my perhaps-home, perhaps-out-fucking neighbors, I kept my voice soft as I told him I was busy and asked him what the bloody hell he wanted. And to play with his mind since I was not allowed to play with his cock, I put my hand around my rod, twirled my fist around my bell-end, and then stroked back, peeling the skin away so all that dark-red, flushed flesh and the knob was visible.

He watched me do it, and when I dropped my hand, he raised his eyes from his cock stare, looked at me, and said, “You.”

I did my very best imitation of a gob-smacked Peregrine, all bulging eyes and fish-gaping mouth.

Michel retrieved a slight bit of his peccability, by lifting that fucking eyebrow of his and asking, “Do you think we might do this inside? Or do you want your neighbors watching me suck your cock?”

I gave him my very best, most suave, tonnish, articulate response. “Uh, I, ah, well...” And then I stumbled, more than stepped, backward and let him in.

The swagger as he walked over to the bed, turned and sat as I shut and locked the door, wasn't his usual one. It was somewhat tense, forced, as though he was acting the part of confidence, rather than actually having it.

I grabbed the chair, moved it in front of him, sat down, spread my legs. My very, very hard, very, very upright cock twitched. He compressed his mouth into a thin line. “This is difficult enough. Do you think you might put that—” and he waved in the general direction of my cock, “away?”

I twitched my cock, watched him watch the twitch. “My cock lives here. He likes to take the air from time to time. This is one of those times.”

“Bastard,” he muttered. He lifted his left hand and ran it through his hair.

I refrained from telling him that the reason my cock just then spurted a healthy spurt of my personal brand of oil was because I was imagining him lifting his hand that way, holding it, while I buried my nose in the remarkably thick hair in his pit, considering how smooth and pale he was nearly everywhere else, then sniffed and licked and stroked both him and me.

He took a deep breath, and visibly forced himself to look at me, his expression clearly saying he would have preferred looking anywhere else. “I'm sorry I kissed you.”

*What?* He hadn't kissed me. *I* had been the one who bloody well started the kiss. I was about to correct him, but missed my chance, since he went on talking.

“Actually, since being honest is a temporary policy just now, although I am far from sure it is the best one, I'm not sorry at all that I kissed you. I liked it. What I am sorry about is that you didn't, and that it cost me your friendship and bugged our friendship with Peregrine as well.”

Gob-smacked did not begin to describe my surprise. I would have said something, but he held his hand up, palm out, and I was not about to talk to the hand. I let him stop my words.

“So.” Another deep breath, and this time the always-assured vicomte looked away. “I am a friend of Edward's. A very good friend, you might say. I realize you are not. But I am hoping you can accept that, and let us, somehow, some way, go back to the friendship we all built last fall.”

“If not?”

“What?”

“If I say I can't, what then?”

He paused as if he had not thought that might be asked, or what he might respond. Followed by a very long, very slow inhalation and exhale. “I think I will take a Grand Tour. A *very* Grand Tour. Beyond Europe. I have heard that South America is lovely at this time of year. Perhaps even an extended visit to our former colonies, as zey have zees fondness for zee French.”

He reverted from mock French to tonnish again. “And I am, after all, a wealthy *French* vicomte.” Another pause. “So. Do I stay or do I go?”

He was going to be staying, but I was not quite ready to let him know that. So I offered him a *non sequitur* of the first water. “Did you mean it?”

“Of course I meant it. Do you think I'd offer to leave England if I...”

My turn to palm him. He stopped. “No. What you said when you were out in the hall just now. Did you mean *that*?”

He stared at me and then surged up off the bed. I followed my natural instincts and leaped up as well. The chair tipped and crashed behind me.

He was furious, but kept his voice low and menacing. “You bastard shite-head. You'll agree to resume our friendship if I whore for you? Suck your cock as payment? What else? Be your cocksucker on call for when you have a cock stand and no cunt to put it in? *Fuck you!*”

I should have learned long ago that I am not very good at this type of game-playing. So I said the one thing I could think of to keep from getting my lights punched out and him leaving.

“I will if you will.”

Perhaps Michel and I should have a contest, judged by Peregrine's friends because Peregrine would simply lie and deny he ever looked like that, to see which of us did the best Peregrine-as-fish imitation.

I relished the brief moment that Michel sputtered and stammered, as it was unlikely, once he recovered control of himself, that I would ever see it again. “I... what... you... *what*?”

I stepped closer to him, close enough that my leaking slit was going to stain his pantaloons. I didn't touch him otherwise.

“Most friends of Edward’s who receive an offer to exchange one cocksucking for another would not, I think, think of that as whoring themselves. But mayhap French friends have different standards, my *French* lord?”

His face flushed nearly to Peregrine-standards, he grabbed my shoulders and shook them far more vigorously than most men would give him credit for and made a single word out of a whisper-shouted, “*You’re not a fucking friend of fucking Edward’s!*”

I let him shake me, although I would admit, if asked, to adding a little extra motion to my hips so that my cock was indeed smearing his groin. My cock and I enjoyed that.

Then he just stared at me. I grinned back. “Not a *fucking* friend, just now, true. But my hole is slicked up, since I was working it with a couple of my fingers, getting it ready for a dildo, before I was so rudely interrupted. I was planning on imagining that the dildo was your cock. So if you want to change that imagining to reality, just tell me, back or belly?”

“This shite is not at all funny, MacLean. You bloody well hated it when I kissed you.”

I poked a finger in his chest. An *oily* finger though he didn’t notice it at the time. “I didn’t hate anything about the kiss, except that *you* hated it. And you didn’t kiss me, I kissed you.”

“You did not.”

“I did.”

“You...”

We realized at the same time what we were doing and stepped backwards to put a slightly more safe distance between us. Safe for him, since he backed into the edge of the bed and sat down on it. Unsafe for me, since I fell over the bloody chair and landed sprawled on my arse. We looked at each other, smiled reluctantly, and then laughed.

He got up, extended a hand. I grasped his forearm, and he pulled me up. Two foolish friends of Edward’s, grinning at each other.

“You do realize where we were headed, don’t you?” he asked.

“I’m a *Scotsman*, whose first name is nae ‘stupid.’ Any more of that and I would have had to shoot your other shoulder.”



“And I would have ensured we again had a matching set.”

“Or we could have a matching set of well-fucked mouths.” I moved in closer, palmed the cock running down his left leg. It was, indeed, as long as I expected, hoped. Perhaps longer. And very, very stiff.

I squeezed it just a little; he shuddered just a little. Then he looked at the oily hand-print on his sleeve. Down at his crotch. “Is it your intent to ruin every item of clothing I’m wearing?”

I shrugged. “If possible. If you weren’t wearing anything, I’d have nothing to ruin.” I rubbed my thumb over his knob. He moaned again. It was a marvelous moan and a marvelous knob. I wondered how much longer it was going to take before I would get to see it, actually touch it, taste it.

It was my turn to whim... moan, when he repaid me by curling his fingers around my cock, and starting to stroke me, pulling my skin over my knob, stretching it out, then sliding it back again, and repeating.

I let go of his cock and began fumbling with the buttons on his placket. “I wanted to fuck your mouth the instant I saw you, Michel. Wanted to see you on your knees, your mouth straining to open wide enough to take me in, fisting your hair so I could control you, making your eyes glaze as I pumped my seed straight down to your belly.”

I might have heard some cloth tear in my eagerness to set his cock free, but decided that was a type of imagining that I would do without. Yes! If not *precisely* as I imagined it, it was close enough. Long, long, long. A fine blue tracery of veins against the whiteness. A marvelously constructed knob, like the spherical cap of a horse mushroom back home, one that would force your mouth or your arse a bit wide, and then you could clamp down on the slender shaft.

I stroked him carefully, stopped with the edge of my hand pressed against the silky, lush hair at its root, admired how very much cock-length there was beyond the coil of my fingers. I bent over, lapped my tongue across the generous slit. He shuddered, squeezed my cock and balls, released. I opened my mouth and swallowed him down until my lips pressed the edge of my hand. I was almost insane with wanting him, though I still wanted to fuck his face first, before taking in every bit of him.

I pulled off, straightened up, admiring the slick wetness as I did.

“It’s a bloody marvel, that cock is, Michel. It will go so far down my throat. Or up my arse. How far, Michel? That has to be bloody more than eight guineas. What... nine? ten?”

He stopped fondling me. Became very still. “Did you just measure my cock in money?”

My mouth proceeded to run several furlongs ahead of my mind, at a speed that set a record for the course. “Aye. Guineas are about an inch in diameter, so that would make your...”

“Make my cock about ten guineas long. Plus a few shillings.” He took a deep breath and snarled, “You bloody bastard!”

My mind was still cantering along, nowhere near the home stretch. “What the hell is wrong with you now?”

He was red-faced again, and fury has a definitely different shade of red than lust. “There is only one man in the whole of fucking England who measures men by money. *You’ve been fucking Peregrine!*”

My mind finally recognized the race, and made a valiant effort, which was unfortunately doomed from the start, to reach the finish line first. My mouth won by several lengths. “Just the once.”

Michel went all white, like the Dover cliffs seem when you’re out in the Channel. His fists clenched, his jaw tightened. He bit the next words out. “Just. The. Once.”

He shook himself and then visibly forced calmness back again. Completely fake calmness, though. My rooms, this building and a good part of surrounding London would make the ruins of Pompeii look like the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, all fresh and shiny, if he erupted.

“How long has he been fucking you?”

I rationalized answering, instead of evading, on the basic principle of, “I’m already fucked, so what does it matter?” “Since that night on the Dock. August. Last year.”

Michel closed his eyes with a “God give me strength” expression on his face. But his cock... and he hadn’t bothered to cover up once he shifted this from sex to talk... betrayed him. Though he was so angry he probably didn’t notice. I notice everything about cocks, hard or soft but particularly hard, when they are in my vicinity. His cock twitched and his hips gave a slight thrust. Men

do not twitch and thrust at the mention of Dock-fucking unless they like what they are imagining.

“Regularly?”

“Not regularly enough. But... enough under the circumstances. More now, since, well, you know...” I couldn't quite bring myself to say “the duel” out loud.

“Does he fuck your mouth, too?” I thought at first he was just getting himself aroused by asking for details, but then I realized I heard a faint note of jealousy in the question. *Why?*

“Not often. I prefer getting fucked, and he's very, *very* good at that.”

He didn't respond, which gave me time to think. Especially since my mind finally crossed the finish line, limping badly. Michel's cock had also been twitching and thrusting when I talked about fucking his mouth. Add in that jealousy, and there was only one conclusion to be reached. Michel was a *cocksucker*. An avid one. My mind whispered instructions to my mouth.

“When did you start sucking his cock?”

Michel looked for just an instant as though he might deny it, but gave in. “30th June. Last year.”

And then it was my turn to have jealousy rear its grossly malformed head. “Did he fuck you?”

Michel's “No!” was sharp and surprisingly loud. He pretended the outburst hadn't occurred and went on. “And I just fucked him...”

His eyes widened. I finished the sentence for him. “The once.”

Michel looked at me. “You had him on 7th December, before midnight?”

I nodded grimly. “And you, on 8th December, after midnight, perhaps around one?”

I received a grim, thin-lipped nod back.

Michel stated the obvious so we would both be very clear on it. “That bloody bastard had sex with both of us the night before the duel. He didn't come to see us to really try to stop the duel, he came to be sure he came one last time, in case one of us died the next day. *That bloody bastard.*”

Michel sat down on the bed again, spread his legs, started fisting his cock back to full stiffness, though neither of us had gone very much soft despite the

discussion. He licked his lips and gestured me closer. I wasn't about to reject his overtures. I did as I was gestured.

He put his long-fingered hands on my arse, caressing my hairy cheeks, opened his mouth, and gagged after taking only half my length in. He pulled back, looking first disgruntled, and then very, very determined.

He stroked my spit-slimed cock, looking thoughtful. "Has anyone else fucked your arse since you started with the bloody bastard?"

I shook my head.

"And I've sucked no other cocks."

He laughed, and it was not a happy one. "Christ, what man wouldn't want what Peregrine has had for a year? Sex on tap. An arse to fuck, a mouth to fuck, whichever he wants, whenever he wants. Did he invite you to the Duchess's ball tomorrow night?"

"I turned him down. I've been... thinking a lot about you lately, and it's ridiculous, but 6th September is, well, sort of an *anniversary*. I didn't want to be there without all three of us."

"He asked me as well, the prick. Despite our agreement that if he proposed some entertainment and one of us turned him down, he would not turn the other into a second-best choice. I, ah, I turned him down for much the same reason."

His look of determination had a whole new flavor to it. "I'm going to swallow your cock, and once I have, you're going to grab my head and fuck my face. Agreed?"

*Bloody fucking of course!* I nodded.

"And when you're done seeding me, you're going to swallow every goddamned guinea of my cock until I've bred your mouth."

My cock and I both found that plan highly worthy of respect. I nodded again.

"He's used us for a year, when all he had to do was tell each of us about the other. He could have done that any damned time. All that fucking wasted time, or wasted fucking time."

I nodded agreement, but refrained from mentioning I'd made Peregrine swear on his honor that he'd do no such thing. But he could have, the bastard, for the good of our sex life. Except the selfish prick chose to keep his stable private rather than sharing.

Michel teased the tip of my cock with his tongue. His smile was positively wicked when he tilted his head back and looked up at me. “I have always thought that if paying back an ill turn was a woman, she would be an extraordinary bitch. I think, therefore, that when we are done here, we should plan precisely how to introduce dear, *dear* Peregrine to that bitch.”

And that was indeed what we did.

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**HERE AND NOW**  
**(1816)**

## ***RORY***

*Saturday, 7 September 1816*

*Past midnight*

*The Duke's Library*

*Alderson House, London*

The bastard just sat there. Saying nothing. For a man who had been so very stupid for so very long, lying to his best friends for so very long, he was smart to be silent. If he started talking, he might disclose a lie we didn't already know about.

I checked to be sure Vidal was in place. Well, bloody hell, he could now be Michel, as he had been before our mutual stupidities led to a pair of shoulders that, according to a garrulous gardener at Somerville House, would provide a wide range of weather information via aches, and twinges and twitches, but fortunately, he assured me, it would only get more accurate as we aged.

Michel lounged against the door, arms crossed over his chest after he, oh so casually, examined his nails. He was the perfect picture of tonnish *ennui*. Had I the funds I would commission a portrait of him in that pose, with that expression, and have the artist title it, "Enthusiasm at the Ball."

He looked at Peregrine, and then at me. Gave me a slight nod, a slight smile, and a slight twitch of his cock beneath pantaloons that were not covering smalls. Though possibly the cock twitch was for Peregrine, who was staring.

Very well. It was time to introduce our *dearest* friend to milady Payback, that bitch. Just a brief introduction for now. While the Duke had most graciously allowed us the use of his library, because we lied and told him we wanted to reconcile the estrangement amongst the three of us, we could not stay there forever.

"Suck my cock, ye bluidy bastard."

Peregrine's eyes widened, and then he gave that smile we both knew so well. Smug. Self-satisfied. He was more than willing to suck cock. He knew from experience that doing so would, far sooner than later, get that marv... damned prick of his in Michel's mouth or my arse. We had no problem with that smile, indeed we expected it. Lady Payback was a subtle bitch, and so smile whilst ye may, ye bloody silly, stupid Sassenach.

He looked at Michel. "Ah, I did not hear the door lock. Is it..."

Michel's voice was even more bored as he replied. "It is not."

"But... but the Duke, *anyone*, might walk in, and..."

"See you on your knees sucking Mr. MacLean's prick, or having finished with him, mine?"

"Well... yes."

Michel shrugged the shrug of a nobleman who had no care whatsoever for the concerns of any other.

"Should that happen, I rather doubt there would be repercussions for Mr. MacLean or me. After all, *you* would be the one avidly swallowing one of our pricks. And it is a well-known fact that a man with a cock stand, who has no wife, or mistress or tuppenny whore with tits nearby, will stick his prick into any readily available hole at all."

He looked disdainfully down that bloody long, slender, *aristocratic* nose.

"If that hole happens to belong to a depraved neddy boy, as what else would be sucking cock at the Duke and Duchess of Alderson's Birthday Ball, we, Mr. MacLean and I, might suffer some *temporary* disapprobation amongst the ton. Unlike the cocksucker."

Peregrine blinked. And blinked again. And yet again. And said nothing at all. Nor did he move from chair to knees and lift my kilt.

We had gambled greatly on this. Gambled on our knowledge of Peregrine—or at least, on what we believed to be our knowledge.

He could have stood, just then, told us to fuck ourselves, in words or with his fucking eyebrows, or with a cold and arrogant stare and simply walked away. We would not have used force, or even a modicum of suasion, to stop him.

Of course, if he had done that, it would have been necessary to unlock the door after all, since we had lied to him.

He was indeed a neddy boy, as were we. And he would have been a *most* abnormal one if he had not indulged in frequent imaginings of what he might do with the both of us. What we might do with him. And one of those imaginings would have been precisely this. Him on his knees... somewhere... sucking our pricks. We gambled that he wanted us enough to take the risk. We



gambled, too, on his arrogance, which undoubtedly led him to believe that our talk of punishment was merely a game.

We won our silent wager.

Peregrine shrugged, got up, stepped over to me, dropped to his knees, sat back on his haunches, and rested his hands on my hairy knees. He looked up at me with that knowing smirk, and then grabbed the kilt and tossed it up and back, exposing my cock. Which had somewhat softened as we waited for his decision.

He put his right hand around the base and tugged it, which caused its inevitable enthusiastic response. And then he swallowed me, his nose buried in the thick hair around the root of my prick, sniffing audibly. He *loves* my scent, whether he's eating my arse, licking my pits, rolling *one* bollock in his mouth, as they're too large for him to take both, or sucking my cock.

He has become quite good at sucking me over this past year, when he wasn't making me spew just from fucking me. I was sure, though, that if I asked... as eventually I would... he would admit that Michel was a far better cocksucker than he. I resisted the urge to dive my fingers into his hair and curl them around the back of his head to control the depth and angle and speed of his sucking.

"Make me seed, Peregrine, and be bloody quick about it. We don't have all night for you to enjoy my dick down your throat."

I tilted my head back, stretched my arms out along the back of the sofa, so that my fingers were gripping the carved wood, closed my eyes so I could enjoy the sensations rippling through my body.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. As they did when something was wrong. As they did when I was being watched. As they had that night on the Dock.

My tension eased as I realized. I *was* being watched. By Michel.

Understanding the need, Peregrine wrapped his hand around the base of my cock, partially stroking, partially twisting, while his mouth worked the rest of the shaft and the knob. His left hand rolled my bollocks around, and then before I was quite aware of what he was doing, he slimed two fingers with his spit, pushed at the skin behind my balls, and I instinctively slouched a little, spread my knees. My grunt was not overly loud as he forced his two fingers up my arse, curled them around my gland, and then fiercely manipulated it, while

bobbing his head faster and faster. And just like that I was erupting down his throat.

He swallowed and swallowed, and did not miss a drop. And when I was clean, he pulled his head away, dropped back on his haunches, looked up at me, and smirked.

*Lady Payback is a bitch*, I reminded myself, and smoothed my expression out, as if what had just happened had been an ordinary, everyday cocksucking. I lifted my head from the back of the sofa, looked to Michel. I had not noticed him moving away from the door so that he stood over us.

“Fuck his throat,” I told Michel, “now that I have it all slicked up for you.”

Michel's expression was decidedly odd. And his cock was more than soft, but far less than hard. He shook his head. “I think not. At least, not now. Later.”

That was not what we had planned, but I couldn't precisely force a not-hard prick down a willing throat, if the owner of the prick wasn't equally willing. I almost said something, but Michel stared at me, unblinking, and I said nothing.

“Right, then,” I said, and tossed my kilt back into place. “Let's be off.”

Peregrine braced himself on my knees, stood, and stepped back to allow me space to stand. I did so.

Michel led the way, and somewhat ostentatiously pulled the door key from his waistcoat pocket, and unlocked it.

Peregrine let out a bark of laughter, but said nothing. We three left the room. Michel pulled the door to.

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## ***PEREGRINE***

*Saturday, 7 September 1816*

*Outside the Duke's library*

*Down the hallway*

*Alderson House, London*

We naturally stopped at the large mirror down the hallway from the Duke's library, instead of going around the corner, over to the stairs and down. Checking one's appearance whenever the opportunity presents itself is perhaps instinctive to Edwardian men. When two of the three were engaged in cock sucking moments earlier, and one was watching, and all three are about to return to a ballroom where everyone will be avidly watching them, it behooves them to be *very* sure that there was no disarray to give them away.

Where once there would have been good-natured raillery as we examined our appearance, tonight there was only a resumed chill. A polite taking of turns to inspect and adjust, as if I could not still taste Rory's hot seed in my mouth and feel it down my throat.

I perforce let them go first. Michel was the least likely to have anything amiss, other than a possible spot on his inexpressibles. I surreptitiously checked. I was quite good at discerning inexpressible stains from an aroused man, even when he is wearing black. An alert Edwardian eye. Alas, I had not excited him into staining. Rory, next, who had nothing more to do than examine his kilt to be sure it was not visibly stained, which was unlikely given its colors. Under other circumstances I would have played at affronted that he doubted my ability to clean his cock thoroughly.

Finished, they fixed me with a stare (Michel) and a glare (Rory) that said, "Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. You *will* follow us." They turned and walked away, leaving me to my waterless "ablutions."

There was only a small amount to repair. An adjustment to my cravat, which was already beginning to wilt anyway in the ballroom's heat. Fingertips through the hair at the back of my head to fluff it up where it was slightly flattened when Rory briefly grabbed me. I backed up, bent forward to inspect my knees and in an abundance of caution swiped them with the palms of my hands. As I did I glanced to my right.

The door to the Duke's library was ajar. Odd. I was certain that...

I must have been mistaken.

I straightened, checked myself once more, and then turned to meet the next part of my doom.

I hoped it would be as enjoyable as the first part.

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## *PEREGRINE*

*Saturday, 7 September 1816*

*Shortly after three a.m.*

*Entrance hall*

*Somerville House, London*

“My lord.”

Damn. Double, triple, quadruple, bloody damn.

The whole purpose behind sneaking in, ordering the footman who was on duty—to arouse the house if someone who was not me tried that—to keep his mouth shut, tip-toeing up the back stairs, getting my clothes and other travel necessities, and very, very quietly walking down the front stairs, was to avoid this encounter.

I could not avoid my valet, nor his annoyance at not being included in this jaunt, but he knew quite well which side of the bread was buttered, and by whom. After the requisite minimum amount of remonstrations and moans, he packed a pair of bags with what he deemed a reasonable amount of clothing for an estimated week away. I cut the clothing allotment by nearly half. I did not anticipate having much need of clothing where we were going, wherever that might be. Michel and Rory were being rather uncommunicative on the subject of our destination.

I was grateful that I was wearing a long traveling coat. The bastard shite-heads, *my* bastard shite-heads, had teased me with murmured words as they forced me to make an appearance with them at two more balls, and then at a popular hell where I was so distracted I lost a monkey at faro in short order. I had spent most of the post-Alderson hours in a state of arousal that they would not let me release.

They occasionally mentioned something about a Lady Payback, of whom I had never heard, and what a bitch she was. I assumed that eventually they would explain.

Of course, any discussion with Remington about anything was instantly fatal to even the most half-sprung cock stand. Butlers who rise from third assistant junior butler in training, or some such rank, at the time of your birth, to the majesty of full butlerdom on your accession to the Somerville title, tend

to have a rather quelling effect on most frivolity. Including any tendency to have a cock stand in the presence of one's butler. Nevertheless, I remained grateful for the buttoned coat, so that, should my wayward mind, which was sharply focused on the undoubtedly *numerous* pleasures to come, and come, and come, on this journey, cause even a partial anticipatory cock stand it would remain hidden.

"Might I inquire where you might be reached on this journey with the Master of Strathairn and *M. le vicomte*? Should the need arise?"

*You might indeed inquire, but I have no answer. And how the bloody hell do you know who I am leaving with when they are in Michel's carriage outside, and I have not mentioned their names to anyone since I sneaked in?*

"To be honest, Remington, I haven't the foggiest notion of where we are going. It is to be a surprise. Although, I would assume that Vidal's staff would have the answer to your question. Ah, of course, only if the need, the very important, crushingly urgent, need should arise."

"Very well, my lord."

It is quite amazing the amount of butlerian disapproval which can be contained in a statement of agreement.

"But before you depart, my lord, there is a message you might wish to read."

"At three in the morning?"

"It arrived about ten last night. From Lord Bennington. His footman said it was urgent. He even wished to wait for you to arrive. I sent him back with the assurance I would bring the note to your attention as soon as I saw you."

I sighed. "There is, of course, no possibility that you did *not* see me just now, is there?"

"Quite, my lord."

I looked at the note he was holding out. My cock argued with my other head, and as on other occasions, though in my own defense, not *always*, my cock won.

I shook my head and did not take the note. "I do not have the time right now to address the quite probably innocuous problem which a young lordling, who has only recently acquired even a sheen of town bronze, has blown up out of all

proportion. Should he inquire again, later this morning, send word that responding to his note will be my first act upon my return.”

More disapproval was sent my way. Although I had always felt that there might come a time when Remington would act, certainly in what he perceived to be my best interests, without my approval or even, perhaps, over my objections, this was not that time.

“And when *will* you be returning, my lord?”

Ah. A very good question. After my cock falls off and my arse collapses from over-use was probably the most accurate answer, but patently one I could not offer to my butler. They had not said how long this journey to the mysterious “there” and back would occupy.

Ah, again. “Lord Glenhaven’s sixtieth birthday celebration is on 16 September. I am sure we will be back by then. After all, one *must* wish one’s father well, on one’s father’s birthday.”

Even if, at times, and many times, the word one wished for one’s father merely *rhymed* with “well.”

“And now, Remington, I really do need to depart.”

“Need” was again not quite the most accurate word, unless considered from the viewpoint of my prick. *Wanted* to leave, regardless of any reason to stay, was the driving force. From both heads at that moment.

Remington nodded, graciously giving his consent for the departure of his lord and master, who often felt like a grubby little boy not yet out of leading strings in his butler’s presence.

I grabbed up the bags and headed out the door held open by a footman. I hurried down the steps, accompanied by a footman with a lantern so I did not trip and break my bloody neck, or some other valuable body part. I helped the driver strap the bags onto the back, and then opened the carriage door. Put my foot on the step. Stopped.

I felt... *odd*. I must have *looked* odd in the flickering light of the lantern because Rory said, impatiently, “Well?”

I shook my head. Climbed inside. The footman shut the door, and turned to go back to my house. Michel rapped his walking stick on the roof, and the carriage started up.

I was between my men. Rory on my right, Michel on my left, our thighs and shoulders pressed together.

"I'm forgetting something," I said.

"You have clothes, do you not? Not that you will have much need of them while we are there."

My cock twitched.

Rory's hand moved from my thigh to my groin, cupped me through coat and clothes, rubbed his thumb over my knob, and brought me to a full stand.

"You didn't leave your cock, or your bollocks or your arse behind, did you?"

Neither question required an answer.

Michel leaned in and murmured, "You do realize, *mon cher*, that it is unlikely you will be allowed to seed while we travel."

I gulped, and I could hear Rory's smirk as he felt my cock surge in his hand. Michel's fingers deftly opened the upper buttons of my coat, and then his hand snaked inside, pinching my left nipple and then my right, to cause a gasp to join the gulp.

"Of course, you will *want* to seed. You might even think you *need* to seed. How often, do you think, Rory. A few times?"

Rory was at his most tonnish as he finished unbuttoning my coat, tossed it open, and started on a closer torturing of my cock, with far less fabric between us. "Rather more than a few, *M. le vicomte*. I should think he will both want and need and be oh so very unsatisfied quite often during our travels. Quite, *quite* often."

They were going to bring me to the edge of setting my seed free again and again, and decide for me if and when I would be allowed to seed. I would most likely die from the effects of their efforts.

I could live with that.

Except...

Except... I was sure I was forgetting something. Something important.

I would think about it tomorrow. Or the day after that.

I spread my legs just a little, enough to press against them. Just a little encouragement. And mocked them, but mostly Michel, with, "Stroke on, Macduff, and damned be him that first cries, 'Hold, he seeds enough!'"

They took me at my word while the carriage gathered speed.

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## *MICHEL*

*Wednesday, 11 September 1816*

*Past midnight*

*Vidal-Sansouci's "Cottage"*

*Suffolk, England*

Three sharp claps of thunder, one right after the other, awakened me and I bolted upright.

Or to be more accurate: I *thought* there were three claps of thunder, and when they awakened me, I *intended* to bolt upright.

It is, however, very hard to bolt anywhere, upright or otherwise, when you are warmly entangled in a comfortable bed with your two men. Particularly when the sheets are more tangled about your limbs than you realized, and the bed has an unfortunate excess of softness that creates a miniature valley down the center, putting the man in the center at risk of suffocation should the bodies on the outside (Rory and me) roll unreservedly inward.

The bolting was more a running battle with the sheets and blankets—a home on the North Sea can be cold even in early September—and a somewhat clawing scramble up what seemed for a moment to be the side of a steep hill, until I was able to grasp the edge of the bed and pull myself up and partially over.

My flailing about naturally woke them both, which was not the happiest of circumstances, as it had not been all that long before that we had all seeded royally well... *yet again*... and fallen asleep. Their inarticulate grumbles, though, conveyed quite clearly the idea of “What the bloody hell are you doing?”

I sighed.

“The thunder woke me.”

We listened for the moment to the heavy lashing of the rain, before a slurring Rory muttered that there was no thunder. And Peregrine muttered something about back to bed, and stretched out his delightfully furred arm, sliding his hand up the inside of my left leg. He couldn't quite cup my bollocks, but he did his best with a few strokes of two fingertips. I could not believe that my cock twitched in response.

Perry's, “Back to bed, Michel,” was just a bit smug.

Bastard.

Then there were three claps of thunder again, not as loud as the first. My turn to be smug about “no thunder, really?”, but fortunately I kept my mouth shut rather than putting my sweaty bare foot in it. The sounds were not thunder, but raps of the knocker on the door.

What the hell?

“Someone’s at the door.”

“It’s yer bluidy great cottage by the sea with ne’er a servant aboot. Answer yer ain duir.”

It was well past midnight. With a storm like the one that began as we travelled from London, and continued all the while we were here, no one was journeying for the joy of it.

Some stranded traveler? I wondered as I threw on a long heavy robe over my nakedness, belted it, shoved my feet into felt slippers as I had no intention of getting a chill from walking over the cold tiles in the entrance hall. I lit a lantern and held it high to make sure I didn’t break my neck on the steps or anything else. It was not as if I spent a great deal of time here anymore and could find my way around in the dark, though my parents had adored it when I was young.

I shouted “Coming! Coming!” as I half-raced down the stairs before realizing both the thickness of the door and the storm prevented whoever it was from hearing me. Lantern on the table, I quickly opened the bolts, unlocked it, and with the lantern again held high, yanked the door open.

God, in His infinite humor, favored me with the eye-blinding flash of a lightning strike, a roar of thunder that hurt the ears, and a gust of wind that sent the rain slashing parallel to the ground and directly through the door, drowning the candle in the lantern. The wind skittered around the hall, wet fingers nipping the candlewicks.

All to illuminate, for an instant, Marcel, my youngest groom, blue-lipped, storm-soaked to his skin, cradling a well-wrapped packet, a damned *letter-sized* packet.

Illuminate me, as well, as he softly said in utter amazement, “My lord, you’re *here!*”

And promptly collapsed at my feet.

I dragged him inside, but my weight alone was not enough to shut the door against the wind and rain.

Peregrine once mockingly said that with a whisper I could fill Covent Garden. His way of saying, perhaps, that I have either a big mouth or a loud mouth, or both. Whispers were not called for at that moment.

I ran to the foot of the stairs, and bellowed my most stentorian bellow.

*"Aidez-moi, mes amis, aidez-moi!"*

The wind killed the last candle. *Merde*. I picked my way in the near-total darkness back to Marcel, bent, and leveraged him up in my arms as a pair of red and gold naked men charged down the steps.

God graced us with a brief bit of lightning that let us see each other.

"Marcel. Groom. Door. Blankets. Fire."

*Le bon Dieu*, how I loved these men. After forcing the door shut, without asking questions, expressing amazement, or any of the normal flustered reactions one might expect, they raced back up the stairs. Though with hands on the railings, as slick bare feet and highly polished oak are not precisely the safest combination. My slippers, carrying an unconscious man, were not precisely safe either, but I managed to get him halfway up the steps before Rory was back, carrying an enormous blanket.

Standing carefully, we managed to wrap the still-unconscious, shivering Marcel in the blanket, and then, being sensible instead of *manly*, I handed him off to Rory, who was far more capable than I of carrying the weight. It was as we shifted him that I realized he was still clutching his packet in what would not, I hoped, be an actual death grip.

We took him to our bedroom. It *reeked*. I thought it unlikely Marcel was a virgin, but even a virgin would have understood that this room had just been the site of some extremely vigorous sex. *Recently*. There were only two members of the staff at my London home who knew about me. Whatever the others may have suspected, they knew better than to ask, and certainly better than to gossip about any suspicions they might have.

Never inquire; never disclose. An informal motto of Edwardian men for quite some time. One I for the most part adhered to, as did Rory and Peregrine. I never had any intention of making this disclosure to Marcel, but once he woke, he would undoubtedly draw his own conclusions. He was young, but not

stupid. But despite that risk, we could not take the far more important risk to his health of starting a fire in another bedroom and waiting for it to warm.

He could not stay in his soaked clothes, so we applied our neddy boy skills and stripped him efficiently and impersonally, dried most of him, left a towel wrapped around his waist, and then bundled him in a dry blanket. We moved him closer to the fire, put him in a deep chair, his feet on an ottoman.

I poured some brandy in a tumbler, knelt by the chair, and said, "Marcel." It took a second time before he pried his eyes open.

"M-m-m'lord, I..."

"Whatever it is, it can wait. Sip this." I put my hand behind his neck, and Peregrine, who had donned a loose shirt and trousers, supported his shoulders. The boy followed orders, gasped, and shuddered. I let him get used to the burn of fire down his throat and into his belly, before having him take a second sip. We eased him back.

"You have a packet for me, Marcel?"

He went into instant panic, with a terrified "I lost it, I lost it!" look on his face, when he realized he had no clothes on, was covered with a towel and a blanket, and there was no package for me in his hand. He started to shove his way out of his coverings, but I put my hands on his shoulders and stopped him.

"Marcel, my apologies. I did not mean to frighten you. You brought the packet safely here." I picked it up off the floor. "Would you complete your task and deliver it to me?"

It was, perhaps, a foolish thing to do, giving the *unopened* package back to him so he could hand it to me. Especially since it was obviously something of extreme urgency. But after all he had clearly endured in reaching me, I felt he should have the satisfaction of *literally* completing what he had been asked to do.

He flushed, and then a bare arm slithered out of the blankets and took it from me. He paused, and then handed it back to me. "M'lord, *Onree* bade me tell you, uh, ask you to read this immediately, and then to return to London as quick as may be. It is of the... uh, utmost urgency."

"Well done, Marcel. I thank you. Now, if you will just rest here for a while. Have a sip of the brandy if you wish, but not too much more. We will look at the letter, and then see about getting you some food and dry clothes."

I rose, walked to the desk, and lit the candelabra. Sat down. Carefully unwrapped the waxed and oiled layers of the package to find the envelope. Used the knife to lift the blob of brilliantly red wax to which Henri had affixed my seal. Another indication of the importance he placed on this letter. I tugged it out, opened it, and tilted it toward the light.

M. le vicomte,

You have trusted me with many things for many years, and I beg you will trust me in this. The three of you need to return to London as fast as may be. If the horses founder under you, if you arrive so saddle-sore you can barely move, that is the speed you must achieve.

Someone, and I will attempt to find out who that is, has begun to spread vile stories about the three of you. But mostly about Lord Somerville and what he was, the gossips say, doing in the Duke's library. The tales are even more vicious about Lord Bennington. You are, the ton believes at this moment, in shameful hiding.

You unfortunately did not disclose which of your properties you were going to, so a duplicate of this letter is being sent to the other two most likely possibilities. I pray that I have not guessed wrong, that you did not choose La Belle Maison itself, or your northern hunting lodge. I am not sure that anything could be done if that is so.

In hopes of seeing you very soon, I am,

Yours most faithfully,

Henri

Neither Peregrine nor Rory said a word as they watched me read, and I made no effort to hide my dismay and my anger. Eyes shut, jaws clenched tight on both emotions, I blindly held out my hand. One of them took the letter.

I looked up as Rory finished and handed it to Peregrine. I watched as Peregrine read. First, he turned a brilliant scarlet, and then a stark, bleached white.

"*Christ!*" he said. And in all the years I have known Peregrine, I had never heard such anguish. He opened his mouth to say something more, realized he could not and looked toward the door. I nodded.

“Marcel, these gentlemen and I need to step outside to speak about... the matters you brought to my attention. Stay warm and rest yourself. We will be back shortly.”

He nodded sleepily and tugged the blanket closer about him. His head tilted and his mouth dropped open a little.

The door barely closed behind us when Peregrine whispered fiercely, “Did you close the door to the library when we left?”

In the dim light of the hallway, I must have looked as befuddled as I felt.

Peregrine inhaled deeply and exhaled somewhere between fast and slow. I had a sense from the way his fists clenched and unclenched that he had used the breath to keep from grabbing my shoulders and shaking me. “Did you?”

I thought back. “Yes.”

“You’re certain.”

I resisted the urge to snap at him. “Yes.”

He collapsed against the opposite wall. “This is all my fault.”

“And how did you arrive at that stupid conclusion?” Rory asked.

“Because someone was in the library with us. Because when we left I looked back, and saw the door was slightly ajar, and I fucking said nothing.”

“It could have...”

His hand sliced through the air in a negative. “That door is perfectly balanced. It stays where you leave it. Someone left that room immediately after we did.”

“Verra weel, someone spied. We’ll go home as Henri asked and we’ll call the bastard a liar. Three against one.”

Peregrine shook his head. “Three against a presently unknown one, *plus* the entirety of the ton who will already have decided that a story so deliciously obscene must be true. But you know that’s not the worst of it.”

He looked at us, and his face seemed to age decades as he reminded us that we were far from alone in this. “Bennington.”

Rory’s “Fuck!” and my “*Merde!*” were simultaneous.

Peregrine turned as if he were going to race back into the bedroom, throw on clothes and leave now. I grabbed him, and when he would have shaken me off, Rory held onto him as well.

“Listen, *mon cher*, we can't leave tonight. Not in this storm. If it's still this way in the morning, of course, but I won't risk breaking our necks or those of our horses by an intemperate start in the middle of the night.”

He remained stiff, as if he might try to shake us off, and then forced himself to relax. He nodded.

“Now, we have a few problems to address. We came by carriage, and riding will be much faster than a carriage, even in this weather, particularly if we are able to cut across country in places. But these horses are not exactly trained for this sort of ride. And then there is the question of money. I had expected we would return in my carriage in easy stages, and as I was thinking of cock, not coin, when arranging to leave, I doubt I have the funds available to switch horses as often as we will need to if we aren't to kill our mounts before we even reach London.”

I did not smile at the muttered, but heartfelt “Shite!” from Rory and “Fuck!” from Peregrine.

“But there is a solution. Ireton has an estate only two hours away. I know he has a stable full of horses, and if he is not there, I am well-enough acquainted with his steward to persuade him to loan us three horses and tack, and to raid his master's moneybox for some additional pounds.

“Also, Marcel is in no condition to return with us. I will ask that he stay at Ireton's until we can send for him. Agreed?”

They of course had no choice.

We realized, suddenly, that we had left Marcel's poor horse out in this storm. Rory raced downstairs to correct that failing, and get the beast into the stables, dry, warm, watered and fed.

Peregrine and I did our best to take care of Marcel.

He refused to eat anything, and we didn't push him to do so. A somewhat threadbare nightshirt from the servants' quarters engulfed him from head to toe, and we stripped blankets and bedding from two other rooms to make him a comfortable pallet by the fire.

Rory returned, now reeking of sex *and* stable. He muttered when he realized he couldn't just strip off and get into bed. He muttered even more when he realized that while we two were quite willing to put up with the odors we had contributed to creating, that willingness did not extend to horse sweat, dung, and bits and pieces of stray straw.

He got some water and cleaned himself as best he could, or rather, just enough to get us to allow him in bed. Then, dressed in a pair of threadbare trousers he brought along for use when outside the bedroom, in case one of the servants should unexpectedly return early, he climbed in.

The three of us then collapsed into the still-reeking bed, but after a while I fell asleep. Presumably they did as well, as none of us bemoaned a sleepless night when we woke.

Very much.

The storm was still going, slowing everything down to a deathly crawl, but by eleven we were en route to London, borrowed horses, borrowed pounds, abiding fear of what we might find, and all.

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## *PEREGRINE*

*Thursday, 12 September 1816*

*11:48 p.m.*

*Somerville House*

*London*

My home was not as ablaze with lights as if I were holding a party, but it was remarkably well-lit when I clattered up to the front door, and fell, more than dismounted, from the last horse I hired. Remington had always had that nearly magical way of the finest London butlers of, for the most part, being “there” when he was needed without needing to be called. I normally attributed that simply to a mathematical mind, even if he did not consciously know he was making calculations.

Milord left at a time certain, in a particular mood. Not that the mood was necessarily known to anyone other than his lordship, of course. And, equally of course, his butler. Mood recognition was undoubtedly a subject taught at the London Academy of Fine Buttlings, from which Remington undoubtedly graduated with honors. The calculations went thusly: I was scheduled to go to this dinner, that ball, this other ball, and then in the company of one or more my friends, whose names I usually disclosed, I would in all likelihood go in search of entertainment at one of my, or *their* customary venues. Knowing my customs and peculiarities, though if pressed the most he would admit to would be mild eccentricities, and factoring in that evening's choice of friends and my mood on departure, Remington was able to calculate to a reasonable degree of buttlings probability when I would return. And be there to greet me.

He had no such facts on which to base his customary calculations since I left town without telling him where I was going, though at the time I had not known myself what our destination was. I had certainly given him no estimated return date, much less a time. Yet as I staggered up the stairs, Remington, in all his awesome butlerian majesty, opened the door himself.

Perhaps I had been wrong. It was not mathematics but magic. I was certain no one had been pressing his face to the glass panels on either side of the door in order to signal an arrival.

“My lord.” Remington's voice was always somewhat austere, but there was an underlying gravity to his tone that was not normally there.

“Remington.”

He held the door open, and I embarrassed myself thoroughly by displaying my exhaustion and momentarily slumping and pressing my palm against the door frame to prevent an even more embarrassing collapse to my knees. When I finally stepped through, he nodded at a footman, who scurried off, and then he began issuing orders to have the horse cared for, a bath drawn, my bed warmed, my valet alerted.

I thanked him, walked to the stairs, stopped on the bottom-most one when Remington cleared his throat.

As much as I would have liked to deal with the problems raised by that damned letter the moment I walked through the door, by bathing, changing into my most glorious armor, and then storming out in full attack mode, Rory and Michel made me give my word, before we separated on the outskirts of the city to go to our respective homes, that I would get as much sleep as I could, and in the morning, moderately refreshed, *we three* would address the problems.

Logically, Remington could not know of the letter, but he had undoubtedly been made aware, if he had not already directly heard, all of the rumors which had triggered the letter. His “I have an important matter to raise” cough either meant he was going to say something on that topic, or, with the way things had been going in my life in recent days, something else entirely.

It was, indeed, something else... just not *entirely*.

“Yes, Remington?”

“I regret, my lord, that there are three matters I must raise.”

“*Must?*” Most butlers would not dare to tell their lord and master that he *must* do something, such as listen to whatever it was the butler had to say, despite the master’s desperate need and desire for a hot bath and a bed.

“Yes, my lord.”

“Very well.” I stayed where I was, leaned back against the gleaming railing to prevent a most inglorious fall.

Remington might have earned a living on the stage, had he desired a different profession. As an illusionist. One moment there was nothing in his hand; the next there was a sealed note being held out to me.

It was addressed to me, in a somewhat shaky hand I did not recognize. I lifted a weary eyebrow. Remington, while entirely unable to speak eyebrow-lift, was quite fluent in reading it.

“The note from Lord Bennington.”

Was I blaspheming when I thought “Christ!” yet again? I held out my hand, took it, used my thumb to tear it open.

And then I remembered.

Remembered what I so carelessly forgot the night of the Alderson Ball, perhaps even willfully refused to remember, simply because my cock was too hard, and my mind so fogged with lust.

Yes, in my eagerness to depart for whatever destination was going to finally lead to sex with both of them at the same time, I forgot two things.

The lesser of the two forgotten things was the door that should have been closed. All I had to do was mention it, and I am certain now, far, far too late, that we would not have left town. Michel would have known he closed the library door, would have recognized the importance of it being ajar so closely after our departure. We would have stayed in the city, and crushed the rumors.

My greater crime, my *far* greater crime, was forgetting the overheard words from Beckwith and the unknown man. And the third who laughed with them. About the man who had been attacked by bangers, to the great glee of Beckwith and his friends. The man who had been severely injured.

The man who stuttered.

Beckwith and his ilk would not care about a commoner's stutter, nor see any reason to mock it. And there was only one man among the nobility who did stutter, though it was slight and infrequent.

Bennington.

They had been gloating about Bennington's banger-inflicted injuries!

I had a gut-churning feeling I knew what was in the note.

I was right. I did not particularly care that Remington saw the way my hands shook when I removed the note from the envelope, nearly dropping it in the process.

Please help.

I was attacked by bangers who They knew me. They did not say my name but mocked my stutter. They beat me and beat me and then they they used their banger sticks on me telling me I wanted it I wanted it I wanted it as I screamed and screamed

I can not tell my father. I have no one to turn to but you. I am dear God I am bleeding down there and it won't stop and I am so afraid please come my friend please help

Andy

I was crying by the time I got to the scrawled, nearly illegible, signature. I knuckled the tears away, looked at Remington. "How is he?"

"My lord?"

"Bennington. How is he?"

I had never before seen Remington look old. Nor dismayed.

"My lord... I thought you knew. I thought you were not all that far away, that you had returned be..."

"Damn it, Remington!"

"My lord Bennington is dead, my lord. He... hanged himself two nights ago."

The night Marcel arrived at *Maison de la Mer*. Christ.

I stayed upright only through sheer stubbornness, as my legs had no desire to hold up the body of a spineless, careless man who had killed a friend.

I was not certain how much more I could bear. All things come in threes it is said, and Remington said there were three matters. My voice was a dull monotone as I said, "And the third?"

He understood what I asked. "My lord, you will have a visitor tomorrow morning. At ten."

He just stopped. We had a waiting game we sometimes played. One of us would stop a conversation, and then we would both wait for one to break, and break the silence. I let him have the win and spoke immediately.

"Would you care to explain how you know I will have a visitor in the morning, when I have just returned to the city, unannounced? I thought the Oracle at Delphi was closed for business these days."

Heavy-handed. But if I made feeble attempts at humor perhaps I would distract myself from my crimes.

It did not work.

Remington then did another thing I had never seen him do in all the years I had known him. He looked uncertain.

“I, ah, gave your lordship’s word that you would see... this person at ten in the morning following your return.”

My jaw dropped. I doubt that even if we had been in public, surrounded by all the members of the ton most likely to mock me for any lapse in decorum, that I could have prevented myself from doing so.

My “Explain” entirely lacked the frost that would otherwise have accompanied this gross breach of butlerian etiquette.

When he was still hesitant, I said, “The rest, Remington. Who is my visitor to be?”

“Lady Bennington.”

“What does his mother want with me?” Why wasn’t it his father, waving a pistol, or a glove to slap my face and challenge me?

“His wife, my lord.”

I grabbed the railing to keep myself standing. “Bennington is not married. I... we... would have known.”

*Wouldn’t we?* Surely he would have told us.

“Lady Bennington, the *young* Lady Bennington, showed me her marriage lines, my lord. I agreed to notify her when you arrived, ah, no matter the time.”

Ah. That explained Timothy getting the nod and hurrying away. But...

“I am clearly not following the logic of this, Remington. Why is Timothy rousing Bennington House at this time of night, instead of alerting Lady Bennington in the morning?”

“She, ah, she is not staying at Bennington House. She is at an inn. In a not, ah, salubrious part of the City.”

Gob-smacked did not begin to describe what I am sure I looked like at that moment.

I must have shown I was about to unleash a torrent of questioning, as Remington stopped me by speaking again.

“My lord, I know you have questions. And I know I have vastly overstepped my boundaries, but I beg you to trust me in this. And not question me further.

I... perhaps I should have waited until the morning to tell you all this, but I felt you would want to know.”

*Christ, yes!*

*Goddamnit, no!*

But Remington was a genuinely devout man, and so I could not say any of that aloud.

I sighed. I could, of course, not be so crass as to question him further. But this news, which Michel would undoubtedly learn from his staff, but Rory might well not, required something more from me before that bath and the unfortunate unlikelihood of very much sleep.

“Would you be so kind as to light some candles for my desk, and then call two footmen? I need messages delivered to Strathairn and Vidal.”

“Of course, my lord.”

I watched him leave the entrance hall, and allowed myself to just sink into a haze, though I remained standing. After a moment, I made myself follow him into my library. I sat down, opened the drawer, pulled two sheets out, picked up the quill, grateful that it was sharp as I was uncertain whether I could safely have wielded even so small a blade at that moment, and began to write. The messages were identical, the salutations formal and impersonal in case the notes should by some mischance fall into any of the many antagonistic hands who would be eager to use them against me, against us.

I regret to inform you, if you have not already heard, that Lord Bennington hanged himself two nights ago. Lady Bennington, his wife! not his mother, will be at Somerville House at ten tomorrow morning. I would appreciate the courtesy of your presence before then. Perhaps at half nine?

I flourished “Somerville” at the bottom, sanded each, folded them, put them into envelopes, sealed them with wax and my seal, then carefully addressed them.

Remington returned with two sleepy-eyed footmen, who were attempting to look both alert and eager. He came up to the desk, took the envelopes and distributed them. All of my staff, down to the least tweeny who was at worst in the process of learning, could read and write. So I only asked if they were familiar with how to get to their destinations, and impressed upon them the need to deliver the note *only* to the man himself, using my name and my orders

as freely as necessary to achieve that result. I left it to Remington to determine how best to get them there and safely back again.

When the footmen were gone, Remington left me alone. I was so tired, both physically and emotionally, that I really didn't want to expend the energy to walk up the stairs, get naked and bathe and then make the effort to try to sleep. I decided brandy would help my efforts.

I resisted the urge to test the impact of a full bottle.

Perhaps I should have made the test.

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## **RORY**

*Friday, 13 September 1816*

*9:25 a.m.*

*Somerville House*

*London*

We naturally arrived early, though when Michel and I talked last night, after we received our notes from Peregrine, we considered arriving *very* early—as in last night. But we could offer no ton-acceptable excuse for our arrival and our staying, and the ton *would* have learned what we had done. Which would only have added more fuel to the fires that might yet burn us into charred, smoking ruins.

Remington showed us to the library. We walked past two women seated in plain, straight-backed chairs which clearly had no normal place amidst the elegance of that foyer. They were severely dressed, one in drab browns, the other in a plain, dark dress, without any frills and furbelows, and a black ribbon about one arm. The widow, who appeared to be restraining some emotion other than grief, stared straight ahead. Her knuckles, though, were white on her reticule.

I did not blatantly look at the woman I presumed to be Lady Bennington, but did so at least out of the corner of my eye as we passed. Michel and I were lucky we were not men made of straw to scare birds from fields, or we would have been incinerated on the spot, with our ashes making a mess on the marble floor.

When the library door closed behind us I felt as if we had arrived in a safe harbor, having barely avoided, but *having* avoided, the steel jaws of a gargantuan trap.

That feeling of relief turned out to be premature.

Peregrine had not bothered to raise his head from his hands when Remington announced us, but he did when the door closed. If shite had human form, that form would have been Peregrine's.

“What is she like?” he asked.

“You coward!” Michel barked, though despite the circumstances he was nearly laughing as he did it. “You came through the damned passage.”



“Uh, well, yes.”

“Passage?” I asked.

Michel looked over at me as we seated ourselves in the comfortable chairs Peregrine, or perhaps Remington, had moved in front of his desk. “Whichever ancestor of Peregrine built this pile thought it would be fascinating to have secret passages. There are three, and not one is usable for getting into or out of a bedroom without observation. The man clearly belonged in Bedlam if he couldn't use at least one for illicit sex... even if he was not a friend of Edward's.”

“When did she arrive?” Michel asked.

“Just before nine.”

“My dear, I can understand a desire to wait on speaking to Lady Bennington, if she is indeed Lady Bennington, until we arrived to provide support. But requiring her to wait in the foyer on *those* chairs?”

“What?”

Peregrine surged out of his chair, and then realized that barging out the library door and into the foyer would defeat his purpose in entering by the passage. He turned, instead, walked to the wall and yanked the bell pull to summon Remington. The butler entered within a few seconds of the yank.

How the bloody hell does he do that? There are no bells in the hallways of this pile. Does he have bat blood?

“Remington! What's this about chairs?” He waved his hand in an “out there” gesture.

“If you mean the chairs from the kitchen on which Lady Bennington and her maid are seated in the foyer, my lord, that was her ladyship's decision. As she was early, I offered to take her to the parlor, but she declined. I offered her quite comfortable chairs, but she declined.”

“And did she say why?”

Remington hesitated, then must have decided he had no choice.

“Yes, my lord. She said that she paid an urchin to watch the back door, another to watch the stable, and another to watch the side door. She and her maid would, she said, wait and watch the front door. So that, ah, you could not avoid her as you, ah, avoided her husband. And, ah, *comfortable* chairs might, ah, *lull* them.”

“Dear God.” Peregrine went white.

“Then we dinnae delay, Somerville. See her now.”

Remington started to leave but Peregrine stopped him. His face was distraught. “I... you two need to read this, before... before Lady Bennington comes in.”

He picked up a somewhat crumpled note and handed it to me as I was closest. I think I became as pale as Peregrine when I read it. Michel whitened as well, when it was his turn.

Our dismay was written for all the world to see on our faces, and we could not let that remain. Each of us recovered in our own way, and once we were in tonnish mode, Peregrine sent Remington out.

I rose, picked up my chair and moved it back near the large fireplace. “Here, Peregrine. Let’s not try, and I do mean *try*, to intimidate the wee lassie.”

Peregrine agreed and we barely managed to shift the chairs into a less formal arrangement before Remington ushered Lady Bennington in. She looked at the three of us, and turned her head to Remington. “Leave the door open as you leave.”

He bowed to her, as if she were Lady Glenhaven or the never-to-be Lady Somerville. And did as she asked without looking to Peregrine for permission.

She looked us over. We were, unquestionably, a collective pile of fresh, stinking shite in which she had had no choice but to step.

What we saw was a tiny woman. Shorter even than Bennington. Slender. Light brown hair pulled back into a painfully tight bun. Fine brown eyes, with long lashes. Her face was lined with the obvious strain she had to be under.

“Won’t you be seated, Lady Bennington?”

There was nothing in Peregrine’s tone to suggest doubt about who she was. Nevertheless, she opened her reticule, pulled out two sets of folded papers. She winced as she looked down at what was in her hand, pain briefly on her face, and then she regained control. Somewhat awkwardly, she put one sheet back.

She marched, and that was the only way to describe her walk, over to Peregrine and stretched out the hand with the papers. It shook only a little.

“My marriage lines, Lord Somerville.”

“My lady, I don’t doubt...”

"I don't..." Her lips tightened again. "My lord, I am here to collect a debt of honor. I wish you to be very sure that I have the right to do so."

Peregrine's shock mirrored ours.

"My lady, I don't owe your... your late husband any money, so far as I know. And, well, the wagers we made were always settled immediately between us."

Where her look in the foyer was scorching, she was winter itself then. "Not all such debts are matters of money, my lord. Please assure yourself."

She looked at each of us. "And let your friends be assured as well."

None of that amounted to a request.

With no choice, he took the papers, but said, "*Please*, Lady Bennington, won't you be seated? No matter what the debt, if it is owed it will be paid. Whether it is a debt of one of us or all of us."

"Very well."

She sat in the chair he pointed to, the most comfortable one, other than Peregrine's own, but she sat perched on the edge, her back rigidly straight. We were finally allowed to sit, once she did.

Peregrine looked at the sheets long enough to have read them, though I had my doubts about whether he saw the words. I had never seen documents saying that a marriage actually existed so while I in fact read the words, I just accepted her word. Michel went through the formality as well, and returned them to Lady Bennington.

Peregrine said, "Lady Bennington, may I off..."

"No, thank you, my lord."

Peregrine's sigh was only internal. "Then how may I, we, help you, Lady Bennington?"

"By honoring my husband's request for help now, as you refused to do a week ago."

Peregrine's face and body showed how badly that gut punch hurt.

We hadn't had the time, after reading Bennington's plea, to tell Peregrine that the death wasn't his fault; that he couldn't have known what was in the note. That in the same situation, Michel and I would have made the same

decision. Not that he would have believed either of us just then. I had my doubts that he would ever *not* blame himself.

“How?”

She opened her reticule, removed the paper. It crumpled as she clenched her fist. Her chin quivered. Firmed.

“I found him.”

A gut-punch for the three of us.

“I... arrived early. We... we were going to tell his parents about us. I was not what they wanted for him. I was a country girl, the daughter of a small landholder. I had no wealth, no connections. But we ar...” She stopped to blink, and force back tears. “We *were* very much in love. We were both of age; our marriage was obviously a quiet and private one. And then he did not know how to tell his parents. Tell anyone, actually. Even the three men he counted as his *friends*.”

So very much loathing in that last word.

“He was not truly strong, my Andrew. He did not tell me of the slights he endured, the mockery, the pain. I did not know that, not until... *after*. But he did talk about all of you, and how much your friendship meant to him. How he was finally being... *accepted*. Because of you.

“*All because of you, you...*”

She stopped herself from uttering what might have been some very unladylike words, though I doubted she knew very many. The paper rustled in her hand. She took two slow, deep breaths before resuming.

“He wrote me a week ago, asked me to come to him. Told me that we would tell his parents together, since they had been pressuring him endlessly to marry an heiress with powerful family connections. I was supposed to arrive the day after, but I came early. *I just wanted to surprise him. To tell him...*”

A single tear leaked down one cheek.

We waited, without speaking, until she was ready to go on.

“I had a key. When I let myself in, I wondered why there were no servants around. I told Marie, my maid, to see if she could find anyone about. I walked quietly to his bedroom, hoping to find... to find... him. Just not in that way. Have you ever seen a hanged man, my lords?” She gave us no chance to reply.

“It is not pleasant to see... or smell. I screamed and fainted. Like a country girl faints, with no delicacy at all and a bump on my head when I awoke.

“My scream brought Marie, who must be made of sterner stuff than I am made of, since she did not join me in a swoon. It was she who noticed the three notes on his desk, after I was awake and briefly stopped sobbing. One to his parents, one to me, and one to Somerville.

“I could not bear to open the one to me, so I went the one place I was sure I would find refuge. Bennington House. I was sure his note would have told his parents about us. The servants would not let me in, although they deigned to take the note. I was hammering on the knocker again when the door was yanked open and his parents were there. His father grabbed me, shook me, asked if I... if I was the lying slut who brought this lying note in a false hand. He very nearly pushed me down the stairs when he let me go.

“And all the time I was crying, telling them that *my* Andy was dead, he'd hanged himself. His father looked at me, finally, and said, ‘I see my son is not even enough of a man to find an *attractive* whore. He is not *your* anything, girl, and when I return with my son, you and this foul May game you are playing had best be well gone.’”

Another pause. The tiniest of slumps. Another straightening. She might be a wee thing, but she was strong. Far stronger than many men I knew.

“I did not know where to go after that, except away. We found an inn that I could afford, as no ton hotel would ever allow me in, in my country mouse dress, with little luggage. There, I read his note to me. And then I decided to see what he had written to you, Lord Somerville. It was a good thing I did, as I thought then that if I delivered it to you unopened, you would do nothing, just as you did nothing when... when he was still alive. I came here, instead, to see if I could find out where you were, when you would return. Your Remington was most kind to me, believed me, and gave me his word of honor that he would let me know when you returned, day or night, and that I could meet with you. If you have any honor you will not punish him for that courtesy.”

Had it been a man who took so many disparaging slaps at his honor, Peregrine would by this time have ignored the prerequisites for a duel and had the man down, pounding the disrespectful shite out of him. I was not certain how much more he could take without breaking.

She looked down at the now-wadded-up sheet. Carefully smoothed it out. It was clearly the note addressed to Peregrine. But rather than hand it to him, so he could read it, so *we* could read it, she read it aloud.

It hurt so very much more that way. To hear his last words in his wife's voice.

You were always Peregrine or Perry in my head, though I never would have dared say that aloud, nor even dared to ask you if we might be on first names with each other. As you are with Strathairn and Vidal. You will be most ashamed of me, embarrassed by my lack of courage when you learn why you are receiving this note.

I do not know why you would not help me when I begged you to why you left town without a word. They are saying such vile things about you. Worse things about me. That I was your catamite, your neddy-boy. That I serviced you and you and I serviced your friends and others, on the Doncaster journey and every

If you were here I would beg you to help me. I think I might even offer to do in secret what I am accused of if you demanded it as payment though I do not truly think you would

I am so very afraid and in such pain I am not strong enough to endure any of it.

I beg of you, if not for my sake then for my wife's sake, and dear Anthea's sake, I beg of you

give me back my name!

Lord Andrew Bennington

Lady Bennington was crying openly now, a steady stream waterfalling from each eye. She held the note out to Peregrine. "Your correspondence, my lord, not at all accidentally opened."

Peregrine's hand shook as he rose enough to reach forward, take it, and sat abruptly back down.

"And if you will not do what he *begs*, for him, or his sister, or for me, *if you have any honor at all you will do it for his son or daughter!*"

She stood up.

At that moment, she was Wellington to our French forces at the end of Waterloo. Complete carnage on the ground.

Lady Bennington was pregnant. And she'd been turned away by the child's grandfather, called a whore.

Christ.

We stood, of course, when she did, but then the spirit with which she faced us down drained away, leaving her looking lost and alone, as indeed she was. Had she been a sister, a relative by marriage, any of us, all of us, would have hugged her, offered her comfort. But we were forbidden by ton rules from that bit of basic decency.

She wavered, as if she had used up every bit of strength she possessed to get this far, and did not now know where to go, or what to do next. And stood there.

“My lady,” Peregrine said, “it is my turn to beg, and I do indeed beg you to please, *please* sit down. I know you have no reason to believe me, but I will make this right. So, please, sit, and let us see how we might contrive.”

“I... Very well.” She sank down into the chair, less than gracefully, her back no longer ramrod-straight.

“My lady, I have no right to ask, and I apologize for any indelicacy, but... have you broken your fast today?”

“I had no m...” She stopped. Flushed at the admission.

Peregrine just nodded and eyebrow-asked Michel to find Remington. Quite naturally, he was just outside the door when Michel opened it. Far enough away that he could believably say he had not been listening, but close enough to be immediately available.

He stepped just inside the door, looked at the wan, seated widow, and the disconcerted, hovering Three R's. “How may I be of assistance, my lord?”

“Would you please ask Lady Bennington's maid to join her? And then... I think a hearty breakfast, with some restorative hot tea?” He looked suddenly dismayed at his words, and I could see the frantic thoughts whirling around as he tried to figure out how he could ask a woman not his wife whether she was experiencing morning sickness—even the phrase sounded horrifying—and thus whether his proposal of a hearty breakfast was at all appropriate.

Lady Bennington was astute enough to understand what he dared not say. “You are most gracious, Lord Somerville. A hearty breakfast would be most welcome.”

Peregrine sagged with relief. He actually sagged. Then straightened. “My lady, we must step outside to confer for a little. If you would be so kind as to

rest here, I will have my housekeeper join you, to see if there is, uh, anything else you might need.”

She graciously nodded and thanked him. The words even sounded somewhat genuine. We waited until she was joined by her maid, and then the four of us left. Leaving the door open once again. Peregrine let Remington give the necessary orders, and then drew us all to the parlor.

“Remington, do you have a way to get word to my mother? Immediately? No muss, no fuss, no notice to my father?”

“But of course, my lord.”

“I’ll give... well, no, I can’t go back in there right now and disturb her with rooting about for pen and paper. Just find me something, anything, to write on.”

In fairly short order, Remington returned with a silver tray, on which there were several sheets of paper, two quills, an inkwell, sand, and a sharpening knife. Clearly understanding that in Peregrine’s present mood, in order to have a surface to write on, as the parlor held no desk, Peregrine might very well sweep his arm across one of the decorative tables and deprive himself, his heirs and the world of several valuable and not-so-valuable figurines and other decorations, Remington set the tray down on the sofa. He then neatly cleared the table, followed by setting out the contents of the tray on it.

Peregrine sat down, realized he could never write in that position, and then stood. He wrote quickly, sanded it, handed it to us. “Anything else?”

Mama,

I need you immediately, or sooner than that. Young Lady Bennington and her unborn child are here and in dire, and I do mean dire, need of help I think only you can provide. Please manage to get here without Father knowing, as he would not help matters at all.

Perry

He blushed a little when we got to his signature. “Only she calls me that, and, no, neither of you ever will, so she will know from that alone how important this is.”

The note went off by whatever mysterious method Remington employed to get a note to the lady of the house, without her lord and master knowing.



Peregrine began pacing, then sitting and fidgeting, then pacing again. We were temporarily alone in the parlor, and for our own reasons left that door open as well.

“Peregrine.” He stopped in mid-pace, looked at me. “I would if I could, but I can’t. So would Michel.”

He blinked and blinked, and blinked again before smiling ruefully at the possibilities of comfort my words suggested. All the way from the simple hug neither of us could give him, to the type of comfort that absolutely required the utmost privacy.

“Thank you. Both of you.”

For some reason, that calmed him down, and he sat. So did we. None of us saw any reason for idle chat, so we waited in silence for Lady Glenhaven, or word that she could not, or would not come.

She arrived about a half hour after the note was handed to Remington. Even I could recognize she was in full *grande dame* daytime mode as she stood for a moment in the doorway. Then she hurried over to Peregrine, sat beside him, and thoroughly embarrassed him with an enormous hug, a kiss on his cheek, and a murmured, “My dear boy,” as she stroked his hair.

He actually needed that bit of love as much as the comfort we could not give him just then.

Then she patted his cheek with a delicately gloved hand and said, “*Young Lady Bennington*. And just how do you know she is *enceinte*?”

Peregrine explained, if not *quite* everything, the most pertinent facts. Our departure for a holiday after our friendship resumed, the note from Bennington which was not answered, learning of the tales being told, hurrying back only to learn of Bennington’s suicide. The arrival of Lady Bennington. The debt of honor to clear young Bennington’s name.

When he was done, he looked at Lady Glenhaven and said, “Mama. I... know you have heard the stories they are telling. The three of us will deal with those, and I beg you to let us do that. Right now, our first concern must be the welfare of Lady Bennington and the heir, or potential heir. And for Anthea as well, as this could destroy her amongst the ton, if it has not already done so. For that, we quite desperately need your guidance.”

“Of course, my dear.” She paused. “Do you know, John Bennington has been a rude pr... ah, prude, for as long as I have known him. But this is beyond the pale. Very well.”

She stood up, as did we. “My dear boys, I have so very much enjoyed our visit this morning. I was quite surprised that Peregrine had in fact returned when I stopped by earlier to check on that very thing. And then the two of you arrived. Followed—so very unexpectedly—by Lady Bennington. It was a good thing I was here, as it is not at all *comme il faut* for a noble young widow, or wife, or young miss, to be alone, maid or not, with the Three R’s.”

Peregrine and Michel seemed satisfied with this Banbury tale. I was not. It could never work. The servants, his and hers, would know when she actually arrived. And so I said.

My bastard shite-heads just grinned at me, all smug, and superior and annoyingly tonnish Sassenachs just then.

Peregrine then proceeded to explain the facts of upper tonnish life to me. “Of course, they will. And the ton might well actually believe them if any were so desirous of losing their positions that they would speak out and contradict Mama. But truthfully, R... Strathairn, once Mama has given her version of events, do you think anyone would dare to accuse *Lady Glenhaven* of lying?”

I snorted. “I’d bow to your superior knowledge, Somerville, except that would make you feel even more superior than you usually do, so I won’t bother.”

I did give a little bow to Lady Glenhaven. “My apologies, my lady, for being a doubting Ruaidhri.”

She smiled back at me. Then she looked inward, considering. I wonder if that was the way Wellington looked, the night before Waterloo, laying his plans. She then bestowed a generous smile on all of us, before inhaling generously. I could not help my generous admiration, in the most platonic sense, of that most generous bosom, though I would not confide my admiration to Peregrine, lest I find something generous of my own snipped off.

“I shall, of course, need to speak with Lady Bennington now. Privately. I will, I believe, need all three of you a little later.” She looked us over somewhat critically. “I will need you looking as fine as five pence, and I’m afraid what you’re wearing will not do. Something better, and more conservative. Quite muted. And with black armbands.”

She headed to the door, and turned back for a moment. “We will, I believe, be laying siege to Castle Bennington, and quite probably knocking down the gates. Should that be *literally* necessary, I will quite rely on you three to be my

gate-knockers. Trust Mama, Peregrine. All will be well with Lady Bennington. With *both* Lady Benningtons. Lord Bennington will just have to follow along, as men so often do, as best he may.”

And so we did as we were told. We trusted Lady Glenhaven.

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## *MICHEL*

*Friday, 13 September 1816*

*Late afternoon to early evening*

*Outside Bennington House, then...*

*White's on St. James's Street, then...*

*Somerville House*

Peregrine is stubborn. He has always been stubborn. When he is angry he is beyond stubborn. His determination then acquires the consistency of granite.

He was at his most granite as we stood at the bottom of the steps outside Bennington House. Lady Glenhaven had decided to stay a while longer, to be sure that the morning's alarms and excursions inside were done, all was quiet and would remain so. If I believed in God and saints, I would have nominated her for sainthood. I am not sure how one comparatively small woman can shatter barricades, breach well-built, long-standing walls of prejudice and arrogance and bigotry with quiet words instead of a cannon's roar.

I hoped that when she finally left Bennington House, the charm of her presence and her persuasiveness would stay behind. It would with the elder Lady Bennington, who nearly swooned when she learned that she not only in truth had a daughter-in-law, but that she was, in the not too distant future, to be a grandmother. Bennington himself was more problematic, but I think, overall, she won him over.

We talked privately with him—a boon he was most reluctant to grant, as he did not like to be in the presence of sodomites, as he so very directly informed us once we *were* private—and I thought we made some headway. As with Lady Glenhaven, we refused to discuss the allegations about Peregrine, and us, no matter how he tried, but I think by the time we left he was beginning to believe that whatever truth or falsity there might be to the stories about us, the son he so often mocked for what the boy could not help—his looks—was as manly as any father might reasonably desire. And that son had sired a child who might well be the next heir.

Throughout the hours we were there, Peregrine grew increasingly angry, though he kept it bottled up and unseen except by us. And perhaps his mother. He wanted, now that Lady Bennington was on her way to being taken care of, to go charging off to find Beckwith and challenge him to a duel. As well as

anyone else who said or might have said something about any of us or about Bennington. We managed to bring him down from a boil to a bubbling simmer as we waited for my carriage to come back, as I had instructed the driver not to keep the horses standing.

Somerville's carriage and driver would naturally wait for Lady Glenhaven. Since Rory and I arrived in my carriage, I was, therefore, in at least partial control of Peregrine's travel. A refusal on my part to tell my driver to follow Peregrine's instructions might well have resulted in Peregrine telling the both of us to "bloody well bugger off" and him walking a few streets over and getting a hackney.

I briefly contemplated appearing to agree to his destination without ever actually saying so, as once I actually said the words, I would be bound to honor them. But that plan contained a serious flaw. Even if I managed to get the three of us into the carriage without directing Jean to take us to White's, once Peregrine realized we were *not* heading in that direction, he was fully capable, at this stage of his ire, of stepping down into the street if we came to a stop in traffic, or simply leaping out while we were moving. Either would serve to make his point that he would not be deterred.

We were either with him, or he was without us.

We nevertheless made one last effort, Rory and I, to persuade him to relent, to let us go to the club and check the lay of the land, and bring back word. That idea verged on suggesting that he act the coward, but we skirted that verge and stayed on the road with the thought that we might find out more by strategically or tactically—I had no idea which was the militarily correct concept, if either—avoiding a confrontation by the substitution of careful reconnoitering. Ours.

That was our last play. If he disagreed, neither of us was stupid enough to suggest that we drive there, and he wait outside while we went in. *That* idea would have been tantamount to *accusing* him of cowardice, because even making the suggestion implied he might agree. In his present mood, I was sure that had we done so, there would have been a pair of duels in the offing. And while I was certain none of us would shoot to kill, I most assuredly did not want my right shoulder shot again, or worse, my left. Rory would have undoubtedly expressed the same opinion had I asked, though naturally his concern would have been for his previously un-shot right shoulder.

Peregrine actually did us the courtesy of considering our arguments, or perhaps he merely humored us.

Then one eyebrow lifted in an arc.

Rory had, by association, acquired some additional fluency in eyebrow-speak, but no translation was needed for that one.

*You are both out of your fucking minds.*

We tried our best to protect our man, but having failed to do so, we joined him.

It was worse than even I, and I am the perpetual pessimist of our trio, expected.

He was not allowed in.

George, the doorman, the quite *large* doorman, nodded deferentially to me, and with slightly less deference to Rory, who had been the guest of both Peregrine or me on prior occasions. There was no nod or bow or any deference at all for Peregrine. Instead, George angled his body so that we could pass by, and blocked Peregrine.

“Members only.” George’s voice was cold. The insult was all the greater for the fact that there was no “my lord” at the end of the sentence.

Peregrine whitened, and his lips thinned to non-existence.

“Then he is here as my guest,” I said.

“Regretfully, my lord, that is impossible. This... person... has been banned from the premises.”

Vastly worse than I imagined.

Peregrine stood very still for a moment, held up his hand when I opened my mouth, and then he blinked. And blinked again. And the edges of his lips lifted in a hint of a smile.

*Ah, shite.* I recognized that look. Something embarrassing was imminent.

“If you will but give me a moment?” he said to Rory and to me.

He looked at George, still blocking his passage through the open door. “My dear George, you perform your tasks most excellently well. But you see, if Muhammad is not allowed to go to the mountain, then it becomes necessary for the mountain to come to Muhammad.”

George maintained his impassive face, but I was reasonably certain he had no idea what Peregrine meant.

Neither did I. I suspected Rory was in the same condition.

We simply stared as Peregrine went down the few steps to the sidewalk, crossed over to my carriage—Jean's instructions were to not bother walking the horses, in the expectation this visit would not take long—and absently patted Thunder's neck, while looking down into the gutter and then lifting his head to look into the street.

Which he then proceeded to step into. Obviously alert, though for the most part looking down for whatever it was he sought, he dodged the odd carriage or two, a dray, several horses and riders who were irritated by his presence where he should not have been, and neatly avoided the droppings that were fresh and steaming or dried and crusty.

On the opposite side of the street and a few yards down, he bent and picked something up in each hand, and then dashed through a brief surge in traffic and returned to the sidewalk outside of White's. He went, however, to stand in front of the wrought iron fence and directly before the bow window. I could see at least one person occupying the seats, but could not tell who it was.

Peregrine let me, and indeed that part of the world on St. James's at that moment, know who that person was. His bellowed "Alvanley!" advised us.

Londoners are, of course, like all people, nothing loathe to be entertained whenever and wherever such entertainment might arise. Especially when the entertainment is *free*. The riders and drivers slowed and stopped, regardless of the irritation of those behind them. Pedestrians paused as well. Their expressions suggested that what was happening offered the possibility of being better than a raree-show.

A nobleman... for what else could Peregrine possibly be with those looks and those clothes... standing outside the famous bow window yelling the name of perhaps the preeminent member of the preeminent men's club in London? Oh, yes, entertainment indeed.

He bellowed the name again. More people stopped and stared.

He switched whatever was in his right hand for what was in his left, and then let us know what that was. His right arm came back and then swung forward. A shower of gravel flew from his hand and clattered against the glass. There was a mild gasp from the onlookers, and George started to move toward him.

Instinctively, my left hand grabbed onto the *very* large left bicep of the doorman. Rory fluidly skirted behind me and stood in George's path, a step

down. Despite the difference in height, accentuated by that step, for a moment Rory's stance and stare made him seem the far larger of the two men.

"George," I said, pronouncing his name as if he were French, "'that man' may not presently be a member, but he is still Viscount Somerville, and Glenhaven's heir. Do you really wish to take it upon yourself to lay hands on him on a public sidewalk? Without express instructions to do so?"

The muscle tension that would have translated into forward motion gave way. A doorman could enjoy a raree-show as well as any other citizen, could he not? And his only orders were to stop the former member from entering the sacred precincts, not to stop him from throwing small stones at a window. Even a *Bow Window*.

With interference from that quarter halted, the three of us watched as the next act began.

The fairly large rock that had been in his left hand was visible now as he tossed it back to his right, and then used his right hand to toss it into the air and catch it. And did the same again. And then again.

"My Lord Alvanley, I merely wish to talk," he said loudly enough for everyone to hear, and as it was perhaps ten feet, twelve, between where he stood and the seats beyond the glass of the bow window, I was certain that the occupants, if there were any more besides Lord Alvanley, could hear just as well.

"Or shall we see if my aim with this—" and he tossed the rock again "—is as accurate as I am with a pistol or a bow?"

There was a pause, while he stared at the man or men in the seats who sat in judgment on the passers-by that day. Then at some unseen signal, he nodded and tossed the rock down. He was not precisely sauntering as he walked back to the steps.

We did not have long to wait until Lord Alvanley himself pulled the door all the way open, told George to step back inside, and then came out on the stoop. A massive man, of massive elegance, and equally massive ugliness, he looked down his nose at Peregrine on the sidewalk, casually leaning against the fence, one foot on the first step. Lord Alvanley's voice was cold. "Somerville."

Peregrine straightened, made no attempt to physically alter the image of power (on the upper step) looking down on far less power (on the sidewalk). Hubert's instructions to be always aware of position, power, and precedence



crossed my mind. But he did give Alvanley a bow that was patently less than sincere. "Alvanley. You took a vote, in my absence, without affording me an opportunity to answer whatever charges may have been leveled."

Lord Alvanley's famed wit was markedly absent. "We did. You could not possibly be unaware of what those charges were. You could not possibly be unaware that there is nothing you could possibly have said that would have affected the outcome."

"What was the margin?"

"You are not entitled to know that. But I shall tell you anyway. We voted on your expulsion as we did on your membership. Then, there was no black ball. This time, there was not a single white ball."

*Those bastards.* My ned-sense knew, though my cock did not, that there were other friends of Edward's who were members of White's. Other men, too, who made use of the mouth or arse or hands of a man from time to time, even though the majority of the time they put their cocks to use in cunts. A secret ballot, not even with slips of paper where handwriting might be recognized, just tiny balls of black or white marble. And the cowards all voted against him.

Peregrine was too intelligent not to have expected something of this nature once he was told his membership had been revoked. But Rory and I could see the blow that those five words—"not a single white ball"—were to him, though I am utterly certain Alvanley could not. Instead, it appeared to affect Peregrine to no more degree than if he had been told he had lost five quid on which raindrop would reach the bottom of the window first.

Peregrine did not allow a moment's lapse between Alvanley's last words and his next, as any hesitation at all would give rise to rumors of his being aghast at, and crushed by, that particular news.

"And these two?" He looked toward us and then back to Alvanley.

"Why, *M. le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci* is a valued member of the Club, who is always welcome. As are his guests. With, of course, one exception."

Alvanley allowed himself a smile, then. A cruel one. "It was, I believe, your *friend, M. le vicomte*, who remarked on some occasion or other, that men being men, when they do not have a woman available, will often make use of any hole that *is* available."

*Bloody, bloody, bloody hell!* I should have cut my throat before uttering those words.

“*M. le vicomte* did not have his Alicia available, nor the Master of Strathairn his delicious Angel at Annabella’s, so when a willing and, from everything one has heard, exceedingly talented and well-used hole was offered...” He shrugged. “Entirely understandable, I am sure.”

Alvanley turned to Rory and me, effectively offering a cut direct to Peregrine. He gestured toward the door. “Gentlemen, I have ordered an exceptionally fine beefsteak for this evening, as well as some somewhat special dishes, and indeed, some quite remarkable port, as well. Perhaps you might care to join me?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the almost imperceptible bracing in Peregrine’s taut frame for a blow that was yet to descend. I regretted that his impulsive decision to come here had resulted not only in all that had happened, but in an even temporary weakening of his faith in the *three* of us as well.

I offered Alvanley my most excellent, courteous bow. “My lord, we both deeply appreciate the great honor you do us with your invitation. But... another time?”

It was Alvanley’s turn to stiffen. An offer to make up two of the eight, and only eight, he ever invited to dine with him, was much sought-after, particularly given the invariable exquisiteness of the meal he provided. To refuse for any reason short of one’s own imminent death was essentially unheard of. To refuse, *and* for all practical purposes request a subsequent invitation, was not heard of at all. It simply was not done.

Yet I am the *vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci*. The fife and drum corps to which I march, as Peregrine so aptly put it years ago, is unlike any other. I was known to respect the rules of conduct for men of my class, but also to go my own way whenever I felt so inclined. Alvanley understood this was one such inclination.

He nodded his head with magisterial weight, accepting the decision I made for both Rory and me. He paused. Lowered his voice. “*M. le vicomte*, a word, if I may, of caution?”

My own nod indicated my willingness to listen.

“One understands your decision at this moment. You have, after all, been a friend of... that man... for numerous years. But you must give some heed to your own well-being. You would not, I am sure, want to chance being tarred with that self-same brush.”

Bloody hell. Both Rory and I had been painted with that “self-same brush” long years ago, and while I haven’t, I knew quite well from the little time we had by the sea that Rory had had that brush up his arse. Perhaps sideways.

“I thank your lordship for your care, and your sound advice,” I murmured back.

*And you can take that advice and shove it up your arse. Sideways and spinning.*

Alvanley and I exchanged bow-substitute nods, and he went inside. George shut the door with not quite a slam.

The watchers, realizing that this had been an exceedingly rare raree-show, but also that these revels now were ended, and this trio of actors, not spirits at all, was not about to melt into thin air, but rather depart in the vastly more substantial carriage that had been waiting all this time, began their own dissolution. They suddenly recalled all the places they were supposed to have been, the people they were supposed to have seen, and realized they now had a need to decide whether those were the best places to go or people to see in order to disseminate this tale in the most advantageous way possible.

As we got into the carriage, Rory shoved his way in first, so that Peregrine wound up between us. We could not kiss him, nor visibly hug him for obvious reasons, but our hands were out of sight of passers-by, except perhaps for a rider who might briefly look down and through a window. We sat there, saying nothing, though Rory and I each grabbed one of his hands and held onto it, squeezing slightly. He shuddered. Closed his eyes briefly; opened them, called out, “Somerville House, *s’il vous plaît*, Jean.” My silence indicated my approval, and the carriage moved into traffic.

Peregrine tugged, and we let his hands go. He clasped them together in his lap, his knuckles going white. His voice was dull. “I killed him.”

“Dinna sae that. He murdured his-sel’. ’Twas his ain choice.”

Peregrine shook his head. His jaw was tight, and his flesh was even more so across the bones of his face, as though he had suddenly lost a stone or two of weight.

“I did not tie the knot. I did not put the noose around his head. I did not do the rest of the things that left him hanging there, while he slowly choked to death. I know all that. But still, because I was more interested in cock in my mouth or arse or both, I left him hanging. Left him alone and afraid, lost and unable to find his way back. *Damn me!*”

His voice was agonized, and possible viewers or not, I started to put my arm around him to comfort him. He shook me off, not even noticing he had done it, his focus was so tightly inward.

“And damn *them* as well. And I *will* see them damned.”

He looked at Rory and then at me. “And you will not dissuade me from my course.”

Dissuasion being all the more difficult, of course, since we had no idea of his course.

“My dear, what *is* your course? Because of course if we are going to try to get you off your course and onto some other course entirely, as you know we will, should we not agree with whatever your course is, we have to know what your course is first, in order to set our own course to, ah, alter yours. Your course, that is. The one we don't know.”

That modest bit of mockery would, under most circumstances, have at least earned me a smile. These were clearly far from “most” circumstances.

He ignored me as if I had said nothing.

“He was not strong enough to face his fears alone, and but for my cock lust, he might not have been alone. We did not have to leave just then. *I* did not have to send that facile message. Your cocks and mouths and arses are not worth a man's life, and I shouldn't have listened to you.”

The surge of fury was so great, I could no more *not* have pulled away from Peregrine as far as it was possible to move in the close confines of my suddenly too-damned-small carriage, than I could have picked the fucking thing up and carried it to our destination.

He stopped speaking, blanched, looked wildly at each of us. “Oh, Christ, Christ, I am so very sorry. I did not mean that, truly I did not.”

I ignored him. Too little, too bloody late.

“Jean!” I shouted. “Faster!”

Speed in London streets was rarely possible, and even when possible, dangerous. I did not particularly care at that moment. I wanted Peregrine out of my carriage, and since I unfortunately still cared too much for him to just grab his lapels, haul him across my lap and shove him out the door into hopefully very heavy traffic, I had to make do until he could voluntarily exit at his home. Most probably with my boot in his arse to assist him on his way.

When he spoke again, Peregrine's voice was almost too soft to hear, but then he cleared his throat. "Did you know that the Bishop of Harwell preached a *special* sermon, quite 'unexpectedly,'" and his voice was bitter on that word, "on Wednesday, 11th September, at a church that just 'happened' to be filled to overflowing that morning?"

"His subject was the sin of sodomy, and the moral degradation which accompanies it, particularly among the young who are seduced into that sin. And how, when the sinner realizes the vastness of his sin, the depths of perversion and filth into which he has been drawn, the only right and proper thing he can and should do is end his life. Of course, suicide is a sin and that would prevent any reconciliation with God the loving *fucking arsehole* Father, but death as a suicide and being eternally damned is preferable to indulging in such sin throughout an inevitably wasted life, and being eternally damned anyway. Better, as it were, to end it now and get started sooner on damnation. And everyone in that church, and everyone who read about it in the *Ton Tales* that Jeffreys kept for me, *knew* he was talking about young Bennington. *Knew* that he was rejoicing in Bennington's death as a sign of God's will."

He stopped, inhaled, exhaled. Stayed silent. And finally, "I'm mad as 'ell, 'n' I'm not fuckin' takin' it anymore."

My "What?" and Rory's sharp bark of laughter were simultaneous.

Peregrine looked at me, and those same deep lines I had seen when he read Henri's letter were etched into his face. "The motto of the Friends of Edward Society."

"Don't be absurd, Peregrine. There is no such thing. Yes, yes, a few friends of Edward's have, over the past year, fought back against the bangers and claimed to be members, but that's just talk. Such ridiculous talk that the French, who will do anything to be in the forefront of anything at all, even emulated it."

Damn me for calling up that memory of Bennington and his cheerful tale of the French "society."

Peregrine let his wince be seen. "No, Michel, the Society exists. Rory and I founded it. 30th August last year. On the Dock. Right after we beat the shite out of three bangers. And though forming the Society was more Rory's idea than mine, I naturally approved whole-heartedly."

"Liar." The word was more fond than accusatory, and Rory reached out to put his vast paw over Peregrine's much smaller one. Peregrine did not push him away.

Rory leaned forward to look at me. “He reamed my arse royally for doing it, despite my best efforts to convince him that his tongue would be better spent on another form of reaming. One far more enjoyable for the *both* of us.”

Peregrine turned his head toward me as well, said, “I am truly sorry, Michel. You are not responsible for any of this. Either of you. Just me.”

I would never have believed Peregrine to be capable of so fine, if unconscious, a portrayal of early Christian martyr. Or middle Christian martyr. Or late Christian martyr. But there he was, completely sincere, and begging for the forgiveness from me which Rory, that far smarter than I will ever admit he looks Scot, had already granted him.

The anger drained away and I shifted back that tiny increment of space that put our legs together once more. He sighed and put his hand in mine. Our fingers entwined. We three sat in silence, ignoring the early evening sounds of the City around us, the clopping of the hooves.

I called out to Jean to allow him a more reasonable pace. I could almost hear his under-his-breath, “Make up your bloody mind, your bloody lordship.”

We were nearing Somerville House, and I was not willing to let this conversation die. “So. You are mad as hell, and you are fucking not taking ‘it’ anymore. So...”

“Not fucking not taking.”

“What?”

“You need to quote the motto correctly. The fucking comes before the taking, not before the not.”

Without letting loose his hand, fully aware Rory still held his other hand, I reached around and punched Peregrine’s shoulder. He yelped and then grinned.

“Very well, Peregrine. You are not fucking taking it any more. So what *are* you going to do, and what does it have to do with this Society of yours?”

He shook his head. “No idea, actually. But I am fairly certain that whatever it is, you two will be well out of it. And no, don’t leap in here with oaths of undying devotion and standing with me through hell, high water, and the fucking ton. This... whatever it is, whatever it will be... is something I have to do myself, since I set this all in motion myself.”

“No.”

Rory added, “Definitely, no.”

“Rory, Michel...”

“Don’t waste your breath, Peregrine. I recognize the voice and expression all too well. Rory, my dear, I am afraid you are going to have to learn this voice and this expression, as you will certainly see it from time to time as our lives go on...”

Ridiculous as it was, we stopped talking. Perhaps even stopped breathing. I was certain, with a certainty so very certain I would have wagered not half but *all* my kingdom on it, that we three were thinking, imagining, if not *precisely* the same things, things that were very much of a muchness.

*As our lives go on.* The three of us... *together...* as our lives and the years went on. And on. And on.

A most wonderful imagining. But one which had to give way to reality. For the nonce.

“This expression, Rory, is the one he gets when he has decided he is going to do something, often something quite silly, sometimes even quite stupid, but his mind has fixed on it. If he were a child, he would be on the floor, drumming his heels until finally he was given leave by worn-down caretakers to do what he bloody well wanted.” I cupped one hand behind my ear, tilted my head. “Hark! I hear a heel!”

Rory snickered, Peregrine glowered.

“We three, Peregrine. All for one, and one for all. Agreed?”

He heaved a ridiculously great sigh. “Very well. All for one, and one for all. And at least we are not in Prague, so there will be no defenestrations involved.”

Ah.

I recognized *that* expression as well. I would explain it to Rory privately. It was the one that said, “Yes, I’ve agreed to do what *you* want, but this is for your own good, so I’m going to do what I bloody well want to do anyway.” He still thought I did not know what that expression meant, and I was naturally not about to disabuse him of that misapprehension.

We remained silent for the rest of the ride back to Somerville House. Once there, Peregrine got out, shut the door, rested his hand on the window’s edge. “The Dumbarton rout. Eleven o’clock.”

We agreed. And I asked, “And do you yet know what your course is?”

“No.”

For once, I could not tell whether he was telling me the truth. And wasn't that just fine under these circumstances?

As the carriage pulled away toward Rory's lodgings, he asked, "Do you think he'll do nothing at all until we meet?"

My laughter was on the somewhat grim side. "He'll do something, and I have no idea what that might be."

"But will he be there at eleven?"

"He will. I do not believe Peregrine will ever lie to either of us. Avoid the truth, of a certainty. Omit the truth, assuredly. Bend it and warp it, likely. But not an outright lie."

We would find out at eleven what he wasn't going to fucking not taking anymore. And the proper word order be damned.

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## ***PEREGRINE***

*Saturday, 14 September 1816*

*10:55 p.m.*

*Dumbarton Hall*

*London*

My carriage blocked easy access to the entrance. That thoroughly annoyed other latecomers, which led some of them or their drivers to consider protestations, perhaps with some degree of vehemence, but one look at my expression in the flickering light of the torches held by the link boys made them rethink what they had been about to say, and in fact, not say it at all.

My presence on the sidewalk undoubtedly gave those who saw and recognized me, which was most of them, more to gossip about once they passed the doors. *Did you see? Hear? Somerville is outside! He's not allowed in!* Their words would simply join with those already eagerly and viciously spread from the last three ton events I had been to tonight. I learned at each of them that although I had received and accepted their invitations, well before 6th September, each invitation had been revoked. The butlers who denied me entrance were not at all sympathetic to my mild protestation that I had received no such notice.

None were ever sent, of course. There were far too many smirks from the far too many received guests, who merely happened to be passing by the door when I arrived. The host and hostesses had undoubtedly spread the word of my impending humiliation with a casual mention here and there to early arrivals, so that the news would spread much as rats spread the Black Plague.

After White's, I suspected this would happen, so I wanted to endure the pain alone, without inflicting it on Rory and Michel as well. Or the additional pain to me when they were offered entrance while I was refused. If it were not redundant, I would say, "*Déjà vu* yet again." I could not even hope they might be late.

Michel's carriage pulled up behind mine. If I took the time to check the time I would just have seen it was precisely eleven.

Rory was, as I expected, in full regalia and stunning in his powerful, red-haired masculinity. He looked like he could easily throw five or six cabers, one right after the other without breaking into a sweat.

Michel... *glittered*. A black tailcoat, black inexpressibles, and everything else brilliant white, including his signature Belgian lace at his wrists. All of which formed a background for the large diamond stickpin that shattered the torchlight into flickering rainbow darts. Diamond shirt studs. A large, square-cut diamond ring on his left hand. And the ferrule of his quite-lethal sword cane glittered as well.

Michel started to wave his carriage away, but I stopped him. What was the point? He would only be needing it again in a few minutes, as I knew that once I was refused, they would not go in without me.

No.

This could not drag on and on. I had to gain access. Had to do something, somehow, for Bennington. Be damned to me.

Ah.

I looked at my dear ones, who stood close by but not close enough to elicit comment in any except the most exceptionally filthy minds. Which would, generally speaking, be most of the ton. And not just the men.

"I have not been admitted to any of the other gatherings tonight to which I was previously invited. My invitation was revoked, and each of the revocations was, must have been, quite accidentally lost in the mail. How... very odd."

My mockery was of course not lost on them. They waited for me to finish.

"I rather expected something like that, especially after White's. But I didn't want you to have to go through that."

I glanced up the steps to where the door was being held open, and the butler and two quite large footmen were just inside. Ostentatiously so. With an unusual number of members of the ton idling in the background. Well, members of the ton *always* idled, just generally not in a doorway on a not exactly balmy night. They were waiting, obviously, for *their* opportunity. "Once is enough."

Michel sighed his most languid, lewd, lascivious sigh, of which there were many in his repertoire I had learned, and said, "My dear, *once* will never be enough."

"Mibbie twa, bit ah dinnae think sae."

Michel looked at him, and actually winked. "My dear Rory, do you think... perhaps *three*?"

“Mibbie, bit ainlie barely sae. Fower wid be better.”

“Four it is, then. But only as an absolute minimum of satisfaction.”

“Aye. Noo howfur dae we decide whilk holes in whit order?”

I literally felt the despair drain away. How could I despair when I had these two to raise me up? With them, I could... stand on mountains. Make myself more than I had ever thought I could be.

I could not, of course, hug them. Kiss them. But they could see both in my eyes. “Shall we, then, march up there to the beat of *our* fife and drum corps?”

“Aye, laddie,” and “*Mais bien sûr,*” were simultaneous.

So we marched side by side up the stairs, knowing we would have preferred to be arm in arm as well. The butler, whose name was unknown, felt quite comfortable in smirking at us as we reached the landing. He had stayed inside so that he was one step above us. The position of power.

Before he could say anything, Michel spoke. In theory to just me. “Did I ever tell you what Mr. Fallon used to say about position?”

As he clearly required no response from me, I offered none and he went on.

“*M. le vicomte,*” he would say, always so very formal with me, “*M. le vicomte,* always consider position, and placement, and power in everything you do. But consider, too, that power most often resides entirely in the man or woman who holds it, much to the detriment of those who rely on mere *position* to achieve it. Or the illusion of it.”

He paused, quite artificially, and then said with blatantly false startlement, “Oh. But I interrupted you. You were about to say something, were you not?” And he graciously gestured for me to go ahead.

“I wish to speak to Lady Dumbarton. Inform her.”

The red-faced butler managed to say, “Viscount Somerville, I regret...” before I interrupted him.

“I am sure you regret many things, but I frankly have no interest whatsoever in listening to a list of your life regrets or of your sins, petty, venial, minor, mortal, whatever they might be. Inform Lady Dumbarton I wish to speak with her.”

Smug. So very smug. So *stupidly* smug to believe he could have his moment in the sun, though it was, indeed, quite late at night, at my expense. “Or?” he asked.

Michel's right eyebrow was undoubtedly arced as high as my own, while Rory compensated for his arcing inability with a tightening of his lips, a straightening of his broad, *broad* shoulders, and the clenching of just one massive fist. He would, of course, only need one if a fist were to become necessary.

"Accept the consequences of not telling her."

"C-consequences?"

Remington would never have been so unnerved, no matter the circumstances. This man must not have graduated high in his class at the Buttling Academy, if indeed he ever went.

Michel stepped into the very tiny moment of silence. "What my friend alludes to, is the consequence of being turned off without a reference when Lady Dumbarton learns that you sent Viscount Somerville away, and he went instead to Lady Palmer and offered *her* the opportunity to have *her* ball tonight become the most talked about event of the Season. Indeed, most likely of any Season for the next decade or so. So. Do we stay or do we go?"

I of course knew of not only the spirit of competitiveness between the two, but sometimes the outright enmity. I could have thought of that myself. In a moment or three. What a trio we make.

"I, ah, I will, uh, ask Lady Dumbarton."

"Excellent." I stepped up and inside the door, with my men closely behind me because we couldn't quite manage three abreast. The butler looked shocked. "Surely you would not be so rude as to require us to wait for Lady Dumbarton's arrival in the cold?"

Having retreated once, it became so very easy for him to retreat again. And thus are battles and wars won... with a single retreat. "Ah, no, of course, my... my lords."

As the butler scurried away, we decided without words to help shift Lady Dumbarton's decision from a possibility to closer to a foregone conclusion. We removed hats, gloves, greatcoats, cape, and dumped them into the arms of the footmen who had been sent to the door for reasons other than this particular courtesy. Since they clearly couldn't risk their own employment by in turn dropping everything on the floor, at least not without specific instructions from their employer, they hesitated and then turned away to hang our outerwear up and safely store hats and gloves.

We waited with every appearance of insouciance, ignoring the stares of the ton who had decided the entrance hall was potentially better entertainment than elsewhere in the house.

As we expected, Lady Dumbarton arrived rather quickly, attended by her husband, who was a non-entity completely under her thumb. She was attempting that same insouciance, with an added touch of “how dare you come in when your invitation was revoked?” arrogance.

I swept her a most courteous bow, quickly followed by Michel and Rory. “My lady, as I have received no withdrawal of your most kind invitation for this evening’s entertainment, surely I have reason to believe none was sent?”

“I...”

“Particularly since honoring that invitation would give you such cachet among the ton. The Three R’s all together, in your home, after all that has been said. All the rumors? All the falsehoods? And we chose *your* ball to make our first appearance. Your ball will be the talk of the ton for *Seasons* to come, I assure you.”

She hesitated, so I went in for the kill Michel had so cleverly thought of earlier. “Or... we could simply gather our things, bow most respectfully, and see what Lady Palmer’s ball this evening is like? And if I mention I was turned away here...”

Her “No!” was just the tiniest bit too sharp. She caught herself. She was indeed on the horns of a dilemma. By all rights, she should give me the cut direct, given *who* and *what* I was, and be supercilious in having those large footmen escort me to the door, while being graciously welcoming to the *other* participants in this drama. On the other hand, doing so would possibly, perhaps even probably, lead to her most hated rival having the coup of the decade. On the yet *other* hand, if she acquiesced in my staying, she could not be *too* welcoming, lest she be seen as an outsider, un-tonnish as it were, in light of the apparently unanimous opinions of me.

Greed quite naturally won out.

“You are quite right, Lord Somerville. Your invitation was not rescinded. *I* would not be so discourteous.” Having set herself up as a paragon of virtue, compared to the other host and hostesses who had been so crass, she regally nodded and then turned away. Actually, it was quite a fine solution. The nod was not *quite* welcoming, but enough so that I could legitimately enter. The

turning of her back was not *quite* a cut direct (given the nod), but was sufficient to establish that she was—really, truly—on the side of the ton, and not mine.

We followed her to the ballroom. But not so closely as to make it appear she was welcoming us and guiding us there.

It was worse than my imaginings, and my imaginings had run riot tonight. I thought I was prepared for what I might experience once I was among the ton again. I was not.

I insisted that Rory and Michel not accompany me as I walked about. They reluctantly agreed.

How had I been so stupid as to believe that some of them would be willing to talk to me? To listen to what I had to say? To listen to the truth about Bennington?

Conversations stopped as I approached. The men turned their backs; the women looked away. And as I moved on, the conversations resumed, louder than before, the laughter more brilliant, even more patently false than was customary.

The first time was embarrassing. The second deeply humiliating. The third was... incendiary. The fourth was... Mount Tambora... only on English soil, instead of the Dutch East Indies.

I turned away, obviously moving toward the stairs and an exit... and I heard Beckwith's satisfied laughter. I ignored it, and him, and all of them as the ton congratulated itself on having fulfilled its moral duty. It had shown its condemnation of the sodomite who willingly sucked the cocks of such fine, upstanding men as the Master of Strathairn and the *vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci*. After all, the disgusting Glenhaven heir has been known to be most persuasive, and well, nudge-nudge-wink-wink everyone knows how men are when a willing hole is available. He is fleeing in disgrace. He'll not dare show his face again.

I veered over to Rory and Michel, who had moved apart so that they were in an island of temporary emptiness. They kept their expressions calm. I paused only long enough to tell them I was not leaving, ask them to stay where they were. Or circulate, as they chose.

They did not argue.

God, how I loved these men.

I accelerated my walk, let my face show something they might interpret as distraught, and ostentatiously “stormed” out the front door, completely forgetting my hat, coat and gloves, so thoroughly had I been routed. More fuel.

Once he saw me gain entrance, Michael knew where to take the carriage. A few minutes' walk, given the number of other carriages that needed a place to wait for their owners' readiness to depart. That did not matter.

I opened the hidden compartment in my carriage, pulled the contents out, wrapped them in a cloth, and went back.

The butler was waiting for me. The stupid, stupid, *stupid* butler. Barring my way yet again, though without his looming guards. “Lord Somerville, I really don't think—”

“Yes.”

He goggled at my interruption.

“I agree. You don't think. Twice in one night. One wonders whether you ever think at all. Do you see this?” I lifted my hand as if displaying a wrapped treasure, recovered from some ancient Egyptian tomb. “I recalled I had a surprise in my carriage for Lady Dumbarton and her guests. I *think* that now that you have had a chance to think about the matter, *you* think it might not be wise to deprive Lady Dumbarton of her surprise. Is that what you think?”

He neither moved out of my way nor answered. Rory solved the problem.

“Is the wee mon in yer way, Somerville?”

The butler whirled around at the deep voice behind him.

“Aye.”

The butler was, indeed, a small man, though not precisely tiny. And he squeaked when Rory quickly stepped forward, grabbed him by both shoulders, bent at his knees, lifted, turned and carefully deposited the butler to the side. He then patted the butler's shoulders, arms, and chest, as if he might have suddenly gotten dusty from the move. The pats were, for the most part, gentle. Somewhat. “Dinnae move for a wee bit, aye?”

“Uh, aye, uh, yes, m'lord.”

Rory looked down at what I carried, *recognized* what I carried, looked up at me. “Well, fuck.”

I paused my fury long enough to wink, and murmur to just him as I passed, “If you ask me most nicely, later...”

Not long after that, I stopped at the top of the steps leading down to the ballroom floor. I was not, of course, master of all I surveyed, but I thought I might be, if only for a few minutes. Yes. There.

I walked confidently down, my movements followed by avid eyes that quickly looked away. It was, of course, quite necessary to at least look at me first, so that I could then be cut into tiny tonnish slivers by the looking and turning away.

There were no slivers tonight. Nor ever again, I realized. For there to be slivers there had to be caring, and I no longer cared. Should never have cared. Will never care again.

Some eyes that turned away gloated at my downfall from the pinnacles of power in the ton. Some seemed to beg forgiveness in an "I have no choice" way. Some, perhaps most, were simply members of the pack, howling when the leader howled.

I did not care.

Beckwith and the Bishop of Harwell, bloody bangers both, though they had most likely never used a banger-stick themselves, were the most blatantly theatrical of the turners and cutters. They blocked my way.

I merely knew *of* the Bishop. I knew Beckwith. I think he was surprised to realize he knew me well enough to recognize the rage that was only in my eyes just then. He gave way a little, stopped, molded his fat features into contempt that should have shriveled me where I stood, and turned away. The Bishop was more bland about the matter, but he turned away as well.

They made me go around them, to the accompaniment of a Beckwith snigger.

I did not care.

My reasonably straight passage through the dancers brought the dancing to a halt. After all, they couldn't effectively cut if they were twirling. That, in turn, silenced the musicians on their small stage. Not being members of the ton, they could not cut. Cutting does not quite work, anyway, when one is seated, with nowhere to turn.

I went up the three steps, crossed to the conductor. "You might wish to take a break."



His affronted “My lord!” trailed away as I partially unwrapped the cloth. He gulped, nodded, and with a glare shooed his musicians off the stage, quickly following them himself.

I performed an exercise in futility: I asked for their attention, loudly enough to be heard over the artificially bright babble among all those turned-away backs.

I performed an exercise in necessity: I unwrapped what I had so carefully been carrying, tossed the cloth well behind me, let the exquisite Manton dueling pistol in my left hand point to the floor, and with the one in my right I shot out the wick of a nearby candle.

All that money spent on wafer-shooting was money well-spent.

Not surprisingly, that got me both their attention and—eventually—their silence. In that moment when they stood frozen from shock, before the screams and shouts and swoons to demonstrate delicacy, before they turned toward me, perhaps on me, I dropped the spent pistol to the floor and put the second loaded one in my right hand.

A few of the men—Beckwith and the Bishop most assuredly not among those few, as they had rapidly retreated to the safety of being behind a group of matrons and their offspring—started toward the stage. They stopped when I raised the pistol, wagged it at them, and asked which of them wished to be the recipient of the bullet, and in what part of his body.

I was unsurprised when I received no response to my most generous offer. Except a halt to forward movement, combined with an attempt to make it look as though all each intended was to get closer to hear what I had to say.

I was unsurprised when the crowd, the mob-in-waiting, stayed quiet as I raised my voice so I could be heard throughout the room. I gave the ton a modestly spectacular raree-show outside of White's, but with a few exceptions, that was something they had only *heard* about. But here I was, already giving them the raree-show of the decade. Of the whole bloody nineteenth century. Of course they would listen. For a while.

“You have been gossiping about me, about my friends, making decisions about who and what I am, who and what they are, without ever bothering to ask about the truth. But that's what we in the ton do, and do so well. A tale is better than the truth any day, because a tale can be turned and twisted, while the truth? So very dull. It just *is*.

“So here is the truth: I am a friend of Edward’s.”

There were gasps and words and expressions that ranged from no surprise at all to complete shock, with most faces that I could clearly see, expressing disdain and contempt and thorough disgust.

“Ah, *quelle horreur je suis*. Except... I am not merely *like* you, I *am* you. Except for this one thing.

“If I were an Edmund Kean on this small stage, I would ask you, ‘Hath not a friend of Edward’s eyes?’ And give you all the rest of those words.

“And of all those words, it’s the affections and passions which offend you most. Affections and passions you merely *imagine*, but never see. Not unless you spy on us in a private moment, or we choose to explicitly tell you just what men who love men do together. We live *invisible* lives among you. We are affected by the same food, weapons, diseases, cures. We freeze in winter; enjoy the three days of an English spring, and sweat in our summers. All precisely as you do.

“But all of you who turned your backs to me tonight—and that ‘all’ includes the *other* friends of Edward’s here who fear you will turn on them if they do not act as you expect them to—all you see is that I love, might love, might just want to have sex with, another man. Perhaps out in the Dumbarton gardens on a mild night last spring? By the fountain? Only instead of it being Lady Feath—well, I really shouldn’t say—with her hands on the fountain’s edge, her skirts tossed up over her back, her bum bare in the moonlight while the man who isn’t her husband thrusts hard and fast inside her, it might be a man bent over, his pants around his ankles.”

I watched Lady Featherstone’s face go pale, and then flush red. Her somewhat older, controlling, easily angered husband did a bit of flushing himself as he looked at her. Payback is *such* a bitch. And I was enough of a bitch myself to repay the bitch whose tongue had spread the tales so assiduously, insisting the ton should be uniform in its contempt for me. Remington should have run the country’s spy services in the late war; they would have been far more effective.

“As I said, *just* like you, well, *most* of you, except for friends of Edward’s it’s cock and not cunt we crave.”

More gasps and mutterings, and a swoon or two, but no one left, no one surged forward to stop me. The Count and Countess of Dumbarton were older, and this crowd contained comparatively few young debutantes, but there *were*

some, and their parents were going to have such fun explaining to the delicate dears in the morning the meaning of the words I used.

“So the Beckwiths among you want me to hang by the neck until I am dead if one of you spies on me and finds me in bed with another man. And the Bishops of Harwell among you preach *your* God's hatred of us.

“But since this is England, a nation of law, and who I love or who chooses to love me back breaks no law, nor makes me guilty of anything more than a vast lack of good judgment should I choose the wrong man to love, you whisper and gossip, you rant and write, and with a wink and a nod and a handful coins here and there, you encourage the bangers.

“The bangers out there who hurt and maim with banger-sticks and fists and boots and knives. The bangers in here and in the rest of your houses, who hurt and maim with words that slice and scar, your voices raised in solo arias, or together in vicious choirs, and all your songs are of imagined sin. Bangers who hurt children, young or old, that you have discarded on the words of Beckwiths and bishops, because of who they are or who you *think* they are.

“*You* killed a young man just four days ago. The bangers with sticks beat him until he barely survived, but *you* bangers finished the job they started. Young Bennington was a kind man who was no friend of Edward's at all, you damned fools! He was a *married* man whose widow is left alone to raise the child he will never get to see, because you banged him, you bullied him, you beat him down with your cuts direct and indirect and all the other ways, you hammered him with the accusation that he molested his little nephew by changing his clothes after the boy fell into a pond and got soaking wet.

“You destroyed him with your accusation that he had joined me in servicing the Master of Strathairn and *M'sieur le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci* a year ago when we took a journey to Doncaster for the St Leger Stakes. As so very many of the men here tonight did. You rode in closed carriages; you slept two, three, four or more to a room so that you could have more funds for gambling. No one *knows* what you actually did behind all those closed doors, what kinds of depravities you engaged in well away from the scrutiny of family. Though we can imagine.

“But you didn't choose to imagine that. You chose to turn your vicious imaginings on an innocent man, an innocent father. You turned his parents from him, you left him with nothing at all, until the only way out he could see was to hang himself.

“And now, good people, for so are you all, all *good* people, let me remind you that as you have sown, so shall you reap.

“Have you heard and mocked that fanciful tale of the Friends of Edward Society? It is no fancy at all. It exists, and I am a founding member. And that Society will do what no one has done before. We will help friends of Edward's, of any age, wherever they may be in England, wherever and however we are able. We will *protect* them from you, or from the hounds of hell, which is simply saying the same thing.

“And if you oppose us, the Society will, as your Good Book says, give you an eye in return for each eye you take. Oppose us with words and argument and receive words in return. Bring one of us out into the light for humiliation and ridicule and hatred when we choose to remain in the dark, as we have the right to do, then we shall hold a mirror up to *your* natures and bring your darkest and most foul secrets into the open, threefold at the very least.

“But most important of all, if you bang us, we *will* bang back. As Shylock would have said, were he both Jew and a friend of Edward's, ‘The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will *better* the instruction.’

“And remember, if you will, the motto of our Society, which will be engraved upon our escutcheon...”

I lowered my voice, stripped it of every shred of what Rory called tonnish tones, and added the tones of the Dock where the Society had in fact been mockingly born, and then truly born here and now: “We're mad as 'ell, 'n' we're not fuckin' takin' it anymore.”

The room was silent. I had lost my temper as splendidly, if I said so myself, as Rory might have done had it been his decision to make this stand. I knew the silence could not last; knew that even here the bangers-at-heart could erupt into violence, and I was merely one among many.

Except... I was not.

Not just *one* among many.

That moment that precedes the breaking of silence, the beginning of movement where movement has been stilled, was almost upon the room when Michel reined it in. They stirred instead, and watched as Michel, more languid and lethal than I had ever seen him before, walked up the three steps to the orchestra stage, and then over to me, his cane deliberately tapping the floor and sounding oddly loud in the lack of sound that suddenly prevailed again.

He stood to my left, looped his right arm through mine, and said, quite loud enough for all the room to hear, indeed, had he wished he could have stood on the stage of Drury Lane, and whispered a word that would be heard from the closest man in the pit to the farthest man in the topmost tier, "I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw. And the wind is most southerly this night."

He looked at me and smiled a smile that said "*Je t'aime*," as he had said last night. He looked back at the crowd. "For those who do not know me, *permettez-moi de me présenter. Je suis Michel Louis Arsenault, vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci*. I am also a founding member of the Friends of Edward Society. And I, too, have a few words for you."

He paused, and then with a reasonable imitation of the sounds of the Dock, recited our motto: "*Je suis fou comme l'enfer, et je ne baise pas prendre plus*."

For all the congratulations the members of the ton bestowed on themselves about their sophistication, which included speaking French, the reality was that few spoke more than the latest phrases, and of those few who spoke more, even fewer were fluent. Michel's voice mocked them all as whispers of translation began. Though there should have been no need for translation.

"*Mesdames, messieurs, jeunes filles, jeunes gens*, to ensure you understand, let me repeat it in your own language. I, too, am fucking mad as fucking hell and am fucking unwilling to take it anymore."

The word "fucking" had never sounded more obscene, more offensive, than it did just then, in that calm, cultured voice. But for the fucking he was verbally engaged in, you might have thought him speaking in church.

And the play went on. Rory, it seemed, had lines as well. He disdained the steps and simply leaped onto the stage, tramped over to us, pushed his way between us so that our sides were touching, and though he was the shortest of we three, draped a brawny arm behind each of our backs, and hooked a large hand over my right shoulder and Michel's left.

Rory's loudness tended to be more the blast of a broadside from a seventy-four gun ship of the line. We managed not to wince as his voice boomed out between us. "Ruaidhri Fearghas MacLean, Master of Strathairn since m'brother, after drinkin' too much o' the finest whisky known to Scots or mortal men, killed himself and a perfectly fine horse trying to jump a wall with a big drop behind it. A very good friend of Edward's, as you might say. Ah. Me. Not m'brother."

He paused. "I'm not as... delicate... as my friends here. *Dinna bugger wi' me, ye bangers!*"

He looked at each of us, squeezed our shoulders. "I think they understand now."

He let us go, stepped to the edge of the stage and jumped down, the ones closest hastily backing away and clearing a space. He turned to look up at us, and at his most courtly, said, "Gentlemen."

He held up a hand to each of us. It could have been awkward, perhaps should have been, as we leaned forward, braced on his hand and jumped down ourselves. But relying on Rory, I realized, and was sure Michel realized it as well, was like relying on the ever-enduring sturdiness of a mountain to keep you steady.

He whirled in place, with an undoubtedly intentional speed that sent his kilt swirling high, and from several nearby gasps, some feminine, some masculine, the gaspers, and others more restrained, got a brief look at what a Highlander does not wear under his kilt. Michel and I would, of course, have the opportunity to examine what was not there, and what *was* there, far more closely in the not too distant future. Provided, of course, that we survived the departure.

We could have walked merely side by side, but we three thought the same, and with an elegance that might be associated with the movements of a pattern-dance, Rory moved to my left, and Michel to my right. Then arm in arm in arm, we began moving toward the exit. Although babbling was beginning, and would mount to perhaps a tidal wave's roar before we reached the door, the crowd gave way before us, creating a broad enough aisle that no one could possibly be soiled by our touch.

When we reached the top of the stairs and went beyond, I was startled to see Mama. I had forgotten her friendship with Lady Dumbarton, the possibility that she might be here. Had she heard? But that was answered when I realized the Earl of Glenhaven was also there. Most assuredly not my father. His voice was the temperature I imagined the Arctic might be, the kind of cold that *burned*.

"I should have killed that boy for corrupting you, for teaching you to conceal such corruption all these years. And these two disgusting freaks of nature have obviously debauched you even further. You are no longer my son."

He paused. Inhaled deeply. "If I am unsuccessful in breaking the entail, I will still not beggar the estate, as I could easily do. After all, there is still a

chance God will strike you down and your brother will inherit. But you will not receive a farthing's worth of anything that is not part of the entail. You are barred from all Glenhaven lands, and the servants will have orders to physically evict you should you make the attempt. With horsewhips. Now get out of my sight."

I expected something like this. I had not expected it would hurt quite so much. Yet by my side, my two men were Viking berserkers, ready to swing double-headed verbal battle axes against any foe, even my father, if I but unleashed them. That calmed me. My own inhalation, brief as it was, did more. So be it.

I gave the Earl my most arrogant eyebrow lift and the most arrogant tone in my armory. "Of course, my lord. But you are in our way. Will you let us pass, or shall we walk... right through you?"

He was already so flushed with anger, the additional amount of blood undoubtedly flowing to his face at that bit of provocation was not visible. I could not find it in my heart to wish on him the apoplexy that seemed almost imminent.

He stepped aside, pulling, no, almost yanking Mama with him. And as we walked he gave me, gave *us*, the cut direct with his back. Mama just stood beside him, watching, and though there were tears in her eyes, my heart hurt over her silence.

We were almost to the door, where the wide-eyed footmen responsible for cloaks and wraps and hats, and door openings and closings, stood gape-mouthed and wide-eyed, when she said, "Perry."

Ah, Christ. She was the *only* one who ever called me that, and not since I was little. I could not help but let go of their arms and turn around. They quietly turned as well. She was walking toward me.

"Helen!" My father's distraught bark—he *never* used Mama's first name in the presence of anyone. I used to imagine he called her "countess" or "my lady" even in private—had no effect on her.

Without looking back at him, she said, "James, Perry is *still* my son."

When she reached us, she stretched up as far as she could, which was not terribly far at all, and I leaned down so she could kiss my cheek. She settled back, took my hands in hers, whispered so only we three could hear. "I love you, my dear. Always and forever. And another day more."

I would not cry. I would *not* cry. At least, not until we were out of *his* sight and hearing.

She looked at Rory, then Michel. "I would give you boys a kiss as well, but that might tip the balance into actual apoplexy, instead of possible apoplexy." My men acquired matching stunned expressions.

Then back to me. "I cannot promise, my dear, that 'this, too, shall pass.' But I will pray for it, and as I can, work for it."

She paused, looked at me with that tiny twinkle that ordinarily boded trouble of some sort. "Will you do a favor for your dearest Mama, my dearest boy?"

"Of course. *Anything*, Mama."

"Get out of your father's sight before the apoplexy becomes real. That vein in his head is undoubtedly pulsing right now. Though I wonder how you are in his sight if his back is toward you. His back is still toward you, is it not?"

I could not help the short burst of laughter that preceded my agreement to all she said. I kissed both of her cheeks, actual kisses, but when we three would have turned again and left, she abruptly reached out and put her hand on my arm.

I looked at her. She lowered her voice, as if to ensure the Earl could not hear. Most unusually, she looked uncertain. "My dear, will you give me your word that you will do... what I am about to ask of you?"

I held back the sigh. People kept asking me to give my word, and when I gave it, it seems I inevitably suffered for it. Such as the word I had given to my two bastard shite-heads, and the sufferings I, and, well, to be fair, *they* as well, had suffered because of that giving. But still, this *was* Mama. How onerous could it be?

"Of course, Mama."

She paused again, pursed her lips, sighed a small sigh, and said, "Very well. Do you recall Mr. Brumley?" She laughed. "How silly. Of course you remember the man who gave you all that money. Well, he's dead now. But they still have his name on the letterhead, which I don't understand at all, because it seems wrong to me to let people believe there is a Brumley *and* a Bainbridge, when..."

"Mama." My dear Mama did sometime stray from her point.



“Oh. Yes. Well, you should be hearing from the firm soon. It probably won't be Bainbridge, though he is the most senior, but since he is old enough to have set sail with Noah, he most likely does not work very much anymore. Laurel-resting and all that, I suppose...”

“*Mama!*”

She twinkled at me. Her digression had been intentional, just to get a rise out of me. My dearest Mama played me, has always played me, with all the skill of Antonini on his Stradivarius.

“If you have not heard from the firm within... a week... then you will go there and ask them.”

“Mama,” I began, masking the slight bit of annoyance I felt I was quite right in feeling, “ask who about what?”

“Why, about your inheritance from Agatha, of course!” she said in one of her “what *else* could it possibly be?” tones. “And you will probably have to speak to that Wainwright, whom I am not quite sure I trust.”

Over time I found that gritting my teeth was far less painful than grinding them when upset. I un-gritted and managed a reasonably calm voice. “So there is something which I need to learn about my inheritance from Aunt Agatha, from a solicitor you don't quite trust, but I've just given my word to wait a week before walking in and strangling him?”

“Oh. You've *met* Mr. Wainwright?”

Grit. Un-grit. “Yes.”

“Well, then.”

Another hidden sigh. “Well, then, *what*, Mama?”

“Oh, just... ‘well, then.’ If you've already met Mr. Wainwright I'm sure you will be able to handle him just fine, should handling be required. And you *did* give me your word, so I of course won't remind you about that.”

Piqued. Repiqued. Capoted.

How I loved Mama. And when a boy loves his mother, what else can he say but, “Yes, Mama.”

Another cheek-pat, and a little smile, and she swirled away to gather up the Earl and venture into the vast den with all the hounds howling for my blood. And other body parts.

I gathered up my men, and we went in the other direction.

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***PEREGRINE***

*Friday, 20 September 1816*

*9:00 a.m.*

*Offices of Bainbridge & Brumley, Solicitors*

*London*

“You sent this to me.”

I held up the rather peremptory letter that brought me, or rather, brought *us*, to the offices of Bainbridge & Brumley this morning.

Your lordship,

It is most important that I speak with you about your inheritance from your late, great-aunt Agatha Mayhew.

Most respectfully,

Gerald Wainwright

So kind of Mr. Wainwright to explain *which* late great-aunt, as I had so very many of them. And so very fortunate for him that he had met the deadline imposed by Mama, thereby depriving me of the infinite pleasure of strangulation on Monday. Though, based on past experience with the lying shite seated behind his desk, he might provide me with such an opportunity today.

Perhaps he thought that, having demanded my presence, I would send a note round to make an appointment. Thus giving him time to prepare for my intrusion, to set a supplicant's stage for the scene he believed he would control.

He was so *very* wrong.

We arrived shortly before nine. Like last February, the porter confirmed Mr. Wainwright's presence in his lair. Unlike last February, Mr. Hamilton made no attempt at obfuscation. When the three of us walked in the door, all the clerks naturally looked up, and two—John and Jamie were still here—promptly dropped their eyes and immediately found something to do that did not involve looking at one grim-faced and thoroughly annoyed nobleman, brilliantly clothed in the finest tonnish armor, and two supportively annoyed noblemen, also brilliantly clad.

Mr. Hamilton rose from his chair with near-grace. "My lord." Was I the only one who heard the "we have been anticipating your arrival with great eagerness" that he did not say aloud?

Despite the cold that compelled greatcoats for Michel and me, Rory was again in full regalia, although he at least acknowledged the weather, as his cloak was fur-lined. When, prior to our departure, we expressed admittedly mild and teasing concern for the well-being of the naked bollocks beneath the kilt—we did, after all, have a certain... *proprietary*... interest in that well-being—he had scoffed at the brisk winds that would soon be swirling up his legs. He opened his mouth to embark on one of his interminable "It gets so cold in Scotland that—" stories, but a kiss from Michel, and my hand briefly squeezing those manly, cold-doesn't-bother-us bollocks, shut him up.

We would have been impressive in a meeting with anyone in the ton. We were even more so in the solicitor's outer office in front of people who did not regularly have contact with noblemen whose armor (clothing and demeanor) in circumstances like these was intended to shock and awe the enemy. If not into immediate submission, at least into a start down that road.

I nodded to Hamilton, bade him good morning.

"John. Jamie." Two heads snapped up, surprise that I remembered them evident in their expressions. "Would you be so kind as to find a safe place for our things?"

Our "things," of course, being greatcoats, gloves (two pair only, Scotsmen having no need for such effete things, unlike the Sassenachs), hats (two), a bonnet, and a heavy cloak. They jumped up to do so, motivated in part because I was courteous to them, and they were most likely unaccustomed to that, and in part because they undoubtedly remembered the meal that accompanied my last visit.

That taken care of, I tilted my head toward Mr. Wainwright's door. Hamilton responded with a tiny nod, and an even tinier smile, quickly erased, as he looked over at the papers on his desk, sat again, resumed work. Pointedly *not* looking at the door.

I was uncertain whether the door would provide a dramatic enough slam against the wall or something else if I just shoved it open, so I settled for one very firm blow of my fist—a blow firmly in the camp of the wake-the-dead variety—before opening it, marching in, and confronting the briefly gawking Wainwright. Who was given no chance to get out of his chair.

He toyed with the letter, cowering just a little, as we were doing a most effective job of looming over him on the opposite side of his desk.

I called out, "Mr. Hamilton!"

He appeared in the doorway as rapidly as if he had been expecting the summons. I rather suspected he had been.

"My lord?"

"Would you be so kind as to bring the two supplicants' chairs out there to join this one?"

His lips twitched, but all he said was, "Yes, my lord."

A few minutes later, the two very plain chairs were added to the one already there, in a row behind us.

"Anything else, my lord?"

"Nothing, thank you, Mr. Hamilton. And please, close the door behind you. I believe this should be a private conversation. Don't you agree, Wainwright?"

His "Yes," was somewhat terse, followed by a noticeable lag as we stared at him, before he added the proper "my lord."

Hamilton exited, closing the door.

I let the silence continue for a moment more. Then, "I think we can all agree, can we not, that we three are not supplicants?"

Wainwright's "Of course not, my lord! And, ah, won't you please be seated?" was a shade too hearty, but a reasonable effort under the circumstances to regain at least a modicum of control.

That was not going to happen.

We sat, Rory to my right, Michel to my left. As always.

"Well, Wainwright? Do you care to explain that rather... *unusual*... letter?"

I let him hear the anger. I had, after all, been lied to last February, and the liar was sitting across a desk from me.

The memory of Brumley's odd expression and voice when he mentioned the "circumstances" of Aunt Agatha's death, together with the revelations of the Four Dukes which were, after all, quite correct, merely added the proverbial fuel to the actual fire.

Mr. Wainwright's nervousness seemed excessive even for a solicitor who had lied to a client. It was almost as if he had not prepared some story about why he had lied, shortly after, or even before, sending that letter. Solicitors are quite good at both lying and explaining away their lies when they have the bad fortune to be caught. Whether his story would be an *acceptable* story was yet to be seen.

There were, of course, other possible causes for the nervousness. Perhaps he had been the one to disclose my finances to my father. Or perhaps it was nothing more surprising than the fact I was accompanied by Rory at his most intimidating, glowering best, and the languid elegance of Michel, who, it was well-known, could buy and sell everyone in the room multiple times over.

"Ah, well, Mrs. Mayhew's instructions were quite strict, my lord. She..."

"Instructions? About what?"

"Ah, well, your inheritance."

"You have instructions, from my late, great-aunt Agatha, about my inheritance, all these years later? Have you, perhaps, conducted a *séance* recently, and spoken to her spirit? Did she actually speak, or, what is that other thing spirits do? Ah, yes. Did she knock once for 'yes' and twice for 'no' on the table?"

He flushed all the way to his collar and possibly below. Good.

"Or is this about the inheritance you told me to my face did not exist, when last we spoke?"

"Ah, well, your lordship, the letter was not about that inheritance. I mean... your *first* inheritance. It was about the, ah, well, the *other* inheritance. The one I was compelled to deny."

Ah, well, indeed. I refrained from voicing the angry "What other fucking inheritance?" that was in my head, and confined myself to a reasonably quiet, thoroughly-annoyed-but-temporarily-not-going-for-the-kill, "Compelled? Indeed. Explain."

From his expression, I was confident my voice conveyed the idea his explanation had bloody well include the reason for the nearly twelve-year delay in letting me know about this "other inheritance." And the bloody February lie.

Mr. Wainwright looked at both Rory and Michel, and then back at me. "Ah, well, her directions were that when... or to be more precise, if... the

circumstances arose that would require providing this, ah, additional bequest to you, the explanation was to be given in the utmost privacy.”

This *wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie*, as I was certain Rory would later describe him, looked as though he desperately wished he could simply order my companions out of the room. I think Rory at his looming, even while seated, best was a large factor in Wainwright's nervousness just then. He could not seem to keep his eyes off him, and I was confident it was not because of any lust. There was something about Wainwright that made it clear he was no friend of Edward's. And quite probably no friend of anyone who *was*.

“Is ‘utmost privacy’ a condition precedent?”

Rory had been cat-toying with Mr. Wainwright, catching his eye and locking in a stare, but that jerked the solicitor's attention back to me.

“I beg your pardon?”

Ah, well, again. It would be so nice to be able to say, “Indeed, you should.” Instead, I explained. “Did Great-Aunt Agatha instruct you that if this discussion is not held in the ‘utmost privacy,’ by which, from your looks, I take you to mean just you and me in the room...”

He bobbed his head up and down.

“... that I would lose whatever this additional bequest might be?”

“Ah, well... no?”

“Is there, then, someone with whom you can consult to be quite sure the answer you just gave me is correct, and not questionable?”

Mr. Wainwright looked befuddled.

Michel sighed. “Sir, it is really a quite simple question. Somerville, here, has merely chosen to complicate it with convolutions. Does Somerville lose his new inheritance if you tell him about it in the presence of others of his choice, rather than alone?”

Michel even managed to end the string of ah-wells. “No, my lord.”

“Do we stay or go, Somerville?”

While there was a certain charm in the idea of forcing them out of the room now that I had made such a fuss about keeping them here... a decision I knew I would pay for later, hopefully in an awesomely delayed, but eventual seed-spewing fashion... I chose to let them stay. And told Mr. Wainwright so.

He opened his mouth, possibly with another “ah, well” waiting at the gate to be let loose, but choked that back. He looked down at the three envelopes on his desk that I had frankly paid no attention to. His correspondence was none of my concern.

But apparently this was not his correspondence, but rather mine. And now that my attention was directed there, I recognized the handwriting on two. Mama's.

“There were, my lord, originally supposed to be only two letters. Per Mrs. Mayhew's instructions.”

He indicated one addressed to me just by my first name in an unknown hand, which I assumed was Aunt Agatha's. The second, which bore the inscription, “Somerville. Read this first,” was Mama's. The third bore a longer inscription from Mama: “Somerville. Don't read my other letter first. Read this one first.”

I merely smiled at him. Great-Aunt Agatha was long dead, and even had she been living at the time this second letter from Mama was given to the solicitors, I was sure this second letter from her would have been added to the small stack regardless of any earlier instructions. Mama has always been a force of nature when she wished to be, flattening all in her path. As she obviously had in this instance.

I picked it up, accepted and made use of the thin blade Wainwright used as a letter opener.

7 October 1813

My dear Peregrine,

I tried, truly I did, to speak of this to you long ago. When it happened. Or rather, after it happened and I learned of it.

I did not know. Truly I did not know how your father's attitudes had hardened, had become so rigid and unforgiving.

If I had been home that day, the day your father did what he did to young Tom, and to the boy's family, I am not sure I could have stopped it, or even lessened it. I hope you will believe that I would have tried.

All I knew then was that you had lost a friend in a most violent way, and we had lost a family who had worked for us



for many years. I did try to speak of it to you, but you refused to allow me in the room. And when you finally came out you were so very remote, so very cold, that I did not try again. And my one attempt to speak to your father ended nearly before it began.

Know, then, that I did something which your father would have forbade me to do had he known, so it is just as well that he did not. The pin money provided to me quarterly because of our marriage settlements is quite generous, and it is, so far as I am able to tell, one set of funds, perhaps the only funds, that he does not keep meticulous track of.

I gave it all to young Tom's family, and provided all three with glowing letters of recommendation. Over your father's signature. I had not known prior to that time what a talent for forgery I possessed. The family, once young Tom had recovered enough to travel, left for our former colonies. I thought it best not to keep in touch beyond learning that much. I hope and pray that they all are well, or as well as can be given the circumstances of their departure.

This cannot erase what was done, and perhaps you investigated on your own, and already know of their departure. But if not, at least now you know.

If you are reading this it is because you have done what your great-aunt always believed was possible, perhaps even probable or inevitable, but which I have, I confess, never quite believed would ever occur. Mothers are, of course, generally all-knowing, as how else can they hope to cope with sons, but I confess that in this one instance, I do not know at all.

Are you quite furious, or merely annoyed-with-Mama upset, at these circumlocutions?

As I write this, I cannot know, of course, if you will ever read it. Indeed, there is a part of me that hopes you never will. Nor read my other letter. Or Agatha's, well, my dear, I am not quite sure what to call it as the envelope I saw was so very thick! A missive? A massive tome? Although there will come a time when, if you have not been given these letters to read, I will at least gather my courage to the sticking point—

Do you know, my dear, I have always thought that must be a most uncomfortable position, and wondered as well what point on one's person would be the point which was stuck.

So, I will gather my courage and tell you all. Well, not all of it, because if you are not reading this letter then you haven't done the thing which would require it to be given to you, and therefore you would not be entitled to know, well, what it is I can't tell you here. Or afterward, if you haven't done it. But at least I can make myself tell you about young Tom.

My dear, I do believe I am circumlocuting again. Is there such a word?

I pray frequently about all this, although as you well know, I am far too frivolous to pray daily. To be honest, there are some days I pray that you never get to read this letter. And other days, well, if I cannot quite pray that you do, ah, what it is you have to do to get these letters, I pray that if you do it, it will be because you believed it was the right and proper thing to do.

Until that day, and if that day comes I am quite certain I shall hear about it,

I love you.

Mama

p.s. 7 October 1815. The solicitors were quite upset with me, and my insistence that the wax seal be carefully opened, so I could add this. Do you know, dear boy, well, of course you don't because you haven't read this letter yet, but the events with dearest Rory and dearest Michel at the Alderson Ball this year made me believe for the first time that it might be possible. "It" being the thing that you have to do to, well, I've already explained, so I won't repeat myself.

Young Tom survived!

I inhaled deeply, and shut my eyes, scrunched them actually, to prevent unmanly tears from flowing. I opened my eyes, held out the letter, but when Mr. Wainwright would have reached for it, Michel leaned forward, and touched it with thumb and fingertip. "May we?"

I nodded. Then sat in silence as Michel read it, and handed it across to Rory so he could do the same.

I was grateful they asked no questions. Questions about young Tom I could have answered, but I would need privacy to do so. The rest was a mystery.

“I take it that my mother’s other letter predates this one?”

“Yes, my lord. They were provided to Mr. Brumley by Mrs. Mayhew at the same time.”

“Very well, let me see what is behind the second door of this trio of doors hiding secrets.”

13 April 1804

Dear Peregrine,

If you are reading this, it is because you have done what Agatha both hopes and expects you might one day do.

About the foundation, about the reason why you might, some day, one day, do this thing, I believe she is correct. I am uncertain whether I would have come to that understanding all on my own, though I like to think that “a mother always knows” when it comes to her children. But still, I might have been oblivious. And Agatha certainly had no reason to tell me her plans, and make me aware of all that might, or might not, yet come to pass. So, it is good, I think, that she has alerted me to the... possibility?

You are now just past your seventeenth birthday, and a most wonderful son. As much as I love your brothers and your sister, you are quite my favorite, and not merely because you are my first-born. You will, I am sure, be a fine and extraordinary man. Though I will not be at all surprised if, as the years pass and you grow into that fine manhood, I do not find you utterly irritating, or discover a necessity to reprimand you for doing something a fond Mama would never approve of.

And I am sure that at this moment in your reading, you find me at least annoying, if not utterly so, for not being plain-spoken, as you and I have always tended to be with each other. But what I cannot say is Agatha’s tale to tell.

So you may now put down this letter and pick up hers.

I love you, my dear, always and forever. And another day more.

Mama

I will *not* cry. It has been years since she hugged me and held me close and whispered those words. Not until just a few days ago, when she had done it again. Until that moment, I did not realize how I missed those words. And here she was, saying the words, a dozen years ago.

Rory read the letter first, and when he was done, squeezed my right hand gently. Head down, I waited for Michel to finish, and discovered he had the same reaction. We sat there for a moment, each of my hands being held by theirs, and then I inhaled, they let go, and I raised my head.

If Mr. Wainwright had been disconcerted by the sight of three noblemen holding hands, he had had enough time while our attention was elsewhere to hide it.

“Mr. Wainwright, I believe it is time to find out what is behind door number three.”

He held out the last letter. The envelope was more bulky. Vastly more.

I sighed with relief that Aunt Agatha's handwriting was not the quavering, nearly illegible scrawl of an old woman, but crisp, clean, precise.

11 April 1804

My dear Peregrine,

If you are reading this, you have already read a letter from your mother, a most marvelous woman, as you hopefully still know and appreciate. You certainly did when last I saw you.

There are only two circumstances which would permit my solicitor, or a member of his firm, as Mr. Brumley is getting rather old, to give this letter to you. The most obvious, of course, is that I am dead. It is not that I had any specific premonition of death that set this all in motion, but rather a desire to see things done ‘right and proper,’ as the saying goes. The second is that you have one day done something which I hope you will do. You most assuredly have not done so as of this writing, or I would have known.

That circumstance is that you have, in some manner, let it be known that you are a friend of Edward's. Let it be known, not merely to those with whom you are most intimate. And no, my boy, for so I have always felt you in some way to be, I do not mean the man, or men, you are fucking. Although my dearest wish is that what you do with him, or them, is something more than merely that.

Close your mouth, dear boy. An old woman is allowed to say whatever she pleases in her private correspondence, and if it pleases me to say "fuck" then "fuck" I shall obviously say.

As I have just said.

And prick and cock and cunt if the circumstances arise.

Though I am obviously not there to observe, I am sure your character has not changed so very much, in however many intervening years there may have been since the day this letter is written, that you have lost that most delightful gape of a fish about to be hooked when you are not merely surprised, but utterly shocked.

The way you were the day after your fifteenth birthday. The day you were aware of our meeting.

I looked much the same then as I had the only time I had seen you before that. Your christening. Your father, God rot his soul, did not invite me. There has never been any love lost between us, as there was never any love which could ever have been lost. But I arrived anyway. He could hardly make a scene in the church, so concerned had he become by then with public propriety.

Imagine me, if you will, some fifteen years younger than when you met me. Horse-faced, of course, with far fewer lines and wrinkles, a throw-back to some distant progenitor without an ounce of beauty or grace to pass down the line. Taller than your father. I had by then been a widow for quite some years, and for the most part I still wore black. Those high-necked, severe gowns were, of course, of the finest black silk, which I could easily afford, as my dear Jonathan, though he was far from dear when first we wed, left me well-to-pass. Imagine,

too, a black turban, with a dyed-black feather and a vulgar diamond brooch in the front, sitting atop grey hair carefully braided and coiled. Had I arrived in my customary garb, jet jewelry clinking, he and the other guests might well have believed I was a wicked fairy, malevolence incarnate, come to curse the precious heir.

Shall I admit to you how shameful I was? I believe I must or I would not have started down this particular path of words. My gown was, instead, of gold, a deep, burnished, patterned gold cut to properly display a most formidable bosom, even at my age. An emerald, diamond and gold necklace designed to draw attention to that display, the green of the gems carefully selected by Jonathan to match the lush hues of summer he said he saw in my eyes. A fringed shawl of patterned silk. Emerald and diamond combs to hold my hair in place.

I was a demure peahen turned gaudy peacock, and my brightness was so very, very out of place for the solemnity of that day. Or so your father said when he maneuvered a moment of private rant for me. I somehow do not think it will be surprising to you to learn that though I was family, though I was as well-, or rather, better-dressed than any woman attending other than your mother (despite my peacockishness), I was still perceived by your father to be the raven at the feast, cawing dire warnings, a harbinger of doom. Though I cawed nothing.

Later, when all the christening gifts had been opened, and approved, or at least, not visibly rejected, your father looked at me, his silent stare making everyone else turn and look, his expression clearly saying, "Well, old woman? Are you too clutch-fisted to give a gift to your great-nephew on his christening day? Or are you simply too poor, despite your ostentatious display of jewels that are undoubtedly paste?"

I did not answer him with words, but nodded to my dearest Julia, who removed the envelope we had prepared from her reticule, and passed it to your mother. She opened it quickly and read it aloud, as she had the cards and notes that had accompanied other gifts. "On behalf of my most dear Jonathan,

your great uncle, who would have rejoiced, as I do, at your birth, a token of our esteem will be presented to you on your eighteenth birthday. Use it wisely and well, my dear, but most of all, have fun with it.”

If I am still living, I will give you your gift personally. If not, then the solicitors will provide it to you as an inheritance. Reluctantly. They do not approve of it at all. I hope your mother has managed to preserve my note for you. Or did your father ensure you knew nothing, so that when my solicitor appeared, you fish-gaped at him?

Are you beyond irritated, dear boy, with my maanderings? You have, your Mama has confided in me, a remarkable facility for restraint, even in the face of most undue provocation. I am an excellent reader between a wide variety of lines, so I am fairly certain that most of the provocation in your now seventeen years has been from your father. And that will likely continue to be so. Even, I quite fear, to an increase in those provocations when he learns the terms of our gift, or your inheritance, as the case may be.

The digressions are now at an end. I shall be most business-like, perhaps, for the remainder.

Your great-uncle Jonathan was far more well-to-pass than anyone knew when I married him. He had what he referred to as a “modest Midas touch” with business and investments, though I would have called it “mostly.” By the time I lost him, he could have given several nabobs a run for their money. To the initial dismay of Bainbridge & Brumley, a mere woman such as I was given complete control of his fortune, every single jot and tittle of his assets. Fortunately, they managed to refrain from making that dismay directly known, as it would have cost them one of their wealthiest clients. Actually, I dare say, the wealthiest of their clients.

They fought me bitterly over my instructions. Or as bitter a fight as they could wage, as they were in obvious fear of losing a substantial part of their livelihood if I became too much angered, and of course, everyone, or rather, every man, knows how readily women become angry or hysterical or both. But in

the end they capitulated. I find men of their ilk usually do, when faced with sufficient force. Money, as I am sure you already know, or if not, you will now speedily learn, is generally sufficient force to accomplish virtually anything one wishes to achieve.

I set aside a quarter of a million pounds for you, my dear. With orders to invest it prudently in the Funds.

I looked up from the letter. Found myself fish-gaping rather than being able to speak.

“Peregrine?” Rory’s voice was soft and concerned.

I gave a quick glance to each of them, reassurance that I had not fallen off the edge into fathoms-deep water. Or into madness.

A quarter of a million in the Funds. At least a dozen years, perhaps more? Interest being folded back in to increase the principal? Mr. Wainwright was not looking at me. I coughed to get his attention.

“How much now?”

“Four—” he gulped, continued “—a little more than four hundred thousand pounds.”

When I want to be sure I understand something, I have always found it best to repeat what I have been told, just to be sure. I needed to be quite sure at that moment. Papal infallibility sure, were I Catholic. “I’ve just inherited four hundred thousand pounds? Or rather, a little more? How much is a little more?”

Mr. Wainwright sounded pained, rather than rejoicing in a client’s good fortune, as he said, “Four hundred thousand, nine hundred nineteen pounds, two shillings, thruppence. As of yesterday.”

I think, perhaps, that even Midas Michel was a little stunned. Rory just laughed and slapped my back, nearly knocking me out of my chair. “Well done, lad. And d’ye have another Aunt Aggie who might want to adopt a braw Scots lad into the family?”

“A *raw* Scots lad, you say? I dinna think so.”

It felt good to have them happy for me. *Genuinely* happy, without expectation of benefit. Other than Mama, that had never been so. But there was more to the letter. I resumed reading.



If the Funds have held steady, and England has not collapsed entirely under the burden of this endless war, you should have at least four hundred thousand if you dither about and delay until you are close to your thirtieth birthday.

There is a reason for this gift. I have a request of you.

I ask, but do not demand, that you use a significant part of this sum, and I leave it to your good judgment to determine what that portion is, to assist and protect friends of Edward's. But not just the male friends. The friends of, well, Edwina's, too, I might say, though there was no such person. There are women out there, dear boy, girls as well, who are as lost, who are as much in pain because of who they are, as any man. More so, actually. Men, at least, have some choice, some possibility of choice. Women and girls have little to none, except to do as they are told. Or go on the streets and still do as they are told by men, except in far worse circumstances.

And no, my dear, I am not an escaped Bedlamite, desperately in need of restraint, to prevent me from tossing my wealth into the air and letting people grab what they might. Or to inter me there, in order to prevent me from using my money for such an outrageously wild project that could only have been conceived by a deranged mind.

Ah.

I realize there are two parts to this request. The second is that what I am now about to relate will not be publicly disclosed, and most especially not to your father, or any relatives of his or mine that might still survive, other than your delightful self. (That was a true compliment, my boy, not a device to encourage your cooperation.)

I am, you see, an intimate friend of Edwina's. We grew up as girls together, you might say. And your great-uncle Jonathan, whom you never met, was an intimate friend of Edward's. Not that we knew that about each other before our marriage and the, in retrospect, amusingly awkward disaster that was our wedding night.

Women, as you may or may not know, have it so much easier than men when it comes to sex. No matter our disinterest,

as long as it is not painful, we can simply lie there and endure, whilst thinking of something else. My mother, in her entirely unintelligible effort to explain to her horse-faced, nearly spinster daughter, what her husband was going to do the next night, ended with that suggestion. As the Glenhavens have always been most patriotic, I decided I would follow her advice and think of England.

That patriotism turned out to be unnecessary, as, well, Jonathan was entirely unable to perform. He honestly believed that he could do so, particularly because he was marrying me under false pretenses, oh, not any pretense of love, he was far too honorable for that, but because he felt he should give the girl he was marrying at least a proper wedding night.

There were protestations all round. So sorry. Don't understand. Not your fault, entirely mine. Of course I understand. Let's get some rest. And he went back to his own bedroom.

We might well have gone on for some interminable, awkward, difficult time before learning the truth about each other, if we ever did. But fortunately for the ultimate health of our relationship and our marriage, your Uncle Jonathan was a randy arse fucker and demonstrably a quite talented cocksucker as well.

You are blushing again, dear boy, are you not? That is one of the bad things about getting old and dying. I won't be around to enjoy things like the sight of you reading this letter and learning all that you are learning.

I could not sleep, and as I had been given a tour of my new home thorough enough to remember the way to the kitchen, even in the dark, where I hoped I might find some milk to warm, a most excellent aid in falling asleep you might wish to remember when you are my age, though wine is, I have always thought, of equal value. But I am rambling.

I went downstairs, completed my milk mission, and on the way past your uncle's bedroom door I heard sounds of great distress, perhaps even pain, from within. Having taken the sickness and health part of our marriage vows to heart, I

naturally opened the door. As I did, the moans of anguish became quite verbal, though hushed.

My husband's Italian valet was bent over the bed, naked, with dear Jonathan standing behind him, his cock standing quite tall (unlike earlier), as he fucked Reynaldo's arse, to the accompaniment of various words of encouragement. I am sure you can imagine what they were. Perhaps from having heard or even uttered them yourself?

I am sure most other women would have done something extremely crude, such as screaming or fainting, upon seeing a man getting so thoroughly buggered. But I did neither. I had always been interested in learning, and here was an education I most certainly had never expected. To bring this tale to a more rapid close, when your uncle had spent himself, he pulled out, spun Reynaldo around, dropped to his knees and began sucking his valet's cock.

And thus I learned of your uncle's randy, arse-fucking, cocksucking ways. Poor Reynaldo undoubtedly had to wait much, much longer that night, if at all, to get his own spend, since the moment he raised his head from watching what was obviously being so well-done to him, he saw me, and, not to put too fine a point on it, squealed.

Part of my education that night was to also learn that in certain circumstances a man of Italianate coloring may become quite astonishingly white for a moment.

It was, again looking backward, quite chaotically amusing at that point, but eventually we all found ourselves dressed, if not with the fullness of daytime requirements, but far more than my nightgown and the nightshirts the men had so obviously no desire to wear, and seated in Jonathan's library. We each had a glass of brandy. The men had tried to fob me off with some foul sherry as being more appropriate for a woman, but I had always wondered what brandy was like and decided to further my education in that realm as well.

Brandy is such an acquired taste, my dear, and I definitely did not acquire it that night. Though I did drink all of my portion.

Seated side by side, they were so very much in love, and so very nervous as well. I could have destroyed them both, seen their reputations, even livelihoods, shattered for that love, by just speaking out.

But I would never have done that, and as your uncle survived for many, many years thereafter, I clearly never did.

They explained to me that they were friends of Edward's, and even provided me with the tale of the men who helped the king escape, and were rewarded on his restoration to the throne. When I asked what the phrase was for women who preferred women, they both looked at me blankly, as though they could not understand the question. And then Jonathan replied that it was the same, his expression clearly saying, as well, "How could it be otherwise?"

### MEN!

Yes, my dear boy, I know you are one of that sex, and I love you despite that inherent flaw in you.

I decided there and then, after only a brief consideration, that I was a friend of Edwina's. And so I announced it that night. After a brief discussion of the fact there was no such person as "Edwina," and thus no rational origin for the phrase, and even, perhaps, a muttered "women!" from one of them, they agreed the phrase was appropriate. Or rather, they would no longer argue with me about it. Particularly as neither phrase was likely to come up in the course of general conversation over dinner, or on a morning call. Though I rather suspected the original phrase might come up, in a variety of ways, not all of them very pleasant, when men stayed behind after dinner for port and their uniformly foul cigars.

We settled into an easy relationship, with Jonathan and me being perceived as a normal couple, married for convenience and not out of love. Eventually, as some years passed without an heir being born, I am sure Jonathan's friends commiserated with him for having a barren wife, as it was necessarily the woman's fault for there being no children.

Three years later I met Julia, who became my companion, and my dearest love.

And then there were four.

We had a good life, the wealthy, childless couple and their loyal servants. But we saw some things over the years that you are unlikely to have seen. Just as I would have been unlikely to see, had I not married “out of my class” when my father got rid of the burden of a spinster in exchange for a healthy infusion of money into his coffers.

You live at the heights of society, up on a plateau where the grass is always green and the skies are blue in an eternal spring. I am clearly not speaking of England itself, since we experience such weather only a day or two out of the year. As you mature, I doubt very much you will make the trek down to the base where life is lived in the plateau's shadow. Nor further down into the darkness and danger of the mines.

You may think you know what's down there, as you rush by the slums and poverty in London, or congratulate yourself on your bravery in venturing into Seven Dials, or when you make use of the Dock. Yes, yes, Jonathan and Reynaldo even explained the Dock to me, but I have never quite understood the cock-based thinking, and I use that phrase with a great deal of mockery, which drives men there.

We heard of and saw such foul things happening to friends of Edward's just because of who they were, but we could do so little. Something here, something there, but nothing on a large scale, because in all honesty, stepping out into public to do that would have destroyed our own lives. After Jonathan died, and Reynaldo not long after, there was just Julia and me.

I never gave a damn what the ton thought of me. I was a widow and far more wealthy than anyone would ever have believed. Why did I not do what I am asking you to do?

Two reasons.

First and foremost, Julia. I could not, would not, risk hurting her, even though I know she would have supported my decision to speak out.

Second, Bedlam. We women are, as all men know, particularly men who claim special knowledge of the workings

of the mind, frail creatures, easily swayed, inherently and eternally on the verge of hysteria that might tip into madness. Had I acted, your father would have acted, as well. To protect me, of course, from myself. For the good of the family. To ensure that the family's money stayed where it belonged, within the family, though I had been declared out of it long years earlier. After the men who wear the wigs of barristers and judges had given control of me to him, I doubt he would have sent me to Bedlam. Too public. Too embarrassing, considering the tours where I might be seen by friends of his. So it would have been private. He could well afford that privacy with control over my money.

And Julia would have been lost to me. And lost without me, as your father would never have made any provision for a mere companion.

My life has been cabined, cribbed and confined by being a woman. So it is only a man who can lead the way. I hope you are that man. That you are reading this means you might be. But the choice is yours to make as you wish.

If you choose to help, then you must learn quickly that you cannot help every friend of Edward's or Edwina's who might need you. You cannot possibly save them all. So do not exhaust yourself, or my money, well, no, my dear, actually your money now, trying to do too much, too quickly.

Now, as you see, there are only a few more lines to read on this sheet, and the rest is blank. Yet you can tell there are more pages. I ask that you not look at them just yet.

The money is yours, regardless of your choice. So, will you keep the money for yourself, or give me your word that you will do what I ask? But you must decide now.

I shut my eyes briefly, to crush back the tears. I will do as you ask, Aunt Agatha. I swear I will. When I opened my eyes and read on, I burst out laughing.

Aloud, dear boy, aloud. How will whichever of my idiot solicitors—though I suspect it will be Wainwright if Wilfrid has died—know your decision, if you hide it inside that thick skull of yours?

“I swear I will do as Aunt Agatha asked.”

It was Michel who asked the obvious question about what in the hell I was talking about. I explained, with a gesture of the hand holding the remaining sheaf of papers, that I had been asked to perform a task for Aunt Agatha, and she had asked for my word that I would do it.

Rory chuckled and bumped his shoulder against mine. “Did she not provide a Bible on which you could take this solemn oath? It seems rather paltry when that kind of money is at stake.”

Michel would never do anything so blatant as bumping my shoulder with his. Instead, he subtly pressed his thigh against mine. “Probably because had she provided it, the moment this rake’s palm touched it, it would have gone up in flames.”

I ignored the raillery, when under other circumstances, I might have responded in kind. I was looking at Wainwright as I gave my word, as I assumed he was the intended recipient of my decision, but naturally looked away when my friends jested. The solicitor had been calm-faced on hearing me, but when he believed my attention was wholly withdrawn from him, he looked, not merely pained, but gut-punched. He rallied, though, and resumed the bland look used by all solicitors, barristers, King’s counsel, et cetera, to convey to the mere client that as representatives of the majesty of the law, their only desire is to provide assistance, guidance and good counsel, with, of course, lining their pockets well, as the price of doing so, being the farthest thing from their thoughts. Wainwright then made what ultimately turned out to be a very foolish decision. Even if, in the midst of the joking, I had not looked down and peeked at what came next.

He gave a little “ahem!” type of cough that self-important men use to draw attention to themselves. He held out his hand. “Very well, your lordship. A wise decision, I am sure. If you will pass back the remainder of the document, we can proceed with arranging access to your funds.”

“Are you *quite* sure I am to give you the rest of this document? Unread?”

“Ah, well, I am, of course, obligated to strictly follow my client’s instructions. Even after death.”

“Written instructions?”

“But, of course, my lord. How else could both sides of any transaction be certain of the terms if they were not reduced to writing?”

“And might I see those instructions?”

He sat back in his chair, steepled his fingers. Looked much more assured. “I deeply regret that I must decline, your lordship. I have no instructions which allow you to view my instructions.”

The asshole must have really believed all the gossip about me. The gossip which preceded my coming out, literally on a stage, to announce my proclivities and plans. The gossip which painted me as a rake who cared only for pleasure, of the type that if I kept on in that way, would surely bring ruin to my house when I inherited. And the probable gossip since the Alderson Ball, about the man who, for all his height and weight and muscles, was merely a needy nedly boy who sucked cock on command. A man such as that would certainly do as he was told. Especially when told by someone so much more authoritative, with so much more knowledge of how the world truly worked. Say, perhaps, a solicitor. A solicitor who was suddenly not nervous at all.

I could feel my two men bristling beside me, ready to leap into whatever fray was about to erupt. But they trusted me, and waited for a signal that they should go for the jugular.

I raised the packet of papers as if I were about to obey. Foolish Wainwright leaned forward across his desk, so very much too eagerly, to take it out of my hands.

“But that isn’t what Aunt Agatha said.” I gave him my very best almost-whine. The one I had raised to a near art when Michel was sucking my cock and I desperately wanted to seed.

Rory and Michel relaxed beside me, having no objection to watching me toy with my prey.

I both leaned slightly forward, and edged slightly forward in my chair, started to hold out the papers to him, and then, pulled back. He did not... *quite*... try to reach across and snatch them from me. I gave him my most ingratiating smile, and read on. Aloud.

Wainwright, I am sure it will be Wainwright if it is anyone, has just asked you to hand him the rest of my letter, without you looking at it, has he not?

The little prick.

Literally so, I understand, based on the lamentations of his wife. I learned early in my marriage that when wives are alone,



discussions of flower-arranging, the fête at the church, the health of one's children, the incompetence of the servants, and the like occupy mere moments of discussion. The meat of the matter, if I may be so bold, is cock comparison. Not merely length and girth, but cock capability as well. Wainwright did not fare very well in those discussions.

If he, or whoever it might be, did not make that request, then extend to the gentleman my apologies. If the request was made, then ask him for an accounting of the rest of your inheritance.

I paused at that. It was my turn to look gut-punched. Or perhaps just gob-smacked. Again. Four hundred thousand pounds accompanied by a request to use it for the best of good works, and there was more?

Wainwright had gone white, then flushed in humiliation at dear Aunt Agatha's prickly comments, before settling on a pained, fish-belly white. But before I made that demand for an accounting, there was a bit more on this page before her signature. I decided to read it to myself.

I hope you will forgive an old woman for testing you twice. Had you not decided to live your life openly, finally following the dictate about to thine own self being true, before your thirtieth birthday, you would not be reading this at all, and the entirety of the remainder of Jonathan's fortune and mine would have been used for other charitable works, with Wilfrid's firm in charge. At a respectable fee, of course. If you agreed to my request, then the rest of my assets are now yours. Which will be a disappointment to the firm of somewhat significant proportions I rather suspect, as those other assets would have been under the firm's control for those charitable purposes had you chosen to just take the first part—the money in the Funds.

If the period between the date of this letter and your reading has been somewhat lengthy, the opportunities for discreet, or less than discreet but still well concealed, speculation have been rife. As Brutus might have said had the subject come up about solicitors in control of one's funds, "For solicitors are speculative men—so are they all, all speculative men." Punish the speculators if you find any, my boy. Thoroughly.

There was a pause just then, which of course you cannot see. I was wondering how best to bring this to an end.

Simple is best, I think.

Oddly enough, I am supremely confident that when the time comes you will make all the right choices. That is to say, that you will agree with me, thereby making your choices the right ones. So I will close with only this additional word of advice: Enjoy the money, besides doing good with it. Use it to bring enjoyment to the man or men in your life. Yes, dear boy, men. If Letitia, Agnes and Hermione could be together for more than thirty years, though the world thought them merely poor spinsters living together just to survive, it is certainly possible for you to have a pair of men in your life as well. If you have the stamina for it! And you are now, I am sure, blushing yet again.

I am not a very religious person, but I heard this once in church, and looked it up to be sure I could say it correctly to you:

The Lord bless thee, and keep thee. The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.

Your most loving,

Aunt Agatha

Rakes do not weep. It is of all things unmanly. So of course I did, proving the delicacy of my molly boy nature to the disapproving Wainwright. Whose firm had just lost undoubtedly handsome annual fees from managing all this, whatever the totality of "this" might be. Even, perhaps, inordinately handsome fees.

Rory said nothing, but put his arm around my shoulders, and shoved a handkerchief in my hand, with a soft-heartedly stern admonition to use it. Michel plucked the papers from my other hand, and as I regained control, I heard the flick-flick-flick of the sheets sliding one beneath the other as he read them.

I leaned forward, picked up the parts of the letter that had fallen from my lap when I began to cry, straightened, and handed them to Rory. Wainwright

opened his mouth to speak, but my hand up stopped him. The room was silent except for the shuffle of papers as Rory read his share, exchanged with Michel, and they read them through. Rory handed me the pages I had not yet seen and I finished them, after sternly warning myself to show no visible reaction. I barely managed not to gasp at the meticulous listing of those “other assets” and their valuation as of the date she prepared it.

Land. Buildings in various cities. A sugar plantation in the Indies. Farming land in England and Ireland. A mine. A trading company with a fleet of five ships, four named for famous explorers, and the fifth, well, it was the bloody *The Angry Agatha*. Warehouses in London. A small shop that dealt in high-end antiques. Part-ownership in the business of what was still one of London's most successful modistes. And on. And on. The last line on the last page provided the total. £385,930.11s.7d.

Meticulous, indeed, my Aunt Agatha. Right down to the shillings and pence. I shall have to learn to emulate her. And if those assets had not been mismanaged, they were worth even more now.

Dear Lord, I had near a million pounds, perhaps more, at my beck and call. I knew nothing of managing that kind of wealth. But I had a lover who probably did, though I had no idea of his worth. Or rather, of his *financial* worth.

I looked at Michel and lifted an eyebrow. Eyebrow-speak is a much more subtle language than arse-wipish. Though Rory and I had not yet begun the process of educating Michel to speak the latter language fluently, we knew it was a process he would quite enjoy.

My eyebrow asked, “Help, please?”

Michel's eyebrow replied, “But of course, *mon petit* cabbage, though there will be a price.”

I smiled back. Undoubtedly my mouth or arse... or... just perhaps, one, even both, of his. In sequence? I would enjoy the negotiations; enjoy paying that price even more.

“We will need to examine the Mayhew ledgers.”

Wainwright looked at me, as my casual wave, with perhaps a bit of spiteful molly boyish limp wrist in it, directed his attention back to Michel. Whose wrists, and tone, were not limp at all. Wainwright inhaled carefully. Nodded. “If you care to come round a week from to—”

“No. Today.” Michel looked at Rory. “Strathairn, if you would not mind, would you be so kind as to ask Mr. Hamilton to join us?”

As Rory crossed in front of us and went out the door, Michel asked, “Mr. Hamilton is your chief clerk, is he not?”

“Now see here—” Wainwright started to rise from his chair.

Michel's, “Sit, sir!” stopped him.

A “sit!” from Michel in that tone of voice would, I believe, have a horde of ravening rabid English mastiffs promptly back on their haunches, their cavernous mouths wide open, great tongues flopping out while drool pooled on the ground, eagerly awaiting their next instruction.

It certainly had that effect on Wainwright.

The door opened, and Mr. Hamilton stepped in somewhat quickly. He had had time to acquire a bit of his own nervousness, perhaps over his failure to stop our entry into the sanctum, although perhaps his quick move was because he was afraid that the glowering broad Scot behind him might just shove him through, possibly without even having opened the door first. He was still rather thin, as if he rarely had enough to eat.

“Mr. Hamilton, it is good to see you again,” I said.

He straightened just a little from a slump that had the appearance of being demanded of him to show he recognized his place in the scheme of things. “I, ah, well, thank you, my lord.”

“Mr. Hamilton, pray let me introduce my friends. The gentleman to my left is *M. le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci*. The gentleman behind you is the Master of Strathairn. I have just inherited the entirety of the Jonathan and Agatha Mayhew estate. Have I not, Mr. Wainwright?”

Thus “appealed” to, Wainwright had no choice but to agree. I looked to Michel to continue.

“Mr. Hamilton, I am, for the moment, speaking for Lord Somerville. Not that he is mute, you understand, just that he lacks understanding.”

I let my eyes do my glaring for me. Mr. Hamilton chose to occupy his eyes by letting them dart about the room, displaying an even more generous portion of lack of understanding.

“Are you familiar with the Mayhew Estate, Mr. Hamilton?”

His eyes darted toward Mr. Wainwright, then resolutely back again toward Michel. He licked his lips. "Ah... somewhat, my lord."

"You are this man's chief clerk and you are only *somewhat* familiar with an estate valued at nearly a million pounds?"

"A... a... *million* pounds?"

"Quite so. And as this has clearly taken you unaware, do you not keep the accounts for this estate?"

"Uh, no, my lord."

"Some other clerk has this responsibility?"

"Uh, no, my lord." Hamilton's eyes were resolutely on Michel. A muscle in his cheek twitched erratically.

"Then who does?"

"M-m-m-Mr. Wainwright, my lord."

"Indeed."

I once read a book, shocking though the thought may be to the uneducated masses, that mentioned the Ice Age. I was under the impression that it took a massive amount of time for all that ice to move anywhere. The Ice Age in this room was immediate, occurring with a rapidity somewhat on the order of the speed with which a harlot displays her undying lust and devotion once her fingers are curled around coin.

Hamilton's shaking was, I was sure, due to a combination of nerves and the severe cold.

"And where might the ledgers be kept?"

Poor Hamilton's trembling increased. He worried his lower lip with his somewhat rabbit teeth. "I, ah, I really couldn't—"

"Mr. Hamilton, I think not only that you could, but you *should* say. After all, in this matter, you ultimately work for Lord Somerville here, do you not? And Somerville is a most generous employer, are you not?"

I took my cue and as a good ventriloquist's dummy should do, nodded my head.

Hamilton obviously chose the Scylla of Michel over the Charybdis of Wainwright. He pointed to a door behind and slightly to Mr. Wainwright's right, with a padlock on it.

“The key, Mr. Wainwright.” Michel’s voice was inexorable.

Wainwright unfortunately tried to make Michel more exorable. “I’m afraid I don’t—”

When Michel is in that mode, that was a big mistake. Huge.

“You *should* be afraid, Mr. Wainwright.” The temperature dropped yet again. If this temperature were outdoors we could be having a Frost Fair and ice skating on the Thames. “Afraid of what the three of us could do, recent events notwithstanding, to your reputation, your income, perhaps even your person, should you prove any more recalcitrant than you have already been.”

Wainwright surrendered to the *force majeure* that was Michel. He took a small key ring out of his waistcoat, used the first key to unlock the drawer to his right, and a second key to unlock a small box he pulled out. Inside this was yet a third key which he handed to Michel. Who in turn held it out for Hamilton.

“Mr. Hamilton, if you would be so kind? We shall need the ledgers for the Mayhew Estate. Anything else behind that door is, of course, of the utmost privacy, and should not be examined.”

Taking the key from Michel, Hamilton diffidently went around the desk to the door, skirting Wainwright carefully, as if afraid of being attacked and severely mauled.

As he put the key in the lock, Michel asked me, “Do you know when your aunt died?”

“I don’t recall the precise date, but in November of 1804.”

“Hamilton, you will select Mayhew ledgers beginning with 1803, I think. Yes. 1803 will do. At least for now. Unless we find reason to go back further.”

Within a short time, Hamilton produced a goodly number of ledgers, clearly more than one per year, from the depths of the many-shelved tiny room or large closet, and set them on Wainwright’s desk.

Michel did not open the books, but regarded them with the cat-bowl-cream look I was accustomed to receiving when he was examining my cock and paying quite close attention to it. His next expression was also one with which both Rory and I were well-acquainted. In relation to exercising his cocksucking skills, it meant he had come up with yet another plan for getting us to the stage of begging him to allow us to seed, before *eventually* deciding to do so. In this context, it meant he had a plan.

He looked at Mr. Hamilton, who clearly had neither the skill nor the desire to hide the panic he was feeling. He had in essence sided with us rather than his employer, which was something akin to going out on a high limb, sitting down facing the trunk, and then proceeding to saw the limb off in front of yourself. The results would be quite painful, and with only yourself to blame, as no one forced you to commence sawing.

Although, in a way, perhaps we had done so with Hamilton. Michel clearly felt that way, too.

“Mr. Hamilton, I rather fear that as a result of your honesty, your tenure with this firm has come to an end. I suspect, too, that any well-placed persuasions we might make to enable you to keep your position here would, in the long run, be quite futile.”

Hamilton's “Yes, my lord,” was agreement, without a tinge of accusation. What a remarkable man.

Michel's voice became quite annoyingly cheerful. “Well, then, Mr. Hamilton, perhaps there is a solution. Are you good at what you do? Do you keep honest accounts, accurate to the last farthing?”

“Of course!” he snapped back, reasserting his dignity.

“Excellent. What do you earn annually?”

“Thirty pounds.”

“Paltry, sir, paltry. Somerville here is quite prepared to double that, are you not?”

The dummy nodded again. Mr. Hamilton's mouth dropped open, and then was quickly dragged shut.

“Excellent! Now, Mr. Wainwright has waived any requirement he might have for notice, and has agreed that he will never say anything disparaging about your departure.”

At the “He has?” in all our expressions, Michel looked at Wainwright. “You have, and you won't. Correct?”

Michel followed Wainwright's abrupt nod of agreement with, “Then, Mr. Hamilton, let's gather up your employer's ledgers and be off.”

As the ledgers were not only numerous, but thick and heavy, three-fourths of our group shared them out. One of the three was, of course, the dummy whose nodding was no longer needed.

We reached the open door, but Michel turned back to look at the fuming Wainwright. "There was a line in Mrs. Mayhew's letter that quite struck me, Mr. Wainwright. She said, I believe, that money is generally sufficient force to accomplish virtually anything one wishes to achieve. Do you believe that between the three of us we have sufficient money to destroy you if you speak of anything that occurred in this room today, except as I, or rather, Lord Somerville, might direct?"

Tight-lipped, patently furious, but equally obviously unable to do anything to vent that fury, Wainwright simply nodded.

"*Adieu*, then, Mr. Wainwright."

Michel's good troopers trooped out, with Michel at the rear. But as he was in the process of closing the door behind us, he paused, and then re-opened it. Mr. Wainwright had gotten out of his chair and was standing at the side of his desk, glaring initially at the closing door, and then again at us. He quickly painted his face in solicitor-bland.

His voice, however was not at all bland. "What now?"

"Your pardon, Mr. Wainwright." Michel was all that was gracious. "Just one more thing. I thought you might be interested in knowing that I shall be having David Franklin review the ledgers."

Mr. Wainwright paled, and his arse collapsed onto the edge of the desk. If he had cause to collapse, it was no surprise that he did. Even tonnish good-for-nothing rakes, who occasionally performed for free as a dummy, had heard of Mr. Franklin. In what the popular press referred to as the Case of the Purloined Penny, he had deciphered the deceptive account books of a supplier of munitions and weapons in the recent war, discovered the theft of just under a half million pounds, and managed to explain the complexities of the deception with such clarity that even the House of Lords, sitting in reluctant judgment on one of its own, could understand what he had done. And having understood, were backed into a corner with no way out other than to convict. The Case of the Folded Folio was even more interesting, I had heard.

Michel closed the door on Wainwright's dazed expression. He looked at the three of us, just standing there. His ever-articulate eyebrow asked, "Well? What are you three doing, just standing there?"

I chose to reply aloud. "You have this tendency to end a conversation, particularly one in which you have been a little, or more than a little, devastating, and then when the person you devastated starts to relax, you say,



‘Uh, just one more thing.’ After which you devastate him further. I was just checking to see if you were going to have need of another ‘just one more thing’ here.”

Michel chose his left eyebrow to remark, “*Touché!*” And then he said aloud, adding a wave of his hand to indicate the aisle and the exit door, to assure understanding, as Hamilton was unlikely to understand the French, “*En avant, mes amis, en avant.*”

We went *avant* as required. My carriage was cramped, occupied as it was by four men whose collective size, in aggregate height and depth and breadth, was not inconsiderable, in addition to the stacked ledgers which found their way to the laps of only three-fourths of us. Michel had explained quite logically that it would be most improper for him to appear in front of his man of business, and give the man instructions, wearing pantaloons that were wrinkled and whose pristine purity was perhaps diminished by dust.

We left the ledgers with Mr. Bellefontaine, who, despite the tiniest hint of a French accent, pronounced his name in quite proper English fashion (“Bell-fountain”), along with instructions to: (a) keep them locked in the vault at all times they were not in use; (b) allow Mr. Hamilton to examine them as needed so as to familiarize himself with the records on which he would be working, and (c) require Mr. Franklin to conduct his examination on-site, rather than take the records to his own office as was his custom. Michel suggested that offering him an additional hundred pounds for the inconvenience, and the speed with which results were required, was appropriate.

As it was the dummy who would be paying for all this, Michel eyebrow-asked for my approval, and like a good dummy, I nodded yet again.

We four left the building, and as we stepped onto the sidewalk, I was jostled by Percy the prick, also known as Baron Wilding. If one rated arseholes as one did diamonds and debutantes, he would have been given the accolade of arsehole of the first water. And upon realizing it was me, and with a glance taking in the presence of Michel and Rory as well, he sneered, turned his head so his eyes would not be further contaminated, and walked away. I manfully resisted the urge to grab Michel’s walking stick and cram it up Wilding’s arse. Sideways.

But it did raise another issue. “Hamilton.”

“My lord?”

“As you saw, working for me has some potential risks for you as well. Contamination by association, as it were. If you would prefer to change your mind, I would not be offended. And in that event, I would pay you a year’s wages, here and now, and we would return to Mr. Wainwright’s office for ‘just one more thing’: a glowing letter of reference for you.”

Hamilton sensibly paused and considered his options. Sixty pounds in hand could tide him over if it took any time to find new employment, or if he found employment quickly, provide him, and his family, if he had any, with some degree of security if managed wisely. Hamilton struck me as a man with that sort of wisdom.

“I think, Lord Somerville, that I shall accept your offer of employment.” And in a risky move, he held out his hand.

It was a gesture utterly inappropriate between a man of his station and a man of mine, unless I was the one making the gesture. I admired his boldness, clasped his hand and released it. “Lord *Vidal-Sansouci* here is acting as banker at the moment. Give Mr. Hamilton a fiver, won’t you?”

Michel’s mock-glare was only in his eyes as he complied.

“That is not an advance on your salary, Mr. Hamilton. Use it for some treats for your... family?”

“A wife and two little ones.”

“Well, then, some treats it must be. And you can begin work in the morning.”

Hamilton folded the note and put it in his pocket, and let us get all of two steps away from him before raising his voice and calling out, “Uh, just one more thing?”

We stopped in our tracks, spun around, all of us thinking, I was sure, what a fine find we had in Hamilton, impulsive though that find might have been, like picking up a lump out of the muck, and finding it to be gold. That thought was accompanied by bursts of laughter at his cleverness. His smile joined us.

“Yes, Mr. Hamilton? What ‘one more thing’ might there be?”

“A matter of site, my lord.”

I blinked, utterly confused. “You require spectacles, Mr. Hamilton?”

Rory’s bark of laughter confused me further. I was new to this business of having, well, *business* about which to be concerned, and hiring employees, and

if it was customary for employers to provide employees with spectacles, I was naturally willing to do so. After all, his work would require long hours and a potential for considerable eye strain.

Hamilton bit back a smile and managed to answer calmly, and entirely without the mockery with which Rory and Michel would have skewered me. "My vision is fine, thank you, my lord. I was merely inquiring where I would be reporting to work tomorrow."

Bloody hell, but I hate it when my whole bloody body goes up in flame. Having one's embarrassment ever on display was, well, damned embarrassing. Office? Office? I had no office. Had never had a need of one. Butterworth, my own man of business had an office somewhere in the City, and he simply came to Somerville House as needed.

Which brought another issue to mind. I had just hired Hamilton. To work for me. I could not in good conscience relegate him now to working for Butterworth. And I *was* going to need help with all that was now possible thanks to Aunt Agatha.

I waved away the annoying laughter on either side of me. And then had the solution.

"Mr. Hamilton, I have no office. Your first assignment is to find one." I paused to gather my hither, thither and yon thoughts. "It will need offices for the three of us, and one for you as well. Space for clerks, and records, and..." I waved my hand to indicate the wide range of "stuff" for which space would be needed.

I glared the two beside me into silence. "Yes, the two of you. If you think I'm bloody doing this on my own, you're out of your bloody minds."

I looked back at Hamilton. "Room for expansion. Good offices in a good location, but not such good offices in such a good location that we leave the impression we are spending more money on ourselves than on the purposes for which the Society is organized."

"Society, my lord?"

I took a deep breath. This was actually the first time the words would be said aloud in their new, out in the open and proud context. The first time was after earth-shaking sex, to mock the bangers who had tried to hurt us. The times since were tales of others taking up the cause, whether in truth or in mockery, though certainly in no organized fashion. The most recent time was my

pronouncement, announcement, whatever it was, that while I had not the slightest idea how the Society would accomplish what I said it would do, I was nevertheless utterly certain that it would be done.

And now I knew how. Or the beginnings of *how*.

“The Friends of Edward Society, Mr. Hamilton. *That* is the work upon which you will be engaged. We will be helping friends of Edward's, young or older or even old and at the end of their days, girls or boys, women or men, who need care, or comfort, or food and shelter, or protection from literal storms and storms that might be visited upon them because of who they are.

“I asked you for honesty earlier, but I was not then fully honest with you, though unintentionally so, as I should have made full disclosure of all this. So, I extend the same offer again. Do you stay or go?”

He thought for a moment. An excellent man, one who thinks before deciding. Would that I had more often been as excellent as that, though I would now have to acquire that skill and quite rapidly, actually.

“I shall stay, your lordship.”

“Excellent.” It was my turn to extend my hand as I paced the two steps back to him. We shook once more, to the shock of the fashionables passing by. “You will most likely find us at Somerville House tomorrow, if you have anything to report in the way of an office. If we are not there I will leave word where you may find us. And of course, keep track of any expenditures, so that you can be reimbursed. Or, no, better yet...”

I looked over my shoulder at Michel, who gave me an anticipatory eye-roll.

“*M. banquier*, another fiver, gramercy.”

After the note reached Hamilton's hand, I told him to use that as the start of our petty cash fund. With mutual expressions of thanks, we parted.

We spent the rest of the day at Somerville House. Celebrating, discussing, planning, arguing, taking breaks from our tumultuous thoughts for a cold collation of bread, beef, ham, cheese and ale at noon, a brief nuncheon at four to last us until an early dinner at eight. Dinner, served in the lesser dining room with much less ostentation than my staff would have preferred, was accompanied by much laughter and gesticulation and more argumentation, followed by wine (Michel), whisky (Rory) and ale (me, as I wished to maintain some semblance of sobriety and therefore sense) after we returned to the library.

When we finally realized it was past midnight, we were unexpectedly exhausted, even though all three of us were well-accustomed to nights that frequently ended at dawn. Mrs. Henderson had prepared rooms for both of my guests. There had been a coin toss as to which of them would be put in the suite of the non-existent, and now, most assuredly the never-to-exist, viscountess, with its convenient connecting door to my own suite. The other was to be banished to a guest room in another wing, though on the same floor.

Michel had insisted on asking Mrs. Henderson to supply a coin from the household funds, which he most solemnly promised to return in the morning with interest. He did not, he explained, trust any coin proffered by a gambler, even if he had the opportunity to examine it before the toss to ascertain that the two sides of the coin were different. He muttered something about rigged coins when Rory won anyway.

Not that we spent the night in separate beds. The house was quiet when we went our theoretically separate ways, and I sent the servants to bed as well. My two... yes, they were my lovers, my friends, the best of best friends in all possible worlds, but I wished for something more, something the Society could never achieve, something society would never allow. I wished, as I waited for them to join me, that they were my husbands. Michel and Rory married to me, and those two married to each other, three marriages to make us a union that was vastly greater than the sum of its parts.

I shook off the useless imaginings. Rory, of course, did not bother with a knock, just coming through the door naked, and teasingly stalking over to the quite enormous bed, then around, to climb up into it. Something like climbing up into a high-perch phaeton.

“Rumpled?” I asked.

“Rumpled,” he answered. He looked at the open connecting door, the unlocked door to the hall. “He’s slow tonight.”

“He has a greater distance to travel, arse-wipe. And servants to avoid if any should be up for some reason or other.”

Whatever reply he might have made was cut off by Michel coming through the hall door, closing it, carefully locking it, and then turning to us. He pulled off the dressing gown of black silk, with a dragon spewing flame on the left shoulder, and dropped it carelessly to the floor. The nightshirt was pulled over his head and met a similar fate.

“Rumpled?”

“Rumpled.”

The fate of their respective pillows, sheets and blankets ascertained and confirmed, he posed to allow us to admire him. And then his long, lean, lusciously languid, lethal only to our sexual stamina, self, strode across the room. He made a point, as he usually did, of his ability to get into this bed more easily than Rory because of his height. The kisses we exchanged were... unusual.

Gentle, loving, but with no intent to arouse. Our cocks remained calm and quiet. Without the need for a discussion, we three knew that sex tonight would be... inappropriate. Or perhaps unnecessary. We were celebrating such a variety of things. Aunt Agatha's generosity, of course. Surviving a day of such shocks. Discovering how well we worked together, and not merely fucked together. Rejoicing in the broad outline of a plan for the Society that we had hammered out.

Until these two, I had never had a man in bed for any period of time longer than it took to fuck, and usually, it was his bed rather than mine anyway. We had established a pattern for those rare occasions when we could actually spend time in the same bed, sleeping. I was in the center, on my back. Rory to my right, Michel to my left. My arms embracing them, at least to start.

While we slept, we discovered we moved a bit from time to time, though not the flailing movements this pair of lying lovers attributed to me. I surreptitiously lifted my leg, stretching a muscle I would say if anyone were to say anything, and looked at my foot. It was not, *they* were not, all that large. Though large would be entirely understandable, given the known scientific relationship, or so I had assured them when I explained, between large feet and large cocks. But certainly not the born-in-Brobdingnag foot size they in turn have assured me, with much swearing of solemn, albeit mild oaths, was a quite accurate description.

“Brobdingnag, Peregrine, Brobdingnag, and looking at your toes isn't going to alter the truth,” said Rory. “So will you just put the damned barge down beside the other one to make a matching, *bed-bound the rest of the night*, pair?”

“I wasn't thinking of...”

“You *were* ‘thinking of,’ my dear,” Michel interrupted.

“Well, it's *not* true.” I was sulking, but sometimes that was fun.

“Yes, my dear, that’s right. All a fantasy. Just a tease.” His pat on my shoulder was as patronizing as his tone. “Now may we sleep?”

I sighed, and grinned, and they let themselves be gathered in again. Even when we moved, if Rory wound up on his back as well, or Michel on his belly, or however else we might be, all the movements resolved themselves into three positions that required us or enabled us to touch.

As we glided down the slope into sleep, I knew they would be gone when I awakened, so as not to offend servant sensibilities by flaunting where we actually slept for at least part of the night. The rumpled beds led to a plausible early rising because of a restless night if the servants happened upon an empty bed.

I hoped that one day we might be in a place, personal, physical, where we could sleep the entire night through together, without worrying over rumpling.

Yes. I could imagine that.

And I did as I fell asleep.

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## ***PEREGRINE***

*Thursday, 10 October 1816*

*Very late afternoon*

*107 Meriwether Lane*

*London*

“Why?”

“Why not?” was Rory’s reply.

I looked at the pair of them. I knew them so well now, after all we had endured together, and apart, and they were up to something, some plan was even now in progress. Something beyond the ridiculous purchase they were proposing. I just could not figure out what it was.

We stood in the parlor of the middle of three side-by-side townhouses, in a less than salubrious part of the city, although it was not Seven Dials by any means. On the border of the West End, not quite inside, but managing to be neither fish nor fowl. The solicitor who most urgently wished to earn his fee by getting rid of his client’s burden of ownership as rapidly as possible, had been almost obsequious in handing over the three sets of keys to Michel. A viscount and a *vicomte*, even if accompanied by, well, a *Scotsman*, could certainly be trusted to lock up after themselves and return the keys tomorrow morning. Even a trio as notorious as we. Or it might be afternoon, depending on when our respective lordships deigned to rise from our beds.

This was a nice parlor, as parlors went. The contents—furniture, drapes, paintings, *objets d’art*—were quite good, both here and in the right-hand house through which we’d been given a most detailed tour. The tour was naturally accompanied by assurances that the other two houses were in equally good repair, et cetera, et cetera. Based solely on this parlor, that assurance appeared to be correct as to this building.

After the surrendering of the keys ceremony, Rory had suggested that we ought to buy the three houses. My somewhat loud “Why?” had been preceded by a somewhat loud “What?” of the are-you-out-of-your-bloody-minds variety.

I already owned a townhouse, and it was better furnished. Michel had a mansion in Mayfair, and its furnishings were rather beyond good or better.

I waved my hand to encompass the townhouse we were in, and the other two as well, as I said, “First, because this is not Mayfair. It is not close to



Mayfair. I agree it is not in a slum, nor is there a slum towering over the garden walls, ready to leap on the houses and devour them to the last brick. But really... move to Meriwether Lane? We would be laughed out of London.”

Suspiciously, there was no response. These men were *never* without a response. The idea was utterly ridiculous and I proceeded with the proof, by reminding them that we already *had* homes. I held up a hand to stop an imminent outburst from Rory about his living in rented rooms, before realizing that there was no burst about to out itself.

What the...?

After only the slightest break, I went on, with my demonstration of the superiority of my thinking.

“Yes, yes, rented rooms and all that, but the only reason you’re still there, you ha-penny squeezing Scotsman, is because you are a stubborn shite. Thanks to Aunt Agatha, I have enough money to buy a townhouse in a far better part of the city and deed it to you. Croesus-cubed here—” and I nodded to Michel, who smirked back “—has enough money to buy each of us several townhouses just with the interest off the money he has in the Funds.”

Michel cleared his throat. It was the disagreement throat-clearing, not the throat-clearing required to get the rest of Rory’s seed or mine down where it belonged. It seemed forever since I had heard that sound, but it was actually only last night. In Michel’s bed.

“Ah, not *several*, my dears. Perhaps two each, furnished, but a third only if the price was right.”

I waved off his annoying, logical response. I did not need logic just then, as logic and Rory were not always the best of companions.

But Rory got logical on me, somewhat annoyed, and lost his tonnish English. Sometimes that loss is deliberate, sometimes not. This was, I was reasonably certain, a *not* time.

“‘Tis nae penny-pinching, ye daft bugger. ‘Tis sound financial planning, somethin’ wi’ which ye hae wee experience. And I’ll remind ye I’m th’ Master o’ Strathairn noo, ’n’ ah damned weel hae mah ain dosh noo, as well, ye eejit.”

I looked at Michel. I was fluent in eyebrow. Even more fluent in arse-wipish, as I helped invent the language. But sometimes, as then, when Rory’s brogue was so thick it could not be carved, but required a battle axe to hack through, I needed translation.

Michel smirked. "Let me see. I assume you caught the parts where you were reminded that you are well-known to be both a 'daft bugger' and an 'idiot.' As for the rest, he merely pointed out that as Master of Strathairn he now has funds available to him, and that what you describe as pinching a penny until it squeals in anguish, is just sound financial planning, something of which a frivolous, care-for-nothing rakehell such as yourself would have no knowledge."

He smiled at Rory. "Do I have that right?"

"Aye, ye do."

I sighed in exasperation. "Some money now, you bloody-minded Scot. We're proud that you wrested control of the land and the distillery from the Laird, and that you're improving the family's finances beyond all recognition. But not enough, I think, to buy a townhouse yourself."

"We love you. You love us. People, even friends of Edward's, who love, are allowed to give gifts. Even extravagant... slightly, *modestly* extravagant gifts like a furnished townhouse. Which I... *we*... will be most happy to give you. *Elsewhere!*"

"I'm nae charity case," he said, rough, raw and with more than a hint of an explosion in the near future. He stood stiffly, and not in the way Michel and I preferred. That Rory actually preferred.

I looked to Michel, whose blandness encouraged me to continue. "Rory, love, it's not charity. It's sharing what we have to make things better for us all. With your own townhouse, already furnished, or furnished as you like by buying an empty one in a much better neighborhood, and then buying out the shops, we would each have a home. With differences that we could share. Of course, a prerequisite for your townhouse would be a bedroom with an excessively large bed, that could, ah, *accommodate* three very, ah, vigorous men."

And then I shut my mouth.

Those bastards.

Those fucking, loving, adorable, bloody bastards.

I knew what they were planning, but I wasn't going to give in so easily. I knew I would, but I'd make them work very, very hard for *my* surrender.

I opened my mouth to continue my argument, but Rory shut it rapidly. Not with his mouth or prick, though either would have been delightful, but with his words.

“Fine. Buy me the house next door. No. 103.”

I gaped at him. I try to avoid gaping because I have been told, frequently, that when I am gob-smacked, I look like a fish with open mouth about to swallow hook and bait. A handsome, blond, ruggedly rakish fish, of course. But still, a fish.

I snapped my mouth shut and snapped at him as well. “Fine! We’ll go to the solicitor’s office the first thing in the morning. I’ll drag your arse out of whichever bed we’re in at dawn’s bloody early light. And by the end of the day, you’ll have your own home. We can take turns as host. Which is rather a good idea, Rory, since the combination of the thin walls of your rooms, and the volume with which you howl our names, one or both when you’re being well-fucked... something for which Michel and I have a remarkable talent... has deprived you of the sheer wondrousness of being fucked through your very own mattress.”

I gave them a triumphant look, to brag about winning my point. Although “winning” that point meant I actually had no idea after all what was going on.

“But your home and mine are not *ours*,” Michel said.

“Of course they are.”

He shook his head. “They’re *family* homes, my dear. With family retainers. Not all of whom are enthused about... *us*.”

I opened my mouth for yet another snap, then paused.

Michel nodded at my obvious realization. “And though your bedroom and mine are each well away from the servants’ quarters, and for obvious reasons we have no wives or children or other relatives residing with us, yet still... do we not each... hold back somewhat in our enjoyment?”

“And then there are those who watch us. And make us the latest *on dit*.”

His voice reeked sarcasm. “Lord S—was seen entering the home of Lord V—late on 14th September last. He was followed shortly by Mr. M—. Neither Lord S—nor his companion left his lordship’s home until past noon the following day. Two days later, it was the house of Lord S—which was the scene of such indulgences as may only be guessed at.’ And they insult Rory by calling him a mere ‘mister.’”

He was, of course, correct. We were far beyond a nine days’ wonder. “And what changes in all that if we do this mad scheme you two have concocted?”

“*Our* homes, Peregrine, these would be *our* homes,” Rory said fiercely. “*Our* staff, who will not care what we are doing in bed because most of them will either be doing the same in the servants’ quarters or elsewhere on their days off.”

I blinked. And blinked again. “You want to hire a group of *neddy boys* to cook and clean, and... and... buttle and everything else?”

Rory relaxed and grinned wickedly. “Of course. Our fellow friends of Edward’s are talented in so very many ways besides how they use their bodies, and are no less eager to be employed where they do not have to hide. However, given the way your eyes have traditionally roved, with your hands and mouth and cock and arse following eagerly after, you’ll have to understand what will happen to you if you stray. We are, I believe, speaking of serious injury, are we not, Michel?”

I almost responded to the absurdity of the thought that having found these two, and given so much to them, given *up* so much *for* them, that I would put my cock in any hole not theirs. Responded with great offense. I fortunately stepped back from the precipice of vast embarrassment by realizing that they were teasing, and did not, after all, have so little faith in me. Or in us.

“Very well. So none of the servants will blink or run away when Rory roars with my cock in his arse, just before his mouth is shut by Michel’s prick. Though... do you think they might wank over thoughts of what we might be doing?”

That created arrested expressions. “They... might,” Michel conceded.

How I delighted in being the one, for a change, to disconcert *them*. I smiled broadly. “Oh, please, Michel. You know they will. Rory is both articulate and loud when his mouth is not cock-filled. A brawny Scotsman screaming ‘Fuck me bluidy arse!’ when I’m pounding him, or clever words like ‘Suck me bluidy meat, y’French slut!’ when he’s fucking your face? They’ll know precisely what is going on, even if they don’t possess *all* of the, ah, *intimate* details.”

It was their turn to look gob-smacked, though only a little so. They had clearly not thought of this. And then, not surprisingly, first Michel and then Rory... *preened*. They *liked* the thought of other men fantasizing over them.

Michel spoke first. Excessively languidly, as if the affectation of boredom would strike me blind so that I did not notice the slight plumping beneath his inexpressibles. “I don’t see that giving the masses something to think about and enjoy...” He waved his hand to brush away the objection I was about to make.

“Very well, very well. The *minor* masses, the small masses we will employ out of the vastness of the masses in London. Or the country. A non-stingy wage, excellent quarters and working conditions, pleasant and handsome employers, topped off with superb wank fantasies. What more could a neddy boy seeking employment ask for?”

He paused. “Though I do think we would be wise not to mention the latter during interviews. Let them learn later of that benefit. Excellent thinking, Peregrine. So... the servant obstacle is overcome. I am sure you have others to raise.”

He lifted his damned eyebrow at me. Even wagged it a little, knowing how much it annoyed me that while I could lift I could not waggle.

I continued the struggle, just because I didn't yet know what they were up to.

“Very well. We'll see the solicitor tomorrow and buy the townhouse next door for Rory, the middle one for me, and the other one for Michel, if you both insist. Although I think we could do better. There are townhouse rows elsewhere in London, in *much bloody better* neighborhoods, where we could arrange to buy three side by side and accomplish the same goals.”

Michel's grin was smug. Yes, he most definitely knew something he had not yet shared. “But this neighborhood has so much potential, Peregrine. And I think you will agree that friends of Edward's generally have the reputation of making the most out of whatever potential there might be.”

*That* was his... their... plan? “A bloody... *enclave* or something... of bloody friends of Edward's in the heart of London?”

“Why not?”

And we were back to the question which started the discussion. Why not, indeed? Gathering friends of Edward's in a specific area might make them... us... more readily discernible targets for the bangers. But we could, perhaps, as a group be greater than the sum of our parts. And protect ourselves better. Strength, numbers, that whole idea.

“Very well, I'm on board.”

“Excellent.”

Bastards. They were smiling far too broadly over a simple agreement to purchase real estate.

Michel said, “Rory, if you will do the honors?”

“But of course.” Rory was at his most suave and donnish. Although he naturally offset that image as he walked toward a small desk, by reaching around to supposedly scratch some phantom itch in the crease of his arse, which the bastard did simply to emphasize what a superbly fuckable arse it was, even fully dressed. He pulled a key out of his pocket, opened the center drawer, and pulled out a thick sheaf of papers. Almost rivaling Aunt Agatha’s missive. He selected a smaller set, put the rest back, relocked the drawer and came back to me.

“Here. The deed to your townhouse. The middle one, of course.”

“Wh-what?”

Rory was positively reeking with smug. “We bought all three on Monday.”

I snapped my gob-smacked, gaping-yet-again mouth shut. I was sure I sounded annoyed when I spoke, because, of course, I bloody well was. “Fine. I will have Butterworth transfer...”

Rory interrupted me with his best languid Michel impersonation. “But, Peregrine, my dear, people who love, even those abominations, the friends of Edward’s, are permitted to give gifts, are they not? Even extravagant, or rather, slightly, *modestly* extravagant gifts like a furnished townhouse?”

And then the daft bugger laughed at me.

Hoist with my own fucking petard. I surrendered. “As you say.”

They closed in on me, hugging me, and we exchanged brief kisses. Kisses that inevitably started a cock stand for me. Michel squeezed my shoulder, said, “I shall be back in a minute or two.”

He left the room, and Rory attempted to distract me with more kisses, and a little ear nibbling, and a wee bit of neck licking. I knew what they were up to then.

The floor plans were the same in all three. There was a rather large bedroom at the front of the house, overlooking the garden across the street. Michel had obviously gone upstairs to turn down the covers, though six hands could make really light work of getting the bed ready.

Clearly, we were going to christen my new home... *our* new home... with cocksucking. Baptize it with buggery.

I could imagine that. I *did* imagine that, and my aching cock reflected the wealth of detail in my imaginings.

Then Michel was back, carrying a silk scarf that matched the color of Rory's hair, not on his head, but the richer, brighter, redder thatch around his cock and balls. They better not have been putting Rory's cock and balls on display to some fucking friend of Edward's in order to find that perfect match. They belonged to me, damn it. Though I would naturally share them with Michel.

"Turn around, love," he said.

Blindfold me? We had never played a game like that, but then, having the time and place and leisure to explore the varieties of love available to us had previously been in short supply. We were making up for lost time. I did as I was told, wondering if my hands were going to be bound as well. Whether I wanted, would enjoy...

Hand-binding was clearly out of the picture, at least for now. I erased the sketch I had been beginning in my imaginings as they most solicitously led me upstairs. They had started out reassuring me that they would not allow me to bump into anything, but I stopped that by telling them, "I trust you, ye daft pair o' buggers."

I could quite grow to like that phrase. It was one that went trippingly on the tongue. Actually, both phrases—about trust, and daft buggers—went trippingly along.

They opened the door, brought me carefully inside, closed it. Removed the blindfold. I gasped.

The room was all golden. In part the flickering candles that were everywhere. In part the colors. Creams and whites and ivories, picked out in gold threads, gold fabrics in complementary shades. An *enormous* bed with the covers indeed pulled back. Sheets a pale... something... that I knew would make my hair a sunburst when I laid on them, and Rory's the bright red of a fire.

There was also something hidden next to the right side of the bed. A screen blocked off my view of whatever it was. Rory stepped left to a small table beside the door, came back looking unusually diffident for him. He held out a parchment scroll, tied with elegant gold ribbon.

I carefully moved the ribbon to the edge and pulled it off. As there was a candelabra standing by the large chair near the fireplace, I understood I was to be comfortable and read it there. I sat down, and Rory sat on the floor, resting his crossed arms on my knees, but would not look at me, and worried his lower lip with his teeth. Michel stood partly behind the chair, leaning forward, and

resting his arms on the back. One long, slender finger reached out to caress my cheek.

“Rory’s calligraphy,” he murmured. “Our... or rather, a good part if not quite all... words.”

Keeping my confusion to myself, I unrolled the scroll and tilted it toward the light, being careful not to disturb either of my men. Without, for a moment, looking at words I just looked at the writing. The calligraphy was stunning. Yet another of Rory’s hidden talents.

I read.

### **The Passionate Pair to Their Love**

Come live with us and be our love  
And three will all the pleasures prove  
That faithful men, in dale or field,  
In all our townhouse rooms, will yield.

There will we lie upon the bed  
And watch the roué bend his head,  
O’er risen cocks, from out our smalls,  
Whilst outdoors, birds sing madrigals.

On summer’s night upon cool sheet  
Our skin will touch, our scents will meet,  
We’ll roll and slide upon that bed,  
Then fuck until our minds have fled.

A winter’s robe of finest wool  
Slides off your shoulders as we pull,  
Warm hands caress your curls of gold,  
Hot mouths will keep your cock from cold.

Oiled wooden pricks of diverse size,  
For holy use and lovers’ sighs:  
And if these pleasures may thee move,  
Come live with us and be our Love.

A place of books, and laughs aloud,  
A haven from the madding crowd,  
Where rogue and rake and roué stay  
And live and love each passing day.



We'll be thy shepherd swains who sing  
For thy delight each May-morning:  
So if our gifts thy heart doth move,  
Then live with us and be our Love.

I immediately began to cry. Years upon years upon years with nary a tear, and then in these past several months I am become such a watering pot that if the North Sea went dry, I could be used to fill it up.

Rory grabbed my left hand, as I had let loose of the bottom of the scroll and it started to curl up. "Peregrine, we didn't mean..."

I squeezed back. Sniffled. "Can't a friend of Edward's enjoy a good cry now and again? It's not as though *manly* men ever can."

Michel's hands were on my shoulders, caressing. Then he walked around the chair, and sank to the floor, cross-legged. Without animadversions about what I or we were requiring him to do to his clothes. A nine-day wonder!

"You do recall, do you not, how we were going to punish you that night? Take you away from Alderson House to somewhere private, fuck you at both ends until you seeded yourself several times, and then walk away from you? Leave you alone without our cocks or arses, but most especially, without *us*?"

"Well, of course I do. But you couldn't and you didn't. And if you had, it wouldn't have worked anyway. For very good reasons, too."

He eyebrow-asked, "Oh? Really?"

I really wasn't going to attempt an eyebrow-answer, because, after all, no matter how fluent one is, eyebrow-speak *does* have some limitations. Rory's massive hand, however, preemptively, painfully prevented any such attempt by squeezing my leg just above the knee. Hard.

"Ow!" I tried to jerk my leg away, but couldn't, and so had to settle for glaring at him. He glared right back.

"Aloud, Peregrine, aloud. You don't speak that fucking *English* eyebrow thing when I'm around, unless the two of you are using it to plan an unusually good fucking that involves me and my bloody arse. Are you?"

"Ah, no."

"So what the hell did that eyebrow mean?"

"Michel said, in essence, that he didn't really believe I knew why you two didn't follow through with the original plan."

“All that with just *one* fucking eyebrow?”

I gave him a bit of shoulder-speak with a shrug that said, “Well, of course.”

“I *hate* English aristocrats.”

I raised one eyebrow at him, and knew Michel was doing it as well. Both of us saying, of course, “Oh? Really?”

Rory blushed just a little. “Verra weel, I dinna hate all of ye. I’ll make an exception. Or two.” He recovered a bit of his glare. “But that’s all. Nae mair.”

I almost annoyed Rory with an eyebrow-ask again, but decided on voicing it to Michel. “We don’t want Rory *loving* any more English aristocrats than us, do we?”

“Definitely not.”

“And we won’t love any more Scottish aristocrats than the one we have?”

“Definitely not.”

I looked at Rory. “Well, then, is that all settled to your satisfaction?”

“Ah wid nae say ah wis *satisfied*, ye ken, nae juist yit.”

We smiled at each other, but Rory had dragged us back to the almost-lost point.

I sighed. “Very well. It’s simple. The two of you realized I would enjoy being fucked at both ends by cocks I adore, far too much, so there was no way it could be an effective punishment.”

Michel started to lift an eyebrow at me, then turned his head to Rory, pointed his right index finger at the partially lifted eyebrow—that long, long finger that could do such wonderful things up inside your arse, particularly when accompanied by one or two or on the right occasion even three of its friends—to emphasize he was lowering it. Rory snickered.

Michel asked, “But what about the leaving part? You would have been devastated.”

“True. But so would both of you. After... what? ...each of you fucking my mouth and arse at least once before your grand departure, once I was gone you would have realized how much you liked my talented mouth, although I do not claim the expertise of *le grand maître de tous*... what is the word? ...ah, *les cocquesuckeurs*.”

I winked at Michel and grinned at my mangled French, and saw a part of a hint of a wee bit of a grin back from each of them.

“And as for my arse, my adorable, adored, adoring men, what can I say about my arse you do not already know? How, ah, *nearly* like a virgin having his very first time, it would have been? How exquisitely tight and hot it was at the Sea House? How rarely you get a chance...”

Rory *growled*.

A friend of Edward's who had never heard a sound of arse-wipish before would have understood *that*: “Are you fucking saying my fucking arse is *loose*?”

I snickered at him. Perhaps sniggered. Reached out to give him a “there, there, everything is all right” pat to annoy him a bit more.

“My dears, my arse right now is *naturally* tight. It hasn't been used all that much; indeed, it hasn't been used *nearly* enough, once I was so *well*-introduced to the glories of being fucked... ah, last December, if I recall correctly? But *Rory's* arse?”

I extravagantly kissed my bunched fingertips and then spread them wide. “*Tres magnifique!* I am a mere student, who kneels gratefully at the arse of the master. And licks, and laps to learn. I can only hope that I have that innate talent which, when combined with years... perhaps, *years?* ...of training and experience, will enable to me to control the cocks in my hole and play them with all the skill that Antonini has when he plays... ah, yes... when he plays Vivaldi's *Violin Concerto in B flat major*. On his Stradivarius.”

I paused. Gave him a distinctly smug smile. His arse-wipish “harumph!” conceded that I had escaped retribution. For now.

“So—as I was saying before I was so arse-wipishly interrupted, even if you had carried out your plan, you would have come back in a day, hell, within hours, apologizing and begging to pick up where we left off.”

“Bloody arrogant British blond, ain't he?” asked Rory.

“True,” Michel answered. “But unfortunately, quite right. Though I think that when we were on the way back to him, he would have been on the way to us, meeting us fairly close to half way, and after some mutually suitable groveling, we would have been back together. And that would have been a waste of several good grovels. We should save those for a *true* problem. Later. Much, *much* later.”

We both agreed with him.

And then it was my turn to get us back on point... the *real* point. The reason they so obviously brought me up here. I carefully rolled the scroll up and set it back on the table and stood up. They stood as well, giving me a little space. We were still close enough that I could stretch my hands out, grasp a shoulder on each of them and pull them to me.

Except it didn't work. The bastards not only didn't move, but shrugged my hands off.

Rory shook his head. "Ah dinnae ken. All this bluidy, logical, *scholarly* analysis o' shite haes murdured th' mood. Ah dinna think ah kin bugger him noo."

*"Tellement vrai, mon cher ami, tellement vrai."*

*M. le vicomte de la prique* joined Rory in the sad head-shaking.

They brought me here to fuck or get fucked, and by God, I was going to fuck *and* get fucked. And it was going to be so very easy to accomplish that. I knew my men.

A side-step put me very close to Michel; intimately so, one might say. My right hand clamped down on his cock, and I began squeezing it gently. He wasn't wearing smalls! How in the hell had I not noticed that? All the better to fondle him as he began to lengthen. "Are you quite sure the mood is *entirely* gone? Do you think it might be, ah, *revived*, if I offered to suck all of you down into my throat, and work on your nipples as I kept swallowing and swallowing and swallowing?"

Michel answered me with a sound that combined an "unh" and a grunt and a moan. He was a natural speaker of arse-wipish! Who knew? He was so fluently saying, "Yes! Suck me now!"

My look over my shoulder at Rory was understandably smug yet again. I didn't bother with an eyebrow or English. Just the universal arse-wipish sign for "come over here and let's get this play on the stage." I reached out with my left arm angled downward, palm up at crotch height, and wiggled my fingers.

Rory thrust his hips out and swaggered right into my hand. He was already hard. I fondled them some more. "Very well, let's get naked and into bed."

At that, two hands clamped down on my wrists and stopped the fondling.

No eyebrows were needed to express my surprise, my whole face proclaimed it, when Michel said, "No. I don't think so." He gently removed my

hand from his cock and Rory did the same. "You see, my very dear, while you are often in charge, sometimes because it is right, sometimes because we simply let you, tonight is not one of them. *We* are in charge."

That somewhat stopped my breathing. Not with panic or dismay, but with an arsehole-clenching, hip-thrusting surge of lust.

It was their turn to step in close. I was not blond enough to object when one of Michel's hands went to my already-hard and profusely leaking cock, one of Rory's went to my bollocks, and their other hands squeezed my arse-cheeks and politely prodded my hole.

Michel leaned in, his breath warm on the side of my face, my neck. He delicately licked upward from the edge of my cravat until his tongue and lips and teeth found my ear and began to do all sorts of wonderfully cock-warming things to it. Then he whispered, "And since you still owe us a good punishment, we're going to claim it. Now."

I could live with that. I could undoubtedly die with pleasure from that, but I'd have to try to avoid the latter outcome.

I nearly did not make it.

They stripped me, teasing and tormenting as they went, and placed me in the center of the bed. The mattress was firm, and I did not sink into a deep crevasse. But I did raise myself on my elbows so that I could watch them bare themselves. Regrettably, they did not do it in a teasing, taunting, tantalizing way. I had occasionally imagined what it might be like to see a man who already made my cock stiff, strip off his clothes, accompanied to music. What music, I could not conceive. But I somehow felt sure that if a composer who was a friend of Edward's were assigned the task, he would compose something with a *hard* rhythm, and a classical-sounding name, which all the neddy boys would disdain, and call it, instead, "The Stripper."

My men, however, were all that was efficient. They wore jackets which did not... *quite*... require someone's assistance to peel off, but they did come off more quickly with a little help. Stickpins out and set on the night table. A tug, two tugs, a yank, and cravats littered the floor. Waistcoats unbuttoned, with only one popping off, to be lost somewhere in the room. Shirts peeled over heads to join the floor litter.

They deliberately paused, I was sure, to give me an opportunity to admire their half-nakedness, but when I did so, naturally moving my hand to my prick for preliminary stroking, Rory barked at me to move my hand away. Then they

popped those glorious arses, only one of which, *most* regrettably, I was allowed into, on the edge of the bed, to make short work of shoes and stockings. Then they stood, bent forward, and allowed me to gaze on one brawny, furry moon and one slender, smooth moon, each with a most delectable *crack* running down the center, as they stripped the rest of the way.

Michel turned to face the bed, his legs touching the side, his leaking prick making stains on the sheet, while Rory went behind the mysterious screen. Since only I could see his face he felt it was safe to eyebrow-ask whether I liked what I saw.

Fuck eyebrow-speak. Sometimes words are far more effective, though far from subtle. I licked my lips and whispered, "Bloody hell, *yes!*"

He stroked himself once, twice, from base to tip, gathered the clear ooze on his fingertips and proceeded to selfishly lick them clean rather than share.

Bastard shite-head.

*My* bastard shite-head.

Rory came back to us, still hard. Profusely leaking, as well. He was carrying a somewhat familiar-looking box. Then I recognized it. It was the "another time" box from last December.

He set it on the edge of the bed. I sat up, glaring defiantly at Michel, since I could obviously not see a bloody thing flat on my back, head up on pillows or no.

"This is my box," he said, and caressed it almost covetously. "This is my box. I rarely travel, you know, without my box."

Then he unlocked it, raised the lid, and shifted it so we both could see.

With my newfound appreciation of my asshole, and knowing Rory's life-long devotion to his, I could most definitely see why he would not willingly be parted from his box.

Which was full of dildos.

The long and the short and the tall. Bless them all. My mind briefly wandered to wondering what one might call such a collection. A gaggle of geese... a deepness of dildos?

And there was more than one layer!

He carefully lifted out the top tray and set it on the mattress. And the second tray.

They were carved from various woods, obviously smooth, highly polished, almost glowing in the candle light. I rather resented the fact the one made of a blond-colored wood was the smallest. Perhaps four inches long, a half inch wide. They grew and grew to the copper-red mahogany I was certain Rory had posed for. I jealously wondered whether the woodcarver got to lick and suck Rory's prick to keep his inspiration... inspired. Onwards, upwards, outwards. To the final one. Carved from an ebony so black the striations were almost invisible. At least as long as Michel. Thicker than Rory. *Much* thicker.

Even Michel looked impressed.

I gulped. My arse clenched tight. Very, *very* tight. Surely no one could possibly...

I looked up at Rory.

The bastard shite-head just grinned at me. "Aye. *Vurra, vurra* real. I even got him to model for the woodcarver. What with me eating his arse, and Danny licking and slurping his prick occasionally, well, fairly often, we kept him slick and hard and shiny while the carving was going on. Though to be truthful, we did our arse-eating, cocksucking jobs so well he insisted on taking a break to fuck my arse. Danny, who was in his fifties, made the mistake of wanking and coming during my fuck.

"It was something of a mistake because my black friend, who never gave me his name, recovered quite quickly after flooding my arse, and decided he needed another good seeding before continuing with the posing. Danny eventually got hard again, and seeded his workroom floor from the pounding of *his* arse. I had never before seen a black prick, let alone *any* prick that size, fuck a white arse, so I was instantly hard again when that black log began plowing my friend's hole. Despite having several decades' more experience, that fuck was accompanied by Danny's howls and curses and pleading. Knowing I could rise again if necessary, I seeded my own palm when the black dick exploded inside Danny's arse.

"What else could I do, after I licked my hand clean, but do the same for our model? And eat every last bit of seed I could get out of Danny's arse. And enjoy the feel of all that seed trickling out of my hole."

I admit to panting at that moment. I admit to pain at that moment since I wasn't allowed to touch myself. And my cock hurt. And my balls ached. The bastard shite-heads!

And inside my head I prayed a slightly blasphemous prayer, to Whoever might be there, to lead me into temptation, deeply dildo temptation, but deliver me from ebony wood. Amen.

They smiled down at me. Rory reached over to the lid of the chest, which was about an inch or so deep, and pulled a well-wrapped vial of oil out of one of several pouches sewn into it. He was like a scout going into unknown territory, having to be always prepared. For anything that might... arise.

He lifted the fucking *blond* dildo out and held it up for me. "Perhaps we ought to start with this one. You being so nearly virgin, so very tight, and all."

"My hole is damned well better than that!"

"Oh. I didn't quite understand, then." He shifted the blond one to his left hand, carefully lifted the black one out and held it up by its handle in his right hand. It looked like he should have been tilted to his right side, unbalanced by all that weight. "Just go right to this one?"

I am, of course, stupid from time to time. A trait of British blonds, various friends and my pair of bastard shite-heads have assured me over the course of my life. But even I was not *that* stupid. Had I been physically backing off and backing away, I would have been down the stairs, out the door and on the front stoop already.

"Ah, no, I don't think so. We can start wherever you like. The little blond one, if you want. You *like* little blonds."

He winced at that. I am, of course, quite blond, but of the brilliantly golden variety. I was referring to, and he was recalling, the blatant blond with the *falsely* bright yellow hair, short, slender, pert-arsed, an *obvious* molly boy strutting down the sidewalk last week. And Rory had fucking *turned his head* to watch him. There wasn't a *huge* bruise on his shoulder from the punch I gave him to bring his attention back where it belonged, but there was one.

He naturally said the *only* thing he could say at the moment to save the moment. "The only blond I like... the only blond I *love*... is you, Peregrine. So can we now get back to the dildo at hand?"

I didn't like what had come out of the first two doors, so as at Wainwright's office, I asked to see what a third door might reveal. After putting the two dildos back, he pretended to ponder, and then lifted out a cherry-wood dildo, a little bit longer than Rory, but not nearly as thick. He mock-glared at me. "We dinna care what ye think. *This* is what we start with."



I raised my knees to my chest, grabbed them, held them wide. Rory decided he needed a “wee taste” of a nearly virgin tight arse before proceeding. Then Michel. I was aching and panting in the silence when the lapping and slobbering were done. Rory eased the oiled-up dildo into my hole, until I clamped down on it, just above the handle.

Then they began torturing me.

I lost all track of time as they worked the dildo in and out of my arse, caressed and pinched my nipples, took turns fucking my mouth without ever seeding, and then they changed the dildo, longer, thicker, and started all over again. Time after time after time they brought me to the edge of release, always seeming to know when I was near... although actually, they most often knew because I was babbling nearly incoherently about how close I was to coming and how desperately I needed, wanted, *had* to do so right fucking then... and hauling my arse and my dick away from the edge of the precipice.

I groaned over the Rory dildo and embraced it eagerly. I whimpered over the one that was no wider but longer. I eagerly accepted the Michel-sized one, for a moment, with my eyes shut, believing it was somehow actually his prick fucking me.

I was in a fog of lust, with Michel rapidly fucking the latest dildo in and out of me, when Rory held up the black one with a wicked smile. “This is the only one left to try, Peregrine.”

My eyes widened. “No! Please, no, I can’t, I really, really, you’ll wreck my hole, I’ll be useless, you won’t like it any more, no, please...” I faded into whimpering as I was dildo-fucked even faster.

“It’s up to you, Peregrine,” that bastard fucking, non-cocksucking, non-prick fucking, shite-head said. “All you have to do is seed for us.”

I was writhing on the bed, nearing ecstasy but not there, and *no one was fucking touching me!* Except for the dildo-fucking.

“No, please, I need... I need, *Goddamnit one of you bastard shite-head fucking cocksuckers suck my prick or just just just bloody wank it!*”

“Come for us,” Michel said softly, and I raised my head weakly to stare into eyes as fogged with lust as mine. I barely noticed the way the muscles of his right shoulder and arm rippled as he fucked and fucked and fucked me with that dildo.

“Come, Peregrine,” they simultaneously said.

And I did.

Gloriously. Tambora last year, Vesuvius, all the rest of the volcanoes in history, couldn't compare to *my* eruption.

Even combined.

When I came back to my senses, exhausted, weak, uncertain whether I'd ever be able to move again, my arse decidedly empty with only air instead of a dildo inside, I realized I had a duty. A most delectable, *dick* duty. My men had not yet been satisfied, unless I missed something, which was entirely possible, of course.

I managed to lift my hand from the sweat-damp pillow. They had moved, one on each side of me. I looked back and forth. "But you..." My voice was rough, so I coughed to clear my throat—most unfortunately not of seed—and started again. "But you haven't... have you?"

Michel said, "Not yet. But we will." He reached down and began stroking my overly sensitive, far-too-tired-to-twitch cock. Rory began fingering my hole.

"No, please," I whined at them. "You did too good a job. I can't seed again. Look, let me just suck you, we'll sleep, and *then* we'll fuck. Later."

"When did you become an old man, my dear?" Michel asked.

"Old man! I'm not even thirty."

"But still you have to *rest* before getting hard again?" Michel mockingly tsked, tsked at me. "What kind of friend of Edward's *are* you? If the members of the Society were ever to learn of your frailty, and I for one, cannot be absolutely certain I could avoid dropping *that* morsel into a conversation at a membership meeting, why you could be stripped of your rank, and drummed out of the Society. You wouldn't want that awful fate to befall you, would you?"

Damn him for making me smile. Double damn his hand for making my prick at least a little interested again. Two of Rory's fingers up my arse naturally helped. "No."

"Fine. Then we'll fuck."

And we did. After getting dildos and chest and used and partially used vials of oil out of the way.

They made me get on my hands and knees, or rather, knees and elbows and forearms, so my head could rest on the pillows. They took turns carefully examining, and testing my hole for what I wasn't quite sure, unless it was closedness. Then they argued over who was going to fuck me first.

Michel insisted it had to be him, because even with the dildo use, I had, as he said, closed up quite nicely. But if Rory fucked me first, he'd spread my arse so bloody gaping wide that Michel would not feel anything at all, sort of like fucking a loosely clasping palm. It was possible to seed, but certainly not well.

I don't know whether the logic or the compliment convinced Rory but Michel won. He got on his knees in front of me, grabbed my hair and lifted my not-at-all-unwilling head so that he could fuck my mouth and get it slimy with spit. Then he got behind me and that fat mushroom head nudged my hole.

"Oil?" I asked.

Michel snorted. "You have enough oil in you right now to lubricate every device in his country that might need lubrication. Your spit is enough."

And it was. We had fucked each other since 6th September, but this one was special. Our first fucks in *our* new home. Rory stroked my again-hard cock, twisted my nipples, fucked my mouth, let his big, callused hands roam over every inch of my body, and then Michel was seeding me, shouting louder than he had ever shouted, ever been *able* to shout, as he screamed, "*Fuck, Peregrine, fuck!*" and came so very deep inside me.

Michel collapsed over me, though I managed to hold him up. After a moment or two of silence except for gasping, he slowly slid out of me and affectionately slapped my rump. "You're a good fuck, my dear. But you'll get better with practice."

Bastard.

Rory mounted me next. No waiting, no finesse. I heard him spit twice on his hand, imagined him smearing it on his cock and then he roughly thrust inside. I grunted a deep, arse-wipish grunt that said, "Oh, fucking, yes!"

Rory pays attention to instructions given in arse-wipe. He, too, was infected by the freedom offered by our home, and gave me the kind of brutal pounding he could never have given me before, a pounding I so very much wanted and needed just then. It was an unfortunately short fuck since he was so aroused by all of what amounted to extensive foreplay for each of them, that he realized he was going to seed me in very short order.

“Wank him, Michel,” Rory ordered, and Michel did. Sweat had to be enough because there was no time for more.

“Come again, ye bastard shite-head,” he growled in my ear, his wet, hairy chest scraping across my back as he fucked me hard. “My bastard shite-head. I want yer hole t’be clampin’ down on my prick when I seed. *Do it!*”

And I did. And he did. And then we all collapsed onto the bed, Rory still on top and still inside me.

When we untangled ourselves into a smelling, somewhat rank mess... odors which made my cock *consider* awakening and twitching... I asked if I was *now* allowed to rest.

They graciously agreed, and we dropped into sleep.

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## *MICHEL*

*Thursday, 10 October 1816*

*A short while later*

*107 Meriwether Lane*

*London*

I very carefully got out of the bed. I did not disturb Peregrine, but Rory raised his head. I do not know how or why, but of the three of us, he seemed to have an alertness to danger or possible danger that Peregrine and I did not possess. And he would be, I knew, if and when necessary, as fierce in our defense as a long ago, ruthless sabre-tooth tiger taking down its prey.

He only moved his head enough to look at me, the rest of him staying motionless, still close to Peregrine's side, and again I thought of a great cat, hidden in plain sight, ready to launch instantly into an attack. I shook my head, gave him a slight smile he obviously did not believe, but he still let the tension slide away.

I backed away from the bed. But I couldn't keep myself from looking... at the dildos. The few still on the bed. The rest in their trays. Couldn't help remembering... the look of utter joy on Peregrine's face as they were used on him, as *we* used them on him. The look of even greater joy and soul-shaking ecstasy as Rory fucked him. And somehow I knew, I was smugly *certain*, that he had had that same expression on his face while *I* fucked him.

And so I wondered. Would it... could it possibly be that way for me? If I were the one being fucked.

I shuddered with the old memories. But still... I wondered.

It would be so very selfish of me. To ask them. This was supposed to be about Peregrine. Rory and I had planned it that way. After all, we were in truth asking him both to be our love and come live with us. So we could *all* these pleasures prove.

But still...

But still...

Something told me that if I did not do this now, I would retreat. I would flee in terror from those memories and never again take even the tiny step I had just... somewhat... taken to overcome my past.

I started as if I had been poked with a pointed stick when Rory rested his hand on my shoulder. Thank God, no one would ever rely on my alertness for their safety. We would all be doomed.

His hand was large, and warm, and comforting in its gentle pressure. He moved in front of me, glanced over my shoulder at the bed, and I twisted to look as well. Peregrine was still deeply asleep, a thoroughly fucked—a *gloriously* fucked, if I thought so myself—little smile on his lips.

“Thinking of trying them? *Us*, perhaps?” Rory whispered.

I could only nod, my mouth suddenly too dry to permit speech.

He cupped his hands around the back of my neck, brought my head down for a wonderfully gentle, *caring* kiss. Our foreheads rested against each other's.

“You're not a virgin, are you? Down there.”

When did *Rory* become so perceptive? Shaking my head might be misunderstood, so I forced myself to take the next step, telling myself that I could always stop and take no more steps. Perhaps if I took enough steps, though, one after the other after the other, the outcome might slide into inevitability. I said, “No.”

“And the first time...”

He felt me stiffen involuntarily, and not in any pleasurable way.

“Times?”

I nodded.

“And they were not... pleasant?”

Another step. I could do this. “Not... not at all.”

His hands squeezed my neck lightly, carefully. “Then... are you *sure*?”

I held my breath. Said to myself, *Next step. Next step. One step at a time.* I opened my mouth.

“Sure about what, Michel?”

I twitched in surprise, but Rory did not. The bastard shite-head had been aware of Peregrine waking, listening. Another example of why I could not be the protector of our trio. Particularly not when I was wallowing... in whatever it was I was wallowing in just then.

Rory simply held me, his thumbs rubbing my neck. No effort to push me in one direction or another.

I sighed. Pushed back, and Rory loosened his hands. I straightened, looked over at the bed. Peregrine was seated on the edge, feet barely on the floor, looking adorably delicious, his cock edibly soft.

I took Rory's left hand in my right, comforted again by its size and warmth. I led him back to the bed. Sat down so that I could hold Peregrine's right hand.

"What Rory asked was whether I was sure I wanted to be fucked."

I could hear Peregrine's gulp, and then another miracle occurred, one if not quite on a par with virgin birth, relatively close. Peregrine remained silent.

"I do. Or... I *think* I do. Except... tonight was supposed to be about *you*."

He squeezed my hand. "I think I could manage to share. But really, your arse and my cock—"

I squeezed his hand back. *Very* tightly.

He winced and said, "Oh, very well, if you insist... *our* cocks."

He fell silent, and we stayed that way, the two of them waiting for me to decide. *Next step. Next step. I can take the next step.*

I took a deep breath, let it out, gathered up my courage to the telling-place, and told them everything that had happened to me. The first time. The other times. My solution—my escape. And just the fact that I had in truth been rescued from what I might have become by the unsurpassed, *unsurpassable*, Hubert Fallon.

They let me say it all, waiting during the inevitable stops, though their hands migrated so Peregrine's left entwined with my left, Rory's right with my right, and both their arms wrapped about me, creating a circle in which I felt entirely safe. And loved.

Safe enough to cry as I had never really done over those events so long ago, so ever-present.

I learned I was not a delicate crier when I let go. Gulps, what in a woman would be described as a heaving bosom, sniffles, snuffles, burning eyes, and naked as we were, nowhere to wipe my damned leaking nose. So I indelicately lifted my left arm, and scrubbed underneath my nose with my forearm.

When I put my left hand down again on my thigh, Peregrine said, "If you get that damned forearm anywhere near any part of me when we're fucking or sucking, I'll break it off and toss it aside. I swear I will."

I let out a watery chuckle, at the idea of Peregrine, who Dock-fucked in heat and sweat and dirt, who was already covered with a wide variety of fluids, bodily and otherwise, dried and not dried, could cavil at a little nose-drool.

I realized, too, that my exorbitantly dramatic recitation, instead of what I had thought I could make a calm, quiet recitation of ancient history, had in all likelihood murdered the mood for my getting fucked. I had gone limp the moment I started speaking, and it seemed unlikely that a resurrection would occur. Perhaps three days would not be required, but at least one.

Peregrine let go of my left hand, lifted his, put his palm on my right cheek, turned my head to him, and softly said, "I claim your arse first... when you're ready." And then he kissed me, a deep, loving, *tongue-fucking* kiss that caused my cock to surge.

Rory's right hand was fondling my balls, and their other hands had worked their way down to my quite small nipples, which suddenly seemed inordinately large as they tweaked and rubbed them. And when Peregrine ended the kiss, I instinctively turned my head to Rory for his kiss.

I never before thought to compare tongue-fucking techniques between the kisses of two men. They were as distinct, my two men, as their cocks were. I had not realized before how wide and long Rory's tongue was, how deep it could reach, while Peregrine's was narrower, shorter, but more agile. And as I moaned into Rory's mouth, I couldn't help but think that my men would, if I begged them prettily enough, allow me to compare their techniques, and the results of those techniques, when they used their tongues on and in my arse.

I whimpered, reached out with my own hands, found their definitely resurrected, definitely ready cocks, weeping steadily.

When he let my mouth go, I asked, "How... how shall we do this?"

Rory's voice contained a smile. "We have, you know, 'oiled wooden pricks of diverse size, for *holy* use', of course." Peregrine groaned and grinned as he had not done when he first read that pun.

"*Most* 'holy' use," he said, "though I think, with me, there were very few sighs, and far more whimpers, and whines, and moans and pleas to fuck me harder and deeper. Do you think, my dear Scot, we might work our virgin here..."

For some reason that irritated me. I snapped, "I am *not* a virgin."



“Yes! You are,” Peregrine snapped back. He grabbed my jaw and forcibly turned my head. Stared at me with those shining, *angry* blue eyes. “You had no choice. You didn’t get your first arse fuck out of lust, or infatuation, or even a semblance of love. You’re a bloody virgin, Michel, and your men are going to relieve you, here and now, of a great burden you should no longer have to bear. No one of your great age should still be a virgin. It’s bloody... unnatural.”

Kissing me again was an effective way to stop any further argument on my part.

When he was done, we reluctantly... *most* reluctantly on my part, perhaps from a hope for a bit of a delay... unwound ourselves.

“How... how do we do this?”

Rory’s fingertip ran down my cheek. “On your back, so you can see what’s going into you.”

“V-very well.”

I got myself into place; held up my legs. I had not realized how *vulnerable* that would make me feel. Yet somehow safe at the same time, knowing without actual reassurance that my men would never take advantage of that vulnerability. Well, other than to each, eventually, soon, far too soon, fuck me thoroughly.

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## ***RORY***

*Thursday, 10 October 1816*

*Right after that*

*107 Meriwether Lane*

*London*

He looked so very vulnerable, on his back, his legs up, his oh-so-damned-tight hole not quite visible, the lines of his muscles, in raised neck, arms, legs, tight with tension. I almost said something to reassure him. Instead, I just smiled.

“I think we ought to start with the blond.”

“That’s what I just said,” Peregrine answered, staring at the smooth, pale, slightly oily, definitely sweaty flesh of Michel’s chest, then reaching out to rub his palm over Michel’s belly, down the edge of the fine, almost-curly around the base of his prick, then up to his chest. “Redheads get seconds.”

“The blond dildo.”

“Bastard,” he muttered as he started using two hands to knead and caress Michel’s calves, and the backs of his thighs.

“It’s a bloody long tradition among you Sassenachs, you know. Blonds. Small, delicate, dainty little things. We ought to get him used to a delicate, dainty dildo, too, in keeping with tradition. Right?”

“Bastard *shite-head*,” Peregrine answered, before his mouth descended on Michel’s hole, while his large hands both helped to support Michel’s hips at the right angle for tongue-fucking, and enabled his thumbs to spread those slender, muscular cheeks.

Michel moaned. I managed not to join him, as I had fond memories of the few occasions when Peregrine and I had had the time and place for him to eat me out... though it was always one of those “’twere well it were done quickly” things... before fucking me deep and fast.

After a minute or two of loud, look-how-much-fun-I’m-having licking noises, Peregrine stopped. He lifted his head, tilted it as he does when thinking. I was using two fingers to smear oil on the dildo, as Peregrine looked around, and then his expression brightened. “Ah, ha! I thought I remembered...”

He darted off the bed. I got into position, and seated the knob at Michel's tightly, *tightly* clenched, not-opening-at-all, there is no bloody way in hell that thing is going inside me, hole. Peregrine was smiling like a Bedlamite as he got back into bed, holding a bloody mirror in his hand. He arranged himself reasonably comfortably so he wasn't in my way, then held the mirror up, tilting it at various angles and leaning around it himself to see what was reflected. At last he got it right. "There. Now you can see what's going into you. And out of you. And in. And out. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera."

Michel looked up at him. "If you say one *bloody* word about holding a bloody mirror up to bloody nature, when we're done I will smite you."

"But I'm *smitten!*"

"With me?"

"With you. And, well, *him.*" He gave a vague head-toss in my direction. "And smiting the smitten is *verboatend* in any language."

"And what is it you think you just said?"

"That smiting the smitten just simply *isn't done,*" Peregrine answered in his most affected tonnish tone. "And I said it in most excellent German. Shall I say it in French, too? I know the French, most excellently well, as well. Suh nest pass dee riggerus."

Michel let loose a little laugh.

Peregrine's silliness served its purpose. Most of the tension was gone, and Michel relaxed. I eased the small knob forward and inside him. Michel's arse clamped down on the unyielding wood. He grunted, and his arse promptly began pushing back.

"It's only a *little* blond, Michel," I told him. "Surely you can let a delicate *little* blond inside you? Because if you don't or can't or won't, I'm afraid I will have to ban buggery by bigger blonds. Nor will there be any redheads rogering your rump."

"I can't have that, can I?"

"Well, you most certainly won't have *this—*" and I wiggled the little that was inside him, "nor anything remotely like it if you don't bloody *relax.*"

Perhaps because he had never been willingly fucked, Michel had remarkably strong arse muscles. Not the usual outside arse muscles from riding, and walking and boxing and exercising in general. *Inside* arse muscles. And

those muscles were determined to shit the invader out with a great deal of vigor. I had a feeling that if I weren't pushing in with enough counterforce, the dildo would shoot out of his arse like a pellet from one of Girandoni's air rifles, and punch a hole in the wall.

He grimaced, and I told him what he needed to hear. Fortunately, it was also true. "And we stop the *instant* it becomes too much for you, if that happens. No code words, just a simple 'stop' and it's done. Or a 'wait' and we pause. Do you think you can remember that?"

He nodded. And then he... *relaxed*.

The blond slid all the way into him. He groaned, and it was not *entirely* in pain. Peregrine massaged Michel's still limp prick.

Many men, perhaps most men, cannot maintain a cock stand while they are being fucked. Oh, they may still get hard enough to seed, but it isn't their best cock stand; it isn't the steel one. My prick has always stood tall, from the very first time I was fucked. If the right man with the right stamina was fucking me, I could seed, wilt just a little and then stand again, and seed again. Peregrine seems to have the same innate talent. Michel... well, I think it most likely he will have to be *trained*.

We will *enjoy* that training, Peregrine and I. I momentarily lost my way, trying to calculate how many times we would have to fuck Michel... *each*... to get him properly trained in the way of cock standing during fucking.

I stroked Michel's hole with the blond dildo, then slid it out. Peregrine was doing to Michel what we had done to him, stroking, caressing, sucking, kissing, nibbling, biting, pulling... only, necessarily, far more gently. Michel was as near a virgin as it was possible to be, and he needed to be carefully stretched before he could be, ah, *used*. Even mildly.

Which turned out to annoy Michel. As I started fucking him with the third dildo, making him twist on the bed and moan, he nevertheless broke off Peregrine's latest kiss, raised his hands to clamp down on the sides of Peregrine's head, and held it still.

Michel's voice was deeper than usual, though I don't think he was intentionally making it so. "Are you going to fuck me?"

"Uh... yes?"

"Do you want me to enjoy being fucked, so you and that excessively hairy Scot get to use my arse again?"

“Uh... yes?”

He looked over at me and rolled his eyes. “We are having a Wainwright moment here, are we not?”

I nodded, but continued moving the six and a half inch dildo he had rapidly graduated to, in and out, twisting and turning it. It was a somewhat special one, the knob end curved down as some cocks do, and the knob rubbed his gland over and over and over.

“I do not *like* Wainwright moments.” He stopped for several almost-babbling words, and some moans and heavy breathing, before he regained his thought. “I want certainty. So. *Are* you going to fuck me, and fuck me well, and get me ready for Rory’s prick?”

He was holding Peregrine’s head so tight, Peregrine could not really move. “If you are,” Michel said, “nod your head.”

And Michel proceeded to nod Peregrine’s head for him.

“*Very* good, Peregrine, my dear, oh Christ!”

The outburst was because I had skipped a size and pushed a nearly Peregrine dildo all the way into him.

I loved the idea that I had turned Michel into a devout, prayerful, churchgoing man. What else could a steady repetition of “Oh god, oh god, oh god, ohgodohgodohgodohgod” mean?

While I fucked his arse with the wood cock, one of the diverse sizes we had promised in the poem, Peregrine had been sucking Michel’s prick, swallowing it to the root. Michel fisted his hand in Peregrine’s hair, and painfully yanked his head up and off his now-hard prick.

“You’re going to fuck me soon, really, really, soon, aren’t you?”

Once again, he bobbed Peregrine’s head up and down for him, so Peregrine wouldn’t have to waste any energy.

“So there’s one really, *really* important thing you need to remember when you’re fucking me. Will you remember?”

Another Michel-controlled head-bob.

And then he snarled, “I am *not* some British blond, you buggering bastard shite-head. I’m Mitchell Lou-iss Arse-naught, the bloody vycompt de viddle sansusie, as your compatriots say, and I will not be fucked delicately or daintily.”

He shook Peregrine's head, though not with a great deal of force, since his own hands were shaking. "Do you *both* understand?"

We both said that we did.

"Then Goddamnit, get some cock inside me." But as I slid the dildo out of him, he gripped a wrist on each of us. "My... first time was... brutal and rough. I want, I think I *need* to be brutally and roughly fucked again, but in the way that men who love me would do that."

"Rough it is," I said.

"Brutal it is," Peregrine said.

Michel let our wrists go and briefly closed his eyes. Peregrine and I looked at each other. We needed no eyebrow-speak, no arse-wipish, to silently say, "Not *that* brutal." "Not *that* rough."

"All right, then." Peregrine slapped Michel's hip, the sound surprisingly loud. "As the saying goes, let's get this play on the way to the stage. Move your arse over, Michel."

"What?"

Peregrine just stared him down. "Do you want this rough?"

A nod.

"Do you want this brutal?"

A nod.

"Then we'll fucking do it my way. Right?"

A third nod.

"Okay, then, move your arse out of the way."

Thoroughly bewildered, Michel moved to the very edge of the bed. Peregrine plumped up the pillows Michel had been using, added another thick one, then stretched out on his back. He gave his glowing white, blue-veined prick a pair of quick strokes to firm it up, and said, "Ride me."

Michel gaped at him. Ah. Michel was a cocksucker *par excellence*. But while he might have seen some friends of Edward's fucking on occasion, those fucks were most likely in circumstances where speed was of the essence. Bum bared, cock bared, cock in, rapid fucking, cock out, bum clothed, cock clothed, separate ways. He was unfamiliar with the ways of fucking, except those he had

seen with Peregrine and me, and oddly enough, neither of us had yet straddled the other.

There were far too many places where the one getting fucked could be on back or belly or bent over, to spend time with a straddle-fuck. But it was perfect here and now.

With a bit of instruction and a bit of worry, Michel got in place. I told him to bend forward, brace his hands on Peregrine's shoulders, even kiss the blond—"golden furred god" Peregrine growled—if he wanted to. He did.

They were tonguing each other, not at all daintily, when I slid three oiled fingers quickly up inside Michel's arse, rolled my wrist around and around, curled my fingers to make him whimper, and whimper again, and yet again. Then I pulled them out, grabbed him just under his armpits, and lifted him upright again.

I brought his left hand around and down so he could feel Peregrine's knob, where I placed it at his entrance. As he strained to get the knob in I spoke softly, while I braced Peregrine's prick.

"If you like this as much as I think you will, some time I could fuck you this way, and once you were fucking your arse on my prick, Peregrine could fuck your face, and perhaps, with luck, with a little twisting and turning and figuring the rhythms out, he could squat a little, and my right hand could shove three or four fingers up his arse and fuck him, and my left hand could stroke you. Do you like that image, Michel? Imagine that."

"Oh Christ, yes!" he moaned as he sank steadily down until Peregrine's sweaty golden hair was against Michel's glorious slender arse. Then he began to rise and fall, gradually increasing speed, and Peregrine's hips began working until they were slamming into each other.

"Don't spend, Michel, don't spend, whatever you do. You don't get to do that right now. Peregrine and I, we're in charge of your body."

As he began moving as fast as he was able, with Peregrine steadily working his cock, bringing him to the gasping, heaving edge and backing away, Michel began to plead with us in a way he had never done, would undoubtedly never again do... at least not until the next time we sexed him... *begging* to be allowed to seed.

I taunted him with my denial. Told him that if he gave Peregrine a very, very good spend, I'd allow him to ease Peregrine's cock out of his arse, turn

around, still on all fours, so he could start sucking Peregrine, while his own cock slid into Peregrine's mouth and throat, and I'd get behind him, spit on his hole, spit on my prick, and then use Peregrine's seed to lubricate my way as I mounted him all at once. And then I'd fuck him and fuck him and fuck him until he screamed out my name around Peregrine's prick, and filled Peregrine's belly as I filled his.

He was incoherent by then, but we understood the "oh yes please, dear God, yes please" part.

And that is what we did.

And when Michel collapsed from his first, though unlikely to be the last, *lovingly* rough fucks he melted into us.

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## *PEREGRINE*

*10 October 1816*

*Right after that*

*107 Meriwether Lane*

*London*

We *soared* tonight.

I decided not to count up the number of times my seed had spewed. I did not even dare to look between my legs, or put my hand down there, lest I learn that my bollocks were shriveled into tiny grapes. Forever.

We finally agreed we could do no more. That sleep had become not something possibly interesting, but necessary.

The candles were safely doused. As had become our habit, I was in the center, Rory to my right as I lay on my back, Michel to my left. Shortest to longest, both cock-length and height. But the length of the bed was more than enough to accommodate us all. More than enough for Michel to scoot down a little bit so that he could nestle in my arms, too.

My arms protected them, their bodies shielded me.

As we settled in, Michel kissed my cheek, reached across me to squeeze Rory's shoulder, and murmured, "*Je t'aime tant, mes chers.*"

I reached between both sets of legs and gently squeezed and released thoroughly sated cocks and well-drained bollocks. "I love you both."

There was silence. A long silence. Followed by a sort of combined snort and snore emanating from the Highlander beside us. I raised my right arm too quickly for him to move and elbowed him in the stomach. He woofed. I pointed out I could just as easily have elbowed lower.

We could hear his grin in the darkness.

"Aw reit, aw reit, ah loove ye baith reit back, noo woods ye baith jist gang tae sleep?"

Oh yes, we had most assuredly soared tonight, would soar again, *together*, in so many ways in the years ahead. But first, a little sleep.

I loved them. And loving them meant I was concerned for their well-being. I had only their best interests at heart in wanting them to be well-rested, because

when we woke I was going to make them soar again. In the process of which I was also going to make them far too sore to soar for quite some time. Their arses were mine!

As mine was theirs.

And so was all of the rest of me... all of the rest of *us*... as well.

That is, after all, how *these* friends of Edward's love: with everything we have, and are, and ever hope to be.

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## **EPILOGUE(S)**

## ***PEREGRINE***

*Thursday, 23 July 1818*

*Maison de la Mer*

*Suffolk, England*

*and*

*Saturday, 4 October 1818*

*107 Meriwether Lane*

*London*

I admit it. Freely. Michel and I are bastards. Not by parentage, naturally, but by inclination.

And Rory deserved it. He truly did.

He had been annoying. Vastly annoying. *Beyond* annoying, into thoroughly irritating.

The Government had proclaimed that the summer of 1818 was, even though it was not yet over, the hottest summer in recorded history. Inasmuch as the Crown, or some Parliamentary committee or some hidden-in-the-corners office in Whitehall had been collecting and analyzing weather data since just before the Restoration, everyone simply assumed that the report, initially in *The Times*, was accurate.

Not that anyone could dispute its accuracy from personal experience. Everyone suffered from the heat. That was, for the most part, why the three of us adjourned from London to Michel's "quite small, really, *mes amis*, a mere bagatelle of a building," on the shore. His father had named it as simply as he had named the enormous mansion at the *Vidal-Sansouci* primary estate. *Maison de la Mer*. The bloody, eight-bedroom "Sea House."

On that July day, it appeared from all of Rory's "manly" whinging that he was far more susceptible to heat than either of us because he was from Scotland. Where, on a normal day, it was much, much, *much* colder than anywhere in the "south." The way he carried on, one might have thought that London, or the Suffolk coast, was located in the tropics that Cook explored in the far reaches of the Pacific. And then, too, "manly" men who had as much thick red hair on his chest and arms, legs and arse, though his back was

surprisingly bare, suffered more than less-hairy men like us, because *their* thick pelts kept all that heat in.

He was joking. Mostly. A little too much “mostly” for us, however.

So we relieved him.

Of his pelt.

Rory had broken his arm last year, and in providing him with a little relief from the pain while it was being set, we accidentally discovered how very little laudanum it took to render him unconscious.

Completely, shake him, yell at him, whack his bum with a slipper until it became a delicious pink, nothing-would-work, unconscious.

Michel, not unsurprisingly, recalled the amount Rory had been given then, and how long it lasted. This time, we gave him slightly more than twice that dose, which should have given us nearly three hours. More like four, as it happened, but that was all to the good.

Our initial plan was just to shave his chest.

“So you can breathe more easily, my dear,” was the line one of us was going to use.

We hauled out sheets the housekeeper, Little Richard—so named so as to be verbally distinguishable from Big Richard, the chief gardener—had set aside for mending, or perhaps disposition into cleaning rags, and folded two to protect the carpet on the floor. We gathered razors, and hot water, and shaving soap, looked down at our naked *hairy* man, grinned at each other, and gave him just what he deserved. Without a single nick.

When we were done, we sat cross-legged on each side of him looking at our handiwork, at those massive muscles, at the ridged abdomen (we could, and did, count eight ridges), all so bare and shining white, and *smooth*.

“I really think,” Michel said with a slight snigger, “that there should be a *deep* bass voice right now, proclaiming, ‘And they looked upon what they had wrought, and behold, it was very, very, so *bloody* very good.’ Don’t you?”

I could not disagree.

And then he looked at me. “But you know, God didn’t rest until *Sunday*. When the *whole* job was done, every jot and tittle of Creation. He didn’t stop after Monday. Or mid-afternoon on Tuesday for a spot of tea. And then knock

off early on Wednesday. So even though this might be considered a task well beyond even Hercules, we really should be thorough, should we not?"

Thoroughness. A quality I had always admired. Once thought of in terms of *thoroughness*, it was naturally quite impossible for us to resist shaving the rest of him. *Quite* thoroughly. Until there was not a hair below his neck. Not a single one.

Great minds such as ours inevitably run in the same channels. When we were done, the shaving soap cleaned off, every nook and cranny wiped with fresh water and patted dry, all that hairy residue gathered up and set aside for later disposal, we again admired our handiwork. And said "oil" simultaneously.

And grinned.

We had, quite astutely, worn only minimal clothes ourselves whilst shaving him—the heat, of course, we had no other motives—and old, worn clothes at that, so it did not matter that they became more than somewhat stained as we then oiled every inch of his body. After which, with a great deal of grinning over slipperiness, we managed to haul all that weight up, and get him sprawled on his back in the center of the bed, laying on another pair of casually spread-out old sheets.

There was a deep porch outside the bedroom, its roof providing shade and mostly blocking the advance of sunlight inside. With the double doors open, a breeze played little games with us, circulating the air in little teases that only provided a modicum of relief.

The heat was so very... "oppressive" was the word we agreed on, should we be interrogated... that it was inevitable that we, too, would shed our clothes. And oil our cocks. And join him in the bed, stroking ourselves, stroking him.

As we had not previously had the opportunity to learn, laudanum rendered Rory unconscious, not unable. That magnificent cock stood up from that glorious bare flesh, wide and proud. Standing, of course, with some handy help, because on its own, unlike the tower at Pisa, it would not have merely leaned, but collapsed from its own weight onto his belly.

We were both so aroused that we could quite easily have seeded his chest and belly, and smoothed and caressed it into his flesh. But we three had long ago decided that spewing on your own was a cardinal sin. Unless, of course, you were being watched by one or both of your men and doing it for their enjoyment as well as your own. Still, it was a sin that would be most difficult to expiate.

So we wisely did not add the sin of seeding to the sin of shaving.

And fortunately, he woke up before lust led the pair of us into the ways of lewdly lascivious seeding anyway.

Equally fortunately, he awakened just as Michel was leaning over him, lapping at Rory's slit, his fist around Rory's girth the only other part touching him, while my left hand toyed with his bollocks, and my right caressed his nipple.

"Hmmm," he sighed. He smacked his lips, as laudanum left him slightly dry-mouthed, and with his eyes still closed, said, "I must have needed that nap. And what a way to wake up."

Rory lifted his right arm and reached out to caress Michel's naked arse, squeezing a cheek, before returning to his own chest and one of his favorite playgrounds. His nipples. We stopped all movement as he unerringly, of course, touched thumb and forefinger to his right nipple, squeezed, twisted, moaned...

And stopped.

His eyes widened, his mouth dropped open, and he roared "What the *fuck*?" as he surged up.

Sort of surged.

Semi-surged.

Had he been at full strength and not feeling some of the after-effects, he might have succeeded, probably knocking one or both of us aside in the process. As it was, my palm-push on his chest was enough to stop him and reverse his course. He was still strong enough to prevent himself from going flat on his back, and ended up braced on his left arm. Which in turn left him partially twisted toward me.

I had seen Rory truly furious before, on the Dock the night we met, certainly, and approaching that at times when the situation between the three of us was at its most... difficult. *This* fury, though, was somewhat tempered.

A friend of Edward's fury, though to be completely honest, *any* man's fury, will inevitably be tempered, if not totally tamed, by a talented hand, oiled, slick, working his cock, twisting around his knob just before beginning the down stroke. I helped the taming by moving my palm over the heavy muscles of his upper chest, pausing to rub my thumb around and over and around and over his oh-so-taut left nipple.

“Ye stript me nekkid!” he nearly wailed.

“But Rory,” I said, as I moved my hand so that Rory’s right nipple would not feel inferior by being left out of what was going on, “we only did it to help you.”

“Help me? Humiliate me, more likely. Ye took away me bluidy *hair*, ye fookin’... fookin’...” He stopped because he clearly couldn’t think of anything bad enough to call us. He paused, but all he came up with was, “Bastard shite-heads.”

Though no one said a word, it was obvious to all of us that he made no effort to get away from Michel’s cock work or my chest ministrations.

A manly man like our Scot might certainly moan when his personal cocksucker *par excellence*—a title I could never aspire to and so was happy with the role of Second Sucker (enter Stage Left)—when that cocksucker opened his mouth and throat and swallowed him to his *hairless* root. But he would never, under any circumstances, whimper with lust.

It certainly sounded like a whimper, however, when several things happened nearly simultaneously.

Michel worked Rory’s cock with his throat muscles, and twisted his right nipple hard.

I twisted his left nipple with equally distracting roughness, lightly slapped the inside of his left thigh with my fingertips, which evoked the well-trained response of spreading those braw Scottish beef thighs apart, and I ignored his bollocks and slid two fingers into the arsehole we had so carefully oiled.

The sound that oozed out of his throat was most definitely a whimper, perhaps even a whinge. And so I would explain to him. Later. *Much* later. For now, I had other things to explain.

“Rory, love, you were hurting. You told us so. Didn’t he, Michel?”

Michel used arse-wipish to grunt a “yes” around Rory’s cock.

“You were suffering so much from the heat, Rory.” I managed to keep a straight face on my voice, though inside I was howling with laughter, as I was sure Michel was also doing.

“What with you being from Scotland, you know, not that far from the Arctic Circle, and unaccustomed to the debilitating... Ah, that means...”



“*Unh!*” The loud grunt that first escaped his lips most likely had something to do with my rubbing his gland.

He followed the grunt with, “I bluidy weel know wha’ it means, ye arse-wipe.”

“Of course you do, of course you do.” I do patronizing excellently well. Annoyingly so.

“Now, as I was saying,” I said, and tweaked his nipple more roughly, and slid three triangled fingers inside him. I paused to enjoy his gasp.

“As I was saying, with your Scots inability to withstand all this *southern* heat, and your, ah, *fur* retaining so much heat and making you miserable, as you have told us more or less frequently...”

Michel un-swallowed Rory’s cock, and lifted his head. Looked left at our Scotsman’s face. “Hourly, Rory, *hourly*.” And went back to his happy sucking.

“You see, we love you so very much, and we hated seeing you so miserable, so we decided that since we could do nothing about the former, we could definitely fix the latter. So we freed you from your fur. Don’t you feel better now?”

He was, however, unable to answer me as he was praying devoutly to bloody fucking Christ as Michel stopped sucking and vigorously stroked Rory’s cock as our man writhed, and huge fists clenched the sheets. It took only a few strokes before he did his very personal imitation of a volcano and erupted in repeated, and *repeated* long spurts of seed up to his chin, and the hollow of his throat, his chest, those marvelous ridges, his navel, and the last few dribbles where his groin hair had been. At the same time he nearly permanently incapacitated the first three fingers of my left hand from the way his arse muscles clamped down.

Being finger-fucked and cock-sucked by the men you love is a most excellent restorative of calmness and equilibrium. Vastly more effective than tea, and far more quick-acting than ale or wine.

Of course, by then *we* needed our own restorative, as cock stands that are aching and leaking are not conducive to calmness. We looked at each other and at our man, still gasping between us, and great minds silently swept down the same channel once again.

Rory was a generous man. In all things, but in a certain matter he was more generous than either of us, perhaps more generous than either of us put together.

The sheer volume of his spend.

A left hand reached out (Michel's), as did a right (mine), and scooped up seed to join the oil already on our palms. Our hands made holy palmers' kiss with our cocks as we scrambled from cross-legged to up on our knees.

"Look what you do to us, ye bastard shite-head," Michel mocked.

He raised his head and did. "Stop."

We did. He twisted around, grabbed several of the thick pillows to put under his head and neck and raise him a little.

"Closer."

We crab-walked sideways, following orders, moving "upward" so that if we had laid our cocks on him, instead of across those rippled ridges they would have been across his upper chest.

He smirked at us, gave us an arse-wipish noise that indicated the subject of deforestation was far from over, and that if he was dissatisfied with the outcome of subsequent discussions, defenestration was entirely possible.

Arse-wipish was *such* a flexible tongue.

Almost like Rory's when it's in your arse.

"Go."

We started stroking, knowing how very close we already were, and then the bastard shite-head told us to go slower. Which we did. Which gave him the opportunity to reach between our legs, tug and fondle our balls, rub a forefinger along the flesh leading back to what an Edwardian Moses would most certainly have called the "promised land," and then use *two* fingers to press and caress our holes.

The noise from Michel was definitely a whimper. Mine was definitely a manly moan.

"Spread and let me in."

We did as we were told, separating our knees even further, leaning forward, using our free hands to brace ourselves on his waist and hip, and then he ruthlessly thrust both fingers all the way inside us. Then curling his fingers to caress our glands, followed by straightening them on the way out, almost but not quite fully so, then back in for a repeat. And another, and another, as we stroked our pricks ever more rapidly.

Sex brings out a prayerful side to men, even in the most devout non-churchgoers.

Michel, of course, prayed in French. I used more normal, ordinary English. His “dear God in heaven!” (“*Dieu du ciel!*”) and my “holy fucking God!” were nearly simultaneous as we obeyed Rory’s command: “Now!”

Our spend *perhaps* equaled his, though I made no measurements. We sprayed across his upper chest, throat, face and into his mouth. Had we been capable of any thought at all, our aim might have been better and he would have had more seed to enjoy. Though he clearly enjoyed those offerings he did receive.

He made us do all the work of rising and twisting to get his fingers out of our arses. We collapsed by his side, catching our respective breaths. After a minute or two, though, what had been highly erotic became sticky and annoying.

Michel sighed. “I will order water brought to the bathing room.”

Rory raised up to his elbows between us. “Don’t bother.”

We both said, “What?”

He put his hands on our thighs, braced himself, scooted his arse down the bed, twisted round, and then backed off the bed to stand at the foot. “Perfectly good sea out there.”

“But...”

“They’ll know...”

We might have been a stage chorus with overlapping lines.

The “they” we referred to were the dozen men we had invited for a house party by the sea. All friends of Edward’s, of course. There were two couples, and obviously had bedrooms to themselves. Ours was the third bedroom, which left eight men to share the remaining five bedrooms in Michel’s “cottage by the shore.” We assigned those at random on their arrival, and then let them sort out the *actual* sleeping (or non-sleeping) arrangements both for that first night, and the five nights since.

That there was a great deal of sex going on was a given. No gathering of friends of Edward’s in private would under any circumstances be devoid of sex. *Frequent* sex. Particularly at one of the rare house parties we hosted.

The families of retainers who would normally have been providing service to us and our guests had been sent off for their own vacations, at full pay and a bit more. Our own Edwardian servants naturally came with us.

None of these men were *precisely* off-limits to our guests, sexually. But unlike the female servants (and occasional male) in the “great” houses of England, *our* servants had a say in when, where, how, and most importantly *if* their bodies were going to be used. The three of us were also unlike other members of the ton, in that if it came to a he-said-he-said between one of our servants and a guest, with respect to force or threats, or virtually anything else, we *started* with the assumption the servant was truthful, and continued that way unless proven otherwise.

What our guests chose to do amongst themselves was entirely up to them. We had not participated. We had not been naked in front of any of them, individually or collectively. Even when swimming in the sea, a frequent activity in this heat, we wore at least reasonably modest bathing costumes, unlike the ungainly garments required, for example, with a bathing machine at Brighton. Granted, some of our guests wore nothing at all, and we did not, virgin-like, blush and avert our eyes.

We were, after all, quite Edwardian ourselves. We *enjoyed*. But we did not provide the enjoyment.

I resolutely did not remind myself of Rory and me at the Dock.

And now our bastard shite-head was proposing to flaunt himself... *all of his seed-stained, oily, smooth self*... to our guests. Who would come flocking once word spread, and with friends of Edward's, when the subject is awareness of a naked man on display, it is almost as if the news spreads mind to mind, without any intervening passage of time.

“Join me for a refreshing sea swim, gentlemen?”

And then he padded to and through the open doors, out onto the porch, and down the steps. We rushed out after him, though we lost a moment or two in a mad scramble to cover ourselves with at least the trousers we had worn. We were in time to see him at the bottom of the steps. He apparently had second thoughts, because he paused. But Rory had effectively given his word, via his taunt, so he squared his shoulders, squeezed those marvelous arse cheeks in a way we both knew thrust his prick and balls out, and stepped down onto the lawn.

Three men were walking back up from the beach, a process we were both certain would be reversed as soon as they saw Rory and where he was headed. Wyndham, Gareth and our French guest, Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, an artist of some renown whose acquaintanceship with Edward was for the most part a secret. Although any friend of Edward's, looking at his male nudes, especially his glorious *Hercules and the Nemean Lion*, with that enormous cock and unusually large, unusually hairy bollocks swinging as the hero battled, could not help but be certain of the artist's inclinations.

They did indeed stop, and we were close enough to see their mouths gape at the gleaming, *hairless* magnificence that was our Scotsman. Two (Prud'hon and Wyndham) remained where they were, to admire the view, stepping aside to let him pass by, turning to admire the rearward view. Gareth did not... *quite*... run into the house to alert the rest, but it was a near thing.

We went back into the bedroom, helpless ourselves to do anything other than gather towels, and blankets, and follow him down the stairs to join the fun. We were soon joined by everyone else in the bloody house. Servants included.

A naked beach frolic ensued. Michel and I perforce joined the nakedness, lest we be branded as un-Edwardian prudes, though we three did not join in the frolicking, which went on well into the night, after we had all joined in gathering wood and creating an enormous bonfire. It might have served as a lighthouse beacon.

We had good reason not to join. Sand, we had learned from experience, is sneaky. It seems to just lie there, quite innocently, ready to adhere to you if you're moist, but then easily brushed or wiped off. That is the picture it portrays. Here for a moment, gone in a moment. Not a big deal at all.

Sand lies.

Sand is a despicable invader, creeping in silence, working its devious way into your most private places. And bloody well staying there. And *staying* there. Especially if one started out oily, or even wet. The three of us were oily, and wet with sweat, and triply wet once we had dipped into the sea.

The remainder of the day was as marvelous in its own way as what we had shared in our bedroom, and our astute Edwardian friends knew full well what had happened there. They had no need for one (or more) of Prud'hon's superb pencil sketches to give them cock stands over their imaginings set down on paper. He used the least amount of lines and shading possible, and created vivid images of a cock in an arse or a mouth, a chain of connected arses and cocks

with each body, each prick distinct, or two men joined cock to mouth in a position I have always thought resembled the way *soixante-neuf* is written. He was generous with his talent, particularly since these sketches seemed to scorch the paper within seconds of the pencil point touching it, and had done a large number of them already, and simply gave them away.

The day became even more marvelous once I realized that Prud'hon had not joined in the fun. He had returned to the house and come back with his sketch pad. And spent a good part of the day sketching.

Sketching Rory, for the most part, though the rest of us were not immune. Fortunately, he understood that while his sketches might serve as inspirations for other works, none of our faces could be used, nor any particular body feature that might identify us. The well-known large scar on Wyndham's shoulder, for example.

When it became too dark to sketch, I accompanied him back to the house, and persuaded him to show me the additions to his portfolio.

One of them was stunning. I wondered aloud whether it might be done in oils. For a price. Fairly soon. He agreed that it could. But even the thousand pounds I offered him would not get me a guarantee it would be done by 6th September.

He stayed on in London, at my expense, freely acknowledging to anyone who asked that he was engaged in a commissioned work, and his patron had demanded anonymity. We met from time to time, in public, as though there were nothing between us but acquaintanceship.

I had, perforce, to admit to Rory that his anniversary gift, for we had chosen 6th September to be *our* anniversary, would be somewhat late. And refused to divulge what it was.

He tried, of course, to get me to tell him. By means subtle and direct. But not even an especially remarkable fuck—his cock, my arse—was enough to persuade me to speak. Though it was a near thing.

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My painting... *Rory's* painting... was delivered on 4th October. I had not expected it to be life-sized.

Rory and Michel could tell from the size and shape of the crate that it had to be a painting. The fact that Prud'hon accompanied the delivery was not lost on either of them. They were not at all pleased with me when I ushered them out

of the front parlor and locked the door while the deliverymen, supervised by the artist, unpacked the painting, and propped it carefully against the mantel.

At that moment, I was not quite sure where it would be hung, but I decided we would find the right wall space, even if it meant rebuilding the interior of the whole bloody townhouse to accommodate it. The debris was quickly cleaned up and the workmen departed, leaving only the artist and me in the room.

Michel and Rory, equally annoyed, were still hovering in the hallway. I left the room, and pointedly locked it behind me, ignoring the glares from my men as I went to the library and a few minutes later, returned, cheque in hand, went in and locked the door again. I heard a distinct, meant-to-be-heard-through-fucking-closed-doors “Bastard shite-head” from Rory.

Prud'hon was gracious enough to ignore Rory, and then his attention was focused entirely on the numbers on the cheque. That attention was accompanied by a loud gasp when he realized I had added another five hundred pounds to his fee. I endured his gratitude and that quick French kiss on each cheek before persuading him that it was indeed time for his departure, as I had a present to present.

They both glared “Well?” at me once the front door was shut. Part of the glare was because I knew that while I was escorting the artist out, they had tried the door to see if it was really locked, and were annoyed that it was.

I gave them a smile for the glares, reached into my pocket, pulled out two scarves, and handed one to each of them.

“Blindfolds, you two, and I’ll have your word that you’ll tie them so you *can’t* see.”

They split up our favorite term of endearment as they each took a scarf and did as I asked. Michel said, “bastard,” and Rory added the “shite-head.”

I guided them into the room, placed them where they would have an unobstructed view of the canvas. Lit additional candles. Moved to where I could see their faces.

I told them to take the blindfolds off, but keep their eyes shut. Their faces grumbled, but their voices did not, and they did as I asked. “Open now,” I said.

It was everything and more than I had hoped for.

There is a natural rock or stone ledge parallel to the beach, about halfway down from the house, perhaps a few inches tall. A small step. We draped a red

blanket over it, somewhat brighter than Rory's hair. Prud'hon's original sketch captured Rory seated with his back to the sea, slightly twisted to his right, his right arm out and back, angled elbow, his hand flat against the stone, fingers curled around the edge, supporting himself. His right leg was bent at the knee, his sole toward the viewer. His left leg was stretched out, knee also slightly bent, the sole of his foot visible as well. A sudden spurt of wind had, at just that sketch-instant, pushed his hair up and away from his neck and off to his right.

The painting was all that and more. Prud'hon had changed the location from the seaside and open air, to somewhere that was almost a cave. The red blanket was draped now over something wooden and thick, a plank, perhaps, with Rory's fingers curled over the ragged end of it. The breeze still blew his hair. And his broad shoulders, narrow waist, and glorious, *glorious* muscles were on display.

They blinked. And blinked again. Rory's eyes began to well.

I put a stop to any incipient maudlinity. "I decided I needed a good picture to wank to."

The outraged "What?" from each mouth spurted at the same time.

I shrugged my most nonchalant, taunt-my-lovers shrug. "Well, from time to time you're both gone, leaving me all alone, with nothing to do but imagine things. So rather than imagine, I decided I needed something definite."

I waved my hand at the painting.

"This is certainly going to work well. I can... *imagine* my hands reaching around those broad shoulders, and teasing and twisting a pair of large nipples. I can... *imagine* telling this, ah, *unknown* magnificent man, to continue twisting right so that he is on his hands and knees, his legs spread wide. I can... *imagine* spreading those muscular cheeks with my hands, lapping at his hole until it is thoroughly relaxed and I can drill deep. I can... *imagine*, the two of us, in that hidden cave or cavern, me mounting him, sliding my prick in his arse and then pounding him until I seeded his innards, and he seeded the blanket."

My men were as hard as I was. They both had excellent imaginations, as I well knew.

Michel smiled at me. "And what about our agreement?"

"That no-seed-spewing-alone agreement?"

He nodded.



I waved that away. “I’m confident both of you will agree to set that aside. Especially if I offer to let you use this unknown man with the so-fuckable arse—” another wave at the painting “—to occasionally fuel your own imaginings.”

“Fook imaginin’,” Rory said, as he began undressing.

*Fook imaginin’* indeed.

And in a very little while, and for far more than a little while, behind a locked parlor door, amidst randomly scattered clothes and shoes, on, over, around, momentarily under, various pieces of furniture, we *fooked imaginin’* and made our imaginings very real indeed.

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## MICHEL

Sunday, 7 September 1856

Hawk Island

The Mediterranean

I use the tip of my little finger, the only one on my right hand not currently wet, to push the final page out of harm's way. Oh, yes, our arses had indeed been his. And gloriously so.

I look down at my belly, at both the dried, and yes, currently sticky seed there. There are some, and I will not identify him by name, but his initials begin with Rory, who, once done, customarily react to blobs of cooling belly and chest seed with the kind of "get it off, get it off, *get it off!*" response of a young child to a harmless spider wandering innocently across a hand, an arm, a leg.

I rather regard it, here and now, as proof there is life in this old dog yet. Proof twice over in yesterday's celebrations. Proof twice over since I opened the chest.

As I have aged, aged very, *very* well, like the fine wine that is no longer in the bottle beside me, I have realized what a vile calumny it is to say that it is impossible to teach old dogs new tricks. Just yesterday, for example, after an invigorating, naturally naked, swim in the sea... our hosts have a marvelous beach of golden sand across the bay from where their yacht (the *Vengeance*) and ours (the *Falcon's Flight*) are anchored... we dried our hands and anywhere that might drip, and opened the copy of the *Kama Sutra* in the wicker basket. The very special, *illustrated* translation which Peregrine had acquired on our last trip to India, and on the blankets on the beach we *adapted* one of those illustrations. Having, of course, first paid careful attention to the written description. More like *instructions* as far as I was concerned. Close reading was of course required.

The seagulls who watched were, I am quite sure, amazed at the, ah, limberosity and bendiness, if I may coin a phrase, so vigorously displayed, by such... not *old*, precisely, but let us say, rather, *well-seasoned* men. And if by chance a spyglass or two were trained on us from our yacht, the crewmen who spied with glass in one hand and the other in the most logical location, could not complain of being shocked by their employers' conduct, because to a man, well, and three women, they are all friends of Edward's. Or of Edwina's, as Agatha teased.

We do not go out of our way to perform for our employees, but no one compels them to watch or listen. And if we sometimes imagine that they are, or might, well... It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a friend of Edward's in possession of a good cock or mouth or arse, must be in want of an observer.

And if he is not there for you to watch in turn, as he watches and wanks, you can imagine him so.

It is, after all, the ability to imagine which separates man from everything else which walks, and moves, and lives and breathes on this earth, in its skies, or in the oceans' depths.

And so I will give others some chance to imagine, to read the words and create images in their minds. Not now, of course. Nor soon. Hopefully not for some years yet. And not until we are gone.

Though given the ever-growing rigidity and narrowness of Victoria's reign, I shall have to arrange for wide, but careful distribution. Our book, finely bound in tooled leather, could never be displayed on Hatchard's shelves. It will not be an *Edwardian* version of the *Kama Sutra*, though that is something we have pondered, the three of us, from time to time, creating the most outrageous names we could think of for the positions in which three agile men might find themselves.

Arousing, nevertheless, I think. Even without actual memories to contribute to the cock stand. They were *most* articulate in writing their remembrances, I think. Far more so than I.

Getting the book to the men who will want it, who will drool at mouth and slit to own it, will be easy. A few free copies to carefully selected, agile young men in the most select molly houses, a few in the hands of the trade who service the highest and lowest in the land in London's alleys and dark corners and on the Dock, will readily and rapidly spread the word.

But I will have to ponder how to get it to the women who will want it. Or rather, I shall task the youngest Robert with that assignment. He is most certainly no friend of Edward's, but, like his father and grandfather, has always been the best of friends of three *particular* friends of Edward's. It will, I think, amuse and intrigue him, as he has inherited that intelligence and wit and sly deviousness when necessary that we were so fortunate to find on Agatha's Day in the eldest Hamilton.

Rory does not quite believe me on that point. For all his roguishness, it shocks his sensibilities; his long-held beliefs about the sensitivity and delicate

natures of women. He has never had illusions about women when it comes to fucking, nor about their innate enthusiasm for it. He was... before the advent of *us*... a fairly prolific fucker of women. But fucking does not an education make, especially not with reference to the women of the ton. And he had virtually no knowledge of them until that advent, whereas Peregrine and I had, quite literally, grown up amongst them.

The truth is, that given the opportunity, given *half* an opportunity, women will demonstrate that they have no such sensibilities at all, and are far from delicate little flowers whose soft petals must be protected from virtually everything but the man who will, he so fondly believes, eventually own them in marital fiefdom.

Years ago, when all that I have just relived was happening but was not yet complete, I recall being trapped in a conservatory of all places. Rory was, of course, not at the ball since I was there. It was also a Peregrine-free night, thus leaving me vulnerable to mothers, aunts and grandmothers of hopeful daughters, nieces and granddaughters. A particularly vigorous woman with her far-from-fragile flower in tow had been at me with all the efficacy of a pair of siege guns battering the walls of Badajoz, and as I felt the walls were perilously close to being breached, I dodged and twisted, and ultimately slithered away to the safety of the conservatory. A most unlikely haven for a known roué, so I was confident I could stay awhile out of sight, then quietly locate the host and hostess, friends of my parents, a fact which had thus compelled my attendance, and depart with my freedom still intact.

I had not anticipated the four women who came quietly through the only unlocked door, promptly locked it, and turned up two lanterns to brilliance that fortunately did not reach to the far shadows where I had initially cowered like a fox on the verge of being caught by a four-woman pack of hounds.

I did not recognize their voices, but then, there was no reason I should. Though I had an excellent ear for men's voices and a hard-on for some of them, even knowing that some of *that* group would have abhorred that knowledge, I had no such recognition skills for women. With few exceptions they all sound the same to me. All I could discern was that they were three women of the ton, and one who most assuredly was *not*.

An old voice, a not-so-old voice, a young, debutante-young but decidedly not silly, voice, with the oldest demanding to know if the book had been brought. A women's book club, a bloody discussion of bloody *literature* at a ball already awarded the accolade of being a sad... bad? mad? ...crush. I nearly

moaned intentionally aloud to alert them to my presence and then with profuse apologies make my escape, but the name of the book from the lips of the woman who was “*not*” stopped that.

*The Priest and the Penitent.*

No wonder the meeting was behind locked doors. The woman who was “*not*” was the purveyor of what the French (we French?) call *pornographie*... oh so very explicit, erotic tales, sometimes in words alone, sometimes in drawings ranging from crude to exquisite art, but always delightfully explicit, and sometimes these works had both words and art.

It was a book I was familiar with. Indeed my copy, well-thumbed, well-used, is safely locked up in the vault back home. A tale told through dialogue and drawings that were closer to the exquisite end of the artistic spectrum, the combination enough to cause even the most jaded cock to rise to the occasion. An older priest, balding, muscular, well-cocked we eventually discover, seduces a handsome young farmer, even more well-cocked, who comes to confession and stays to come.

Though the drawings may not have been exquisite, the detail in which the women discussed each of them was. The size of the cocks and balls, the firmness or not of the arses, whether the farmer's virgin penetration was painful, and how much pain he endured before finding the pleasure, which he so visibly did. The combination of my memory of the book and their explicit discussion of every inch might have gotten me hard had I not been so horrified by the shattering of the last of my illusions about women.

When they were finally done discussing, they quarreled over who would take the book home and how long it could be retained before having to be turned over to the next, during a morning call which quite naturally occurred in the afternoon. And then they finally left.

I mentioned the tale to Drake, a retired molly boy who then owned his own very much upper strata house. He died some years ago, peacefully in his sleep, with a smile upon his face I heard. I assumed he was thinking of his own version of heaven, a land of wine and whisky, and seventy-two virgin young men to pleurably debauch. I discovered from Drake that I still had illusions about women that could be shattered.

They like watching.

*Actual* watching.

Men fucking and sucking. Or performing any of the innumerable things, and variations on things, that men may do when we are rutting with each other.

Their husbands, fathers, sons, nephews, uncles, grandfathers, who do these things they publicly profess to find offensive and obscene, are certainly not performing at home where they might be caught. With equal certainty, women cannot cruise down a molly walk in a park, or go into certain seriously dark parts of Vauxhall Gardens. The Dock would be impossibly dangerous.

Enter Drake and one other, who allowed women into their houses, for a not inconsiderable price, to peer through peepholes into well-lit rooms. Anyone who fucks in a molly house, or any brothel, has to be a damned fool not to realize there is always a possibility of being observed. Sometimes the women selected the molly boys they wanted to see in action; sometimes it was mere chance. Most often, the men and their clients were unaware of the watchers. But sometimes they knew, and put on an extra vigorous display, even to performing, naturally for a fee, as requested. It was with even greater rarity, Drake let me know, that the molly boy or the client knew it was a woman who was watching. But of course, never *who* the woman was.

I can appreciate the beauty of a woman, inner and outer, to precisely the same, somewhat austere degree, with which I appreciate the beauty of fine porcelain, the flowing grandeur of an Arabian stallion in motion, or the sounds of Beethoven's "Eroica". But I cannot quite comprehend why women would enjoy this, when the idea of observing two women doing whatever it is they would do to each other, though I could logically figure it out if I bothered, is offensive at worst, boring at best. I barely comprehend desire between a man and a woman, even though I have imitated it on necessary occasions in my thankfully long-past youth.

But after the night we stepped out of the closets in which we had been hiding, they knew. The ton knew. The broadsides and scandal sheets ensured the country knew, or those who cared to know, that it was not merely two men together, but *three*.

The men who had never had sex with men before wondered about us. Imagined what it might be like to use one or more of us, perhaps while the other two watched. But they dared not be seen with us in anything remotely approaching privacy, to whisper and hint about what they wanted. Sex that dare not speak its name. Or at least sex *they* dared not name.

The friends of Edward's knew damn well what it was we did, still do with each other, and some wished to watch and wank, some to join in. Some were

even bold enough to ask. Though they never got their wishes then, nor ever since. They will simply have to rely on the elaborate paintings in their minds or stories they tell themselves in intricate detail before they seed.

At least until the book is published.

The women, though. I wonder if they wonder in detail what it is we do when the doors of the three houses are shut and locked. When the servants are gone. When the doors between are opened.

I wonder how *vivid* their imaginations are, if they are amongst the vast majority of women who have never actually seen a man's cock in a man's arse or a man's mouth.

Do they imagine the roué naked, on his knees in Rory's sitting room, while his two men stand fully dressed, the plackets unbuttoned and down, their weeping cocks out as he sucks them in turn, caressing and tugging on their bollocks until they each explode down his throat?

Do they... rightly? wrongly? ...imagine the rogue with an enormous thick cock dominating us, first putting the rake on his belly on the bed, that rakish prick rubbing the sheets, then fucking him with long, pounding strokes until they both explode? And after a miraculously short recovery time, since this is, after all, their fantasy where all is possible, the rogue lifts the long, wiry, lightly haired legs of the roué over his shoulder, fucking him even more brutally, commanding him to fuck his own fist, until the clenching of the roué's cock as he spews seed in long, arcing spurts up to his chin and then dribbling the last drops onto his hairless belly brings the hairy Scotsman over the edge once more and he fills a second willing hole?

Or do some of them, the ones with daring and I-can't-believe-how-wicked-I-am imaginations, imagine something like the red-haired rogue, gloriously red-haired everywhere, on all fours while the rake devours his arse, getting it dripping wet with spit and sweat, then using only that and the pre-seeding oil that leaks from that wide slit, shoves in balls deep to howls of delight, before the howls are cut off by the long, slender roué's cock that fucks his mouth fast and deep as well, until at last the short, thick, angrily red Scots prick seeds the bed and is rewarded with an arse and belly full of his lovers' spending?

All those imaginings. And more, far more, than those random thoughts of only sex, or of sex as the only way to know and make known love. Those imaginings, though, I imagine were only imagined long and long ago, when we were so very young, more vigorous, less lined. They have turned their

imaginations, women and men alike, or as alike as women and men can ever be about anything at all, to images in their heads who are currently young, vigorous, handsome and lined not at all.

Fools.

All of them, fools.

For as Enobarbus would most certainly have said had he known Rory and Peregrine, as he knew Antony and Cleopatra: "Age cannot wither them, nor custom stale their infinite variety. Other men might cloy the appetites they feed, but these make hungry where most they satisfy."

Enough! We will renew their fantasies with our book, taunt them with our tale of *Love's Labours Ever Won*, and in a way live riotously after, when we have gone to our rewards, if rewards there are at all, whether just or unjust. Though if just, our rewards should be most glorious, indeed.

I rise, stretch. Carefully stack the pages, replace them in the chest, and lock it. Rinse the wine glass in the bucket and place it stem up on the provided cloth.

I return to our room. Look down at my husbands. For so they are, though not at law, nor even church-sanctioned. By *any* church. We were married by an elderly Catholic priest in Rome a decade ago. A priest who, we had discovered by accident, quietly and quite in violation of doctrine, actually believed in God's generous love. He was a friend of Edward's, but unlike so very many of his colleagues, Father Petrelli kept his vow of celibacy. And with equal quietude did all he could to help those friends of Edward's in his country who were beleaguered by Italy's own bangers.

He was bemused by our request for three ceremonies, Peregrine to me; Rory to Peregrine, and Rory to me, but complied with appropriate solemnity, accompanied by the slightest of twinkling in his eyes, and a great deal of love. A quite generous love that expected no return except for us to love well and long. He was most shocked at the size of the gift we put entirely at his disposal, and only his, for the uses he saw fit.

My husbands are naked, sprawled on the bed, sheet on the verge of sliding off the end. The brilliant moonlight filters through the sheer drapes that rustle softly in the slight breeze, painting them in cool blue that belies the actual heat. Peregrine is, as always when we sleep together, in the center, on his belly at the moment. Rory is on the left side of the bed, on his back, half-hard cock flopping on his thigh, one red-and-grey haired calf closely pressed to the still-



golden fur of Peregrine's leg. I carefully drape the robe across the back of a chair, and climb into the bed on the right side.

As usual, when the three of us are finally together and presumably ready to sleep, Peregrine wakes enough, though he is not truly conscious, to squirm and turn, flip and flop, knees, elbows and those somewhat Brobdingnagian feet flailing about, sometimes endangering delicate and not-so-delicate parts of our bodies—which he most vigorously denies when we point to the occasional bump or bruise, and contrives most fanciful explanations for them that do not involve his guilt—before he finally quiets and winds up on his back between us.

His arms curl and draw us in. Heat or no, touch is a necessity for us. As it always has been, as it ever will, for after all this time, these three dogs are far too old to learn, or wish to learn, any new tricks that might change what we have.

I press my knee against Peregrine's leg, just a light touch and release to say "good night."

His name means traveler, wanderer. And tomorrow we will begin readying for our leave-taking, and on the day after, board *Falcon's Flight* and begin our peregrinations again.

Peregrine is our falcon. A fine falcon, indeed. He ripped our jesses off that night, and though the hoods yet remained for a little while, we got free of them as well. We flew then, by God, we *soared*. We, Rory and I, were not the wind beneath his wings, lifting him higher. We were, we *are* his wings, stroking in heartbeat synchronicity for forty years now. And if we no longer fly so high, if our wings are no longer as strong as once they were... yet still we fly. And still we love.

And in all those years, in all those flights, of fancy and otherwise, his mother's words to him were shared and said between us, often and often, or heard without a word being said.

I love you, my dear, always and forever. And another day more.

Imagine that.

***FIN***

## Author Bio

*Eric does not do well with third person writing, as his own writing attests. Nevertheless, he's giving it a go. Eric is a Midwesterner, and older than dirt. Or as Lady Glenhaven might have said, "He's old enough to have sailed with Noah." He has had an intimate connection with the arts during these many years, and in the real world he writes for a living, but not fiction. (Though there are those who might differ about what he and his colleagues do.) He started reading at five and has been a science fiction/fantasy addict ever since. That's why, with rare exceptions, most of his writing, has been and probably will be in those genres. There are exceptions, though, as you've just read. Hopefully a book of poetry with a working title of A Rollerblade Day will be published by December of 2014. He's working on two more M/M romance novels, though not quite as long, in "another England": no way out and The Serpent Mark. The former is possible by the end of the year. The latter—who knows? He's also acquired the rights to use an incredible piece of "dragon art" called "Worldbreaker, Worldmaker," by the very talented Rachael Mayo, as a book cover—besides buying the original for his office wall. If you're interested, you can find her portfolio at DeviantArt. Now he just has to think of a dragon shifter tale to go with it.*

## Contact & Media Info

*Questions? Comments? You can contact Eric via email.*

[Email](#)