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WHEN MALICE SURROUNDS YOU

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Constance J. Hampton

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Wellington's Officers Series Book 2

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Editor: Alex Blackburn

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Chapter 1: A GRAVE IN ST. GILLES

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June 1809, London, Saint Giles-in-the-Fields.

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A fine black calf's-leather bootee tapped on the big grey slab of limestone on the church floor. It hesitated when it felt a slight tilt.

The woman lifted her skirt from her ankles so that she could look more closely at the well-trodden horizontal tombstone. It was lying in the middle of the path which led from the rows of seats for the congregation straight to the exalted, barely adorned altar. No doubt every poor soul that entered the now disreputable church would place at least one dirty foot, probably more, on that slab that covered the rotting corpses beneath the tiles.

Saint Giles-in-the-Field hid the way into the Rookeries, the most feared, criminal neighborhood in all of London. It was the Cerberus to London's hell that stretched as far as Great Russell Street and lay flanked by another poor man's cursed region called Seven Dials.

Perfect! It was just perfect!

A sardonic smile played around lush lips, hidden behind the black lace of her heavy veil. She felt like gathering the spit in her mouth and dropping it on the stone. She would have performed this disgraceful act if she had not seen someone praying fervently in the benches at the back.

The woman curved her lips; she had noticed the pious wreck peeping at her through wrinkled dirt-stained hands.

"May you burn in hell, William the Fat," she whispered. "May your flesh crinkle like lard in a hot pan and may it

grow back on your evil body and start your agonies all over again, every single day you're doomed to stay there!"

She stepped back two paces, gloating as she looked at the place where her elegant black boots had rested.

"I hope I am standing on your useless dick," she muttered, careful to keep the venom from her voice.

She heaved her left foot and let the heel come down hard. She almost yelped when the slab of stone moved.

"Ma'am?"

She immediately recognized the eager voice of the young vicar and raised a hand to remove the black widow's veil which was covering her face. She slid her black wrap from her shoulders with the other.

The Reverend Simon Desmond, newly appointed vicar of the suffering church of Saint Giles-in-the-Field, stood hesitantly before her. She wondered if he had not immediately recognized her as his stare was directed at her highly indecent neckline, which was decidedly inappropriate for a mourning widow.

He was a handsome man, this young vicar. His crow black hair curled around his ears. His jaw was firm and his eyes shone with what could be easily interpreted as devotion. He lacked height but that gave him the opportunity now to stare directly at her barely covered chest. She wondered if he would be so bold as to put his nose against her cleavage and suppressed a grin.

"Reverend Desmond," she murmured, "I did not hear you approach."

Simon Desmond almost fell down on his knees when he acknowledged his latest benefactor at last. Her cleavage had not only been revealing but also very distracting.

“Mrs. Alexander,” he chanced to mumble, almost unable to look up into her lovely face. It was hard to choose between the milky, fleshy, mounds in the black silk bodice or the beautiful heart shaped face that was now surrounded by a mantilla of black lace.

“So this is his final resting place?” Marguerite Alexander’s voice was husky as if she was swallowing tears.

“Yes, yes, I am afraid so,” the vicar confirmed, wringing his hands.

“I explained to you that it would be hard to find a suitable place inside the church...”

Marguerite put a mesmerizing black satin-gloved finger on her almost visible breastbone.

“Don’t you worry, Reverend,” she breathed, “my husband would not have wanted any other place...”

In order to hide her smirk, she turned her head away from the light that fell through the high, coloured windows.

Saint Giles-in-the-Fields, his preferred place of burial, indeed! He would now be turning in his shallow grave if he could. The place was the messiest burial site in all of London. The bodies in the graveyard almost flowed out of the coffins onto the sticky mud whenever it rained in this terrible part of the city. The always present stench of decay was a fierce attack on the senses, and any normal breathing person would hardly be able to stand the smell for more than a few minutes without fainting. She could. She, Marguerite Alexander, formerly the Honourable Miss Marguerite Aurora Ross, the late Baron Halkhead’s daughter, just stood there in this hell of decay, almost dancing on the grave of her tormentor: her so very dead husband, William

Alexander. She imagined that his decrepit smell of degeneration was probably in her very nostrils right now.

The Reverend Desmond had initially refused to take her husband in for burial. He had not wanted him inside the church and neither had he wanted him in the cramped graveyard. Everybody in London knew that the church of Saint Giles-in-the-Fields was overflowing with dead bodies; rotten corpses, everywhere.

Marguerite had offered to pay through her nose to get William Alexander inside the church. And so it happened. The church was a poor man's church and how could a vicar in need of funds refuse to fulfil a dying man's last wish? If Mr. William Alexander had expressed his preference for his last resting place in the picturesque church in the middle of his beloved city of London, who was the humble vicar to refuse?

The grave had been shallow, narrowly accommodating the big coffin. The slab of stone was wobbly because it almost rested on the lid of the coffin. It had been somebody else's grave, because the slab of stone carried the name of a corpse long gone: another William. This one may have died peacefully amongst his beloved family in 1745, instead of perishing on his smelly commode, shitting himself in his last moments of agony, when his black heart and bilious liver deserted their services. His own servants had turned their heads away from his corpse, pinching their noses when he had been carried away for the necessary rites. The corpse had been coloured yellow and green and had reeked worse than a pig's sty full of shit.

Marguerite had to bite her lower lip to keep from smiling at the memory of how her husband's ever-fawning

staff had been disgusted with their employer, whose demise had been so undignified.

Smelly Pig William, tucked away under somebody else's stone. The affront! The delight!

Nobody had been there when his heavy coffin had been lifted into the shallow hole of the grave; none of his old cronies, none of the other misers, none of his Scottish family members who had only come out later in full force to get their hands on his fortune. Such loneliness in death! Such sweet revenge!

She had professed to be on the way to the funeral, but her heavy carriage was delayed in the crowded streets. She had meticulously planned a route that took her through the narrowest streets, which she had ordered her unwilling but obedient coachman to take.

At last, the vicar, tired of waiting, had started the service in honour of William's demise without her, exactly as she had intended. In June, one could not delay a burial for too long and it was not right anyway to bury a law-abiding citizen after six o'clock. There were the evening prayers for the parish, and in any case, the body had emanated a smell that sickened the coffin bearers to gasping and heaving and had to be gotten rid of as soon as possible. It was assumed that the widow was having such a bad time parting from her husband that his fat and fast decomposing corpse had remained a few days too many on this earth. She had insisted he should be buried on a Sunday, the Day of the Good Lord, as she had whispered. A bit scandalous; burials were for the weekdays, but after another sum had parted from her black satin reticule, the needy vicar realized that the Bishop lived far away and would anyhow, most

certainly, approve of the extra funds for the poor parish, if not for the vicarage.

No doubt in her sadness, the widow had not realized that the body could be partly embalmed and sprinkled with specific herbs to prevent that awful smell, which was causing everybody who approached the expensive, but curiously dripping coffin within a circle of twenty yards to gag; the stench was unbearable.

“Are you well, Mrs. Alexander?” the vicar asked, still not able to remove his stare from her breasts.

Ah yes, the vicar! It had taken her the loan of a dress from one of the serving wenches and an afternoon near the women’s bathhouse, filthy to the rafters, to find out that yes, the vicar was too good for this world! He just could not say no to the needy, and no, the vicar was not married. Yes, he had his small vices, but didn’t all men of flesh and blood? Especially as he was not blessed with a tall body (snicker), but the face of an angel, nay make that the bounder Lucifer with his dark good looks and his crow-coloured hair.

One of the younger misses had told her with a giggle that the vicar, although very serious and probably pious, had not been able to keep his sights nor his hands off his generously endowed laundress, suggesting he might marry her, although he had already checked the registers and found out that she was firmly wed to a sailor. That had been a bit of a setback for Marguerite. Such a man could easily become a nuisance to her not very serious intentions.

The next confession had convinced her to try to seduce the man into burying her spouse in the most obnoxious place in London. The girl said he did not “feck”, which meant, within a good translation, that the vicar touched, but did not put his cock inside a woman of his parish. He

obviously had narrowed down the biblical idea of “carnal knowledge” to the act of penetration itself, not to the delights of touch and suck.

Marguerite had felt a pang of desire worming its way down her belly to a very sensitive place between her legs. Ah, God, but touch and suck would suit her very well! There would be too much explaining to do around the birth of a child more than ten months after the death of one’s husband nearly in his dotage anyway. Further information had taught her that the vicar preferred abounding mounds of flesh on a woman’s chest (which Marguerite could amply supply). The girl had giggled profusely, obviously hiding a few more juicy details. She did reveal that he had this thing about women clad in black. It was almost eerie and all too close to the description of a widowed Marguerite, but there it was! As a final insult to her deceased tormentor, she would seduce the vicar who put him in his undignified grave.

She had come to the church this morning, dressed in her inappropriately low-cut widow’s weeds to see how to go about that task.

She had known he would come to the church as soon as he had seen her burly coachman, Crowley, holding the leading horse of the carriage in front of the church. Three armed footmen were standing next to her town-carriage to avoid any molestation on the part of the less honourable people that crawled out of London’s Rookeries.

She turned to the vicar with a sad face. She had already noticed that “sad” drew more of his attentions than anything else.

“I do feel a bit faint...” she said with a weak gesture of her gloved hands towards her temple. She moved slowly as

if she was on the verge of falling to the floor. At that moment she felt his helpful hands high on her waist, his thumbs closely under her high corseted breasts.

Vicar Simon Desmond originally came from a good family; his father was a country-squire in Kent. He had been the third of seven children and at the time serious enough to be deemed suitable for a religious calling. He was only twenty-six years of age when he had become the vicar of a very small village in Sussex. There he met a wealthy widow who used her sexual wiles on him. They had a somewhat stormy 'affair' until she found somebody else to her liking: richer, older, another man of the cloth. Regrettably one that surpassed poor Simon in rank and position. When Simon started to stalk his paramour after a great fit of the mopes and threats to his competitor, word suddenly reached the bishop about his unsuitable behaviour. He was given the choice of a vicarage in another hole in the ground in Northumberland or Saint Giles-in-the-Fields; the disreputable and poor parish in London. He had chosen wisely for the city of London. It was just that Saint Giles-in-the-Fields was possibly the worst place one could be called to. It was dirty, filled with criminals and was the poorest section of London. It was also worldly however. Its inhabitants did not frown if you leered at pretty, fleshy girls, they merely expected you to. His background protected him from the all too ambitious girls who would like to share his bed and the household of the small vicarage by means of a snug golden ring on their finger; his golden ring. The likes of him did not marry the likes of them, and that was final.

His small victories over willing girls were sensibly few within the parish. He did not mix with the abounding Magdalena's of the neighborhood, who represented about

half of the Rookeries population, if not more, except for taking their confessions and tending to their last rites.

The not so few times his mind was overpowered by his overwhelming manly desires, at twenty-seven one still had his baser needs, he had taken off his vicar's garb and disappeared into the anonymity of the crowds near Covent Gardens. He might have to take a paid woman against a wall in an alley, always putting on the French letter his ex-lover, the widow, had provided him with, but it silenced his rampant needs for some time. Being a vicar did not protect one from being human or horny.

Without the clothes of the clergy-man on his back he assumed he could stretch the words of St. Paul to an agreeable extent; that he was only a sinner finding carnal knowledge with somebody outside the boundaries of the parish. To be truthful, his was not a calling but a job.

The almost fainting widow Alexander, although way out of his league, was now resting comfortably on his lower arms. She had been subject to his erotic musings and dreams for many long, shameful and rather hot nights in a row of late.

She could never fool him with her demure behaviour. As a man of the world, he knew she was nurturing lustful feelings for him. After all, this was something he had to cope with on a daily basis.

When he tried to straighten her a bit he rested a hand on the delightful underside of her generous bosom.

Her slight little smile told him all he needed to know, so he convinced her to come into his vicarage for a strengthening cup of tea.

Only when she turned around to peer at her husband's grave did he see the vengeful expression on her exquisite

face. Vicar Desmond was well aware of her obvious thoughts of revenge, his widow in Surrey had been full of it as well, and he was not disinclined to be used for the purpose of it. After all, his life had not been a bed of roses either.

He did not mind being ‘used’ by the poor beautiful Mrs. Alexander, especially now that she was so recently widowed and poor in the way of the spirit, not to mention the deceased husband’s fortune that was now hers to spend as she pleased.

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From the diary of M. Aurora Ross

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Third of June 1809

Dear Diary,

Welcome to my life. I never dared to have you when the Fat Man was still alive. I know everybody including him spied on me and I even suspected that poor Mr. Baines, his man of affairs, had strict orders to report every small thing about me that would be of interest to the Fat Man.

Of course, I could have given you into the care of Rose, my wonderful maid, but I had already burdened her enough with my scraps of newspaper about H.A., and I didn’t want to make another nuisance of myself. The Fat Man would not have been above punishing poor Rose if he had any inkling that she was hiding my most intimate thoughts put on paper. I know he disliked Rose utterly, and for sure, the feeling was mutual. The only condition I dared pose, before marrying him, was that Rose would come and be allowed to stay until mine or her dying day.

No, Rose was disgusted when she heard I was to marry the Fat One, but who were we to oppose the wish of my grabbing parents?

What I had wanted to put on paper anyway, in those last five years in my prison on Berkeley Street, was his abusive annoyance with me when he found out that I could excite him enough to feel some stirrings in his lower regions, but as soon as he contemplated to do the deed he would go as limp as a lily. (That was not my own expression, but one out of those naughty books out of the Far East that were lying around in his dressing room.)

I had wanted to write about his unreasonable jealousy if a younger man dared to look at me twice. I was not suffering from leprosy or any such thing and men always stared! So many dinners I had on a tray in my bedroom because he did not wish his customers to gawk at me. I was not aware at the time that he resented their licentious thoughts about me, because I never noticed that they nurtured anything of the kind, which was silly and stupid and naïve of me. Alas, that is what I was when I married the Fat One: silly, naïve and mercenary. Oh Sweet Lord was I mercenary!

Should I have counted the number of days that I was not allowed to leave that miserable house? Because he was scared out of his wits that I would smile at the street sweeper and have him debauch me in a hidden street corner?

Should I have stated the obvious, that I was to be released only those few times, when it could not be helped, like that dinner with the London Mayor because London and the Prince needed money?

Oh Lord, how I hated those invitations. He always took his revenge later by doing those abhorrent things to me as soon as we returned home –back into that prison. He was such a vile man, that Fat One! I will only be consoled by the fact that he never, never...

But today, I had my day of revenge.

Today I stamped on the stone that covered his stinking fat body. Today I came back to check if he was there, at the most detested place I could think of. Sweet Good Lord- I had the impression I could smell him where his body decayed. Speedy decay: it was just as the Apothecary had promised me when he gave me that powder to throw over his disgusting corpse when it was securely in its gross, leaking coffin.

I had tea with that young vicar who looks like an angel but who had adopted vices that would make even Lucifer himself blush. It was just like that laundress said, but heavens, did he bring me to the gates of Paradise with his tongue and his fumbling! Am I naughty enough to describe it to you? Oh, why not, he is not here to read it, he is dead, dead, dead!

I had seen it in one of those books that the Fat Man kept in his dressing room. I just never guessed it would be such a wonderful thing to experience! To have someone's tongue actually licking your very intimate spot, while he was doing things to that strangely rigid member of his. I call that strangely rigid, but the laundress said that almost all men get to that stage when they are properly 'excited.' I asked her afterwards. She told me all those things for only one sovereign. She sat with me in the carriage. I had Crowley look for her and she was not very far away. The whole

neighborhood had come out to watch the carriage, imagine! I was sitting in it talking to this girl, who knew everything!

She was not shy at all about it and I was happy to hear an experienced account of those things people normally keep secret from a 'respectable' woman.

I wonder if Rose ever knew about those things. She had been married, you know, although that must have been before I was born. If I remember correctly, there was no husband around when she worked for my stepfather and mother.

We have our own laundress at Berkeley Street but still I offered this one the job, just to have her close to me. I was astonished that she refused to come, but she said she was seeing somebody special and that she hoped he would come to live with her and her mum. She told me her husband never came back from his sea-voyage to the Far East, as the ship was reported to have gone down near Aden, wherever that is.

Imagine preferring a life in the Rookeries with a specific person, to serving in a great house in Mayfair! I had to make her swear to keep silent forever about our conversation; but she only laughed and said that everybody knew about what she was explaining to me. Imagine; everybody, except for me! Well, I knew about that thing where the Fat Man forced me to take him in my mouth. Good sweet Jesus, he was rank and stale with that terrible pungent odour of his! This must have been because he hardly ever took a bath and that useless old valet of his was not allowed to wash him "there."

Well, there had been enough punishment for me to last me a lifetime! Yes, punishment, for my mercenary thoughts when my stepfather convinced me to marry the Fat One.

People say I was forced, Rose says so, but I did say 'yes' in that chapel four years ago, didn't I? I wanted all that money and the luxuries at the time and I never once looked back at poor Hengist, who begged me to run away with him after that one kiss.

Oh, my wonderful Hengist! I was only just eighteen and certain that being married to the Fat One would be the right thing to do. Hengist was only a captain at the time, and although he is the second son of the Earl of Loghaire, normally a great catch for a girl like me who was only 'Honourable' and just a lady, he would never have the money his brother might inherit (said my stepfather), if any would have been left, of course.

The Old Earl was known to be a terrible gambler and a rogue, until he had that accident and slowly lost his marbles and was at last reduced to live like a plant in a hothouse. Anyway, Mother and my Lord McKenna needed the money then, or better the day before that yesterday. After I wed the Fat One, Mr. Baines had explained to me that the Fat Man had bought off all their debts. Those debts would have been able to reduce us all to a life on the streets, or worse yet, in a vile Debtor's Prison, if I had not consented to marry the Fat Man. I married him because Father and Mother kept on pleading with me and I truly could not stand their tears and laments.

I had no idea what it would mean to be married to someone. I thought you just said yes, wear an incredibly expensive dress and then depart in a beautiful town-carriage.

Rose tried to warn me, but my mother sent her away on some errand. My mother should then have warned me about my marital duties, but she just told me to lie back, open my

legs wide and think of the jewelry I was going to get when I presented my husband with a son and heir.

If only I had talked to the laundress before the Fat One put his dirty hands on me, or even that I had met Simon before everything happened, because when I married the Fat One I did not have a clue about what it meant to be with a man. How nice it is to have the company of a man like Simon! He's only a couple years my senior and, unlike that Fat Old Ape, he smells good, has nice strong arms and a sweet smelling chest with no hair at all on it.

Of course, I didn't have any experience with men at all. My hag-mother took care of that. I was only allowed to go to church or to the lending library when we lived in Edinburgh, but that is all water under the bridge, now.

I must hurry because Mr. Baines will come to explain the accounting to me. He already told me a lot more about Alexander and Stephenson's, even during the time the Fat One was still alive and travelling. I think it is very complicated, all of it, but he insists that I know about these things because I own most of it now. Rose shakes her head about it, but I tell her it is very enlightening and does keep boredom at bay.

Mr. Baines' motives might be a bit less noble, I think, than I'd given him credit for, but I don't care. He teaches me to read the balances of the 'ready investments' but I have never been on any of the Fat One's shipyards in my life. I have the impression he wants me to be happy with my fortune, which is reasonable enough. He is looking for someone to buy the shipyards because I have no inkling as to how to run them. Well, I couldn't care less about those shipyards. Truth be told, the thought of ships gives me a

queasy belly, but then, I have never been on a real one except the ferries over the Firth.

Back to happier thoughts. Tomorrow night I will have a rendezvous with Simon. I will take a hackney to St. James Park where he will join me for a ride. God, but I am a wanton woman because I cannot wait to have his... I'd better reign in my wanton thoughts, because I am not certain Mr. Baines will not guess them otherwise.

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Chapter 2: A MOLLY HANGING

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London, Newgate, 23 November 1809

The crowd seemed to go berserk when the condemned criminals were finally led through the Debtor's Door outside the Old Bailey. The mass of bodies swayed in front of the portable gallows. They surged and pushed shouting, shrieking, and cursing in a merge of England's most colorful dialects and accents. Just for a short time the differences in station, race and sex seemed to disappear as everybody chanted in a strange mutuality: gentlemen, potboys, whores, shop-girls, and servants alike.

"Bugger! Bugger!" the mob roared in wild elation, obviously gin-soaked and beer-bellied even at the early hour.

A swat of drunken harlots tried to rush the cordon of soldiers carrying pikes who were placed around the gallows to ensure a neat execution without interference from the mob. The military men just laughed and called out hoarse, raw jokes; pushing the women back with lecherous glee, manhandling them by purposely gripping their sagging breasts, skinny butts, and fishy-smelling mounds. The heavily painted birds of the streets jeered at them, reeking of the night's bad gin, their bodies unwashed after having struggled out of their dirty cots and pallets just to be in time for the early morning's execution.

They leered at the soldiers in the cordon for after-execution custom; anyone there knew that executions changed men into horny rutting beings and business would be good.

The three prisoners stumbled to the short stairway leading to the platform of the portable gallows; their wrists tied in front of their chests, a rope bound their arms, shoulders, and bellies to diminish any motion of the upper body. They wore white night-caps that hid the hair on their rugged heads--obligatory at the execution--lending them a strange innocent look.

All three were shivering, frightened by the teeming mass of people that surged and moved wildly, shouting the vilest curses, throwing dung and dirt at the convicts who were now visibly white with fear.

“Look at those Harpies,” Lord Morvern mumbled, staring at a group of vicious bedraggled women, who shrieked with foulest insults, throwing handfuls of rotten fruit and vegetables at the hapless convicts. It was clear that the main target of their abuse was the sodomite who tried to hide behind the prison’s ordinary.

“Would you mind sitting back, sir?” The ungodly reeking fat man next to the Viscount urged.

“We all paid the same money for a good view, mind.”

Philip shifted his chair a bit so that he turned away from the stench of the man. Some people did not understand the meaning of soap and water and this was surely one of them. He got his perfumed handkerchief out of the lace sleeve of his shirt and pushed it against his already long-suffering, offended nose.

He had wanted to do that from the moment he had entered the small, smelly room, but Jefferson had warned him not to appear obnoxious.

Enough was enough, though. Philip inhaled the scent of Bay Rum deeply, his nose hidden in the immaculate linen.

The two men opposite Philip leaned out of the small window as far as they could, as they tried not to listen to the fat man's new protests.

"Oakden's wet himself," the one closest to the window-sill said glumly. "Filthy swine! See! There's piss on the floor right where he stands."

The fop next to him sniggered, merciless in his glee for the convicted sodomite.

"That will teach him for putting his dick in a boy's arse!"

Master Jefferson, seated at Philip's other side, looked very grim. He stared at the three men on the scaffold who were praying with the prison's ordinary, while in the meantime, the hangman was putting a noose around their necks; tugging and pulling at them, unmindful of the fact that the three men were having their last worldly conversation with their Maker.

The crowd, impatient with the spiritual support the convicts were seeking, roared, chanted, and threw more rotten objects.

Master Jefferson pursed his lips when a few hardy and filthy hags pelted the praying men with horse dung, trying not to imagine what it must be like to have to die before such a teeming mass of Londoners, wet with one's urine and dirty with unspeakable dreary projectiles.

Although the tickets for the view from this house, directly on the scaffold in front of the Old Bailey, had been arranged by him as soon as it was known that the sodomite would hang, he had hardly uttered a word since they were led to the window with a clear view of the gallows. He simply abhorred London's most favourite pastime: watching public executions and trying to participate in it as much as

possible. He had been appalled by his deceased client's request to bring Lord Philip Agnew, Viscount Morvern, to this particular one.

Philip sighed morosely. He truly wondered what he was doing there, watching three convicted criminals who were shortly to be executed. He did have a distinct idea, looking at the elderly Oakden, who had started to shed tears now.

He needed to piss, but he was mortified that the other viewers in the room would condemn him for being a coward if he disappeared behind the screen, now that the convicts were waiting to have a sack pulled over their heads and the dreadful moment when the hatch would open was fast approaching. He folded his legs instead, squeezing his genitals, hoping he would not follow Oakden's example and wet his pants.

It was freezing cold outside, and the opened window did not help to keep the room at an agreeable temperature, although the owner of the house had built a big fire in the fireplace and had placed a simmering hot rum punch awaiting their consumption on their small table. Philip clenched an ice-cold hand around his beaker that had long ago been warm. The handkerchief remained pushed against his nose because the fat man started to move in agitation, wafting his pungent odour into the room.

"He's sniveling, the foul beast!" the young man opposite him said.

Richard Oakden, the sodomite, had clearly started crying after the Ordinary of Newgate had had a word with him; last words of a religious nature, no doubt. Philip wondered how anyone could listen to words of consolation when one was about to be hanged for his so-called unnatural sins of the flesh. Poor bugger indeed.

A roar went up from the crowd when the three criminals had sacks covering their heads and were put on the hatch with the ropes still hanging loosely on their shoulders. "Can't be long now!" the fop next to the windowsill said excitedly. Philip ground his teeth and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again he saw that the three long ropes were hanging taut and the convicts were dangling waist-deep into the black hole where the hatch had fallen.

"Burnskill has bungled the sodomite!" the young man opposite Philip shouted with glee, "See, the rope is still moving and twisting!"

Philip felt his stomach do a somersault. Christ, Oakden's neck had not been broken when the hatch opened and now he was slowly being strangled by the rope.

"I gather Burnskill must be hanging at his legs by now so as to hasten the suffocation or stretch his neck," Master Jefferson said worriedly.

"Serves him right to get Oakden's shit and piss all over him," the fop muttered, "No doubt he did it on purpose. He hates sodomites. They heard him say so when they brought them to the executioner's room yesterday."

He looked around with pride that he was able to come up with that juicy piece of information.

The fat man next to Philip only belched and took a bite of the shepherd's pie that no one else had wanted to touch. He stared at the scaffold with a ferocious gleam in his piggish eyes.

Master Jefferson coughed with dismay, roundly cursing his client for exposing him to the barbaric scene of a man struggling for the breath he would never catch again, leered at by grueling lechers that found gratification in his slow struggle with death. Of course the hangman had 'bungled'

the poor man. He had probably been paid to do it by one of the righteous pricks that found it necessary to start another witch-hunt against the men that preferred the company of their own sex to that of a woman.

He peered at the scaffold, noting with abhorrence that Burnskill was standing back, with a mocking sneer, while the unfortunate Oakden still wriggled and struggled. The hangman had not bothered to jump down the box and help the sodomite out of his misery.

Philip gazed at the rope until it was still, clutching his handkerchief against his nose. The crowd in the street had quieted somewhat now that the three men were obviously dead. Some people were staring at the now still bodies; others were turning away from the scaffold. It had been a new day for quite some hours now and work needed to be done.

Only the idlers, the night-workers and the street urchins could afford to wait for the cutting down of the bodies, in about an hour's time. Whores and pickpockets started to move about, searching the area for customers or victims. The harlots did not bother now with the armed soldiers around the scaffold: they would have to stay until the bodies could be removed, and surely they could snatch a client or two before they went after the willing men of the cordon.

Philip felt relief now that the anxiety over the execution was clearly wearing off.

"I need to piss," he mumbled in Jefferson's direction, not realizing that one did not normally speak that way to one's family lawyer.

He disappeared behind the screen where a chamber pot was placed on a knee-high stool. No wonder the room

smelled like a sewer; the pot was almost overflowing. Nobody had emptied that pot since the night before.

“Better sit down, my lord,” Jefferson said when he returned busily buttoning his fly and trying not to breathe in the stench that permeated the room.

Jefferson reached to close the window, after having conferred with the two men; their fronts were freezing and the choice between stench and warmth seemed an easy one at that moment.

“Must be thousands of onlookers, ’t will be difficult to get to the carriage for some time to come.”

Philip sat down clenching his jaws while looking up at the sky through the dirty glass windows. He felt sick.

“Who set you up to this, Jefferson?” he asked, not caring that the other three people in the room suddenly had grown very quiet and observant since Jefferson had called him “my lord.”

“The late Lady Loghaire,” Jefferson said without a qualm, “in a special addendum of the will, which was not read to you as it was only an instruction to me; thirty pounds for two at this delightful place at the window.”

“Typical of the bitch.” Philip sneered, “Waste of money of course. Is Hengist going to have a similar sort of treat?”

Jefferson smiled and shook his head.

“I dare say he sees enough killings in the Peninsula. Are you appropriately shocked my lord?”

“Inordinately,” Philip drawled. He took one look out of the window where the masses were still teeming. He rose and walked to the fireplace, cursing his dead mother who, of course, had never understood why he could not be ‘normal’ like his damned brother Hengist. He had been removed from her will: she had left all her worldly possessions to his hero-

brother, leaving him without a bloody penny. He wondered how she could have been so disgusted with him. It wasn't fair; he had always adored her for the forceful, handsome countess she had been.

He sighed, wondering what his last night's conquest, Willy Robson, was at right now. No doubt in his cot, sleeping deeply after spending Philip's money on a bottle of cheap gin. Or maybe he was outside, sitting on a roof, or a ledge, still hazy and hung-over, joking with his noisy friends about the sodomite that refused to die, not caring to think that Oakden's fate might be his own, one day.

They never hanged lords of the realm like that, did they?

Philip suppressed a shudder. He had not wanted to be impressed by the whole horrid charade that had been played out in front of him, but he was. Oh, the hag had known him so well!

He peered at Jefferson who was stiffly seated near the window, wondering for the umpteenth time that day if the lawyer knew why the countess, now months in her grave, had put him through this demeaning ordeal.

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Diary of Aurora Ross

London 23rd of November 1809

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I am very angry this morning! Rose had told me that all the servants had gone away without even asking me permission. They left some stale bread and a lukewarm pan of tea, and that was supposed to be my breakfast.

I am even more disgusted with myself for not being able to control the Fat Man's servants. I know they do not care a whit about me; they never did in those years I had to live here, almost like a caged animal. Well, I tell you, this will be the last time I have been treated in such a disrespectful way. I told Mr. Lane that he can go forward and negotiate with whoever wanted to buy the house; that Earl of somewhere behind York, was it Rotherhood? No! I remember now it was of Ham, Rotherham or some such thing. If I remember correctly he has three daughters and wants to bring them out next season, well two of them, the third is still in the schoolroom. He is welcomed to the house. Mr. Lane says it is worth a small fortune because it is built in the heart of Mayfair.

I know now what Mayfair is like, I did not know all the years when the Fat One was alive. He never allowed me to go out. I was not even allowed to sit in the garden when the weather was warm. Now I take strolls in the park with Rose; the park called St. James Park. I only walk there nowadays in the mornings, when it is not supposed to be the fashionable hour. I don't want to meet many people because they always stare at me and seem very curious about me. My problem is that I don't know anybody in that park and I have the feeling 'they' know all about me. Well, there isn't anything of interest to know about me, is there? I am a

Scottish lass, born from a gentle Scottish laird who died before I was old enough to remember him. My mother then remarried to Laird McKenna and we lived either in Kenna or in Edinburgh in my stepfather's town house.

I had governesses until the age of seventeen when my mother started to educate me for my 'coming out.' I am very mediocre with the needle. My governesses always despaired of me, but their complaints about my needlework always fell on deaf ears with my mother because she was not any good at it either. I do have a nice voice though, but the last time I sang was when I still lived in Edinburgh. The Fat Man never invited me to sing for his guests and truth to tell I was glad of that.

When the Fat Man died I was quite filled out myself. The food at his table, I should say our table, was always filling and greasy. He liked it that way. He had a terrible sweet tooth as well; he used to eat heaps of buns and cakes for his breakfast. They were always baked in a soft sappy manner because he had hardly any teeth left in his mouth, and whatever was left was blackish or brown. I supposed I should have pointed out to him that one can make one's teeth last longer if the teeth are brushed with calcium powder every day. Incidentally, his teeth were not so few and bad when I married him.

I was always afraid of him. One could never foretell his reactions to anything; he was impatient and he was a bully, and thought nothing of beating me whenever he felt like it.

Anyway, I told Mr. Lane that I preferred to go and live at the house off Piccadilly which the Fat One bought for me. He actually bought it so that my family could stay there, whenever they were in London. Mr. Baines said it is not half

as prestigious as the house I live in right now, but I truly couldn't care less. I hate this house at Berkeley Street!

I feel very much alone of late. Simon went and married in September and I have not heard from him since. It's not that he was such good company. We actually only indulged, well, in the niceties of the flesh, as he would call it, but he was somewhat of a friend, a familiar person.

To my horror, I read in the paper that Hengist was badly wounded in a battle in Portugal last September and now I am fearful of reading the announcements about the deceased. I have Rose go through them, she does not read extremely well, but well enough to tell me if there is bad news.

I asked Rose why all the servants had taken the morning off and she had to ask the girl from next door, who was just going for an errand. She would not tell me at first, she said it was too sensitive information for my ears. That really annoyed me to no end. How can one think I am too fragile to hear why the servants took a morning off? After having been married to the Fat Man for four years I fear I have become the most cynical person in the world.

Well, I had to eat my words, because I did not understand at first why people would be interested in the hanging of a 'sodomite.' Rose had to explain it to me and even after all the perversities the Fat Man had subjected me to, I had to blush. I could not for the life of me understand why two men would subject themselves to the things Rose was telling me about, until she said what happened to two men like that was similar to whatever happened between Simon and me in a way. Ah, that shut me down good.

Simon and I had gone as far as to, well, I was doing it in the way he liked to do it with me, and that is to say, he

wanted me to rub his interesting part with my mouth instead of my hand. At first I thought it a bit distasteful, but when I knew he'd washed himself before we had our rendezvous in the hackney I even came to like it in a way, although I always needed to keep a handkerchief ready because I found the white stuff that would emerge at the end quite unsavory. Rose does not know of those details of course. She merely asked me if I needed her help if I wanted to prevent unwanted pregnancy. I told her I would not need any help from her there, thank you very much, as we did not indulge in the sort of thing that made prevention necessary. Rose just smiled and said that whenever I needed anything she would ask the Scottish apothecary near Covent Gardens. Sometimes I think she nurtures a 'tendre' toward the man there. I understand he is in his late fifties just like she is. Well, I hope she finds some compassion there; life was hard for Rose until now. Truthfully, so was mine.

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Chapter 3: A TENT NEAR LISBON

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Lisbon, January 1810

While shaving, Hengist almost cut his own throat when he felt a hand touching one of his big hairy thighs.

With a curse, he threw down the shaving knife and swiveled around, his dark green and black battle kilt swishing around his knees.

“For God’s sake Lily, what are you doing here?” he growled at the giggling woman who was crouching down on the mat in front of him.

She was not impressed with the dark glare he shot at her.

She rose to her full height, reached out and clutched his soapy chin, shushing him prettily at the same time.

“You’d better be quiet, Major,” she whispered, “do you want the whole camp to hear I’m with you in your tent?”

“Oh, for crying out loud, Lily,” he grumbled. “I never knew you to be shy of anything.”

She teasingly spread the soap from her fingers to his forehead, giggling again when he tried to pry her hand away with an agitated move.

“You like it better here?” she asked coyly, shoving her hand under his kilt again.

Hengist jumped, trying to evade her touch, and bumped his big leonine head into the tent’s sail. He cursed. He was so bloody tall, there was no way he could take a step sideways without getting his head tangled in the cloth of his bloody housing. Damn the Peer for putting him in a tent anyway, but with all the new troops arriving there was no

way they could be billeted in a house at the fleshpots of Lisbon. At least the tent proved to be reasonably warm in the Atlantic winter.

Lily stood, pouting her fleshy red lips, stepped closer, and put a very enticing cleavage from her half-opened bodice under his nose, firmly lodging her hard nipples against his naked chest.

Hengist stood stock-still. His body had already responded to Lily's bold ministrations, but he realized that it was an impossible time for that sort of play. He clenched his teeth trying to force his arousal down, but dammit, he was only human and Lily was one of the most experienced women in the world.

"Lily," he said pleadingly, "I must finish my shave. I'm due at a staff meeting with your husband in a quarter of an hour."

He reached for a towel to wipe off the foam that was still on his big, handsomely rugged face. He cursed himself for letting his batman go ahead to take out his horse because he professed he was well able to shave himself. Lily had no doubt seen her chance when Portman had left his tent.

"Let me do you," she smiled, noticing a slight hesitation when she dimpled at him. "Knowing you it won't take five minutes."

"Lily," he pleaded half-heartedly, but she had already gone down on her knees in front of him, lifting his kilt to the waist tucking it expertly in his belt after having shifted his sporran to his left hip. Her smile was saucy on her fleshy knowing lips.

"Ah, Hengist," she murmured with delight, "I knew you would not let me down. It's been too long, my love."

Hengist leaned against the pole, closing his eyes, enjoying her moist mouth around the crown of his stiff cock.

Why, it had been too long ago for him not to be hard as a rock, even if it was only Lily.

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Later, when he wended his horse through the large British camp, curtly greeting the men he recognized or that hailed him, he knew for certain that this time he would file for leave.

He had given in to Lily's seduction again, going all the way, not being able to just let her use only her mouth on him. The fuck had been great, too satisfying for words. Now his lustful elation fought with his sense of decency and honour: Lily was his commanding colonel's wife, there was no future in that and a future was what he wanted now.

He frowned at that thought.

Idiot! Why seek a future when he was in the middle of a war again? But then... he never had been rich before. His soldier's pay and his mother's allowance had always been all he'd had to his name. His father, although a Scottish Earl, had always struggled to keep his finances on the straight and narrow path of survivability and everything his father still owned in infertile lands and crumbling properties would one day be owned by Philip.

He cursed in silence. Bloody, deviating, Philip; his brother, the degenerate.

He pursed his lips, giving his horse free rein on the path that led alongside the long rows of tents.

He shifted in the saddle, his dick grinding against the rough wool of his kilt. There had not been time for a wash; he had already been late when Lily had interrupted him. He felt a slight itch, knowing it was caused by the wetness of

her eager mound mixed with his seed. He bit his lip, trying not to scratch his genitals when he was sitting on his horse and touring the encampment with the eyes of more than a few privates and fairly many of the camp followers watching him.

Damnation! He was fed up with one-night stands with the likes of Lily; even if he had just fucked her as if it would be his last time on Earth. He had been driven by his perpetual slumbering lusts, again. What he truly wanted now was peace and quiet and a lovely, loving woman.

An image hovered in his brain before his very eyes, an image of the most beautiful creature in the world. The creature that had lived there for more than eleven years, the girl who had heated his nights when he felt lonesome and depressed, the girl whose face was glued on the blurring visages of the camp-followers and the whores with whom he had spent his restless mating on their dirty cots or wherever the fancy had taken him. The girl who had led him a merry dance in his erotic fantasies, the girl whose name had always been on his lips when he came, not caring whether the whore or the slut, or in Lily's case the mistress, could hear.

Hengist clamped his jaws and shook his head with weariness. She was a married woman now. God only knows she probably had a batch of children with the old lecher who had taken her into his bed and household.

His horse almost walked into a group of people laughing and joking, who were standing in the middle of the road.

“Still asleep, Major?” an amused mocking voice called out to him.

He steered his horse grumpily away from the laughing men. No acknowledging smiles from him there. The men

seemed to feel his mood and fell silent, gaping with the unexpectedness of it. Major Hengist Agnew was a cherished war-hero and not a sour military man!

Uncharacteristically he shrugged. So let his mood be foul.

To dream of something that could never be was enough to shrivel any man's mind.

He strengthened the hold on the reins. Walking into a crowd of people had been Jason's cry for attention. Bloody horse.

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Chapter 4: PHILIP'S PREDICAMENT

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London, January 1810

Philip scowled when he looked at Stevie Mac, who was throwing his legs over the arm of the big easy chair.

“That was a damn close call!” he muttered, brushing clots of old spider webs from his normally immaculate breeches.

“I didn’t think I could ever go home again with that mob in front of my door.”

Stevie swallowed and nodded. He had never been so afraid in his life. Mobs were something one heard of, or read about in the journals, about angry farmers or under-paid miners. Mobs certainly never threatened a young pampered lording, such as him.

He peered at Philip through his long black lashes, trying to gulp back tears that were readily forming in his throat. Nerves, he thought with contempt. Damn nerves, damn stupid afflictions of on-coming melancholia!

His friend had no such compunctions.

Philip plucked at the cobwebs on his shoulders and collar, muttering in disgust. Lord Morvern was always perfectly clothed. Cobwebs and dirt were just inconceivable. After some futile attempts to remove the undesired spots, he shrugged. Little Stevie Mac would no doubt offer his valet to see to the abject cleaning of Philip’s coat and breeches. The lording was certain to have one, as nobody but an accomplished valet could knot a waterfall tie like the one he wore last night. He had supposed Stevie was not able to

knot it into that creative fashion himself, so he had helped Stevie to make a passable knot after their little bout of intimacy. He had not dared to wake his own valet John Row. John was the only fixture left to him in the house; all his other staff had been made redundant or had left in a huff during the last few months.

John bedded a parlour maid next door, so she would help him once in a while to clean some parts of the house during her spare hours. He was also not averse to physically consoling his handsome employer in his periods of need, which had been many, as of late.

Philip had not been certain of John's reaction to Stevie in the house. He never brought his flings home any more: that would be too dangerous, what with the new witch-hunt for sodomites these days. No use leaving them a trail to his residence. If he had learned anything from the bugger's hanging he had endured watching last autumn, it was to be more circumspect about his lovers. It was incredible to what length he would go now to hide his unnatural inclinations toward juicy muscled men.

His mother had been wrong when she had tried to reach him from beyond the grave. Witnessing a sodomite swing had not put him on the righteous path of the attraction between the male and female species of the kind; on the contrary, the lurking danger of discovery seemed to give his trysts an exciting depth, just like forcing his shaft into Stevie's willing butt had done while he listened to hear whether John would wake up and hear them. Realizing that John Row could enter the drawing room at any time while he was pumping his latest amour had given him a surprising extra dimension to his explosive gratification.

Of course, John Row had been sprawled on his bed after having indulged in a whole bottle of cheap gin. One even doubted whether the creditors shouting in front of the house would be enough to wake John out of his stupor. That had been just as well, as both he and Stevie had fallen asleep on the rug in front of the fireplace, which Philip had lit that morning with probably the last pieces of wood from the woodpile. Lighting his own fire, he mused, was another deep low in his already degenerate style of living.

He wondered if there would be anything left in his life that could cheer him.

He had looked down at the Honourable Stephen Mackenzie, son of a Scottish country laird, the small stalker he had not really fancied at all. Stevie Mac was too pretty and small for his tastes; almost as dainty as a girl. The boy had muffled a squeal when Philip had entered him and only then had his half-arousal gone to its full stretch. He liked them to be a bit terrified of him. He had not bothered to repeat the act the next morning. He could not get it up again, not with a group of creditors in front of his house shouting for money or his hide.

After a panicky conversation with his lover, Philip had raced to the kitchen, pointing out the now empty wine cellar and its hidden corridor into the neighbouring garden. No doubt one of the house's former owners had lived dangerously as well, and had foreseen future possibilities of escape. Philip had promised to light a candle for him in St. George's as soon as he was able to show his face there; whoever he was and whether he was alive or pushing up daisies.

He rose elegantly from the couch to help himself to a large whiskey from the sideboard, although it was only

eleven o'clock in the morning. At least the good side of ordeals was that one could indulge in stiff liquor at all hours. He sniffed at the decanter. Not bad. He had not tasted such good stuff for some time now.

Stevie watched his handsome friend while he poured and tasted. He stood slightly bent in front of the sideboard that carried the different flasks with alcoholic beverages, his buff breeches tightening around his sleek butt and muscled thighs.

Something shifted in Stevie's mind and a sharp longing for the elegant man made its way through his young body.

Philip suddenly looked up, as if he was aware of Stevie's changing mood. His piercing blue eyes flashed on a flushed Stevie and he smiled.

"Don't worry, love," he whispered. "Things are never as bad as they seem, you know."

He came forward to ruffle Stevie's lanky hair, which was supposedly cut in the fashionable Brutus, but as there had been no chance that morning to ask Macy the maid to use the curling iron on them he looked quite like a street urchin now. Stevie was almost a foot smaller than Philip, but then Philip was blessed with the most gorgeous tall body: broad shouldered with a lean waist and standing about 6ft 4 tall. Philip was not only a giant of a man; he must be one of the handsomest men in the world, reflected Stevie, for the hundredth time that day. His long blond hair hung in small waves on his neck. Not quite adopting the new style that had become fashionable due to Wellington's latest demands in the army, short hair and no moustaches, he liked to wear his hair in short curls, easy when he was at his favourite sports: fencing and wrestling.

“I’m sorry I had to ask you to hide from that mob, but there was no other way,” Philip said apologetically, sucking his lips in a way that had proven to be characteristic of him.

He must have the whitest teeth this side of the equator, Stevie pondered lovingly, wondering how he did it. If Stevie could ever get close enough to Philip’s valet, he would ask. He looked longingly at Philip’s buff beige breeches. After last night, he knew what power they hid and he could hardly suppress a dreamy, longing sigh.

“I don’t know where to go from here, just yet.” Philip mumbled morosely. This mood swing alerted Stevie out of his state of longing.

Philip gazed unseeing in his tumbler. After the excitement of this morning’s adventures the reality of creditors beleaguering his house came to him at full tilt.

He had once been the owner of fifteen-thousand pounds; his inheritance from his grandfather, the Earl of Loghaire, plus the yield of the Morvern lands that had been his viscounty, since grandpa’s other son, the heir, conveniently died, but it had all gone up in thin air in no time.

Last night he had been at one of the most miserable gaming hells in London, and after the losses of his ready money, he had not been able to come up with forty-five pounds. Young Stevie McKenna had been watching him and offered him a loan. The young boy had refused to take an I.O.U. but had been content to have Philip take him to his house at Upper Brook Street later on, after all the clubs had closed or started to serve breakfast.

Philip had known Stevie to be following him around like a lovesick puppy, acting nonchalant every time they set eyes upon each other. Philip had not been very happy with the

stalking until the boy seemed capable of bailing him out of a nasty situation.

Stevie shrugged.

“My parents are not yet due back from Scotland,” he said. “My mother will probably only want to return in April, so you’re welcome to stay here, if you like. We’ll pick up your clothes at midnight. I gather your debtors will be gone by then.”

Philip looked intently at Stevie. He seemed a lot younger than his twenty years, especially now that the damp and filth of the secret tunnel made his clothes cling to his small and lanky frame.

“Biggles never told me we had company, Stephen,” a voice said behind them. It was young, melodious, and very feminine.

Stevie gasped.

Not Marguerite, not now, she would see his and Philip’s dirty clothes and no doubt would start asking questions!

She was dressed entirely in black and the darkness of her hair set off the big luminous brown eyes in the pale porcelain face. Stevie knew that if Philip were one of the most beautiful persons in the world, his own half-sister would be a worthy addition to such company. She might not be deemed very fashionable with her black shiny and curly hair--Polite Society preferred blondes--but her face had the classical beauty that had forced poets through the ages to write long and gushy verses about ‘unparalleled incomparable.’

Stevie had always been jealous of his dainty but proportioned stepsister because she had always been closer to the ideal of a woman than he had been to the requisites of the perfect male. He resembled her like two eggs in a

basket, but that made it only worse for Stevie; he wanted to look male and not like the spitting image of his sister.

He glanced a bit fearfully at Philip who was scooting up from the couch, almost spilling whiskey out of his tumbler when he plunked his glass onto a side table.

The Viscount strolled in a fashionable way to the apparition at the door of the library, lifting her hand to his mouth for a kiss above her knuckles, because the lady was not wearing gloves and to kiss her naked skin would be unpardonable.

“Mrs. Alexander, I presume?” he gushed in a foppish way that was entirely a la mode.

“Forgive me my presumptions, but do I remember you from a court event in Edinburgh?”

“Lord Morvern?” she asked in amazement, looking with a pleasantly surprised smile at her stepbrother, “I did not know you and Stephen were acquainted?”

More than you’d ever guess, Stevie thought darkly, feeling envious when Philip was all over his stepsister. For once, he was glad she was still in mourning for that nut of a husband of hers. Although Philip’s real inclinations had at last been revealed to him last night in an amorous fashion, he was jealous of all the attention that was not forwarded to him by the glamorous Viscount. He realized at that same moment he was not only in love with his new paramour but that he felt hot envy if Philip only looked at someone else. He hated to recognize it: jealousy had always been the bane of Stevie’s short life.

“Er... yes, it must have been Edinburgh shortly after I came out. How have you two befriended each other?”

“We met about a week ago at Lady Tottenham's rout,” Philip lied politely, faking to lap up her beauty and definitely noticing the resemblance between Stevie and her.

Stevie blushed and nodded. He could hardly tell her that it had been at The Cockpit where he had first seen Philip. The Viscount had been heavily betting on cocks he could hardly distinguish due to his apparent state of drunkenness.

Marguerite's eyes fell on the mud and cobwebs on Philip's coat and breeches.

He bowed at her with a charming smile.

“Your brother and I had a small accident in the street, nothing to worry your poor... yourself about. A carriage passed us close by when we were just hopping over a puddle. We were both thrown against a wall. We came here to freshen up. It is closer than my residence at Upper Brook Street,” he said suavely.

Stevie could not help but admire Philip's quick wit in finding an explanation for his dirtied clothes. Of course, he could hardly tell her they had been crawling through a secret passage leading from Philip's house to the neighbouring garden to avoid a mob of furious creditors.

Thinking of the event only made him shiver and he longed to crawl back to his chair. Alas, he could not sit when his sister was still standing. In normal life he did not give a damn about such politeness towards her, she was merely his sister, but now that Philip was behaving according to Society's etiquette rules, he could hardly do any less.

Still at the door, Marguerite watched him from her position.

“You look ill, brother,” she said with worry in her voice, “is there something I can do for you?”

Yes, go away and come back in April, Stevie thought furiously.

He shook his head.

“No, thank you. What brings you here?”

Her eyes widened.

“I live here,” she said pointedly. “I sold my husband’s Berkeley Street house in December, and I had to move out. I’ve been here for two days now. If you’d bother to rise at a more Christian hour than you are wont to do, and if you ate at home at night instead of heaven knows where, you would have known we are actually sharing quarters.”

Stevie flushed with apprehension at her obvious snub and felt at the same time a wave of disappointment at his sister’s explanation. If she had come to live here, it would mean that Philip could not stay in the house. It would be uncalled for to have a bachelor living here without his parents chaperoning, even when his sister was already twenty-five and a widow.

Philip had watched their strained dialogue with a thin smile on his lips. Back to Upper Brook Street and his creditors it was then!

A shiver ran down his spine. He had visited the occasional unlucky acquaintance in Debtor’s prison and had a good idea what it would be like to be a permanent resident there. God knew he was in a bloody snitch!

Marguerite looked at him with something that seemed like longing in her face. Philip almost stepped back from her. He had come to fear that look; it was on most of the Ton’s matchmaking mama’s faces and on as many of their husband-seeking daughters. He had always cursed the plight that would be put on his shoulders one day. He was the heir and although his father of late seemed forced into a grey

world of his own due to his slowly approaching dementia, he could never hope to escape his parents' wish and social obligation that he would marry one day and produce an heir and a spare of his own. The thought was always enough to make him puke.

At least his financial problems would make any matchmaking mama think twice, he thought cynically. It was just that Debtor's prison was a damn daunting prospect.

He bowed again, hoping that Marguerite would take the hint.

She did. She reddened, then curtsied and turned around to the stairs.

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Marguerite walked slowly back to her rooms on the second floor. She wondered if she was coming down with some illness or another as she felt very tired and slightly sick. Even the meeting with the handsome Lord Morvern had not succeeded to wrench her out of her blue feelings.

She heaved a deep sigh. It was not easy to be a twenty-five year old widow, albeit a very rich one. Her disgusting deceased husband William Alexander had been dead for eight months now and she still had to wear deep mourning. Society's rules decreed public sorrow for a dead husband was to last two years. Deep mourning would deprive her of all the gaieties of life. She would be allowed to go to sober teas in the daytime, with bossy matrons if she knew any, or if they wanted to know her, but her days stretched ahead every day like gloomy black vaults. She was yearning for the day that her first year of mourning would be over; she might wear grey colours instead of the constant black she was obliged to put on every day and she would be allowed to watch serious dramas and opera at the theatres. She might

even go to musicales, as long as the music was not too worldly. Accompanied by the right people, she was allowed to attend the balls of immaculate reputation, without being able to dance of course, until another year of mourning had passed.

At least she was glad to have gotten rid of her husband's gloomy town house. She had been the stray duck there since the day she had come to marry the rich and fat William Alexander. All the staff, except her own maid, Rose, had been in his pay and confidence, and she had lived to know it. They had been suspicious of her youth and beauty and had done little if anything to make her comfortable as the young innocent bride she was when she was first brought into his unwelcoming house. It was only due to Rose's care that she had not been forgotten when taking her lonely meals in her rooms, when her husband did not deign to bring her on his business-trips or ask her to come to join him for a meal in the dining room.

Marguerite had never been so elated than when she was finally able to avenge herself by firing all William's staff after the sale of the house; putting them onto the cobblestones without a reference to their names. Well, except for Crowley of course, the coachman who was not half as bad as the rest and who knew a bit more than she cared to admit about a certain young vicar.

She put her fingers to her forehead noticing the throb of an upcoming headache.

Darn, but she had been quite hard to poor Stevie, piling her own widow's frustrations on him. He could not help it that five years ago she'd married the forty years older William just to help her parents out of the claws of debt and maybe even Debtor's prison. Although she herself had been

a frugal and modest girl all her life, it was certain that her mother and stepfather, Lord McKenna, had never heard of the words 'economizing' and 'saving' or, if they had heard of them, they had discarded them as nothing to do with them.

She opened the door of her sparsely furnished bedroom. It was almost Spartan, with only the high old-fashioned bed with the thin mattress, a chest for blankets and a table with a chair. Stevie did not know she owned the house and just lent it to her parents when they were in London. William had known very well why her parents had agreed to marry her off to him and had deeded her the house on their wedding-day. He did not want his wife's nosy and bossy mother visiting his own house when she would be staying in London, so he bought another one, taking care not to furnish it with anything of value because he expected such luxurious objects to disappear in due course; to find their way to the pawn-shops, in order to pay for the McKenna family's foolish spending. The house had been an expensive enough gift, although such an investment to his own wife was nothing but a nice gesture that would only bring him more money in the end, once he could sell it again when the market was up.

William and Marguerite had lived the four years of their marriage in the posh house at Berkeley Street. They had lived between the Peers of the realm there, but they had hardly been able to mix with that uppity part of society. Although Marguerite had been the only daughter of John Ross, late and last Laird of Halkhead, William had just been a disgusting common cit whose father had become extremely rich in the Glasgow and London shipping industry.

She sighed again. Marriage to William had not been a bed of roses. At least she had not nurtured any illusions about their relationship. A more than forty-year-old bridegroom did not do much to the daydreams of an eighteen-year-old girl, accustomed to devouring romantic novels of the most deplorable kind. She had longed for a knight in shining armor, until her illusions were shattered by her parents' greed and her own compliance and sense of duty.

Although their married life had been a wasteland, William had turned out to be an extraordinarily jealous man and her years with him had been like being a captive in a harsh prison with an unresponsive and heartless staff.

They had entertained many an important merchant or investor but William had distrusted the aristocrats and other high flyers around them, calling them wastrels, so that her experiences with the parties, routs and weekends with the people of her class had been nil during their relatively short and very unhappy marriage.

Marguerite had had a modest coming out at the time. Her parents had felt obliged to have her presented to the Queen, but before her come-out, William Alexander had already been discussing marriage settlements with her stepfather and greedy mother and they had glumly taken William Alexander of Stephens and Alexander's Shipping Company's bid for her hand; they were certain no one else was to offer the ultimate bounty like he did. Thus, Marguerite's honourable bloodlines were sacrificed on the altar of a wealthy, albeit ancient, despicable, fat son-in-law.

Marguerite sniffed. Her mother's motives had been too mercenary to, at the very least, stop and think about what she did to her daughter. Anyone could imagine how

frightening it must have been to be eighteen and to have to marry a man of fifty-six. A very fat, smelly man of fifty-six, because William Alexander indulged in two things only: lots of food and even greater quantities of drink. He had been married before, but his poor first wife had gone to an early grave leaving him without a most needed heir for the Alexander fortune.

Marguerite had not wanted to hear about his first wife or their life together before she went to the house at Berkeley Street, as marriage to William Alexander had been mind-robbing enough. She thanked God on her knees that there had not been stepsons or –daughters. After a week of a honeymoon spent entirely at Berkeley Street, she in the confines of her bedchamber, with him entering her privacy whenever he pleased, she understood why stepchildren had not been forthcoming. At the time she had gone down on her knees again in extreme thankfulness, with the sudden knowledge that money could not buy the Fat One everything he wanted.

Marguerite turned down the blankets of her bed and rang her old maid Rose to get her out of her black dress. She would sleep for a while, maybe that would get her out of her feelings of depression.

When she was lying down on her pillow, she thought of that handsome guest her stepbrother had brought home; Philip Agnew, Lord Morvern. It was earth shattering how he resembled his brother Hengist.

For a second, when she had looked into the library, she had thought Hengist had come to visit her at last; coming to rescue her as he had done once before.

She dug her head into her cushion.

Hengist. It had been more than five years since it had happened. Those strong-arms, that innocent but oh so wanted kiss when he had saved her from the robbers who had gotten hold of her carriage when she was travelling to London, to marry old William.

She closed her eyes and laid a hand on her breast where Hengist had put his for just a split second.

Hengist. She knew he had gone back to war. First to Denmark and then he had been shipped to Portugal together with one of the famous Highland Regiments called the Black Guard. She had secretly followed the Black Guard's progress through Portugal, to Spain and back again, always searching for Hengist's name in the newspapers that were brought to William's study every day.

She had often enviously thought about him and... women; army followers, officer's wives who followed the drum, their pretty daughters, beautiful signoras; so many opportunities for him to fall in love and marry one. Her hand sought the hem of her night shift on her knee, sliding up her thigh.

At least thinking of him made her happy for a few moments. She knew her thoughts of Hengist Agnew were close to an obsession and she realized that the secret dreams about him had carried her through the horrors of her marriage.

She licked her lips, her face in a secret smile.

She could always dream, couldn't she?

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DIARY OF M. AURORA ROSS

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January 31, 1810

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It was very strange indeed to see Lord Philip Morvern in the house today. It's just that I am still not used to visitors, neither in the Fat One's house nor in my own, off Piccadilly.

Mr. Lane found somebody to buy the house on Berkeley Street fast enough. An indecent rich Earl whom I've never heard of before: a Cyril Fairfax, Earl of Rotherham. It seems he has three daughters who need to have their come-out in the next years to come. I should look up his name in a Debrett's, but as the Fat One never believed in bowing to the aristocracy we never had a copy, and of course I did not think of buying my own. We never knew our neighbours on Berkeley Street either, which was not unsurprising under the circumstances. The few times I descended the stairs at the front door I was quickly hidden away in the town-carriage while people stared at me and then pretended not to see me. I am a despicable gentry-miss who has put her higher birth on the gold altar of a rich old cit.

The only persons I did know, although to 'know' is a bit exaggerated under the circumstances, were the footmen that worked in the house almost opposite ours. Rose told me they were Lady Elton's footmen and every time they hurried outside to receive visitors, I would hide behind my curtains in my room on the second floor and watch them. Yes, watch them like an urchin watches a freak show, because that Lady Elton has a very special taste in footmen. They are all very tall, much muscled and extremely handsome. I know it is not fashionable for a gentleman to have bulging muscles like a farm-hand but truth be told: give me a man like that any day! Don't ask me why, but only to look at them makes me a bit weak in the knees.

Now I understand those feelings better, since I had my fling with Simon Desmond, God bless him. Simon was neither muscled nor tall, but when I watched his mouth, and a very sensual mouth it was, I would have that same feeling of faintness and excitement as when I looked at those footmen.

Rose said that I had been ‘awakened’ and giggled about it.

I don’t really know about being awakened, Simon never ever went ‘all the way’ as Meg the Laundress called it, and I never truly wanted him to, because... well, because we were not married and I am not some sort of a Covent Garden strumpet who just lifts her skirts to some horny vicar. (What do you say about that new part of my ‘worldly’ knowledge? I had a few more conversations with Meg, the laundress.)

I always told Rose I never did that thing with Simon and she told me that was just as well, as she did not fancy explaining to her Apothecary that her mistress had erroneously conceived and could he please find her some means to get rid of it.

I like to think Rose is quite naughty there, if I ever conceive a child I am going to keep it tight in my belly and close to my heart. At first I did not want a baby when I was with the Fat One, but strangely enough that changed when I knew he was never going to give me one.

Simon actually once wondered if a marriage between the two of us would be possible, but I was not so stupid that I was not able to see that I had to get myself on the higher rungs of the ladder in any marriage market. With all the money the Fat One left me through his own negligence (as our lawyer liked to explain, he did not think of himself

dying at any inconvenient time), I may aim for a certain second son of a certain Scottish earl.

Anyhow, after somebody had blabbered about Simon's amoral and amorous secret meetings with a certain rich and very unsuitable young widow, Simon's family found him a sweet and somewhat moneyed bride and got him a nice cosy vicarage in Sussex. I must confess that I do miss him at times, especially that very smart tongue of his. It is not easy to live on memories and my own shameful fumbling alone, but the Simon Desmonds of this world are not easy to trace when one is a widow and does not know a soul in all of London.

So yes, it was very nice to see Lord Philip Morvern in the library of my house and I liked the attention he bestowed on me.

I am sorry that Stevie was not at all happy to see me. He has changed a lot since he came to London in autumn, after turning twenty-one and preferring to live far away from his father's wiles. Well, that I can understand! Lord McKenna is a bully and has a vicious temper.

Anyway, that Lord Philip is the spitting image of Hengist; at least that is what I think. They are both tall, blond and very attractive. I hope he will come back soon. I would like to ask him about Hengist. It has been more than five years since I last saw him and now that Simon initiated me in the passions of the body, I wonder how it would be to experience them with somebody like Hengist. I am most curious as to how Hengist would feel when in that hard and rigid state that Simon would get into when he got all excited.

Meg says the man can only do the deed if he is in such a state. I understand only now the Fat One's frustration; he

could never get into such a state with me. I wonder if he would have been able to get into ‘the state,’ if he had had somebody experienced enough just like Meg. Oh, don’t get me wrong, I would never have a friend like Meg be forced into ‘the state’ with the Fat One; I just mean it was not very handy of the Fat Man to take me as a bride because nobody ever told me what to do, so he never got what he bargained for.

I wonder very often now, how Hengist would be ‘in the state.’ I mean as part of amorous pleasure like I had with Simon. I do remember the first time Simon pushed himself against me when we were fully clothed and it felt a bit peculiar, hard, as if he had put his walking stick between the both of us. Since I became aware of the ‘walking-stick,’ I do remember a sort of similar feeling when Hengist kissed me. Good grief! I was such an innocent girl, then!

I’m afraid it won’t do me a lot of good to start to contemplate things like that. According to the Morning Post the Scottish Black Guard is somewhere in Portugal, close to Lisbon. Moreover, I have not seen anything about Hengist in ages. He was listed with the heavily wounded last September and I hardly dared to watch the lists of the deceased since then. Lord Morvern was not wearing any signs of mourning; bless him, so I can still hope that Hengist still wanders this side of the world.

I wish I knew if he’d ever spent some time thinking of me. Rose says that things are different with men in that respect and forbade me to try to write a letter to him. She said it was not done for a lady to draw attention upon herself by stalking a man. It is very depressing to know that she is probably right.

Yesterday Mr. Baines told me that due to an extremely good year and the sale of the Scottish wharves I am eighty thousand pounds the richer. He has found a buyer from Boston who would like to take over the London and Bristol wharves, which will be fine with me. I know Mr. Baines is not doing this without some self-interest, but I am happy enough to see things going fine for him as well, as he receives a percentage. I seem to be one of the richest girls in the country but I would gladly give some of my money if I could have a man with Simon's soft mouth and... Oh well, I have to stay in mourning until the end of April 1811. The chances that I will come upon a nice young man who is able to get himself into the state and knows what to do with his mouth and tongue is almost nil. Maybe I should do something like Lady Elton and install a few very good looking footmen in my house. Or start a fling with the handsome Lord Morvern, or travel to Portugal... but that would not be wise, would it? There's a war going on there.

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Chapter 5: STEVIE'S RUSE

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Stevie had succumbed nicely to Philip's urgent pleas and had called for Marguerite's town-carriage to drive him to Philip's house in Upper Brook Street.

He opened the hatch in the cab to the big coach-driver, instructing him nervously to wait for him and to stay alert. He peered at the house. It was not very big, but then Philip had hinted to him that he did not need a lot of space as he was always away, out and about, not even bothering to come home to sleep there if the fancy took him, or supposedly, Stevie contemplated with pain in his heart, if someone else's fancy took him.

The house was entirely dark. No doubt Philip's valet was somewhere in the house, snoring away a hangover as he, according to his lover, had the habit of drinking lots of cheap gin when his master was not around. Stevie had wondered why the valet had bothered to stay with Philip as the rest of the household either had fled or had been dismissed. Philip had told him laughingly that John Row was having an affair with the second parlour maid in the house next door and so secured himself a hot meal every night, and she would help him keep the house clean on her days off as long as he took advantage of her on the floor or on the old couch in the drawing room now and then.

Philip had sniggered that he could not ask for a better arrangement, but Stevie had not been amused. He had not seen John Row on that early morning when he had been allowed inside Philips' house but his instincts had sent a warning shiver over his back and into his head: why indeed

would anyone stay with a heavily indebted employer unless...?

He looked nervously from the front door of the house to his coachman, who had not bothered to come down from his high perch. Just a well, if a fast flight out of the neighborhood was needed. There were no nearby-lit lanterns in the street or in the portico. Stevie could smell the nearness of the Thames, because Philip's house was on the far Western part of Upper Brook Street that ended near the warehouses of the docks.

He approached the front door with a hesitant step, trying to decide if the creditors had left the premises at last. He knew all about creditors, what with his parents with holes in their hands as big as their palms. He had cause to know that creditors never gave up easily on their prey.

A big hand suddenly grasped his neck and he started in horror, looking up into the broad face of a giant of a man.

"I've got him!" the man cried triumphantly to the jeers of a lot more voices.

Stevie tried to wriggle out of the man's grasp, using his new fashionable cane to poke him in the belly. The man howled and let go of him, but Stevie was immediately grabbed again at his upper arms by fast hard hands and his cane was wrestled away from him.

A smelly thin man held a torch to his face.

"That's not 'im, men!" he hollered, "Better let go of 'im!"

The rough hands that clasped him retreated at once, and Stevie stood in the unfriendly bleary light of the torch, looking around him in a terrible fright.

“I’m the Honourable Stephen Mackenzie, son of Lord McKenna,” he bit at them, conquering his fear through his arrogance. “What are you up to here?”

A few of the men touched their forelocks and somebody put his cane back into his hand.

“We’re here to cash in on Lord Morvern’s debts,” one of them said gruffly. “We heard he lost his last penny at the Cockpit last week and we want our pound of flesh before he’s sent to Debtor’s prison.”

Stevie blanched at the suggestion of a warrant of arrest for his new friend. If somebody had gotten a magistrate to bring out a warrant, all would be lost for Philip. The image of his new lover in the stinking cells of Debtor’s prison horrified him. He knew he had to do something to help his friend out of his predicament. Money, money, Philip needed money and fast. His mind started to whirl. Money; who had enough money? Suddenly the thought struck him.

He swallowed, and then said: “Lord Morvern will be affianced to my sister, Mrs. Marguerite Alexander, the wealthy William Alexander’s widow, as soon as she comes out of mourning this year. I’d dare say all the debts will be paid within short notice. My sister is a very rich woman, you see.”

The group of men peered suspiciously at him, then their looks went to the luxurious solid town-carriage with the two matched pairs of horseflesh in front. William Alexander had only been stingy on things that could not be seen. The carriage was as superb as the widow who used it in the daytime. The absence of any heraldic suggestion of nobility cried out that the carriage was a wealthy cit’s possession.

One of the men stared at Stevie.

“You’d better tell us the truth,” he said menacingly. He did not add the “or else...”

Stevie could only swallow his upcoming bile and nod.

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“You did what?”

Philip towered over Stevie in his shirtsleeves. He had thrown his stock, jacket, and waistcoat over the only chair in the small bedroom that Stevie had acquired for him in the busy coaching inn.

Stevie had thought long and hard on his way to the inn where he had settled his friend the day before.

It had required some deep thinking on his part to find the right solution for Philip’s lodgings and in the end, the big coaching inn at the Northern road into London had seemed the best place to hide his lover. The coaching inn was always bustling with people, coaches, and carriages. No one stayed long at the inn because it was only a place to change horses, to have a quick meal, to catch one of the many coaches heading for different places in England or to spend a singular night before the continuation of a journey. People of the Ton that would be able to recognize Lord Morvern would normally not stay long at the inn. If they rode their own coaches, the inn was too close to London for a stop or a meal, let alone for a night’s stay. As long as Philip did not show his face in the big public taproom, Stevie did not expect him to be in danger of recognition.

After his encounter with the creditors’ men, he dared not enter Philip’s house. He had gone home to his own house to sleep. The next morning he had sent a boy with a message to John Row, with the strict warning that it was for John’s eyes only, requesting him to bring his master’s necessary things for his toilet and his clothes. It had seemed best to await

John Row at his own place, not to put any disgruntled creditors on Philip's trail at the coaching inn.

He had paid for the inn in advance, so that Philip could stay there for a week before returning to his own house.

Now he looked longingly at the small bed.

"I knew that it would be the only way to quiet them down and send them back to whichever holes they crept from."

It had helped his family years ago when they were in a similar situation. Only then, his sister would marry the wealthy Mr. Alexander from Stephens and Alexander Shipyards.

Philip suddenly gave a shout of laughter.

"Do you think she would have me?"

Stevie shrugged.

"I don't know," he said, peering at Philip's muscled legs in the very snug breeches.

"You'd say a viscount and an Earl's heir would wet any girl's appetite," Philip mused, looking down on Stevie.

Stevie frowned, suddenly doubting his whole scheme.

"She had a terrible marriage with that fat pig. It might take some persuasion to get her to ever go down the road of matrimony again. Would you be prepared to court her?"

"Would she want me to? She's still in deep mourning, isn't she? She seems a prim and very correct person to me."

"Could you court her?" Stevie asked innocently. He had not known Philip for a long time, but something told him his lovers tastes were miles away from any person wearing a petticoat.

"I've been brought up in the Ton," Philip drawled, "I know how to behave towards a woman of our class."

Especially when my freedom for the rest of my life is at stake, I might say.”

Philip took his coat from the chair and quickly put it on.

“Let’s go down and discuss this further over a drink. You still have money, don’t you?”

He strode out of the door, forcing Stevie to hop off the enticing bed to follow him quickly down three stairs.

Philip noticed a mutinous look on Stevie’s face when he sat down in the taproom. He smiled broadly at the boy, pulling him next to him on the bench, his hands lingering near Stevie’s crotch.

“Later...” he whispered.

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“Bad news,” he said, putting on his breeches and then clambering back on the bed next to a drowsy Philip.

Philip looked at the ceiling. He was bored to death and therefore he had indulged in a little tryst with Stevie, although it was the middle of the day and therefore not without danger. His little room at the inn did boast a lock that had been used for the purpose, but his little lover was a mewler and a screamer and anybody with a working brain and ears could have put the mewling and the screaming together about the two men of the gentry that happened to be in the same room. On the other hand, Philip had noticed a quite forthright business conducted by a few of the maids who worked in the inn, headed by a busty woman who worked conveniently in the taproom. Mewling and screaming went on at times in a specific part of the inn. Philip understood that the innkeeper did not mind a little business on the side, as long as it did not interfere with the inn’s reputation. Having in-house whores always attracted travelers who were in need of gratification, but did not want

to go through the moves of finding a whore and then to do their business somewhere.

The inn boasted two taprooms, one for the upright travelers, families and gentry and one for the less scrupulous amongst them, the servants, the coachmen, and the locals coming in for a meal or a drink. Philip preferred to stay in the last one, nobody would recognize him there, and after telling the whores there off, he would have nothing to fear. He wondered if they knew his secret preference for his own sex right now, but did not worry about eventual blabbering about it from their part: more than one of the whores preferred the members of their own sex over the men that sought them out for some quick pleasure. He had actually seen that with his own eyes on a quiet evening.

He had not yet been able to go back to his house or even so much as to show his face outside the inn. It was really and truly bad this time; his debts amounted to twenty thousand pounds at least, at his last ineffective count, and he had been worrying his head off as to how to get himself out of London and out of his creditors' clutches.

He turned his head slowly to the boy who was as smart as he was clingy nowadays. He hated clingers, calling them creepers and keeping out of their way. Stevie's ways amused and irritated him at the same time, but now that there was no chance for him to prowl the streets and his usual haunts, he preferred to swallow his aversion and turn to the dainty boy instead for his abundant sexual needs.

"What's so bad, my sweet prince?" he asked, raking the boy's tight breeches with his eyes. The boy fell for it like a log.

Philip reasoned that was a good thing, the boy had shown initiative and spunk and for safety reasons he would hold on to his little friend until it was no longer necessary.

“I did as you told me to. I searched her room for secrets or flaws.”

Philip nodded without seeming interest.

He had promised to go along with Stevie’s plan to try to marry the rich half-sister, asking Stevie to get to know as much as possible about her. It would not be easy to snatch the rich widow, especially not such a pretty one. It was a good thing she now probably only had boring teas with frightening dowagers in the day-time and was not allowed to go out at night. The ever needy peers of the realm would gobble her up without so much as a by-your-leave if she could be out in Polite Society: she was rich, beautiful and her father had been a baron. Christ, she was a blooming catch!

He mused that he would only be able to appreciate her wealth and was slightly worried about what marriage entailed after one left the altar. He had never been able to get it up for a woman and however much she resembled his beloved little prince, her stepbrother, the basics would definitely not be the same.

“I found out she has a secret crush on another man.”

Philip sighed at the pathetic remark.

“Tell me more, little one.”

“I could not find anything of note at first so I took her old maid Rose in my confidence. Rose said the marriage with old William was a disaster and that she really wanted Cherie to be happy blah blah...”

Philip signaled with his hand for the boy to go on. It was all too boring for words.

“So she showed me a box Cherie kept hidden in her maid’s room. It was full of clippings and newspaper articles about some guy called Henry Agnew. I understand he is some major in Portugal who serves with one of the Highland Regiments.”

Philip sat up with a start.

“Hengist? She’s in love with Hengist?”

Stevie shook his head.

“No, he’s called Henry.”

“Oh, shut up and let me think,” Philip said irritably, burying his handsome head in his hands.

“What is it, my lord?” Stevie laid a surprised hand on Philip’s muscled thigh.

“That Henry Agnew, Major Henry Agnew of the 42nd, or 78th, or God knows what regiment he’s in now, my bed-prince, happens to be my brother, my younger brother by a year. It’s true his birth name is Henry but we changed that into Hengist when he beat the shit out of two bullying cronies nearly twice his age when he was only twelve years old. He started his army career about eleven years ago and has been on and off in England and Scotland, but mostly abroad. How in hell could he have met your sister?”

Stevie hoisted himself against the bed board.

“Some of the Highland Regiments were housed in Edinburgh. We have lived there for years as my mother refused to live in Kenna. She might have seen him there?”

“Yeah, quite possibly,” Philip drawled.

“Does this Hengist resemble you very much?” Stevie asked suddenly excited.

Philip yawned. He wanted a drink.

“Very. At least the last time I saw him. That was five years ago.”

Stevie pulled at his hair. He always did that when he was thinking.

“We should use that to our advantage,” he said slowly. “We could make her fond of you because he resembles you. On the other hand, we have to invent something to take her thoughts off him. Could we say he died and then whenever he shows up we claim it a dreadful mistake?”

“And make me wear black for a year and delay the wedding because I’m in mourning?” Philip sneered, “I don’t think so.”

Stevie leaned his head against the white chalked wall.

“We could spread the rumour that he got married in Spain to a general’s daughter or something,” he suddenly said with fervour. “I’m sure that would put her off him. We just have to get that news to her making sure it cannot be traced back to us.”

“Like an ad in a paper?” Philip grinned skeptically.

Stevie’s answer was a huge hug.

“You’re absolutely brilliant, my lord.”

“An advertisement?” Philip asked, “You must be daft, little prince.”

Stevie shook his black hot-ironed curls. It cost him a pretty penny every time he had to ask Macy to use her art on him, but he wanted it because it did give him a certain modish sophistication.

“War correspondents! We’ll tip one and if needed we pay him handsomely for the news. It would not be the first time they invented a good story. As far as I know, nothing has happened in ages with the army in the Peninsula. I understand they were suggesting in the House to bring the army back home, it’s over budget already and no one is lifting a finger in Portugal.”

Philip turned to the bright-eyed boy, taking him in a bear hug.

“It’s you who’s brilliant,” he whispered, fumbling at the boy’s recently fastened flies.

“Yes,” he said excitedly, biting into the soft flesh of the boy’s long neck, “come to Daddy, my sweet, brilliant prince! Such a brain you are!”

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Chapter 6: DEVASTATION AT LADY ELTON'S

TEA

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Marguerite sat stiffly in Lady Elton's lavish salon. It was the first time that she had received an invitation for tea at the house of the Lady who had lived opposite to her in William's Berkeley Street residence. She had felt awkward enough when she entered Lady Elton's opulent house, understanding very well why she suddenly had been interesting enough to get an invitation for tea. Even after lowering herself to marry that notorious cit nobody had forgotten her lineage and her husband's riches.

She found herself a seat facing the high windows, noticing only too late that she had a straight view of that hated old place where she had spent those horrible marriage years with the disgusting fat ship owner. She suppressed a shudder and reached for a thin watercress and ham sandwich; anything, as long as she could avoid the view of the big stone construction that had been her private prison and hell for years.

She stirred her teacup listlessly only listening with half an ear to the chattering ladies around her. She was in truly high company, she guessed. Next to her sat Lady Sophia Grey, sister to the notorious Duke of Lindley. Lady Sophia was unmarried and firmly on the shelf by her own designs, according to the many sheets that followed the Quality and that Marguerite had started to read with enormous interest.

Marguerite estimated that the Duke's sister would be in her late thirties. She looked like a bluestocking, wearing a dark-blue nondescript dress and spectacles. Her hair,

although of a spectacular ash-blond colour, was straight and knotted in a bun. Yes, the epitome of a spinster.

On the other hand, one could wonder if Lady Sophia did her utmost to seem as unattractive as possible, which was quite a feat; her mother had been a notorious beauty, first married to the old Duke of Lindley and after his demise due to a bad liver disease, marrying the handsomest man in the Realm: Jonathan Montgomery, at the time sole heir to the Duke of Rothford. She stared at the Lady again. There was something strange about the glasses, as if the spectacles were made of normal glass; as if the lady wanted everybody to think that she was a bluestocking. It was not an abnormal thing. Some spinsters were proud of the fact that they were intelligent and they purposefully looked down on beautiful and seemingly empty-headed girls. It was a strange phenomenon to realize that a woman actually wanted to seem ugly, Marguerite mused. All Lady Sophia's efforts did not hide the fact that her face was a beautiful oval, her features very regular and her teeth were very white. Anyone who took the trouble should be able to see that Lady Sophia had been on the receiving end of her fabulous mother's beauty.

She wondered about Lady Sophia's companion, Miss Nora Martin, from somewhere up North, who seemed the opposite of her employer. She had an interesting face, lively and smiling. Her way of dress was less simple and demure than Lady Sophia's clothes. That was strange; the Lindleys were far from destitute those days. Richard Grey, Duke of Lindley since his second year on God's Earth, had turned out to be the opposite of his wastrel of a father, who had been a drinker, a gambler and a rake. After Richard Grey came of age he dismissed his guardians and started taking

care of business matters in order to pay back his father's debts and bring back prosperity in the dukedom. He could definitely afford to buy his sister the most expensive clothes now. Marguerite wondered again if the Duke's sister was playing down her appearance and fleetingly asked herself why anyone would want to do that.

She almost dropped her teacup when she saw Lady Sophia looking straight back at her with furrowed brows and a glint of humour in her eyes. Oh, well!

"I don't think we've formally had the pleasure, Mrs. Alexander," the Duke's sister said to her, "I don't tend to go out a lot anymore, but I do not remember having seen you before in London. Am I remiss in my supposition?"

Marguerite swallowed and then decided that telling the truth may be the best choice under the circumstances.

"You are almost right in that you may not have seen me before, because my deceased husband did not entertain inside the Ton. This is the very first time I have been invited for tea within Lady Elton's circles."

She stopped to put her cup on the table in front of her. She knew she must be trembling because the fine bone china made a soft rattling sound.

"Your deceased husband..." Lady Sophia wondered, "You mean you never entertained during your marriage?"

Oh, right to the heart of it! This Lady Sophia was a very astute woman.

"My husband was adamant on that point, I'm afraid," she answered with some desperation in her voice. "He was thirty years my senior and one may very well presume that he was not quite used to the needs of a far younger wife."

That was putting it mildly.

Her spoon tinkled against the gold-rimmed bone china she had picked up again and a colour rose on her cheeks. Marguerite felt as if she was just entering a schoolroom under the gaze of a lot of cynical onlookers and she bit her lip.

Lady Sophia's silver grey eyes showed amused understanding.

"Ah, yes," Sophia nodded, "exactly why I never entertained the reality of a marriage myself. Those men get too much power over us women as soon as that ring is slid onto our finger."

Marguerite could not help smiling at her.

"Quite so," she admitted, "but for some alliances there is no help."

Lady Sophia cocked her head.

"One would be hard put to see the blessing of marriage in such a light, Mrs. Alexander. Tell me what your parents sold you for? It must have been the money as your husband never bore a title, although I do seem to remember he tried to buy one, before his demise."

Marguerite coloured a deep red. That was one of the most direct remarks ever made on that issue.

Lady Sophia put her hand on Marguerite's wrist.

"Don't get me wrong, my dear," she said almost in a half-whisper, "everybody knows that when you marry at eighteen with one of the wealthiest old cits in the country it cannot be the young lady's choice. I am truly sympathizing. My father died when I was still a toddler but he'd already managed to arrange to have me affianced to a widower marques, who fortunately did me the utmost favour of tipping up his toes after one of his debaucheries with a known courtesan, while I was still diligently learning

stitches. At least I had my wondrous escape. The heartless Fates did not bestow that miracle on you, apparently. Mind, I am not criticizing you, as a matter of fact, I feel deep sympathy for you.

“I had the mischance to meet your husband at a banquet at our house. Oh, it must have been six or seven years ago. He was a plain old rotter, excusez-le-mot. He was married to your predecessor and it was clear she was suffering. No wonder she walked into the waters of the Thames. One must admire you for your rock steadiness that you didn’t.”

Lady Sophia looked about the drawing room, as if realizing they were far from alone in this altogether too frank conversation. She looked a bit relieved when she saw that only Nora Martin had followed their talk. Marguerite stared wide eyed at Lady Sophia.

“I never knew that his wife...”

“Of course you did not,” Lady Sophia interrupted her quickly, “why would anyone bother his young bride with such small details of his former relationship? At least you survived him and I am immensely delighted with that.”

She looked up at the parlour-maid who offered newly baked almond cakes on a heavy silver platter.

Marguerite looked around to see if any of Lady Elton's famous footmen was hovering close.

Lady Elton obviously hid her hobbyhorses from her exalted tea circle because only an elderly butler was supervising the parlour-maids.

“She hides them,” Lady Sophia whispered from the side of her mouth.

“There has been a rather naughty article about them in one of those rags and since then she keeps them away from her visitors.”

She bit a piece of her newly acquired almond cake, daintily and expertly using the silver fork left for her convenience.

Marguerite laughed softly.

“I use to admire them from the window over there.”

She pointed at the window of her former own room in the house opposite Lady Elton’s.

“I bet you would,” Lady Sophia said drily, pondering that anyone could comprehend that the muscled backside of a handsome footman would rise very high in the esteem of a lonely, more or less imprisoned, and bullied wife.

“What did he die of?”

“What?” Marguerite asked aghast, totally forgetting her manners. She had been wondering how she could have been so uncouth as to admit to admire tall footmen’s backsides in the recent past.

“What happened?” Lady Sophia persisted.

Marguerite’s deep red colour came flushing back.

“I am not sure. They say his liver gave out.”

“Ah, nasty!” Lady Sophia exclaimed, “That must have caused quite a stink!”

Marguerite suppressed a grin.

“They found him dead on his... on his...”

“Privy? In that case he must have over-eaten. I remember the same happened to my uncle Gordon. They say his wife still cannot bear to live in his apartments because of the smell,” Lady Sophia told her chattily.

They were interrupted by a smiling Lady Elton who sat down on a chair near their settee.

“Well,” she beamed at Lady Sophia, “we have not had the pleasure of your company for a while!”

While Lady Sophia was answering Lady Elton's deferential questions Marguerite looked around her.

A bit further away on an embroidered couch the Ladies Wharton and Eastbourne conducted in loud voices a most confidential conversation. They were both grandmothers, interfering with their children and grandchildren at every turn. Marguerite's eyes widened in surprise. The two women were gobbling up cakes and cookies as if they had not eaten in three days and not bothering to use any cutlery.

"I told Joan it was a disgrace that she has not yet conceived!" she heard Lady Wharton of the rich Wharton's exclaim, "Imagine, she's been married for five years now."

Ah! Marguerite shifted a bit towards the source of indignation. One thing was for certain, when you were seventeen and preparing for your come-out, no one, absolutely no-one, would ever mention one word about things like marital relationships. As soon as you were married or better still widowed, the conversation between the Ladies of Polite Society would suddenly only go on about the interesting topic on conjugal or not so conjugal relations. You would think there was nothing else in the world to talk about apart from the exciting subjects of babies and upcoming nuptials.

The elderly Lady Marsh stirred her tea as if she was brewing a magic potion in it.

"If you want offspring you have to do it, Brenda," she said with a disinterested voice. "I warned you John was not in the petticoat line, he's never been one for the skirts."

"Oh, pff," Lady Wharton protested, "I dare say it is Joan's fault. Did you know she moved to the West wing of their house? The poor boy has to walk for half an hour

before he gets to her room. Cold feet are never a good start for romantic love, you know.”

“Romantic, my backside!” interferred a slightly drunk Lady Bromley, “He only needs to spread her legs for a few weeks to get her with child, at least that’s what my dear Harvey did, God bless his sweet soul.”

Marguerite was now sure that Lady Bromley’s teacup contained a good amount of brandy.

She had to force a smile from her face when Lady Wharton hissed in a stage whisper to her neighbor Lady Allen; “Her legs and about a hundred others. Wasn’t he once sweet on you too, Paula?”

Paula Allen sniggered and only nodded. It was not the time to make Lady Bromley any wiser about her straying husband. Only when he was good and truly in his grave would it be a nice time to whisper a few words about his unfaithfulness in her ear. Harvey Bromley was an old but still vigorous debaucher who did not mind finding his inamoratas between the lonely elderly women of the Ton; it did not cost him a penny and they could not be gotten with child. And of course there was the advantage that they were normally not disease-ridden. The poxed never normally got that old.

Lady Sophia fumbled with her reticule, her mouth suddenly in a prim pout.

She rose from the couch.

“I dare say we have been here long enough, Miss Martin,” she announced pointedly, throwing a defying glance at Lady Elton.

The hostess reddened, cursing her friends silently. How could they have forgotten that Lady Sophia was a spinster and such free talk about scoundrels of husbands, or talk

about the Earl of Wharton's capabilities of impregnating his wife, was not suitable for her ears? Drat! Sophia Grey was such a catch at a tea party. She hardly went to any of the glamorous parties that abounded during the Season. Only a musicale with known performers (that did not include the marriage-hopeful misses of the Ton, whose undiscerning and equally hopeful mamas insisted that they were inordinately accomplished on either pianoforte or at mixed duets, whilst they murdered operas, scores, and ears) could attract her in some cases.

She often appeared at the Opera, or at the Bard's more serious theatre plays, such as Othello or Macbeth. Everybody knew that Lady Sophia was literate, educated, very high in the instep and a stickler for manners, just as she should be.

Lady Elton threw a worried look at the recently widowed Mrs. Alexander. Marguerite Alexander had been a Lord's daughter, although the title had disappeared after his death. Nobody could guess the extent of her wealth right now but the stories had abounded and the knowledgeable bankers' wives had confirmed its astronomical height. The beautiful Mrs. Alexander was the catch of the season in more than a few ways.

Lady Elton had seen her talking to the normally taciturn and haughty Lady Sophia and they had even shared a laugh, if not a... giggle! Well, that had been fortunate, Mrs. Alexander did not mind a few racy remarks it seemed. Lady Elton's teas had the reputation of being entirely fascinating because of all the eccentric and talkative highborn hags. Lady Elton tended to approve of such friends, it made her teas interesting instead of dull, but today with the ducal

spinster in attendance she wondered if she should have cut short the too free conversation.

Her teas were on strict invitation only, and her invitation to Lady Sophia had been as much as a standing one, one might never know, and thank the Lord she had come this time. She could now only pray that the Lady had not been insulted!

Mrs. Alexander was a bit of a strange duck in this pond as a very wealthy but very young woman, although there were enough reasons to invite her anyway. About a few hundred thousand reasons, if Lady Elton's information was on the dot.

Lady Bromley rose and seated herself next to Marguerite.

"Don't mind that one," she whispered at Lady Sophia's disappearing back. "If Lord Wharton is not in the petticoat line, she is definitely not into men's boots."

"I heard that, Olivia," Lady Wharton said sharply.

"Well, it's true, aint it?" Lady Bromley grumbled with a slight slur.

Marguerite looked wide-eyed at her neighbor.

"Out of which hole did they pull you, girl?" Lady Bromley asked irreverently, "Everybody knows the poor Miss Martin is being tumbled both ways. If she does not sleep in Sophia's bed she is wont to be found in the Duke's. And dammed if I know which one she prefers."

Lady Wharton looked indignant but kept silent. Even she knew that her beloved Johnny was sooner to be found in the cot of a well-shaped naked footman still wearing his boots than in her daughter-in-law's bedroom. It was a sure thing that hope kept her longing for a grandson while she

was alive. Johnny had indulged in girls when he was younger, it was just that after his days in Cambridge...

Marguerite blushed but could not prevent a giggle burbling from her lips. The conversation was scandalous but very enlightening. She had lived in a cage for years and was actually still as innocent as a chick when it came to the Ton's scandals.

"Lindley is one heck of a promiscuous fellow," Lady Bromley went on with glowing eyes. She liked nothing better than to shock young prim women, "what with all those parties going on in his summer house."

"You don't know if those rumours are true, Olivia," Lady Elton warned, aghast.

"My Harvey was invited to one, Sara, I swear," Lady Bromley said with glee, "and he saw our little Miss Martin there as well, together with Lindley's birds of paradise. He confessed it all to me."

Lady Elton turned stiffly to an improperly amused Marguerite.

"How much longer will your mourning last, my dear?" she asked in a nasal voice; anything to shut up the tipsy Olivia Bromley.

Marguerite blushed. She knew by now that every biddy in this room must have a needy cousin or son of marriageable age who would jump at the chance to snatch a rich and appetizing widow.

"May," she nodded, in a clear voice. "My husband died on the twentieth of April."

When she saw the expectant glances of a few of the other ladies she hastily added; "I will go into half-mourning then, of course."

“Oh, what rot!” Lady Bromley growled, wiping the crumbs of a pound of quickly savored almond cookies from her huge cleavage, “The year of mourning is only to ensure that the child you breed will get the right father’s name and inheritance. You don’t look eight months pregnant to me. You’ll be just fine going into the last part of the Season, believe you me.”

Marguerite just smiled thinly. She had heard the whispers about forty year old Arthur Bromley, Lady Bromley’s one and only pampered son. To avoid Debtor’s prison he would have to sell his lovely estate in the Cotswolds, unless he landed the likes of Marguerite as a wife.

She had seen Arthur Bromley at Hookham's Bookshop and Lending Library only a few weeks ago. He had wide ears, a prominent nose, a bad complexion and she supposed he must suffer from a bad bones illness because he was bent as if he was eighty years old instead of forty. She had wondered what he’d spent his money on to be caught in the debtor’s trap, but then reflected one could never tell. Her own experience had taught her that some vices were more visible than others, but the invisible ones could be equally as expensive.

She was pondering whether she should get up and take her leave as she had been sitting in Lady Elton’s drawing room for nearly hour when she heard Mrs. Canning, the rich Colonel’s wife, mention a very well-known name; Major Henry Agnew.

“I’m not surprised Lillian agreed to the marriage,” Mrs Canning said with an envious tone in her voice, “she was always so hell-bent on Tina marrying into the nobility. An earl’s second son and an army man to boot! Although I’m

sure he does not own a penny, unless he has been able to loot his fortune together.”

She tooted at that last remark and shook her head. Most hopeful mamas did not approve of second sons. They were untitled, if not for worthless courtesy titles, mostly penniless and, because of that, became inordinate wastrels and rakes. An earl’s second son and a war-hero was of course an entirely different matter.

“Must be real love,” Lady Bromley boomed from the other side of the room. “That yummy Hengist has always been a looker, just like his naughty brother Philip. At least our handsome Lord Morvern is still on the market. Can you imagine landing that one? Last time he appeared at Fanny Bell’s ball half of the debs swooned when they saw him in his evening wear.”

“They whispered he’d lost a fortune at gambling,” Lady Marsh piped up.

Lady Bromley shrugged.

“He’ll get over it. I tell you that one has saved himself for the best.”

All the ladies peered at Marguerite. It must have been all over London that his Lordship had frequently been seen in the youthful company of her half-brother Stephen McKenna. Surely that could only mean he was after the beautiful and wealthy sister?

Marguerite did not notice the ladies’ meaningful stares. She sat frozen on her chair while her heart slowly broke.

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“He was only a dream, sweetie,” Rose whispered while she folded the blanket against Marguerite’s lace-clad shoulders.

Marguerite just buried her head deeper into her pillow.

“Don’t say that, Rose,” she sniffed with a tearful voice, “I was sure there was something special between us, he’s been after me for years! And when he saved us from those robbers... I know he felt for me!”

“Maybe so,” Rose murmured soothingly, “but he has never come back to you, you never heard from him since. He did not so much as write a jot to you.”

Marguerite started to sob softly.

“He couldn’t. I was on my way to marry William. And I’m glad he never did. You know how sickly jealous William turned out to be.”

Rose only nodded. It was best to indulge her little mistress now, because, if anything, she saw an attack of melancholia heading in Marguerite’s direction. It would not be the first time. Sometime during her disastrous marriage she had decided to give up hope. Rose reflected that nobody could really blame her. For such a young woman, her life had been drenched in misery and she had always been so patient and quiet. Rose had helped her little mistress indulge in the lovesick dream which at least had gotten her through the horrible years of her marriage as the sole ray of hope in her gloomy horizon.

Now it all had come crashing down and Rose felt very sorry about that.

She wondered if the young master had something to do with the devastating news for Cherie. He had asked her about Cherie’s secrets as he wanted his friend Lord Morvern to marry his rich sister. Rose had decided to help him. After the William Alexander disaster she wanted nothing more than to have a nice strong young man share Cherie’s bed and make lovely babies with her. Lord Morvern was just the type. It was true that there was a rumour that he had

squandered his money, but then Cherie would have enough for the both of them. The girl was so serious; she would definitely be a good influence and live a happy and joyful life with him. Yes, a bed full of roses, she decided with hidden elation.

Cherie had fallen asleep, her hands clutching the sheets.

Rose went to the door and beckoned a jumpy Master Mackenzie who had been a witness to Marguerite's devastated homecoming.

"She's very upset, the poor dear," she said regretfully, "but she'll get over it in the end."

Stevie tried not to look glum. It had been such good luck that this Colonel Canning's wife had been at Lady Elton's tea. He knew by now that Colonel Canning had been forced to retire due to his age and rheumatic fevers that had wrecked him while he had been campaigning in the North Americas at the end of last century. Since then he and Mrs. Canning kept track of all the battles and gossips of the war in the Peninsula.

It had needed some prodding to find someone believable to 'marry' Hengist, and after an afternoon of studying about thirty papers on the war near Lisbon, Stevie had come up with the right person. There was this gossip about the sinfully beautiful Lillian Clinton, wife of the elderly Colonel Clinton who had a sixteen-year-old daughter Bettina, for whom whole regiments were vying, if one could believe the gossip mills. Hengist would be thirty soon and no doubt eager to become a colonel himself and betrothing a famous colonel's daughter, whose uncle was the very famous General Clinton, would be the right road to take if he did not wish to fork out the money for a colonel's commission. Yes, it was all very plausible and to make it all seem much more

realistic he had Philip scribble a letter, supposedly from Hengist to his noble brother, copying army news from other letters and proclaiming the news of his marriage soon to come. They had dated the letter three months backward so that it seemed as if the marriage would already have taken place.

A bored war correspondent had been happy to use the copy for the Times. The war in Portugal had been at a standstill since September last year to everybody's regret; war should be fought and not sat, as it was only eating up the Treasury's money for nothing.

One down, and good riddance, Stevie thought moodily. He truly disliked the eventual outcome of the project, his sister marrying his lover, but he would cheer up with the thought that they would be able to live together in the same house and see each other every day.

He slowly went down the stairs to the library. It was the only room in the house that was decently furnished. He should remind his parents to do something about the house's shabbiness. He shrank back from receiving any of his latest cronies; they'd think him desolate for money if they saw the state of the house. Only Philip's house looked worse, as far as he knew.

Philip was thinking of selling his house at Upper Brook so that he would have some money to make a splendid impression on the Ton and his sister, but the question was; where would he live until he got himself safely married?

At least the rumours about his upcoming nuptials had reduced the hardy creditors to a dwindling few in front of his house. Creditors preferred possible prospects rather than a man fading away in Debtor's prison who would never be able to come up with a penny.

Stevie nibbled on a thumbnail and pulled at his hair.

‘His little brain’ Philip had called him tenderly yesterday night, before giving him his rightful reward, and he had loved the implication behind Philip’s remark. Philip needed him and had implied he had a talent for intrigue, which his lover seemed to lack entirely. But then Philip had always been busy keeping his glorious body in shape.

Stevie bit his nails even harder. Behind the inn which he’d paid for Philip’s lodgings was a lot of wasteland where Philip practiced his wrestling and fencing skills with his hastily drummed up cronies. Stevie had watched him wrestle with the young Lord Nicholas Bradbury and had been almost sick with jealousy. He had never practiced any of the bodily arts, as his small stature was his undoing in every fight or competition. He had never been remotely interested in riding, hunting or horseflesh, everything Philip practiced with a passion, and now Stevie felt his shortcomings sorely.

Stevie tried to swallow away his unease. There were things to do, things Philip could not achieve without his help and interference.

He needed support, he decided. Marguerite was not going to marry Philip without a battle, unless... unless he could secure himself the help of his ambitious mother. He was certain she would agree with the choice of Philip, especially when he would exaggerate Philip’s value on the marriage market. Exaggerate? He had heard about debutantes swooning whenever Philip entered a ballroom in his finest clothes.

He made a beeline for the desk and sat down to write.

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Aurora Ross’ Diary

It cannot be true. Mrs. Canning must have been wrong.
He cannot have married. I am certain he loved ME.
My heart is broken.

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Chapter 7: HENGIST'S DECISION

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Lisbon, March 1810

Hengist held his horse Jason by the bit where he stood watching the last ship sail out of the port. A curse lingered on his lips. Damn, another convoy going back to London without him on board!

He squeezed his eyes to slits against the harsh sunlight. Even in spring the sun glared, he scoffed. It was supposed to be a lot better than the Scottish weather, but he had had his fill of it. Four long years of service had taken the charm out of the Portuguese sunlight.

He had fought bloody battles in it, and the last scar of the Battle at Oceana still hurt his back. He had taken a sabre wound there and had been ill for two months until it had slowly closed without much infection but with a nasty scar.

His mouth curled into an involuntary smile. Lillian Clinton had made a huge fuss over him at the time, assuring his recovery so that she could climb between the sheets with him in his isolated tent when he was well enough to get his dick into position again. She had been a keen and lush lover, implying her husband had stopped bedding her for ages. Hengist had doubted that. Clinton was elderly but not doddering. Lillian was just a man-eater and fancied him because he was young and high-ranked. He was certain she would never stoop to anything lower than a major and a six-inch dick.

Alas, like the Portuguese weather, the joys of Lillian wore thin. Hengist knew he had lost his cheerfulness and congeniality a long time ago. He had stopped appreciating

the camaraderie amongst his peers; it was empty and practically non-existent with all the abounding pettiness and big jealousies. The men of similar rank were--almost without an exception--ten years older and most had wives that followed the drum, took care of their needs, and kept their beds filled all night.

Hengist licked his lips. He had never expected to become such a domestic person as to want a woman in his bed all night, even only to sleep with, just for the company, but there it was. He did not want to be alone any more, he wanted someone to care for, and who would care for him.

His trysts with Lillian ranged from five minutes to one hour at the most, leaving him satisfied for the next quarter of an hour and then it suddenly turned sour. He wanted the sex with her as eagerly as she wanted him, he was probably at the height of his sexual needs, but it was just not enough.

Lillian did not waste her time talking; she used to grab him as if he were one of the whores of the followers' camp and just leave him after she had moaned her satisfaction, between clenched teeth because tents did not provide a lot of privacy, especially when you were fucking the Colonel's wife on your portable writing desk.

To his dismay his dreams of Marguerite, Cherie as she once was called by her close friends, were increasing with the heightened state of his sexual affair with Lillian.

Thank God Marguerite's nickname was similar to the French word for 'darling,' so the few times the name had sprung to his lips when he was doing Lillian it had only managed to enrapture his eager lover. His own secret embarrassment, however, had annoyed him more than he could ever admit.

His eyes held a tender expression when he thought of the first time he had seen her. It had been a hot day in Edinburgh and he had just come back from another boring errand - sixteen year old ensigns were ill-used by all the higher ranking officers, which meant just about every officer in the contingent. She had passed him by on her pony, unescorted and dreamily holding a bouquet of meadow-flowers.

He had been a big, remarkably innocent boy in the short kilt of the 42nd Highlanders and he felt as if he had been hit by a thunderbolt when he saw the twelve-year-old girl lazily urging her sturdy Scottish pony along the path where he was hiding in the blackberry bushes, after having complied with a call of nature.

At twelve, she was already maturing into the womanly forms of the young adolescent. She wore a flowery short-sleeved dress that was quite tight around her rump and only accentuated the apple-like contours of her young breasts. She had done up her shiny black hair in a high pony-tail and the fact that she showed quite some leg from the side where he was gazing confirmed to him that she must have slipped out of the house for an illicit ride. The leg was appealingly soft with flesh at the right places, her unsuitable slipper ornamenting it rather than distracting. From that magical moment she had been a prominent apparition in his young boy's lustful thoughts, whether at waking or at the time he laid his tired head on the coarse pillow of his bunk.

At seventeen he had his first full sexual experience with the daughter of a local wine supplier only because she resembled his beloved Cherie, at least in the dark, and thus Cherie had settled herself in his mind never to disappear again. Most young officers of his age bragged of early

experiences with housemaids and farm-helps, but in his father's household the secret humping had been done by his lecherous father himself, who took care to have more pretty faces there than he could play the two-backed beast within a week.

Hengist had known his mother did not care a whit about her husband's sexual encounters. She had firmly closed the door of her bedroom on her husband the moment she had given birth to her spare heir: Hengist.

Young Hengist had always wondered about the marriage of his parents. They seemed barely able to bear each other's company, yet his mother had always stayed in the same house as the Earl. Later on, he understood that there was more than one way to control a despised husband. His mother was a rich Lindley, niece to the Scottish duke. The young duke's representative had only allowed the marriage because the heir to the Earl of Loghaire, Andrew Agnew's uncle at the time, tended to be rather chummy with the Duke of Rothford, Lindley's so-called Nemesis in Scotland, although his beloved stepfather as well. Hengist's father's marriage with Lady Lindley, whose mother was a Wharton, had brought a true hoard of gold into the family and did not differ from all the other aristocratic marriages of those days: lineage, titles and money was all. It had helped that Loghaire had been a sight for sore eyes unlike his merely handsome bride, but as usual things had turned definitely sour when Hengist's father could not keep his breeches on, or his kilt down, when other women were around.

Hengist had always loved his wonderfully sociable and intelligent mother and was quick to take her side whenever a bad situation occurred in the house. He had been her knight in shining armor and thus showed a talent for gentleness and

gentlemanliness. His father had despised him for it, calling him a bloody molly to his face. That is why Hengist grew up in a divided household: Philip could not do wrong by Andrew Agnew, who had become the Earl of Loghaire when his sons were fairly young, while Hengist was secretly spoilt by his gentle mother. She did love Philip as well, but was quick to see the numerous failures and faults in his character. She always used to complain to Hengist that although the brothers looked similar in every way, Philip had the bad taste to resemble his father in character.

When Hengist became a first lieutenant, he had pledged his hope to marry his beloved Cherie one day. He knew all about her at that time. After all, a day of soldiering in Edinburgh did not offer a lot of enjoyment to a young officer who hardly drank, and who deplored going to the brothels. He used his obsession for the girl to spy on her; the house where she lived or the few places she went to, which amounted to church-goings and visits to the lending library. Alas, he was asked to join the 78th Foot for a mission to Ireland, after he earned himself a captaincy due to his leadership and background. When he came back to Edinburgh Cherie was 'recovering' from a simple Season in London and was betrothed to the wealthy but old Mr. Alexander from Stephens and Alexander's Shipping and Ship Yards.

Hengist had been devastated and appalled. The only thing he had been able to do was to schedule the long trip of the 42nd for embarkation in Southend to some unknown far away destination at about the same time as when Cherie was to travel to London to marry the unsavory William Alexander.

His heroic role to save her and her company from the wandering group of highway robbers was easy enough to achieve as he had been with two platoons of the 42nd and the robbers were only five men. He would have begged Cherie to abandon her marriage plans and to elope with him if it had not been for the impressive presence of Lord McKenna and the equally bossy mother. So he had clenched his jaws and accompanied them as far as North London, hiding his love and his perpetual hard-on.

She had never known about his obsession with her. He had only kissed her once, when he drew her away from the miscreant that surely had his dirty designs on her, not being able to help himself, while one of his soldiers shot her attacker in the head.

His hand had touched her full breast for only a second, but he knew now it must be the longest stretched second in all eternity. That second had helped him through his miserable nights in his lonely tent and the lurid moments of his existence when he was not drinking away his longing or paying for comely enough streetwalkers. Hengist had found out to his shame that he had inherited his father's despised lecherous nature; he started craving the relief between the legs of a woman more than the comfort of bottles or his friends.

Women had come and gone, quite a few whores and camp followers, and they had all worn one face; hers.

One could wonder why he wanted to go home; objectively Portugal could be as good a place as anywhere else because the woman of his heart was married. But all reason concerning Cherie had left him a long time ago. He would go to London to study the situation and if necessary he would beg her to leave her despicable husband and ask

her to elope with him. Something had changed the situation for him, or more accurately; someone. He was a rich man now, inheriting the bigger part of the Wharton fortune as his mother had refused to donate to Philip's bottomless money pits in her will.

He turned to face the horizon where the ships were still silhouetted in the light of the slowly setting sun and swore he would be on one of them the next time they sailed once more from Lisbon to London.

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Chapter 8: LADY MACKENNA'S PERSUASIONS

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Lady McKenna was terrifying when she was angry and this time she was absolutely ablaze.

“What the hell are you doing in that ghastly black dress?” she shouted at her daughter.

She had only just descended from the ugly old-fashioned McKenna travelling coach, her carriage dress crumpled, but very becoming on her still very appetizing form. It was clear to see where the beauty of both Stevie and Marguerite had come from.

Marguerite felt like shrinking back behind one of the heavy oak pillars of the stairway. Her ambitious mother had been her nightmare incarnate since she started growing breasts and even now, widowed and fully of age, she still could not hide her fear of her mother's often unjust and uncalled for accusations.

She swallowed and managed to come forward for a curtsy.

“Mother,” she gasped, not adding how she had not expected her mother to appear until late April. If there was something her mother hated most it was uncomfortable travel and in mid-March the roads from Edinburgh to London must have been quagmires of mud.

“Don't you all just stand there!” Lady McKenna cried out cattily to the hastily and frightened assembled staff, “Bring refreshments to the drawing room, and have my luggage brought up. And you, young lady...” she pointed an accusing finger at a shocked Marguerite, “You come with

me, and explain why the house is still in such a deplorable state and why you are wearing those ugly rags!”

Marguerite followed her mother into the drawing room with a heavy heart, peeping at Biggles who was wearing his no-nonsense polite butler face.

Her mother always had a knack of insulting her in front of her staff and now, in her recent state of mourning for a despicable man, she could not bear a repetition of what had happened in her dead husband’s household; disrespectful staff members. They could quietly turn your world into a hell of small but nevertheless important occurrences such as cold bathwater; piss in the soup, fleas in your bed, tea that tasted like dishwater, the appalling list was endless and unfortunately she had seen and experienced it all in the house on Berkeley Street.

Her only hope of surviving her mother’s open disrespect towards her was that Biggles could maintain his grip on her not yet unruly household, and the certainty that he had a profound disliking for Lady McKenna because he knew from five years’ experience that, apart from the sumptuous title, she was not a lady at all.

That knowledge could give Marguerite some comfort.

It was true that the staff would not dare to put fleas in her mother’s bed or some such abhorrent thing because that was almost similar to volunteering for an old-fashioned whipping or an immediate post on the cobbles of London’s irregular streets. It kept the servants on their toes and with the vicious lady in the house they would not dare to indulge in the small pestering that could make life in a house practically intolerable.

It had only been a few weeks since she had heard about Hengist’s marriage and the wound of her sorrow was still

raw. Stevie had pestered her in the meantime with requests to allow Lord Morvern to come and see her, court her more like, and she had only been able to come up with the excuse of her mourning for her late beloved husband. She had wallowed in her loneliness, taking to her bed in the afternoons and before the Ton even thought of having dinner in the evening she would be hiding under her blankets once more. She had refrained from putting in any appearances in the dining room, taking trays in her bedroom that returned untouched to the kitchen. She knew the appearance of her mother would put an end to all that wallowing in self-pity. For one, her mother was a night animal who abhorred everything that seemed remotely dull and had anything to do with going to bed early, unless it was with a tasty lover.

Her mother sat down in the drawing room's best chair frowning at the fireplace where a few measly flames pretended to heat the room.

"Call Biggles, right now!" she snapped at her daughter, and when the alarmed butler came in, she rattled off to him whom he had to summon to the house:

Miss Germaine, the French dressmaker, Mr. Boodle from the largest furnishing shop in town, François Toussaint, London's most famous hairdresser, haberdashers, boot makers, shoemakers; the list seemed endless.

"That will teach you what money is for," her mother bitched at her. "How dare you become so rich and not use a penny on any of us! How dare you keep such a shaggy household! Look at the rags you are wearing! If I had not seen you born myself I would not believe you are my daughter!"

She took a quick swallow of her lemonade that was obviously laced with a large percentage of brandy or rum.

Marguerite said nothing, but remembered clearly the four hundred pounds per month that she paid for her parents' upkeep in Scotland. It was true, she had not yet spent a lot on herself, but frankly how many black dresses did one need? Simon had a penchant for black, true, but it had been half a year since her last farewell to him, on that occasion in a coaching inn South of London. They had rented separate rooms but they had shared hers with a finicky Simon, while Rose had stayed in his, and where he had almost been persuaded to do the deed with her at last, on a real bed instead of a smelly hackney, which had been the most seductive to induce real coupling. Alas, Simon had been able to summon his religious conscience and the fact that he was due to meet his new wife persuaded him to restrict his fumbling and ministrations and he had spilt in her hand instead.

She had only come to live in the house in the beginning of January, after having touched an indecent sum on the house in Berkeley Street. William had known the ins-and-outs of his investments and the London house had surely been one of his best. She had sold the house with furniture and all. She had not wanted to be reminded of the years of her incarceration, so she had refused to bring even one chair out of that house to her recent residence.

The mattress in her bedroom upstairs was lumpy and thin, but she would prefer to throw herself from the roof of the house rather than sleep on the one silent witness of her humiliations; the big feather mattress of her marriage bed. The mere memory made her shudder. She clenched her teeth and shook her head trying to suppress the memories of

William coming to her bed again and again. She was again reminded of the sour and slightly rotten sweaty smell of her old husband, who ordered her to give him his due with her mouth and would then lock her furiously in her bedroom. The years had taught her one thing- there was only one thing worse than an old lecherous husband; an impotent lecherous husband. After all his futile attempts he had feared that she would look for her bodily satisfaction elsewhere so he had dismissed all the servants younger than fifty, had her followed everywhere by two hateful old footmen whenever she was permitted outside the house. He only allowed her at his dinner table when the rich visitors were near their dotage. The musty years, she called the time after her wedding vows, the dreary, horrifying, musty years.

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The dressmaker was first to glide into the house and while she discussed fashions and colours with Lady McKenna, Marguerite was measured from head to toe by her assistants.

Four servants brought in rolls and rolls of cloth and Lady McKenna just pointed at the ones she deemed well enough for herself and Marguerite, without even once consulting her daughter. After she had ordered at least twenty dresses in all, she flashed a grin at a roll of pearl white Chinese silk.

“We’ll use that one for my daughter’s wedding dress,” she said coyly.

The room became suddenly quiet.

“Well, congratulations, Madame, I did not know!” beamed Miss Germaine at Marguerite, “I am sorry to have missed the announcement in the morning papers, but who is to be the lucky bridegroom?”

Lady McKenna looked nonchalantly at her nails when she said: “Why, Lord Philip Morvern of course, heir to the Earl of Loghaire. I’m appalled you are not up to snuff, Miss Germaine.”

When everybody started to chatter at the same time a pale and breathless Marguerite, who had not eaten a crumb all that day, fell in a dead faint on the floor.

Lady McKenna shook her head when a hastily called Rose tried to coax Marguerite back to the world of the conscious.

“I have not come back a moment too soon,” she drawled, “I knew that rascal would get to her when I was not there to prevent it. Now they’ll have to marry by special license.”

That evening it was all over the Ton that Marguerite Alexander Ross, rich widow of that cit Alexander, was already receiving Lord Morvern’s attentions and that the baby would be due at the end of December.

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“I’d say your lovely mother has done miracles with the place,” drawled an expensively dressed Lord Morvern.

It had only been a week, but the morning room in which he was having a whiskey-laced coffee was crammed with new furniture, Aubusson rugs, and mass produced paintings. Evidently the last ones were bought more for their ability to hide the ugly spots on the old wallpaper, than for their artistic addition to a rather gaudy interior.

“Expensive but tasteless,” a mocking Lord Morvern had muttered when he first saw the change to the place. At the least, he appreciated the fact that good taste would take years to acquire, so that he himself would be able to refurnish the house, where he was to live for such a long

time to come. He could always get rid of Lady McKenna's horrible monsters in the future, but for now they were accepted, as they only needed some luxury to sit on, so to speak.

Nobody ever wasted a word on Marguerite's poor deceased husband, but then he was only paying for the whole affair; the upkeep of Philip's future household, the few debts the bridegroom had incurred, only amounting to the measly sum of twenty-three thousand eight hundred and sixty-five pounds at his own last count, the new additions to the stables of the houses in London and Edinburgh and two racing horses to add to Philip's and Stevie's importance and pleasure.

Although the future bride was in residence, she was hardly to be seen outside her room, but the fashionable people only thought that very sensible considering the delicate situation she was in.

Philip was even less comfortable than Stevie today. The cause was the special license he had obtained for the marriage within a week that was burning a hole in his breast pocket.

Although he had been swaggering confidently between the ladies at the ball of the Courtenay's, last night, kissing his future wife's hand at almost every opportunity to show his love and devotion, even daring to kiss her on the mouth when the carriage had stopped shortly when it was filing out of the party, his heart had not been in it at all. Truth to say, it was easy enough to imagine that it was Stevie he was bestowing his attentions on, the chit he was to marry was well able to remind him of his recent paramour, but the thought of the approaching wedding night turned his guts into water. He knew he just could not do it.

He had never been able to make love to a woman and God knew he had tried when he had discovered his true nature, or better: his affliction to bestow ‘unnatural love’ on the persons of his own sex, which was a hanging offence.

Philip had always been a practical man and after his discovery that he preferred men to women for his sexual pleasure he did not want to spend a long time on the why and how of it. For some reason it had been quite easy to find similar thinking souls and now that he was almost thirty years old his amorous conquests added up far into the hundreds. He had always favoured first helpings only and would normally not come back for seconds, but was lusty enough to have a full bed, figuratively speaking, as he hardly took his lovers home.

It was so easy to think of marriage in the abstract way, only pondering on what it would bring him; release of his debts, a good house filled with servants to cater to his every need, and a wife to take care of all his domestic needs except that specific one... and someone to tackle the boring details of financial management.

His only worry until now had been the clinging creeper called Stephen Mackenzie, only son to Lord McKenna and most definitely too madly in love with him to allow him any space for play with the competition.

Stevie’s competition was a lot fiercer than he suspected. John Row, now settled cozily on a small bed behind a screen in Philip’s new dressing room was planning to push the manipulative Stevie out of Philip’s affection, which would prove to be a job of Herculean proportions. This morning when he decided to wake up his master with a well-earned blow job he had already found Stevie at the task, his master lazily laying back on the bed, his muscular

arms behind his head, his belly trusted up, humming with content. John Row had sworn that his time would come again. He had to agree that his bread was now thickly buttered thanks to the efforts of little Stevie Mackenzie. It would be very hard to give him away to the bride-to-be, as there was no saying how little rich Miss Prim would react to the news that the bridegroom shagged Stevie, while until now his affections towards her did not extend to more than kissing the bride's hand.

At least John Row had profited from his duality in taste, when he had found the chance to indulge in a swive with an oversexed Lady McKenna. The lady had imbibed far too much Champagne and Brandy at a Ton party and had been too late to secure herself an intermezzo with one of the younger stags, who were always on the prowl for an easy lay with the lady herself, which usually came without any expenses. She had staggered boldly into Philip's dressing room, most assuredly in the hope of finding her future son-in-law there, and was too deep in her cups to notice that it was not her daughter's prospective bridegroom who had taken advantage of her Champagne and liquor heightened libido.

In short, the house off Piccadilly had been in an unparalleled promiscuous uproar of late, with the exception of Marguerite, if one didn't count erotic, but very lonely, dreams about a certain handsome major.

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Philip had been utterly dismayed when his bride-to-be had entered the morning room with a glad smile hovering upon her lips. The impossible had happened at last; she had accepted her future fate with a husband who closely resembled the man of her dreams.

After he had shown his fondness of her in the critical eye of Polite Society she had at last relented and decided to close him into her arms and her heart. This morning she had convinced herself she was in love with him and as a result she seemed to bloom before his very eyes.

Philip, normally never at a loss for words found himself speechless with terror and annoyance. The last thing he wanted was her to be in love with him.

The next person to walk into the morning room was a slightly hung over but very satisfied Lady McKenna, who could not remember exactly who had done her last night until she had screamed, but knew that it had been an utterly satisfying experience, definitely worth the repetition.

Stevie still had his head in the clouds after giving head to his great love and hummed a tune he had heard at an intimate party last night. The conclusion could be that with the exception of a worried Philip, that morning Marguerite's house was at last a happy house.

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"You must help me!" Philip had whispered to an adoring Stevie who languished in a low chair, lazily sipping his brandy laced tea.

Life really had changed for the best for Stevie since he had written his mother that pleading letter about being disregarded by the Ton due to his lack of title and money, and all that because his sister refused to be courted by a madly in love Lord Morvern. Of course, he had not forgotten to include what a social catch the very handsome Lord Morvern was, being heir to the Earl of Loghaire and all, and please would his mother not come to London and sort things out here as poor Marguerite was still hiding in her rooms, mourning her beloved dead husband.

Stevie had known his plea would not fall on deaf ears; his mother loathed her confinement to the backward town of Edinburgh, a social backwater compared to London in her opinion. It was just that Lord McKenna, Scotsman through and through, had a profound dislike for the English capital and only came to town when there was no other option left to him, which was luckily not often the case.

The beautiful Lady Georgina McKenna, originally the daughter of a Scottish-English impoverished country squire, had first landed a marriage with the noble but almost equally poor Gareth Ross, Lord Halkhead who had, due to a hunting accident, only been able to enjoy two years of marriage with the wily but very sensual Georgina.

Lady Halkhead had only birthed him a daughter, so upon his death his title was referred back to the English Crown to possibly be gobbled up by one of the Scottish dukes who were always eager for more lands and honours. It had not taken the very ravishing widow Ross a long time to hook the elderly, but far from doddering, Lord McKenna. It took her only a year with the help of the handsome young doctor Morris, whom amazingly resembled the deceased Gareth Ross, in Edinburgh to conceive Stevie, who became the first to inherit Lord McKenna's barony as the death of his first wife had left him without issue.

Georgina Mackenzie, Lady McKenna, well into her forties but pretending to be not just yet thirty-five, was a shrewd and ambitious woman. She had been the one to orchestrate Marguerite's first marriage with the obese but utterly wealthy William Alexander. It was true, it had pained her that he was not at all noble, but as titles could be bought nowadays, she had set her regrets aside in favour of William's bank account. She had never had second thoughts

about delivering her exquisite daughter into the hands of that despicable man. Georgina might have some muscle beating in her breast to keep her alive but it definitely was not a heart.

She had taken over from Stevie the moment she stormed into Marguerite's house, ordering all the servants around and lashing her poor daughter with every unsympathetic word that could leave her scolding mouth.

Marguerite had always been defenseless against her mother's wiles, and even now as a rich widow of twenty-five she was powerless to her mother's ambitious machinations and manipulations.

Lord Morvern had been invited to diner at the house off Piccadilly on the same night of Lady McKenna's arrival and already at pre-dinner drinks the betrothal was a fact.

Stevie was discomfited to notice that his mother obviously fancied Lord Morvern more than his half-sister did, but knowing the true nature of his secret paramour he tried to overcome his second thoughts and put a happy face to that evening's affair, not for the first time disregarding his sister's dazed astonishment that she had been talked into an unwanted marriage for the second time in her life.

When he told his satisfied mother that having his Lordship in the house would prove infinitely more rewarding, she could not want the couple to live elsewhere. Thus a happy self-congratulatory Lord Morvern secretly moved into the house off Piccadilly within twenty-four hours of his betrothal.

When Stevie applied to his sister to pay for his new wardrobe, it was a logical move to include the bills for Lord Morvern's clothes. This way Philip was fed, clothed, and

housed without even having to foot the bill for a single stocking.

The only thing that was still a problem was the absence of an allowance and Stevie could not stretch his for the two of them. So the only thing Philip could do was to put his house up for sale and borrow against the prospect of future money.

Of course Philip proved to be a model betrothed, accompanying a blushing Marguerite to every occasion Lady McKenna could cram into their schedule. He had always been a party animal and his father, under the severe orders of his sociable mother, had sent him to Harrow and Cambridge. Although this ensured him a posh education, his academic achievements had never equaled his successes on the sports fields and at fencing classes, but it did give him a place among the peers of the realm of which he profited now that he had to face the Ton in London with his brand new fiancée.

Lady McKenna bathed in the envious attentions of Polite Society and quickly found her way into the good circles, with the exception of the royal ones. It was so amazing what money and a titled handsome future son-in-law could accomplish in Polite Society.

When Philip pleaded for help, Stevie could only lend him an eager ear.

“I’m worried about the wedding,” Philip growled.

Stevie cocked a brow. He loved it when Philip showed how much he depended on him.

“Maybe we can find somebody to do the deed for you,” he proposed.

Philip broke out in a smile.

“Christ, you’re a genius, little one, why did I not think about that myself?”

Stevie sucked his lip.

“The problem is: whom can we ask? We can hardly advertise that you don’t want to perform. And the few we know that like both sides are far and few and not very trustworthy.”

Philip played a tattoo on the table with his recently manicured hand. The closest one that was a two-way lover to his knowledge was John Row, but to send a valet to his future wife’s bed was unthinkable, what if she conceived? He shuddered inwardly. He peered at his little paramour who had given his life such a boost lately. Stevie was most definitely never to know about John Row. It would not be beyond him to sack John Row on the spot if he as much as suspected Philip’s and John’s true relationship. Stevie was the worst for jealousy; there had been a few near misses in the past with Stevie when he encountered Philip’s other lovers. Philip was addicted to more than one tryst with others on a daily basis as he needed the thrill of conquests and he was rather over-sexed. The thought of being faithful to one person had never entered his head. Why should he? The institution of faithfulness only applied to women; one had to be certain that the baby in the cradle was the husband’s, that was all.

“Can’t we postpone the wedding?” Philip asked urgently, “We could use the excuse that your father is not here...”

Stevie clenched his teeth. The less he saw his father the better. Lord McKenna was a big, domineering man, who would probably shoot him if he found out about his only son’s ‘true preferences regarding physical love.’

“I’m sure my mother wants him to stay in Edinburgh,” he mused, thinking of the few strategic attacks his mother had launched on a few very tasty ‘lords’ of the Ton. She had been devastated to find out that they did not come cheap or easily, so now she concentrated on the rakes of the Ton who were not bothered by age or scruples if it considered a quick swive at a hidden place.

“Marguerite’s period,” he suddenly said.

“Her what?” Philip cried out, wrinkling his nose in disgust

“I’ll ask Rose when it’s due so that we can do a decent planning for the wedding. With some luck we may delay it for two or three weeks.”

Philip shot out of his chair to embrace a flustered Stevie.

“Christ,” he murmured, “you’re truly a genius, little one.”

Three weeks may not be much, but who was to say which solution to their dilemma would show up in the meantime?

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“Delayed?” asked Marguerite, “but why?”

“Because you are having your monthlies in a few days,” Rose said soothingly, whisking away brushes and combs, “Lord Morvern would be terribly inconvenienced if you were still, well, if you were...”

“Oh, I understand,” Marguerite replied blushing. Monthlies were indeed an inconvenient thing. She wondered how she would be able to cope with that obstacle once she was married. Now that she thought about it, how on earth was she going to cope with a young husband who might come to her bed every night? Memories of her old husband demanding his rights with regularity even when he could not

bring himself to the desired conclusion were still too fresh in her mind. She picked up her brush with a distracted face.

“Do you think I should tell him about William? I mean before we...”

Rose shook her head ferociously.

“He’ll find out what he needs to know in due course.”

Marguerite wondered why her old maid was so resolute about it.

“But I...”

“Out of the question,” Rose said. As a future bride you are only allowed to discuss books, poetry, and the weather with him. What would it all come to if you discussed the unmentionable things with a man before he has given you his hand in marriage?”

“At least I hardly have to speak with him then,” Marguerite pointed out with a pout. “He did not give me the impression he ever read a whole book in his life and I dare say his knowledge of poetry may be well limited to bawdy songs.”

Rose smiled at last.

“So it will be the 3rd of May then? Might be auspicious; your mother’s last marriage was in May and look where it got her.”

Marguerite suppressed a giggle. Her mother’s efforts to get into the good graces of the young Earl of Oxbridge, the biggest rake in London, had not gone unnoticed. She wondered fleetingly if she would do the same in about twenty years’ time. She shook her head. It was just not in her. Even with an ever hovering husband, young merchants had managed to get close to her, obviously out on a tryst or even more serious affairs, but she had never even as much as dared to talk to them, let alone arrange a rendezvous with

them. William had been too possessive and mistrusting, anyway, shouting warnings and insults at her if she so much as smiled to the eleven-year-old potboy.

He had caught her one day gazing at the handsome footmen at the other side of the street, who were helping guests out of their carriages, admiring their manly height and their tight breeches whenever they made a deep bow for the important guests, parting their frog coats and showing their tantalizing behinds. What saved her when William caught her was that he thought she was watching the guests and longing to be one of them.

She had only been nineteen years old then, still remembering vividly the kiss of a strong mouth with clean regular teeth and a nice manly breath. He had been tall and muscular, just like Lady Elton's prime footmen, with that big, slightly rough hand touching her breast through her muslin dress, pushing his strong thigh against hers, rubbing an interesting, very hard ridge against her belly. Ah, she could live on that memory forever, especially as Lady Elton's head-footman resembled him from afar. It was a bit mortifying that the same head-footman had once caught her staring at him.

If only I could have been more like my mother, she thought with regret, life would have been a lot more joyful.

On the other hand, the mere thought of putting the horns on her terrifying husband had made her shiver with fear. She still wondered if her husband would have killed her if she had cheated on him. She knew for a fact that William had been ruthless in business and the frustration of having his wife cheating on him on top of everything might easily have made him turn into a wife-slaughterer.

Her thoughts went to Philip, her husband-to-be. She realized she hardly knew him. Oh, he was ever so sweet and gallant, but she was realistic enough to perceive that things might turn in a different direction as soon as she wore his wedding ring on her finger. For the last two weeks he had only tried to kiss her once. Kisses on gloved hands did not count, Ton manners dictated lots of such kisses, and he seemed to be tremendously good at it. On the other hand, etiquette demanded that they did not touch until the night of their marriage...

She sighed deeply.

She knew she was Philip's golden hen. She was not as daft as her mother liked to pretend. When Philip had showed his interest in her she had summoned Master Baines, one of the managers of her deceased husband's Shipping Agency--of which she owned eighty percent of the shares--to inquire after the eager Lord Morvern.

It had only taken Master Baines two days to unearth the exact height of his debts and his tendency to play deeper than he could obviously afford.

The only reason why she had complied to her mother's wishes that she should marry him was the fact that there were no women of note in his life; no mistresses and no brothels he was known to visit on a regular basis. And of course the fact that he was such a nice friend to poor Stevie.

Marguerite had always loved Stevie from the moment he was born and she was forced to share the nursery with him. She was never certain he reciprocated her love, but she had decided that it did not matter.

They were brought up in Scotland, either in Edinburgh or in the small mansion in Kenna. Her stepfather was not rich, merely well off, and so Stevie had not been given a

gentlemen's upbringing at one of the fashionable schools in England. He had to suffice with cheaper tutors and governors. In the end Marguerite considered that as an advantage because Stevie had not at all turned out to be the brash, bragging, and forward boy one would have expected him to become, especially if one considered his blustering father.

Stevie was only allowed to come to London after William died and as he had not gone to posh schools where he could have accumulated friends and thus a straight ticket into Polite Society he had a hell of a time finding his way into the Ton jungle. He first had befriended Lord John Wharton. Marguerite could not guess where they'd met, the same John Wharton whose wife, Joan, had annoyed his mother by not being in the family way after more than five years of marriage. Stevie's friendship with the exalted lord had seemed quite short-lived however.

It had obviously taken Stevie months before he could infiltrate into the circle of friends hosted by the marvelous Lord Morvern. That they were such good friends had filled Marguerite with gratitude; she knew how hard it was to find suitable aristocratic friends in London when you had no one to sponsor you.

Now that the wedding had been delayed Marguerite gladly contacted William's shrewd lawyer Master Geoffrey Lane. She was worried about Philip's gambling habits and was not prepared to hand over William's inheritance to her new husband so that Philip could pauper them within a year's time. She was sure he was not going to like it, but his marriage with Marguerite Ross was to be governed by stringent prenuptial agreements.

M. Aurora Ross' diary
London 21st of April, 1810

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Rose told me the wedding has to be postponed until the 3rd of May because Lord Morvern cannot be inconvenienced by a bleeding wife on his wedding night. She did not put it that way exactly, but that is what it meant. Well, if I think about it clearly it seems that it will be an inconvenience to me as well.

Men don't like it when women bleed, it was the one reason that I had used to keep the Fat Man from coming into my bed. The one time I had a romantic hackney rendezvous with Simon when I had my flow the encounter did not last more than five minutes, chasing Simon back into the maw of Spittalfields.

Lord Morvern strikes me as a prudish and fastidious man, he only kissed me once during the weeks of our betrothal, and that was more a peck on my lips than a true kiss. I know about true kisses because Simon adored long kisses on my mouth and sticking his tongue deep inside it. I am afraid I like kissing as well; I've liked it since that first time when Hengist kissed me during the racket when the soldiers were fighting the robbers off my coach. That was not a mere fast peck; that was Hengist using those nice lips and his insistent tongue. He had raced inside the coach, giving Rose the fright of her life, taking advantage of the distraction of the robbers. Ah, Hengist my love. Oh, I should not write this down. I am to marry his brother who is a very worthy person. I am sometimes a bit afraid that he will be entirely the opposite of the Fat Man. I truly think that fastidiousness is his second name and truth be told, I hope for a happy life with him where he will be as eager as

Simon to please me. So he must discard with his... we'll call it his "good manners".

We hardly speak, Lord Morvern and me. Sometimes I have the feeling that he does not know how to talk to a woman at all. Oh, he seems good enough at the superficial 'Ton' talk that is so fashionable nowadays, but as I said to Rose I have the impression he never finished reading a book in his life, not to say that he ever even started one. Mother likes to be naughty when she talks to him, but the only reaction that incurs is a panicky look on his face.

So yes, I understand why he would prefer the wedding to be postponed, although I am afraid that some blood on the wedding night cannot be avoided. Rose said that with losing one's virginity blood occurs. I wish I had insisted that Simon and I had gone all the way at least once but since his discovery in the refectory that 'I had remained unmarked by any man' as he put it, I have never been able to convince him that it would be a good thing to take me 'into his bed.' Simon believed that taking a woman was similar to taking a wife. A bit strange if you ask me, as Meg told me that Simon was seen by her neighbor with a woman of bad repute coming out of an alley close to Covent Gardens and anyone knows what that means! I do after Meg explained it to me.

On the other hand, they can hardly be called virgins, can they, those women, so that must have made it all right for him? Oh dear, I cannot believe I am writing these things about Simon, but on the other hand what we did together made me often try to imagine what 'going all the way' would be like.

I was never in love with Simon, of that I am certain. It is just so shocking that I felt, well, something like lust for him.

I sometimes wanted to beg him to put that specific part of his body inside me, which I truly still don't understand. And the worst is that I am looking forward to marrying Lord Morvern so that it will all happen after all. I must remember to ask Rose if there will be a way to avoid that blood flow on our wedding night.

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Chapter 9: OUTSMARTING WELLINGTON

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Marques General Wellington peered unobtrusively at the other end of the table. Pudding had been served and with it new bottles of Champagne had been opened. He had wondered fleetingly where on Earth those bottles had come from. The last battle against the French was almost eight months ago and Lisbon was not exactly the place for that sort of contraband. On the other hand, if he would ask about it he was certain to get all sorts of evasive answers; the whole army knew his attitude when it came to plunder. Hangings for that criminal offence had been legion all through the years.

He played with his spoon. He had always been a sober person, hardly indulging in the sins of life, apart from the fact that he had a problem keeping his hands, and a more specific part of his anatomy, off of other people's wives, or women in general for that matter. He had never been a big eater and the sugary desert the cooks had produced did not entice him at all.

He knew exactly what was enticing him tonight. He had to wriggle his underbelly under the table, quite grateful to ply a rather big serviette over it, as he had nurtured a shameful erection all evening. He peered along the table from under his eyelashes. The subject of his elevation was sitting three places on his right, obviously quite unconscious of his attentions. She was a voluptuous woman, her hair long and blond, coiffed on top of her head and falling down in long ringlets along an enticing neck. Her face was lush and very beautiful, and her cleavage thrust into a very tight

bodice was mouth-watering. She brought her desert spoon to her lush lips and the Marques almost exploded because he'd created a vision of those big hot lips around the part of his body that now made him so very uncomfortable. He closed his eyes and clenched his lips. The aggravating thing was that she had hardly seemed to notice him. She turned impolitely away from her left partner at the table, the old and musky Colonel Forester. Showing a delightful set of almost naked shoulders to the people she sat turned away from, she gave her full attention to her partner on her right; that hulk Major Henry Agnew, or Hengist as they called him.

Arthur Wellesley sent the Major an annoyed look, but as he was known to be a dour fellow most of the time Hengist hardly noticed it.

Hengist was having a hell of a difficult time trying to evade Lily's more suggestive remarks and movements. Once she even dropped her serviette near his left booth and when they both bent to retrieve it she grabbed his crotch with a teasing hand, unseen by the other diners, except for the Marques.

Arthur Wellesley was not Britain's greatest General for nothing. Nothing escaped him, especially not at the table of the 42nd whose turn it was this month to invite the great warlord.

Lillian Clinton was giving her favours to Major Henry Agnew, brother to Viscount Morvern, was she? Unthinkingly his right hand massaged the bulk in his tight white breeches until he realized it and shoved it with a shock toward his waiting Champagne glass. Mrs. Moriarty, a Colonel's wife on his left, tittered at him and he wondered if she had seen him rub his genitals. He cursed inwardly.

Mrs. Moriarty was an old bat, as was the ugly Mrs. Croons on his right and it was known they never kept their mouths shut about anything. They both had grown-up children in England and they had come to Lisbon in autumn, because no new battles had been expected. They would be going back soon, it was certain spring and summer would bring new hostilities and the army could not stay around Lisbon forever. Wellesley had a whole Peninsula to conquer.

The Marques looked absent-mindedly at his fingers that had grasped the long stem of his glass. He normally hated the separate regimental dinners where spouses were part of the invitations but custom dictated that he attended them once a month. The dinner with the Highlanders were generally hardly to his liking; they pretended to be coarser than the English and had their own inside jokes which he had a problem grasping. He had always felt a slight dislike for men that were dressed in skirts, although they called them kilts. It was just that the Highland Regiments were normally the best-trained ones, often the bravest ones and they could weather the bad circumstances like no other.

Mrs. Moriarty lanced a question at him, doubtless about his wife and children, and he had pretended to listen to her own explanation of her own brood back in England.

The Marques utterly disliked questions about his offspring or his ugly wife because he hardly knew anything about them. Oh, there was enough of a correspondence between them, but his wife wrote the most insipid letters which only arouse irritation in him. He had not seen her in more than two years and that situation suited him just fine.

Lillian Clinton's seductive voice suddenly found its way to his unwilling ears. It was hard to believe but she had

actually asked him a question; Did he like the town of Lisbon?

He gave her a pleasant answer, holding her eyes and giving her the Wellesley charm he hardly showed, unless he wanted to bed a woman. He hoped none of the officers would comment on his answer about Lisbon as he had always declared it to be the worst place on Earth with the exception, of course, of the house where his wife lived.

She just simpered and drew herself behind the bulk of Colonel Forester. To his fury he noticed that her hand went reassuringly to Major Agnew's bare knee, who was wearing a short battle kilt. Curse the fellow for such indecent exposure of his legs!

At least, he noticed to his utter relief, his erection had subsided into a half-masted position.

When the ladies suggested leaving the men to their cigars and port he nodded gratefully and walked to the open doors of the house to share a smoke on the terrace.

Hengist did not often smoke but he followed the Marques, a glass of port in his hand.

Hengist had always been a shrewd man and the Marques' interest in Lillian had not gone unnoticed. It had suddenly dawned on him how he was going to obtain the warlord's permission to leave the Peninsula. The General had never taken one during his campaign in the Peninsula, simply for the sole reason that he preferred to be on the battlefield rather than in close vicinity of his wife. That was why he never allowed his officers to go back home unless it couldn't be avoided; which mostly meant that they were either half-dead or dead completely.

The Marques was known for his promiscuous behaviour, but it was common knowledge that he had a

recent fall-out with his Portuguese mistress. As Hengist had been indulging in numerous trysts with the passionate Lily for the last six weeks he recognized at once the state of affairs with his highest commander.

Therefore, he had taken Lily's gloved fingers in his hand and when he was certain the Marques was looking and Lily's husband still inside the house, he had turned her hand around and kissed the palm in a lingering fashion that was quite certain to give the Marques the impression he wanted to convey. One only kissed a woman's hand thus when one wanted to seduce her.

With a prudent eye on the backs of the gentlemen and Mrs. Moriarty, who was last to leave the dining room, Lily suppressed a giggle and quickly ascertained that they would meet that night.

When he asked the Marques for an immediate leave that evening it was speedily granted. Although the Marques thought he could hardly afford the loss of any high-ranking officer at the moment, it was a small sacrifice for him; with the handsome Hengist out of the way the Marques assumed the road to Lillian Clinton's bed would be unobstructed.

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"I am going with you!" Lily said defiantly as she sat up in Hengist's camp bed.

He looked languidly up at her. He was lying on his back, his arms behind his head, showing off his huge shoulders and his muscled torso.

He grinned and threw an arm around her waist, hugging her against his chest.

"You'll do no such thing my love," he laughed, cupping a very round buttock. "There is no reason for your husband to let you go to England."

“Bettina must have her come-out,” she almost snarled.

He grinned.

“At sixteen? I think not, my dear!”

Hengist brought his mouth to a silky breast and started to suck a rapidly hardening nipple. When she loosened an involuntary sigh he brought his hand to the apex of her legs.

“Oh Hengist, I’m going to miss you,” she murmured a few moments later when she sheathed his rigid shaft, her fleshy legs sidling his slowly moving hips.

Hengist remembered the obvious arousal of a certain warlord and smiled.

“You’ll be fine here, Lily,” he mumbled, “You’ll be absolutely fine on top of things.”

The high-ranking Marques... he supposed that would be enough; even if eventually he would not measure up to that other requirement.

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Chapter 10: PRENUPTIAL DAYS AND THE SWAN

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Philip bowed to Marguerite's retreating back and hastened to the library.

God Almighty, it had been an insufferable evening.

He raced to the table with the whiskey decanter. An evening at Almack's might drive a normal man through the roof! Insipid drinks, bad sherry and stale cakes! He wondered how anybody could wish to be found dead on the ballroom floor there.

He gulped the sharp Scotch, reveling in its taste. His eyes went to the clock on the mantelpiece. Damn, he had to hurry. No doubt Stevie would come home soon with his mother. Lady McKenna had insisted on using her newly obtained Almack's vouchers for an outing to that dreary place this Wednesday evening. It had not been entirely for the benefit of her daughter, although showing off an infatuated Lord Morvern had been a feast. No, Lady McKenna had heard that the very rich young Miss Frances Robles-Audubon, who had recently been introduced to the Queen, would make her first appearance at Almack's, and wouldn't it be tremendous if she could meet the very adorable Stephen Mackenzie, heir to Baron McKenna? Bless Marguerite to have a sudden headache, near the end of the evening, her expected monthly courses no doubt, and Lady McKenna had seen fit to send her daughter and future son-in-law both home in the carriage, with instructions that the carriage should be sent back to Almack's as soon as they got home.

Philip sniggered. It had been a blatant breach of etiquette of course, his betrothed to be sitting alone in a carriage with him at almost midnight. He was certain Lady McKenna would not be in a hurry to go home so that they could have a nice little snog in the carriage or somewhere more comfortable in the house. Alas for Lady McKenna, he had behaved as a real gentleman should: escorting his future bride as far as the stairs, kissing her hand with unfelt passion and delivering her into the hands of her hovering old maid Rose.

Gads, he had to hurry if he wanted to avoid walking into Stevie tonight.

He looked down at his evening wear. Absolutely too overdressed for tonight's destination, but it could not be helped. If he wanted to avoid Stevie's company tonight he had to leave the house right now.

He almost ran down the steps outside the front door and to the garden gate. Thank God the front garden was only big enough to accommodate a carriage with four horses. He quickly scanned the street for Marguerite's carriage; nothing. If he raced to the corner it would be only thirty yards to Piccadilly, where it would be easy to hail a cab or hansom. He panted with relief when he sat down on the tattered leather of a specifically smelly hansom. Thank God. Stevie would never find him where he was heading tonight.

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The parlour of the White Swan was crowded with men when Philip entered the house. It was not a very big room and all the couches and seats were taken.

"Philly!" a voice piped and when he turned he saw the huge dragoon signaling him to come closer. Philip complied with a smile.

“Silvia!” He exclaimed holding out his arms.

A man behind him tapped his shoulder.

“Your token, sir,” he said holding out a dirty hand.

Philip fumbled in his pocket and took out a few pennies.

“You’re not going to need the back room?” The man asked. Philip gazed at the dragoon who looked at him with an air of longing.

“Why, of course,” he drawled, licking his lips and taking out another coin, “I see my little sweetheart is here. I wouldn’t want to disappoint her, would I?”

Silvia was not his usual self tonight and Philip wondered if the big dragoon was coming down with something.

He shoved Silvia into the back and he looked around the rather dark room to see if any of the four beds was unoccupied.

No such luck, every bed was taken. On one of them there were three men wriggling about.

“We’ll ask Patty if we can have one of her rooms upstairs,” Philip decided. He did not fancy a quick one against one of the bare walls of the back room, with at least nine pairs of eyes watching his progress.

“You’d do that for me?” Silvia asked rather hangdog.

“Anything,” Philip mouthed at him, pushing the giant towards the stairs.

At least the drinks in the brothel would be better than the delicacies served downstairs and Philip was certain that at this late hour there would not be too many customers; most of the Swan’s clientele boasted people of the working and lower middle class and they all had to work at sunrise.

Patty Pierson, the proud patron of the molly house came to greet them, all giggles and dimples. He was dressed in drag and Philip’s lips curled in amused appreciation. He

handed Patty a shilling for his best room which was much too much of course, but he liked to show off in front of Silvia who was already stepping out of his breeches.

“Oops!” Patty exclaimed looking at Silvia’s blatant erection, “Let me get you some lubby, on the house, my sweet lordie, that one is never going to fit otherwise.”

Philip just laughed. HE was going to fit right into little Silvia, not the other way around. That length of Silvia’s dick was to hold on to. He licked his lips in anticipation.

He pointed at the fireplace and Silvia obediently leaned his hands against the mantelpiece, giving Philip his back.

“Be gentle with me, darling,” he whispered looking at Philip with his watery smile.

Philip did not care to answer. It had been more than three days since he had been able to escape Stevie’s omnipresence and he wanted to use all his energy to do right to Silvia, oh yes.

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Marguerite sat silently in front of her dressing table while Rose undid her hair and brushed it exactly one hundred times. Rose noticed her mistress’ reticence but knew better than to ask her about it. She had known her mistress almost from the day she was born and had followed her through her unhappy adventure with William Alexander in London, unable to do anything about the mental and physical abuse that was forcibly fed to her poor little mistress during those years.

Rose was brought up in the small village of Halkhead. She was the daughter of the gardener and laundry woman of Halkhead Manor. She was nineteen when the handsome lord had brought home his beautiful bride Georgina and, just like everybody else at Halkhead Moor, was delighted with his

good fortune. Lord Halkhead was such a wonderful fellow, always laughing and seemingly happy. The servants were certain in the end that Lord Halkhead died a very happy man. He had been of a little too shallow a character to understand that the 'lovely good-natured' Georgina he had married was a first class shrew and a calculating bitch.

Everybody in Halkhead knew that she had known the harsh Lord McKenna before Lord Halkhead met his unfortunate death. When she married Lord McKenna half a year before her obligatory year of mourning was finished, rumours ran rampant in Halkhead.

Rose had followed her mistress to the slightly more lavish McKenna household in the Kenna mansion and soon after to the big house in Edinburgh. She had seen Georgina turn red with fury when she found out that Lord McKenna had not been the rich man he had pretended to be. The couple quarreled often after that discovery and when Lord McKenna started to talk about the fact that 'you could as easily marry in Scotland as get a divorce', Georgina was in a hurry to give Lord McKenna an heir to avoid the fate of a divorced woman.

After a year of frequent but fruitless beddings she had turned to visiting the very handsome doctor Doug Morris, on whispered recommendations of her lady-friends in Edinburgh, and she turned out to be pregnant after only three or four lengthy visits, 'treatments' and examinations. It was much cause for worry to Lady McKenna that the heir to the McKenna title did not resemble her tall blond husband in the least, but as Stevie had the dark and slender looks of Marguerite, everybody, Lord McKenna included, just presumed the future Lord McKenna just favoured his mother's coloring and bone structure. Georgina would never

even think of the fact that Stevie was actually the spitting image of 'Dougie' Morris. Georgina had taken care of the rest of Lord McKenna's doubts by coming to his bed almost every night before Stevie was conceived and made love to him so rigorously he could hardly eat his porridge in the morning. At least in Lord McKenna's mind it was out of the question that his wily wife would cheat on him with somebody else; if he was too tired every morning so should she be. The poor man never understood the nature of sexuality with women.

Rose in the meantime was maid to Georgina as well as little Cherie.

Marguerite had been a happy child just like her deceased father had been a happy man. It had irritated Georgina to no end of course, when the girl became more charming, beautiful, and intelligent than her mother could ever hope to be.

When the girl came into her incredibly lovely teens she began hating her enough to nip in the bud whatever pleasure her age could bring her. Marguerite was restricted to only going to church or the lending library. She had to take her lessons at home with a very dour governess and her coming-out was made a very dull affair in order to prevent any thoughts in the girl's head of catching a nice young husband. As William Alexander had seen the girl in church on occasions in Edinburgh, he had made an offer for her before she went to London for a very short season. Georgina completed her petty revenge by promising the girl to him. Thus, she accomplished her desire to deny her daughter the chance to marry one of the handsome, rich bucks who were impressed by her ethereal beauty. Georgina just did not have the patience and the good sense to await a more suitable

offer for Marguerite, and a nice young buck in Scotland would probably prove to be of no help in improving the eternal suffering accounts of the Kenna's household.

Although Marguerite's father had been a Peer of the Realm she did not own a penny; her mother had taken care of that little side of the marriage with the Happy Lord Ross. In order to improve the McKenna's financial situation Marguerite was bartered off to the obese William Alexander, one of the few men mother Georgina could not touch with a ten-foot pole.

As it turned out, Georgina was too afraid of her harsh, big husband to cheat on him whenever he was in her close vicinity; with the exception of the services of Doctor Morris, of course. She had to restrict herself to the few occasions when she went to London, using the excuse of visiting her lovely Cherie, who was growing paler every day and suffering from her husband's jealous and abusive attentions.

Georgina preferred to stay happily unaware of her daughter's sufferings. At least the house off Piccadilly enabled Georgina to have her many trysts with the young rakes of the Ton who did not wrinkle their noses at being entertained by the somewhat older but enormously experienced Lady McKenna. For Georgina it was a double win situation, as her husband, now closer to sixty than fifty, preferred to have his porridge in the mornings in peace rather than to have his wild termagant of a wife visiting his bedroom and wearing him out for the rest of the day.

"Are you not well, Cherie?" Rose ventured in the end. Marguerite was sitting before her mirror, sighing profusely but not looking at her lovely self in the glass.

“I don’t know, Rose,” Marguerite had whispered, “I feel so strange these days. It is as if I don’t know who I am. I keep wondering why I feel so empty, why it doesn’t feel like me when I smile at other people or when I talk to those old biddies. But when I start to contemplate about the person behind this face, then I just don’t know.”

She hid her face in her hands and molded trembling fingers to her scalp.

Rose started to say something comforting, but she closed her mouth again. Empty? Her little girl felt empty?

“Are you not happy that you will soon be married to that very handsome Lord Morvern?” she asked hesitantly.

Marguerite only rubbed her eyes in answer and kept very still.

“Aren’t you, love?”

This time Marguerite peered at the reflection of her faithful servant in her mirror.

“Do you think I have reason to be?”

A sigh followed the barely audible question.

“Well...” Rose continued, “He is very good looking and a nice man to boot.”

He is a nice man? Maybe so, but he was not Hengist Agnew, and there was something about him, something indefinable, something that prevented her from looking at him with the same eagerness she had felt when she’d looked at Lady Elton’s footmen. He was just not ‘there.’ As if he lacked a certain smell, something that prevented her from seeing him as the handsome man he was. She was certain of it. She’d had another tea at Lady Elton’s and when the head-footman, coming out of hiding for the overworked butler’s sake, helped her into her pelisse, she had held her breath and blushed when she had felt his hands touching her shoulders.

Philip had kissed her, but truth be told, it had not moved her at all. It had not given her that frisson of anticipation she had felt when Hengist had kissed her or when that head-footman had touched her.

Marguerite sighed again.

“I don’t know who I am any more Rose. I think I’ve not known for years. How can I link myself to another person if I don’t know what I really want?”

Rose recognized the appearing depression in her little mistress’ voice. She put down the hairbrush and went to the bed to turn back the covers.

First thing tomorrow, she would ask Biggles to call in Doctor Matlock. First thing.

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A watery English morning sun was already shining when Philip crawled into his luxurious bed, tired but very satisfied. It did not happen very often that he had to choose out of four inamoratas in one night. He just took them all upstairs one at a time to his dearly paid for room at Patty’s. Although he had a very good round with Silvia, he had been too excited to leave the Swan after they had said goodbye. Silvia had to be back at the barracks in time as he had to be up at five in the morning, perish the thought.

When some boisterous young bucks entered the house he was not able to restrain himself from this windfall. The Swan boasted its best times on Sunday afternoon and evening. Wednesdays were far from the busiest days, so a few poofs on the prowl were a welcome extra for Philip.

The establishment catering to the needs of many London mollies had been opened just a few months ago. A certain James Fox, disabled in one arm and therefore not able to do his work as a clerk in one of the many trade-houses in

London any more, had convinced the owner of the house in Vere Street, Mr. Cook, of the necessity giving hospitality to the many male Londoners who indulged in the sinful affairs of unnatural love. The White Swan in Vere Street became a huge success within a few weeks.

Mr. Cook, who was married with children and was never seen to indulge in the sins of the flesh with a person of the male sex, had invented an easy and cheap formula; one paid for drinks and small snacks as well as an entrance fee, and if one wanted the use of the back room with whomever one fancied, one paid for the pleasure of entering that room.

As needs were dire and some gentlemen refused to be hurried, Mr. Cook decided to resolve the problem of congestion of the back room by placing as many beds as possible there. The upstairs rooms in the house were rented by Patty, who had three lovely mollies working for him that were known to cater to any need humanly possible, as long as they were unnatural.

It was true that Mr. Cook's formulae attracted the less blessed people of London's society: many a workman or lowly scribe were visiting the White Swan at the time.

The appearances of the likes of Lord Morvern were few at the Swan, as the more gentile part of the unnatural Londoners feared the scandal in case they were recognized. Although Philip definitely had such compunctions that Wednesday night, there was no way he could hide his upper class status as he was still clothed in his fine evening wear. He had decided to take the good with the bad. It was either to be smothered by his lovely but clinging future brother-in-law, or have a night of lavish and almost unbridled sex with as many men as he could possibly seduce.

Philip liked his lovers big and muscled, just like himself. He adored smooth trained bodies and great wiry chests.

He knew his adoration for such men was born out of his own self-love. He was with all his other vices a narcissistic man. He liked his lovers clean-shaven and clean smelling. He once had sent Willy Dobson, who worked in the port unloading ship's cargoes, to the bathhouse.

Philip normally did not truly mind sweat, it could be quite arousing on some occasions, but Willy's had been sour, sharp and musty; he had clearly not washed in weeks.

Willy Dobson was one of the few young men of late who had shared more with Philip than the wall in an alley or the support of a fireplace. They had shared Willy's cot when Philip stayed the whole night. Philip normally never stayed the whole night: a quick pounding was enough for him as he liked to repeat the action with others on his nights on the prowl, but for some reason he seemed to be changing. He seemed more inclined to enjoy the advantages of a known body of late.

His evenings at the house off Piccadilly had prevented him from going where he pleased: clinging creeper that he was, Stevie was never far away. Philip sometimes had to gnash his teeth and resort to John Row's secret ministrations, just so as not to take flight in anguish for the lost life he used to lead.

Stevie, God bless him for everything else, hardly excited Philip any more: he may be a beauty, but this small effeminate body was nowhere near to Philip's jaded tastes. More was the pity, as he soon was to be chained for the rest of his life to the house off Piccadilly, wearing the unimagined shackles of a married man and an unwanted brother-in-law.

Philip's head touched his pillow and he slept at once, happy in the knowledge of having been able to spend a full night at his favourite pastime. That early morning he seemed to have nothing to wish for. He had a wonderful clean and soft bed to sleep in, his belly was full of good food, apart from the ghastly stale cakes at Almack's the evening before, and he had thoroughly buggered four partners of his choice. He refused to think of his looming unwanted marriage; he was just going to take his life one day at a time.

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Stevie sat morosely on the side of his sumptuous bed. It was a new bed and so were the big-feathered mattresses and the satin dark green hangings. All due to the manipulations of his mother, who had not left one stone unturned when refurbishing the house to her gaudy tastes using his sister's fortune.

Stevie felt dreadfully unhappy and did not spend one thought on the changed circumstances of his room. He had noticed Philip creep into the house and did not need much imagination to conjure where his lover had been or what he had been up to.

He shifted his hand to his stomach; he felt sick with jealousy and wondered if he would have to make a run for the commode and throw up.

He lay gingerly down on his pillow, hiding his strangely salivating mouth in the white soft linen. Oh God, he did not want to throw up, he did not want to be jealous, and he did not want Philip to make love to somebody else, anybody else but him.

The evening at Almack's had been dreadful. Philip had played the part of the joyful fiancé to perfection, pulling

blankets over the eyes of all the mamas' and dowagers' about his true nature. He had danced twice with a rather wooden Marguerite, as custom dictated, and he had asked Georgina and a few more of the older biddies, but refrained from dancing with any of the young girls present, showing that he was only reserving himself for his bride-to-be.

Stevie had been forced by his mother to stand up with the nice but rather insipid Miss Robles and her overbearing mother. He had considered dancing with his own mother, stretching it a bit too far, and had fled to the card room where he had lost what remained of his pocket money. Not that the old chaps at Almack's had been playing deep, of course, he had just indulged in too much spending with Philip in the week before and now his small funds were gone he had pockets to let for the remainder of the month.

Due to his bad monetary situation he was forced to come home with his mother. He had hoped to find Philip there waiting for him either for some elongated bed sport or to treat him to a hellhole or so. It would have been utterly fair if Philip had done so. Stevie had been paying for Philip's needs out of his own pocket for some time, until Philip was able to secure himself a loan on the expectation of the sale of his house or his marriage to Marguerite, whichever came first.

His lover's absence had hit him like a punch in his stomach. He concluded rightly that Philip did not want him with him that night and could only find one reason for such abandonment; Philip was out to meet someone else.

In his heart he had known of course that a man of Philip's beauty and stature could never be expected to be faithful to him. It was just that he had hoped Philip would

remain his only, out of his own conviction, wishes that now turned out to be futile.

The mere thought of Philip making love to another man made him scoot for the pot in the commode, and there he vomited until he could only bring up green bile.

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“Melancholy,” the Doctor said with conviction. “Bad humors turning into black bile.”

He nodded severely at Rose who’s only reaction was to press a hand against her mouth to suppress a cry.

Lady McKenna quickly got out of her chair.

“Nonsense!” she shrieked at the Doctor, who was closing his bag with a snap.

“Absolute nonsense! She’s about to marry the handsomest lord of the realm, she’s loaded with money like a stuffed turkey and she has a whole loving family catering to her needs! Melancholy indeed!”

The Doctor stared hard at the protesting lady.

“This kind of affliction has a tendency for the worst if your daughter does not get every help she can possibly acquire. I would advise a sleeping cure of a week for her to start with. She is only to be fed light meals such as cooked fish, chicken and toast. I will send a nurse to help take care of her as Mrs. Alexander needs purgatives and the admonishment of ground calf’s liver in wine three times a day to keep her blood from blackening. She is to stay in bed for a week. I will come back every day to see how she’s faring.”

He nodded at a dazed Marguerite and left the room.

Lady McKenna uttered an unladylike curse, bolted for the door, and slammed it behind her retreating back.

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Roman Carlton nurtured a pleasantly aching arse when he leaned against a pillar at Lady Baldwin's soiree-with-dancing. He clenched a glass of Champagne in his gloved hand, surreptitiously looking around the small ballroom for the one he now loved to distraction. He sighed with frustration when he saw only the morose face of his Heart Desires' soon to be brother-in-law. Some people had all the luck. Not only did Stephen Mackenzie share a house with the delightful Lord Morvern, he was also of more than an Earthly beauty. Roman had seen Philip and Stevie paint the town vermilion in those recent weeks and guessed that they had been lovers as well.

He moved with languid steps in Stevie's direction. He did not know the depth of Stevie and Philip's involvement but it could not do any harm to loosen a few fixed stones, so to speak.

"Stephen," he drawled when he approached the McKenna heir, "you missed all the fun yesterday night. Where on Earth were you?"

Stevie was shocked into his awareness of Roman Carlton. Roman was one of those boys who had everything except looks. His face was small, ferret-like, whey-coloured and covered with ugly red pimples. He had bad teeth and a lanky body. What he also had was buckets of money. Roman Carlton ran with John Wharton's set, the set Stevie had to leave because it was impossible for him to keep up with their spending and he had not fancied becoming one of their catamites. He had seen what happened to them if the set felt like debauching the poorer boys who hung on to their wings. He had always been disgusted with Roman and had never indulged in the smallest of trysts with him.

Roman was mean and vile and worse; Roman had detected Stevie's dislike for him.

Stevie cursed the reason which had led him to this soiree. His mother had forced him to accept the invitation because young Miss Robles would be here tonight. After all, Lady Baldwin's soirées were a good second to the list of the most tenuous occasions to visit to see and be seen and to acquire a bride that was approved by the Ton. One could wonder what Roman Carlton was doing here but he was damned if he was going to inquire. If Roman Carlton was out to angle Miss Robles, Stevie would be very pleased indeed to step aside from that parson's trap.

Stevie considered giving Roman the cut direct. Although he was known in the inside molly circles to indulge in the fancies of unnatural sex, it was whispered in the Ton that he was having an affair with a certain Lady H. who in her turn craved whips and other instruments of torture.

"Don't you dare cut me," he heard his adversary growl, "or do you wish the Ton to know your sister is on the verge of marrying a molly?"

Stevie straightened and nodded perfunctorily at Roman, in the meantime taking a step backwards to try to walk the other way.

"He had me at the Swan, you know," Roman whispered at him. "Such a glorious dick!"

He made a slobbering sound with his lips.

Stevie just turned around and walked to the hallway of the house, wondering if he could withhold his spew until he was outside.

“That quack is determined to have her sleep for a week and to stuff her with things that feed the blood. I intend to end the charade right there!” Lady McKenna said with indignation to a very quiet Lord Morvern.

He swirled his whiskey silently in a glass.

“What’s to become of the marriage?” he asked after a few minutes.

Lady McKenna took a deep breath.

“I always thought it a bad idea to delay it,” she said sharply. “Marguerite has always been a willful child. What if she uses her illness to delay it forever? With her you never know.”

“We should not oblige her. We can’t have her do that, can we?” Philip said aghast, thinking of all the debts that had to be settled within short notice.

The door of the library was thrown open and a disheveled Stevie came pounding into the room.

He made a beeline for his lover and only stopped in his tracks when he noticed his mother there.

“What’s the matter?” he asked her with an angry snort. He so wanted to confront Philip about that despicable Roman Carlton.

“Your sister is assumed to be suffering from melancholy,” his mother said with a sneer. “That idiocy may take months...”

“Months?” he asked unwillingly, not wanting to care a whit about his sister now that he’d found out that his lover had been unfaithful to him.

“She’ll not be able to do her wifely duties,” Lady McKenna bit at him. “She won’t be able to marry Lord Morvern for months.”

Stevie fell down onto a chair.

“Why ever not?” he asked in a bored voice, “Who cares about those duties anyway?”

Philip and Lady McKenna suddenly sat up straight.

“Yes,” Lady McKenna said aloud, “who indeed? Do you still possess that license, Lord Morvern?”

Philip’s hand went to his pocket, but of course he had put it in the desk in his bedroom.

“What would you need the license for?” He asked in confusion.

Stevie looked long and hard at him. It suddenly dawned on him that Philip might be strapping and handsome but that the best part of the body called a brain had not been entirely handed over to him at his birth. The harshness of his feelings when he entered the library suddenly changed into a sort of bewildering tenderness. Philip needed him, how would he ever survive without him?

“When will Marguerite be able to go to the St James, mother?” he asked pointedly.

Lady McKenna shrugged.

“The Doctor prescribed her a sleeping cure of a week, which means she will come out of it in six days,” she answered.

“Well,” Stevie smiled at Philip, “you will be the happiest of men within the week then. No reason at all why you should not marry soon. Marguerite’s condition gives us a good reason to have a much-reduced wedding breakfast, if we need to have one. And as for her wifely duties, no doubt you’ll forgive her if she will apply them after she is well enough.”

Philip looked with elation at his clever lover.

“You are incredible to think of all this,” he said. “I’ll marry within the week Lady McKenna and we’ll give Marguerite all the time in the world to recover.”

He nodded sagely at her. Thank God the bitch was so egotistical she would not detect underlying motives if she fell in them.

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As soon as Lady McKenna had left the library in a far better mood than when she entered it, Philip sprang up from his chair, pulled Stevie out of his and pinned him against the wall, kissing him passionately and fondling him almost wildly.

He might not be a very smart man at times, but his intuition had sounded shrill warning bells when Stevie had entered the library with a very angry frown on his face. He supposed his best defense would lie in his attack and he was certain that a few well-aimed caresses would bring Stevie up to snuff.

It was again Stevie who hastened to turn the lock of the library door to insure them the privacy they needed for a quick pounding on the gaudy new Empire desk.

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“Why did you go with Roman Carlton?” Stevie blurted out at a sated Philip who was reclining on a couch, his clothes and hair disheveled, and with a catlike smile on his face.

He had used Philip’s handkerchief to catch the result of their amorous encounter and was straining to put his very tight breeches back on.

“Come here, my Prince,” Philip drawled. “Leave those breeches, I’ll help you with them later.”

Stevie hesitated and then complied. Who could ever deny Philip anything, especially when it had been so good between them again?

While he was at it Philip had whispered and groaned all those sweet nothings into Stevie's too willing ears. He had even cried out that he loved him when he climaxed, which was nothing short of the sweetest music to Stevie's ears. Philip had never said before that he loved Stevie.

Philip of course knew very well what he had been doing. Nothing was good enough for his wily, foxy little Prince today! He was going to marry Marguerite without having to perform any of those annoying husbandly duties to her. That was indeed worth something and really a few words of love cost him nothing.

"I am so very sorry, sweet love," Philip said tentatively, "but I was rather drunk and truly, in the dark I thought it was you. You must believe I don't care a whit about Mr. Pimpily; he must have taken advantage of the situation. Do you know he even has pimples on his very ugly sagging butt?"

He drew a halfway-reconciled Stevie onto his lap and touched his cheek with a tender finger.

Stevie moved his forehead against Philip's shoulder at the place where Philip's stock normally used to be knotted. It was now lying somewhere on the floor.

"What's that Swan, then, Philip," he suddenly asked, remembering Roman's remark about the place.

"Oh," Philip answered him dismissively, "it's a sort of a mollies pub, nothing worth much. Now, let's see what I can do about those breeches of yours..."

It then took Stevie at least another half hour to get them back on.

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Chapter 11: PRENUPTIAL CONTRACTS

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Master Geoffrey Lane looked appalled when Biggles showed him into Marguerite's bedroom. The only occurrence for him to enter a lady's bedroom was when his client was on her deathbed. He could not possibly imagine that the lovely Mrs. Alexander was dying...

Marguerite was leaning against a pile of cushions. Master Lane could very well see that she looked pale and strangely exhausted.

He made a short bow in her direction before sitting down on a chair near her headboard.

"I'm sorry to receive you here, Master Lane," she whispered with difficulty, "the doctor ordered me in bed for a week. The problem is that Lord Morvern wishes to marry me after the week is up so there was no other way but to discuss the prenuptial agreement here. Did you draw up the contract?"

Master Lane ruffled in his old leather portfolio and drew out different sheaves of paper.

"It's all in here, ma'am," he said quietly, looking into her lusterless brown eyes. Involuntary his look strayed to her very prim night-rail. She had always been primness herself, he mused, ever since the first day he had seen her on her wedding day with William Alexander. Prim and without joy, just like today.

He had often wondered about her. There must have been a hidden spark within her that made her attract men like bees to honey, but in all the five years he had dealt with her the spark had never truly emerged. He wondered if it ever

would. Even marriage to the very handsome but notably destitute Viscount Morvern could not elicit hidden joys, it seemed.

He slowly picked up his spectacles and pinched them on his nose.

“I have done as you asked,” he said, scanning the pages of the contract. It was only about six o’clock in the evening and the sun still shone into the room, allowing him more than enough light to read.

Marguerite’s bedroom had been redecorated in only creams, gold, and vieux-rose. It looked light and airy, more elegant than feminine. On a sideboard stood a huge Sevres vase with branches of apple-blossoms. It was a vast difference to what he had seen in the rest of the house. He wondered if Marguerite had put her foot down to furnish her own rooms herself instead of allowing the bossy taste-lacking Lady McKenna to refurbish them for her.

As Mrs. Alexander’s legal man of affairs he had seen the bills. Mrs. Alexander had insisted he saw all the bills and accounts before one penny went out of her purse. She had explained to him that it was not a sign of mistrust towards Master Baines, but two pairs of eyes always saw more than one. It was not truly a part of his job normally, but as Alexander Shipping was his biggest account he had been very hard put to refuse Mrs. Alexander, understanding her predicament as a young vulnerable widow in a world where mercenary vultures were legion. She had at once raised his fee to twice the amount he used to receive from her frugal husband and had seen that the same sort of generosity stretched towards Master Baines.

Sensible girl.

“Everything is in the contract, Mrs. Alexander. Would you like me to read the contract to you before I ask your husband-to-be to sign?”

He was not surprised when she nodded weakly and lay back into the cushions to listen listlessly.

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“Five thousand pounds a year?” Philip asked incredulously, “Is that all, Lane? Are you certain?”

Master Lane looked sternly at the handsome Viscount.

“Mrs. Alexander will pay off all your debts, amounting to more than forty-thousand pounds thus far. I remember you mentioning twenty-thousand, but obviously you forgot some tiny details about your spendthrift. You will live in this house and you will not have to pay your tailor from the allowance, which amounts to as much as four hundred fifty pounds a month.”

He looked disapprovingly at a dejected Philip. Had the man expected more? Four hundred and fifty pounds per month was a fortune, whole middle-class families had to live on money like that in a year, yet Lord Morvern could use it as pocket money in a month!

Marguerite would pay for everything else; even the new matched pair of black horses, recently purchased for her noble betrothed at Tattersall’s, in which his Lordship had showed more than greedy interest, and neither would Philip have to fork out a penny for the wonderful new showy phaeton that was obviously to come with it, already ordered in anticipation of the nuptials.

He pursed his lips together. Mind, he had not felt more than a hesitant respect for his deceased employer. William Alexander had been a far from likeable man, business-like to the core and without a nice bone in his body, but to see

his money being sunk in this aristocratic wastrel's bottomless pit would be certain to have him turn in his grave, wherever it was.

He frowned, suddenly remembering not having seen any bills regarding Alexander's funeral. Every bill Mrs. Alexander had to foot, even the ones from her worthless modiste, which William had found for her indoor day-dresses--she had hardly needed a fashionable one, and she never seemed to leave the house in those days--had passed his desk for approval and payment.

He shivered at the horrible thought of the only burial that would not cost any money at all: a poor man's grave. She would not, would she? Not this glorious example of virtue! He made a mental note to ask her when the opportunity might arise. A bit late, most certainly.

He had been unpleasantly surprised not to have been invited to the funeral. Normally one asked the man-of-affairs to be there, but he had been very busy with the estate in those days, as William, always punctual and precise, had never bothered to finish his will. He knew that William had been working on one but then had delayed the issue, probably unwilling to accept that even he would go to his Maker one day. The problem with rich and powerful men was that they never wanted to be distracted by the issue of their own mortality and regrettably William had not been an exception to that rule. The bitter result was that his money would end up in the hands of bookmakers, gamblers, and God only knew what other riff-raff the viscount owed money. Master Lane now possessed a list of course, and the names on it were colorful, to say in the least. He had been gratified to notice there were no mistresses and bastards to maintain with William's money. He would not have known

how to explain that to the youthful widow. William had always been faithful to his second wife; Geoffrey knew that for a fact. His vices had been food and drink, not the rank seductions that were to be found outside the house and under women's skirts. He had not even been a member of a Club, which was surprising even for a born Scot. Every self-respecting member of society had at least one membership at a prestigious club. William would have most certainly been accepted at Boodles or Grosvenor's, the rich men's clubs that catered to the more specific needs of the wealthy middle class; less gambling, better food and subdued luxury. Even the more aristocratic clubs such as Brook's or White's would probably not have denied access to one of the richest men in London.

"Mrs. Alexander is adamant that the marriage-contract should be stated thus..."

Master Lane used enough of his dry and slightly contemptuous emphasis to stress that otherwise the possibility of a marriage would be in jeopardy.

Master Lane understood better than anybody else Lady McKenna's desire to marry her daughter off to a titled husband; the whole family would move up mightily into the hierarchy of Britain's aristocratic circles. Viscount Morvern was to be an Earl one day when his now demented father cocked up his toes.

Although some titles were definitely for sale, a viscount's title was not to be laughed at. The Agnews of Loghaire were a Scottish lot and had never been very wealthy, but the title was a very old and respected one. Both the Dukes of Lindley and Rothford would lick their fingers at the prospect of angling that title in some way or another because Loghaire did not belong to either dukedom.

Lindley had loved getting his hands on Laird Halkhead's title after the poor man died without a male issue, but it probably was to be reverted to Loghaire, strengthening Loghaire as a buffer between the dukedoms of Lindley and Rothford. As far as the lawyer knew the barony was still 'floating' for the King's 'further' use, which would mean he might like to give it to one of his bumbling lackeys. It was just that the ill King had forgotten about the barony and in his recent state could not be relied upon to make a good decision, Master Lane supposed. Philip would only make Loghaire's claim to Halkhead stronger by marrying Baron Halkhead's daughter. Master Lane had fierce doubts that Philip had ever contemplated that advantage of his marriage to Marguerite.

Philip's father had come into the Earl's title after his uncle died from a sudden fever, leaving no issue, thus making Philip a viscount at eleven, which was the Earl of Loghaire's heir's courtesy title. As his brother Henry had not inherited anything at the time, he had remained merely an Honourable Mister Agnew and so was denied the courtesy title of 'lord.' Master Lane doubted if Henry, Hengist according to his family and friends, gave a jot about being a lord or not. The man had gone into the army as of what, fifteen years old, and already had been promoted to major at the age of twenty-seven due to his merits and not due to paying for the commission.

Now here was Philip, trying to juggle all sorts of balls in the air while everybody knew he was hardly able to knot his own tie.

Master Lane shook his head in disgust. What on earth had the young buck expected to receive? Five thousand a year was a bloody fortune!

“If you sign here and here the formalities are over and nothing will stand in the way of your future happiness, my lord.”

His voice sounded clipped and crisp, showing Philip there were no other options. It dripped with an undertone close to disrespect.

Philip ignored Master Lane’s sarcasm and dipped his quill in the inkwell to sign the designated places with a scowl, although he admitted that all in all the deal was good. He could have languished in Debtor’s prison by now with no chance in hell of ever getting out, but he still wondered about the exact height of his future wife’s fortune. Surely it must be an amazing lot if she did not blink at all his accumulated debts. Or did she?

He wondered how far he could go with four hundred and fifty pounds a month in his new circumstances. He knew Stevie only received a hundred pounds a month, thirty from his father and the rest added by his sister. Still, the boy had been able to go rather far with the money; paying for Philip’s stay at the inn and all the other costs that were incurred until he could get Philip to live in the house off Piccadilly. It had been Philip’s gambling at the Cockpit that had cost him dearly this month.

If Philip wanted to do his usual bit of gambling his allowance would probably be stretched to its limits. He wondered fleetingly how his dear wife-to-be would react if new debtors were to come to the door. Would she pay up? Not a chance in hell, it seemed. All Mrs. Alexander’s belongings were to be put into a specific trust fund and as for Mrs. Alexander’s fortune; there was another. Master Lane now explained to a fuming Philip that the funds would only belong to Mrs. Alexander or a new-born heir who

would become Viscount Morvern, but surely to Marguerite Ross and her own natural children at her death, when they reached the age of twenty-five. Shock proof and watertight, the bitch!

If Debtor's prison had not beckoned, Philip would have loved to throw that part of the deal back into Master Lane's and Marguerite's face. He had no business to marry anyway. He had managed fine being a bachelor, thank you very much.

Right now, he just got up from his seat with a sour expression, showing no gratitude at all.

When Master Lane withdrew he had problems hiding his smile. He understood perfectly well that Mrs. Alexander was in for another loveless match and he was glad he was able to save her fortune from the clutches of a greedy young husband. He grinned when he looked down at the last clause he had added: Lord Morvern was to receive a bonus of two thousand pounds after the healthy birth of an Agnew child. The added bonus for a male heir would be as much as five thousand. That should teach him, he thought with a grin. He'd had a Bow Street runner check out the young Viscount and when the Lord had come back from the Vere Street Molly-house that morning the runner had reported the information to him without delay. There would be no mistresses or bastards, of course, because Lord Morvern was not at all in the petticoat line! A trap for poor Mrs. Alexander, was it? Well, he hoped the Viscount was able to get it up for the woman, otherwise he would miss out on a few substantial sums in the years to come.

He shook his head still when Biggles showed him out the front door. She had given no inkling that she knew that her future husband had strange and unnatural preferences

and he did not feel inclined to tell her. It was not his affair as it had not been when she married old Alexander. She might have money now, he mused, at least that was a distinct and better situation than when she had married that disgusting William Alexander.

His mind roamed back to the young woman in the bed upstairs. She had always had this aura of innocence that always made his heart reach out to her, even though he had been in the employ of her old and viciously sour husband. One could doubt whether she was aware that men like Philip Agnew even existed; men who preferred muscled buttocks to soft breasts. No, she was an innocent.

He nodded at his coachman to open the door of his simple but secretly luxurious carriage. He looked up at the house, searching for her bedroom window. Innocent enough not to bury her bully of a husband in a poor man's grave? But why would she?

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Chapter 12: STEVIE MEETS DAVID STONER

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Stevie raced round the corner of the street straight onto Piccadilly and stopped a dilapidated hansom.

“Do you know the Swan in Vere Street?” he asked.

The dirty and smelly coach driver looked at him in a strange way, not immediately responding.

“The Swan in Vere Street,” Stevie repeated bossily, understanding that the man must be well acquainted with the premises. He realized too late that he should have ordered the man to Vere Street without further specifying his destination. If he had he would have stepped out there to find the Swan himself. How long could a street stretch anyway? Damn, but that Coachie could well be one of those molly-slayers! He was a burly fellow with a reeking coat and a hat that looked as if he had found it in a gutter. He surveyed Stevie with a dirty look, probably on the brink of refusing to take him anywhere near such a place as the Swan. Stevie reproached himself that he should be more careful. A place like the Swan was no doubt a taboo even with the London hackney drivers. But in the end the driver just nodded at him, looking pointedly at Stevie’s fine clothes. Ah, the victory of all things material over scruples! Stevie stepped relieved into the dirty vehicle.

He looked around to see if anyone had heard him ask for the address and saw to his relief that no one was taking any notice whatsoever. Piccadilly, at six o’clock in April, was swarming with people, the traffic of carts, handcarts, coaches, and hansoms, noisy and dense. He jumped eagerly into the cab. He might have to hurry, he had no idea how far

it was. Philip had gone to his rooms to nap before dinner and he calculated he had about two hours for his investigation.

He leaned on his cane to look out of the grimy little window. He had never had any idea of the existence of Vere Street until he had asked John Row, Philip's valet, about the whereabouts of the Swan, which turned out to be the White Swan in reality. It did not surprise him that John Row knew about the Swan. "Servants always know everything" was the adage, which at this time was to Stevie's advantage. He had wondered fleetingly if John Row suspected he and Philip were lovers, but was quite reassured with the business-like way John had answered his question. Surely John would have acted differently if he had any inkling that he and Philip were having a relationship that stretched far beyond a normal friendship.

He was surprised to find out that it was only a short ride: the coachman turned into Berkeley, then onto the West End and then continued north for only a short time.

Vere Street was a quiet street off the fashionable shopping streets, and when the smirking driver stopped right in front of the asked for establishment a blushing Stevie threw him a few coins and headed straight for the door. Apart from the humiliating reaction of the coach driver Stevie was glad he had asked him to bring him to the house because it was far from obvious that the White Swan in Vere Street was a public place. A wooden door opened into a dark room stuffed with tables and chairs. The place boasted a bar which was placed alongside the far end of the room. Probably due to the unfashionable hour of six o'clock there were only six men huddled at a table in the middle of the place. They all observed Stevie with apparent curiosity

and awe. He struck a fine figure in his tight and obviously expensive clothes, with his black hot-ironed curly hair; a treat from Macy the chambermaid who acted as if she fancied him. He looked like an angel who'd recently fallen from heaven.

Stevie looked around the establishment, noticing the shabbiness of the place and the lower-class men who were all seated gazing at him with surprise and a kind of hunger, as if he was a grilled capon that was on its way into their mouths.

A man who clearly missed the use of his right arm got up, grinning at him with a gap-toothed smile.

“Cud we be of help, milord?”

Stevie hesitated. The Swan was truly not at all what he had expected it to be. He started to wonder if he had been brought to the right place when he noticed a handsome young workman leering at him, touching his crotch at the same time. He blushed profusely and then said: “Maybe you gentlemen would like to share a drink with me?”

They all began blurting out at once what they'd fancy to wet their throats. The young blond man tapped a chair next to him inviting Stevie to sit close to him.

One of the men disappeared behind the bar in search of beer and gin for the men and a rum-punch for Stevie.

“Wud ye like to 'ave some pie, milord?” the blond man whispered when Stevie was served his punch in a beaker.

He gingerly touched Stevie's thigh and a thrill ran through Stevie's spine.

Stevie shook his head in confusion. The blond man was young and muscled and very good looking. Stevie wondered whether he was a carpenter or some such. A few times in his life he had encountered men of humbler professions, apart

from the men who worked on the estate where he had lived of course, and they always filled him with a sense of curiosity. It always amazed him how people could cope with the harsh demands of their work and their day to day life, and with the blond man he did not feel different. It was pure and undulated awe that they worked to keep themselves alive, while he, Stevie McKenna, had never done as much as a day's work in his entire life.

The man held out a broad hand to him.

"I'm David Stoner," he said with a smile that almost stopped Stevie's heart. "Ye're new 'ere, aren't ye?"

David's fingers were rough and covered with a greyish substance, the palm of his hand felt hard and prickly.

"Just finished me work," David mumbled, feeling the softness of Stevie's recently manicured fingers. "I'm a mason. I'm working on a new house in Marylebone."

Stevie wondered if he should give David his name, but the man obviously did not expect him to mention it. It suited him fine if they would call him 'my lord.'

"Davy's out early today," the man with the crooked arm laughed. "He's sumtin' to celebrate, don't ye Davy?"

Davy shrugged.

"I'm outta me job as of today," he murmured. "The merchant's missus had me ousted for lookin' into her bedroom."

"E was only after 'er 'usband's valet!" one of the other men laughed, wiping a rim of hock off his upper lip, "Weren't ye, Precious? T'is just that the missus confused 'erselves wi' the man!"

David laughed heartily and then said: "Sight fer sore eyes, that one was, almost jest as perty as you, milord!"

He looked at Stevie with open admiration and the young man found David's hand straying to his thigh. Stevie almost gasped and looked into two warm hazel eyes.

The other men at the table rose in unison, claiming they had things to do, two of them disappearing behind the bar and the three others retreating to a far corner of the room.

Stevie gasped when searching fingers found the bulk in his breeches. He looked in confusion at the other men who had all turned their backs on them.

“Ye're not new to it, are ye, little Lord?”

Stevie gazed steadily into David's eyes, wondering if Philip and David...

David leisurely bent over to kiss Stevie on the mouth. It was a slow lingering kiss. He tasted of dark brown beer and something spicy. No doubt he had eaten the pie for his tea.

“Want to come upstairs wi' me?” David asked, “Pat's not yet there an' so it will only be a few pennies.”

Blood rushed to Stevie's cheeks. Philip had only been with him less than one hour ago so how could he feel so enticed by this young workman?

“Ah,” David murmured, showing a dashing smile with most of its teeth still in place. “Ye're new to the game after all, aren't ye?”

He rose, taking Stevie by the hand, pulling him out of his chair with unabashed ease.

“We're up,” he announced to the barman, putting a hand first to Stevie's waist, then to a buttock.

Stevie followed him in a daze.

He knew he would be the one not able to make dinner tonight.

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Chapter 13: A SEA VOYAGE

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Hengist watched with a frown when Jason was pulled on board the Sea Anemone. The horse had been fidgety and nervous as soon as it arrived on the docks. Hengist uttered a sigh of relief when the horse was hoisted to a fixed place on deck. He watched while the sailors untied the horse's blindfold; the thing had been necessary because Jason would not move a muscle when he was led in the vicinity of the narrow gangplank of the ship.

"That horse of yours is definitely not a sea-horse," a languid voice said behind him.

Hengist turned around with an irritated expression on his face, but it changed the moment he saw a blond giant standing behind him, dressed in the full regalia of a Scottish Major.

"Lochiel!" he exclaimed. "Did you come to see me off?"

They were almost eye-to-eye, although Lochiel was the taller one by an inch.

The big Scot grinned at him.

"To see you off and to ask you how you did it," he said, taking Hengist in a bear hug, "I'm sure you are one of the first in four months to be allowed a leave. The Peer does not like to send anyone home, not even when they are half-dead!"

"Ah, yes, well..."

Hengist looked around him and noticed the two of them drawing every eye on the dock. It was a rare sight no doubt; two tall, muscled blond handsome Scottish warriors in their dark coloured kilts on a Portuguese quay; hugging as well.

He stepped back from Lochiel. This was staid Portugal where men of rank were expected to act with decorum.

“We’re not gone yet,” he said, “the tide just went in. Let’s have a drink at the inn, the wine is good here.”

He pointed at a big dockside inn. The weather was bad--drizzly and overcast--and the wind coming from the Atlantic Ocean was cold.

“Right,” Lochiel said, accepting a beaker of sweet Portuguese wine from a bulky manservant, “so what’s the secret?”

Hengist smiled at Lochiel Cameron who was to take over his command of the 42nd Foot. Lochiel had only arrived on a misty December morning a few months ago. He had been a captain at the Edinburgh training- and guarding-garrison, but the death of a few officers in the Peninsula had obliged the commander of the 42nd to send him off to the war.

Lochiel had not been keen to go. His secret lover Lady Elisabeth Montgomery, Marchioness of Lorna and Kintyre, had birthed him twins in secret and Lochiel had adopted them and was reluctant to leave the beloved trio in Edinburgh. It had soon dawned on him that his sudden new appointment and rise in rank as a major had not been coincidental; the Marchioness had been called back to London to do her duties to her husband, who had never cared about her. It so happened that he was the Duke of Rothford’s younger brother. Rothford had married an elderly divorced woman who had at least ten children with her former husband, but he worried that she could not conceive any more. So the task to take care of an heir for the Rothford-line had been placed on the shoulders of the very unwilling Lorna and Kintyre couple.

Lochiel's goodbye to his lover had been sad, but they had both known there had never been a possibility of a future for them. Not only the marchioness was married, but so was Lochiel, although his wife had thrown him out of her bed and house years ago, after he had fathered four sons.

To forget about his affair with the beautiful Lizzie Montgomery he had started to bed women whenever they cared to look into his direction. Lochiel was a sight for sore eyes with his long sculpted body, his overly long blond hair and his dark eyes in a very handsome face, which often reminded the elderly in the army of Jonathan Montgomery, the old Duke of Rothford. Although about everybody in Scotland suspected that the old, now five years deceased Duke of Rothford was his father, albeit on the wrong side of the blanket, Lochiel seemed blessedly unaware of that interesting fact, even after 'inheriting' a beautiful Klingenthal sword from some 'stranger'. That sword was recognized by all the old battle heroes as Jonathan Montgomery's own weapon, from the time he had been the colonel of his own regiment, that was later joined with the 42nd.

"Her name is Lillian Clinton," he said taking a thirsty swallow, "Wellington had the hots for her but she would not look his way as long as I was around, so he found a good excuse to send me back."

"You don't say..." Lochiel said unbelievably, "He sent you back to have free rein with her? What about Clinton?"

Hengist shrugged his broad shoulders, eyeing a dark-haired girl who had descended the stairs at the back of the taproom.

"I did not get the impression Clinton was watching his wife that closely, and maybe he likes the idea that the great

Welley is putting his general's staff inside her. Who knows?"

"Is he?" Lochiel inquired, "I think I'd kind of like a piece of Lillian Clinton myself."

"I have no clue," Hengist confessed, "I was sent down here almost at once. But knowing Lillian I dare say he got his evil ways with her. That won't mean she will not be eager to have a go at you as well, my friend. I know her taste and you're exactly it. So you're not homesick for your wife and offspring are ye?"

A shadow crossed Lochiel's handsome face. But then a grin re-appeared.

Hengist knew he had blundered. Lochiel Cameron's elderly wife had bluntly told him after birthing four children that he could take his affections elsewhere if he so pleased. Lochiel had been abhorred with the notion at the time; he had always been the one exceptional soldier who did not fancy whoring around after his marriage to Catriona MacGregor. Well, Hengist knew of another exception, the fastidious first son of the Earl of Wentworth, Lionel Armstrong, but the exceptions did prove the rule now.

Lochiel's wife had been ten years his senior and only seemed to have married him to fill up the Laird MacGregor's nursery, after her brothers had died. As young as he was Lochiel Cameron had been eligible to become Laird of Clan MacGregor through his marriage, and as far as Hengist knew he now carried that title.

Hengist had known about his friend's adoration for the wife of a duke's son, but after only one conversation on the subject they had never again talked about it.

Their friendship went back a long time. Hengist had been in the Highlander's Regiment at Edinburgh and they

had occasionally met after Lochiel continued his career in Edinburgh after becoming an ensign at Stirling. Hengist had been appalled when he heard about Lochiel's marriage to Catriona MacGregor at the age of almost twenty.

"How long are you allowed to stay away?" Lochiel suddenly asked.

"Three months." Hengist replied, "My man of affairs in Edinburgh wrote me that my father's health is badly deteriorating. He has brought him to my mother's, ah, my house in Edinburgh, because there was no way they could take good enough care of him at Loghaire. It seems that the Castle is falling down around everybody's ears. I'm afraid Philip could not care less about his heritage and now they've asked me to come and check it all out. It's a mess since Mother died. Philip is obviously angry that he did not inherit a penny of her fortune and hides in the house in London, as far as I know. I may have to chase the army when I come back, no doubt the Frogs will restart their counters this early summer, but I'm damn glad to go back."

Hengist, strangely, did not want to tell Lochiel that he contemplated not coming back at all. It felt a bit like betrayal to his old friend.

"I went to her funeral," Lochiel said reluctantly.

Hengist's mother had adored her second son and it would have been extremely hard for her to know she would die without ever seeing him again. Lizzie had lived at her, now Hengist's, townhouse in Edinburgh when the countess was hanging on to her last days. Philip had never bothered to make a reappearance in Edinburgh.

Hengist nodded at his friend.

"I thank you for it," he grated.

His eyes strayed to the black-haired whore who had been watching them for some time now.

“Here’s business for you,” he mumbled, looking at the way Lochiel reacted to her.

The girl came to stand boldly in front of their table. She had opened her bodice and her large plump breasts made an effort to roll out of it. Hengist felt his groin tighten and rise under his blue and green-chequered kilt.

“Two for the price of one?” Lochiel suggested, remembering a very old game they used to play when they were young, unattached ensigns.

Hengist grinned widely.

“Heads or tails who’s to be first,” he drawled.

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Hengist groaned and tried to turn on his narrow bunk. Christ, there was no way he could sleep on the bed that seemed to move up and down. He rose and grabbed his stomach at once.

“Bloody ship!” he muttered, staggering to the door of his cabin. His stomach suddenly seemed to heave and he raced through a small gangway onto the deck. He reached the ship’s railing just in time and vomited until he thought his innards had wrung themselves entirely through his throat.

“Take my advice next time, Major,” he heard an amused and haughty voice say behind him, “always vomit with the wind, never against it!”

Hengist closed his eyes, unable to answer.

“No sea-legs, I gather,” the man continued.

Hengist searched for a handkerchief in his shirt pocket and only then noticed that it was very cold at sea. He wondered if he had come aboard with his coat on. The last

thing he remembered clearly was taking off his coat before enjoying Giulia the Portuguese whore.

“My coat...” he mumbled.

“Brought on board by your batman!”

Hengist looked up into the grey-blue eyes of a very amused Captain Barnes.

“Why don’t you come to my cabin for some breakfast?” the Captain asked, “If you think you can cope, that is.”

Hengist scowled at the man. He seemed quite young for a captain, not much older than himself, but then was he not too young to be a major in his own right, as well?

He looked down at his ruffled shirt and short kilt.

“I’ll change into something suitable,” he said in a thin voice.

“We’ll be at ease, Major,” the Captain said soothingly. “Apart from you and your batman we don’t carry any passengers, more’s the pity. Let’s go inside for a cup of coffee and then I suggest you go back to your bunk. It’s still early in the morning and you could use your time better than to hover on the deck. My men don’t take to watching or interfering landlubbers very kindly.”

“I might check on my horse, Barnes,” Hengist said stiffly.

The Captain shrugged.

“You might, but it does not seem necessary, he’s been fine all night.”

He opened the door to his cabin which was about twice the size as Hengist’s. He summoned his servant to bring in breakfast and coffee.

“It’s porridge,” he said gleefully, “with cream because we could buy fresh milk and cream in Lisbon.”

He rubbed his hands together, nodding at one of the chairs at his Captain's table.

"Such a treat," he glowed. "You just cannot imagine what it's like to go without fresh dairy every day. We had a goat going from West Africa to Brazil but it just dropped dead one day. Did not dare to eat the meat either as no one had a clue what killed her. So she went to feed the sharks."

He sat down, waiting for his servant to dish out the hot porridge.

Hengist looked at him with a wry smile.

"As a good Scott I yearn for real porridge," he said. "Haven't had any for a while. At least not cooked with milk. You hardly find any milking cows close to the battlefields."

Captain Barnes looked at him sideways.

"Point taken," he nodded. "How long have you been in the Peninsula?"

Hengist shrugged.

"Almost three years now," he said, while enjoying his meal. It was damn good porridge, the cream was heaven on his palate.

"You must be glad to go home then."

Captain Barnes helped himself to another portion. Hengist studied his long face with the hawkish features and the prominent nose. His probably dark-blond hair was sun-bleached and his complexion darkish and sunburnt.

"It seems to me you did not come from the North," he remarked casually.

Barnes swallowed the spoonful of porridge he held ready and then shook his head.

"I've been at the Capricorn-circle for two years now. I'm going back to London and will take a few months leave. Africa and South-America are great for their views, but it

makes people yearn for the bad weather in England. South Africa is beautiful and I adore the Cape of Good Hope, but still it's not even remotely close to the cool beauty of England.”

He put his spoon down and looked with a smile straight into Hengist's eyes.

“I'm going back to look for a bride. I've passed my thirtieth birthday and had the luck to become Captain of this ship when my predecessor died of some nasty ailment.”

“Ah, is there anybody... do you have hopes for some young lady or another?” Hengist asked, more polite than curious.

The Captain picked up his spoon again.

“One can hope,” he muttered. “There is a lady who has been widowed quite recently, but truth be told she's a bit out of my league.”

He folded his napkin, deciding not to eat any more.

“What about you, sir? You must be on urgent business indeed to be allowed to go back.”

Hengist rubbed his chin, which was remarkably scratchy. He looked down his shirt and kilt, noticing his sporran was missing, probably lying next to his bunk on the floor. He suddenly blushed; it had never been his custom to take a formal breakfast unshaven and unwashed.

“I was basically due for leave,” he said, unblinking despite the lie. “Of course, I'm snowed under with messages, letters and dispatches. None of them terribly urgent is my guess.” Another lie; Wellington himself had handed him a very urgent message to the Duke of Lindley, Richard Grey, who worked at the War Office. It was safely tucked into a chest, which only contained official papers.

He took a sip from his black coffee. The stuff was tasty and bitter.

“Brazilian?” he asked, holding up his cup.

Captain Barnes nodded.

“There’s more where that came from, although I managed to sell quite a lot to the Army in Lisbon. But then I’m bringing in a beautiful Oporto, Ruby Red. Great stuff! You and I will have some after supper tonight.”

Hengist could only nod. The last good Port he had tasted had just been fed to the fishes.

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Chapter 14: ABOUT A WEDDING AND UNHAPPY THOUGHTS

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Philip was in a bad mood and looked morosely at an inordinately cheerful Stevie.

“Where the hell have you been all night?” he asked looking at a hasty knotted stock and a disheveled Brutus which had been clearly groomed by clumsy fingers.

“I’ve frequented a charming establishment called the White Swan,” Stevie said innocently while heading for the bottle of claret that was standing readily at a side-board. “You should try it too one day, such nice clientele there!”

“The White Swan?” Philip almost choked on his brandy, “Yes, I’ve heard of it. Nice people you say?”

Philip’s heart started to race. He did not want Stevie to know he was cheating on him, not now that he was still negotiating his marriage with Stevie’s sister.

Stevie only smiled. He looked at the tall man who sat seemingly relaxed in his chair. Ah yes, Philip was a handsome man and he was still somewhat in love with him, but God, was he happy to have met David Stoner; such an uncomplicated friendly man, so entirely different from the moody Viscount.

They had made incredible love in one of the rooms in the upstairs of the Swan and he was more than glad to miss his dinner in order to share a pie with his new lover. They were to meet anew the next evening and he was already impatient at the thought to see the blond looker again. He had given him ten guineas, recently retrieved from Philip, knowing that the man had just lost his job as a mason. David had pocketed the bounty without a qualm, understanding

that Stevie was not paying him for any services rendered, but that he just wanted to share his money with his new lover. Stevie couldn't care less about this seemingly mercenary side of his new friend. He just longed to see him again and did not care if he had in a way paid him too much for his favours.

“Your sister is a lot smarter than we thought,” Philip said ruefully, “I had to sign a rather stringent prenuptial contract tonight without being able to negotiate. The lady drives a hard bargain.”

“Did she now?” Stevie asked surprised. “She had hardly raised her voice when the idea of your marriage popped up. What's it all about?”

“Four hundred and fifty pounds a month,” said he, “when all is said and done.”

Philip raised his hand to scratch his skull, wondering if any of his Swan lovers had lice. “And seven thousand if I get her with an heir.”

Stevie sipped his wine slowly, enjoying the good quality of it. He had not dared to touch anything else but rum punch at the Swan. Most pubs sold beer, gin and rum punch. Very occasionally they would have wine in the offering, but the stuff was mostly undrinkable.

He grinned.

“I don't think there is a lot of difference between my sister's, ah... heavenly gates and a neat butt, pimply or not,” he drawled.

Philip pouted. So his little Prince was obviously paying him back for his committed trysts after all.

“I don't know how your sister supposes I can live on such a measly sum,” he grumbled.

Stevie finished his wine and rose. He was due to go to a 'musical' at Lady Robles' and he had to bathe and dress for the occasion. The problem was that he did not want to wash away David's smell from his body. He wanted to lie in his bed and dream about the big blond man.

"I would be happy to take over an allowance like that," he said with false cheerfulness. "If you are not able to make do with a godly sum like that I'd suggest you find some work that pays even better. Why don't you start a gaming hell for the boots lovers, with certain facilities to cater to other appetites? It would only have to be a small club with expensive tastes. Something like The Swan, but only for gentlemen of the Quality."

He walked to the door.

Philip jumped out of his chair, grabbed him by a shoulder and kissed him loudly on a cheek, as Stevie just turned his head so that Philip could not reach his mouth.

"Stevie, my one and only Prince!" he exclaimed, "You are incredible! How come I did not think about that myself? I'll make thousands a month!"

Stevie stood stock-still. He had only been jesting rather cruelly just so Philip would know he knew about the White Swan.

"But how...?"

"My house at Upper Brook," Philip smiled. "It's ideal for the purpose."

"That house is basically a dump with hardly any furniture!" Stevie objected.

"Furniture enough in this house," Philip gestured at the quantity of furniture in the library, "and I imagine there is quite a lot in the attic. I'll just borrow against the house because all my other debts will be paid within a few days."

“Starting new debts?” Stevie asked his eyebrows reaching the short fringe of his Brutus.

“You’ll be amazed to see how fast I’ll be able to pay them off. God, do you know how much you can earn owning a gaming hell for mollies?”

Stevie looked down at his nails. He actually could.

“What about me? Will you get me a share in it?” He thought of his hundred pounds per month that hardly got him anywhere.

“You are going to be the manager,” Philip said quickly, thinking about how he had never done a day’s work in his life, honest or otherwise, and he was not going to start now.

“Come on Stevie, let’s sit down and discuss this. It’s so much more exhilarating than a bloody ‘musicale,’ don’t you think, my love?”

It was. He sat down again to listen to Philip's excited voice.

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Marguerite sat straight up in her bed and frowned.

“What do you mean I’m not to have one more drop of the draught?” she asked a hovering Rose.

“After having had me totally under I won’t sleep a wink tonight without that stuff!”

Rose looked at her apologetically.

“It’s too heavy, dearie, you won’t be able to keep your eyes open at your own wedding tomorrow.”

Marguerite moved a few of the pillows in her back and reached for a book.

“Wouldn’t that be a blessing?” she asked, her voice brimming with sarcasm.

“Now, now,” Rose shushed, “Lord Morvern is a dashing man, I’m sure the whole Ton envies you...”

“I have not seen him in ten days,” Marguerite grumbled.
“Such a dashing man!”

“You know he could hardly come up to your bedroom, those days,” Rose said soothingly, patting the counterpane, “I dare say your mother would have fainted with shock.”

Marguerite humped. There had not even been as much as a message from him or a letter. Somebody had sent up flowers but they sure as hell had not been Lord Morvern’s.

She opened the book where the bookmark had been, but leaned back in her pillows without even scanning the pages.

“I am absolutely crazy.”

“What is it, dear?” Rose asked.

“I’m an idiot to give in to mama again and marry a... a...”

It was a bit hard for her to find the right epithet. Lord Morvern had only been nice and charming toward her and very, very correct.

“A blooming fortune-hunter!” She gnashed her teeth.

Rose shook her head.

“A very handsome, charming and titled fortune-hunter, at least,” she said, smiling meekly.

“Rose, marriage is for life!” Marguerite fumed, “What if... what if everything goes wrong again, just like with William?”

Rose bent towards the tea tray which had just been brought in by one of the young under-footmen.

“Forget about William,” she said decidedly, pouring a wide cup of tea, “it won’t ever be like that again. Lord Morvern is young and virile, and if my eyes don’t deceive me, very appreciative of your beauty. Believe you me, my dear, this is a match made in heaven.”

Lady McKenna shifted uneasily in the very modern empire chair. Gads, she should never have let Lady Bromley persuade her to go to Lady Throckmorton's tea. Not now, not under the new circumstances! Lady Throckmorton was in league with the Countess of Guernsey; sticklers for etiquette and manners were they and she had been under their spiteful fire for half an hour now. They were wondering why the wedding was to be a low-keyed affair when everybody must know it should be the coup of the season. Lady McKenna had lamely come up with the excuse about Marguerite's fragility and widowhood.

They had frowned at the explanation, since it was being rumoured that Philip already lived in her house. Lady McKenna had to use all her persuasive powers to convince the biddies that the rumour was entirely false. Of course, the groom still lived in his own town house at Upper Brook Street and if he had been seen often at their house it was because he and her son Stephen were such amazingly good friends.

Sweat broke out on her upper lip, and she had to take out her fan to hide behind it. She knew it would not be easy to fool those high-born sticklers of the Ton, but truth be told, she had dearly miscalculated their shrewd- and astuteness. When they left the matter for what is was, it was only because Georgina would be the mother-in-law to an Earl one day and it was not considered very handy to raise the hue and cry against such a person. Certainly not when Lady McKenna had married into a good title herself; baronies were more valuable in Scotland than in England as the Scots had few earls and even fewer dukes. The knowing biddies were aware of that fact. Title hunting was hardly

inexcusable in the high circles of the Throckmortons and the Guernseys.

Luckily the irascible Lady Bromley was able to divert the roomful of women to the latest scandalous on-dits concerning the wife of a certain earl who was related to the brother-in-law of a certain general fighting in the Peninsula.

Lady McKenna had never thought she had any obligation to harbor grateful feelings for the bulldog-like Lady Bromley.

She rose as soon as it was possible, murmuring there was still a great deal to do before tomorrow's happenings, promising herself not to go to any teas with sticklers and hostesses that were too high in the instep. She did not fancy having her rather unstable reputation shredded by the bullies of the Ton.

She breathed in deeply while she awaited Marguerite's town carriage. That Lady Guernsey had become truly vicious since her mishap with the Prince of Wales. Now her own daughter's reputation was going to be on everybody's tongue in the Ton; what with her husband preferring another woman and fleeing to Turkey with her and she being left with half a score of his brood! At least she was rescued by the Duke of Rothford, who had married her within three weeks after her divorce. Most ladies who were facing such a shameful thing as a divorce were not so lucky!

Lady McKenna bit her lips, wondering if she should have any cause for jealousy. Now that Marguerite was rich and marrying into the nobility and her own ageing husband preferred to stay up North there was hardly a thing she could complain about. She had no qualms about taking lovers as almost every day the Ton was swarming with bucks that had little more to do than to get themselves in and out of their

breeches and did not care if the lady of their fancy was a bit ripe in years. No, she was absolutely fine!

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Philip cornered Doctor Matlock as soon as the doctor came down from his visit to Marguerite's room.

"I hope my future wife is well?" he asked, inwardly trembling if she was.

The Doctor eyed the Viscount warily.

"Her sensitivities are still quite frail;" he answered sincerely, "Mrs. Alexander has been on a healing cure for only a week."

Although Marguerite had seemed belligerent today he still believed her to be in a melancholic shape. Belligerence was known to be one of the symptoms of the illness. He had complied with Lady McKenna's wishes not to have her drugged over much for tomorrow's occurrences, but because Marguerite had not shown any romantic anticipation for the marriage he had ordered that she should go back to her room and to her bed after the nuptials.

He thought a slight warning for the bridegroom was in order.

"I am certain you are willing to bring your tomorrow's nuptials to a good conclusion, my Lord," he said in rather silky tones, "but if you want my true opinion I would be very careful of the matter."

Philip's mood lifted at once, although he did his utmost not to show it. He is telling me I should not bed her immediately tomorrow?

"Do you mean to say, sir, that I am not to... That I am not to..."

The doctor blushed and looked down. Obviously, the young groom was very eager to claim his marital rights.

He sighed and then patted Philip's arm.

"Just be careful, my man," he grunted, "I understand your feelings but you will have to take care of her sensibilities. I'm not sure if she could cope, you see."

Philip felt like shouting with joy.

"Nor could I," he whispered at the Doctor's retreating back.

"You should not be here, my Lord!" Buck Burton grumbled disapprovingly.

Philip shrugged at the man. He did not try to answer him over the noisy din of at least eighty visitors. His eyes scanned the room eagerly.

It was opening night in the Upper Brook Street house called 'Gents' and it seemed a raging success.

Philip searched the big salon for Stevie, who had been at the roots of Gents and had been able to organize the new gentlemen's gaming hell and club in a matter of days. They had used all of the old furniture of Marguerite's house and some of the new pieces that had been cluttering up the house anyway. Stevie had hired the shrewd Buck Burton as their representative, using fake names for the so-called renters of Philip's house who were supposed to set up Gents.

Stevie had used all his knowledge of London's Molly scene to send out as many invitations to the club as possible. They seemed cleverly formal but utterly understandable to those whom it concerned and not understandable at all to those who did not indulge in the unnatural and risqué love that might be on the offer at Gents.

Philip presumed it would sort itself out soon enough; although the evening was a crush he truly did not think it would stay that way.

He was sure it was merely the novelty of the new gaming hell. The men that fancied themselves in the petticoat-line would leave the house soon enough as the presence of women for sale in the vicinity of Gents was not allowed.

He surveyed the salon and the back room where the card and dice tables were. Drinks and snacks were all taken in from the large pantry next to the gaming room. Stevie had been adamant that the first two drinks should be on the house that night. Memberships for Gents were sold later on for those who wanted to use the upstairs bedrooms. Twenty pounds subscription for the right to go upstairs for an hour, all through the year, and additional payment of one pound per night for the use of the larger rooms. The house boasted four smaller private rooms. The membership fees and subscriptions were written down in code by Mr. Burton himself.

Philip turned towards the front door, receiving his cane, hat and cloak from a stern footman. He was not fooled. Most of the staff in the new club catered to unnatural needs that seemed natural enough to him. Burton and Stevie had taken care of that. It would not do to have indignant staff who would be appalled at the upstairs comings and goings, or rather doings.

Burton would be the only one who had the use of an upstairs room to sleep in if he could not go home. His interest in Gents was merely mercenary; he had a wife and children.

“It’s a crush, my Lord,” he heard the footman say.

Philip, who was already almost out the door turned to study the young man. Footmen were hired for their height and their imposing qualities. The one at the front door was

likely the tallest and handsomest. It was understandable why Burton had put this one at the door tonight. He was of imposing height and well-muscled, his face under the footman's wig was young and handsome.

"I think I'll come back at a quieter time," he said, nodding at the man in approval. "Your name?"

The man blushed, noticing Philip's appreciation of him. It occurred to Philip that he might sport a roaring reputation these days within the Molly-scene.

"Denning, my lord," he answered politely. "Rick Denning."

Philip turned back to look at the building when he was about to enter Marguerite's town carriage. His old house was bathing in light and sound. He smiled. There was really nothing to do than lie back and become rich, he thought, and fuck the Dennings of this world, of course.

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She almost stumbled when she had to descend the big U-shaped stairway; it seemed as if she was walking on a cloud with holes in it.

She had to hang onto Rose and wondered what had been in the medication that was spooned into her mouth just before she knew she had to go down and meet her soon-to-be husband.

As she had predicted she had not slept a wink last night, because she did not get the help of the sleeping draft which had kept her under for a whole week. According to Rose, she looked like a wash cloth; white and spent after her night of wakefulness, worries and new qualms.

Lady McKenna insisted they call in Doctor Matlock again; Marguerite was too restless and in a bad mood, nothing close to the blushing bride she was supposed to be.

One might think most of it could be solved by some clever make-up, but Georgina hated to take any risks. What if Marguerite suddenly remembered that she was of age and truly did not need to marry anyone right now if she did not feel like it?

After the very helpful spoonful, administered by Doctor Matlock himself, something happened to her brain; it suddenly seemed empty, devoid of any logical thoughts. Then the pink clouds came wafting towards her and surrounded her. Yes, she was certain now that she was walking in the sky and she couldn't care less. It was just that she felt very queasy, as if her stomach was protesting its last addition. She pressed her gloved hands against her lips, smearing her gloves with the red lip colour Rose had applied. Oh darn, she truly felt sick.

“Will you, Marguerite.... take... to cherish and to obey... obey... obey...”

“...sickness and health... till death....”

“...with my body... with my body...”

“Yes, I do,” she heard herself mumble after her mother's impatient fingers prodded her.

Something happened to her stomach on the ride back from St. James church at Piccadilly. It heaved and when she opened her mouth to complain to the strange man sitting next to her, she vomited all over the pearly cloud of silk and tulle that was her wedding dress. Before she fainted she saw the very painful smile of the man sitting at her right side who looked amazingly like the love of her life; Hengist Agnew.

When she came to, she was lying on her back on her own bed whilst Rose was trying to wash her neckline of a sour smelling substance. She whispered Hengist's name but

Rose only scrubbed doggedly on. She closed her eyes and when she woke up again somebody lifted her onto her pillow and fed her a light broth of chicken and cooked vegetables.

Something else undoubtedly medicinal was admonished, and then Rose tucked her in and kissed her on the forehead.

“Sleep well, my love,” she whispered. “The doctor thinks your husband should not come to you tonight.”

Her eyes widened for a moment, trying to grasp the meaning of Rose’s words, but then she gave up.

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Chapter 15: TOWARDS A WEDDING NIGHT

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Hengist looked intently at the façade of his brother's house in Upper Brook Street and shook his head. It must have been three or four years since he had been there and the house had always had a dilapidated look about it. Now the windowsills seemed to have been painted and washed: they gleamed in the sunlight and he wondered if the masonry had been treated with some stuff or another. The bricks looked so much redder than they had looked in the years previous. Upper Brook Street had stopped being a fashionable address since the eighties of the last century but the Agnews had never been able to sell the house and hold out for a more Tonnish place. The house was entailed to the Viscountcy of Morvern, but Hengist himself did not have much opportunity to dwell at the place. He'd lived in Edinburgh when he took his service with the Highland Regiment. His tours in Ireland, Edinburgh and the Peninsula had hardly brought him to the house his brother now owned. He was certain he could count on the fingers of one hand the days he had stayed at the Upper Brook Street address.

He turned back to the driver of the hackney who had brought him from one of the busy coaching inns in London, which had been the end goal of his journey from Southampton. His batman had left him there as he would be journeying up North to Scotland, to take a boat to the Firth to see if he still had a family somewhere in Edinburgh.

Hengist had arrived late at night at the coaching inn and had deemed it better to stay the night there and to find a barber next day. He needed a shave and a haircut badly.

Although Wellesley insisted that his English soldiers cut their hair, many of the Highlanders ignored the prescriptions regarding their looks and had sported ponytails and long locks. Hengist had not bothered to have a real haircut since his last arrival in Lisbon, and had sported hair that went way over his ears and was long enough to bind into a tail.

The barber near the White Horse inn had refused to cut it short to the cropped size Wellesley favoured, so Hengist found himself with a fashionable look that was neither long nor short. At least it was clean and as the barber had made a lot of fuss over Hengist's shave; his face now literally gleamed.

On board of the Sea-anemone Hengist's batman had had more than enough time to look after Hengist's rather limited wardrobe; two old uniform coats and one hardly worn parade coat, all in dark blue and green, matching the dark tartan colours of the Black Watch Highlanders. Hengist only had one decent kilt that fell over his knees as opposed to his two battle-kilts that hardly covered his much-muscled thighs. He had already decided to go to a tailor to measure him one or two breeches, knowing that Londoners stuck up their noses to men walking around in kilts. The very fashionable Scottish Dukes of Rothford or Lindley had not been seen in kilts for more than a decade. Hengist would never have contemplated the whole problem of whether to wear a kilt or not had it not been for his craving to find Marguerite Ross again. He would not dare to insult her sensibilities if she shared her aversion to kilts along with the bigger part of her contemporaries. She was of Scottish descent, surely, but after having lived in London who knew how fashionable she had become?

The coach driver threw Hengist's luggage into his arms, obviously understanding the big man was neither a fop nor a dandy and very able to catch his own trunks. He grinned at the coins Hengist held out to him, tapped his hat, and turned the hackney away.

Hengist put his trunks down on the cobbles and continued to stare at the house with his fists at his sides.

This morning, before his visit to barber and bathhouse, he had sent a message to his brother's house, stating his coming visit, but after he had gone to Whitehall to deliver Wellesley's messages to the Horse Guards and to the Duke of Lindley he had gone back to the inn to pick up his luggage. There had not been a word from his brother advising him of the receipt of his letter. Hengist had shrugged his enormous shoulders and whistled for a hackney to bring him to Upper Brook Street.

He stuck his nose in the air as if that could help him decide if something was wrong or amiss. It was clear that there was no help to it; he just had to knock and ask if his brother would be receiving.

The moment he reached for the knocker the door opened and a tall and handsome footman stared him in the face.

"My Lord?" he gasped, his gaze fixed on Hengist's dark kilt, long white socks and buckled shoes.

Hengist understood at once that the man had mistaken his identity for his brother's.

"I'm Major Agnew," he rumbled, "Lord Morvern's brother."

"Ah, oh, yes," the footman stuttered, obviously not yet over the similarity of the appearances of Lord Morvern and the Major.

"Well?" Hengist cocked a brow.

“Please come in, sir,” the footman gestured into the hallway, “I’ll see if Mr. Burton is here.”

“Burton?” Hengist frowned, “I don’t know of any Burton.”

“Please take a seat in the small salon, sir,” Denning said hastily. “Can I bring you refreshments while you wait?”

“Wait, wait?” Hengist asked, “Do you want me to cool my heels in my own brother’s house? I have come home from Portugal, friend! I have not been home in years! Where is he?”

There was another knock at the front door and Denning almost ran through the hallway to open the door, mumbling an apology to a steaming Hengist.

Gads, he thought, guiding the four new members of Gents into the big salon, I hope the gorgeous Major is of similar tastes as his brother!

As he had promised, Philip had come back to the house at the quiet hour of three o’clock in the night when there were about eight card-players in the card-room and when all rooms upstairs were serving their specific purposes. The eager and slightly drunk Viscount had not lost time with preliminaries but had taken Denning into the small sitting room and had shown the footman the meaning of some vigorous amatory principles of rigorous lovemaking. After that, Richard Denning had hardly been able to sleep on the cot in the attic he shared with three other footmen. It was unwise to fall in love with a member of the aristocracy, he knew, but that was exactly what had happened to him.

Philip had not spent the night at Gents, murmuring something about a wedding.

“Can I be of service, sir?” A harassed Burton, who had been watching the scene with the Major and the front

doorman, asked. He warily eyed the Major, who truly resembled his boss to the nines. He already had a good eye for his clientele and knew at once that this Major would not be looking for any of the services that were provided upstairs unless there was a woman available.

He shook his head regretfully when the Major explained his visit.

“Lord Morvern has let this house to a gentlemen’s club,” he said apologetically, “I understand he got married today and now lives at the house of his new bride. Would you like me to send a message to him, sir?”

“Married?” Hengist exclaimed, “Philip? How? I mean...”

“Maybe it is better if I give you directions,” Burton suggested politely. “Surely on his wedding day his Lordship would be elated to see you?”

Hengist still gaped at the idea of Philip taking a bride. He knew many of Philip’s ilk were wont to marry a rich woman to keep them in money and their own ways, but the knowledge of Philip taking a wife was staggering.

He still shook his head in disbelief when he left the house after the fancy footman had called a hackney for him. He saw the man leering at him, taking in his very visible bare knees with what looked like a drool. Damn, but if he hadn’t guessed into what sort of house Philip had changed his London residence!

“Corner off Piccadilly and Berkeley,” that Burton-fellow had said.

Hell must have frozen over and pigs must have started to fly if Philip had gotten married, Hengist mused again. He wondered at the woman Philip had seduced into becoming his. No doubt she was ugly, fat, and very wealthy. On the

other hand, Philip was a vain man. He was not likely to be found dead with somebody unattractive. So forget about the ugly and the fat then. Maybe blond and as tall as a Valkyrie? Philip had always preferred the men that were tall and blond. No doubt his wife...

Gads, as far as he knew the address 'corner off Piccadilly and Berkeley' was at least prestigious. That would hopefully solve the problem of his lost bedroom at Philip's own place.

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Philip sat lazily back in his chair sipping a gold coloured whiskey.

He was still dressed in the formal morning clothes of a bridegroom and to Stevie, who was stretched out on the opulent couch that was the eye-catcher of the library, he still seemed the handsomest man in the world.

Well, maybe not handsomest, he pondered, if truth be told. His David fulfilled that role, with his rugged looks and his imposing workman's body, but surely Philip must be the most elegant eye-catching person in the world.

He looked into his glass of claret trying to stifle a sudden longing for his new lover who was not only wonderfully passionate but also kind and warm.

He had only been at Gent's first opening for less than half an hour. Burton had told him and Philip that under the circumstances it would be better not to openly patronize the club. It was bad enough that Philip's name was still associated to Gents as the owner of the club's house. They had to wait and see if Gents infamous background could be kept a secret within the Ton's circles. As soon as Gents was accepted by the Ton as a gentlemen's haunt, then they would be free to come whenever they pleased, although

Burton's undertone meant that it would be wiser if they did not participate in the doings of the bedroom floor.

Stevie did not feel very much like indulging in trysts at Gents anyway, his head was full of David. However, going to the Swan also implied taking too many risks, so he was fervently searching his brain to find a solution which would enable him to see his lover without attracting the attention of people who would tell on them for the sake of a reward from Runners investigating cases of buggery.

It had been damn easy for him and Philip to live in the same house; they had continued their affair wherever and whenever they pleased, so long as they took care that servants did not walk in on them.

At least he was happy that Philip hardly seemed to notice him today. He understood now that Philip was not the kind of man who wished to be tied to one person only, and if he had not found David he was certain it would have broken his heart. Stevie never had indulged in having more than one lover at the same time. He'd had his experiences with a few men before, but for him love had always seemed more important than physical attraction only. He understood now perfectly well that Philip's attraction to him had not been merely physical but also very mercenary; Philip had needed a way out of the road to Debtor's prison.

Stevie stared quietly into the glass of claret he clasped in his hand. He wondered if he was suffering from a bout of unwanted regrets and bad conscience. Upstairs in her bed lay his poor sister whom he had sold to Philip for nothing but some empty affection.

He sighed deeply, not caring that Philip looked mockingly at him.

“Are you having second thoughts, my love?” Philip guessed. He held out an elegant hand.

“Come here.”

Stevie shook his head.

“Not now, it’s the middle of the day.”

“That does not normally detain you,” Philip drawled.

“It’s your damned wedding day, Philip!” Stevie scowled, “Show some respect for my sister!”

“Ah, yes, your sister, my wife.”

Philip put his whiskey on a table and leaned his head against his chair.

“A bit hard to respect her when the first intimate thing she did in my poor presence was to throw up over my shoes and her wedding dress. I hope you can imagine the smell?”

“I hope you can imagine how sorry I feel for her now.” Stevie muttered darkly.

Philip scratched at an imaginary spot on his silk silver-coloured morning coat.

“How happy do you think I am with a measly four hundred pounds per month in exchange for a life-long attachment to a woman?” he asked with a frown.

“Really, my Prince...”

Stevie wanted to shout that he was not Philip’s Prince, not anymore, but he deemed it better to hold his tongue. There would be time enough to bring David into the equation, if he would ever decide to do that. He was happy enough that Philip had not forced any attentions upon him after David had made love to him. Apart from the fact that Stevie had had his amorous inclinations elsewhere, he was certain Philip was seeing other men, which was, under the circumstances, just as well.

It would probably prove difficult enough to remain faithful to David with Philip prowling the house, but he had promised himself only to think about it when that situation arose.

He was to see David tonight in a gaming hell off Covent Garden. It was one of those hells which only catered to the need of gamblers who wanted to get rid of their money. Later at night it would be crowded with whores out of the bawdy houses next to it. They would sup at one of the many inns in that neighborhood and see if they could find a way to be together. Not an easy thing, as this year London's town committee had sworn to put an end to the increasing number of sodomites that roamed the city.

Philip watched his new brother-in-law through his thick blond lashes. He had noticed a reticence in Stevie's attitude in the last couple of days and he did not like it one bit. Philip felt happiest when he was domineering the situation, any situation, and he felt his little Prince was slipping through his fingers. The boy had just refused to come to him and he reflected angrily that the refusal had been rather mutinous. Worse, it probably had nothing to do with the early hour or his sister's wedding day.

He forced himself to relax. The boy had served his purpose. Philip was out of the bad weather with a bright shining future. Yesterday's earnings at Gents must have amounted in the thousands, his sham of a marriage had secured him food and a roof over his head, and tonight he did not have to share his new wife's bed. If it was up to him he never would. Why bother with a pouting boy who was having a bout of conscience over his missish sister?

Their looks crossed when Biggles knocked on the library door to announce a visitor.

“A Major Agnew to see you, Milord!”

Biggles bowed importantly in Philip’s direction. Philip had often wondered if the butler had ever suspected his inclinations towards the male sex, but the butler’s pride in serving in a Viscount’s household was evident and genuine. Surely he would be proud to serve a Viscount, soon to become an earl, sodomite or not?

“Major Agnew?” Philip repeated, elated and taken aback at the same time.

“Hengist?”

When the huge Scot appeared in the doorway, Stevie blinked in astonishment. Was he seeing double?

“Hengist, my God, Hengist!”

Philip almost shouted with joy.

“Gads, Hengist, I thought you were fighting in Portugal! And a Major now?”

Hengist took his brother in a bear hug, ruffling his hair at the same time.

“Philip? So it’s true, you married?”

They smiled at each other and then burst out laughing.

“Must have been a cold day in hell...” Hengist guffawed.

Philip signaled an approaching Stevie to come closer.

“My new brother-in-law, Stephen Mackenzie, heir to the Laird of McKenna,” he said good-natured.

“McKenna?” Hengist repeated not yet remembering the name, “You married a Scots girl then, Philip?”

“Yes, yes,” Philip nodded hastily. “Would you like a whiskey, Hengist? Are you here on a special mission, or did you decide to say farewell to Old Nosey?”

“A bit of both, a bit of both,” Hengist answered, sitting down on a big leather chair and accepting the whiskey.

His gaze trailed towards Stevie who had gone back to the couch. There was something about the boy... He suddenly shivered and stared at the boy.

“Somebody walking over your grave, eh?” Philip asked.

Hengist laughed and lifted his glass.

“To your wedding!” he toasted, “Apropos, I understand it was to have been today. Are you not receiving any guests? Or am I too late for the wedding breakfast?”

Philip toasted his brother silently and took a sip.

“My wife fell ill more than a week ago, but we had a hard time delaying the wedding. Therefore, I’m afraid it’s a bit of a quiet affair. We’ll throw a ball or something when she’s up to scratch again.”

He deemed it best to change the subject rapidly.

“So how long will you be staying in England?”

“I was granted a three month leave. I must be back in Portugal at the end of July.”

Philip’s nod was not devoid of relief. Hengist would only be around for a few months. He had not seen his brother for years and the few times they had met in the past it had only been for very short periods of time. He had always hoped Hengist did not know about his true nature or his unnatural inclinations. Hengist was the epitome of maleness and everything that stood for male pride and interest in women. Philip normally did not feel ashamed of his inclinations, but where Hengist was concerned he was bashful of them.

“Who told you, about the marriage I mean? It will only be in the newspapers tomorrow.”

“I went to your house in Upper Brook Street,” Hengist said casually.

If Philip wanted to let his house to a male brothel because he had a far better one now that he married, it was his own affair.

Stevie's eyes widened.

"You went to, eh... that new haunt?"

"Yes, they directed me to your house here. Very kind people."

Philip's heart missed a beat. His brother had been to Gents?

He hoped that it had been too early in the day to remark anything unusual about the club.

"Ah, yes, the place only opened up yesterday. At least they gave the house a nice new finish..."

"So am I to see your new wife as yet, Philip? 'T will be kind of a new experience to have a sister-in-law!"

"Oh, well..."

Philip looked at the floor, "I am afraid I don't know when she will come down again. She was rather unwell after the ceremony, you know; up too early and all that."

Biggles knocked again when the silence was thickening.

"Pardon me, Milord, but where do you want me to place the Major's luggage?"

"Luggage?"

Philip swallowed. He had not yet realized that his brother was there to stay.

"Blue suite, Biggles!" Stevie said hastily.

It was the room next to his sister's that should have been Philip's as of today, but the other six guest rooms were hardly furnished yet. Philip was still housed in one of the best rooms although Lady McKenna had meant to move him to the blue suite upon his marriage. Obviously the oversight of the moving was due to Marguerite's lingering illness.

“Cook has prepared a magnificent dinner for tonight,” Stevie said uneasily, “although I am afraid the bride won’t be able to come down for it. Marguerite’s maid told me she was not doing very well this afternoon.”

“Marguerite?” Hengist asked sharply.

A sudden feeling of doom filled his heart.

“Yes, yes,” Philip answered casually, studying his nails, “Marguerite Ross, the former widow Alexander made me the happiest of men today.”

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Hengist sat on the small bench at the foot of his bed, plucking at his stock.

Of all of the days of hell on Earth this truly must have been the worst! The only girl in the world that had been able to set his mind and his body on fire, the only girl he had dreamed of for the last twelve years of his life, was married to no one less but his degenerate brother!

His heart had ached during dinner and his despair had known no bounds.

He hid his head in his hands, wondering if he truly wanted to stay in this house.

He had not seen her yet. According to her mother she was too unwell to come down. It was just as well. He wondered if he would have been able to blunder through a dinner with his heart in tatters and Marguerite sitting there, happy and blushing as Philip’s new bride.

He rose from the bench, wondering if he really should wear his one and only night shift. Springs in England were still chilly and with his window open, he wondered whether he would freeze if he slept naked.

His room was opulent and luxurious and Philip had insisted on lending him his valet John Row, who was now

pottering about in his dressing room. Hengist was not going to need him, for sure. His batman had only seen to his needs when it came to his uniform, his coffee in the morning if there was any and his sleeping facilities. There was no way he needed somebody to dress or undress him, or to shave him. It was a gentleman's thing but he had not been able to suffer through ablutions to his body by another man, however professional such a treasure might be.

The gloom he had been trying to lift came roaring back to him. She was married to his brother!

He rubbed his face, shaking his head. Why had fate played such a horrible trick on him? If he had been only one day earlier! Oh well, what then? Would he have been able to ask her to elope with him, the spare, but not the heir? No doubt Marguerite would prefer a future as a countess over the low life of a soldier's wife. What did he know? It had been four years since she had last seen him and truth be told, he had not grown any more handsome with a body that was littered with ugly scars.

He peeled his blankets back and crawled between the crisp sheets, thinking how strange it was to lie in such a luxurious bed. He pushed his cheek deep against the soft pillow, wondering how it must be to make love to Marguerite in such surroundings as these. He felt a familiar tightening in his loins and growled with frustration.

Philip and Stevie had gone out after dinner, after half-heartedly inviting him to join them. He had refrained, still too heartsick to even be able to think of enjoying himself in town.

Lady McKenna had looked at him with those eyes full of calculation during dinner. Damn if he did not know that look! He had seen it everywhere since he had been fourteen

years old. God knows how many times he had granted the ladies their wish when he was a bit older; the invitation to their beds. He shook his head restlessly. Not her, never her, never his love's mother! He was not that perverted.

He shifted in his bed, sliding his now aroused cock against the sheets, groaning with frustration but unable to sleep with an erection.

He could not remember the last time he'd had to resort to self-gratification. Even in his months of abstinence in Portugal he had not indulged in masturbation. It was what young boys turned to. His world had always been full of willing women and when the need arose he just had chosen one and been done with it.

He heaved a long sigh, bringing his hand to his hard shaft. At the last moment he remembered that the upstairs maids would notice if he spent in his bed. He jumped out, diving for the towel next to the washstand when a door suddenly opened.

"Oh!" Rose exclaimed, her hand to her mouth, looking wide-eyed at the dim figure in the dark room, "You're here, Milord! I did not know you intended to... I was sure you were not going to..."

She suddenly curtsied.

"My lady might be asleep," she murmured, peering at him in the darkened room. "Shall I go and warn her of your...?"

Hengist quickly folded the towel around his waist.

"No, no, I... No, please don't wake her," he whispered urgently, feeling his cheeks warm with sudden embarrassment and guilty anticipation.

"I'll leave through your door then," she mumbled, crossing his room to the door that opened into the hallway.

He watched her go to the door and took a deep breath.

Rose turned her head back to the man in the middle of the room. In the very dim light caused by a full moon that tried to shine through the thick cloth of the curtains she could see that he was naked apart from the white towel he had quickly bound around his waist.

“I’m sorry to be this impudent, my lord,” she said softly, “but please be careful with her!”

He stood there, nodding at her in the dark and swallowed when the door clicked shut.

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Chapter 16: POOFS ON THE PROWL

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“Did you not eat tonight?” Stevie asked when David finished his piece of pie in less than five minutes.

David grinned at him.

“Annie made me a nice meal, M’lord, but I allus find myself ‘ungry if truth be told!”

“You must call me George,” Stevie urged, looking around the small inn, “I don’t want...”

“George?” David asked, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

He shook his head.

“The name does not suit you. You’re far too refined to be a George, if ye take me meaning. Ye look like an angel. I’ll call you Rafa, short for Raphael, if it comes to that.”

Stevie looked down at the oak table. David was right, George was a horrible name.

“Who’s Annie?” he asked feeling a surge of envy.

David sat back with a sigh of contentment.

“Me wife.”

“Ah, yes,” Stevie murmured, “your wife.”

David moved as if he wanted to grab Stevie’s hand, but pushed his hand in the pocket of his rough coat instead, pretending to be looking for a pipe.

They had met at the gaming hell, at the other side of the street.

David was hoarding the rest of the ten guineas Stevie had given him a few days ago. He had bought himself the fine woolen brown coat he was wearing now and had spent some of the money on the boys and Annie.

They had left the noisy and smoky place in favour of the big inn. It seemed neither David nor Stevie were gamblers at heart.

It was easy to find a place near a window where they could have a quiet conversation without attracting attention.

“Annie’s me cousin,” David said, “I married her when ‘er man died at sea and she had the kid.”

“Does she know...?” Stevie asked hesitantly.

David shrugged.

“She suspects, I’d gather. However, after ‘er last miss she does not want me to... ye know.”

“You mean to say you slept with her?”

David tried to hide a tender smile.

“I didn’t know since about three years ago.”

Stevie stared at his new friend and lover.

“How?”

“I never cared much about women,” David explained softly, “but they was ‘allus after me. At least that changed since I married Annie. The third child was born dead and Annie was ill after that ‘un fer a long time. Now all we do is sleep in our bed and that’s fine with the both of us.”

“But, but, you never knew from the start?”

David shook his head.

“Nah, it’s not the done thing between masons. It’s still not easy fer me. Buggers are not treated with niceties, ye know; at least not where I come from. I once went to a dockside inn and got roarin’ drunk. A ship’s doc got me into his bed there and kept me there fer three days. After that I knew.”

He looked at Stevie through thick blond lashes.

“What about you?”

Stevie took a gulp from his ale.

“My tutor. I had a new tutor when I was fourteen. My father refused to send me to a school. So...”

David frowned.

“A tutor? Were ye forced?”

“No.” Stevie shook his head with vehemence, dislodging his carefully hot-ironed curls.

“He touched me often, you know, patting my head and my hands and when we were outside for a biology class we became more intimate, but it took some months before we went to... when it happened, and I wanted it. We only... He was very careful and he only came to my bed when my parents were not at home. My father sent him away when I became sixteen and I was heart-broken for about a year.”

“You look hardly older than eighteen,” David muttered, restraining himself from touching Stevie again.

Stevie licked his lips, feeling the air thicken between them.

“I’m twenty-one,” he just whispered.

“I’m a twenty-seven year old mason,” David smiled sardonically, “who dreams of being an architect but knows that dreams never come true. Not at my age.”

“An architect?” Stevie asked, surprised at the fact that a humble man could have such ambitions.

David scratched into the rough wood of the table with a finger.

“Let’s ask for the bill and find...”

Stevie nodded and David signaled a buxom waitress.

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“You should not be here,” Burton growled.

Although he had taken Philip’s hat he stood with his legs wide as if to block Philip from the main drawing room.

“Why not?” Philip asked lightly.

He was slightly drunk from imbibing since the disaster of his wedding.

Burton nodded in the direction of a man who stood drinking in the drawing room, looking around as if he owned the place.

“That’s Bean. He’s a minor Runner in the service of the Town Council. He came in with some Lord or another and I don’t trust it. You know there’s a witch hunt on.”

“So?” Philip asked with all the arrogance he could muster.

He saw Denning at the door and was already aroused. He wanted the footman badly after this disastrous day.

“I would not advise you to go inside, not on your supposed wedding night, Milord.”

Philip stared hard at the burly man.

“Alright he suddenly agreed, “but I want you to send Denning to the coach house, I need to talk to him.”

Burton tried not to look mutinous. At least if his new boss wanted to take his pleasure with Denning in the coach house the spies in the drawing room would not know, as long as he kept them inside.

“You better be damned careful!” He warned, “I need him back for his duties within the hour.” That was a bit strong towards the Viscount, but Burton was very nervous about the Molly-hunters. They were everywhere and he wanted his footman safely back into the club without a horny viscount hanging on to him, who was too drunk to know he might easily betray them.

He signaled Denning to the door.

“His Lordship needs your assistance. Better put on a cloak and take your wig and coat off.”

It would not do if anyone got a flash of the servant in full livery making out with his handsome employer.

Denning could not help flashing a smile.

Philip looked morosely at Burton.

“What are you going to do about them?”

Burton refrained in time to give the Viscount an impolite shrug.

“Entertain them and not allow anybody to go upstairs as long as they are here. That might become a problem as the Duke just entered. He does not know what ‘no’ means, so I’m told, and he can be a very nasty fellow when opposed.”

“The Duke? Which one of the ten?”

Philip threw a curious look in the direction of the big drawing room.

“Cumber...” Burton muttered with his head down, so no one could see his lips move.

Philip frowned. The Duke of Cumberland was one of the royal dukes, with a very bad reputation when it came to affairs of the flesh. He had never been certain if the Duke tended to like skirts or boots, which meant he probably favoured both. At a haunt like this he only meant trouble if there were Runners in the house. The Duke of course knew he was almost untouchable when it came to his sordid scandals. Even with a raving mad King George on the throne, no one in the realm dared to take down royalty such as Cumberland.

Philip had always managed to avoid the man. He was just too sordid for his taste.

He turned, uncertain as to what to do next and started studying himself sideways in the big mirror in the hallway, recently borrowed from his wife’s house.

Burton solved his dilemma.

He looked pointedly at the Viscount, made a short bow in Philip's direction, and turned away.

Philip just walked back to the front door, donning his hat.

At least his investment was in good hands with Burton taking care of things, even when the sodomite-hunters were in the club.

Denning, hidden in a long black cloak, was waiting for him at the garden gate and Philip lengthened his stride in anticipation.

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Chapter 17: INTIMATE DEALINGS

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She was asleep.

Hengist had crept into the room the servant had vacated earlier.

There were at least four huge windows and not all of them were properly covered by curtains. Moonlight stole through many an opening and bathed the room in an eerie bluish light.

She was slumbering on her side, her face halfway hidden in a plump pillow.

He slid his long body into a chair next to the bed, clutching the towel that hid his loins.

An elf, he thought, looking at her long black curly hair that was fastened in a loose ponytail. He wondered how she could look exactly as she did when he kissed her five years ago.

He stretched out his hand to touch her cheekbone, but then he thought better of it and put it back near the knot of his towel.

It was her wedding night. How Philip could not be here instead of going out into town was beyond him.

He shook his head. No, it was not beyond him. He had known about Philip since he was seventeen, when his brother had come to Edinburgh with some friends from college.

Hengist had asked for an afternoon of leave from the barracks and had gone to their mother's town house. He wanted to show off his second Lieutenant's uniform to his big brother.

It was a warm summer afternoon and the house was quiet. He was searching for one of the four servants who was a permanent fixture in the house when he had heard a noise. It had sounded like a moan and he had quickened his steps to the second floor, wondering if somebody had taken a fall and was hurt.

The door to Philip's bedroom was open, but when he saw his brother bending over a young man, both of them stark naked and moving, humping in an age-old rhythm, he had stayed frozen on the doorstep. It had taken him one step back from the doorway and about a mile back to the barracks of Edinburgh Castle. He had hidden on his bunk, his smart uniform coat thrown on one of the few chairs in his cramped, shared quarters.

He had just lain there, trying to rid himself of the awful sight of his brother bugging another man. He had understood then. All those times when his brother had been wrestling and fighting with his friends, all the strange noises that sometimes emanated from his brother's bedroom when he had friends staying over. His brother was a sodomite.

The notion was not a strange one to Hengist. Sodomy happened, even in the 42nd Highland Regiment; men who loved other men in a most physical way.

In Scotland, men discovered in the vile act were tied to the whipping post and given at least fifty lashes, which was still a far better fate than the English soldiers caught in the same crime. For the English sodomy was a hanging offence and if their Captain was angry and evil enough they ended up at the gallows, punished by a deadly dance in the wind.

It had taken Hengist a long time to overcome that fateful day's vision of his brother's perversion. But now, more than eleven years later, it was not more than a fleeting memory

that became only more insistent now that he was gazing at Philip's new beautiful bride.

Philip would never... He was almost certain that Philip had never turned to a woman in his life for his sexual release.

Oh, Philip had always played the matchmaking game well, indulging the feared mama's of the Ton to introduce their daughters to him and to flaunt the poor girls on the dance floor of a ballroom or during rides at the fashionable hours in the Park. But there had never been one rumour about Philip indulging in trysts with the Merry Widows or the bored Ladies or even the Fashionable Impures of the Scottish or English Ton; never!

Philip had hinted at Marguerite's wealth when they were lingering over their after dinner port. When Hengist remembered Lady McKenna's smug remarks about her daughter finally marrying into the aristocracy his picture about the whole affair was complete.

Anger rose up in him when he realized his beloved had been sold again; not for wealth this time but for a viscount's title. Worst of all, to a sodomite who would avoid her bed like the plague.

He sat rigid on the chair, trying to tamp down his anger, not knowing what to do next.

She suddenly woke up and gasped when she saw him watching her in the blue light of the moon.

"Who... what are you doing here?" she demanded in a fierce whisper, her eyes wide with shock.

He did not know what to reply so he stayed silent.

"Are you here to claim your rights after all?" she asked tersely.

"I..."

He swallowed wondering if she would find out that he was not the man she had married that day. But then, how would she know? She had been in bed since he had entered the house and it had been obvious her servant had been laboring under the misapprehension that he was Philip. She did not have a reason to think he was any other than Philip.

“You’ll be getting cold, sitting there,” she whispered haltingly, peering at him in the dark, noticing his state of undress.

Hengist wondered hazily if it was too late for him to apologize to her and to turn back to his own bedroom. If truth were told he did not want to apologize and go back to his lonely bed. Who would know it had not been Philip visiting her bed tonight?

He thought of his earlier longing for her when he had lain between his crisp sheets. It was surreal, as if some good fairy god mother had decided to grant him that one wish: to be with her, make love to her, even.

He felt his traitorous cock harden again under the towel, lifting the soft cloth. He clamped his jaws together, not knowing whether he should flee or give in to the lust that suddenly heated his entire body.

She seemed to move over a bit, making a place for him at his side of the bed, turning down the covers in invitation.

Hengist stopped worrying about his duplicity and lanced himself on the soft sheet next to her.

To his utter surprise she threw the blankets to the foot of the bed and bent to grasp the hem of her nightdress to tug it over her head. She let it flutter to the floor at the other side of the bed, lay down, stark naked and opened her legs in blatant invitation.

It was all quite blurred in the hazy light of the moon but it was in a way clear, nonetheless.

Hengist was now lying beside her, on his side and he could not help gaping at her.

“Well?” she asked in a muffled voice, “Don’t I please you, my Lord?”

Please him?

His eyes went to the luscious white breasts that were shaped like the halves of very big apples and his throat went dry.

“Why are you lying down like this?” he whispered, remembering that his voice was deeper than Philip’s, but that she would not notice when he whispered.

“Is this not how it is done?” she asked him petulantly.

“Done?”

He suddenly understood. She had been married to that fat old Alexander, surely the geezer would not have cared about real lovemaking or to give his wife pleasure.

“Let’s get the blanket,” he murmured quietly, “the room is cold enough as it is.”

He rose to tug the blanket back over her body and then crept closer to her.

She smelled of roses and lilacs and woman; a scared woman to his dismay.

He moved a leg against the one of hers that was closest and although she did not withdraw it, he felt her shiver at the touch of his rough hairy skin against the soft velvet of her calf. He bent his buttocks backwards so that his arousal would not prematurely touch her hip. He did not think she would be up to that yet.

She moved restlessly, not understanding his inactivity. His arm snaked out and touched her shoulder then progressed to the side of her jaw.

“Will you allow me a kiss?” he asked, feeling reckless.

A kiss was the most intimate of things, he realized. He could easily couple with a woman, doing everything that would bring blushes to the cheeks of the most hardened rakes, without ever kissing the object of his lust. Kissing was for love. His love.

He felt more than saw her eyes grow big.

“A kiss?”

He rose on an elbow, gripping her jaw softly with his other hand, and bent over her mouth.

“Like this...” he mumbled, tasting the full silky lips.

She swallowed and closed her eyes. There had only been a kiss once, a long time ago, and it felt like that same kiss all over again. It could not be of course. On the other hand, Philip was Hengist’s brother, was that why his kiss seemed so similar?

He withdrew a little bit and she felt his smile.

His head moved back over her face and this time his kiss was far more persistent.

She gasped and he took advantage of her wonder. He fixed his tongue between her lips and started to search for hers. She arched her back and felt him closing down on her, while his insistent tongue probed and licked. She became dizzy with the sensation of feeling his breath in her mouth and moaned inwardly.

His whole naked length now seemed to cover her lithe body and the intimacy of it was almost her undoing. She told herself she must not swoon because the sensation of having him so near in the bed was too good to be true.

Something hard and at the same time silken touched her right hip and when she realized what that must be the dizziness in her head heightened and she was fearful of losing consciousness to never return to the real world any more. Was she dreaming or was she really being kissed by the man she wed today while his stark naked body was touching her so intimately and so carefully and lovingly? A dream coming true after the harshness of her fat husband crouching and nipping and leering without ever being able to come to that one conclusion?

He stopped kissing her, lingering at the corner of her mouth and then diving to her ear to nibble and bite.

Her hand came to his shoulder, feeling bulging muscles and unyielding flesh. She started with the intimacy of it and withdrew her hand.

“No, don’t!”

His voice was hoarse and urgent.

“Please touch me...”

She moved trembling fingers back to his broad shoulders and his neck. He turned his head halfway to kiss her fingers then went back to the business of licking her jawline.

He moved a bit away from her, gripping and moulding her breasts with both hands, to suddenly move back to treat her half-open mouth with another astounding kiss.

His head went down again to a breast, lapping and furling an anxious nipple.

She gasped with delight and he rewarded her by taking her other nipple in his mouth, tugging softly at it so that she started to wriggle under him with longing, feeling a very familiar pooling in her loins. She felt his smile against her breast and a hand felt its way down to the roundness of her

belly, over the little button of her navel through the crispy dark curls of her mound.

“Oh God, woman,” she heard him sigh when his eager hand parted the lips that protected her warm sheath to find it wet and ready.

“I need to have you now...” he mumbled, “otherwise I’ll disgrace myself...”

She nodded into the dark intimacy of her bed. He crouched between her legs, nudging them apart with his knees.

She waited in anticipation.

She experienced unfamiliar arousal, hot and wanton.

Suddenly his big body leant over her and she felt a nudge against the entrance of her womanhood.

Hengist was lost in the fervour of his lust for her. He was certain he was living a dream that needed only completion. He had wanted to prepare her slowly for his intrusion, but now that he was at the brink of doing what he had dreamt of for so many years he could only steer himself to its fleshy, warm goal and plunge his hard shaft deep inside her.

She was sweetness personified, her sheath snug and silken. He would not have noticed that he broke through something had she not cried out in pain.

He became entirely still, leaning on his wrists and on his toes not to smother her with his weight.

“Cherie?”

He heard her sob once.

“Cherie?” he asked again.

She moved her hips. He did not know if she invited him deeper inside or if she wanted to get rid of the offensive feeling of him.

Her hands were clasping his shoulders; he felt one nail of her hand deeply embedded into a muscle.

He bent to kiss her mouth again.

“You should have told me,” he whispered against a soft cheek that felt wet from a tear.

“I would have gone easy on you. I’m so very sorry.”

He started to withdraw from her but she clung to his neck, preventing him from moving away from her.

“Please stay,” she begged him, “oh, please stay with me. You must finish this, Philip, please...”

He groaned.

She had given him a good fright and the fact that she called him by his brother’s name should have undone him, but he was still hard and wanting.

He changed the balance on his wrists, careful not to go too fast although his cock told him otherwise. He moved back deep inside her and instead of having her withdraw from him in pain he felt her hips come up to him, drawing him further inside her sheath, her muscles grabbing him, curling around him.

Something inside her suddenly changed. He heard her breath raggedly when her inner muscles first seemed to milk his cock then clasp him, almost unmanning him. They furled around him in a soft throbbing rhythm. When she cried out this time he knew it was not pain that caused it. He surged inside her and lost all sense of control. He arched his back and clamped down a shout when his seed spurted towards her womb, forced by the best orgasm he had ever experienced.

“Oh, God, Cherie,” he whispered again, unable to find other words.

“Hengist!” she whispered, her eyes firmly closed.

He went still again.

Her mouth came up to his face, searching for his embrace. He bent his head and kissed her and kissed her again.

Hengist? Had he heard her correctly? Or had it been a cruel case of wistful thinking that his poor addled brain had forced on him?

He withdrew from her in silence, confused and strangely ashamed, grabbing the blanket and sheet that had fallen away from them. He lay back on his side, nudging her hip with his belly, reaching for her shoulder. All his shame and sudden bashfulness could not hold him back from touching her.

“Why Cherie?” he asked, not really knowing whether he wanted to know about her virginity or why she had cried out his name in her moments of utmost passion.

“My husband... er... William was not able.”

He heard the embarrassment in her voice.

So the old fatso had been impotent! And no doubt had blamed her for it!

He moved to gather her in his arms.

“You are the most wonderful woman in the world. Forget about what he did to you.”

He did not see her eyes fill with tears. She tried to swallow them away but he heard her choke.

He swore under his breath.

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

She only shook her head. How could she ever talk about the humiliations she had suffered when her fat husband had subjected her to the vilest manipulations, because his cock had been like a limp shrimp? It had taken him weeks before he gave up on it and her. But there had been four long years

in which he subjected her to every humiliation and cruelty he could surmise, just because she could not make him into the man he always had wanted to be and probably never was.

Hengist understood.

Years as a military man had revealed to him the vile and base nature of men that could surface when life had frustrated them or cheated them of the things they wanted most.

He kissed her on her head, nuzzling the curly locks that still emanated the scent of roses.

“Sleep now, my darling,” he murmured. “Tomorrow there’s another day.”

She smiled and sighed.

“I love you, husband.”

Hengist lay back, startled, swearing at the irony that had forced her to marry a worthless husband who was at the same time his brother, refusing to hopefully admit to the fact that she had cried out his name at the peak of her passion and not Philip’s.

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Chapter 18: THE MORNING AFTER

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“I think she’s pissing!” David said, turning his head into Stevie’s soft gleaming mass of hair.

Stevie slid his cheek over the smelly sheet to look at the fat whore that was lying on the floor of the foul room. She was snoring and losing her urine at the same time.

Stevie wriggled away from under David’s heavy body.

“That does it!” he cried out, “That damned does it, David!”

David rolled away from the lithe body of his lover and held his breath. The acrid smell of urine was now permeating the room.

“T was th’only way to go upstairs together wiv’ out rousing suspicion,” he growled apologetically, “I could hardly bring ye to Cock Street and take ye against a wall, don’t ye see?”

Stevie nodded sadly at the big man. He touched his finger against David’s huge hairy chest.

“I did wonder why you had to bring the ugliest and fattest whore in the taproom,” he remarked quietly.

“She was the one too pissed to notice what we were about. And the only one wiv’ not a tooth in her mouth, which gave me the best excuse to av’ er come up wiv’ us.”

Stevie shook his head, shuddering. A cocksucker’s toothless mouth might seem priceless to some people but he was not one of them. Not if she was foul and rank.

He groped for his breeches, hoping they had not been lying on the floor with that sorry piece of mankind wetting the premises in her drunken stupor.

He glanced at David who was hastily tugging at his clothes.

“No use to stay here wiv’ that smell. We’ll leave her the bottle and some coins.”

David grabbed Stevie’s neck.

“One last kiss, M’lord.”

Stevie kissed the big man’s lips, feeling the scratch of an upcoming beard.

“We need to talk, David!” he urged his lover, “I just can’t go on like this.”

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Back in his lonely bed sleep had eluded Hengist for a long time.

He had napped a bit in Marguerite’s bed when her beautiful body had become warm and limp in his arms. She was still drowsy when he had woken her up to love her again, this time without the urgent need that had so hurried their first coupling. When she fell asleep again, after whispering her love for him, he had hurried out of her bed. The soft shades of twilight had found their way into the otherwise darkened bedroom and he knew that within half an hour at the most the servants would rise and be up and about. He had hastily groped for the towel to cover his loins and had crept into his own bedroom again, wondering why on earth he had been given the bedroom that should be Philip’s by rights.

When he was just about to fold open his blanket he heard noises coming from the hallway; the thump of unsteady feet and the too loud voice of a man in his cups. Philip.

He wondered if his brother was early or just late and he hoped that his brother in any case would stop waking up the

whole household. Someone's crisp voice, that Hengist recognized as Philip's valet's, said something urgent and he heard Philip snort out a short laugh. A door in the hallway opposite Hengist's room opened and closed, leaving Hengist to suspect that Philip's rooms were opposite his.

Hengist went slowly back to his bed, thinking.

He would never feel sorry over what he had done to Marguerite on her wedding night, he decided. But by all the Gods in Heaven, he wanted her more badly than ever before. He had never guessed that she would be so entirely his; he could never in the world have contemplated that he would be the one to take her precious virginity, the only exclusive gift a woman could present to her lover.

He fell asleep when the sun started its slow rise, to wake up again after three hours with a raging and rampant need for the woman he'd only had in his dreams until last night.

She would surely still be asleep in the confines of her luxurious bed, curled up like a baby, in a house that was already teeming with activity.

He slowly started to massage his turgid cock and decided that this time he needed the towel for its original purpose. He could hardly get dressed with a marble erection and there was no way his sleeping love could release him from the nuisance.

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"I understand your brother, Lord Morvern, got himself wed yesterday?"

The Duke of Lindley, clad in immaculate grey pantaloons, crossed his legs before accepting a cup of coffee from a taciturn footman.

Hengist moved uneasily in his chair. It had been hard enough to dispense of his elation to have had his true love

on her wedding night and it was kind of difficult to talk about her in a sociable way.

He had left his room at about nine o'clock, after a hasty shave and an insufficient wash.

There had only been a washstand in the room with a basin of water, hardly enough to splash his big body with.

It had shocked him to find his loins covered with blood spatters. He had not noticed that the taking of her maidenhead had been such a bloody affair and he had used his sperm-smudged towel to rub it all off him. The towel had looked a telling mess, so he had tried to rinse it in the washstand, abandoning the cleaning when the towel became only sodden and more blotted. In the end he had thrown the towel aside with a curse, hoping that the chambermaid who would take away his dirty linens was as blind as a bat.

He was received at the War Office by some higher placed nabob who interrogated him mainly on the doings of Wellesley. The General had suffered quite some scrutinizes by the Crown; there were people who were still not impressed with the actions of the stoic warlord. It was true that for the last nine months the troops in the Peninsula had been almost inactive, as it came to the war against Napoleon, but that had hardly been Wellesley's fault. The army counting almost 70,000 men had been stationary behind the lines of the Torres Vedras, inviting Marshal Massena to attack and be annihilated, but the French had not moved. The whole area in front of the Torres Vedras had been devoid of food and the French, who were being starved slowly, started to withdraw to the Portuguese frontier with Spain, where the foraging was better and the carts with food could reach them.

The nabob's interest was mainly about monetary situations, which made Hengist wonder if the man was a politician or a bean counter from the Horse Guards, the army's administrative body.

In the end, they had sent him to see the powerful Duke who was whispered to play a permanent role behind the political and diplomatic scenes.

Richard Grey, Duke of Lindley, was an austere man, even at thirty-seven. He was known to be powerful, wealthy, and tough; at Whitehall he was a power to be reckoned with.

As far as Hengist was able to judge another man's looks, he presumed the Duke was not handsome by most people's standards. His face was harsh and proud, his nose too long, although the rest of the Duke's features were regular. His mouth showed willfulness and arrogance, which was deemed normal in such an exalted person. He was very tall and of good build. Hengist was certain the Duke kept up with the normal gentlemanly exercise such as horse riding and fencing. The Duke's hair, already slightly thinning, was of an ash-blond hue and his eyes were as grey as the thunderclouds over London.

He had never remarried after his wife and daughter were killed in a carriage accident in Cornwall. Sentimental ladies of the Ton whispered he could not get over the death of his beloved family. The more ironic male part of the Ton knew he contented himself with more mistresses at the same time. He seemed to have a taste for the more ebullient species of the female kind. There had been quite a few stories about his prowess in the bedchamber which Hengist had discarded as probably exaggerated. He knew, however, that he was

sitting in front of a colorful man, his name, and grey clothes notwithstanding.

“The Right Honourable Marguerite Ross, daughter of Lord Halkhead,” Lindley quoted, “I don’t think I ever had the pleasure?”

“She was brought up in the North, your Grace,” Hengist said formally, “in the household of Baron Lord McKenna, her stepfather. She married William Alexander of Alexander and Stephen’s Shipping after a very short come-out and was widowed last year. My brother finds himself extremely fortunate that she took his hand in marriage.”

“Hm,” the Duke said, stirring his coffee, “Old Alexander, the fat Scot? He was absolutely loaded when he inherited his father and Stephen’s fortune.”

It seemed like a casual remark but the Duke obviously expected Hengist to bring him up-to-date about his brother’s new financial situation.

“Wealth in exchange for a title is a normal occurrence, I’d say, your Grace. As I said; my brother was lucky.”

The Duke nodded slowly, obviously tucking the information away for further good use.

“Will you go back to Edinburgh to visit your father?” he asked, “If so I would like you to drop by one more time.”

No way in hell! Hengist thought. Not with his beloved sleeping only one bedroom door away from him, not if he could bloody help it!

“It is not quite certain. My father is living in twilight and probably won’t even recognize me,” he lied. News about his father had been bad, but not to such an extent.

The Duke looked askance at him.

“You are not accompanied by your own wife?”

Hengist almost choked on his coffee.

“My wife, your Grace?”

“Yes, yes, I distinctly remember an announcement in the ‘Post’ more than a month ago. The delectable Miss Bettina Clinton, am I right?”

Colour flooded Hengist’s cheeks. What he had done with the more than delectable Lillian Clinton had had nothing to do with marriage, at least not with the formal part of it.

“I still find myself an unwed man,” he answered stiffly. “Surely there must have been a mix-up with the war correspondence?”

“Ah, yes,” the Duke nodded, “of course.”

Hengist’s eyes went to a table where plans were spread out; building plans obviously. He knew of Lindley’s attachment to a famous architect called John Nash.

“Do you intend to build?” he asked the Duke.

“Actually, yes,” the Duke said, his face brightening, “There are definite plans to build in Marylebone, North London. It’s a beautiful site, right far enough from the smells of the inner city. The Prince of Wales himself will be a sponsor, we hope. We all think it would be a great investment. At the same time I’m hoping to do renovations to Lindley House. Are you interested in architecture, Major?”

Hengist shrugged.

“I think investment in housing in London is rather sound, but I’m hardly an expert when it comes to building styles. I’m only a Scottish soldier, your Grace.”

The Duke looked at him with apparent eagerness. Hengist Agnew was an earl’s son, second in line for the title. The recent Earl of Loghaire had been married to a niece of his, if he got his family tree right. What's more,

Lady Loghaire's mother had been a Wharton of the rich Wharton branch; a rich niece who had dared to leave all her money to her second son. The will had caused a darn upheaval in the House as it stated that old Loghaire was not sound of mind any more, with no less than three learned doctors testifying to the fact. It had been Hengist's good fortune that his fame had already spread as a war hero, even though he'd nearly succumbed to a nasty battle wound. The House of Lords had shrugged. Few of the Lords knew Loghaire's true heir anyway. Philip's bottom had never covered the seat in the House that could lawfully be his after his father had been judged not to be sound of mind. Philip never asked for it, so the seat remained reserved for the Earl and would only become Philip's at his father's demise.

Hengist had always been the war correspondents' favourite.

Lindley suspected that Wellington purposefully added information about him to the sea of admirers which the Major unknowingly hosted in the Realm. War was costly and long-winding; it was best to throw in the occasional hero.

Lindley knew what attracted women, and it was clear that Hengist had the makings of an epic hero. The man had legs like pillars in that rather short kilt. Lindley had silently studied the man when he entered the Office. One could almost deem it indecent the way he dressed. Short kilts were for battle in order not to become obstructed by the swaying of a longer one. Normally, a decent Scot outside of battle wore a long kilt with socks as high as the knees so that in the end all the skin on the legs of a Scotsman would be covered. Lindley wondered if Hengist had ever thought about the length of his kilt when meeting people socially.

The answer was probably a firm ‘no.’ He admitted that the man had just come back from the battlefields in a very warm country where short kilts for the Scots must be a regularity, more than an oddity.

Certainly, Hengist was a mesmerizing man. He was probably almost six foot five tall, with a chest like a flat rock and shoulders like planks. Lindley wondered about Hengist’s eating habits. Not a gram of fat on those bones, he mused with a wry smile, realizing that his own lack of exercise since he had stopped crossing the Continent on the back of a horse had added more flesh on his waist than he’d cared to contemplate until now.

“We are still looking for investors in the Marylebone project,” he said slowly, understanding that he had been staring at the relaxed man opposite him.

“We intend to build more than a hundred houses, which will participate in paying for the infra-structure. The investors buy the houses at cost-price and all the profits at the sales will be their own.”

Hengist nodded thinking about his savings. His mother died in August last year, only about nine months ago. Lindley doubtless remembered that she had been rich as nothing escaped him.

Hengist remembered Philip’s enraged letter to Portugal when their mother had deemed it more prudent to leave Hengist the biggest part of her money, including the house in Edinburgh. With all his savings, his earnings and his inheritance he knew he was worth almost thirty-five thousand pounds; enough for a good share in a building project.

He grinned inwardly. Bless his wonderful mother, an Earl’s daughter who had not cared less about convention.

Lady Loghaire had known about Philip's gambling and had always announced that Philip at twenty one had been given enough when he got the entailed Morvern property, including the income that came with it.

It was true that she had loved Hengist to distraction, not understanding why her husband gave all the advantages of being an Earl's son to Philip, leaving Hengist with nothing but his commission as an officer in the Highland Regiment.

"I'd be interested in the prospectus, if there is one." Hengist decided.

The Duke scribbled something on a paper.

"I'll send you the details of the Marylebone project to your brother's house. 1a Berkeley Street, isn't it?"

Hengist wondered why he was not surprised that the Duke knew his London address by heart. He had been the great spymaster for years. He probably knew to a penny what Hengist possessed. Well, not to a penny, because after the Horse Guards he would find himself a tailor in Bond Street to have him fitted into some fashionable breeches and pantaloons. He was not sure how Marguerite felt about his kilts, but if he was to move in London's society he'd rather not have to keep his hands on his kilt because every curious woman would like a peep underneath to see if he was a real Scotsman.

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Marguerite had gone down for luncheon in a boisterous good mood, leaving a flabbergasted Rose to clean up after her.

When Rose had woken her charge she had been shocked by the fact that Marguerite obviously had slept naked. More shocks awaited her when she opened the bed covers. So much blood, it was a carnage!

Marguerite was happily unaware of Rose's hooded looks at her body. Blood had caked on her inner thighs and her buttocks and there were blue spots on the skin of her neck, shoulders and breasts that looked suspiciously like love bites.

Rose had shaken her head in disbelief. At least Lord Morvern had obviously made their wedding night into a feast.

Marguerite was all dreamy elation and that was a marvelous thing. Gone was the melancholy, Rose presumed, and a good warm bath and a high-necked muslin morning dress would take care of the rest.

Marguerite had at first refused to take her chocolate and scone on a tray in bed; she declared that she was looking forward to having breakfast with her husband.

Rose had not slept well at all and had heard his Lordship come home at about five in the morning. She had wondered about Lord Morvern's cruelty to leave his bride's bed after having had his rough way with her and go paint the town vermilion on his own wedding night. Although, who was she to criticize the Quality?

She knew however, that Lord Morvern's apartment door was still firmly closed.

"I understand his Lordship is not yet up and about, sweetie, so you better eat and take your time to make yourself pretty."

It was clear Marguerite hankered to see her brand new husband, but she could hardly go into his bedroom and wake him up. She had settled at last for a very slow breakfast in bed that was constantly interrupted by loving sighs, laughing declarations and remarks of undying love. It was

clear to everybody who needed to enter Marguerite's bedroom that the new Viscountess was a very happy bride.

Rose cleared Marguerite's bed of the bloodied sheets. She thought grimly that only half a century ago people had to be shown the bloodied blankets after the wedding night to prove the bride had still been a virgin. Well it was certain that Marguerite had left that state in life behind last night.

Rose frowned, remembering the tears and desolation after Marguerite's first wedding night with the Fat Man. After that particular night Rose had been relieved that the custom of the sheets had been abandoned. Fat William Alexander had been a frightening man and for people to know he was not able to penetrate his charge would have been a mortifying insult and the same would apply when the bride had not been a virgin due to lack of blood on the sheets. It had always made Rose secretly smile with glee; thank God for small mercies!

She heard a thud and clattering in the room next door and she hastened to open the connecting door. One of the chambermaids was bent over a fallen tray. The coffee service lay on the floor, the china cup broken.

"Why Macy, what's happening here?" She asked the buxom girl.

Macy had been in the service of the McKenna household for almost the five years since they had come to the house in London. The girl was born in London and Biggles had had a hard time getting the Cockney accent out of her.

"Aw, I'm so sorry Rose but I tripped over the washstand," she said, almost crying.

"Luk' wha' I've done. I broke the coffee cup, ye see?"

Rose knelt to pick up the broken china.

“Why are you in here, Macy? The Viscount is still using the bedroom at the other side of the hallway!”

“Aw, yes, I know, don’t you see? They put the Major in ‘ere.”

“The Major? Who’s that?” Rose bent to the fallen washstand.

“ ‘Is Lordship's brother, Rose! 'E's come back from the war!”

Rose got up with a start.

“Which brother?” she asked sharply.

“ 'E only 'as one, Rose., It's an 'ulky one.”

“The Captain?” Rose asked, “The Captain has come back?”

“ 'Es a Major now, for sure, tha's wot Mr. Biggles told me. Cor, 'es a charmer, that 'un. Wish 'e wud 'ave sent fer me! No need fer ‘im to make a ‘and job of it!”

Macy’s eyes shone with excitement.

“What hand job?” Rose asked harshly, already coloring when she anticipated Macy’s answer.

Macy picked a sodden towel out of the laundry basket she had just filled with the dirty linen in the room.

“Luk, 'es bin trying to wash it off, I's swear, but that is a man's seed, ye see?”

She opened the towel showing telling white spots.

Rose’s blush deepened. She knew girls like Macy thrived on finding such private matters in the house. Nothing more fun than gossiping about the inhabitants of the bedrooms on the second floor.

“Why’s the towel all pink?” She asked, trying not to look at Hengist’s very telling spurts.

In a big house with so many male servants the need for self-gratification was great. Touching one of the serving

women was an offence that led to immediate dismissal. It did happen of course; but mostly the lads had to find themselves a quiet place in a deep cupboard or a hidden corner in the garden to find some physical release. Rose had more than once staggered upon one of the men busy getting an erotic thought or two out of his system.

Macy frowned at the hardened paste-like substance that had come from Hengist's loins. Such a waste! She would have loved to hug the man with her legs. It had been some time since she had a lover; this household surely had not provided her with one for months. Master Stevie was clearly too innocent to indulge in physical relationships with the staff, he just seemed uninterested. The new head footman, who had been her target for more than a week, only seemed interested in the charms of Cook, who was, if the truth be told, an attractive woman. Lord Morvern, she was certain, did not even know she existed.

The old Lord McKenna had surprised her once when she was cleaning his bedroom. She found out soon enough that he was not that old. He had been foxed and the hump was slightly long winded, but it had earned her an extra pound because he was not carrying anything less in his pockets.

Macy had for a short time pondered to make it a go with John Row, the Viscount's valet, but there was something about him that had sent her warning bells clanging, so she stayed away from him. He was a bit too slick to her taste. Some men were, especially the too handsome ones. She did not trust him. He never came down for tea and more often than not took a tray up for the Viscount, although everybody now suspected him to eat it all himself. As the Viscount kept very irregular hours the valet was allowed to sleep in the Viscount's dressing room behind a screen. She knew he

did not shun a good hump as she had recently caught him with Lady Mac in his Lordship's own dressing room.

She was sent to search for her Ladyship by her personal maid Trahern, who had heard the lady come home in a definite drunken state and was worried when her Ladyship had disappeared in the house. It would not be the first time for her to bed down on the carpet or on a couch somewhere. Lady Mac was a shameless woman whose only pleasure in life seemed to exist in pestering her long suffering daughter and opening her legs for every buck that took her fancy. Of course, only the servants seemed to know about her secret undertakings. She seemed prudent enough not to show her taste for fine young bucks in public, as that would cause enough scandal for her to be 'cut' by the biddies of the Ton.

That particular night Macy had found them banging away in a chair, hitting the wall of the dressing room with every surge that came with the heartfelt power of John Row's eager thrusts, making a racket that would wake up the dead.

She was only surprised about the fact that Lady Mac had allowed a valet to touch her, albeit a tall and handsome one. Everyone knew about her lovers, mostly insolent bucks of the Ton that preferred her to paying for an expensive whore. They had strolled in and out of the house at their leisure, instructed by Lady Mac to act as her son's friends.

They had never before noticed Lady Mac succumb to a staff member. Macy smiled at the pun, but truth be told they had never been worth looking at before John Row came to the house, let alone... ah, well.

Blood and seed on a towel?

She shrugged, still feeling annoyed that the big man had not asked her to perform some duties in his bed.

“Must ‘ave cut 'isself shaving.”

Rose bit her lip.

“Yes, probably,” she muttered, slipping back into Marguerite’s room and noticing that Macy took a deep sniff of the soiled towel.

The girl was a fool, she thought with some anger. A... a... what was the word again? When a woman craved men?

She sat down heavily on one of the ottomans, spying on Macy through the open door in the other room, who bent to pick up the laundry basket.

The Major had been in that bedroom and not Lord Morvern? No, impossible! She was certain she'd seen the Viscount...

Could it have been the Major she had encountered in that bedroom yesterday night?

Rose’s eyes widened. He would not have.... No, she shook her head. She remembered the Major from that one time when he had saved her and Cherie from those highwaymen. The Major, then captain, had been a perfect gentleman. But come to think of it, he did resemble the Viscount! Same blond hair, same posture, maybe a bit brawnier and possibly slightly taller, but still... The room had been dark and she had seen only the man’s silhouette.

Rose buried her face in her hands. What if it hadn’t been the Viscount? What if she had sent the brother to her charge’s bed? Had the Viscount been at home at all, last night? She’d heard him return in an evident state of inebriation when the sun wasn’t yet up...

Rose cradled her chin and mouth with her hands.

Whoever had been with her had made Cherie very happy. That was the fact that distorted the whole equation. If Cherie had not been the wiser about who had shared her

bed last night then why go through the bother of finding out?

And then: it must have been the Viscount, it must have! Even if she had heard Lord Morvern come home drunk at about five o'clock that morning, he could have bedded the Viscountess at his leisure earlier that night. How long does it take to hump a woman normally? Five minutes? Ten? She refused to consider Cherie's elated remarks that her husband had been with her till the house was awakening. That he had made love to her two times as he had been very eager.

Rose searched her memory for remarks the servants might have made last night about either the Viscount or his brother, but she remembered none. They had hardly commented on the Viscountess anyway. They had known her sad circumstances too well, even on her wedding day: the ruined dress, the doctor's repeated visits, the instructions for very light food to the kitchen. Macy had found the Major's seed in the towel, supposing it was his, but who else could have soiled the towel, and then it only gave evidence to the fact that the man had been sexually aroused when he was on his own.

Was any man able to be aroused for three times in one night? Did any man need to satisfy himself when he had been with a woman for hours, who claimed he had mounted her two times already? Rose shook her head. She had never been in a position to know. Once, yes, twice maybe, but three times? She shook her head. This sort of arithmetic was for the foolish, and yet... Rose did not know whether to cry or to smile.

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The only person who had come down for luncheon was her mother.

Marguerite's exuberance changed into disappointment. Drat, her mother who had always taken trays in her bedroom had changed that habit since Lord Morvern had come to live with them.

Her mother was attacking a honeyed bun with relish when she looked up sharply at Marguerite. A glum smile spread over her face.

"Ah, my daughter has at last been well bedded and thoroughly fucked, I see."

Marguerite sat down, not at all surprised by her mother's bawdy remark. A blush crept over her cheeks.

"We may congratulate ourselves, I would say," her mother said smugly, "I knew that man was capable of getting it all up and about with you! Such a change since that despicable Alexander."

Marguerite's head came up from her plate straight into Lady McKenna's calculating green eyes. Had her mother known?

"Bah," her mother continued, "I knew Alexander was a bloody eunuch. Tales were running wild around him before he married you. None of the whores he visited in Edinburgh could ever keep their mouths shut about that customer."

Marguerite's cheeks went a fiery red.

"You knew and yet you let him marry me?"

Lady McKenna shrugged, reaching for some pudding.

"We knew he would never sire any children on you; so much the better. His money enabled you to catch that randy husband of yours, isn't that a scream? Just get him to impregnate you, girl, and your new title will be safe. You'll be a countess till the day you die."

She laughed tilting her head.

“My daughter the Countess! Take that, old hags of the so-called Quality!”

She rose with a grin.

“I’m having tea with the Alderlies. Everybody was worried about yesterday night because of you and that damn melancholy, or whatever. Now I can assure everybody that it was just girlish fear. It needs only a man with a stout cock to cure that sort of prudish wimps, you know!”

Marguerite sighed after her mother had closed the door of the breakfast room behind her. So it had already started. One night with her husband and all the prudery had been thrown out of the window. She would now be truly part of the matrons who whispered and giggled from behind their fans, presuming with glittering eyes, calculating and hinting. Her mother had used bawdy language she had never heard her use before towards her.

She wondered if everybody knew what had happened on her wedding night. Oh, but they could not. If all the biddies in mother’s circles knew what she knew now, they would not be so sour and forbidding. At least her wonderful husband had made her happy. Oh, god, if he would only come in for luncheon!

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Philip woke up with a foul taste in his mouth, a headache, and a hard-on.

He pulled at the bell hanging near the bed and waited for John Row to come scuttling in.

“I need to piss,” he grunted when the valet stood before his bed.

He sat at the edge of his bed, trying to relieve himself in the chamber pot John had fetched him, swearing at the stiffness of his member.

“Hair of the dog, my Lord?” John asked him politely. He knew his Lordship’s moods were more often bad than good after waking up from a night full of debauchery.

Philip grumbled something affirmative.

After he had waited for Denning to come back to the coach house for hours, the man had been too tired to be attentive. Philip knew he had to make long days at the club, especially now that it had become such a success, but he had little patience with sleepy lovers, especially that one. He had become angry and broody afterwards, deciding to go and spend the thousand pounds he had received from Butler as an advance to almost a half-week’s earnings.

It was just that something strange had happened to him: he had not been able to gamble his money away! He had looked at the hard cash in banknotes and had even found it difficult to go to the gambling tables to throw his blunt into the maw of the fickle Lady Fortune.

He had shaken his head and had put the money away, shouting for a bottle of brandy. The brandy gave him a headache and a bad mood. He had gone back to Gents to insist on having his chamber and the less stimulating company of Denning, who had done his utmost to stay awake during his amorous attentions.

Philip surprised himself by tucking Denning in after their little adventure and left his former home to find his own bed in the house off Piccadilly. By that time, with another half bottle of the fiery stuff swigged during his attentions towards the handsome footman and right after, he was pleasantly drunk and in high spirits.

Now with a wake-up headache and a hard-on nothing of his good spirits remained. He was however, surprised to notice that he refused to have that latter little problem cured

by his valet's or his own ministrations. A strange thing had asserted itself; only Denning would do!

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Marguerite wondered why exactly the day after her blissful wedding-night the hours seemed to pass so slowly. She had asked Rose at least five times if his Lordship had been heard to be up already and she had changed dresses three times because she wanted so much to look her best for her new husband. When Rose had shyly admitted to have heard stirrings in his Lordship's rooms (she could hardly confess to have sat waiting in the Viscountess' dressing room to spy on John Row, who was at last seen going down for the Viscount's shaving water), Marguerite decided that she would send a footman up to request his Lordship to join her for tea in the small drawing room.

Philip was flabbergasted by the request. His bride of one day was supposed to suffer from her usual bouts of melancholia and should be lying in her bed being sad, instead of requesting his presence for tea.

He muttered a curse and told John Row to hand him his boots. He decided that tea would be fine in the end as he had not had any breakfast. He pondered if he would be up to handling his wife correctly and hoped his head was bright enough to help him find the right excuses if the new Lady Morvern would dare to bring up his last night's absence.

He figured it would be better to attack than to take the defense, so he sailed into the small drawing room with fine aplomb, reaching for her hand to kiss it with quite unusual warmth. He had soon reason to genuinely wonder at her splendid mood and sparkling eyes when he made his bow to her.

He admitted to himself that she made a fine picture in her high-collared yellow muslin dress which showed her beautiful face and curly black hair to its advantage.

“Ah, my lady,” he hinted with a delighted face, “I’m so glad to see you up and about after your ordeal.”

Marguerite blushed shyly and then smiled fondly at him, preening behind the tea tray.

“It was not an ordeal, my lord, for sure,” she whispered, looking sideways at the footman who was awaiting orders next to the door.

She would never have hinted at their night together if Philip had not started to call it an ordeal. Her blush became deeper when she remembered what sort of intimacies she had shared with this man. Did married couples admit to their nightly adventures in bed in the day-time? It was true that William Alexander had boasted once in a while of his prowess with his young bride when he talked with his elderly cronies, something that had chased her out of the room in a hurry. But then William’s boast had been merely that, as he had never been able to do the act with her anyway.

“No milk, thank you, madam,” Philip mumbled, his face almost a full question mark.

His wife was not about to interrogate him about his absence last night?

He sat down in a chair opposite her and grabbed a piece of cake.

Marguerite watched him with a delighted smile on her face. Ah, but he looked so wonderful today! He had chosen a very snug dark brown coat over a pristine cream coloured silk shirt and a russet gold waistcoat. Cream wool breeches hugged his long legs.

She blushed a deep red, thinking of his muscled thighs that had stroked against her own inner legs when he had bent down on top of her to make love to her.

She took a swift sip of her tea, hoping he would not notice her blush. Surely, it was not at all a done thing to ponder about her husband's physique, even after their first night together!

Philip shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Gods, the girl was behaving in a bloody fanciful way!

His eyes roamed to the big standing clock in the middle of the drawing room. Half past four! It would be the best time to see if he could have another little fling with Denning. The club would not start its clamoring business till after eight o'clock in the evening!

This morning he had decided to ask Burton to put Denning on a less strenuous schedule. He needed the man for his own pleasure. He knew in advance that Burton would protest his request. It would hardly do to put Denning on a half time schedule at a time like this, but as Gents was his club, Philip decided that he could do as he damn well pleased and if one of the footmen took his fancy he could bloody well indulge in it, bugger-hunters notwithstanding! He just had to find a proper excuse to get rid of the clinging chit that was as of yesterday his wife.

That excuse walked conveniently into the room.

"Hengist!" Philip almost shouted coming out of his chair to thump his brother on the back.

"May I introduce my brother Hengist to you, my dear?" He asked sweetly, remembering very well that his wife was supposed to have had a crush on his heroic brother, which meant she'd had some sort of an acquaintance with him.

Marguerite sat up straight, almost dropping the cup she was holding.

“Hengist came rather late to the house yesterday night after our happy occasion. You had already retired, my love.”

Marguerite stared at the man she had loved for so long.

Hengist was here? Oh, God, why? She had felt so happy today after her romantic night with her husband; she had even been able to forget about her hero for a few hours. And now that she had been wedded and bedded by his brother he was standing right in front of her.

“Captain?” she said, not wanting him to know she had inquired after him for years.

“Ah, no, it’s Major Hengist Agnew now,” her husband said glumly.

Hengist stared down at the woman that he had hardly been able to push from his mind all day. By Jove, she looked adorable in yellow. Like a spring queen or a fairy out of his favourite story when he was a child.

He reached for her hand and instead of bowing over it he crowned her knuckles with a kiss. He noticed her gasp and smiled inwardly. She had been wriggling beneath him, her wet cunny clasping his arousal and now she was shocked by his kiss on her bare knuckles? God, life was strange!

He looked into her exquisite face that expressed confusion and embarrassment. So she had truly not known that she had shared her bed with her new brother-in-law instead of her degenerate husband!

He quickly stepped backwards, glad that his sporran hid his hardening cock under the heavy dark blue and green kilt he wore.

“My Lady,” his voice sounded husky and he damn well knew it.

If it was up to him he would lift her up in his arms and carry her straight back to that bed of hers for a repetition of last night’s amorous events.

Philip looked at him with some amazement. Hengist was not taken with his wife? He'd hardly said a word!

“Hengist,” he drawled, looking pointedly at the door, “I have an urgent errand to do, so it’s just as well that you are here. I dare say her Ladyship would love to ride in the park at the fashionable hour of five, so I’d like to beg you to be my substitute and accompany her.”

He bowed to a now ferociously blushing Marguerite who felt justly that she had been fobbed off onto her husband’s brother.

She stared after Philip while he took his leave, not noticing Hengist’s elation at being able to have Marguerite all to himself, even if it would be in an open carriage with the entire fashionable London crowd watching them.

He looked eagerly at Marguerite who studied her hands in confusion.

She had been so happy all day with her husband’s ardor for her on their wedding night. She was ready to forget about her feelings for Hengist! If only it was Philip who would be riding with her in the park today!

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Aurora Ross’ Diary
London, 4th of May 1810

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I was very happy this morning because at last it had happened between me and milord Morvern. And that, after

everybody told me that he was not to come to my bed upon doctor's orders!

It was true that I threw up in the carriage when we came back from the chapel but I am sure that had been entirely due to the medicine doctor Matlock gave me before we left. You see, I had not been able to eat, I only had two cups of tea, and after he gave me the medicine the whole world started to roil and whiz around me. Truth be told, I do not remember a thing about the wedding ceremony and I truly think that is a great pity.

Lord Morvern was... I cannot find the words for it. It was so just like I dreamed it to be!

He was so loving and nice; he even asked if he could kiss me. The Fat Man never kissed me, which was just as well with all the rotten teeth he still had in his mouth.

Oh, I should not ponder on that unhappy period of my life now that I have entered a whole new existence!

I love the way he, well, how he bedded me; a very thorough bedding indeed, I think. It only hurt a little bit when he entered me first; it was just a pang of pain when he got through my maidenhead. He was amazed to find me still a virgin and said that I should have told him. How was I to explain to him that I had wanted to warn him, but that Rose thought the subject was too indecent?

But it was so... I feel so happy, I have never been happier in my life!

Well, the only shadow over this very first day of my lovely new marriage was that Hengist suddenly returned from the Peninsula. I acted as if I did not know that he had been promoted to be a major some time ago.

I was very confused indeed to see him stalk into the drawing room after the night that his brother turned me into a woman.

I am still very confused about Hengist. Since last night my love for him seems to have shifted towards his brother. Isn't that fickle? Oh, I don't know. Philip seems very bashful about our wedding night. He even called it an ordeal for me!

He asked Hengist to ride with me in the park and that was rather infuriating. But Rose said that some men have a problem with their attitude towards the women they wed and have been intimate with. Anyway, being married to Lord Morvern, Philip, is a big improvement to the Fat Man. He thought that he could try again the next morning, saying his problem had been the drink and then he hit me when he still remained limp and forbade me to leave the bedroom because he would come back to try again. Truth be told, I did not fancy going anywhere with a blackened jaw and bleeding teeth, but I never expected to be kept a prisoner for the next fourteen days.

At least my new husband did not make me do those disgusting things the Fat Man asked of me. Rereading this, 'asked' was not the right word to use, most certainly.

I am just very happy with Lord Morvern as my husband, even if he does not show the slightest affection for me in the daytime.

Rose said I should give it some time and it could be possible that he would never show anything towards me in public or in the daytime. She said some gentlemen are like that. Of course I know that. My stepfather never showed his appreciation for my mother and they often lived like cat and mouse. Come to think of it, I think only people from the

country or the lower classes might show their love for one another in the daytime. It was very foolish of me to expect otherwise.

I must be content; at least my husband is not limp or has a tendency to beat me. And he beds me well, I have to be grateful and count my blessings, I think.

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Chapter 19: INDECENT PROPOSALS

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Burton watched his employer with a mutinous scowl. He felt definite disgust for the man. Viscount or not, employer or boss, the scoundrel had no right to barge into his office and demand that one of his handpicked footmen should be taken off his duties, because the damned man took a fancy to Denning. He did not have the right to disrupt the schedule kept for all his staff.

What if his Lordship decided tomorrow that he was taken with one of the other servants? He shook his head looking at the floor. Maybe Philip Agnew, Lord Morvern, seemed a nice man. Burton most definitely knew better than that.

Lord Morvern might seem the amiable aristocrat, with the many sins that people quickly forgave him because he was so handsome and a peer of the realm. A charming man very recently married to a beautiful wife, indeed a love match they called it, her Ladyship's money notwithstanding, but Burton had huge doubts about Lord Morvern.

He had seen the man on the prowl and he knew already about Philip's deviation; his taste for big men. He oozed with the depravity of the sodomite's ardor, especially for Denning, who knew no better than to turn his ass in Lord Morvern's direction whenever the ingrate felt like it.

Burton sighed, although it sounded more like a growl. He knew perfectly well by whom his bread was thickly buttered. He might not like that specific viscount but the man was as socially high above him as the stars in the sky, and if it had not been for him and the honourable Stephen

Mackenzie he would not have a lucrative amount of three hundred pounds per month extra to take home to his beddable but grasping wife and greedy children.

“Would it not be for the best if I let go of Mr. Denning so that you could take him into your own service, my lord?” he asked, giving his voice an innocent twist.

Philip pressed his lips together. Oh, how he would love to have Denning close to him in the house off Piccadilly, but he knew he would be asking for a lot of trouble there. John Row would not give him up without a fight, not when the subject of his new passions would be living in the same premises as his valet. And then Stevie might notice; he was a young, intelligent; a little nuisance. Gods, Stevie might even try to take Denning away from him. It was evident that Stevie had a similar liking for big blond men!

Philip gazed into his coffee cup as if it would give him the solution to his problem. He would love to bring Denning home with him; wake up with him, have him wherever and whenever he pleased, but he knew it was an impossible dream. He had acquired a wife only yesterday and she was already becoming a drag on the first day of their marriage.

He had his bloody new mother-in-law to consider. That one was about to proposition him every minute she laid eyes on him, but she was also shrewd, very shrewd; frighteningly shrewd.

No, he decided. Denning had to stay at Gents. He could hardly set him up as one would a mistress somewhere in town. People would notice when Denning would only have him visiting there and the sodomite-hunters were too rife in London to ignore.

“Let me put it this way,” he turned to Burton with ice in his voice, “you will indulge me in this, or you will be

looking for another job this very hour. Do I make myself understood?"

Burton swallowed heavily. Never underestimate a sodomite of the Quality, he thought darkly and with loathing. Never one who has his pockets lined with bank notes while being dangerous enough because he has to keep his unsavory secrets away from the noble crowd, and who was horny for a lowly footman with a handsome body and matching face.

He nodded.

"He will work in the day-time from noon till ten pm, my Lord. After and before that he will be at your, ah, disposal or at your further pleasure," Burton said with a scowl, not able to leave well alone.

He had noticed that many of the visitors of the Gents were very taken up with his footmen.

He had lain awake thinking about it last night while his lovely Thea lay softly snoring next to him. It had been a bit of a shock to him to find himself as the supervisor of a club that gathered the gay men of the Ton, but he had quickly gotten used to the idea.

Buck Burton had started out his work as a footman in a rich man's household where the people had been too rich to care about small things missing or disappearing. He had not really called it stealing; it was more like taking from a big heap that was lying there ready to go to waste anyway. The household had been rife with adult sons and their friends who were very often too lazy to go out into town and get themselves a paid woman.

Burton had soon recognized the possibilities of having a few of the maids cater to the inhabitants needs and to earn quite a nice amount of money on the side.

The rich man housed almost thirty people on the staff. Most were doing their work there adequately, but they were a lot more than the household needed.

Burton had risen to the important position of under-butler to a very old and rheumy butler called Mister Potter, who preferred to have his long naps in his own tiny parlour.

He had started to reorganize the duties of the eleven maids in the household. Those who wanted to earn extra money on their backs for the young bucks and their friends and later on even for the master of the house, were placed into light service in the middle of the day, until before dinnertime. The ones that had scruples about it, about half of the maids, surprisingly, had to go on duty all day, doing all the heavy work that the others had been able to get themselves out of. The footmen and other duty men were on a normal schedule of course and it all worked like clockwork as long as everybody kept their mouths shut.

The first problem arose when one of the maids turned out to be pregnant. She was the household's favourite so there was no telling whose baby she was carrying and as Burton had shared his cot in the attic with her he proposed to marry her and accept her little cuckoo as his own. That deed of Christianity had proven the end of his job with the family after the babe was born and started to walk. The rich man only endured his own children in the house and Thea refused to live somewhere in London with only the babe to keep her company while he continued to stay under their employer's roof.

It had also been a mistake to offer the services of two or three girls to the master of the house. When his lady-wife found out about them, they were thrown onto the cobbles without ado or a reference. The mistress was damned if she

allowed one word to be uttered about her straying husband, by members of the staff no less. It was just too humiliating for words and the bad apples were removed from the otherwise cosy basket without any notice.

The good thing was that one of the sons of the household had referred Burton to the owner of a small club whose supervisor was stabbed to death in some alley.

The club was visited by members of the somewhat higher middle-class; merchants that were wealthy enough, owners of small factories and the like.

The club members led respectable lives in the better parts of London. They had church-going wives who insisted on religious educations for husband and children and enough staff to keep their houses up to snuff. Their outlet for sexual entertainment, which they did not seem to find with their bossy wives, was far and few. They were known enough to be recognized if they went on the prowl in the alleys behind Covent Gardens and they were too spoiled to appreciate the specific entertainment that was offered in the open air or in sleazy little rooms, where they would catch up on the latest fleas and lice. They were also very lazy when it came to searching for the gratification of their own pleasures.

They did not keep mistresses. Mistresses cost time and money and although they had the latter in abundance they refused to cater to a wily foxy lady that would only be the source of a strange and hard to explain post in their accounting books. Mistresses were for the wastrels of the Quality.

Burton had rented the neighbouring house, devised a path from the back door of the club to the back door of that house and put the maids who had been fired by his former

mistress and a few of their very willing and probably hungry friends there. Burton refused to think of the next-door premises as a brothel, because the girls only catered to the needs of the club members. Needless to say, in the first three months of his employment there, the memberships of the club tripled.

He had heard coincidentally through the grapevine of the new club that was to be opened for the very wealthy gentlemen of the Ton.

His old club tottered at the time. Nothing changed except for the girls in the house next door, and he decided to take his chances with Gents as well.

He had gone to Upper Brook Street where the Honourable Stephen Mac was busy trying to get the club organized in just a couple of days. After giving him some advice on the subject of running a club the young man had taken Burton's fate in his hands, offering him four times what he made in a whole year at his old club. The only thing he had not counted on was the fact that the club members might want the service of male staff instead of girls.

On further perusing, that was not a real problem for Burton. The members of his former club had sometimes required services that went beyond the duties of a 'normal' whore. A few liked to inflict pain or to be whipped, there was an occasional man who preferred the company of extremely young girls and then there were the ones that asked the use of a room for unseen persons that were decidedly mostly of the male sex. Burton, pocketing all the revenues by allowing the members to have their wishes fulfilled, could not care less.

He had lain awake at night thinking about the best way to organize his footmen, if they were willing, into a pool of servitude towards the club members of Gents.

Before hiring his staff he had started a whisper campaign about the club's possible requirements regarding the footmen and the response had been astounding. Of course, work needed to be done and he had been able to hire men who were willing to do most of the footmen's tasks, which were not very strenuous, and who might be willing to entertain the club's sponsors otherwise. Of course, the people who would be relied on to do the normal tasks of a household were only hired for their ability to work hard, to look the other way if necessary, and to keep their mouths shut.

Lord Morvern's plea to have Denning partly released from his duties so that the boy could reserve most of his time for him could actually work in favour of Burton's plans.

Burton understood in a way why the Viscount and other men fancied the tall Denning; he was extremely handsome and well built. Burton himself had experienced his own adventures with quite a lot of his employees in the past, but his desires were dull and normal and had never stretched to members of his own sex. On the contrary: the more he saw, the more he fled into his beddings with his own Thea, who was still a lusty woman after all the children she had birthed; she always liked things on a normal footing, as was his idea exactly.

Philip nodded glumly.

"I'll tell him this myself."

He rose and left a morose looking Burton who wondered when the other aristocrats would come asking for such

debilitating favours. Damn those sodomites, even when the club thrived on them. Every evening the bedrooms upstairs, call them clubrooms, were full to overflowing. The word had been out in a way, the petticoat-liners avoided the club like the plague now.

Gents was now extending services to the ones who liked male boots and male members, excuse the pun, more than a cleavage and a female butt.

Burton sighed and sat down behind his desk, adamant to make the best of this situation. The truth of the matter was that easy gains never turned out to be easy at all in the end, but anyone with some experience in life could tell you that.

He wondered how he should organize his new task. A big part of Gents' daily income was to come out of the letting of the rooms to their amorous members, but just like in the White Swan, the establishment the Honourable Mackenzie had pointed out as a blueprint for Gents' activities, it had not provided the service for Mollies for hire. That was done by the independent brothel upstairs. There was no neighbouring house that could be rented, more was the pity, and it would be insane to let rooms for the hour to some play with the staff. It was already Burton's experience that Molly-sex happened a lot faster with few of the foreplay-like situations that sex between a man and a woman seemed to require.

There was the coach house of course. It was hardly used. Gents did not maintain their own coaches as yet, and most members came by hired hackney in order to avoid recognition.

Burton bit on his thumbnail brooding over the coach-house's facilities. There was a big space that gave room to about six carriages and there were about ten large stalls.

Good. Why not? He would warn the Honourable Stephen and call in the carpenters tomorrow.

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Before they set out for their ride, grey clouds started to gather in front of the sun and Marguerite hastened to send a message to the stables that the open carriage had to be exchanged for her town carriage.

She felt very much relieved not to have to expose herself entirely in her open Barouche to the eyes of the Quality in the park, when riding with her brother-in-law instead of with her husband on the first day of her marriage. Although the wedding had been a sober one, she did not doubt that everybody had read its announcement in the morning papers. Her mother had surely insisted it would be advertised at the most expensive and visible place money could buy. One did not become the mother of an Earl's heir every day!

She endured a few queasy minutes when her mother presented herself at the front door, announcing that she was going to join them. She seemed delighted when she noticed that Hengist had been asked to come instead of the new bridegroom.

In the end Marguerite decided it was just as well that her mother would be sitting in the carriage with them. The ride would have more of the look of a family outing instead of a newly married girl showing herself to the world with a man next to her, who was not the lucky spouse.

Lady McKenna for her part rejoiced in the idea of placing her silk clad legs against Hengist's manly knees which stuck out from under his kilt in their nakedness because his long white socks only covered his muscled calves and his kilt tended to wriggle up to his equally

enjoyable thighs. He was supposed to wear a so-called long kilt, but the Scottish weaver who had made the kilt had not known it was meant to be worn by a six foot five giant, who would be in need of at least an extra four inches of cloth, so that his hairy thighs could be covered.

There was another slight disturbance when Stevie stepped out on the porch, watching Hengist with almost similar intent as his noble mother and who decided to join the party so as to make it into a four-some.

Stevie really wanted to be with David, but the man told him he was needed at his house and truly they could not be seen in public so often. They had said goodbye in an alley near Covent Garden that was normally used for the stringent business of paid love, but was deserted due to the early hour. Stevie blushed with the memories of their last embrace. David was such an incredibly gentle lover, as opposite to the Viscount, who sparkled in absence.

Stevie watched the Viscount's brother from under his eyelashes. His lonely years of observing men without being able to approach them had taught him a thing or two about humanity and the male species. This Hengist was not of his kind, he was probably hunted by all sorts of women, his sister included, and he gave in to the pleasures that women brought him. Still the man enthralled him, more than Philip had ever done. The man possessed a magical charisma. Doubtless, his men would follow him on the battlefield blind folded. Stevie was certain he was worth every sin.

Hengist was slightly less amused when he was forced to take the place in the carriage with his back to the horses. The knees of his love's mother performed a less subtle dance against the naked but rugged skin of his own, while Stevie pressed his right leg inquisitively against his kilted

side. Marguerite stared out of the window with her feet primly folded under her seat.

Hengist bit his lips. At least she was sitting opposite him now, giving him the opportunity to study her in full daylight.

He hardly could hide his elation. She was more beautiful than ever, more enticing than he could remember. What was more, she was his; handed to him on a platter by Lady Fortune herself in the shape of an elderly lady's maid.

He could not resist licking his lips when he watched her enticing profile, which was lit by the filtered light of a spring afternoon in May.

He had wondered about her high-collared gown, although it looked utterly charming, and only when she stretched her neck to admire the swans in the pond they passed, he noticed the brownish red mark that showed up over the fringe of the velvet band of her collar.

He almost gasped. A love bite! His love bite! Had he bitten her so hard that it showed? He felt his cock surge and pushed his hands down on his sporran that lay in his lap. He cursed his habit of showing himself a real Scotsman, which meant he did not wear any small clothes. Underwear at least did not make the cloth of his kilt leap. It gave a man some protection. He shuddered to imagine the riveted smiles of Stevie and Lady McKenna staring at his crotch and groaned inwardly.

The carriage suddenly came to a stop when an open carriage passed them on Hengist's and Lady McKenna's side. Lady Jersey, of all the cronies in the field. Lady McKenna opened up the window to exchange a few pleasant words with her before they drove on.

“Lady Jersey says you look very smug today, Major,” she smiled at him, “I’m afraid she mistook you for Lord Morvern, but I thought it best not to make her the wiser. You do look quite similar if not for your Scottish garb. Are you certain you were not born twins?”

Hengist’s smile at her was almost a grimace.

“There is a bit more than a year between us. But the possibility of similarity shows in your own son and daughter. They both possess that same charm and the same colour of hair, the same astounding features,” he bowed in Stevie’s direction, “if you don’t mind me saying so, Master Stephen.”

Stevie felt like huffing at that remark, but suddenly remembered that David had made him a compliment in exactly the same way when he had kissed him last night. He refrained from commenting, but only smiled gingerly. David liked his almost feminine looks and height that was entirely contrary to his own.

Lady McKenna sat preening on the cushions of the carriage. Lady Jersey, Almack's famous patroness had taken notice of her, now that she was the mother-in-law of a Viscount, one day to be an Earl. She could not be a happier woman today!

Marguerite cast an inquisitive look at Hengist who sat back against his seat with an indulgent smile. There were undercurrents in this carriage which she failed to understand, but Hengist truly had the image of a cat that had stolen all the sweet cream. She looked away when his eyes met her own, not at all comprehending the message in them.

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She had not been down for dinner for a long time, but tonight, even after the disappointing disappearance of her

husband after he had foisted his brother's company on her, she felt she just had to sit at that long dining room table to see if there was any spark left of the passion she and her husband had shared that night.

Nothing!

She could not possibly distil the slightest of his amorous feelings he had so expertly showed her on their wedding night. On the contrary, Philip expressed irritation at the late hour of the dinner, eight o'clock as usual and not deviating one minute from the customs of the Ton, or those always performed in the house.

Philip sat moodily through the dinner at the head of the table, now that he had become the head of the household, removing Lady McKenna to the place on his right and Stevie to the place on his left. This meant that Marguerite was sitting at the bottom of the table, about six yards away from her husband. They were both in full view sitting opposite each other.

Hengist was placed at Marguerite's left, a situation that influenced his normal hearty appetite in the extreme.

She looked stunning in a peacock blue velvet dress, which fit her like a glove; the high fashionable waist was close cut, and showed off her enticing curves. She was wearing a blue and pink cashmere shawl, which accentuated her unblemished pearly skin and the unusual colour of her dark eyes.

Hengist toyed with his food, only longing to bite into that superb female flesh again now covered by her shawl.

He did see her devastation at his brother's utterly nonchalant treatment of her and wished he'd had occasion to have a word with Philip before they sat down for the meal.

Christ, did his brother not understand that his attitude would never do? The man had known perfectly well that he would make a sham of the marriage, but was it truly necessary to show he did not give a damn? Marguerite seemed close to tears and her pitiful expression tugged at his heart.

“This trifle is delicious, Lady Morvern,” he ground out at her, more in need of diverting her attention off the languid Viscount than to make her actually eat the dessert.

Marguerite bravely picked at the trifle, her heart too high in her throat to be able to eat. Hengist looked upon her with extreme kindness. She was grateful for the sympathy he offered and confused by the fact that only one day ago she would have killed for such a tender look of his grey eyes.

Yesterday seemed like a lifetime away. Last night she had become the Viscount’s bride in all ways possible. He had pierced her maidenhead with his body and had made her his more than once. He had made her dreams come true. After last night, she would not need the naughty book she’d bought from a downstairs maid, who had probably found it in the drawer of a night chest in one of her former employer’s guest rooms, to excite her into the secret sparks of bodily pleasure.

After last night, it should not be Hengist’s physique appearing in her secret dreams. After last night, she had a husband for all that and more. It just puzzled and hurt her that he seemed not to care to remember what had happened between them. He did not seem to care a jot that she could only gaze at him with lovesick eyes.

Hengist's sympathetic ways only made it worse for her. She did not want Hengist's warm eyes resting on her, she wanted her husband's!

No such thing happened at the dinner table. For some reason the Viscount seemed to avoid her altogether. He did not look up when the rest of the company addressed any remarks to her, nor did he ever ask her anything.

It got even worse. When Lady McKenna and Marguerite were about to leave the table so that the three gentlemen could have their port and cigars, Philip got up hastily with an eye on the clock.

He was not going to smoke, he explained, as he had made a long-time ago appointment that was too important to forego. He bowed at the ladies and strode out of the room, most definitely happy that the boring dinner was past.

Hengist exchanged looks with Stevie, who only shrugged slightly.

Lady McKenna shot out of her chair.

"I need to change," she mumbled, "I am due at Mrs. Doherty's musicale. Her daughter is going to perform on the pianoforte."

She gripped Stevie by the shoulder.

"I need you to accompany me, young man."

Stevie winced in Hengist's direction. Curse the Misses Doherty and Robles of this world! His mother truly had entered the quest to marry him off at his young age in favour of heirs, spares, and loads of guineas.

"You may wish to come as well, Major," she invited Hengist sweetly, "Alicia Doherty must have invited every possible Hopeful in London."

Hengist repressed a shudder. The last thing he wanted to do was to accompany the feisty Lady McKenna to a

mediocre concert of debs and man-hunting single women, with the consequence that he would have to take her home later on when he would have no chance in hell of fighting off her saucy propositions for the night.

“I am due to see the Duke of Lindley tonight,” he managed to croak, hating himself for the excuse to leave Marguerite all by herself at home. “He promised me an introduction to Brooke’s.”

Lady McKenna dug her hands in her sides with an indignant look.

“You’re not really going to join that viper’s nest of Whigs, are you, Major?” she asked sharply, “Your own brother is a member of White’s.”

Hengist almost bit his cheek to avoid uttering a few very impolite expletives to the woman. He did not care a whit about politics, but he did care about Richard Grey's intention to introduce him into the clubs of the Quality. One never snubbed the kindness of a duke. He knew his brother was a member of White’s, although he never went there. His mother had actually paid for his brother's bill there one year ago, because she did not want the heir of the Earldom to lose his warranted place in London Society.

Stevie understood exactly what was swirling through the Major’s brain.

“It seems it will be the two of us then, mother,” he coaxed. “Good night Major, sister!”

He almost pushed his mother out of the dining room.

Hengist stood when Lady McKenna got out of the room.

He looked down on a notably depressed Marguerite.

“Will you be all right tonight, my Lady?” he asked with more warmth in his voice.

Marguerite fixed her gaze on the linen tablecloth.

There was no way in hell she could show herself at a Ton event without her new husband, tonight! Oh, it was not a done thing to show affection for each other, but to go anywhere without her bridegroom on the first day of her marriage would set the tongues wagging. It was bad enough he had sent her to ride in the park with his brother. It was fortunate that nobody had seen the difference, but then everybody always saw what they want to see.

“Don’t worry about me, Major,” she said with skilled hauteur, “after yesterday’s event a quiet night might do me a world of good.”

Hengist smiled charmingly and bowed over her hand.

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“So they’ve all gone out, 'ave they?”

Macy leaned back on her chair, simulating a yawn while straining her bodice till it seemed to burst.

Ian Porter, the new head footman, scanned her bosom with interest. Macy was a luscious girl and since his entrance into the house of the viscount only one week ago, he had wondered about her invitational ways. He sent a quick look at Cook who was the main reason for acquiring his position in this household. He and Cook had been going steady now for almost two years. She was three years his senior, but at twenty-nine she was still an appetizing woman, fleshy in all the right places, with most of her teeth still intact and with pleasing blond hair that angled from under her white cap. Abby Whidbey was certain to be his future: as Cook of the Viscount’s household, she made two times the amount of money he got, and he liked the idea of a wife that could go on working until her retirement. They had met at the meat market almost two years ago, when he worked as a footman for the Earl of Norton’s household. He

liked the big bosomed woman at once; the moment he had seen her when she was haggling over a piece of mutton and had gone on courting her until she had given in to him. They made love noisily in her own larder for the first time, when none of the McKenna family was in the house and because she was not a virgin but a rather experienced and hungry lover, he decided to stay at her side. When the need for more footmen and a head footman arose, when the marriage between Mrs. Alexander and the Viscount was decided upon, Abby had been quick to shove him forward and Mr. Biggles had no qualms whatsoever to take in the handsome man who had been serving in an Earl's household. Cook had her own bedroom and shared a parlour with Mr. Biggles, downstairs. A Cook's administration was almost as extensive as a butler's, what with the menus and the bills for all the food.

After Mrs. Barnshow died of a heart attack a year ago, the household did not boast a housekeeper as she had never been replaced. Because the household at that time was only half-staffed, Biggles had taken Mrs. Barnshows' tasks in hand until now. Now that the former Mrs. Alexander had come to live in the house and had taken a new husband, he was more than ready to bring up the subject of hiring a housekeeper to the Viscountess.

Rose stirred her tea. She had just helped her mistress into her night shift. The Viscountess had gone to bed at the early hour of half past nine.

Ian shook his head.

"No, her Ladyship must have decided to stay at home. Not surprising after her recent illness I say. Don't you agree Rose?"

Rose, upon hearing her name, only nodded at him.

“No doubt the Viscount will be back in time,” Macy mused, “being newlywed an’ all!”

Ian grinned.

“Who’s to say with the Quality? The Earl of Norton had a fixed schedule with the countess. He’d come to her bed when she was at her most fertile, would hump her, and disappear to his club or his mistress. It’s a miracle he sired the Viscount on her at all, and I know for certain he never did his duty to her again after the little Lord Merton was conceived.”

One of the young footmen, Peter Falk, put his teacup back on its saucer.

“I don’t think his Lordship was with my lady last night,” he put in slyly, “he came home this morning before sunrise, as blue as the sky.”

Rose looked at him with indignation.

“Don’t you dare tell stories about him, young Peter!” she cried out angrily, “There was proof enough that he consummated the marriage.”

“Well,” Peter mumbled, “if anyone should know, it would be you, Rose. I’m sorry to have upset you. It’s just that I would not be surprised if the Viscount had not been capable.”

Rose looked at him with murder in her eyes.

“What do you mean 'not capable'?”

The boy blushed low into his collar. Gosh, he'd got himself on thin ice here.

“There were the... the gossips about him, Rose.”

Rose remembered the gossips in the servant’s quarters at Alexander House all too well. At first she did not want to believe them, until her sweetheart had shown her the proof of William Alexander’s frustrations. He had used a riding

whip on her back because he had not been able. What was worse, the gossip about him had been on the dot.

“Why...” she faltered.

It was too bad that she had to interrogate a seventeen-year-old junior footman on the doings of her mistress’ husband.

“Aw,” Macy waved a hand at Peter, “if his Lordship was not interested in nipping my butt, it just does not mean he’s... he’s not able, ye know.”

Ian’s eyes started to twinkle. He knew the likes of Macy: they were never afraid to earn an extra shilling if a house guest wanted their services for a small tryst. Even in the strict household of the Earl of Norton there had been room for the Macys of the world, whenever one of the handsomest footmen in the house had his eyes on them, if the Earl or his noble guests were not there first.

“What Peter was going to say is that the Viscount may never have pinched your butt, but he damn sure pinched Peter’s.”

Peter reddened again to the roots of his hair. Ian winked at him.

Rose watched them in terror.

“How... Are you sure this is true?”

“True or not, he’s done it to the mistress, didn’t he? He wouldn’t be the first to like it both ways, Rose. I know plenty of them who are... Let’s see...”

Ian started a lengthy story about people of the Quality he knew who liked people in petticoats as much as boots.

Rose pursed her lips and drank her cold tea in silence.

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Hengist came home at the stroke of midnight.

He had not planned to stay so long at the club the Duke had introduced him into, but he got to know a lot of interesting people who induced him to tell about his many adventures in Portugal. Then the Duke had gotten him into a very private conversation regarding the Scottish attitude towards new revolutionary ideas. Only then did he understand why the Duke was keeping him so close at hand. The Duke needed information. The Duke needed a spy. Hengist abhorred spies.

The head footman opened the door because Biggles obviously had called it a night.

“Has anyone of the family been back home yet?” Hengist asked.

Ian nodded.

“Lady McKenna came home more than an hour ago. She complained that the musicale was giving her a headache. Master Stephen and the Viscount have not yet returned.”

“Oh, well,” Hengist drawled, “I might turn in early as well, it has been a long day.”

It had been, after a sleepless night with the most wonderful woman in the world and his appointments at the War Office.

The head footman sent him a curious look.

Hengist reddened. That scoundrel was of course wondering why he was not in town spending his money on a juicy whore as any soldier allowed leave from a war would probably do.

“Will you need the services of Mr. Row, Major? I shall rouse him if you do!”

Philip’s valet? Phillip’s domestic sodomite, no doubt! He had seen the man peering at his crotch while he was

undressing last night. The thought was enough to make him angry. What the hell did the fellow think...?

“Then I wish you a good night, Major,” the footman said politely, bowing at him.

Hengist took a deep breath. Damn if he was not behaving like an imbecile! Philip had given him the use of his valet because he had always needed one himself. How was his brother to know he only needed the services of his batman for the normal domestic tasks like cleaning up and making him coffee, shining his boots or his battle-gear. If he was too drunk to get into his bed unclothed he would lie on top of his blankets with his uniform on. No other man than himself was touching his skin with a razor or unravelling his kilt for him.

He took the steps of the stairs without hurry.

Someone was standing in the darkened hallway that led to his room.

She stepped out of it and put a finger to her lips. It was Rose, his sweet love’s maid. She pointed at the open door of his bedroom and advanced him inside.

What the...?

She was a small person, her greying crown reaching only up to his breastbone.

“What is it?” He asked softly.

She reached out an arm to close the door behind him, but only stared at him.

“Well?”

He found he was more curious than irritated.

“It was you with her last night, wasn’t it, sir?” She suddenly blurted out.

The room was only lit by one candle, placed there by a prudent chamber maid. He felt a blush mounting his cheeks

and hoped sincerely Rose would not notice it. He coughed with embarrassment.

Rose wrung her hands. He wondered if it was terror of her bold assumption or shyness that she had dared to bring it up.

As he did not know what to say he just remained silent, morosely staring at her.

Rose shook her head and stilled her hands in front of her belly.

“I... I... I’m sorry sir, I must not meddle...”

His curiosity got the better of him.

“Why don’t you sit down, woman?” He asked gruffly, pointing at the Ottoman. He turned to a small table to pour himself a glass of hock. He would have preferred water to quench his thirst, but people hardly drank water in London as anything coming from the Thames was unhealthy enough to kill.

Rose sat down in silence, wiping her hands at her apron while he took a big swallow.

Then he leaned against the door frame, his eyes hooded.

“My lady was in love with you for years,” she blurted.

Hengist drew up a blond eyebrow but still kept his mouth shut.

Rose gulped. This was not going to be easy.

“I hoped he would be a good man for her, especially after... after all the suffering she went through with that William Alexander. But I...”

Ah, yes, that was a more commonly known thing. The nasty fat Mr. Alexander who, thank God, had not been able.

“But I heard gossip about your brother today and...”

She eyed him now with fear. There were too many uncertainties about the Viscount, maybe the Major did not

even know of his brother's depravities. Her hands stroked her apron again in a restless move.

Hengist stifled a groan. Of course, the servants knew or had guessed about Philip. Servants always knew everything, didn't they? Philip's behaviour last night could not have escaped them; being newlywed and leaving after dinner to come back at five o'clock in the morning hardly fitted into the picture of a besotted bridegroom.

"What do you mean?" He asked her curtly.

She shot him a pleading glance.

"My lady had a horrible time of it, those past years. I hoped so much she would find some happiness with him..."

Her head pointed in the direction of Philip's rooms.

"But now I think..." she hesitated.

Hengist noticed she tried to swallow upcoming tears.

"I don't think he ever intends to come to her bed, sir."

It was blurted out with the force of the underlying sadness that seemed to constrict her throat.

Hengist stepped forward to kneel beside the ottoman and took hold of her hands. They were dry and bony.

"What would you make me do about it?"

His voice was low and filled with hopefulness.

She turned her stricken face to his.

"She always wanted a child," she whispered, "even with that evil man she married. A child of her own."

Ah, so the suffering had been a two-way thing in the end. The fat man not able to reproduce and the beauty not able to have a child. The punishment was not Alexander's alone then. Poor Cherie!

She gazed at him with intense pleading in her eyes.

"Your brother... he would not care, I am sure. He may even welcome it. He needs an heir, doesn't he?"

Hengist got up to pace the carpet before the bed. So the maid knew. She had been quick to come up with all the conclusions: Philip had been away all night, a fact easy to check with the butler or the footman on night duty, and her mistress had lost her virginity anyway.

Well, if Cherie's bed had looked half the slaughter as his body and towel had...

Even if one could protest Cherie's courses had started, Rose would know when her mistress' courses were due, no hiding behind that fact.

Maybe Cherie had confided in Rose and told her that he'd had her two times... She could hardly have been bedded by a ghost. Oh, if only Philip had the decency to stay at home last night!

The maid rose from the ottoman.

"She's asleep now and I darkened the bedroom entirely. You don't know how happy she was this morning..."

With that last remark she glided out of the room, leaving him in a state of shock.

Had his love's maid just invited him to go into her mistress' bedroom again and repeat what he had so ardently done to her mistress the night before? Had she urged him to sire a child on his brother's wife? Please Major, just go in and impregnate her? It was bloody unbelievable!

He took a deep swallow.

And just what he had damn well longed for the entire day!

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Chapter 20: STEVIE'S PLANS AND AN URGENT PLEA FOR HENGIST

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Stevie leaned toward David, almost grabbing his hand over the grubby table.

He withheld himself in time. The inn's pub was still noisy as a couple of young bucks were celebrating one of their winnings at the races. It must have been a huge pile of blint if one witnessed the amount of beer and liquor they were swilling.

The serving wenches behind the tap were eyeing them with interest. The Boar's Tusk was quite a well reputed tavern and if you wanted a woman fast you just had to go outside and you would find one prowling the alleys, but some coins of the right colour could always get you into an arrangement with the girls of the tap whenever the inn's host was not closely watching.

"I think I know a way out of your predicament," Stevie whispered to his friend.

David sat up straight, eyeing Stevie with tenderness.

"What predicament, M'lord?" he asked, trying to tamp down his booming voice.

Stevie shook his head with impatience.

"My name is Stephen, I'm not a lord. My father is, although not a significant one. I'll only be a lord when he dies, which is far from today, I think."

"Ah," David smiled, "but you have the looks of a lord, no doubt about it."

Stevie shook his head with a smile, responding to David's flirtatious remark.

“Well, you should do as you please, David, and maybe it’s just as well you don’t use my real name. I have been thinking about your situation and I may have the solution. It’s just that we will have to turn you into a gentleman first.”

“A gentleman, eh?”

David leaned backward on his wooden chair.

“I may have found a way to get you into an architect’s office, as an apprentice, mind, but you must behave like a gentleman.”

David smiled broadly.

“I can easily do a gentleman, M’lord. My father happened to be a vicar in the Western part of London,” he said with pride.

“You what?”

Stevie’s eyes widened. If he had heard well, David had not swallowed one syllable in his last sentence.

David nodded, his eyes beaming.

“When he died there was no way my sister and I could stay in the rectory there, so we were out on the streets. Annie was pretty enough and she married Artie Gibson, a master mason, who’d had his eye on her for a long time since he helped renovate our parish church. He’s actually the father of both the children. Artie took me into his guild and taught me the ropes, so to say. But I could not be a mason talking like a gentleman so I just adapted my speech. Artie was killed in an accident on site and we had to move out of his house. It was not his own, you see.”

“Annie? But you told me she was your wife!”

Relief swept through Stevie when he realized his lover was not married at all.

David took a swallow of his beer.

“Annie was better protected when we said we were married, the Rookery being such a rotten place to live in. Nobody dared touch her if they thought we were man and wife. My height would frighten them off...”

He grinned.

“Annie is a girl that would invite men to slobber after her if it wasn’t for me. If I don’t act as her husband, every idiot who thinks he might have a chance with her will crowd our doorway. And knowing what we both know now I was not sorry to play the indulgent husband. I don’t sleep with a woman but I can share my bed with Annie and the boys easily.”

A frown formed between his blond eyebrows.

“Annie went into a decline since Artie died, you know. She loved him. He really was a fine man. At first I did not want the marriage because she was of gentle birth, our father being of the cloth and all, but Artie insisted he would take good care of us and in the end beggars can’t be choosers.”

David closed his eyes and rubbed them with his big hands.

Stevie folded his hands below his chin, watching his lover with eyes full of pity. He had hardly had one day of hardship in his life and found it difficult to imagine what it would be like to confront life the way his big friend had done.

“You live in the Rookeries?”

David shook his head.

“Lived. Artie rented a fine little house, but after his death we were evicted. We found some dilapidated rooms in the Rookery until I earned enough to move out of it. We rent

a floor near Covent Gardens now. It's only two rooms, but it's a hell of a lot better than the slums."

He leaned forward eagerly.

"You said something about an apprenticeship with an architect..."

"Ah, yes," Stevie smiled, "at dinner tonight my brother-in-law's brother told me about his visit with the Duke of Lindley..."

David's eyebrows shot up at once.

"You keep good company, M'lord, if your family visits with dukes!"

Stevie grinned. David was surely right. His family had recently gone way up in the world.

"Anyway, the Major said that the Duke had invited him to join in the investment of a project that will take place in Marylebone. It seems the Duke needs money and the Major has some to spare. But the wonderful thing is that my sister paid attention to what was said at last and she did not seem adverse to joining in with the project as well."

"Your sister?" David frowned, "You mean to tell me you have a wealthy sister?"

"Her first husband died a year ago. He was born with a gold spoon in his mouth. He was a cit however, and my mother wanted her to marry into the nobility this time."

"So whom has she married now?" David asked when he saw Stevie hesitate to go on with his story.

He started to draw his fingers along the lines of the scrubbed wood on the table.

"I convinced her to marry a Viscount who needed her money badly. She did not know... Does not know he's..."

"Like us?" David offered with an ironic smile.

Stevie blushed. It was almost eerie how well his lover seemed to understand him at times.

“How does he get away with it?”

Stevie’s blush only deepened.

“I don’t think he gets away with anything at all. The doctor declared her ill, melancholia he called it, and the Viscount just goes away. He married her last week and has hardly been home since. I know he does not wish to consummate the marriage but it will have to happen if he does not want to face an annulment and my family’s fury. He’s the heir to the Earl of Loghaire, you see.”

David just nodded, although it seemed to Stevie he was sympathizing with Marguerite. Strange man. What did he care if Stevie’s sister was properly bedded or not?

“Why make such a big thing of it? He has a brother, hasn’t he? Usually the brother and his offspring are second in line for the Earldom.”

Stevie shrugged.

“True, although the Major is not married and chances that he will not survive the war are many.”

“So what has all this to do with me?”

David crossed his legs. He was a patient man. He started to sip his beer again.

“I will convince the Major and my sister to invest largely under the condition that the architect takes you as an apprentice. One favour for another. Mr. Nash seems always in need of apprentices.”

“Nash?”

David almost choked on his beer.

“You mean Mr. John Nash, the great architect?”

Stevie shrugged indifferently.

“I think so. He’s the one who designed the Marylebone project. The Duke seemed to think the world of him if I may believe my sister’s brother-in-law.”

David watched Stevie in silence and awe. His lover must come from high places if he was talking about investments that were sponsored by a duke and a rich viscount’s wife.

“I did not know you were a vicar’s son, but it truly helps,” Stevie continued glumly.

“A poor vicar’s son,” David insisted.

“A gentleman’s son, nevertheless,” Stevie corrected him stubbornly, “I gather that you know how to read and write?”

David’s eyes started to twinkle with amusement.

“More importantly I know how to cipher and measure. I can read a root map. Artie Gibson in his role as a master mason was a splendid teacher, you know.”

“So you will let me arrange it for you?”

David heaved a deep sigh.

“It would be my heart’s desire my little lord, as you are.”

Stevie only smiled widely, wishing to touch his friend, but not daring to as the tavern maids were watching them as avidly as they were staring at the noisy dandies.

“I’d find you a better house with an apartment for myself, so that I could live close to you and your wife and children,” Stevie said pointedly.

He was proudly thinking of the four hundred pounds advance that Mr. Butler had given him. It had been a very busy and lucrative time at Gents. More money was to follow and four hundred pounds would pay for years of rent of a nice house, if he was correct.

“I could not do that if you were not a gentleman, but if you have a gentleman’s occupation we could in a way share a house. It’s time I find myself some bachelor’s residences. My mother forces me to go to Ton events in search of a bride. I’m twenty one, going on twenty-two, but I’m far too young anyway.”

He frowned.

“It has been done, though, so I’m eager to escape her influence. I’d rather live close to you, in the same house if possible.”

“Ah,” David uttered, trying not to stare deeply into Stevie’s eyes.

He had noticed the tavern maids were getting impatient to do some business of their own. “That, M’lord, would be another part of my heart’s desire!”

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Hengist stared at the connecting door.

It was faintly lit by the one candle that was burning on his bedside table. It was of a heavy oak like the door leading to a castle; a castle with its sleeping princess.

He groaned with indecision.

Yesterday’s occurrence could be called a sort of a coincidence, but going to Cherie again would allow no excuse. He would be purposely deceiving his brother’s bride in pretending he was her husband. Although Philip had showed no eagerness whatsoever to claim his husbandly rights, Hengist would be inexcusably continuing into an adulterous affair with his sister-in-law, no matter how long he had loved her from afar.

No, there was no way he could find an excuse for loving her again as he had done yesterday. The truth of the matter was that he was not much aware of feelings of guilt for

cheating on his brother. He doubted his brother would care under the circumstances.

It was the fact that she would still think he was Philip! Apart from his pride, he wanted dearly for her to know who visited her bed and he also realized that he would unknowingly drag her into an adulterous situation she had not asked for.

He stretched his back along a bedpost, feeling his erection rise with the anticipation of lowering himself into her softness again. He was stark naked and aroused. There was actually only room for one thought in his mind; how to bed her again.

His gaze strayed to the doorknob of the door that opened into the hallway. Suddenly, while he was undressing, a dressing gown had magically appeared, folded around the brass knob on the door to the hallway. Rose had no doubt figured that if he was to go to Marguerite's bedroom he'd better do so disguised as the Viscount.

He walked to the door and grabbed the green velvet robe, which was lined with black silk and garnered with a black sash. He shrugged it on with relish. Hengist had to admit it felt extremely luxurious. He had never had anything like such a robe before. He shook his head. Softness like this was for the faint of heart and mind. Hengist the warrior slept in the nude and wore his kilt when he was awake.

He approached the door that connected with Marguerite's bedroom, gingerly sticking out his hand to turn the knob. The door remained closed.

Damnation! Some prudent servant who knew that the Major slept in the room next to the Viscountess had probably locked the door!

He looked down his robe. The only way to enter Marguerite's bedroom would be through the main door in the hallway. Rose must have known that, hence the robe. It would be the perfect distraction as well if anyone happened to see him enter or leave that room in the half-dark.

He did not know if he wished to bless Rose or to curse her, or to think of her as the most conniving servant in the world.

Now that he thought about it, the candle-lamp close to his quarters had not been burning, putting the hall in semi-darkness. No doubt that had also been Rose's doing.

He listened at his door for some time. It would not do to meet anyone in that hallway, however much he might resemble his brother now.

He got his courage up and glided through the door, his bare feet tapping on the hall carpet with a light sound.

The next door on his left should be the one to her bedroom. It opened at once when he turned the knob.

He heard her light breathing when he closed the door behind his back. She must have gone to bed at ten and he calculated she had been sleeping for hours already. Just as well. For what he had in mind for her, he preferred her to be well rested.

He crossed the room to the side of the bed where he had slept the night before, slid off the robe and joined his sleeping beauty under the sheets.

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Denning was sound asleep in Philip's bedroom at Gents when Philip at last found his way to his sleeping quarters. He had Denning assure him that he was to sleep in his bed every night from that day onwards, after he had carried the news to him that he was to be on light duty from now on.

Philip, although very eager to see his new lover, was in a bad mood. He had been perceptive enough at dinner to see his new wife's longing eyes following him all the time and had not known better than to avoid her gaze. She had looked completely besotted with him whenever he had been in her company that day and the mere thought gave him the creeps.

He feared the fact that it was the day after he had been joined in holy matrimony with her and he shuddered at the thought of what was next expected of him. It would all have been so much easier for him if she had just continued to have her attacks of melancholy; no one was expected to bed a frail and sick wife.

His mood had not improved when Gents turned out to be full of people. It was a Saturday night, the best night for the club, and he had been forced to mingle with the guests who had recognized him as soon as he walked through the front door. That had kept him away from his bedroom for a full two hours and he had to take the servant's steps in order to reach his own room unnoticed.

At least Denning was there, lying in the full glory of his nakedness in the light of a single candle.

Philip tore at his clothes, determined to wake up his lover and forget about all the frustrations of that day; his first day as a married man.

He studied Denning while he was undoing the buttons on his silver and black satin waistcoat. The man was an incredible specimen; broad but lean shouldered, with long muscles that made Philip wonder if the man had been a footman all his life. His back was hairless with smooth shoulder blades and a nice sleek spine. His buttocks were well formed, not too round and with a smattering of blond hair. It made Philip's mouth water when he lifted the sheets

that covered Denning's long, hairy, well-sculpted legs. His arousal had lengthened and hardened in no time.

He purposely lay down against the sleeping man, his cock touching Denning's hip, his eager mouth on the footman's spine. He licked the sleeping man's vertebrae, nuzzling the young flesh on the hard muscles.

Something changed in Denning's breathing and he made a gasping sound. Philip smiled when the man came groggily awake.

"Wake-up, sleepyhead," he murmured, "turn around and show me how much you like to have me here."

"My lord?"

Denning turned on his side and Philip made for the young man's genitals. He was disappointed when they turned out to be slack.

"We can't have this..."

He fondled the limp penis that was already big enough in its normal state.

"Ah," he ground out, "do it for me, love. Wait, I'll suck you..."

He bent his head and Denning turned on his back.

"Oh, Christ, my lord, let me..."

Philip nudged and sucked, his hands eagerly clutching Denning's intimate body parts.

"Please let me do you, Milord," Denning panted. "Oh God, stop before I..."

Philip stopped abruptly.

"Ah, Denning," he whispered, "this is going to be a lovely night, you know! Our first real night together! That's cause for celebration."

"But my lord, let me..."

“Philip! It’s Philip for you when we are together like this, understand!”

Denning swallowed and nodded. Philip took him in an embrace, tamping down all Denning’s ablutions of gratitude.

He closed his eyes when he nuzzled his lover’s throat.

“Oh, God,” he thought almost with an audible moan, “I think I love you!”

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“I had not expected you’d come tonight.”

Marguerite turned on the pillow to touch Hengist’s face with her hand.

His mouth immediately placed a kiss on her fingers.

“Why ever not?” he asked in a whisper.

Voices were hard to recognize if one whispered, he knew.

“You... you were so indifferent today!”

Hengist heard tears forming in her throat.

“I wasn’t,” he assured her, “for God’s sake, you must believe me that I wasn’t. I have a problem showing my feelings.”

Which at least was true.

“Did I seem indifferent just yet?”

He laughed softly.

Her hand wandered to his collarbone and then to his upper arm that was bunched with muscles.

“No.”

She shook her head. Hengist noticed the undertone of admiration.

“I never knew it could be like that... I mean, between a man and a woman...”

“Just think of how it has been between us when the sun is up and I have to act the indifferent man again,” he murmured, which he had to admit was no untruth either.

He breathed deep through his nose. Why in hell was he counting truths or untruths with her now? To whom did he own a conscience?

“I adore your body,” he sighed, wriggling to his side. Her roaming hand slid alongside the place under his heart, slowly gliding towards his back. He was hard again and was too distracted to notice that her fingers started to delve into the groove of the scar on his back.

“What’s this?” she asked, nuzzling his shoulder, sliding her hand all the way down the badly sewn and healed slash he had incurred during one of the first raids in the Peninsula. She had felt the scar before but in the throes of her passion had not thought to ask.

Hengist almost cursed. How to explain a bayonet knife that had fortunately been misdirected only to carve a deep groove in his skin?

“I had a stupid accident as a kid,” he grumbled, thinking fast, “I fell against the front grate of the fire place and raked my back against the sharp ends.”

He felt her pucker her lips.

“That must have hurt,” she whispered searching for his ear in the dark to press a kiss on it.

“And this? Also a grate?”

Ah God, the girl was paying attention! Her hand was now lovingly following the wide scar on his midriff of the very recent sabre slash which had almost cost him his life last September. His skin had gaped like a whale’s mouth until the surgeon had sewn it all together with impatient strokes. Curse that man to hell! If he had taken a few more

minutes his chest would not have looked like a badly repaired mattress. The infection had not helped either, curling around the stitches, forming rims of scar tissue.

“A duel, unfortunately,” he admitted, again not untruthful either.

The French officer had been a master at wielding his sabre. It must have been the fight of the century, although probably nobody had noticed. In battle one did not lose time by looking at somebody else fighting.

Hengist heaved a deep sigh. He would have loved to have fought the man in one of the fencing places that ran rampant in London or at the practice grounds of the Edinburgh barracks. He'd have to wait however for the devil to open the gates of hell for him. He had killed the man while he had been bleeding like a pig. The slash, for some reason, had given him the strength to strike back at the man, almost severing his head from his long neck. A bloody pity, to kill such a skilled swordsman! Ah well, that was war for you!

“A duel?” she asked incredulously.

“Why?”

“Mercenary reasons, I suppose,” he answered languidly, trying to distract her by reaching for that delicious spot at the apex of her thighs.

She moaned and clasped his genitals, humming with delight when she found him hard and willing.

And forgot all about his war wounds, thank God!

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Rose swallowed and lent her ear towards the locked door again. She heard them talk quietly and suppressed a smile. At least her darling was having another honeymoon night! God bless that big Major. What a man! They had

been at it for hours now! If Cherie would not have a babe in her arms within nine months she'd eat bloody Lord Morvern's best hat! Or his dick, for that matter! The dirty swine!

There was still anger brooding inside her, after the discovery of Lord Morvern's unnatural inclinations. He liked men, nothing less! And had dared to marry her sweet Cherie, with the intent never to come to her bed!

She groaned and sat down on the ottoman hoping the Major would not stay too long. If he fell asleep in Cherie's bed she'd have to go and wake him. That he was not Cherie's husband had better remain a secret between the two of them. Rose did not suppose Cherie would appreciate the fact that her brother-in-law had been the one so eagerly bedding her due to her old maid's shenanigans. At least not for now, Rose presumed. One day Cherie would thank her for it; when she would know about Lord Morvern's depravity, when she was cradling a big baby boy in her arms, as strapping as the man that was, if one interpreted the soft moans coming from Cherie's bedroom, mounting her again for the third time this night.

Rose smiled with delight, pushing her fingers against her mouth not to make any noise. Did men really do it three times on one night? Only the thought made her feel tired!

She yawned profusely, wondering if this time it would last less long than the last one. She wished she could go to bed and sleep. God, she was tired!

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Hengist woke up with a start. His panicked gaze flew to the curtains. He sighed with relief. It was still dark outside as the moon was shining through the small gaps in the curtains.

He looked down at Cherie's dark curls that covered almost his entire chest. How to move her without waking her?

The question was moot in a second.

"Are you awake again?" his love asked him in a very husky voice that was almost inaudible with sleep.

He kissed her on the top of her head and slid away from her to the edge of the bed, where he sat up in a hurried motion.

"Where are you going?"

His hand stroked her face and her hair.

"Back."

"Why? Can't you stay till the morning?"

He shook his head in the dark, fishing at his robe that he had shed on the floor.

"No," he mumbled, "it can't be done."

"You're ashamed of us!" she accused fervently.

He shrugged in the dark, pretending indifference. Then, understanding she would not be able to see his reply he just whispered: "No!"

Of course he was not ashamed of her. He longed to sleep with her tucked against his body, her long black hair tickling his nose when he bent to snuggle against her soft tresses. To wake her up when the sun started to shine and to make love to her again, to not only hear her moans of pleasure but to see them leave her rosy lips...

"Will you come next night?" she asked.

"Please don't nag, Milady," he growled at her, "I'll come when it pleases me. Go back to sleep!"

He strode out of her room, closing the door quickly.

That, he thought, had been a real Philip's reply and retreat. He had felt her eyes widening in disappointment, a thousand questions on her sweet lips.

It was the only way, he assured himself. If he wanted, no, when he wanted to come to her bed again he needed her not to be forewarned with all the candles burning. He needed her to be asleep with all the lights out. It was bad enough she had noticed his scars where Philip had none.

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John Row looked sourly at the clock in the dressing room. Six o'clock and Lord Morvern was still not back home.

He'd had a good night of sleep because Philip had disappeared into Town after last night's dinner, but now he sat on his bed with disapproval etching his face.

He had been elated when Philip told him about his lucky way out of debt; the marriage to the wealthy widow Alexander, the letting of the house to the gentlemen's club. The valet had been happy to take his place in the new household, until he had, hiding behind the pantry door, overheard last night's conversation in the servant's dining room.

He had originally loved to live in a well-established household, where he did not have to go to the nearest inn to get some warm food in his belly, or where he did not have to be inventive to get some wood in the stove to keep himself warm.

He had forgotten the convenience of having his employer to himself, to cater to his every need, however physical they were at times. He had also forgotten how convenient it was not to have anybody in the household

snooping around, guessing the true relationship between employer and valet. Now they knew about Lord Morvern!

John groaned with frustration. How long would it be before they discovered the carnal bond between him and the Viscount?

True, the Viscount had not asked for his personal services for some time, but knowing his master well, he knew it was only a matter of time.

John had been with Philip Morvern for almost five years. He was handed over to the Viscount by an elderly lord who had preferred to leave the country on a grand tour because he had been threatened with his depraved nature being revealed to the Quality. Until then Philip had not been able to keep any valet for any long period of time. He had a way of getting amorous, when he drank too much and unsuccessfully roamed the City looking for a willing victim of his affections. Love either way was easy to obtain but one mostly needed coins for it, a necessity that was not always in the wandering Viscount's possession.

His former valets had not appreciated the overtures a drunken lord might make towards them and most had left him without prior notice.

John Row liked the way they had lived. It had created a special bond between him and his master. He had come to think of them as two adventurous gentlemen-villains and it had struck him as devilishly romantic.

He disliked the Honourable Stephen McKenna the moment he set eyes on him. Not only had Stephen been a 'far' shot from his master's usual taste in men, but he had also spotted Stephen's keen intelligence and creative nature. It took one to know one and John had cursed the presence of the effeminate boy in his Lordship's life. Even if John could

match Stevie in mind and spirit he lacked the gentlemanly upbringing and descent that fitted young Stevie like a glove.

The moment Stephen Mac entered their lives it was obvious to John that he had been nurturing an illusion. They had never been gentlemen-villains, he and the Viscount. He had always been the son of a draper's assistant. He would never be to Lord Morvern what anyone of his Lordship's class might become. When Philip Morvern went out on the prowl, he, the valet, had to stay home and await his Lordship's pleasure.

Everything John Row could not obtain was within the reach of the Honourable Stephens of the world.

He had been right on the dot. After Stephen devised Lord Morvern's solutions to his ever pressing money problems, the Viscount did not need John Row any more. He needed a valet, most certainly, but the creative solutions John Row would propose to him on a daily basis had failed to become a necessity, now that the Viscount was nicely ensconced in the cares of a wealthy household.

John Row lay back on his small cot behind the screen in the Viscount's dressing room, wondering if there would be a solution at hand for his problem. The fact of the matter was that he loved Philip Agnew, more than his life.

He had been glad to notice that Philip's interest in Stephen was waning, most definitely so, as there had been no more sounds coming from Philip's huge bed telling him his master was carnally entertained by his spoiled housemate. Prudent inquiries had taught him that Philip and Stephen had not come home together of late, which proved to him that they were not together anymore, and that they had stopped visiting the same haunts. But how important

was that? Even if Stephen had stopped influencing Lord Morvern, the damage had been done!

Lord Philip had to marry the ever so lovely but hugely female Mrs. Alexander; a matter which had not improved his mood these days.

John knew that contrary to himself, Philip could not and would not make love to a woman. So there was a situation that would bowl Lord Morvern over with worry, no doubt about it. It was not a sense of honour that caused the worry. John knew his master well enough to understand that honour was one of the least things on Philip's mind, simply because he did not possess a lot of that commodity.

Philip would fear annulment of the marriage. He most definitely relished the good things, which came with his new life: his daily clean linens, his comfortable luxurious clothes, the availability of food and drink whenever he felt like imbibing or indulging, and a roof over his head. He now had a suitable, furnished house, without pots and pans on the floor in the upper bedrooms to catch the water falling through too many leaks on the roof that soaked the floor boards and the ceilings below them.

John shook his head and closed his eyes. He was not going to come up with a solution to his problems now. There was no alternative. If he was honest, there had never been an alternative. Philip Agnew, Lord Morvern, had been heading straight for Debtor's Prison. The fact that he was a Viscount would never save him from that particular place. He would not be the first aristocrat to lounge there and neither would he have been the last. Philip's debts had simply been huge, even for London standards.

John gnawed his knuckles.

Worst of all was that John and Philip had that simpering ninny Stephen Mac to thank for their timely rescue. It was totally baffling! One would almost prefer... John shook his head. No, it was true that there was no worse place than Debtor's Prison in the Old Bailey.

Lord Philip had once looked up a crony there and John had accompanied him under a lot of protest. A prison was not a place for his Lordship, he had complained. That this statement bore nothing but truth was evident the moment they had entered the gates to the prison's court. John could still gag if he just so much as imagined the smell and the filth there.

They had 'visited' Philip's friend. He had been incarcerated in a small room without a window, with only a cot with dirty blankets and one rickety chair. Philip told John later that once in a while the man's true friends would come by and use some of their winnings from their gambling to bribe the prison guards to give him a place all to himself, so that he did not have to share the same sort of room with at least ten other lice-ridden unfortunates. Philip had brought him a bottle of liquor as well, murmuring that there was only one way out of the man's troubles, drink, as he would never be able to pay back what he owed.

John wondered fleetingly what had become of the man when his friends stopped coming to hand over the few necessary coins for his humble cell and the few comforts that might come with it. He had probably died of some foul disease, as the prison was as rat-infested as the jakes behind a brothel of bad repute.

No, Debtor's Prison was not a way out. It was a way into grueling misery more like.

John hugged his chest while he lay on his cot.

He needed to think hard! If his boss was happy, he'd better take care he would be happy as well. It would not do for him to hide and sulk.

He understood very well that he should get closer to the staff in the house, in order to keep track of what was happening and maybe get his influence back on things. His days as the hidden valet would be over, he had to come out and keep his eyes and ears open.

He had already scanned the six footmen and one head-footman for hidden inclinations toward the male species, but he had found nothing of the sort. They were all as straight as arrows. Pity that. If it came to it he preferred the male body to that of a woman.

The upstairs maid called Macy was not to his taste at all; too much bosom and a fat butt, although she was the only one spreading invitations like confetti. No, she was also too inquisitive and extroverted. That would only mean inviting disaster. He had seen her propositioning his Lordship's brother, the Scottish Major. Now that was a specimen one could adore like a deity! But devils take him, he was clearly a woman's man, although he was not noticed to have taken Macy up on her obvious invitations, according to Minnie the Mouse.

He sat up slowly. There was a downstairs maid called Minnie, she was a very quiet and hard working girl, one hardly noticed her in a crowd. Hence the 'mouse' nickname. What had attracted him already to her were her very slender figure and her pointed, small breasts. She worked downstairs and slept in the attic in a room with the always babbling Macy.

Minnie.

God, he preferred his beautiful lord any time, but it was no good to dream of the unobtainable. His Lordship would have him whenever he fancied him and John knew he would always come gladly.

He closed his eyes. Might as well go back to sleep. If his master did not turn up at sunrise, he would probably not turn up at all.

His hand shifted towards his crotch and he started to stroke himself, ever so slowly. He could always dream about his great love, couldn't he? Although fantasizing might be the second best thing, it had gotten him through many a lonely night without fail.

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Stevie was already eating his breakfast when Marguerite entered the breakfast room.

This morning she was in a slightly worse mood than the day before, due to the way her husband had left her bed when she had nearly begged him to stay.

She frowned when Biggles lifted a cover from a plate with fat kippers. She used to like kippers, but today she did not feel in the mood for them.

"They're very tasty," Stevie remarked quietly when he saw that she only took some toast and a boiled egg. "You always used to like them."

"Don't you dare interfere with my breakfast, Stevie," she snapped at him.

Stevie slumped and eyed his sister from behind his teacup.

Jeez, if she was in such a bad mood today he'd better not start to ask her about the Marylebone investment.

"Did you sleep well, sis?" he inquired, trying to ignore her bad tempered remark.

Marguerite sat down slowly, looking into her teacup as if it would provide her with the right answer.

“Well?” Stevie urged her.

Marguerite scanned him and felt sorry immediately. Stevie looked young and quite innocent this morning. What did he know about baffling husbands?

“I’m sorry Stevie,” she said, “I slept quite well after... I slept truly well.”

One look at the clock showed her it was after eleven. That was rather late for a woman who had not gone out the evening before. It was her husband’s vigorous lovemaking which had made her so relaxed afterwards and she had slept like a log after he’d left her bed.

Strange, that she had been deucedly annoyed with him.

Her annoyance with Philip came back after Rose had entered her room and drawn open the curtains. Rose had chided her for being such a slugabed and had laconically cleared the room, lifting her night-shift from the floor where her husband had thrown it down, not batting an eye about the fact that her mistress again had been stark naked when she woke up.

The mere memory made Marguerite flush again. O, he had been so wonderful, so loving so... strong.

She sighed in her teacup.

If he had been so wonderful, then why was she moping now? Because he had not wanted to stay with her until they’d had to wake up? Because he had accused, yes, accused her, of nagging?

Had she really been nagging her new husband after two days of marriage? Oh, God, it could not be true! She had never been the nagging type; she was always a balanced person, quiet and comprehending. She had never dared nag

William. Why was she then harassing her husband now, after he had made love again to her three times in a row?

She bent her head in self-disgust. Surely she was not taking his coming to her bed for granted? Oh, my, she had been actually arguing with him after he had honoured her with his presence! She shook her head as if she had to chase away a mosquito. She had been behaving like a... like a discontented wife!

She reddened with shame. Oh, but he had been right to become so annoyed with her. She was certain most husbands of the Quality came to their wife's bed, lifted their night-shift, got their gratification and left again, contrary to her own husband who had taken his time with her. He had been patient and loving, yes, loving; quite unlike herself.

She looked down at her toast, wondering if he would ever forgive her.

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Chapter 21: A DUKE'S INVESTMENTS

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The Duke's brochure had arrived, delivered by one of the ducal footmen, and Stevie had almost jumped upon it. He pulled a disappointed face when it bore Hengist's name.

Darn! It would hardly do to open the Major's mail. If a morning could be a "yes" or a "no", it was definitely a "no" morning.

He heard the pounding of footsteps on the stairs and looked up to see a kilted Hengist in his formal major's regalia descend the stairs.

"Going on parade, Major?" Stevie dared ask after looking wide-eyed at the insignia on Hengist's dark blue Black Watch coat.

Hengist grinned sheepishly at him. Like all the true warriors, he disliked the showy parade dress that was only good to impress the fawning crowd of debutantes and interfering mamas at a very formal ball.

"I need to meet my peers at the London barracks and pick up my horse there. Biggles informed me he would be welcome at the stables here."

He looked down at his coat.

"I look like a damned Christmas tree, don't I?"

Stevie felt very much like stroking a hand along Hengist's broad chest, but he knew he would be in for a facer if he did not refrain from that urge. His intuition had told him already on Hengist's arrival that Hengist was not the kind of man to take that sort of male attention lightly. Hengist was a ladies-man; Stevie had seen him gaze at Marguerite whenever he was in her vicinity. It had amused

him to no extent. Obviously, Marguerite's and Hengist's attraction for each other had been mutual for years without either of them ever realizing it, or to be able to cash in on it. Poor sods!

"I think some mail for you arrived, Major," he said pointing at Richard Grey's missive with the ducal seal.

Hengist cocked an eye.

"That should be Lindley's brochure. I won't have time for it now, young Stephen..."

"Brochure? The one you talked about at dinner? The Marylebone project, wasn't it? Would you mind if I had a look at it?"

Stevie was enough of an actor to feign surprise.

The Major pounded him on the shoulder with a gloved hand.

"Developing an interest in architecture, are ye? Be my guest, Stephen, I'll look at it when I get back, so you can leave it in the library when you're done."

He turned around to the front door, almost colliding with his brother who had just entered the house wearing a greatcoat and boots.

"Good Christ, Philip!" Hengist exclaimed, "The sparrows are falling from the roof with this heat, and you are wearing a coat fit for a winter storm!"

Philip scowled at his brother.

It was indeed a very sunny day, almost rare for London this time of the year. He had not dared to walk back into the house in his evening wear. One could forgive a man for coming back at six o'clock in the morning in his formal dinner clothes, the London Quality would not bat an eye at that, but to come back at noon dressed for the evening was quite another matter.

He had stayed in his room at Gents until ten o'clock, making passionate love again to a rested and enthusiastic Denning.

He sent a boy to the house for the greatcoat and his boots, in order to hide his evening clothes. He remembered in time not to send a footman in Gents' obvious blue and silver livery. Apart from Stevie and John Row, nobody else was supposed to know about his lucrative position in the place. Hengist obviously knew some about it because he had been there, but that meant that too many people were already in on the secret.

Philip unbuttoned his coat with a sour face and handed it over to the head-footman who had opened the door for him.

Hengist nodded at his brother.

"I need to talk to you when I get back."

Philip shrugged indifferently.

"I'm not going anywhere until tonight."

Hengist sent his brother a fierce scowl and reached for the doorknob to open the door himself before the head-footman could race him to it, almost tripping over Philip's greatcoat.

He slammed the door shut behind him.

Stevie's look shifted from Philip's face to his boots.

"New fashion, I presume?" he asked, pointing at the riding boots that hugged Philip's evening breeches.

Philip just sent him a dark look before running hastily up the stairs in search of John Row.

Stevie looked sadly at his former lover's ascent. The man had been away from the house all night. The bad thing was that he had heard the upstairs maids gossiping about the state of the new Lady Morvern's bed. It had been well used last night, but not only to sleep in. He hoped they would not

notice that the bridegroom had not been home at all last night. That would be a cause for disaster.

Stevie narrowed his eyes. Hengist had looked smug and contented, a man well satisfied. He happened to know that the satisfaction had not been caused by the nymphomaniac upstairs maid Macy, who had at last had her chance with one of the young footmen in the attic last night.

He had heard that tidbit when John Row and Minnie came back from their breakfast in the servant's hall. Macy had forced Minnie to sleep on the footman's cot in the attic while the footman had taken Minnie's place in the bed she shared with Macy, Minnie complained to a very understanding valet.

At least it was certain that she could not have been the cause of Hengist's obvious contentment.

His sister had sported blue smudges under her eyes, and Stevie had noted the love bites on her long neck.

Love bites; not scratches due to vermin or insects.

He wondered about them. His sister had never been one with a roving eye, except maybe for Hengist. As far as he knew nobody but fat Alexander had ever visited her bed.

He turned around to follow the new head-footman into the wardrobe.

"Porter?"

Ian turned around after quietly and professionally hanging Philip's coat on its hook in the wardrobe.

"Yes, master Stephen?"

"You've not just witnessed that scene with the Viscount."

Ian raised his eyebrows.

"What scene, sir?"

Stevie turned on his heels in thought, heading for the stairs.

“Somebody is sending you a lot of mail,” his sister said, closing the door of the morning room.

When Stevie stared at her in wonder, she laughed and pointed at the big envelope he held in his hands.

“Oh, that?” he harrumphed, “The Duke of Lindley sent this to the Major. It is the prospectus of the Marylebone building project, by the design of Mr. Nash. I understand the Duke is a most fervent sponsor of the project and seeks more investors.”

Marguerite looked askance at her brother.

“If it’s the Major’s mail, why do you have it?”

Stevie coloured a deep red.

“The Major allowed me to read it first and afterward I need to leave it in the library.”

He hesitated artfully before asking: “Would you like to read it as well? I understand investments in buildings are quite the thing at the moment, certainly now that the Prince has put his support behind it.”

Marguerite took the big envelope and weighed it in her hands.

“Why don’t I study it? Or did you want to...”

Stevie shook his head hastily. There were some things he had to arrange post-haste.

“No, leave it on the library table when you’re done with it, Sis.”

He watched her turn to the library before he took the stairs two at a time.

-

“Rose?”

Stevie stuck his head around the door of Marguerite's bedroom, where Rose was putting some unmentionables away in a drawer.

“What is it, Master Stephen?”

Rose looked up from her work and stretched her back. She was not getting any younger and her concern about her lady made her feel a hundred years old.

She had not slept much last night; she had snoozed on the ottoman in the Major's bedroom and then had forgotten to warn the Major to go back to his chambers.

Thank God for the man's discipline never to sleep late; he had been back in the room early in the morning when it was still dark and Rose had the chance to ask him to hide the Viscount's robe in one of the drawers.

He had discarded the thing and folded it into his dresser in the bedroom.

Rose's eyes had widened when she saw his body in all its nakedness; he truly was a very formidable man.

She did notice the wide ugly scar on his back and stifled a gasp. When he turned around, he frowned.

“Still here, Rose?” he whispered, “You'd better find your bed, it's almost morning. You should not have stayed up so late, I can find my own way in this room!”

She had seen a glimmer of amusement on his face and could not help to smile back at him. She raked the front of his glorious body.

“You're scarred!” she remarked, pointing at the enormous scar on his midriff.

He looked down and shrugged his huge shoulders.

“As long as she never sees my brother 'au naturel' she won't be the wiser.”

He laughed softly.

Rose turned and made for the door.

My, my, she contemplated; no wonder that bed was carnage that night; the man is huge even when he is limp!

She had chuckled, thinking of the impotent William.

Take that, fatso! I hope you're watching from your front seat in hell!

She was still smiling when she found her lonely bed in her attic room.

It was two narrow stairs up from her mistress' bedroom. She had her own sleeping place in the servant's quarters, unlike that slimy John Row, who slept in his master's dressing room behind a screen. It was just not done, that a servant slept in his master's quarters, even if it was only a dressing room.

When her mistress was awake at past ten she hastened down to take care of the mistress' bed before one of the upstairs maids could get their hands on the sheets.

That had proven to be a futile mission, as Macy, a bit red-eyed from her last night's adventures, had already been making the bed.

Rose had frowned at the girl's forwardness. She was not a lazy girl, but she was never in a hurry to tend to the bedrooms either.

Macy looked straight-laced when she walked out of Marguerite's bedroom with the laundry, but Rose could not help trace a certain smugness.

Oh, dear! No doubt those sheets would be the talk of the staff's hall today, for lack of something else as remotely interesting!

John Row had not yet been downstairs for his master's breakfast claims, which meant that the Viscount was still asleep.

Just as well, Rose had mused, until she had seen him at noon.

She had heard his footsteps in the hallway and had spied on him when he entered his own apartment.

Oh, Lord he was still in his evening wear, his elegant breeches stuffed in his riding boots! Damned, that she had not had the chance to bring Marguerite's sheets down herself, to hand them over to the new laundry-girl and wait until they disappeared in the boiling water of the big washing tub! That evidence of another night of the Viscountess' lovemaking with the wrong person had been in Macy's hands and Lord knew what she would do with the information those sheets provided!

Rose shook her head.

My, my, it was certain that the Major had taken the job seriously again! That was all that mattered, in the end; that there could be a baby. Even a baby-girl could keep her mistress away from the frequently visiting blues, although a boy would be preferable.

Rose had frowned.

How long was the Major going to stay? There was talk downstairs that he would visit his father in Edinburgh, soon. Scotland was a long way. What if Cherie did not conceive before he went away? What if all her efforts to get her mistress breeding were for naught?

Her hands trembled when she was putting away the newly washed stockings and other unmentionables.

When Master Stephen called her, she looked up with a harassed look in her eyes.

-

Stevie quickly stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

He glanced at the big bed where his sister used to sleep. There were no signs of last night's happenings left; the counterpane was neatly covering it, and the pillows were all tucked against the headboard.

“We need to talk Rose...”

Stevie sat down on one of Marguerite's dainty bedside chairs.

The room looked bright and welcoming with its cream-coloured curtains mixed with gold and soft pastels.

Rose sent him an uncertain look. She had known Stevie since he was a babe in arms, a wonderful little brat, but he had changed a lot in the last year since he had been in London. His friendship with the Viscount seemed like a blessing to her, until she had interpreted yesterday's remarks downstairs in the servant's hall about Lord Morvern.

After what she had heard about the Viscount's depravity she wondered if his very young friend who had brought him into the house might be a part of that unnatural style of friendship the Viscount seemed to prefer.

She frowned when she remembered that Stevie had been the one to insist on the wedding between the Viscount and Marguerite. She now suspected he had even called in his formidable meddling mother who had achieved the feat of the betrothal in less than a few hours. Lady McKenna's arrival had been a bit too convenient to be coincidental.

She frowned at him, standing straight-backed against the chest of drawers.

“I heard the upstairs maids chat about the state of Marguerite's bedchamber last night and the night before.”

Rose looked aghast at the young man who sat in the chair with indifferent elegance.

“I will tell Mr. Biggles that the girls feel too free to gossip about their mistress, Master Stephen,” she said breathlessly.

Stevie’s mouth turned up into a smile.

“That is not why I mentioned it,” he answered crisply, “you see, Rose, if everybody thinks the marriage is being consummated with quite some vigor...”

Rose blanched at his words.

The rascal knew! No doubt about it.

“...While the Viscount has never been at home during the first night of his wedding or the second...”

Rose gasped.

Oh, Lord, the chickens were coming home to roost!

“Then whom...” Stevie continued, enjoying his cat and mouse game immensely, “...has been sharing my sister’s bed?”

She could only gasp again, wringing her hands in front of her bosom.

“Oh, Master Stephen,” she uttered with difficulty, “it was all a misunderstanding, especially on the wedding night!”

“Ah.”

Stevie could hardly hide his elation at her quick confession.

“I did not know that the Viscount had not exchanged his guest-room for the master bedroom,” she babbled, “I thought it was him waiting in the master bedroom, so I urged him to go and...”

“Fulfill his duty to my sister?”

Stevie cocked a mocking brow.

“Then who have you sent to the Viscountess on her wedding night?”

Rose gulped like a stranded fish.

“The Major was put in the master bedroom, sir. I don’t know how that came about.”

Stevie nodded slowly.

The Major indeed; he could not have imagined a better stud.

Brilliant! It had been his suggestion to put the Major in the blue room, the one next to Marguerite’s.

“So, if the Major went in there that first night,” he nodded into the direction of Marguerite’s bed, “all by mistake as you claim, how come he has lain with the Viscountess again last night?”

The chest of drawers made a chunking sound when Rose leaned against it with some force. She looked down at the carpet; one mass of nerves.

“Because... because I asked him to, Master Stephen!”

It came out inaudibly. Stevie had the best ears in the world, however.

“You asked him to!” he repeated ominously, “Why?”

Rose came out of her nervousness. She suddenly looked at the young master with contempt.

“He had made her a very happy woman that first night, Master Stephen! Because he is a big virile man who can give her a beautiful babe, that’s why!”

Stevie raised his eyebrows at her outburst.

“Woman, you sent a stranger to my sister’s bed...”

“Don’t you ‘woman’ me, Master Stephen!” Rose suddenly hissed, “Don’t you dare criticize me! It was you who brought about a marriage with a foul debaucher, a... a... sodomite! If he never visits my lady’s bed I won’t be sorry!”

She brought her hand to her mouth in horror; not truly knowing if it was because she had called the Viscount a sodomite, or because she had snapped at Stevie.

Stevie clenched his hands into fists and pursed his lips. So the secret was out?

“How did you get this sort of indecent information about the Viscount?” he snarled.

Rose heaved a deep sigh.

“The servants downstairs, sir. They don’t know the right of it as I have told them that the Viscount was with her Ladyship those two nights. But they wondered, sir, they wondered about it as they had thought he was... He had been so brazen as to touch one of the junior footmen intimately. On his... on his behind.”

Stevie felt like swearing.

Why, oh why, could Philip not keep his hands to himself in his own household?

Bloody, bloody idiot!

“A playful pat and they think he is deviant?”

Stevie hoped to keep his voice innocent, although he steamed with anger. Philip had turned out to be a damn fool!

Rose shook her head.

“They think he slept with the Viscountess, but we both know otherwise! The first night he did not come home until five o’clock in the morning and this morning he came back at noon, less than twenty minutes ago. I saw him enter his apartments in his evening clothes. He is definitely not interested in Lady Morvern, Master Stephen! If he was, he would not have left her in the days of her... their honeymoon!”

Stevie got up from his chair.

He brought his mouth close to Rose’s ear.

“We need to do some damage control here, Rose,” he whispered. “Things have got out of hand already. It will not do for the staff to find out the eventual truth about his Lordship’s... ah... preferences.”

He took a deep breath.

“The last thing we want anybody to know is that somebody has taken over the Viscount’s duty to her Ladyship; although I must commend you for your choice of a stud!”

He smiled mockingly at her startled face.

“In the meantime, let’s not interfere with the Major and my sister. The way things look any heir will be an Agnew anyway, although he may not be entirely a Morvern.”

He strode to the door.

“What will you do?” Rose cried after him.

He looked at her with clenched jaws.

“Damage control, Rose; you play your part and you play it well! Take care that the servants won’t be the wiser about who’s sleeping with my sister in reality. I’ll talk some sense into the Viscount about his nightly wanderings.”

The door closed behind him with a click.

Rose sat down on the ottoman, covering her face with her gnarled hands, trying not to cry out in fear or confusion. She wished it had only stayed a secret between her and the Major! She knew perfectly well that Stephen had changed into an opportunistic and manipulative young man. He was not to be trusted with such sensitive information! He was sure to use it to his own advantage, no matter whom he could hurt with it.

Her only hold upon Master Stephen might be the assumption that he had been the Viscount’s lover.

She shook her head in anguish. Oh, my God, she was really too old and too humble to be drawn into such an intricate web like this!

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It was only six steps from Hengist's to Philip's room and Stevie knocked imperiously on the door.

John Row answered it at his leisure, irritating Stevie to no end.

"His Lordship is taking a bath, Master Stephen, maybe you'd like to come back later?"

"No, I won't."

Stevie pushed the unsuspecting bigger man aside.

"Row, go and have your lunch and be back in half an hour!" he commanded.

John Row looked questioningly at his master who was lying on his bed wrapped in towels, his hair still wet from the ablutions of a quick bath.

Philip looked with amusement at Stevie and then shrugged and nodded at his valet.

Stevie waited for the valet to disappear and then sat down on an ottoman.

"Not joining me on the bed, my prince?" the Viscount asked him in a mocking voice.

Stevie looked sternly at his former lover.

By God, the man behaved like a fool!

"We need to talk."

"Talk?" Philip raised a brow, "Have some brandy, my gorgeous; it's a delicious soft kind."

He took a glass from the bed table obviously filled to the rim by his industrious valet.

Stevie shook his head. It was only about noon was it? Since when had Philip started to indulge in hard spirits before five o'clock in the afternoon?

“Philip,” Stevie started in a neutral tone, “you have been married for two full days now, and the hours at night you have been at home cannot be counted on one hand.”

Philip took a large gulp of the brandy.

“So?”

“You have a specific duty to perform.”

Philip put his glass down with an irritated sigh.

“Not that again!”

“It needs to be discussed.”

Stevie folded his arms. He had to play this well; Philip could not have known about the other man visiting his sister's bed.

“I can take care of the matter; for a price though.”

Philip started to laugh.

“My prince on the white horse again?”

Stevie almost groaned. Why could his bloody Lordship not be serious?

“Do you want me to take care of it or not?”

Philip sent him a curious smile.

“Of course I do. Go ahead!”

“I can arrange it, but it will cost you.”

“How much?” Philip had stopped smiling.

“I need your full cooperation in this matter. If we want this to work, you need to come home at midnight for the next three weeks. You can leave at six in your riding-clothes, for all I care, but you must promise me to keep to your rooms between twelve and six, understood?”

The Viscount sent him a piercing stare.

“How much, Stevie?”

Ah, yes. The mercenary matter. If Stevie got four hundred pounds for his share in Gents last week, than surely Philip must have had double that price.

“Four hundred quid and payable now.”

The glass fell on the floor when Philip sat up in his bed.

“Four hundred and I don’t ever have to visit your sister’s bed?” he asked happily, “That’s done, my friend! It’s a bloody bargain!”

“Is it?” Stevie asked smugly.

That would be four hundred pounds for something that already had been dealt with! He’d never made such fast money in his life.

“I want it now, Philip,” he said impatiently.

With Philip, one never knew.

“In my yesterday’s dinner jacket,” Philip pointed.

He did not seem to care a whit.

When Stevie strode to the dress-boy where John Row had hung the jacket for airing Philip said; “No servants, and not you either, my little Prince!”

Stevie turned around to the man elongated on his bed.

“You don’t think...” he ground out.

“You and your sister? No, not really. I’d never thought you were one for incest.”

Philip grinned hatefully.

Stevie counted out his four hundred pounds from a big role of paper money, trying to keep a straight face after Philip’s insinuating remarks.

Sticks and stones... he thought. And words can never hurt me.

“I need your word that you will be at home for the next week between midnight and six or in the company of your wife.”

Philip's shrug was indifferent.

"Will I be allowed to watch?" he asked, "You know, when she and whoever are at it?"

"Christ, Philip," Stevie stammered, "I never knew a man as perverted as you! We're talking about my sister here!"

He stormed out of the room, leaving a very amused Philip, still drinking from the brandy bottle.

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"What do you think?"

Stevie watched the big man reading through the papers.

The Major sat behind the big table concentrating on the prospectus.

Stevie had studied Hengist's face with eagerness. There was no doubt about the man's powerful charisma; even just sitting at the huge mahogany table, reading, he gave the impression of unstudied magnificence.

Hengist closed the booklet.

"I cannot find much fault with the project."

"Neither does my sister," Stevie hastened to assure the Major. "She was actually quite impressed with the whole thing. She said she may be able to invest fifty thousand in it."

The last part of the remark was a lie. Marguerite had read the prospectus and had shrugged, saying she would ask her man of affairs to look into it.

His sister, Stevie knew, had shown herself a businesswoman with some acumen. She would never throw herself into any deep investments without a thorough study of the case. At least that was one of the very positive accomplishments of her marriage with the horrible Alexander, apart from the fortune she had inherited of course.

Stevie had always been surprised that William had allowed her to inherit so much. Fat William had been part of a big family throughout England and Scotland and as far as he knew, they got nothing at all when he died, not a farthing.

Hengist chuckled.

“Unlike yourself, your sister must be very rich,” he said.

“Rich and happy,” Stevie nodded with emphasis, looking Hengist very straight in the eyes.

Hengist had an unusual intuition when it came to people; probably because he had worked with them all his adult life.

He cocked a brow, looking intensely at his lover’s brother.

“Why, young Stephen, do I have the impression that was not just a statement?” he drawled, holding Stevie’s gaze sternly.

Stevie had the decency to blush.

Trying to get Hengist where he wanted him was an entirely different matter compared to the indifferent Viscount. Philip had been amused with what Stevie had been suggesting, however indecent his proposal had been.

He had to dare now; otherwise he would have to disappoint David and that was the last thing on Earth he wanted to do.

Oh, David, his ardent and decent lover!

There was some desperation in his voice when he said: “I know you have visited my sister’s bed!”

Hengist laid his arms on the table, trying not to show the turmoil Stevie’s remark caused him.

“I beg your pardon?”

He was clearly stalling for time.

Stevie swallowed.

“I know you slept with my sister, your brother’s wife.”

“Ah, is that so, Master Stephen?”

Hengist pushed a fist against his jaw.

“So why would you bring a thing like that up, after you made me study the Marylebone building plans?”

It was most uncanny how the Major was able to put such a quick link between Stevie’s remark about his sister and the prospectus.

Stevie’s cheeks reddened.

“I only would like to ask a small favor of you, Major.”

“In exchange for what? Your silence maybe?”

Hengist frowned. He hated blackmail and that was what Stevie was bluntly offering.

Stevie almost fell over his words.

“A tit for tat, Major, nothing else; my intended ignorance about the situation as against a very small favour.”

Hengist snorted. He'd got himself into a fine pickle here!

“Who else knows?” he growled, squeezing his hands into fists.

“Me, Rose, and you,” Stevie confessed with a blush that reached as far as his ears.

“What if I deny it all?”

The moment the words left Hengist’s lips, he was sorry he’d said them. It was bad enough he got himself into a situation in which this young pup could blackmail him. It was worse when he started to lie about it.

A tit for tat, indeed!

Stevie heaved a shoulder.

“Would it not be the best if nothing was said about the whole affair in exchange for a small favor?”

Hengist sighed very audibly.

“Right. If I give in to this, Master Stephen,” his voice had become clipped and sharp, “then what would the small favor be?”

Elation slid through Stevie’s mind; he was going to give in, this man? But certainly, he could not wish for a scandal, that was easy as pie. Not if he felt the remotest respect for Marguerite.

“There is this man, David Stoner, who was taught by a master mason... He would like a place as an apprentice in the office of Mr. Nash, the architect of the project.”

Hengist looked at Stevie with frank amazement. That was it? No money? Just a favour for a friend?

“Your request surprises me, Master Stephen,” he grumbled, “and although it is not a big request...”

Hell, he could have figured anything but this!

“It is still made under very shady circumstances!”

Stevie pouted.

“As if you would have helped me with this if I did not have the force of a threat behind it!”

Hengist shook his head.

“You could at least have tried. Are you going to carry tales to your sister as well, if she throws in her fifty thousand quid?”

“My sister does not seem to know who is really bedding her, Major!” Stevie said sharply, “So I suggest you do the convincing about Mr. Stoner’s position.”

The chair creaked when Hengist sat back.

He pointed a finger at Stevie.

“I’ll indulge you in this, young Stephen,” he said darkly, “but be assured this is the last insult you’ll ever throw at me! Having sexual relations with a man is a hanging offence

in my book. So if you ever utter as much as one word about your sister's situation the magistrate will know about your precious boyfriend, if not about you!"

He rose, turned and left the library, trying not to gloat.

Ah, the joke would be on young Stephen from now on! He disliked throwing a threat back into Stevie's face, as blackmail was not his style, but he hated the insolence of Stevie's attitude!

-

Stephen sagged in his chair.

How could the man have guessed about David so easily?

At least he was certain now that with Hengist's and his sister's contributions David was going to have his heart's desire. That was more important than the Major's returned threat.

He rose and walked to a sideboard to pour a glass of claret.

All in all, it had been a very profitable afternoon: four hundred pounds and the probability that David's dream would come true.

His look darkened when he sipped the excellent wine; he just dreaded to think to what cost eventually.

That Major was not a dim Scot He had a mind as sharp as a bloody razor.

Stevie suddenly sniggered; at least the future Lord Morvern would have a great mind. No doubt about that!

-

Stevie held out his arm, pointing to a red brick house which consisted of at least four stories. In the middle of the house were broad steps into a darkish maw that seemed to lead to the partly hidden entrance of no less than four doors.

They were of honey-coloured oak and gave the impression of sturdiness.

David gaped first at the house and then at his young lover.

Stevie smiled tenderly at the big man. The mason was dressed in an impeccable black woolen coat that clung to his broad shoulders. His breeches were of black velvet and his shirt was white, thick cotton such as gentlemen would wear at times of leisure. The high linen cravat he sported was stiff and knotted in an elaborate ‘waterfall.’

Stevie had never thought he would steep as low as to dress a man, but to find David new clothes -- not at one of the fashionable tailors of course -- had been an experience of a lifetime. He looked with pride at David’s very big feet which had sunken into the most beautiful black boots his money had been able to buy.

“Are you... you cannot be serious, my lord!” David stuttered.

His eyes roamed over the solid oak shutters that were to cover beautiful diamond shaped glass windows.

“I’ve never been more serious in my life,” Stevie said smugly, moving toward one of the front doors.

“Look, the entrance on the left will be ours. It gives way to two apartments, the ground-floor one will be yours and your, ah, wife and children’s, and the first floor apartment will be mine.”

David shook his head.

“You can’t... It’s too much, my lord...”

Stevie looked around him.

The house at Cowe Street was at a busy thoroughfare and it was perfect for his purpose. His first floor apartment was spacious, with a big drawing room, a bedroom at the

side of the back garden and a good shaped dressing room with a built-in bathtub. The bathtub had drainage going into the garden sewer so that it only needed to be filled with hot water. At the back of the apartment that would be David's was a big communal kitchen, which sported a food- and a hot water lift.

David's drawing room was a bit smaller than Stevie's, because it had made room for a small extra bedroom, which was an addition to the dressing room and the already existing bedroom.

Their communal front door led into a hallway with a door to David's apartment and a stair leading up to Stevie's front door.

Stevie could have kissed Master Lane, his sister's man of business, who had found him the place after having listened to Stevie's serious urgings. A week had gone by before the man had come up with the keys of the apartments, giving Stevie enough opportunity to prepare and dress his lover and his small family for a new way of life in far more luxurious surroundings.

David's sister Annie was an attractive and quiet woman, somewhere in her twenties. She was slim, tall, and soft spoken, and after having seen her Stevie had no doubt that she was in on David's secret regarding his preference for the male of the species and she clearly did not judge him for it.

That amazed Stevie most of all. He had often asked himself how his own sister would react if she knew of his attraction to men. There had never been a doubt in his mind that she would look upon him with abhorrence if she knew the truth. To have sex with a man was probably something entirely different in her book than mere admiration of one of his own gender.

David did not object when Stevie explained to him his plan; there was of course a slight opportunistic streak in him, but Stevie figured that a forgivable treat in his otherwise good character. The man had been through hard times and might be considered a gentleman because his father had been a vicar. Most certainly, David wanted the best for his sister and her two little boys.

It was a bit more difficult to get Annie into more decent clothes than the ones she had been wearing. Eventually, Stevie had turned to Rose and asked her to go out and shop for a good dress and necessary under-things for Annie first, before going to a mantua-maker of some repute with her. Annie's clothes were too shabby for words and it was clear that she'd spent all the available money David brought in on her two little boys. She now owned a small black wardrobe because she declared she was still in mourning. Stevie did not bother to ask her for whom; her long dead parents or her not so long ago deceased and true husband.

David had just shrugged his broad shoulders when he learned of her declaration. It was perfectly suitable for him to wear black with white linen shirts, so people would not wonder about him not wearing clothes of mourning as well.

Both apartments were scantily furnished with a big bed, a sturdy, oak dining room table with six matching chairs, a huge cupboard for earthenware plates and tin cans, and a commode.

Stevie was certain he would go out one day with David to find them some rugs and maybe a painting or two to decorate the bare whitewashed walls. Both apartments had a big fireplace and Stevie certainly wanted some furniture so that he could sit and contemplate by his own hearth.

“I could kiss you,” David whispered when Stevie opened their communal door with a big key.

Stevie smiled at the blond giant in front of him.

“Well, why don’t you then?” he asked with a meaningful flick of his hand, “Our bedroom is only one stairway away.”

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Hengist looked with some confusion at the contracts in front of him. So now he was to participate in the big Marylebone project, just like Marguerite.

The hard paper on which the contracts were written made a sound similar to that of an umbrella when folded in. He stared at them, not really knowing whether or not he should feel elated about the project. He would be in it for twenty-five thousand pounds which would leave him about ten thousand pounds as a reserve. Twenty-five thousand pounds would buy him about eight houses, maybe even ten if he did not buy the biggest ones.

He had discussed the project with Master Lane, Marguerite’s man of business, before getting back to the Duke about it. Master Lane had given Marguerite positive advice and she had agreed to invest fifty thousand, just like that.

Hengist had a hard time asking the Duke to negotiate the placing of a certain Mr. David Stoner in the offices of the famous architect Mr. Nash. He had blushed like a peony, not knowing how the powerful man would react, but to his amazement the Duke did not move a muscle at his request.

Well, Mr. Stoner was a lucky man to have the support of a duke, seventy-five thousand guineas, and the unknowing help of a beautiful future-countess. Hengist wondered absently what the said David Stoner looked like.

It was a busy week for Hengist, going to and fro to the Horse Guards for his witnessing of the movements of Lord Arthur Wellesley, now Marques Wellington. He knew Wellington was under close scrutiny because he had a lot of enemies in Parliament, although the group of his supporters was still bigger than the one against him. It was very clear that Wellington needed a new great victory soon or Parliament would lose interest in him and the money-gobbling war against Napoleon.

The Duke of Lindley's role in the politics regarding the Continental war was everybody's guess and Hengist had stopped thinking about it. He was not apt to readily understand the diplomatic movements involved and reminded himself that there were other pressing things on his mind.

The situation in his brother's household had been almost unbearable for him.

He had stopped coming to Marguerite's bed after her stepbrother's heinous blackmail. Hengist had lost heart, now that three people were into the secret.

He knew he could trust Rose, but Stephen McKenna was another matter entirely. So every night when he tried to go to sleep in the room next to Cherie's he gnawed his teeth, clawing his pillow with longing and regret. Sleep would elude him for a long time, while his longing for her seemed to increase a thousand fold.

He had gone back to wearing his kilt instead of his new breeches, as the cut of the breeches was so tight that the merest stirring of his loins showed. He just could not help himself when he was in Marguerite's vicinity and the tight breeches would betray him if anybody thought of looking down at them when he was in that blasted state of longing

for her. At least his sporran sat in his lap like a brick, heavy enough to keep his traitorous cock in check. Even if he hardly moved one muscle when he was close to her, his dick seemed to lead a life of its own; stirring and filling every time he got so much of a whiff of her scent, or a glimpse, God forbid, of her enticing cleavage or a fashionably bared shoulder.

Hengist did not know whether he was in love with her or only in lust and the knowledge that her bed was empty of her uncaring husband, his dear depraved brother, only made matters worse. He knew his brother would never share the same sheets with his beloved, so his sacrifice not to come to her anymore only seemed more and more useless and idiotic.

Rose always looked at him with frenzied begging eyes, but every time she did so he turned his back on her.

Marguerite, poor dear, was definitely confused with her own husband's behaviour towards her as Philip was indifferent and barely civil.

He made it a point to come home with her after the usual numbers of visits, dinners, musicales, and balls, only to leave her to go to his rooms, never to reappear until six o'clock in the morning, dressed for riding.

When Hengist once offered to join him in his early morning rides, Philip had only looked sardonically at his brother, muttering that he had better things to do than to go to Rotten Row for a tame gallop.

Hengist had pursed his lips and turned around, understanding that his brother might go out for another sort of ride than he had so friendly offered to share with him.

Lady McKenna's behavior was another nail in Hengist's coffin; her not so subtle pursuit of him became quite

relentless and after a week of trying to avoid her propositions he was clearly running out of plausible excuses and he had no other options than to be rude towards her, just to rid her of the notion that he ever wanted to bed her.

At least, to Hengist's relief, her obnoxious and manipulative son had hardly shown himself. Stephen McKenna had not joined anybody for any social affairs of late. He was in and out of the house at odd hours and seemed very content to avoid any living soul at home, especially his overbearing mother.

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Chapter 22: A DUCAL FAMILY'S INTERFERENCE

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Everything changed on the fateful night when Lady Sophia Grey, more or less forced by the Duke of Lindley, decided to throw a dinner party for the investors involved in the Marylebone Project.

The Viscount frowned when he looked at the invitation that came from the Lindley Residence in Arlington Street.

“There is no way I will sit at the same table with that upstart jerk and his Sappho sister!” he growled, throwing the engraved card on the waste-paper tray.

His wife confronted him in the drawing-room less than an hour later about his behavior.

“My lord,” she addressed him, a bit sharply as she was losing her patience with her indifferent husband, “I dare say we cannot refuse to have dinner with the Lindleys. Lady Sophia confirmed to me that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales is to attend. I have never met the Duke, or the Prince, and this seems to me the right time to become acquainted with them.”

Philip looked at her with hostile eyes. He was in a damn bad mood because he had only been able to spend a few hours with his new lover in his bedroom at Gents. The house had been noisy and Richard had seemed distracted and flighty. Philip nurtured all sorts of jealous thoughts and visions of his loved one with somebody else, such as the young rich nobles of the clientele.

“Lady Sophia?” he asked sardonically, “Since when are you acquainted with the Duke's dear old spinster sister, Madame? Don't you know about the rumors?”

That last tidbit he asked her with sarcasm honing his voice.

Marguerite widened her eyes. She was somehow getting used to her new husband's daytime manner, which was neither pleasant nor respectful. He seemed to be in a perpetual black mood when he was around her and his attitude towards her when they were in company reminded her of the very bad acting one could witness at the town square of Halkhead, when a particular bad troupe had erected their stage.

It had confused her mightily at first, but now after almost two weeks of marriage she had concluded that her erstwhile charming and oh so ardent husband had joined the ranks of most of the aristocratic espouses, who preferred to turn to other matters than annoying wives. What was worse, she knew that his attitude would not change in the next nine months at least, as she had already missed two days of her monthly flux, to Rose's delight and her own chagrin.

“What rumors?” she asked her brows lifted high.

She was dressed in a particularly enhancing morning dress of satiny egg-yolk yellow with a very low cleavage. The low décolletage had been her mother's idea of course.

Marguerite was not aware that she was looking seductive and edible to unfortunately everybody except for her husband.

“Oh, forget what I said,” Philip said rudely. “No doubt your teas with her are unduly innocent!”

He turned around to leave the room.

Marguerite was flabbergasted; her husband could be impolite, but forceful rudeness was a new experience for her.

It was as if something in her head disconnected. Such a sham, that new husband of hers! He was worse than old Alexander! At least her dead husband had a very good reason to remain in a constant black mood. Rose had told her that impotence was a truly big wallop to a man's pride; especially when he was married to a beautiful young woman. Lord Morvern did not have such an excuse, of course.

"Your brother received an invitation as well and he seems to have already accepted," she almost yelled after him.

The dratted man really knew how to make her forget her manners.

He turned round at the double drawing room doors.

"Fine," he growled, "let him escort you then. I have other things to do than to babble about things I don't participate in and that don't interest me!"

The door slammed shut behind him with an impolite crash.

Marguerite stared at it, trying to hold back her tears which seemed to flow quickly nowadays.

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Hengist had watched the scene silently from the hallway on the first floor. He gnashed his teeth when he noticed his Cherie's obvious distress.

Damnation! His brother needed a small lesson in manners and behavior towards his wife! Hengist wanted badly to take her in his arms and to tell her that everything

was all right. He would love to smack his brother's face until it bled.

He watched his brother leave the house, yelling for his phaeton.

The nerve, Hengist thought, his brother had a bloody nerve to misbehave towards the woman who had saved his miserable life from a harsh long stay in Debtor's Prison! The woman who now paid for every inch of clothing on his back and who had probably not even blinked an eye when she received the bills for the new phaeton and the imperious matched pair of horseflesh that went with it.

He went into the drawing room at last where he found her crying silently.

"Oh my sweet, please don't cry," he murmured, taking her into his arms.

She sniffled against his new green and blue wool coat that matched the green squares on his formal kilt.

Her scent wafted into his nostrils and at that moment he was damn glad he had put on his kilt that morning, as desire speared through him like a hot flame.

Marguerite clawed her fingers into the heavy wool on his upper arms trying to withhold the tears which threatened to flow anew.

Hengist squeezed her in his arms until he sensed that she wanted him to let go of her. She looked despairingly at him with tearstained cheeks, which caused his fury to burn as hot as the fires of hell.

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Hengist looked at the Duke's invitation with a face like thunder.

He had called for Rose and put Marguerite in her protecting care. Rose had been slightly confused about the

situation of finding the Major and her charge more or less entangled in an embrace. Marguerite was wallowing in her tearful sobs; Hengist's arms were not far from keeping her safe where she was.

Hengist had advised the women to go up to the Viscountess' quarters, so that her ladyship could calm down and maybe take a restoring nap.

Biggles had come in and presented him with a letter, which had travelled from his house in Edinburgh to his regiment in the Peninsula and finally found its way to the London War Office, where it had been sent forward to the Duke of Lindley, who had his secretary deliver it to the residence of the Morvern's off Piccadilly.

Damn it, it was an urgent letter from his father's steward reporting on the situation with the Earl. Donaldson explained that they were forced to bring the old Earl to master Hengist's residence in Edinburgh, a property which had belonged to the Earl's late wife and which Hengist had inherited. The reason for this move was that there had been a steady deterioration in the Earl's health, whose mind seemed to be wandering further and further into an unmarked twilight zone. Donaldson was worried about the fact that several missives to Viscount Morvern's house in London had gone unanswered.

The old steward had known Lord Morvern quite well and had always disapproved of his debauched way of life, as far as a steward could show any disapproval. He had been quick to realize that if matters had to be arranged before the Earl sank any deeper in a world where problems seemed not to exist, let alone were solved, he'd better trump up the help of the Earl's second son.

Hengist sighed heavily. He wished he could ask Philip to go to Edinburgh and take care of the matters, but he knew instantly that it would be no use; Philip would acknowledge that he should act on the urgent letter, but would delay any actions until it was too late.

Hengist remembered that the Duke of Lindley had asked him to go to Edinburgh and now that Donaldson had actually requested the same, he knew there would be nothing for him but to give in and travel to Scotland.

He looked out of a window, a pained look on his face.

It would be best to travel by sea. Travel by boat meant there would be no nights at inns; he could sleep while his voyage continued and with some luck, he may be back and forth in about ten days.

There was nothing to it.

He called Biggles to bring him ink and paper and a footman to deliver an urgent message to the Duke at the War Office.

He would be going to Edinburgh. At least that would take care of his nightly cravings to go and bed his brother's wife.

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Chapter 23: ANOTHER TEA AND AN EARL IN TWILIGHT

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“It’s a miracle she is hosting that dinner!”

Lady Bromley was leaning close to her friend, Lady Elton. Everybody else in the room heard her stage whisper, but that was also due to the fact that this afternoon less than a dozen women had visited Lady Elton’s tea.

Lady Bromley impatiently waited until the doors closed behind Lady Sophia and her companion.

Lady Elton giggled profusely. Marguerite wondered if this time her tea was laced with a good amount of whiskey. She had noticed that the cup Lady Elton drank from contained a yellowish see-through liquid, which was too light to be tea.

“I’d say the Duke has forced her to. He knows she hates that part of her obligations, but now that most of the financiers for Prinny’s project have been found, she’ll have to feed them at least once. My, if I only could have persuaded Melvin to participate! I understand even William Beckford has subscribed.”

Lady Marsh laughed harshly, scrubbing her huge bosom with a napkin.

“Well, if that one comes creeping out of that hole he’s dug for himself, you can be sure it’s a good investment. He never leaves House Prettiest Boys; not for anything!”

“He would!” Lady Bromley assured her, “As long as some of the investors have nice black curly hair and are not older than twelve!”

She looked pointedly at Marguerite who was stirring her tea.

“Your half-brother has very nice curly hair, doesn’t he?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Marguerite had not expected to be the focal point of attention at this tea. The elderly ladies mostly bore her presence with disinterest since the news that her marriage to Lord Morvern had been consumed. No hope for their sons and nephews there, anymore! She had not even wondered how the biddies had heard the news; it had no doubt circulated through the servants’ gossip.

Marguerite did not know how to tattle and never knew any good tidbits of gossip. She had been rather dreamy and silent this afternoon. She was always like the strange duck in the pond; widowed at twenty-three and married again barely a year later. She hardly fitted into the niche of elderly gossipmongers.

“William would actually love that brother of yours,” Lady Allan clarified, “although he might already be too old for his taste.”

Marguerite just stared at her, not knowing what to say or how to react. Was Lady Allan implying that...?

Lady Wharton peered at Marguerite. Lady Bromley sniffed.

“Leave the girl alone, Paula,” she boomed, “she won’t be able to form her own opinion of that dandy if you spread rumors around like that.”

“So how is your new situation for you?” Lady Bromley asked curiously.

She had not seen Marguerite since her marriage to the Viscount. What was worse, she knew a little secret or two about Lady Marguerite Morvern’s husband.

Marguerite swallowed. Only an hour ago she'd had that horrible exchange with her indifferent husband. Then Hengist had come to her rescue, consoling her and putting her in the care of her old servant. He had advised her to take a nap, but she had left for Lady Elton's tea instead.

She suddenly felt bile coming up from her stomach and she grabbed a napkin to push it forcibly against her mouth.

"Oh, my word!" Lady Allan exclaimed, peering at her whitened face, "So the rumors were true, you are already with child? Oh, my, who would have expected that from Philip Morvern?"

Marguerite slowly let go of the napkin.

"How do you... What are you suggesting, Lady Allan?" she asked in a quavering voice.

"I told you to leave that girl alone, Paula," Lady Bromley interfered gruffly, "those are only rumors and they are untrue about him, anyone can see that. So when can we expect the interesting occurrence, Lady Morvern?"

Marguerite opened her mouth and closed it again, like a goldfish in a pond.

"I only missed my, ah, specific occurrence a few days ago," she quavered, "it is not at all certain!"

When she saw almost a dozen interested eyes boring into her face, she blushed profusely.

"A few days, you say?" Lady Wharton inquired.

"See, Paula, the girl is innocent of your libel, a few days and not a few weeks! She's right, anything can happen, or nothing at all!"

She leaned over and patted Marguerite's hand.

"It's bad luck to talk about it before three months have passed. I'm glad that at least your husband knows his duty..."

Lady Wharton suddenly stopped speaking. There was always the problem with her John, an Earl who would not bed his wife. Whatever they said about Philip Morvern, at least he knew where he should properly stick it.

“How come you’re invited to that prestigious dinner?” Lady Eastbourne continued the earlier conversation as if there had not been an item at all about the Viscount.

“Oh, my husband’s brother asked me if I would put some money in it, and that’s what I did. That’s why I am to go to that dinner as well.”

“Hengist Agnew?” Mrs. Canning asked, “We really got fooled with that one, you know! Lillian Clinton came back a week ago and she said that they would have loved him as a son-in-law, but he never offered for her daughter, let alone married her!”

Marguerite still felt slightly sick, dizzy, and confused. It was true Hengist had never even mentioned that he might be engaged or married. After the bliss of her two nights after the wedding, she had not thought about Hengist’s eventual marriage anymore. Now that her happiness with Philip seemed to be over, her mind raced back to Hengist’s strong arms, which had encircled her so lovingly just this afternoon.

The ladies looked at her with expectant eyes and she only shrugged. It was bad enough that they had already stolen her secret within minutes of her entering Lady Elton’s drawing room. How long would it take them to find out that she had been crying in her brother-in-law’s arms only one hour ago?

“It’s a bit of a coup that Lady Sophia has gotten Beckford to accept for that dinner party,” Lady Elton resumed where they had left off. “Although the man is such

a disgrace since that scandal, he is still by far the richest man in England. He does not give a... farthing for our sensibilities, though. Poor Iphegenia; I just don't know how she copes with a father like that!"

Lady Bromley stared at a very specific cupcake that seemed to have been drowned in rum.

"Iffy will no doubt marry one of the dukes," she grumbled, "maybe even one of the royal dukes if she is so silly as to accept one. Money does the talking when everything else fails. I would not be surprised if Lindley would do a bid for her. He's due to marry soon, as far as I understand. He did not take another mistress. I heard he turned missy upstart Helen Fayette down and he never had a thing with Harry Wilson."

Lady Wharton stirred her tea noisily.

"It's not good Ton to talk about the demi-monde," she snubbed. "Who cares about the likes of that Fayette anyway? I happen to know Richard Grey's taste in women; he prefers them pudgy and compliant and not shrewish and as thin as a broomstick. Iphegenia Beckford is too tall and willowy for his taste, I tell you."

"And Richard is always in need of money," Lady Bromley added. "Don't forget his father left the duchy in an awful state of debt. If it comes to choosing a wife his monetary considerations will be the big issue, whether she's too tall and willowy, or not!"

Marguerite sighed. Of course, it was a well-known thing that money persuaded people into unwanted marriages. The thought had already crossed her mind that it had been her husband's one and only incentive to marry her. It was absolutely lowering!

Just how could she blame him? She had done exactly the same thing with the Fat One and now her new husband had paid her back in doing the same despicable thing to her. She had been blinded again by her mother's and Stevie's arguments.

"Be it as it may," Lady Elton concluded, "Rothford certainly had no compunctions marrying Alvesley's hand-me-downs. Poor Caroline must have had ten children, and still Rothford did not mind marrying her."

"Hm," Lady Bromley grated, "I think it's a very crazy thing to do. Rothford does not have offspring and if he thinks Caroline can still give him a full nursery he may be in for big surprise. Lady Jersey told me she's not able to conceive anymore."

"Oh well," Lady Wharton scoffed, "he probably leaves that to his brother anyway. John Lorna made his mysterious wife come to London. No doubt at his brother's command to do something useful and offer that soil some fertilizer. They say he slept with her once on their wedding night and then left her to rot in Edinburgh. Her father was only a baron and he hates her. Nobody understands why his mother made him promise to marry her on her deathbed. I think the chit was still in diapers at the time."

"She is a beautiful woman," Lady Bromley boomed, "and there are rumors galore about her and some handsome soldier-boy, who was glad to take Lorna's place in her bed. What's his name again?"

"John Rothford is not at all bad looking, if you like the type," Lady Elton added to the conversation. "Anyway, I invited her for tea a few times but she keeps to the Rothford residence, silly girl."

Marguerite gazed at the agitated woman who fished a new scone from under the heap of goodies. She wondered if she would decline the Lady's invitation, when she was married to a Duke's brother and not at all inclined to enter the less exalted circles of society. They were horrible gossips!

She sighed again. She must convince the Viscount to accompany her to the Duke's dinner. She did not want to be this tea circle's next subject of gossip. At least the dinner was about two weeks away. She would have time enough to convince her errant husband of his wrong decision not to come with her.

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“Why wasn't I told?”

Stevie leaned against the cupboard in the morning room. He had just finished breakfast and had turned to go back to Cowe Street. He liked to act as if he was still living at the house off Piccadilly.

Marguerite had been up to enjoy a breakfast in the morning room, if not with her unwilling husband then maybe with his sympathetic brother, not knowing that the early bird had left the house for a fortnight on an urgent mission to Edinburgh.

Only four weeks after her wedding she was already racked by morning sickness. She had wailed to an uncomprehending Rose that she had never heard of anyone becoming so unwell after only a few weeks of so-called pregnancy. Rose fed her biscuits and tea in bed and that seemed to help.

“It will be a very healthy boy, no doubt,” Rose had said glumly, “if he is already showing himself like that, it is!”

Marguerite had pouted and asked Rose to help her to put on a nice dress; nice as in not too enticing. It was now three weeks since her husband had visited her bed; as if he knew the need of his visits was over. She had stopped hoping that he would make another appearance in her bedroom at night. She accepted the futility of dressing to seduce him.

She had felt slightly better when she entered the breakfast room only to find out that her husband had already left the house. To her surprise, Stevie joined her for breakfast somewhat later. He was in a jolly good mood until she told him that Philip did not intend to join her at the Duke of Lindley's dinner party.

She was slightly confused about Stevie's anger when he understood the Viscount had refused to go.

"I'll talk to him, sis," he promised her, to Marguerite's vast amazement.

"It will definitely not do if he refuses to go, even if it is technically your money that is to be used for the investment."

Marguerite shot him a grateful look, although it puzzled her how Stevie would succeed with her husband where she had until now failed.

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The old valet bowed, before opening the door to the room where the Earl of Loghaire had been staying for the last two months. Hengist walked in with a distracted air.

He had preferred to go to Edinburgh Castle first to find out about the problems the Duke of Lindley wanted him to look into regarding the 42nd Regiment.

It was clear that the war against Napoleon had claimed too many of the Scots who'd fought for the King's shilling. The initial problem had been created as far away as the

battle of Culloden; many of the then able Scots had been massacred. The Scottish forces had been reduced to less than a few thousand and a larger part of the younger Scots had fled to the fleshpots of the Americas, where one was only pursued if one possessed a red skin and not a kilt. It became a problem now to find and recruit enough able young soldiers to fight in the Scottish Black Guard, Wellington's hardened Scottish regiment. The few Scots that could replenish the emptying army were loath to serve as meat for the French cannons, even if it was not solely in the interest of the English to withhold Napoleon from invading the British Isles. The Scots had held interest in the French kingdom as their ally for ages. Now, with the demise of the French King, Louis Capet and with Napoleon ruling the better part of Europe in his stead, even the hardheaded Scots had to agree that a war with France was unavoidable and could not be fought by the English only.

It might seem improbable, but Hengist's leave from the Peninsula was felt in Edinburgh; there were hardly enough Scottish officers to replace such a shift in their regions. Lochiel Cameron, who had been called to come to Portugal and later to take Hengist's position in his regiment, had left a hole in the organization in Edinburgh.

It was that bad. Hengist had not been able to do much about the problem but suggest a new recruiting campaign and had promised to try to find other officers in the other Highland regiments. The captain almost begged him to stay in Edinburgh to help build the 42nd back to its former glory, but Hengist knew he could not answer to that plea right now. There were too many other things which required his attention.

His father's valet, who went by the name of Derrick, followed Hengist quietly into the room.

Hengist sniffed and wrinkled his nose because the air in the room was decidedly smelly. He turned raised eyebrows at Derrick who was standing unobtrusively next to a throne-like chair.

Hengist wondered why there was a pile of dirty laundry on the chair, until he discovered that the pile was a human form covered in not very clean clothes. The human was bound to the chair with leather straps around his chest which failed to keep him upright; his head had fallen on his shoulder and he snored with a wide-open mouth.

Hengist gazed at his father with pity in his eyes.

He and his father had never been great friends; his father had always been fond of Philip, and that had more or less decided their relationship. James Agnew had been a formidable man twelve years ago, when Hengist had been an ensign with the 42nd. Now Hengist looked down on a thin man who was nothing like the mighty Earl his father had been when he was still the keeper of the balance between two powerful dukedoms.

He noticed with pain in his heart that his father was fastened to nothing more than a commode stool. Even sitting on his loo, the Earl had managed to piss on the sheet, which was bound around his naked buttocks and belly.

Derrick followed his gaze and blushed.

"He must have done that when I came to fetch you, Master Hengist," he apologized. "At least this way we keep the worst filth out of his way. He does not seem to notice the need to relieve himself any more, you see."

He looked morosely at the man before him and Hengist wondered if he was fighting back tears.

Derrick had been his father's valet since his father needed shaves and his own extensive wardrobe.

He had been close to his thirtieth birthday when he was taken into the young man's service. A quick calculation revealed to Hengist that the man must be approaching his seventies. Derrick had always been small and thin while his employer had always seemed big and burly. The few hairs that were still adorning his scalp were snowy white and trimmed short. Hengist guessed that he still looked so well at his age because he had never suffered the mishaps of most of the Scots; he was always well fed and the life of a valet in an earl's household was normally hardly strenuous.

Hengist wondered if the man had ever married, although he could not remember ever having heard anything of the kind.

The valet stepped forward and tugged at the Earl's sleeve.

Hengist noticed his father was wearing some sort of short night shift that reached as far as his belly. The rest of the earl was wrapped in the soiled sheet.

Derrick saw Hengist's guarded look at the sheet.

"Do you wish me to clean him first?" he asked, "I normally never leave him in such a state."

Hengist just shook his head. As a soldier, he was used to worse things than piss on a sheet.

Derrick bent over the sleeping man.

"Look who's here, milord!" the valet announced in a loud voice.

There was a snort and then the Earl lifted his head sleepily.

"Mm?"

“Look who’s here!” the valet repeated, standing aside so that the Earl could see Hengist.

He peered at his son, closing one eye.

“Would he know me?” Hengist asked with anxiety in his voice.

The valet was about to shrug when the Earl gave a big smile full of wonderment.

“Da?” he asked.

Hengist stood frozen but the valet stroked the Earl’s sleeve again.

“Da?”

“He thinks you are his father,” Derrick apologized, “I am so sorry Master Hengist, but the doctors explained he is living in the past, only remembering things that happened forty years ago, if he ever talks, that is.”

The Earl stretched out a trembling hand into Hengist’s direction and Hengist could only think of clasping it between his own two big paws. He was shocked to notice how claw-like his father’s hands were.

“Oh, father!” he sighed, shaking his head, “Oh, that it has come to this!”

The Earl nodded, showing another delighted smile.

“Da!” he said again.

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Donaldson reached for another sheaf of paper when the old butler shuffled into the library.

“Doctor Prendergast, my lord,” he announced with a quaking voice, stepping aside from the door to make space for a burly man.

Hengist looked up with a frown.

Donaldson had told him that it would be better to leave everybody in the belief that he was Lord Morvern, which

might make a few things less complicated if it came to doing business, which could only be handled by the heir.

Donaldson had explained to him that too many affairs were left without proper handling. With the Earl in his recent bad state, the earldom was almost at a point of collapsing.

Hengist had resented the fact that he had to act again as if he was his brother, but he saw the reason for it. Only Derrick had known at once that he was the second son. None other in the household was able to see the distinction.

Philip had not been at the Edinburgh property for years. Now that Hengist had inherited his mother's house, Philip had never felt inclined to visit the house anymore. He hated Edinburgh and preferred to stay in London, anyway.

The staff in the house, which was originally his mother's, had been quite new apart from Derrick and Donaldson.

Padding, the old butler, did not seem to remember him at all.

They had worked in the library all day with Donaldson dragging one paper after another out of files and portfolios.

Hengist was appalled to see that Donaldson was actually right. His father's heritage was in a very bad state.

Donaldson explained that Lady Loghaire had done her utmost to keep the earldom afloat but the wasting disease had taken all her strength in the last half year of her life and only the very necessary arrangements had been made in the one and half year that had lain behind them. Donaldson handed Hengist his father's seal and his ring, muttering that Lord Morvern never bothered to come and fetch them, although they had warned him that his father was not able to make any lucid decisions anymore.

Hengist stared at the artifacts of his father's power, wondering when Philip was ever going to take up his responsibilities. He already knew in his heart that Philip would not mind the title but would object to the administrative details that came with it.

Hengist remembered that his mother had often complained that it was a disgrace, when the heir could not care less, where the spare always did.

He did care for God's sake. He had been doing the work that should be by all rights Philip's. He paid necessary funds out of his own pocket, as there had been no other way. The earldom was devoid of money, but he still had his mother's inheritance, minus the investment he was going to make in London.

Hengist often wondered how it was possible that an intelligent man like Philip had no inkling of what would be expected of the future Earl of Loghaire. For Philip, the world was one big playground and he just never ceased to play. Of course, it was always easier to turn your back on your duties and pretend that you had none.

Hengist knew his brother better than anybody else in the world.

Philip had always acted as if he was too stupid to understand his responsibilities, but Hengist knew that Philip had never had any problems at school, or even at Cambridge, to get through his exams. Philip paired a quicksilver mind with a boggling laziness, possible astuteness with incredible indolence, which was nothing new of course; Philip just played the role of the haughty, uncaring aristocrat to perfection.

When the doctor arrived in the study Hengist rose and held out his hand.

“I am glad you could come, Doctor Prendergast,” he grated, signaling the butler to give the doctor a chair, “I was shocked to find the Earl in such a bad state.”

The doctor’s handshake was cool but firm.

“I am delighted myself that you have come at the summons of Mr. Donaldson, my lord,” he admitted quietly, obviously not intending to hide his displeasure about the Viscount’s absence in Scotland for so many years.

Hengist preferred not to react to the doctor’s hidden censure. It was bad enough that neither he nor Philip had been there when his mother died, something the doctor seemed to remember far too well.

Hengist knew his stay in the Peninsula was of course excuse enough, but everybody in the house and beyond seemed to know of Philip’s lack of interest.

“Tell me why my father is like... like this...” Hengist asked when he had sat down on his chair.

“Stay, Donaldson,” he commanded sharply when the steward prepared to leave the room. “Sit down for God’s sake. This is as much your affair as it is mine!”

Donaldson took a chair and tried to make himself unobtrusive.

“Your father is suffering from an illness that is called dementia, my lord. It is a sickness of the brain that causes some kind of ... uh, madness. It started to show about five years ago when he had that accident and it was a bit of a slow process in the beginning, so that it took some time to diagnose it. He had broken his hip in different places when he was fishing and fell from a rock, remember, but it was not clear that the trauma affected his brain as well as his body. Only when the Earl started to become restless at nights and his forgetfulness became too notable to be called

distraction did the illness became evident. We had hoped it was only a state of melancholic dementia which seems is curable under some circumstances.”

Hengist stared at the doctor.

He was a medium-sized man approaching his fifties. He nurtured the belly that came with a profession that provided more than enough food on the table and a few glasses of wine at supper. There was an air of professionalism about the man. Well, to be the house surgeon of an Earl did require knowledge, especially when the Countess had hired him, whenever they lived in Edinburgh. His mother had never been one for hiring a doctor because he was good Ton, or some other fashionable excuse.

“Dementia?”

Hengist rubbed his chin with his hand. He had not taken the time to shave that morning.

“Is that not something people get when they are old? Father was only fifty-four, five years ago.”

The doctor shook his head.

“The illness often reveals itself in people who are in their dotage, true enough, but it is known to happen to anybody at any age. The asylums are regretfully full of people of all ages with this affliction.”

That stopped Hengist short.

“So you are saying that my father shows such a state of madness that normally he should be confined in an asylum?”

The man sitting opposite him pursed his lips.

“Asylums are institutions for the mad, indeed. If your father had not been an Earl with an entire staff of caring servants at his disposal he might have very well found himself in such a place. As long as he can be confined to his

room and is not allowed to wander, he will be perfectly fine. He is not very aggressive anymore. He has already passed that stage due to his forgetfulness.”

Hengist nodded slowly. So his father was mad. That was a damn sensitive revelation.

“Why does he need to be restrained to that stool?”

The doctor shifted in his chair.

“Donaldson,” Hengist turned his head to the steward who still tried to be unnoticeable, “I think it is time for some refreshments, it’s late enough for a claret. Ask Padding to bring in a bottle and three glasses, please.”

He smiled when he saw the look of appreciation in Donaldson’s eyes, wondering whether it was for the ordered claret or the ‘please’ he had added to his request.

He turned back to the doctor.

“Your father broke his hip again, more than two years hence. Because he did not realize he injured himself in his state he tried to walk on it and only made the injury worse. He had to be restrained because he tried to get up all the time. His valet requested to put him on a stool, as the Earl does not seem to remember... Many such patients don’t remember the functions of their bodies. His valet was only being very practical, combining the restraint and the stool. He is to be commended for his inventiveness and his care, I must add.”

Ah, the doctor was in league with the valet in this.

Hengist suppressed a smile. It was obvious that both men cared about his father, which was a bit like balm for his heart.

“So what is the prognosis?”

Doctor Prendergast blinked his eyes.

“Prognosis? I am afraid the situation can only grow worse, my lord.”

Hengist nodded at a silent Padding who had entered the room with a decanter and glasses and who started to serve the wine to the three of them.

“Worse?” Hengist asked unbelieving, “What can be worse than being restrained to a stool and to think his son is actually his father?”

“I am not certain we can speak of worse or more severe, my lord. It is a matter of how we define a situation. Two years ago, when the Earl was confined to his bedroom and later on the stool, he would shout all night, driving everybody to the limits. We had to silence him by giving him laudanum, but that caused addiction to the medicine. It was a very hard time for everybody in the house and especially for the Countess who was declining rapidly with her very unfortunate wasting illness. What I mean by worse here is that he will in all probability go into a further decline of madness. He will remember less and less, act like a two-year-old child, and forget all his speech. In the end, if his body does not give up on him, he will live like a... a vegetable.”

“There surely must be some medication?”

Hengist was in shock.

The doctor only shook his head. He reached for his glass and took a careful sip. It flashed through Hengist’s mind that unlike most Scotsmen Doctor Prendergast was not a drinker.

“The stage your father is in is already beyond any sort of cure, my lord, I am deeply sorry to tell you. It is fortunate, as I already stated, that he has the servants to make his life a bit more bearable. I don’t know if you have ever been inside

an asylum, but one can imagine there are a lot of places on Earth where one might prefer to be than there.”

Hengist sagged back into his chair, his glass of wine forgotten on top of the opulent desk which might have been his father’s, once.

“So what must I expect?”

The doctor gave a short laugh.

“He may yet live to be a hundred, but he will never be able to do more than what you can expect of a two year old toddler. The earldom will need a regent until the day he dies.”

“He may live to be a hundred?” Hengist asked with doubt in his voice.

“As a matter of speaking; most of those patients don’t survive a decade of such illness. Just as they forget the words and every day’s dealings, their body seems to forget the good use of its functions. They die inside. It starts with unexplained inflammations in the whole body and in the end the body refuses to cope with that.”

Hengist shook his head, despair entering his mind.

“What does he feel? Does he notice things?”

“He only notices some of the discomforts, my lord.”

The doctor threw Hengist a sad look.

“The discomforts are only felt like a babe in arms would feel them. It’s far worse for the people around him.”

Hengist took a large swallow of his claret.

“So we are left to see him go into a decline, unable to be of any help to him?”

The doctor dipped his head. He did not care to hear that specific request that was so contrary to his oath of Hippocrates and his own religion, that obviously lay on Hengist’s lips.

“I am afraid that is what it will be all about, my lord.”

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Chapter 24: AN UNWELCOME RENDEZVOUS

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Why the hell do I always get myself into the traps of cloying women? Hengist mused, looking down at the one woman he really did not wish to see in London.

Only one day after he had come home from his voyage he had received a note inviting him to come to the Boar and Arrow, one of the North London posting inns.

He did not mind the one-hour ride to the far outskirts of London on a frisky and happy Jason. Although the grooms would ride the horse when Hengist was not in London, the horse was obviously happy to have his master back to take the reins.

His return to the house off Piccadilly seemed uneventful, as if nobody seemed to have noticed his absence. Only the face of Ian, the head footman, had lightened up when he saw Hengist emerge from the hackney that he had taken from the London docks after leaving the small ship in the port.

Hengist was relieved at the indifference with which he had been received.

There was enough turmoil in his head to last him a lifetime. Sorrow, regrets and anxiety for the future of Loghaire...

He had never feared death on the battlefields, but now that he had seen death's approach in the face of his own father, a slow sliding into nothingness, he nurtured feelings of sadness and remorse.

For the 42nd Regiment he had done what he could do to help to find solutions, but truth be told, they were only of a

long-term nature. He still had to find the short-term solutions for the Horse Guards, pertaining to the war in the Peninsula and the available Scots. He was afraid they would have to send the reserve-regiment that was not yet fully trained to the Peninsula, keeping only a very small framework for further training of recruits in Edinburgh.

He had left Edinburgh with sad feelings about the earldom.

Donaldson had suavely overlooked the fact that he was not really working with the heir, as times called for some quick decisions, and if Hengist made his signatures obscure enough nobody would be the wiser, he had allowed.

Hengist understood like no one else the need to arrange things, so that the earldom would not be hindered by the Earl's inability to even scrawl his name on a document, so he helped wherever he could.

He would have liked to visit his mother's grave, but it was not sensible to do so because it was at Loghaire Castle, one day's ride to the South, which would be a waste of at least two days. He gave in to the urge to speed back to London instead, only to find that nothing had changed there during the days of his absence.

The Boar and Arrow was one of those very busy inns, catering to the people who came to London from the Northern road. It was also the assembly place for the coaches from all directions except the South.

He discovered that it was also the perfect meeting place for a secret rendezvous.

The inn was big and busy. If one succeeded in being unobtrusive, quite impossible if one was almost 6 foot five tall and handsome, you might get away with it there.

At the house off Piccadilly, a boy brought him clear instructions written in a letter with distinctive feminine handwriting.

“Please meet me at the inn. Please wear English clothes (meaning no Scottish gear, he presumed). I will be waiting in the private room on the first floor at the end of the Western corridor.”

He had been too curious and too bored to disregard the puzzling request.

He started to wonder if he was overstaying his welcome at his brother’s new premises. He hardly ever spoke to Philip, as they seemed to be awake at entirely different hours.

He still had to duck the very persistent advances of his brother’s mother-in-law as well.

The lovely Marguerite, in the meantime, was without a doubt confused and in distress about her husband straying from her bed, since he had made an impressive appearance on the first two nights of their marriage.

Hengist was very sorry to see her in such a state of depression about her husband, but he considered that there was no way to help change the situation, in which he had played his own doubtful role.

He wanted to feel disgust for the whole situation, but his elation of having slept with the woman of his heart drove his disgust away. He asked himself many times how he could get himself entangled in such an atrocious situation and not feel bad about it. He wondered if he was an opportunist, just like his debauched brother.

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Similarly, he asked himself why he was not surprised to see the enticing Lily Clinton in the private room at the inn.

The letter had hardly been subtle, but Hengist had never seen Lily's handwriting before because they had only dealt in fast hard sexual encounters - a spur of the moment thing - without ever exchanging written notices.

She made a beeline for him, jumped into his arms, and opened his very modern pantaloons, fishing out a rather erected cock and before he knew it, he had been humping her in one of their favorite upright positions.

It was only after the deed was done that he shook his head, wondering how on earth he could have submitted to another bout of frenzied passion with Lily Clinton when his heart so longed for his brother's beautiful wife.

The answer that formed in his head made him blush with shame. His infatuation with Marguerite had never prevented a good tumble with Lily Clinton before and obviously, even after he had Cherie in a clandestine way, Lily could still easily arouse him to a frenzied lust and a voracious fuck.

He stopped himself wondering what that would make him into.

When Lily had closed her eyes drowsily for a little nap on the big bed, urging him to do the same, he noticed he was still too excited to sleep and he pawed her because he wanted to repeat their lustful encounter.

Lily would not have been Lily to skip an opportunity like that and they soon lay panting and growling on the bed.

Hengist forced all thoughts about love and decency from his mind, only allowing lust and Lily's squirming body to lead him on. Lily was too experienced not to notice the initial doubt, but that same experience helped him to enter a haven of wriggling flesh and exalted arousing cries. It was

after their second hurried coupling that thoughts of Marguerite fell down on him like a brick.

Hengist turned to his clothes he had shed hastily.

He did not know what to do or to say to a luscious smiling Mrs. Clinton, his colonels' wife.

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Lily got slowly and incredulously up from the bed, gaping at Hengist's broad disappearing back.

"Where do you think you are going?"

Her voice was sharper than she had ever used on her lover before.

Hengist started when he reached for the doorknob.

He felt a blush creep over his face.

"I, ah, thought you might like some wine from downstairs," he improvised.

Lily smiled, nodded, and lay back on the bed, covering her nakedness with a blanket.

"Oh, Hengist," she sighed at his disappearing back, "you are such an attentive man!"

Hengist's blush deepened when he made his way down the stairs. Had he really thought to walk out on Lily Clinton as if she was a one-shilling whore? He had treated the dirtiest camp follower with more respect than that!

He sighed deeply, a sense of betrayal churning his gut.

What had he done? His heart belonged to Marguerite Agnew, Viscountess Morvern, his brother's wife in all but reality, his, in all his dreams. She gave her virginity to him. Unknowing, yes, but it had been him who had bedded her after she had spoken her marriage vows to his brother. Why, on Earth, had he bedded Lily Clinton? What was wrong with him?

The answer to that question was shameful; he had been horny and ready to bed just any willing body. Lily's presence in the inn had been the secret fulfillment of a wish; he wanted a fuck. He was sick and tired of only dreaming to have his Cherie underneath him. There was not a chance of him going back to her bedroom and sinking into her body without her finding out that it was not her husband Philip sharing a bed with her, because a young poof had blackmailed him about bedding his married sister.

He still nurtured lustful feelings while he could not have her anymore.

He slowly opened the door to that bedroom again, a flagon of wine and two glasses in his hands.

The miracle he seemed to have hoped for, that the room would be empty, the bed unused and Lily Clinton gone, went up in smoke the moment he turned to the bed.

She was laying there in all her promiscuous glory, the blanket hardly covering her belly, making a frame for her big bare breasts.

It was the first time that Hengist almost felt sick to see her half naked in front of him.

She sent him a seductive smile and tapped the place on the bed next to her.

Hengist obliged with trepidation.

He tried to gain time by slowly filling the two glasses with the outrageously expensive claret the barmaid downstairs had handed him, while giving him a fat wink.

Lily was more perceptive than Hengist had credited her to be. She pouted her lips, shirking her bare shoulder against his upper arm and then raised her glass.

"To no regrets," she said quietly.

Hengist nodded, toasted her in silence, and drank.

“You have always been grumpy after we've made love, you know,” she remarked casually. “Why’s that, Hengist?”

Hengist sipped his wine again, his mind in a whirl.

He tried a short laugh.

“Am I now?”

God, this was sodding awkward!

Lily shifted on the bed, covering her breasts with a sheet.

“We need to talk, you and I.”

Alarm bells started to clang in Hengist’s head. His so-called talks to Lily had never been more than lustful grunts and teasing banter during sex and shortly after those momentous occasions, if there had not been a reason to race away from her.

He opened his mouth but could not for the life of him find a proper reaction to her remark.

Lily was not a woman to mince words.

“I’m leaving Clinton,” she announced.

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The silence after she dropped her little bomb was heavy and long.

Hengist looked at her with bland incomprehension.

Lily slammed her fist against his chest.

“I am leaving Clinton, you dolt!” she growled, anger rising in her voice.

Hengist took a deep breath.

“So you just told me,” he said slowly.

Tears filled Lily’s eyes.

“I’m leaving Clinton,” she repeated with some expectancy, of which Hengist could not grasp the meaning. He was too numb to understand anything right now.

Lily swallowed when Hengist still refused to react properly.

“I am leaving Clinton,” she said slowly, “because I am expecting your child, Hengist.”

Hengist’s eyes widened.

“How...”

He looked at her almost pleadingly.

Her laughter pearly from her mouth, the undertone derisive and sarcastic.

“We always fucked without protection, Hengist, so one may credit the possibility that the child is yours.”

“You’re married,” Hengist argued. “How can you say the child is mine?”

Lily’s mouth went down.

“I knew you would not make this easy for me!”

Hengist registered a certain astonishing lack of logic in her remark.

“Lily, you are married and no doubt I have not been the only one to bed you, so how can you say I am the father of the child you think you carry?”

Lily started to cry.

“Because... because Clinton has ... God, Hengist, don’t you listen to rumors? Clinton hardly ever touched me in his life!”

“But you have a daughter together, Lily,” he protested, needing to close his eyes as some devastating whispers about Colonel Clinton suddenly came back to him.

“Don’t you understand?” Lily nearly hissed, “He is not Bettina’s father.”

Hengist sat back against the headboard, almost gaping like a fish...

“Then who...”

“Does it matter?” Lily snapped. “He has always accepted it and acted like her father, even when he knew she could not be his.”

Lily’s look became mutinous.

“Some men don’t fuck women!” she ground out, “I know you cannot comprehend that, Hengist, being the stud that you are!”

Hengist froze into silence. Some men don’t fuck women. His brother did not. In addition, Colonel Clinton, this woman’s husband, obviously did not fancy indulging in that sort of bed sport, either.

“How long?” he asked.

“You mean how long ago I conceived?” she asked.

“It must have been two months ago.”

He nodded and then drank from his glass. The claret tasted horrible but then everything in his mouth would have tasted like ashes.

“If he has accepted the fact that you conceived Bettina by another man, would he not be equally accepting of a new babe right now?”

Lily snorted.

“Not when it’s a boy. Clinton’s lover is his heir. He would be abhorred if his precious entitlements went to his cuckoo child.”

Hengist frowned. He had never been a Debrett's fanatic, but everybody knew Clinton’s heir was his old cousin’s son, Benjamin Grosvenor, Captain with the 24th fusiliers. A worthless man who did nothing but hide behind his soldier’s backs when there was so much as a quarrel. Clinton had wanted him to become his aide, but Wellington himself had interfered. The last thing Wellington needed was a profound weakness in his regiments due to two incompetent high

fliers whose sole value was that their families had been rich enough to buy them their commissions.

“Lily, a divorce will take years and I am certain Clinton will abhor the scandal. What if it brings up all the hidden shit? Wellington would adore it if one of his colonels is hanged because he feels unnatural love for one of his own captains and his heir to boot. To have to give his inheritance to his bastard son would be a small price to pay, given the fact that your son will only receive it all when his so-called father has turned up his bloody toes.”

Lily shook her head.

“You don’t understand, Hengist. Benjamin’s father has squandered his fortune. He is the sickest gambler in the world. When his lovely daddy goes to heaven he will be worse than destitute. And Clinton thinks he’s too fine to rot in Debtor’s Prison.”

“Still a divorce won’t help you or Benjamin out of your misery. The child will be born before you have your divorce, if you go ahead with it, and then Clinton will be its official father anyway.”

Lily hung her head. Hengist’s reasoning was too clever to be untrue.

Yes, what could Clinton do but accept the child as his, if he wanted to avoid exposure to the world as the freak that he was?

Tears welled in her eyes. What she had wanted was for Hengist to fold his muscled arms around her and tell her that everything was going to be all right. That he would marry her the moment she would be free to do so.

Lily Clinton was not really a very smart woman; she grew up within the protection of the rural Cotswolds, the daughter of a country squire who had caught the attention of

the Clinton family while they were spending their summer vacations there.

Harry Clinton was a quiet second son, destined to follow in the footsteps of his uncle and grandfather who had formed their own regiments to fight for His Majesty's shilling. It was obvious that he would be more fitted for the robes of the church but that had been no option within this martial family. The pretty sixteen year old girl with the promise of radiant beauty became the perfect bride, as her sauciness and sexual attraction were hidden within the bloom of her young innocence. At eighteen a quick come-out was arranged in London and looked upon with indulgent smiles, while a very shy Harry Clinton courted his countrified bride. The miracle ended when Clinton had kissed his wife on the cheek on their wedding night and then left her to a lonely marriage bed in which he never intended to sleep, let alone perform.

Hengist shook his head slowly. Poor Lily must not have noticed at once that something was wrong when her husband led her to her bedroom door, kissed her hands or her cheek tenderly and then left her to her very own dreams.

"Lily," he said with regret in his voice, "I am not the solution to your problems. Clinton will just have to accept the situation as he had created it years ago."

He frowned when she looked up at him in sheen of tears.

"What of the child, Hengist? Your child, maybe your son?"

He clenched his jaws; a son, a child? Women had nothing else in the world to think about other than conceiving, birthing and nurturing; all very far from any man's experience. It was something a man never thought of,

other than to cope with such problems by having himself fitted his own French letters.

For Hengist the idea of sons was being one, not having them.

“Maybe you’ll have another girl, Lily,” he said quietly. “I don’t know what to think, honestly.”

When she looked away from him, probably in disgust, a small voice inside him wondered if he was not being set up. Who knew who Lily Clinton bedded? The father could be anyone with a title, a high position in the army and at least a six inch dick!

He took a deep breath.

He had rejected a good number of women in his life. Women were never satisfied with merely the quick sex that was so convenient for him; they all had wanted him, body and soul, hair and bones, and every thought that crossed his mind.

They never took ‘no’ for an answer gracefully or easily. Lily was not going to be an exception, that much was obvious.

“Lily, I am in love with somebody who is very close to my heart.”

He used his Scottish burr that normally gave the impression of tenderness, but also finality.

“Even if it would be possible to marry you it would be a mistake. I am sorry.”

Lily gaped at him, the sheet falling down around her white round belly.

“You are in love with somebody else?” she asked with incredulity in her voice.

Oh, God, Hengist thought, she cannot really have been thinking we were more than lovers, enjoying a quick fuck now and then?

He nodded slowly.

“I have been in love with her for half a life-time, Lily, and I’m here in London to do something about that.”

Lily’s eyes started to squeeze together.

Hengist knew this did not signal anything good. Women always reacted like that when he denied them a wedding ring and the life next to a second son of an Earl.

He jumped from the bed just in time to avoid a hit with a stone claret decanter.

“Please, Lily,” he almost begged.

They had been friends in a way. She had helped nurse him back to health after he had almost been sliced in two. There had been fun evenings and stolen moments of deeply satisfying sex.

“I hate you Hengist!” she choked, “God, how I hate you!”

There was truly nothing left for him to do but to walk to the door and leave.

With his cock still sticky from their juices he mounted a swiftly saddled Jason, feeling sadness and remorse.

Good Christ, it had been Lily who had wanted this seduction, but why did he feel as if he had just let her down in a very damnable way?

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Chapter 25: PARTICULAR DINNERS

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“Where is he?”

Marguerite looked around in a panic when she reached the landing of the big U-shaped stairway that led right to the wide opened doors of the Duke’s drawing room.

Hengist bit his lips in annoyance.

He was dressed in his new-fangled evening wear; a black coat, white satin breeches and a silver and ice-blue waistcoat. The right evening wear involved knee breeches and silk stockings with black shoes, adorned with silver buckles.

The last time he had worn knee breeches was on one of his visits to the North. He was eleven years old then, forced by his father to join the aristocracy that received the King in Edinburgh.

He moved one step behind Marguerite’s skirts.

She wore something skimpy, in green silk. Down from under her waist-line the shape of her enticing derrière was almost fully visible under the swirling silk.

He ground his teeth, trying to tamp down the erection that had bothered him since she had come down the stairs at home. She was a dream in silks and emeralds, her dark hair lifted high on top of her crown, away from her visible, pale, and kissable long neck.

He almost groaned when she had made a curtsy to him, showing her white, partly silk covered breasts.

The ride in her carriage had been hell enough, but now when he was facing her delectable backside, he experienced

a deep wish for the privacy of a closet to relieve himself of his lustful tension.

The evening would be damnably long, and he did not fancy the painful blue balls that awaited him if he was not relieved of his predicament in time.

“Your card please, Madame, Sir!” the butler at the door asked, while a footman with impeccable white gloves extended a silver tray.

“Oh, my word!” Marguerite stammered, “My husband should have them, but he is not...”

The butler allowed himself a fleeting annoyed look, before his face folded back into an indulgent smile. When one was a butler in the residence of a duke, one had obtained one of the highest rungs of the ladder. He did not feel elevated over the aristocratic guests, but already he had seen a few cit yokels that had the brunt of his contempt. He feared he was facing another two of those.

“Did you happen to bring the invitation, Sir?”

Hengist, abhorred by his predicament, that he was going to be announced to the highest Ton circle in London with telling, bulging satin breeches, had remained silent for one moment too many.

“I am Lady Morvern, wife to Viscount Lord Morvern,” Marguerite said breathlessly, and very much against the strict door rules. “He should be...”

“Ah,” the butler nodded suddenly helpful after his gaffe of deeming them of lowly cit status, slightly puzzled by the couple’s strange behavior; of course he had seen their names on the list of invitations.

“Yes, of course! This way my lord, my lady...”

Hengist gazed momentarily at the butler’s straight back and then understanding dawned.

“Oh, Christ, no...” he mumbled, not daring to step away from behind Marguerite’s swishing skirts, “He’s going to... Good Lord, stop him Marguerite, he’s going to announce us together! He thinks we are...”

Marguerite looked back at him in confusion, but he was too close behind her.

Her only view was his square chin. She did not understand what he wanted to say to her so she hurried after the Duke’s butler.

The butler ceremoniously took his place next to the door.

“Viscount Lord Morvern and Lady Morvern!” he announced with a voice that extended to the end of the huge drawing room.

Hengist looked straight into a room full of strangers, most of them members of the exalted London Ton and the less exalted, but wealthiest people of London.

Marguerite barely suppressed a gasp when she heard the announcement. Only now did she understand Hengist’s urgent plea to her to stop the butler.

There was nothing else for it than to endure the butler’s wrongful announcement at the door.

Hengist prayed that everybody’s eye was fixed on the beautiful newlywed Viscountess and that nobody would think to look down his waistcoat and further, where his bulge was still very visible under the silk of his white breeches.

Sweat started to trickle from under his thick blond hair.

He hardly paid attention to the fact that he was now upgraded to the rank of Viscount and a lord’s title. He never had the right to a title: his father had become Earl of Loghaire when Hengist had been eleven years old. Philip

had become a 'lord' then, because he inherited the viscounty when their father became Earl of Loghaire, but Hengist had acquired nothing.

He had to take a deep breath in order not to panic.

Christ, please let nobody notice his arousal! He would be the laughing stock of London tomorrow, if not of this party, if they only assumed...

He silently cursed the frog-coat that was the height of fashion and which the Bond Street tailor had talked him into purchasing.

The thing was entirely cut away from his front, the tails only covering his buttocks, and cut parallel over his hips. If only he could have worn his bloody kilt instead of white silk breeches! Silk! It clung to his crotch as if it had been wet before he got into them.

He breathed quickly again through his nose but nothing could abate his arousal.

Good Christ, the mystery of the prick! Even when he was afraid of being embarrassed the thing refused to slink back into its relaxed shape, something that could still be cause for embarrassment in silk breeches.

"Ah, there you are, my wonderful investors," the sophisticated voice of the Duke rang out. He strode to the baffled pair with both arms stretched wide.

Marguerite curtsied deeply to the man with the right to carry the ducal strawberry leaves, presenting the whole audience with a good view of her seductive cleavage.

Hengist ground his teeth again when he heard the appreciative murmur of the men in the room. Oh, he concurred entirely, for certain, but why did that have to be so visible?

“Major?” the Duke asked with a mocking frown, his voice not louder than an almost whisper, “Did my butler muddle up? Where’s the Viscount?”

“I’m afraid your butler was not presented with any cards and misunderstood the fact that I brought the Viscountess in,” Hengist confessed out of the corner of his mouth. “My brother was to come here separately. At least your man got the Viscountess part right. Marguerite was not carrying a card of course and I have never bothered with them myself, truth be told.”

“Oh well,” the Duke chuckled with an amused smile, “then you will have to play the part until your brother is here. Never mind, now that you are not wearing a kilt the two of you look alike, like the proverbial two eggs in a basket.”

He looked Hengist over while he raised Marguerite from her curtsy, planting a charming kiss on the knuckles of her gloves.

“You are most ravishing, Lady Morvern,” he claimed, peering into her eyes. “My sister has already told me all about you. She told me you were a very charming woman, but I don’t think she did you justice with that statement. Viscount Morvern is a very lucky man.”

The Duke glanced sideways at Hengist who seemed to hover over Lady Morvern like a tall shadow.

Interesting that, he mused.

Sophia’s account of Viscount Morvern’s wife had surprised him no end, until he heard of her inheritance. One did not have to be an insider to know of Lord Morvern’s tastes, which most certainly did not include beautiful women, however rich they were.

Ah, but he liked a bit of intrigue, especially at a party that might turn out to be an excruciatingly dull affair otherwise. He was forced to invite Prinny and part of his darn clout. There were even a few rich cits with their over-ambitious wives, but a heavy protocolled dinner never turned out to be very interesting; the cits would be too over-awed by the presence of the Prince of Wales, while part of the present Quality would be delighted and cater to his every whim, and the other part would surely be resentful and slightly sour because they distrusted his presence in any endeavor that had to do with money.

The Prince was known to be a fickle man, his battle against his father to obtain the throne before the King died was a proven situation that did not carry everybody's agreement. He was a staunch Tory and a resourceful enemy if he was set upon it, a gambler and a man with strong tastes; in a way a true son of a King who was considered to be as mad as a hatter. Still one had to cater to the Prince's whims because he was the necessary big hat in the latest and most ambitious building project of London.

For a few seconds Lindley wished himself abroad again, visiting the troops in Portugal or appearing at a royal embassy far away from London. Life would never be more secure than here in his own house in Mayfair, but on the other hand, there he would be his own boss; ruler of his own mind. Here he was subjected to a fat man who overindulged in everything God had chosen to give the Earth, only because his cradle had been standing in a royal palace. Sophia was to sit at the Prince's right hand side at the table, but now Richard wondered if he should put the delectable Lady Morvern close to the second man in the Kingdom. On the other hand, the Viscountess was very young, somewhere

in her twenties, he guessed. Prinny liked the more stale type in his company. All his mistresses had always been a good few years older than himself. No, the young Viscountess would be wasted on the Crown prince; she just did not carry the right amount of years.

He smiled. He would re-plan the sitting schedule so that she could sit close to him. He liked them of Marguerite's years himself because he was only in his mid-thirties and had never stopped to adore the tasty scent of younger bodies. With some women he did not care whether they were young or in their thirties: when they were experienced whores then of course age did not matter, as he just wanted their jaded special ministrations that he quite favored once in a while.

He had never cared to start 'friendships' with younger women that were of another nature than the admiration of the flesh. He had never met a young woman who was able to keep his interest for more than a good tumble. Young girls of the Ton were mostly vapid, stupid and annoyingly cloying as soon as he showed the least interest in them. 'Everybody wants to marry a Duke,' was the saying and it indeed haunted him wherever he went in Polite Society.

His now deceased wife had been very young, but so was he at the time. She had been sweet and demure, but his interest in her had not survived their two months of honeymooning. He had been bored to tears at last when they had retired to his estate in Wiltshire.

He had done his utmost to put an heir in her belly, but in the end her solemn attitude towards 'the Act', which meant for her to spread her legs and pray to the Lord -- by which she had not meant him, by the way -- had driven him into the dairy house. There the lusty girls had shown him the real

meaning of rural life. It was a pity that his new wife had gone to look for him, pure coincidence of course, and had found him with three eager country girls, romping with enthusiasm.

His wife had tactfully retired, but after that unimportant occurrence he'd had one hell of a time to find access to her bed again, let alone some enthusiasm for the game called lovemaking, which was nothing else than the boring mating dance for spouses, in her case.

That she had managed to conceive he still considered a miracle, but when their daughter died with her in the accident at Cornwall, when he was just thirty, he was back where he started.

He had not bothered to look for a new bride after his year of mourning was over. If married life was what he had had with her, he'd gladly pass it by, thank you so very much.

His wife had been good at pouting and accusations about his behavior, both probably entirely deserved, but he had abhorred the nuisance of it. The only woman who was able to keep his interest was his sister Sophia. She ran the affairs, such as his household and the minor organization of his estates -- things he was profoundly disinterested in -- like clockwork. Sophia understood him completely. She had never liked his wife anyway, calling her a ninny and a bore behind her back. Richard had often contemplated that his life would have been so much easier if he could have married his own sister.

Truth be told, there had been half-hearted talks with the secretive Earl of Rotherham, who had been a privateer for years, earning his gold by pirating the seas.

Cyril Fairfax had three daughters and Richard had his eye on the oldest one. He liked the fact that the girl had

made her father desperate with her machinations, which had everything to do with one of the sons of the neighboring baron. She might be too young for his taste, but she possessed a passionate nature, rode like the devil, was tall and challenging and a sheer beauty. Richard was of the opinion that such a woman could keep his interest at least until she had given him his heir and a spare.

Alas, Fairfax felt forced to marry her off to the old neighboring baron himself, as he had declared to Richard during one of their secret meetings that he could not be certain that his daughter's choice of sweetheart had not come from his own loins as he once had a long lasting relationship with the baron's wife, the boy's mother. By marrying Anthea off to the boy's father, she would never be able to marry the son, according to British law.

Richard had found the shenanigans with the neighbor exaggerated; if Fairfax had just told his daughter that he doubted the parentage of the boy she fancied, it would have been enough.

Rumor had it, however, that the old baron had departed the now for the afterlife on the wedding night. Which meant more specifically, that the Baron had never been her husband in truth as he died before any consummation had taken place. The young harridan was claiming non-consummation of the marriage. Such a matter went as far as the courts and probably the House of Lords, all because she refused to leave her mother's huge inheritance in the hands of the family of a husband who had actually never been one and she had obviously never wanted in the first place.

She had pined for the handsome son, who was quickly dispatched to his Majesty's Cavalry before the wedding of his unattractive father took place.

Ah, life could be intriguing, but Richard Grey doubted if the Ton would see it thus from their point of view. To marry her now was probably inconceivable, but very tantalizing. He had often wondered what it would be like to be married to a beautiful passionate shrew that would not cater to his every whim except to the naughty ones he yearned to experience in his huge ducal marriage bed. If only Anthea Fairfax was not every healthy man's wet dream!

Now she was not obtainable to him anymore. She was covered in scandal up to her ears and such a woman could never do for Richard Lindley.

Pity! He was certain that Sophia would like her.

But for tonight, at his table it would be nice to have the blushing Viscountess next to him, with the delectable tits and her fashionable dress that showed every lush curve.

He suppressed a smile when he felt a twinge of desire. Ah, she would not be for him, only married to Morvern for two months or so. One had to await the heir and the spare before a little lady like her would be available to shed her clothes for someone else but her husband. And shed she would, he guessed. She had that "je ne sais quoi" that left a man longing with his tongue hanging out.

The couple was now surrounded by a crowd of curious members of the Ton, who had never had the pleasure of meeting the would-be couple before and everybody seemed to have a reason to present himself. They bowed at the little lady, taking her hand and kissing it, close enough to her décolletage to almost nuzzle it. Richard noticed that she knew a few of the visitors. He assumed she'd met them at the countless musicales and balls she visited since her marriage to Morvern. Hengist stood stiffly behind her only bending his head once in a while to a newcomer.

Richard realized he could not know a lot of people because he had been living in Edinburgh until he left for the battle-grounds of the Continent.

Even Sophia had appeared with a big smile on her face.

The Duke shook his head. She would never learn, that woman. It was clear that the lovely Lady Morvern was no meat for the likes of Sappho-Sophia, but then maybe she just liked the girl. She had told Richard that the apparently shy Viscountess had spunk and was wise for her years, even though she had gotten herself married to one of London's most famous poofs. Richard wondered if the girl knew the real facts about her husband's anomalies. Another creed was that the wife was always the last one to know.

He watched her with squeezed eyes. One could always tell if a woman had found satisfaction in bed. At least he always could.

She did not show the prudish behavior of the innocents, the secrecy about suffered sexual abuse, or merely any lack of knowledge of amorous delights offered by a husband or a lover. There had been some reports on her; he liked to keep his tabs on his investors.

She had, not surprisingly, been very unhappy in her marriage to old, fat William Alexander. The man had hardly allowed her to leave the house in the four years of their nuptials. Had she been a prisoner of the Fatso's lusts? There were rumors galore about the fat man; he could never get it up and he liked to beat the shit out of his wives.

The first one had died under slightly suspicious circumstances and people still wondered about the man's own untimely death.

Little Lady Morvern did not have the looks of a poisoner or an axe-murderer, but Richard had enough experience to know that looks could easily deceive.

He sniggered inwardly. Man, were his thoughts straying tonight!

He glanced again at the Major, now suddenly the viscount.

He had never seen the man in knee breeches before. As far as he knew Hengist had always been a stickler for his Black Guard uniform with the dark colored kilt.

The man must hate knee breeches for sure, he looked so deuced uncomfortable!

A frown and then a sudden grin showed on the Duke's face. Jesus, his good Major must have the hots for the girl if he's in a state like that! Christ, if one had a bulge like that, one could understand why he always hid his crotch underneath a kilt!

When Richard noticed the Major's sudden blush after his inquisitive stare, he suppressed his knowing grin.

"Nothing to be ashamed of," he muttered, when the Major's face turned almost purple.

The Duke stepped back from the little circle around the Viscountess and signaled to his butler, who joined him at once.

"The ah... Viscount may need our assistance a bit later, Poussin," he murmured, not hiding his smile from his servant. "When he asks for the commodes you'd better tell Betsy where he is going. She will no doubt know how to ah... guide him."

Poussin looked at his ducal master with a straight face.

"Why, most certainly, Your Grace."

Poussin had been with the Duke since the latter had been a boy in short breeches. There were not many things that could surprise the ducal butler anymore.

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Hengist leaned against a board that could be nothing else but a section of a closet to store all different sorts of linens. His hands gripped the sides of the open armoire while he jerked his hips back and forth, trying to hold on to the elation of a fast approaching orgasm in the mouth of a total stranger.

Her tongue swirled enticing along his thick crown while she massaged the base of his long shaft with a soft but very steady hand, joining him in his noises of enjoyment.

Hengist groaned and let go; the unleashed tension almost as a sharp shard of pain, before it turned into the sweet release of his overtly strained cock.

“Oh, sweet God!” he moaned when he felt the sucking movements of her experienced mouth, “Oh, my God, Cherie!”

He felt the woman with her face close to his crotch beam.

“You’re very welcome, my lord,” she said brightly, “I’s to tell you that his Grace gives you his compliments.”

Hengist sagged against the beams.

“His Grace? So this joke is on him?”

“I would not know of any jokes, my lord,” the woman breathed earnestly.

Hengist, utterly replete, with his expensive knee breeches indeed on his knees, felt in a pocket of his tailcoat.

“Here,” he grumbled, throwing his savior a couple of guineas that were to be lost at the card tables later anyway. “Thank you again. I guess I needed that.”

The woman chuckled at him in the dark.

“If you need me again tonight, ask Poussin for Betsy, my lord. Maybe we can go all the way then, eh?”

Hengist only waved at her, not realizing that it would look quite dismissive, if not for the dark.

She disappeared without further ado, a below job well done, no doubt; the reward almost royal.

Hengist leaned back against the boards, breathing heavily, telling himself that if he'd called out her name whilst he was coming in the mouth of one of Richard Lindley's servants he was not being unfaithful to his Marguerite.

No more hard-on, no regrets.

His thoughts were too dark. He knew that Richard had seen his arousal and the fact that the Duke knew how to handle that indiscreet matter shamed him thoroughly.

She had almost found him pawing himself in a dark corner of the commode room. He had gone so far as to open the buttons of his falls when she had come in, taken him by the hand and led him into a small room that was possibly the dining room linen closet.

She had not asked any questions and he had not been able to think of one. Without a word she had tugged out his heavy arousal and sucked him, sitting on her knees.

He wondered if the whole thing had taken more than two minutes. Probably not; after the painful state he had been in.

So now he owed one to Richard Grey, didn't he? The best things in life were never free, especially not when they came from a very, very, smart Duke.

Marguerite glanced about her.

Darn, but now even Hengist was gone. Where on earth was he?

She looked up guiltily when Mr. Reginald Cavendish asked her something.

My word, she did not have a clue what it was all about.

She hesitated and then just smiled at him.

Reggie Cavendish was a dashing man and a cousin to the Earl of the same name. He was also one of the Prince Regent's beloved friends.

Sophia had whispered to her that his investment had only been a couple of thousand but that he claimed there would be more as soon as his new venture could be cashed. Sophia had not told her what sort of ventures Reggie Cavendish dabbled in, but Marguerite did not doubt it had something to do with card tables in dinghy gambling hells.

Reggie blushed far into his Beau Brummell style intricate tie.

"I should not have asked, my lady," he said shyly, "it was most impolite of me to talk about money to a woman of your standards. I beg my humblest pardons..."

Ah, money. Reggie Cavendish talking about money must be similar to asking for it!

She opened her fan and hid her mouth behind it, showing Reggie Cavendish that even if he had made a faux pas, which of course she could not know as she had not heard a word he had whispered to her, she would be the last to take him to task about it.

When she peeped over her fan she saw Hengist heading toward her. She wondered if he had been outside on a balcony or a terrace because he looked slightly disheveled as if he had been standing in the wind.

The Duke, who had been talking to a very rich cit turned towards him and asked him something, smiling quite intimately at him. She saw Hengist redden and say something from the side of his mouth and the Duke laughed and thumped him on the back. He signaled to a footman with a tray of glasses and they both took one, toasted and drank, smiling and talking.

So Hengist was rather intimate with the Duke, was he?

Marguerite pouted her mouth in thought, inviting another remark from Reggie Cavendish who insisted on staying at her side all the time.

Lady Sophia came to her rescue and suggested she go with her to the buffet to take some snacks. Dinner was to be served within the hour, but Lady Morvern would no doubt find herself to be a bit peckish?

Lady Wharton was standing near the bowl of punch that had been laced with expensive Jamaica rum. She must have imbibed quite a lot of the beverage as she had to hold on to the table and her coiffure was slightly askew.

“Ah,” she exclaimed, “our lucky girl!”

She glimpsed at Hengist who was still talking to the Duke.

“Yes, yes, our lucky girl. John should have married you instead of that stupid Joan. She still does not show any sign of you know...”

She tried to focus again on Hengist.

“Handsome man,” she murmured. “Who would have known he would turn out so well? I always said it would be possible, although everybody around me said it was inconceivable... If Philip Agnew can beget a child on a woman, John must be able to do the same...”

She laid her gloved hand on Marguerite's wrist. Marguerite noticed it was fatty with pie crumbs. Lady Wharton obviously had not only imbibed of the punch, but had not waited to try the shrimp pies as well.

"Do you think he is in love with you?"

Reggie Cavendish had followed Marguerite and Lady Sophia on their heels.

Marguerite supposed Lady Wharton was referring to Reggie.

"I dare say he does not, Lady Wharton," she declared, sending Reggie a distant smile, "we were only shortly acquainted."

"Well, he is always looking at you every time I peek in his direction. I'd say that man is madly in love with you, child. Look he's coming this way. Bit scandalous isn't it, to seek out his own wife at a reception like this. You'd think that the two of you would have time enough in the bedroom as it is."

"Oh! Lady Wharton!"

Marguerite started to deny that Hengist was her husband but Lady Wharton's suggestions suddenly made her speechless. Hengist? In love with her? Surely Lady Wharton was wrong in her assumptions, as wrong as she was to think that Hengist was her husband.

She glimpsed around Reggie's padded shoulder in the direction of her brother-in-law and met his eyes.

Her face started to flame right away. He stared at her with the look of a man... deeply besotted? His grey eyes seemed to burn into hers.

She shook her head.

“See?” Lady Wharton pointed, “Can’t take his eyes off you. What a miracle. I should go and talk to Joan. This proves a man can change and don’t tell me it doesn’t.”

She waddled away, clenching a cup of her new favorite drink.

“I hope she does not disgrace herself,” Sophia remarked sourly, “she’s bound to drop that cup any minute now. Go on! Take one of those shrimp patties before they’re all gone, they’re delicious. That stupid old bitch thinks she can change her son into loving the wife she has chosen for him.”

Marguerite was flabbergasted at Lady Sophia’s language. Duke’s sisters hardly referred to a dowager-countess as a stupid bitch, did they?

“John Wharton has very specific tastes, which do not include women. Unless they carry a whip.”

Marguerite widened her eyes.

“A whip?” she repeated numbly.

“My brother asked me to have you seated next to him and opposite your husband, ahem.”

When Marguerite remained silent, not knowing how to get out of the changeling predicament of the Major becoming the Viscount, Lady Sophia said briskly; “Richard told me that Poussin muddled up the titles. It’s just that if the Viscount does not arrive in time I have to change the seating. Mind you, it was complicated enough with all the cits and Prinny at one table. Richard wanted you seated next to your brother-in-law, for some reason, but now that he turns out to be your so-called husband it is hardly the correct thing to place you together. I’m not sure what has gotten into Richard tonight. God, I wish he would find himself some suitable wife so that I can go back to my own manor in Hampshire and be done with all this! Well, that Major is

approaching so why don't I go confer with Poussin to see if we can make other suitable arrangements for tonight. I may have to dress up one of my servants to get even numbers."

She left Marguerite hurriedly, leaving the Viscountess standing with her mouth almost open.

"Ah, she is in a bad mood today!" Reggie said appearing as if from out of the blue, "Her companion asked her if she could visit with her parents somewhere in Norfolk and she has been grumbling ever since."

Marguerite blinked her eyes. Until now she only had known Lady Sophia as the epitome of manners and elegance.

She noticed that Hengist was held up in his progress to get to her so she turned to Reggie.

"Did I hear that you are soon to be betrothed, Mr. Cavendish?"

The safe subjects of conversation as always were betrothals, marriages, alliances, and outings, or the weather.

Marguerite dipped into it with grace.

"My uncle is determined to have me leg-shackled this year, somewhere on my very far away estate in Yorkshire come winter. If I had known you were in the market for an alliance, Lady Morvern, I would have been first at your door."

He allowed himself a glance at Hengist, who was peering at them with a dark expression.

"Although I have heard that you are a great influence on the Viscount and that he has bettered his ways already. I can call that a miracle! I never aspired to the same circles as your husband, so I must state that I do not know him well, but some people are clearly believed beyond redemption, and voila he marries you; and all is well that ends well!"

“Oh, but this man is not...” Marguerite tried to protest another claim on her marriage to Hengist.

“Ah, I am very sorry to seem so indelicate, Lady Morvern!” Reggie almost barked at her, seeing Hengist’s steady approach and blaming the strong cognac he had been sipping constantly for his too candid behavior, “Now if you will excuse me?”

Marguerite walked gingerly to the nearest chair.

“I need to sit down,” she mumbled to nobody in particular, but it was Hengist’s hand that shoved the chair into a good position.

“Is something troubling you, my dear?” he asked in a fatherly fashion, knowing that at least a score of eyes were on the two of them.

“We have been here for less than an hour,” she sighed, “and people are already confiding the strangest things to me. Why would Lord Wharton like women only when they are handling a whip?”

Hengist almost barked with laughter at his love’s innocent look. She was a married woman herself now, well bedded by him, so maybe it was time she lost something of the rest of her innocence. God knew she would be told soon enough about Philip’s perversities; that was absolutely unavoidable.

“Lord Wharton has this thing with inflicted pain,” he said levelly. “Some people cannot perform the, ah, act without feeling pain. Pain delights them. I dare say his wife does not know about this particular characteristic or does not care about it.”

He smiled wickedly when he saw the deep rose of her blush creeping over her face and down to her lovely silk clad bosom.

“Hengist!” she exclaimed suddenly, with a warning in her voice, “Is this the sort of conversation I should have with my brother-in-law?”

“Ah, but you asked, Cherie!” he said with tenderness in his voice.

Her head came up fast at his endearment.

“I don’t think we should be on such familiar terms, even when we are related through your brother,” she protested earnestly.

A thought crossed her mind.

“Did he tell you that he calls me that name when we are private?”

Oh, damn, a first slip of the tongue!

“He actually did.” Hengist lied, cursing his bad luck and her quick wit.

“Well,” she said hesitantly, “maybe he would not mind if you called me thus as well then. Not if he told you he does.”

Hengist nodded.

“Did you chase Lady Sophia away? I saw you were just talking.”

“Oh, Hengist,” Marguerite huffed, “she actually used some very unsuitable language about Lady Wharton, I was so shocked! According to Mr. Cavendish she was in a terrible mood since her companion left to visit her parents in Norfolk. She also said something about the change of table seating now that Philip has not yet shown up.”

Hengist tried not to grind his teeth.

In the last ten minutes she'd already had half the Ton throwing the Ton’s filth over her! How on Earth was he to explain to her that Lady Sophia was a known Sappho, who had her companion to accompany her in her big bed to the

service of her every wanton needs; that John Wharton was a masochist who could only reach an orgasm when he was mastered and beaten and, that her own husband was a man of perverted tastes, which did not include her at all. Let alone that she had been bedded by her own brother-in-law who could only dream about being inside her, but who had minutes ago had his cock sucked by one of the servants, whom the Duke probably used to fulfill his own jaded needs, when necessary.

At least Richard Lindley was known as a womanizer, one of the few ‘normal’ subjects in this already too long line of improbable sinners.

He was not her husband. He did not have the right to talk freely about those dirty little secrets around her, with which half of the Ton amused itself with and hinted to her about.

He could kill that William Alexander for keeping her indoors for four years and so keeping her innocent to all the ills of the world, except for his own dirty perfidies.

“This does not seem the right time to talk about such subjects, Cherie. If you wish we will discuss things quietly at home, in the company of your husband, if need be.”

Ah, he was such a glorious liar; never in his life would he allow Philip to be closer to her than three yards and never would he ask his perverted brother to help educate Marguerite in the ways of the world, never.

To his relief Poussin strode into the drawing room to announce that dinner was ready to be served.

Hengist helped Marguerite out of her chair, holding out his arm to take her in for dinner, realizing too late that a husband seldom was expected to do so at a formal dinner outside his own house.

Damn, another gaffe! What had happened to his manners and his wits? He quickly scanned the guests with his eyes, but if people had noticed that he was bringing his own wife in to dinner, nobody seemed to react visibly.

Her feminine smell, this time enforced by her soft perfume wafted through his nostrils. He had a very clear view of her enticing décolletage, fashionably just barely covering her small pink nipples.

Oh, God!

He realized that if he could not go to the commodes now and find this Betsy and have her handle his arousal for a second time, he would be doomed to sit through the entire dinner with a hard-on that would reach his navel.

He sat down on the plush chair at the immense table, grateful for the long white linen that covered his crotch, until he looked into the amused eyes of Richard Grey, the Duke of Lindley. Damn the man! Did he notice everything?

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“Don’t look now,” Sophia urged her brother, “but there is something remarkably weird going on between Lady Morvern and her brother-in-law. Dash Philip Morvern for not showing up, just like that damnable Beckford! I could kill them both for the insult!”

“Oh, hush, Sophia,” her brother chuckled, “you cannot convince me that you really had expected Beckford to show his face at a party in London, even if it’s my dinner party! The man has a price on his head, remember! It’s bad enough everybody knows him for the sodomist and the child-seducer that he is. Philip Morvern does what he pleases, I bet he does not give a horse’s fart about Nash’ project. Don’t tell me you care about two poofs not showing their faces!

We better concentrate on Prinny; he has a face like a thundercloud. I guess he is hungry, so you'd better get on with that meal fast. Do try to be friendly to him, my dear! It was hard enough to get the Marylebone project started with his support, I shudder to think what will become of it if he withdraws. At least you were sensible enough to put Nash close to him, so that they can talk shop together."

Sophia laughed.

"Wish me luck on that one, dear brother! I cannot wait to discuss gables and porticoes with them. Promise me I can withdraw to Whitesands after this. I need to leave London in a hurry."

Richard frowned mockingly at her.

"What! Without a companion? You'll feel lonely there."

"Companions are for hire anywhere, I assure you."

Sophia walked away from her brother towards the head of the table where the Prince of Wales lounged in a special enforced chair, truly resembling a stranded whale.

It would not be easy indeed to find a companion to her taste. She'd have to look for one in London. Whitesands was built in a deserted stretch of woods and she had never heard of anybody there who would be able to cater to her special needs, which included something else rather than a good reading voice.

She caught the eye of the Prince who gave her a quick expectant smile.

He wanted his dinner, no doubt.

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"They are all having this posh dinner at the Duke's house as we speak," Stevie said with a sniff, "so I dare say you will be called to Nash's office in no time at all."

They were seated at Stevie's table in his bare apartment, digging into a steak and kidney pie that Annie had served them. There was ale and wine and some fresh baked bread as well.

"Were you not expected to go to that dinner as well?"

David sliced into his piece of pie and did not notice the hurt expression on Stevie's face.

"Naw, I only instigated the funding of the project with my sister and her brother-in-law. I did not put in the blunt. So no, they don't need me there."

"For how much did they participate?"

David stuffed a final piece into his mouth.

"I heard something like seventy-five thousand," Stevie said nonchalantly.

There was a snort and a very loud cough. David tried to cough and was choking at the same time. Stevie hastened to slap him on the back.

"Careful," he warned, "people have died of chokes like that!"

David wheezed into his napkin. When the worst of his fit was over he noisily blew his nose into his napkin. This earned Stevie's sideways glance.

"What?" David rasped.

"I bought you a dozen handkerchiefs, Dave," Stevie pointed out. "Please use those instead of the table napkin. I hope your father taught you the difference between a napkin and a handkerchief?"

"Oh," David soothed, "don't bite my head off, my lord, this was an emergency."

"I'm not biting your head off, David," Stevie returned irritably, "but I did tell the Major you were the gentleman I want to help out. Imagine that the Duke might ask you to

come to show yourself. Then we truly cannot have you committing social blunders. It's already nerve wrecking as it is!"

David took up his fork again, stealing a glance at his sister who was putting the pudding on two plates.

"I'm sorry; I don't want to look ungraceful. I truly don't. It's just been a very long time since we were in circumstances like those. We did not have napkins on the table for years, did we Ann?"

Annie stared at her brother and then silently shook her head.

"We're very grateful, my lord!" she managed to whisper at last, "Now, I'll leave you to your cigars. I have to check on the boys."

After she left David took a deep swallow of his ale.

"This Duke, do you know him?"

Stevie picked at some lint on his sleeve. He did not want to confess to David that the Duke was only a hearsay subject for him. He had never been invited to the high-echelons of the Ton, as he had only been the son of a lowly Scottish laird before his sister married a viscount. Philip had hardly gone to those sorts of parties before he began living in Marguerite's house, since he did not want to blemish his reputation any further or to receive any direct cuts because he was hounded by his creditors. The parties he had been to after his nuptials were only for show and a cover up for a poof's hasty marriage with the heiress of William Alexander's fortune.

It had only been wise not to include Stevie too much; the eyes of the Ton were harsh and discerning. Everybody knew that Philip did as he pleased in the end, but Stevie's reputation was still vulnerable. Stevie avoided the lower

Ton parties whenever he could because his mother seemed to be resolute in marrying her only son off as soon as possible to somebody rich.

“Not that well. It’s enough that my sister and the Viscount do. You’ll see, David, Nash will have you as an apprentice soon. You have the support of seventy-five thousand pounds behind you, you know.”

David looked at his little lord with glinting eyes.

“I know what I’d rather have before me now, my little lord; someone with a remarkably tight butt.”

Stevie looked at the door that had closed behind Annie when she left the apartment.

“Does your sister know?” he asked guiltily.

David grabbed Stevie around the waist, dragged him from his chair, and placed him onto his lap in one movement.

“We never discuss it. I think it’s for the best. I think she has her suspicions. Now, I find there have been too many words and too few actions. Will you be staying the whole night?”

Stevie shrugged.

“I can, but will you?”

David shook his head.

“It’s best I’m back in my own bedroom before sunrise. Which, I must remind you, is rather early at this time of the year. I don’t want anyone to suspect. I don’t fancy the boys to know and I don’t want Annie to worry.”

Stevie shrugged again.

“At least we can be together without hiring a bad smelling, pissing, toothless whore.”

“Ah, yes,” David agreed, fumbling at Stevie’s waistband, “I dare say that’s the best of it, besides to having you in my arms all night.”

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Sophia fixed a polite smile on her face when the Prince was addressing Mr. Nash.

There had been a lull in the conversation with the very wealthy Lord Gunfleet whom she had seated next to her because he was a man of culture and few words. Lady Gunfleet, who was exactly his opposite, was placed somewhere at the middle of the table, next to the foully rich Mr. Thompson, who was recently widowed and in the market for a wife. Lady Gunfleet was in the position to fuel his needs for a wife as she was trying to educate five rather unruly daughters of no notable beauty, but of impeccable dowries.

Lady Gunfleet had extracted a promise from her mild husband that they were to bring ten thousand guineas to the best bidder, which was enough to bring in the most rakish fortune-hunters.

Mr. Thompson would of course not be bequeathed with the Gunfleet's oldest daughter. You just could not marry off your oldest daughter to a cit when you had so many poor nobles to choose from, but one of the others would do nicely enough. One could not maintain too high a standard where piles of money were concerned.

Sophia grinned at the thought that Lord Gunfleet would have no say whatsoever in the matter anyway and that after tonight one of his daughters would have been auctioned off in the direction of Mr. Thompson. Notwithstanding the fact that Mr. Thompson was known as one who tended to be violent towards his wife after having had too much hard

liquor. However, if one was so foolish as to marry an unruly Gunfleet, only to add to a fortune that was already too big for anyone's comprehension, then the future Mrs. Thompson and the recent Mr. Thompson probably deserved each other.

"You should smile more often, you are beautiful when you smile, Lady Sophia."

Sophia looked up quickly from her plate.

Obviously the Prince had finished his long discussion with the architect and now had turned to her.

"Ah, what can I say, your Highness," she answered, annoyed by the fact that a blush was coloring her face.

Was the Prince actually flirting with her? How interesting!

The Prince pointed at his porcelain gold rimmed plate.

"That lobster was excellent," he continued smoothly, noticing the high red color on her cheeks.

Lady Sophia was the epitome of arrogance and high handedness, as anyone could expect from a Duke's sister, albeit not a royal duke, of course.

She was a known protector of arts and culture, the boring Gunfleet next to her was testimony to that. It was rumored she was a Sappho, but then everybody in the Ton would be called one if they were not inclined to marry and were due to wear a spinster's cap.

At least she took care of the duties that would be the ones of a wife if one had one. Correct that, Lindley's wife had always been sickly and rumors had it for a long time that the former duchess fell from a cliff out of the desperation that formed in one's mind when one was not in the right spirit, so to say. Others would call her totally cuckoo, a Bedlam case. She had never taken up the

extensive duties that were part of being the exalted wife of a duke.

Sophia, although merely a sister, had.

The Prince had always had an eye for women and in the end he preferred them a bit fleshy and slightly long in the tooth.

Lady Sophia was all that.

What the Prince liked most was her quick, almost sarcastic wit and her knowledge of matters, which were often considered beyond the boundaries of the female mind.

They had not been able to meet often; Lady Sophia's circles and interests hardly covered his own. To his own wonder, it had thrilled him to sit next to her tonight.

Life had been boring him to tears of late. At forty-nine, he had been indulging in too many long nights of gambling with his friends and too few things to get excited about. His affair with his last mistress had gone down the drain, but then it was always a mistake to return to someone whom one had known thoroughly before. Not going back for second helpings was a hard won adage in his circles and he had been so stupid as to have ignored it.

Why not try a fling with a Duke's sister, who had decided years ago never to marry?

She was not an old virgin spinster. He knew it because he had been at Groathill years ago where she had fallen victim to Percy Waterhouse's wiles and had spent an afternoon in a haystack with him. To be unfair to Percy, an hour in Percy's hands could spoil a woman forever. The man was not only known as a rancid perverted lout, he had also always been a charmer. Sophia had not realized he would take his flirtation to the whole bitter end, which meant that

she was completely and utterly ruined after Percy had been done with her.

Elisabeth Rothford would never accept the lowly and debauched Percy as a husband for her daughter and had tried to hush the whole affair. It was a pity that the Quality had a long memory, Sophia had found out to her horror and shame, and she had punished her mother's astuteness in finding Sophia a far better husband than a Waterhouse by declaring she would remain unwed till the end of her days. She could not have found a worse punishment for the former grabbing Elisabeth Belding who had managed to marry two dukes in a row: the drunk William Lindley and later the country's favorite Jonathan Rothford.

The Prince had watched Elisabeth Belding's marital manipulations with alarm and amazement. He had only been about six years old when the actress' daughter caught William Lindley and maybe ten when she married Rothford, but she had been his mother's lady-in-waiting for years.

He had always heard everything that befell her and at a young age he had seen her having an assignment with Jon Montgomery, then only a colonel of his own regiment and heir to the Duke of Rothford, while she was just married to Lindley.

Maybe people of the Ton doubted Sophia and Richard's parentage, but he had no cause for any doubt; as young as he was, he was still capable of understanding the palace staff's remarks and the counting of the months on their fingers. Jonathan Rothford was the father of his own sons Randolph and John, but also of the beautiful Sophia and her intelligent brother Richard Lindley. When one looked closely, there could not be any doubt about it: they were far too similar in looks.

Jonathan Rothford had always been incredibly handsome.

The Prince had wondered about the affair between Jonathan Rothford and Audrey Agnew, the Countess of Loghaire, no other than Viscount Morvern's mother during the last years of the Duke's life. Audrey Agnew had never been a beauty, like Jonathan's wife Elisabeth, but she had the reputation of being a wonderful astute and friendly lady. He understood Jonathan's need to have a friend more than a lover when he was older. He himself was at an age where he would prefer a good conversation with a nice lady over an encounter in his bed that required the gymnastic he could no longer deliver.

The perfect truth was that the Prince was never really looking for a fleshy and beautiful mistress himself; any bawdy house in London could provide him with such a commodity. He wanted spirited banter that could uplift his own mind far over the depressions that he was apt to fall into of late. He'd had hopes of that when he'd started his affair with Mrs. F. again, but the woman was too sweet and too complying.

Lady Sophia would never be complying. No, a close female friend would be better than a mistress. Anyone in the palace could suck his cock if he asked for it, but none would give him cynical ripostes as he knew Lady Sophia would be capable of.

"You must send the recipe for those to my chef at Carlton House," he whispered. "I will call them 'Sophias' and they will be the new height in London cuisine."

That was putting it a bit strongly, but the funny thing was that Sophia thought of it as a bummer and her smile became definitely impish.

“I’ve never been so honored, your Highness,” she whispered with exaggerated gratefulness. “Maybe you should call them Sophia’s mounds!”

They both started laughing, almost giggling to be more specific, and if ever there was any ice, it was considered broken entirely.

“Are you enjoying the evening, apart from the patties?” she asked him, watching him dig into a roast that was rife with a thick sauce of wine and foie gras.

He wiggled his head which could be interpreted as a ‘yes’ and a ‘no.’

“It’s quite different to be stared at by the richest cits in the entire kingdom and be mostly ignored by the wealthiest peers of the realm,” he said in thought.

Wasn’t that exactly what he needed; the admiring rich cits? The wealthy peers were not apt to help him pay off the staggering debts he had accumulated again, but the cits might.

Sophia nodded, finishing her chew.

“It’s just what you need. I don’t see my brother helping you out of your predicaments, but Parliament might, and that is crowded with gold-capped cits.”

“Your brother already helped me out of a few predicaments, to be honest,” the Prince confessed, “but they were never of a monetary nature.”

He laughed when she lifted a brow, guessing the true nature of the Prince’s problems.

“I was not introduced to the little lady sitting next to your brother. Is she a rich cit's wife as well?”

Sophia did not look in the direction of her brother at the other end of the table. She had redone the seating and she knew perfectly well to whom the Prince was referring. The

motherly and very amiable Lady Owen-Wharton on her brother's left could hardly be ranked as a little lady.

"That's the newly wedded Lady Marguerite Morvern," she said in low tones, "Viscount Philip Morvern's wife. She inherited the Alexander-Stephenson's fortune only about a year ago. I understand she was the only daughter of a Scottish baron, Lord Halkhead. After his death Lindley picked up his title. Or was it Rothford?"

"Ah, so... lucky," the Prince exclaimed.

But then his eyes darkened.

"You mean Philip Morvern, at the time Agnew?" he inquired, "The one that was the little accomplice in the scandal with Beckford?"

Lady Sophia uttered an exaggerated sigh.

"Such a good memory, Your Highness! It must have been at least fifteen years ago. Morvern always seems to have been a good looking lad, attracting attention from one or another."

The Prince hid a smile while he was tucking into another helping of the heavenly beef.

The one or another Sophia had been referring to had never included a woman.

"My word, Lady Sophia, consider your chef fired and been placed under my arrest. So is he here?"

Sophia shrugged a dark silk clad shoulder.

"He did not show up, although my butler thought he did. She's with her brother-in-law, Henry, who comes fresh from the Portuguese battlefields."

That information stopped the Prince from eating altogether.

"Which one's that then?"

“Opposite the little lady, your Highness,” she mumbled from the side of her mouth. “He resembles Philip like a twin, now that he is not wearing his kilt uniform. They call him Hengist after the Saxon of the ferocious character. He’s a major with the Black Guard, one of Wellesley’s favorite fighting regiments. My brother seems to be rather charmed by him. It amused him that Hengist never wanted to put up another pile on the table to buy young Belding’s commission after he decided to stop playing the colonel. The fact that colonels do a lot more desk service than majors also seemed to have played a part in that decision.” “Maybe he did not have enough blunt for that commission?”

Sophia placed a serviette on the Prince’s fat thigh just before a splatter of the excellent sauce was going to soil his silk white breeches.

The intimacy of it did not go unnoticed and they shared a haphazard smile.

“He would not be sitting here if he hadn’t!” she returned decisively, “He inherited from his mother, the Countess of Loghaire. She was a Wharton and I remember she’s actually related to our house. A niece twice removed or so. I don’t remember exactly as she never cashed in on that acquaintance.”

Sophia remembered clearly, however, how much her stepfather, her so-called stepfather, Jonathan Rothford had adored the woman enough to continue to have an affair with the Countess of Loghaire for years, till the day he died.

“Major Agnew thinks the Marylebone project worthy of his, ah, pile.”

“Smart man,” the Prince laughed. “Is there something wrong with his eyesight? He’s staring ahead all the time,

and I think the little Lady Morvern is the focal point of his attention.”

“You’re inordinately perceptive, Your Highness. I thought I had been the only one to notice.” She stopped, realizing she had been on the verge of laughing about sisters and brothers falling in love with each other. The Prince was rumored to have more than a healthy interest in his frail sister Amelia, who was, truth be told, the beauty of the big royal family.

Of course, there would always be rumors about such things. She knew the same sort of nasty rumors were swirling about the Ton about her and her ducal brother.

She snorted dismissively. Richard was her beloved younger brother, but their relationship never overstepped the bounds of familiarity. She also knew she had a reputation as a Sappho, which could not be helped. She indulged indeed in sexual encounters with her companion, but that was more because such a relationship would never lead to unwanted consequences than the fact that she liked girls more than men. She had learned from Percy Waterhouse’s ‘rape’ that whatever one did with a man would lead to consequences. The problem was that now she was rapidly reaching her forties she had cause to regret a few things about her angry oath to her mother. Regrets that included children.

“Do you think his brother knows of his interest?” the Prince asked slowly.

Sophia knew he adored gossip and decided to indulge him.

“Would he have stayed away if he cared, do you think?”

The Prince’s laugh was on the loud side. People close by looked up curiously.

“Morvern’s known for his carelessness. He does not give an ass’ arse. He’s less careless than Beckford, I’d say, though. He does not move in my circles, although he has been seen in the somewhat lower echelons. He has not been at court for a decade, to be sure. I’ve noticed him in the Cockpit once, but he was too busy losing his money to acknowledge me. I wonder what will become of the little lady’s inheritance as soon as he has his hands on it.”

Sophia shrugged with an exaggerated pull of her shoulders, that made her breasts wriggle in her costly gown. The Prince fixated his eyes on them.

By Jove, she really had a good pair of tits!

“She’s far shrewder than people give her credit for. It seems she buried her money under piles of trust funds, all to the benefit of her unborn children. He gets an allowance that is so small that he had to go into business. I understand he owns a haunt now in his old house that, according to Richard, is only visited by the London poof and molly scene.”

The Prince stared at her, holding her eyes for seconds.

“Astute but unwise; that is capital crime, par force. Does he hold a seat in the House?”

Sophia shook her head and the Prince said: “He should. If he dabbles in poofs he will only gain some immunity if he takes his father’s seat. Stupid man. You know that Lloyd is trying to clear London of unnatural love this summer? There are raids afoot. He’ll hang when he’s discovered unless he has to be judged by the House. I’ve never seen them hang anybody for sodomy. They couldn’t. If they did half the House would be empty.”

Now it was Sophia’s turn to laugh very loudly.

The Prince realized that he had been talking to her as he would talk to his friends at the card table. He wondered if he should apologize, but then the Prince never apologized.

“He can take his father’s seat because Loghaire is known to be losing his marbles,” she said quickly, understanding his gaffe and covering it.

“I’ll ask Richard to look into the matter quickly. I’d hate to lose my friendship with the little lady when she’s mucked in scandal. She seems all sugary devotion on the outside, but as young as she is she seems to have developed a spine of steel. She must have inherited that from that witch of a mother of hers. She’s much more keen and crafty than anybody would guess from that delicious appearance. On the other hand, I’m sure marriage to that fat old man has taught her a thing or two. Diamonds are made under pressure, you know.”

The Prince looked at her with a smile of appreciation.

Definitely his kind of girl and he would love to suck those big breasts of hers!

His smile deepened into a grin when he felt a not so familiar tug in his breeches. Ah, but the Duke’s sister would do nicely, soon!

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Hengist folded his arms behind his head, wondering if he was feeling shame or elation. He voted for elation and felt immediate shame. Oh God, he had done it again!

He had escorted her home, waited for her to be tucked into bed by a very sleepy Rose, and had lifted his eyebrows at Rose when she came out of her mistress’ room into his.

“She’s almost asleep, the lamb,” Rose had muttered.

He had tossed her a guinea, one from the same stack he had given to Betsy with the miraculous mouth.

When Rose looked at him with a stricken face, he whispered to her that he was going to make Cherie happy tonight. Rose only nodded and shuffled away, not daring to show her elation.

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She was already asleep when he got into her bed and he decided to wake her up with a very special treat. The same sort of treat Betsy had given him. He imagined that might even the score of his unfaithfulness to her earlier that night.

The mere memory of Lily Clinton was already tucked far away in his mind.

He had her hot and squirming below his mouth in a trice, so that she was pleading with him when he took some time to enter her.

He felt her fingers seek for the scar on his back and when he came after she had gasped her love for him, it was like coming home.

Oh, sweet, sweet Christ, it was like coming home! It had nothing to do with Lily's experienced ways or Betsy's specialty; it was as far from those things as the Earth was removed from Jupiter.

At that moment he understood what brought soldiers home after years of living with an army, what brought sailors back to their wives after eons of roaming seas. Love. Goddamn love!

He had fled from her bedroom and now, lying in his own bed he wondered what to do, where to stand in her life.

It was all goddamn impossible!

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When the Majordomo tiptoed inside his room to open his bed curtains he swore with a vengeance.

That Lindley had too good a claret to waste. In the end he must have drunk it all if the state of his wooden head was any indication.

Swearing only made his head throb more, so he ended up lying back in his pillows.

“Pot, Duckhouse!” he managed to whisper.

Duckhouse only clicked his fingers at his valet Meredith.

Prinny leaned to his side with some trouble.

Meredith took his member in thumb and forefinger and pointed it at the pot. He sighed when he pissed, taking a long time to empty his bladder.

He lay back and remembered.

“Where is she?”

Duckhouse showed him a bland face.

“Your Highness?”

Ah, yes, some things remained unmentionable. Things like a rather busty woman that had sat on top of him, because he was too fat to lie on top of a woman without immediately crushing her last breath out of her.

“Was she rewarded suitably?”

Duckhouse remained silent for a few seconds. It had been the night head-footman who presumably had taken care of the matter.

“Was she?”

“I dare say she was, Your Highness,” he stuttered uncertain.

What did he know?

“Close those curtains, Duck,” the Prince groaned. “Tell Merrill to shift my appointments; I wish to sleep for a while more.”

He had wanted to add that as soon as his headache was gone he wanted the woman back in his bed, but he went back to sleep instead.

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It was not the first time that David had seen John Nash.

He had noticed the man from afar, discussing building affairs with his assistants on a project, when he himself had been working like a mason on a rich man's house in Marylebone.

It was certainly the first time he'd heard the famous man's voice direct a question at him.

He almost gasped before he found words to answer.

"You know how to read a plan? Good, that is at least something."

The man nodded and cocked a brow at the young giant standing in front of him.

"For Christ-sakes man, do sit down before I get a crick in my neck!"

When David complied the architect smiled faintly at him. He was famous and hardly a patient man, but the giant in front him intrigued him

"Why do you want to become an architect, Mr. Stoner?" Nash asked, searching for his pipe.

David hesitated; he was in total awe of the man in front of him.

As Stevie had predicted the summons to come to the offices on Cowe Street had come the day after the dinner at the Duke's residence.

David's visit had been appointed at six of the clock in the evening and David had spent the whole day in nervous anticipation, driving his lover crazy with his worried remarks and uncertainties.

He was introduced to one of Nash's assistants, an elderly and rather sour man.

He was summoned into the famous presence a bit late, feeling smaller than the dirty dwarf he had once seen at a fair in North London.

"I have built parts of houses with my own hands, sir," he managed to croak, "and I have always wondered how it all came about; the planning from the start, the design, everything. My brother-in-law knew all about the business of masonry and building and after almost ten years I think I got the grasp of that and I just wish to move on."

The architect sucked on his pipe, which seemed to have a mind of its own and refused to light. He threw it down in a bowl on his desk without looking at it.

David nervously followed the trail of tobacco spilling out of it and littering the wooden surface of the desk.

A smile played around the architect's mouth.

"At least I'll have a student who knows his way around stone," he said smugly, "which is not a minor achievement and is a lot more than most of my students bring me."

It was true that most of his students came from good families, who could afford to send their ambitious sons to Italy to learn about styles and culture, the war with Napoleon notwithstanding. It was a pity that the ambitions and intentions of those youngsters were mostly a lot better than their ability to calculate and understand the structure of stone and other materials.

He looked down at a piece of paper in front of him.

"Is Stoner your real name or one you acquired?"

David swallowed and decided to tell the great man the truth.

“My sister’s husband was nick-named Stoner, sir. He married her when our parents died. I more or less adopted this name. It was easier, no explanations asked. My true name is Wentworth. David Daniel Wentworth.”

“Ah, but that is a noble name! Are you by any chance related to the Wentworths of Went in Yorkshire?”

The question was not an unfamiliar one, so David shrugged his big shoulders.

“My father’s grandfather was a fourth brother of the Earl, sir, so I am, what, a cousin four times removed?”

He shrugged again. He had never been able to bank on the connection and had not cared. His father had been a vicar in a small village, and a true gentleman, but of how much use had that been when his parent died?

The architect nodded and rubbed his chin in thought.

“I suggest you to report to Mr. Mannering tomorrow morning at seven if you still want the position. I will tell him to have you assist at the drawing tables, which means you will skip all the menial tasks a student is usually submitted to. It would be a shame to waste your experience on those things, although you may not find a lot of sympathy with the other students for such blatant signs of privilege. On the other hand, they start work at seventeen and you are many years their senior. I hope you realize you are a very lucky man, Mr. Wentworth! Unlike most students, you will earn sixteen pounds a year so that your sister will not have to go and work for the bread on your table. Maybe one day you can explain to me how you could obtain the support of a duke, a viscountess, and an earl’s second son and so even attract the interest of the Prince of Wales. Right now I am only interested in getting myself an assistant in due course, who will be able to give me honest

advice on masonry and stone. So unless I am mistaken I will expect you at the drawing tables tomorrow morning.”

He nodded at a dazed David and resumed lighting his pipe.

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Chapter 26: IN THE INTEREST OF THE REALM

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The Duke paced over the black and white marble tiles, walking three yards to and fro, until he realized he had resumed the Prison-pacing of the width of a cell he'd acquired during the time he was imprisoned by the French, more than a decade ago.

He sighed and sat down on one of those uncomfortable chairs that were used in the anti-chamber to make the visitors feel anxious and unwelcome.

Damn, Prinny was taking his time!

He was fumbling for his golden watch fob when the door to the hallway opened.

“His Highness will see you now, your grace,” Merrill said evenly, pointing at the door and making a short bow, just deep enough to acknowledge Richard’s ducal rank.

Richard grimaced.

He and Prinny were normally on rather unofficial terms, so if you were accompanied by Merill, it did not bode very well.

He wondered what had gone wrong at his dinner party, now three days ago.

The Prince was seated in his chair behind his enormous desk which had been especially designed for him when he had Carlton House renovated almost twenty years ago. He nodded at a chair and signaled Merrill to leave them alone.

After a deep bow Richard sat, noticing there was to be no coffee-service. He tried to keep his expression bland, but his mind was racing. What on earth was wrong?

The Prince came directly to the point.

“I read your report on the Scottish heritage issue and I don’t like it one bit.”

Richard almost sagged with relief and waited. The Scottish issue had hardly presented a problem since the Battle of Culloden which happened more than six decades ago. It was true that the heritage was in a bit of a pickle right now as neither himself nor the Duke of Rothford had had yet produced an heir. They were getting on in age, although they were still in their productive years.

Richard knew that Prinny was getting more or less obsessed with heritage issues; he had only one daughter with the not-so-delectable Crown Princess Caroline and chances were slim of him ever getting a son because the Princess of Wales and Prinny were on worse than non-speaking terms.

“If we are not alert the Earldom of Loghaire will become too much of an issue between Rothford and Lindley and I will not have it.”

Ah, he feared that the Dukes of the North would be in each other’s hair again! Strange, because they shared the same mother, the renowned beauty Elisabeth Belding-Lindley-Rothford, and if rumors were right the same father, Jonathan Rothford, deceased Duke of Rothford. It was a public secret that the now deceased Baroness, Richard’s own mother, had been lover of the heir to the Duchy of Rothford at the time when the Duke of Lindley assumed to marry an untouched beauty. It remained everybody’s guess of course who really had fathered Richard, the recent Duke of Lindley; but both recent Dukes of Lindley and Rothford were extremely alike, proverbial peas in a pod.

“Why would we cause a problem, your Highness?” Richard asked quietly, “As it is now, both dukedoms are

without issue, the Duke of Hamilton may angle after Iphigenia Beckford, but they are not married as yet and we cannot expect Rothford to sire a child with the Jersey woman, as she has already birthed ten with Alvesley and is now probably over her childbearing years.”

Richard still had a problem understanding why Randolph Rothford had married a woman in her forties who had divorced her faithless husband in a Scottish court.

Randolph had never been clearly explicit about his preference for men or for women, but to go and marry someone so unsuitable, even when she was an Earl’s daughter, was beyond him.

The Prince leaned backwards in his chair.

“It’s Rothford’s brother, John Lorna and Kintyre I don’t trust, Lindley,” he growled impatiently.

“He suddenly saw the light and had his neglected bride brought to London. He happens to thoroughly dislike you and is suddenly turning ambitious. If Loghaire reverts to Rothford there is no saying how the shift in power will bring the Scots to rise against us again.”

Ah, yes the eternal issue.

Richard sat up slowly.

“I fail to see why Loghaire would revert to Rothford, your Highness. Loghaire’s wife was a Lindley from the Wharton side. I would have first claim due to that clever move.”

If he had anything to claim, of course.

The Prince pounded his fist on the desk. His color was high and his eyes were puffy.

Richard wondered if the man had been gambling all night with his cronies, and was now in a bad mood because of a hangover and lack of sleep. Richard knew that if he

himself was so grossly overweight he would hardly be able to breathe, let alone live the life of debauchery.

“Loghaire is as mad as a hatter through dementia and though only fifty eight years old his doctors don’t expect him to live long. Worse, his heir is a bloody poof who does not even keep up appearances with his new bride, as he proved at your Marylebone-project dinner.”

The Prince needed to take a loud breather there. His face was even redder than the purple coat he wore and Richard feared he would have a heart attack while he sat at his desk.

“Reports from the household are that he never even speaks to his new wife, let alone sleeps with her. His brother, although now on leave, is expected to go back to the Peninsula before enmities are resumed. He has had a few close calls already and one word from Rothford in the wrong ear at the right side and he will be no more. I assure you the Rothfords have their eyes on the earldom. It will make or break the balance.”

Richard tutted.

He had to calm the Prince down, or the man was going to have an apoplexy in front of him.

“Now, now, your Highness, they all could still have children without breaking any scales or balances and live happily ever after!”

He looked up when the Prince’s look shifted for a brief moment.

“I want Lady Morvern’s fortune to stay firmly in the hands of Loghaire! What if she has the marriage annulled? Sophia told me her money is in trust for her future children, which will surely not be Lord Morvern’s if the reports are correct. I know he is a poof. He was in that scandal with Beckford fifteen years ago. Once a poof always a poof,

believe you me, Lindley! If Hamilton snags Iphigenia Beckford, I bet you John Lorna will be very pleased to go after Lady Morvern should her husband suddenly come to a nasty end.”

“Your Highness, John Lorna is a married man!” Richard protested.

The Prince tapped a tattoo on the gleaming surface of his desk.

“He married Lizzie Campbell because his dear mother, as well as yours, on her deathbed made him swear to do so. At that time Lizzie Campbell was still in diapers. He has always hated her. Do you know she had a very bad accident a few days ago; a fall from the bloody stairs in their town-house? They had been quarreling ferociously, their staff reported. According to Harvey she miscarried. John Montgomery did not even know she had conceived; bloody idiots, all of them!”

Richard had not known that tidbit. Was his spy-network slipping? That was very grave indeed. John Lorna must have wed the girl about seven years ago in Edinburgh. He was rumored to have left her on the wedding night never to return to their house in Edinburgh. The woman had done as she pleased and had had a blatant affair with an army-man. The one that had taken Hengist Agnew's place, as reports from the Peninsula had it. Yes, Lochiel Cameron. Maybe the child had been his. Drat, if that was the case Lorna would have had every reason to divorce her in Scotland. It was proven to be easy enough; the precedence was set with Alvesley's rejected wife who had married Randolph Rothford within three weeks of her Scottish divorce.

Richard shook his head.

“Whatever happens to Lizzie Lorna is of no importance to Loghaire, Your Highness. My sister informs me that the biddies’ network has reported that Lady Morvern is possibly pregnant.”

The Prince gaped.

“What? Don’t tell me the poof bedded her!”

Richard smirked.

“Somebody bedded her, your Highness. The ladies’ laundry girl confirmed that since the marriage there were no signs of... you know, any monthly flows. And the ladies’ maid was certain that the pretty bride was bleeding two weeks before the wedding night. Poof or no, he will be a father in the next year.”

Prinny relaxed visibly, but only for a few seconds.

“They only wedded a mere two months ago and you know the biddies might be wrong. He’s a damned poof, I tell you. My sister had a similar problem and when my father was going to turn a horrendous racket about it they found out she had not done anything at all, it was because she was underfed and exhausted due to her illness. I want the poof gone, Lindley! I don’t want a poof as the Earl of Loghaire. The man is not interested in anything. I have had no reports of his new gambling debts as yet, but everybody knows the little Lady Morvern had to throw in a fortune to keep him out of Debtor’s Prison when she married him. I want his brother as the new Earl. I read all those reports you wrote on him and he may keep us well sleeping at night. As it is now, Henry Agnew is Morvern’s heir and I want you to pamper him as one. If anyone is going to be killed in that family it won’t be Henry Agnew. I want you to order him out of the army in the Peninsula at once.”

Richard shook his head, at last understanding the Prince's real issue.

"Morvern is a wastrel and a gambler. If you want Lady Morvern's fortune safe we must do something about it, true. She should not have the chance to spend her money on either Lord Morvern or Loghaire. We all know that Loghaire is close to being destitute."

The Prince looked blandly into the Duke's eyes.

"The project lacks about another two hundred thousand," he pointed out, "Beckford refuses to pay up more. She's our only chance."

"But it will not get you anywhere if she gets widowed," Richard remarked. "She just might marry another idiot like Lord Morvern."

The Prince sat back and grinned, steeping his fingers.

"She might marry you, Richard, and then all that lovely money will be ours, yours and mine."

Richard hardly refrained from gasping.

"Ah, of course," he said smoothly, not able to hide his sudden excitement. He was after all the second Duke in the game. "I'm awaiting your instructions, Your Highness."

He suddenly clamped his jaws shut. He feared what was to come. The Prince had only shown scruples in the past for his beloved projects when there was not much money at stake. Everybody knew he had mountains of debts himself.

The pretty Viscountess had regretfully only herself to blame; if she had not participated with her investment in the Marylebone project the Prince's Gargoyle eye would never have fallen on her. He must have found out how much she owned and now he wanted it all for Marylebone. Hell, she could easily build a whole new city if she wanted to. Suck the Scottish issue! There wasn't one! Rothford and Lindley

were both more English than the Prince and would never ever indulge in another Scottish rising. No, the future Countess of Loghaire was sitting on a treasure that must not go to waste on Lorna or her unsatisfactory husband!

Richard was certain that the biggest financier Beckford was being blackmailed into backing the project for more than he cared to give, in exchange for an unofficial pardon for his hanging offenses. For certain the hounds had been called off a few months ago, but Beckford hid on his estate, not trusting the word of a greedy Prince.

“Then Morvern has to be given his own piece of rope,” the Prince growled. “He’s useless to any cause. We need to concentrate on his brother and I think he should be the one to become the Earl when the time comes.”

When Richard stared at him in silence, he pounded his fist on the table again.

“Don’t give me that look, Lindley!” he shouted, “The world will be better off with one bloody poof less! Just take care that soldier-boy Agnew is not going anywhere but the London Guards. I’ll tell that ass Welles... Wellington he has to find a replacement for the war-hero! And be quick about the poof. I don’t want him an Earl to be protected by the House of Lords!”

Richard shook his head.

“There is one flaw in the whole thing as it is, your Highness. What if the lady refuses to throw in her part and marry me after her years of mourning are over? We’re looking at two years after the Viscount’s eventual demise?”

The Prince grimaced.

“Every woman wants to be a duchess, Lindley, so you put yourself and your lovely sister to the effort of wooing her vastly and properly. It’s all terribly simple. Get rid of the

Viscount. Woo the little Lady and get yourself a better prenuptial contract than he got. And don't forget to put young Henry Agnew out of the danger of being killed by some idiot in that Spanish wasteland! Loghaire will thrive best with an earl with a brain and some other useful skills.

You may leave now or stay for a round of cards. I need a fourth badly because Beau passed out on the carpet; whichever you prefer.”

Richard stood and bowed, gnashing his teeth.

Damn the bloody bugger!

He'd had such instructions before, but Morvern was only guilty of preferring arse to pussy. Richard could not care less about that and neither did the Prince, probably. Morvern's only mistake was that he had married a rich widow who had shown an interest in the Prince's project. Now the Viscount would have to receive the proverbial Chinese chest with a silken cord. Poor Morvern, he was as good as dead already!

Thinking of a certain lady becoming a widow again and then a duchess did not help. He liked her enough, but he hated to become a David in an Uriel-Bathsheba triangle.

Something warned him she was not destined for him. Hengist had looked too hungry and too possessive about her at the dinner, even after he'd had his need relieved by Betsy.

A man could easily disregard that. Everyone knew that you'd better get rid of the nuisance of a boner during a very formal dinner when the possibility presented 'herself', nothing to be ashamed of.

Richard knew every woman in the Realm would disagree with this line of thought, but he was hardly interested in most women's ideas unless they came from his sister.

Merrill handed him his cane and hat, looking reproachfully at him because he was not staying for a much-needed fourth at the Prince's card table. The Prince had a way of reverting his anger onto his staff, if it suited him.

Richard straightened and walked out the front door under the rickety colonnade.

The day was nice and warm and he decided to walk through St. James' Park back to his house, reflecting that it was ages since he had taken the opportunity for a stroll.

He worked too hard, and for what?

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“You cannot go to Whitesands, Soph.”

Richard took the teacup from his sister, who was sitting behind the enormous tea-service in their informal drawing room.

She looked very handsome in her bottle green muslin dress, her ash blond hair in loose curls instead of the severe bun she liked to sport for the outside world. The fake spectacles she put on for her public appearances lay unused next to her embroidery.

She was a two-faced lady just like he was a two faced man.

He watched her with some wariness while he sipped his favorite lap sang souchong tea.

She stirred her cup with her usual calm.

“What did he want from you?”

Ah, she was a perceptive woman, his sister. She had heard of the summons of the Prince and had known it had not boded anything good.

He finished his tea and sat down next to her on the big settee.

He nodded dismissal at the footmen and at Poussin and waited for the doors to click close behind their backs.

“He wants the little Lady Morvern’s money.”

Sophia grimaced.

“Without the benefit of a marriage of course.”

Richard shrugged.

“Since he has been a married man for years now I don’t think we could count on that option.”

“He wants it all for his project.”

It was not even a question.

“Truth to be told she can triple her fortune on the project, so that is not really an issue. He’s not going to rob her of it. It’s just the way he wants to avail himself of it.”

“And that is where I come in?”

Richard sighed, toying with a silver spoon with the Lindley crest on it.

“That is where we come in. He wants Hengist as the heir of Loghaire, not Philip. We are to grab Lady Morvern’s fortune from Philip’s clutches and put it at the royal disposal for his building plans.”

Sophia brought her hand to her throat.

“You mean... You cannot mean that Lord Morvern will soon be lost for this world?”

“I don’t know how Prinny could solve the inheritance problem otherwise,” Richard admitted dryly.

“That is, he wants me to solve the problem for him; us actually. You seem to have professed your admiration for the little lady.”

“No, no,” Lady Sophia said urgently, “it’s bad enough when people get blackmailed to do as he pleases, but even he would not want a murder on his conscience. No, Richard,

we need to find a way to... to avoid the inevitable. I beg of you, please don't take this on!"

"Ah," he murmured, "I've been in His Majesty's Service for more than ten years now, dear sister. What's another life in the whole of the Realm's interest?"

"I bet you never had to take the life of a Peer of the Realm," she countered with vehemence.

Richard noted distractedly how her big bosom seemed to shudder with indignation under the green cloth of her dress. Sophia had inherited all their mother's beautiful assets.

"I am not going to take anybody's life," he drawled. "He's going to give it himself and he has the means in his own possession."

Sophia looked down at her teacup and decided to pour herself some fresh tea. Her hand trembled when she clenched the teapot.

"Where do we come in, then?"

She sounded resigned.

"The Prince thinks I should take a new bride after Lord Morvern's demise. You may have your wish and have a sister-in-law within a year or so from now. The Prince is prepared to split her dowry with me."

He sipped his tea.

"By the way, how was he?"

Sophia blushed deeply. She was not yet used to her brother's blatant voyeurism, even though she had some evidence of it.

"What can you expect of a man who has to lie on his back? I was amazed he got it up at all, after all that drink, but you were right. You should do something about the

safety measures at Carlton House. Nobody asked any questions. What if I had meant to kill him?"

"Maybe they would like him murdered. He's getting vastly unpopular. But we're getting away from the issue at hand. How was he?"

She dimpled a smile.

"You're curious about his bedding capacities?"

"I cannot imagine he has any."

"He must have had when he was a youth. You were right; apart from getting it up he was not able to do a lot with it. The fact that I was not quick enough to withdraw may account for that."

"Hm, that may mean that within nine months you will get your sojourn at Whitesands anyway."

She slapped him on the wrist, almost dislodging his teacup.

Richard smiled teasingly.

"How much power would that give us, his bastard with the Duke of Lindley's sister?"

"Stop teasing me!" she grinned. "Just tell me what we will have to do about my little friend. Before you start thinking otherwise; he has a very nice dick, very nice indeed. If I will not be able to find me a replacement companion I may be persuaded to see him again. That dick, I mean."

Richard shook his head.

"How come I always thought you preferred your own kind to ah... mine and his?"

"Naughty, naughty, Richard! We women have to make do with what artificial means we can put our hands on. The real thing, especially with somebody who would not know

domination if it sat on him, is always preferable. Now let's go back to the problem at hand."

Richard drank his tea wishing it was brandy.

"We need to put somebody in Morvern's household as well as in that club of his, to monitor his movements."

He discreetly suppressed a burp. The idea of preparing for Morvern's untimely demise gave him a stomach ache.

"No way of buying yourself in?" Sophia asked.

He shook his head slowly.

"Too risky. It's easier to put in a new spy. You never know where the servants' loyalties lie."

"Does Morvern have a special lover?"

His grin at Sophia was rather wry.

"That was easy to find out. He spends his time with a boy called Rick Denning. He's a footman at the club, but never does anything most footmen are supposed to do, at least not anymore. Morvern fancies himself Denning's lover, but I daresay he is not the only one."

"This Denning might be your man then?"

The Duke shook his head.

"The fact that he entertains other men does not prove he is not loyal to Morvern. He's probably merely opportunistic. I'll see what that club might need for more staff. I do think I found the solution for the Morvern household. The Viscountess' little brother, the Honorable Stephen Mackenzie, does not have a valet. It seems that he never had one. The female staff in that household take care of his clothes and he goes to a barber for his further needs; a very sensible solution. I even know that one of the upstairs girls curls his hair."

Sophia smiled at her brother. As a Duke he had a whole army catering to his personal needs but he did not like it one single bit.

“Ah, so the Honorable Stephen Mackenzie will have a valet soon? Anyone you have your eyes on?”

“Actually, yes,” Richard admitted. “Somebody that looks a bit poofy and can play the game but who is definitely in the petticoat line, if you get my drift. We don’t want our man to fall in love with any of those rogues. That would complicate things immensely.”

Sophia shrugged at that.

“I’ll invite the future widow for a small tea party, then. Do you think you should start to woo her yet?”

Richard shook his head.

“Nothing that will look obvious. I’ll give her some extra attention when we meet. Romeo and Juliet is playing at the Aldrich, it will be a real treat for her as the poof never takes her anywhere anymore and Hengist Agnew has not had enough imagination yet to bring her to a good play. I’ll show up before the third act. We can have a light supper at the house afterward.”

“I will have to invite Lord Morvern!” Sophia warned.

“Yes, do, for heaven’s sake,” he growled. “We must observe proprieties. He won’t come anyway if I judge him right.”

He put his cup down on the table and rose.

“I’m leaving for the War Office now. It is best to put everything in motion right away. Hengist Agnew is to lose his job very soon.”

She watched him open a door and leave. He looked ducal and proud, but at that moment she knew better.

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Chapter 27: MUSINGS OF A CATAMITE, THE MANAGER OF GENTS AND AURORA

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Rick Denning looked down on his sleeping lover. The Viscount lay sprawled on his back, taking almost the whole width of the bed.

He sighed and put on his breeches. They were a little less than spotless and he wondered if Mr. Burton would see it and comment upon it.

He probably would not. Mr. Burton was like putty in his hands now that Rick had the Viscount's attention and his bedroom.

Burton's original reluctance about the part-time work deal had disappeared when Rick had pointed out a few advantages concerning his newest employment. He had the use of the bedroom when the Viscount was not in the house. He distracted the Viscount's interests in the keeping of the books and Mr. Burton shared a percentage when Rick found it in himself to entertain someone else other than the Viscount. Luckily, Rick entertained quite a lot of gentlemen in the pursuits of manly love lately.

The Viscount was a very handsome man, no doubt, more handsome than most of Rick's 'rendezvous' but it actually left him as cold as a block of ice.

When he had been ravaged by his first 'mentor' it had reduced him to tears and depression, but he had learned to cope and now, at twenty-four, the lovers and mentors provided him with good money to pay for his mama's

doctors and medication and to help him build his little secret nest egg for the times to come.

He had often wondered if his mother guessed the truth about his less than honorable earnings. He hoped she didn't; she had never been a worldly woman, not even after his sire's seduction of her.

He realized that beggars could not be choosers and mama's heart condition could only be monitored by Dr. Harmon, who would only treat his mother because he realized that she was a lady and thus Rick would be a gentleman. When Rick was garbed in his gentleman's gear no one could guess what he had to do to earn more than an honest living. He liked to muse about the fact that the snooty doctor would have a fit if he had any inkling that the polite young man -- who always paid in time for the doctor's cares -- was a male whore, a sodomite earning his money dressed up as a fancy footman.

He did not even mind the footman bit. The white wig hid his blond hair well and his night-blue and cream uniform was splendid and tasteful, while sporting silver braiding that could be easily removed if the occasion called for it. Mr. Burton liked them to be unobtrusive and without the wig and the braiding one could easily take him for a modest visitor of Gents if necessary.

Only the head footman, Trentham, was an impressive specimen of 'footman-ship.' He was now the one at the door since Rick was only working a few hours every night, and he was dressed to impress. He was also the one to direct the amorous clientele to one of the house's footmen of their choice.

Trentham did not like Rick very much and the feeling was obviously mutual. Trentham slept with Boyd Bell

whenever he could and whenever Boyd was not otherwise occupied, but Rick had the impression Trentham would dearly have liked to have the handsome Viscount as his lover.

It had surprised Rick that the Viscount had not tried his wiles on the likes of Trentham and Boyd. They did not have his languorous tall beauty, true, they were unfashionably muscled and of mediocre size but in a crowd of pot-bellied aristocrats their rough handsomeness was rather striking.

Trentham had tried a few times to redirect Rick's 'interests' to one of the others, but most clients had proven most adamant in their wishes.

Rick was to cater to the Viscount's needs, such was Mr. Burton's first rule, but the Viscount mostly appeared early in the mornings, now. His goings were a bit more haphazard. He loved to stay the night, but sometimes he would leave before twelve to be back again after six o'clock in the morning.

Mr. Burton had devised a routine if the Viscount would show up while Rick was earning his keep elsewhere in the house and in that respect no real 'situations' had come up.

The Viscount never bothered to pay Rick anything, so Mr. Burton was obliged to keep a booklet in which he registered the Viscount's visits and calculated Rick's earnings accordingly, paying them out of the 'Gents' coffers that contained more coin than one could count in a day.

It was all neat, tidy and very efficient.

Rick had stopped dreaming a long time ago. He liked to convince himself that he was being practical.

After his first encounters with his 'mentors' -- such a better word than customers, whores had customers -- he had stopped altogether thinking about girls and a 'normal' life.

Being debauched at eleven was a sure thing to stop anyone from becoming a romantic or less than opportunistic.

The amazing thing was that after a while the fumbling and the fucks made him find bodily satisfaction. It had been his revenge for a long time that the things he was subjected to actually gave him pleasure. It exhilarated him vastly that they paid him while he obtained his own pleasure. The crazy thing was that his lusty cooperation in the act excited his 'lovers' to no end. They started to crave him as if he was some exquisite being.

He told himself it was not important but that attitude made them only cling more to him, begging for his favors, dishing out gold and presents.

The Viscount, although strangely tight in the purse, was the worst of them. The Viscount professed his love for him every time he mounted him or threw his arms around him, but Rick had become wary of him of late. There were more rumors about the Viscount than Rick cared to hear. According to Mr. Burton he had recently married some heiress and lived in a fancy house in Mayfair.

Rick regretted that. When there was a wife, there was no room for a catamite in the household. If nothing else, that was what he aimed for; to become a kept man by a very rich lover. He knew that there should be more to life than being a man's plaything, but he could not imagine what that could be. He was not ambitious enough to entertain the thoughts of having his own club or to be a manager of one just like Mr. Burton was doing. Going into real servitude was no option at all because the money was not good enough, and then at twenty-four he would be a mere footman or under-footman. He had heard of a few ladies of the Ton who maintained footmen for their own pleasure, but as it was

normally a hush-hush thing; that meant a footmen's wages and not even an occasional present to go with it, because one could fear being accused of theft by the rest of the household. Jealousy among the staff in such households was a feared factor in life.

Mr. Burton saw at once that there were dirty spots on his breeches.

"Lord Dunford is here to see you and I understand he is in a bit of a rush," he said tersely. "You won't have time to change into something recently laundered, so I suggest you meet him in the back-parlor. Afterward I suggest you ask Mrs. Clark to supply you with a clean pair of breeches."

"Lord Dunford?" Rick asked with some delight.

The elderly squire was an extremely generous tipper, probably because he was unfortunately largely equipped in the nether parts and needed to perform the act with an experienced lover.

"You better hand me some of the magic balm then, Mr. Burton," Rick proposed suavely.

"His lordship has stayed since this morning?" Mr. Burton asked him while opening a small cupboard.

Rich shrugged when Mr. Burton handed him the small pot with the special greasy balm.

"He did. He won't be awake for another hour though, he already came in oiled. Are any of the rooms upstairs free?"

Mr. Burton scratched his jaw. He needed a shave; later, when the house was quiet. A few of the members had stayed over and had to be gotten rid of first.

"If Lord Dunford does not object to the back-parlor I think it would be best for you to stay there, Denning. Looking at the state he's in, it won't take long. Don't forget to lock the door and to close the curtains. I'd rather not have

the two of you on the stairs. You never know who you will run into.”

He squinted at the pot with the magic potion and seemed to suppress a smile.

“I suggest you squeal a bit when he makes the move, Denning, he may be apt to pay you a bit more.”

Denning grinned at Burton.

For a very straight forward person who had handled a rich man’s household, way before he was given the job at Gents, he seemed to be learning fast.

“I’ll cry hot tears,” Rick promised.

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Mr. Burton cocked a brow as he listened quietly while he was standing in the hallway of the club.

He frowned when he heard some noises emitting from the back-parlor. Although the house was very quiet at ten o’clock in the morning with nobody roaming about, he worried about sounds that were easily recognizable. Maybe Denning was overdoing it with Lord Dunford! Just when he decided to put in a ‘knock’ on the door to warn Denning to reduce the noise, one of the footmen opened the door for the Honorable Stephen Mackenzie.

Mr. Burton sighed inwardly.

He had wanted to go to the barber for his shave and now he was certain to be held up for at least an hour. The Honorable Stephen Mackenzie, although very young, had taken his task as a manager of Gents very seriously all of a sudden, which was also no doubt due to the money he would extract after they had been poring over the books.

Stevie greeted him and walked straight into the library.

“The books, sir?” Mr. Burton asked him politely.

“Yes, yes.” Stevie sounded distracted.

He drummed a tattoo with his fingers on Mr. Burton's not very expensive desk. Premises not visited regularly by clients from Gents had not yet been redecorated.

"Has the Viscount been here of late?"

Mr. Burton coughed to delay his answer.

"He has, sir," he admitted.

Stevie stared at his hand that had just been busy with the tattoo.

He had just heard the excellent news from Rose that might make Philip's eventual still-pending assistance in Marguerite's bedroom unnecessary. That was one problem down and a few more to come.

He had been very irritated to hear that Philip had not bothered to go to the Duke of Lindley's dinner though. Philip's lack of care for conventions worried him to no end. It was as if the man wanted to be caught as a fraud and a sodomite.

Christ, he had only had to sit through that dinner for a couple of hours and nobody would have been the wiser about his true interest in the Marylebone project and his wife! He truly did not seem to care that he was playing with his reputation.

And mind, it was not only his own reputation that was in jeopardy; it was the whole family that would be dragged down if Philip started to get the direct cut of the Ton. At least Philip avoided other Ton events like the plague nowadays. He spent his days in bed or at Gents, he wrestled with his sporty friends at their houses because they were all known mollies and none of the 'straighters' wanted them near them in the boxing parlors.

Sometimes Philip dragged himself to the stables to inquire after his new horses and to take the ribbons for a

stormy ride through the park or to the fields behind North London.

He had no clue as to what he possessed nowadays and once, to the stable hands' great hilarity, he had taken out Jason, Hengist's very own horse, thinking he recently bought it. His acquired racing horses were at the Marques of Ware's stables in Richmond because Philip had decided he could not be bothered with their training. The Marques was happy to have his champions back in his own stables, even after selling them to Philip. Marguerite took the tab on the horse's expensive housing and training, of course.

It was true that Stevie's life had improved a lot since Philip had married Marguerite.

He had his own place now in Cowe Street with his lover living a staircase away, he had his income from Gents, that secured a luxurious life for him and David, without anyone knowing he was independent, with a nice nest-egg that added value every time he came to Gents to check the books and empty the till.

He allowed Mr. Burton to give Philip a fraction of the money earned by the House. The House was making vast amounts with its entertainments: the gambling, the providing of luxury foods and expensive drinks, the extra club fees for the use of the rooms and the percentages of the specialized services of the footmen.

Philip never asked about the amount of blunt he was supplied with, but then the man had no worries in the world at all.

He had strangely refrained from gambling since his wedding, and everything was paid for through the household funds which Marguerite had provided. He had his allowance

topped up nicely with his 'income' from Gents which did not even include the letting of his house.

Still, Philip seemed uninterested in what happened around him. At least he deigned to come home for dinner almost every evening, as the food was improved now that Cook's budget allowed the best ingredients. His dining at home helped in keeping up appearances with his wife, who had taken her husband's absences or lie-ins in the daytime in her stride.

Stevie was certain she was not aware of Philip's strange hours of absence. He knew now of course that Philip had taken to sleeping with Rick Denning; an inquiry here and there had convinced him that Philip had taken the footman as a fixed lover and Mr. Burton's small notebook told him exactly the frequencies of the affair.

It was all fine with him as he knew he did not care about the Viscount any more. He also knew now how soothing it could be to have someone waiting for him at night. Now that he lived at Cowe Street, at least in the evenings and at night, although he put in the occasional appearance at breakfast and at dinner at the Morvern residence, he felt relaxed and content.

To his amazement nobody in the house off Piccadilly seemed to have noticed his nightly and daily absences at all and if anyone did it was obviously no cause for discussion. He felt amused to observe that it was so easy to lead a double life, but of course, the fact that he was a gentleman of means helped him a lot.

David had to be at Nash's office every morning at seven and he mostly did not emerge until seven o'clock at night. Stevie was surprised that David was extremely happy with that arrangement. He would come home in a good mood and

have dinner with his sister and the children or with Stevie, when Stevie could take his dinner in his own apartment.

Of late Lady McKenna had insisted less and less that Stevie accompany her to boring Ton events, which suited him more than fine.

Stevie did not know if Hengist still visited his sister at night and truth be told he could not care less now that Rose was certain that Lady Morvern was ‘carrying’ and Mr. Nash had taken in David as a very happy apprentice.

Life should be excellent for all of them now, so why did he have that nagging feeling of forewarning that something was wrong?

“This week’s entrances if you please, Mr. Burton,” he said, sitting down on Mr. Burton’s ancient chair.

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M. Aurora Ross’ diary
19th of June 1810

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Today I did not feel well at all when I woke up. That was surprising because my lord visited me again last night and he was sweeter than sweet. I was vastly surprised that I was feeling so queasy and had to race for the chamber pot, although I only had some dry heaves and nothing emitted from my stomach.

Rose came rushing in and put me back between the sheets, telling me to lie down quietly. She ordered tea and some toast with jam from the kitchen to sooth my stomach. When she understood that I had done my marital duties again last night, she urged me to sleep some more after I had my puny breakfast. She told me that Lord Morvern had gone out very early this morning, which meant that nobody expected me to go to the breakfast room today.

Truth be told, I had trouble getting back to sleep. If someone had told me that manly love could be such an incredibly wonderful experience I would never, never have married old Alexander in the first place.

I like every inch of my new husband's body, oh well, especially those very specific inches of him that give me so much pleasure. I am certain that's a very naughty thing to write but oh, how he made me squirm and sigh last night!

I cannot help wondering why aristocratic husbands need their own apartments and their own beds. I happen to know that simple people always share their beds.

Would it not be nice to wake up with a husband next to you every day? Oh, I know it is not the 'done' thing, so I don't pester the Viscount with my requests anymore that he stays the night until the morning, but Sweet Lord I would enjoy that!

Lady Sophia has invited me for tea this afternoon, although it is not a real tea because her message said we were going to have a bit of a 'tête à tête' in the summer house behind the Lindley Residence, which means that the usual ladies will not be invited. I must confess I am very curious about that summer house, the same one the ladies mentioned last time as a place of sin. I am certain it is all exaggerated.

Last night I did ask my husband to come to more events with me. Hengist is always accompanying me, apart from the days that he was in Scotland, and I was shocked to notice people continue to think he is the Viscount since the mistake the butler at the Duke's house made.

He just laughed and said he liked the situation just fine and that Hengist would probably be bored out of his wits if he could not continue to be with me. I have cause to doubt

that, although I think Hengist is wonderful to be with. Since his return from Scotland, he is often at the War Office or the Horse Guards, or he rides that big horse of his all the way to the barracks in South London. I like Hengist fine and if Philip does not object, I do not mind to be in his company. He is a very amusing and nice person and he sometimes has this way of looking at me that is almost, well, sinful. Simon used to look at me that way before he dove under my skirts and...

I should apologize. It's neither here nor there to have thoughts of that nature about Simon anymore, now that I am bound in matrimony, nor of Hengist of course.

But last time when we arrived home from Arabella Kingsley's ball I had the feeling that he wanted to kiss me, Hengist that was; he had that hungry look about him.

I just fled to my room; I am a newly married woman and a happily married one at that. I am almost certain that my husband noted his brother's interest in me, because he came to my room as soon as Rose had put me to bed and he was very, very amorous.

It is just that I am a bit confused about the fact that I still seem to have feelings for Hengist. The truth is that he resembles my husband so much.

Last time when we waltzed a set at the Kingsley ball, I noticed that they even smell the same! Imagine! But Rose said that that is normal because they are brothers and he has been seen using Philip's Bay Rum after his shave.

Rose said that Philip's valet John Row takes care of Hengist as well. I kind of like John Row. Lady Sophia asked me about Philip's valet, if I think he is a good addition to the household and that it was not easy to find somebody that would fit in very well. She is an expert at it; the Lindleys

have more than eighty staff in their ducal residence in London.

I must confess I am not very experienced in managing the staff because Old William never let me and Mr. Biggles seems to be doing just fine. He did ask me to appoint a new housekeeper as we don't really have one. The house never needed one when it was always empty of visitors with Rose and me living at Berkeley Street. He said that somebody was recommended; a Mrs. Nola Clark. I said I would leave it all up to him. I know it is not a done thing and maybe Lady Sophia would disagree with me being so easy on Mr. Biggles. She was very amazed that my little brother did not have his own valet and she may be right there.

I don't see much of Stevie these days; he seems to be very busy of late, although I truly don't know with what. Those gentleman-like occupations, no doubt, such as going to his club, or judging 'horseflesh' at Tattersall's, or... well...

Mother is rather annoyed that he does not accompany her to those silly entertainments where those poor 'Ton' girls are put on display, but I pointed out that at twenty-one he is really too young to marry.

Mother prefers to go to those parties that prudish married women such as I are not allowed to think about, let alone talk about. She has been away to many a house party in the country, imagine with the Season still in swing!

But of course I cannot care less about that, at least she is out of my hair and rightly happy with her new outfits and the extra pocket money I allow her.

Well, I must be getting on, Lady Sophia expects me at three of the clock and Rose still has to do my hair.

Talking about hair; I mentioned to Hengist that I like the latest style of short hair and he was rather, well, almost angry with me. He said that respectable women were recognizable as their lovely long hair is coiffed in a decent way. He added that the town's so called most fashionable Impures all wear their hair short these days (he was no doubt referring to Harriet Wilson, that most infamous of courtesans).

He might be right. I think I should ask my husband's opinion on the matter. Maybe tonight at dinner, although... He is always strangely distracted when we meet in the house in the day-time.

I wonder if he is bashful of his nightly passions. I do understand why it is not a done thing at all in the Ton to feel passion for a wife.

Contrary to that, Hengist is always very courteous and nice to me and I noticed that I still care a lot for him. That is a bit of a predicament because I am married to his brother, but I prefer not to ponder too much on this situation. I just try to take it as it is.

It is a bit hard though. Last night on our way home from the ball he sat next to me in the carriage instead of on the opposite side and I am ashamed to say that I felt like kissing him. He has that nice manly smell emanating from his clothes, it reminds me of my husband at night when he joins me in my bedroom. Oh well, I'll just have to take it as it is.

One more thing; I asked him last night about the announcement about his impending marriage which was in the paper a few months ago and he just frowned and said that it must have been a misapprehension. Well, so much for the right information we poor ladies at home are fed about our military men. I don't want to think about what it would

be like if I had been married to him instead of to Lord Morvern, but I do think about how it would be if he... Oh, Aurora, that is neither here nor there, again!

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Chapter 28: DEATH AT THE DOOR

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Marguerite yawned and peered at Rose who was leisurely and slowly wobbling around the bedroom.

She huffed when she picked up Marguerite's crumpled dressing gown and the lace nightshift that had been lying on the ottoman in front of the bed.

Marguerite blushed, wondering why she had not thought to put on her nightshift again when her husband left her bedroom last night.

"You did not tell him yet, did you?"

Rose puffed while she folded the nightshift, before throwing it into the laundry basket.

"What?"

"Don't play the innocent with me, missy," Rose grumbled, "you're just afraid he won't visit your bed anymore when you tell him. I never knew you for so wanton, but you have a baby in your belly to consider."

Marguerite's eyes widened.

"Do you think it is dangerous for the child if I... if we..."

"I dare say a big man such as your... as that one could easily damage your womb or the child," Rose pointed out, slipping her hands along her apron.

Marguerite pouted.

"How would you know, Rose? I imagine he does not show himself to the servants. Or have you been peeking by any chance?"

Rose breathed in deep.

My word, she almost betrayed herself! She was thinking of a big, very impressive Hengist dressed only in a notably tenting towel around his muscled loins.

Good Lord, but what was wrong with her today? It would not be the kippers the head-footman so kindly saved for her this morning when she had overslept.

When she had seen Hengist emerging from his rooms dressed in one of Philip's robes last night she had not bothered to stay up so that she could warn him away at first light. If it was up to her it was their own affair now and truthfully she wanted her mistress to know that it had not been that debauched wastrel of a Viscount that had been pleasing her all those nights.

She shook her head, feeling a strange dizziness and nausea. There was a tightening around her midriff and she started to breath slowly to relax herself.

"Well," she struggled to recover from her setback, "anyone can see he is a strapping fellow, and some imagination can tell me that he might very well be big in all... ah... well, all ways."

"Ah, is that so?" Marguerite's smile became impish.

"And how would you know, Rose?"

Rose let her irritation get the better of her.

"It is not exactly my place to tell you, my lady, but it was good nobody was at home last night, because the noise was almost..."

She suddenly stopped. It was true, they had been rather loud, her charge and the lover, but it was Cherie's house and who was to tell her that the noise of their lovemaking had carried into the hallway?

"You mean we were audible?" Marguerite was quite alarmed with Rose's revelation.

Rose sat down on the ottoman.

“You may have to buy another bed, my lady. Yours creaks!”

“Oh!” Marguerite brought her hands to her face in abhorrence.

“Please don’t tell me we were heard? That is... that is horrid!”

Rose looked at her with a twisted smile. It was hard to breath with the ripples that seemed to spear bolts of pain under her corset.

“It is your house and his, my dear. It’s no one’s business.”

“Yes, but...” Marguerite sighed and put her hands down again.

“Do you think the staff heard?”

Rose opened her mouth to say something reassuring, but only a gasp emerged. She crumbled suddenly on the ottoman, grabbing her chest.

“Rose!” Marguerite bolted stark naked from the bed.

“Rose! What’s wrong, Rose!”

The old maid twisted on the ottoman, her face contorted with pain.

“Oh, God Rose!” Marguerite grabbed the night-robe from Rose’s lap where it had fallen.

“Biggles, Biggles!” she shouted, racing to the door, trying to button down the slippery silk.

“Biggles!” she screamed again at the top of her lungs.

Ian came running towards her. He obviously had taken the stairs two at the time.

“Milady, what’s wrong?”

His breath came in gasps.

Marguerite was glad he had raced his lungs out of his body for her.

“It’s Rose!” she breathed, “Rose feels suddenly ill. Help me get her on my bed and then send somebody to fetch the doctor. Where is everybody, where is Biggles?”

Ian bent over Rose, who was as white as a sheet. Her face was one grimace of pain.

“I am carrying you to milady’s bed, Rose,” Ian said soothingly while he shifted his arms under Rose’s thighs and along her waist. He stood, holding her in his arms.

Marguerite hurried to the bed, praying it seemed not too big a mess after last night’s love-making. Her husband had been insatiable and had made love to her for hours in a row.

Ian laid Rose gently on the covers.

“I will send in Macy to help undress her a bit, milady.”

“Oh, god, Rose!” Marguerite cried.

Rose’s eyes were firmly shut now but she breathed in small gasps.

“She seems a bit better now, milady. I will send one of the lads to doctor Harmon.”

“Where’s Biggles?”

“He was in the butler’s parlor, milady. He was talking to a young miss who told him she wanted to have a word with you. She said she knew you. She had been waiting at the servant entrance for half of the night.”

Marguerite frowned but did not care to react.

“Get the doctor and send for Macy, Ian, and have somebody bring up some breakfast for me.”

She turned to the old servant.

“I’ll stay here until the doctor comes. Pray, let him be quick. I don’t like the looks of this.”

Ian nodded and hurried to the door, almost colliding with an irate Hengist.

“What’s going on here?” he demanded of Ian, but when he saw Marguerite sitting on the side of the bed he was with her in three big strides.

He was only wearing black riding breeches, his boots and a cotton shirt that had not been entirely buttoned. His uncombed blond hair swirled around his head.

“She fell ill,” Marguerite said tonelessly. “She grabbed her chest and...”

Without thinking Hengist lifted Marguerite into a standing position and closed his arms around her.

“I think she had a heart attack,” he whispered in her hair. “Don’t worry, she’s still breathing.”

“Ah!” a voice called out from behind them.

“Such a moving scene for the benefit of a mere servant!”

Philip stood in the doorway in elegant riding clothes, one brow drawn up in mockery.

“Philip!” Marguerite cried out, hurrying to her husband.

Philip moved backwards into the hallway.

“Madam, cease this theater, it’s only a servant who’s feeling unwell, I presume.”

Marguerite stopped dead in her tracks.

“A servant, sir?” she asked icily with anger at his unexpected heartlessness for Rose.

Philip sniffed and turned on his heels.

“A servant, ma’am. Good-morning or what’s left of it. I have to change.”

Marguerite watched him stomp away.

She wondered how he could be so heartless in the daytime, when he was so warm and caring at night.

Passionate, warm and caring! God almighty, was she smelling strong liquor on his breath? When on earth had he been imbibing? It had not been there last night! His mouth and breath had tasted sweet and slightly of the mint he probably used as a mouth wash.

She gazed down her night-robe to her bare feet.

She looked a fright. Her hair had become undone and she was only wearing her night-robe. No wonder her husband had been so unfriendly!

Hengist strode to the door of her bedroom, staring after his brother's fast retreat.

"Milady needs help with dressing," he said to a breathless Macy who had appeared through the dressing-room door and had been watching the little marital scene with rapt interest, "after you have undone Rose's stays. I cannot imagine she can breathe with those things laced so tightly!"

He surveyed Rose silently. She looked now as if she was asleep. Her face was very pale but he could see her attempts at shallow breathing.

"I will come back when the doctor arrives. I'll tell Biggles to have a room prepared on this floor. Aren't there spare bedrooms here, Macy?"

When the girl shyly nodded, definitely noting Hengist's state of undress and liking it, Hengist mumbled; "We don't want the good doctor to mount three stairs to hit his head on the beams, do we, Macy?"

He disappeared, quickly leaving an amazed Marguerite staring at his broad back when he turned into the corridor to his room.

Caring and compassionate, Marguerite mused. If I did not know better, I would fall in love with him again this instant.

-

Meg had been sitting in the butler's parlor since seven that morning.

Her mother had told her to go and see that nice lady about a job because that would be the only way out of the Rookeries, where Meg had spent almost all her life.

Pom, her new lover, had died in a brawl in one of the drink houses the day before yesterday and with her husband missing at sea, there was truly nothing binding her to the smelly one bedroom apartment she used to share with her mother.

As the head laundress of the Hospital of Mercy, Mum put in her own decent share, which was entirely bequeathed by the rich ladies and gentlemen of the city. She was not earning a fortune mind, but doing better than most.

Mr. Wells had been after her mum since the day she became a widow and surely one might expect them to go for a short ceremony soon before the new vicar.

Meg would not be standing in the way of their happiness, although she doubted the latter. Mr. Wells had this thing about leering at her whenever he saw her, so one could doubt he would remain forever faithful to her mom, let alone forsake all others.

At least Mr. Wells would keep her mum safe, being the hospital's clerk and all that. It was a blessing he'd had the hots for her mother, but then that was not really surprising. She may yet be thirty-six, but unlike all the other women in the neighborhood, she had kept her looks. The hospital's

laundry had kept her clean, fed, and in her looks, God bless her.

The butler, Mr. Biggles, had been summoned away.

She tried to listen, as the door had been left open by the hurrying head-footman, to whatever emergency was going on in the big house, but nothing much was forthcoming.

She sighed, wrapping her hand around the third cup of tea that had been poured for her this morning.

At least she was not hungry. Cook had given her some freshly baked buns, dripping with honey.

She had smiled shyly at that formidable good-looking woman. She could not yet be thirty, Meg mused. Blond like herself and comely, good-natured for sure and rather tall; no wonder that nice head-footman was gazing at her as if the sun shone out of her lush... oh well.

Then she heard a piercing scream.

Within seconds she was at the grand stairs leading to the family's bedroom floors.

-

Marguerite held her hand over her mouth, trying to force her stomach not to turn and throw up the few pieces of bread she had hastily grabbed, while Macy was coiling her hair into a sober coif.

“Mother?!”

Lady McKenna tried to turn her white face towards her daughter, but the effort was too much.

So tired, she was so tired.

She tried to whisper something but the sound never left her mouth.

“What happened?” Marguerite asked a hovering Macy.

“Her ladyship...”

Macy stared at the bed. Blood had seeped on the floor forming a huge spot on a gaudy pink carpet. The smell was terrible.

A young woman raced to the bed, nimbly avoiding the blood that seemed to be everywhere. She stuck out a hand to clasp Lady McKenna's throat, bending her nose towards her face.

She seemed to study the lady's face for a long time, keeping her fingers on the slender neck. Macy and Marguerite just stared.

"What's happening here?" Hengist's voice was harsh, the one of an officer addressing his troops.

"I think the lady has just died, sir," the unknown woman said to him.

Hengist assessed the situation quickly.

A dead woman and a bed full of blood. She must have bled to death.

His gaze went to her wrists which were lying on the counterpane. Nothing there, no slashes, nothing.

"Dead?" Marguerite whispered, "How can she be dead? Tell me she's wrong, my mother cannot be dead!"

"That doctor, where's that doctor?" Hengist barked.

Then in a softer tone he said: "Please return to your rooms, milady, I'll... Oh, hell!"

Marguerite had crumpled to the floor, vomiting onto a place on the carpet that was still devoid of her mother's blood.

Meg knelt beside her with a small towel she had quickly grabbed from the night table.

"Easy, milady, easy," she almost crooned. She wiped Marguerite's mouth prudently.

Marguerite's eyes opened and widened.

“Meg?”

“In the flesh, milady,” Meg smiled. “Let’s get you away from here; there is nothing we can do for the poor lady, no more. Maybe your husband would not mind giving a hand, eh?”

Hengist bent down and took Marguerite up in his arms. He smiled tenderly when he smelled the sourness of her vomit in her breath.

“You don’t have to...” Marguerite protested weakly.

“Don’t worry, love!” he whispered.

She just closed her eyes, overwhelmed by his tenderness.

“Tell Ian to have the mess cleared up here and to bring up some tea for her ladyship and something light to eat,” he ordered at a silent Biggles, who had joined the scene.

“Macy, you take care of Rose! Sit next to her until the doctor arrives. Meg, is it? Follow me!”

Meg dipped a curtsy and followed the tall handsome man.

Cor! Such a lucky lady to have 'im as a husband!

-

“He’s not the Viscount, Meg!”

Hengist had just left the room after leaving Marguerite into Meg’s professional care.

She was now tucked up in her bed, which was still slightly disheveled, as nobody had yet come up to change the sheets.

Meg had looked at the bed with a practiced eye. That bed must have been well used last night, or milady would have something to discuss with her upstairs maid!

“He’s not?”

She was busy tucking up the pillow behind Marguerite's back when one of the downstairs maids entered the bedroom with a tea-tray with soft jam-filled scones.

Marguerite shook her head faintly; she still was not feeling very well.

Meg waited until the maid left.

“Then who...?”

“His brother, Hengist. He's a major on leave.”

Meg clacked her tongue.

“If that's the brother I wonder what your husband is like!”

She turned to the tea tray that was placed on a tripod table within close reach.

“Here milady, some tea; drink it while it's still hot, and a bite of a scone, if you please. I dare say you emptied your entire stomach on the rug.”

She watched Marguerite attentively. The lady had closed her eyes wearily when she smelled the scone.

“Ah, that's the way of it, eh, milady? When's the wee one due?”

Marguerite managed to smile.

“I must have conceived on my wedding night, so it's more than two months ago. I'll have that tea, Meg. And tell me how you got to be here today.”

Meg told her how Pom had died and how she now hoped to take up milady's promise for a job.

Marguerite managed to grin.

“My maid fell ill this morning, Meg. Would you like to take her place?”

Meg almost fell from the bed-side chair.

“I... I would love to; anyone could help to put clothes on a body, but I don't know how to do a lady's hair!”

Marguerite smiled faintly.

“I’ve mostly done my own; Rose was not a master at it either. On the other hand, I can ask someone to come in and teach you. No doubt you’ll have a better head for it than poor Rose.”

“Oh, cor!” Meg almost dropped into a rapid cockney, “Are ye sure ye want me for that, milady?”

“I do.”

Marguerite sipped her tea gingerly.

“I need a friend in this household, Meg, a knowledgeable friend. I’ve been thinking about you so often. What do you think happened to my poor mother?”

Meg bit her lower lip. This was not going to be easy.

“An abortion. An abortion by the hands of some butcher! She’d’ve done best to have the babe and then give it away. Now she’s dead, poor lady.”

-

Hengist opened the door of his brother’s bedroom.

He turned to the man lying on his big bed. He was drinking straight from a bottle of brandy.

“Don’t you ever knock?”

“I did.”

Hengist sat down on a chair next to the bed.

“Your mother-in-law just died under rather messy circumstances. The doctor who came in for Rose confirmed her death.”

Hengist deemed it better not to mention the reason why Lady McKenna was now a corpse. He did not think his unscrupulous brother would be interested anyway.

“Rose?”

“Your wife’s maid. Did it get through your thick skull that I just told you your wife’s mother died this morning?”

As the head of the house and the family you will have to arrange a funeral in the next few days.”

“My wife...”

Philip was still thinking of Hengist’s insult to his skull.

Hengist rose with barely hidden impatience.

“You were never good for anything!” he growled, “Why do I think you would be useful now?”

“Get ... l...l... lost!” Philip stammered, “And you.... p... piss off as well!”

He threw the bottle at his valet who had entered through the dressing room door.

He turned his face into his pillow, not caring whether his brother left or stayed.

Hengist only vented his spleen by slamming the door shut behind him.

“Worthless!” he grunted, “Totally worthless!”

-

“Meg, go and ask the head footman if my brother, master Stephen, has been told about my... our mother. He has not shown himself even with that racket going on so I think he must have gone out. Ask Biggles to come here, I don’t think my husband will be showing himself again and we need to talk to a... an undertaker to take care of mother. My stepfather resides in his house in Kenna for all I know and I need to know how we can reach him in time for the funeral.”

Meg opened her blue eyes wide.

“Her husband is all the way in Scotland, ma’am? Oh, the poor soul! That’s more than a week away! You should send yer poor mum’s body up to him, so that she can be buried close to him!”

“In summer?” Marguerite asked cynically, remembering the Fat Man’s smelly remains.

“Oh, yes,” Meg nodded, “when we had the rich ones dying at the Hospital they were embalmed by Mr. Melford so that they could be brought home, wherever that was. They would be put in a coffin covered on the inside with zinc or such thing. No need for your mum to smell or leak, you know.”

Marguerite swallowed. Of course her mother, however nasty she could behave sometimes, did not need to receive the treatment Marguerite had created for her old dead husband. Her mother would lie in the family vault at Kenna and Marguerite would only have the hassle of getting her body on one of the ships to Edinburgh. No talkative biddies, no nothing. Doctor Harmon was going to put in the death certificate that her mother died of hemorrhaging, which was not exactly a lie.

On the other hand, what did it matter? Her mother was dead and outside the family nobody had to know about the true reasons why and how.

She shook her head. She was getting rather good at those things of late.

“It would certainly be for the best if my mother could be transported to Scotland, she is the wife of the Laird of Kenna, you know.”

A small voice inside her head whispered that she could easily rid them all of a humiliating funeral in London that way.

“Do you think your Mr. Melford would do the embalming?”

Meg nodded.

“Why not? It’s money for him, see. I’ll ask that hunky Ian to send a footman to Mr. Melford. He lives close to the Hospital.”

-

Biggles was sitting down while Cook poured him another cup of tea.

“It’s so devastating this situation, Cook!” he complained, “It is all not done, you know. And if we only had a housekeeper! Now young Ian is racing about the house fulfilling all those duties. It’s absolutely atrocious! A young lad like him should not have to concern himself over a dead mother-in-law. Why did she die anyway? I understand she bled to death!”

“Ah, yes Mr. Biggles,” Cook said soothingly, “woman’s troubles, you know! And don’t you worry your brain about Ian, I think he’s coping very fine, he is.”

She looked up when Hengist entered the butler’s parlor, thinking for a second it was the Viscount honoring them with a visit.

“Major!” Biggles exclaimed, getting to his feet.

“Sit down, Biggles; I’ll join you for some of that tea.”

-

Hengist pulled up a chair and smiled his thanks to Cook. She moved some honey-and-hazelnut pie into his direction and he found out he was ravenous.

“I have discussed the matter with Lord and Lady Morvern and it is decided that her ladyship’s remains will be shipped to Edinburgh to rest in the family plot in Kenna.”

He waited a while before continuing.

“The circumstances of her ladyship’s death are such that we would like to be as prudent about the situation as possible. Nobody actually needs to know her ladyship died

here this morning, we will leave it up to Lord McKenna if he wants to put an advertisement in one of the newspapers. A Mr. Melford will come to take her ladyship's remains to his premises; he will wait at the servant's entrance at the back. Arrangements will be made for the shipping of the coffin to Edinburgh, but that will not be part of your worries.

I only wish to be assured that none of the staff will blabber about this situation, as it can only do a lot of harm to Lady Morvern's position in society and therefore yours as well."

Biggles and Cook hastened to make it clear to Hengist that they understood the situation very well and that they would do everything possible to have the staff kept quiet about the sinister happenings of the morning.

"The only thing I need to know is if you have any inkling where young Stephen might be."

Ah, that quieted Biggles and Cook down. They watched each other surreptitiously.

Cook decided to have the word out.

"According to Ian he keeps a house in Cowe Street. He comes home here often enough, especially in the day time to have his clothes washed and to have lunch and sometimes dinner here. Sometimes Ian is asked to run special errands for him. I don't think it's a harmful thing, sir," Cook added hastily, "he's a young man and I don't think he's after anything bad."

Hengist nodded slowly. Slimy Stevie was out of the way? That suited him just fine, although he doubted that Cook was right about Stevie not doing bad things. The little blackmailer no doubt lived in close vicinity to his lover with the architectural hang-ups.

“Maybe Ian will find the time to warn the Honorable young McKenna that his mother has sadly passed away this morning. I understand from Lady Morvern that mother and son were on excellent terms. Now I thank you for your tea and that splendid pie.”

He got up from his chair, but Cook withheld him.

“How’s poor Rose, Major?” she asked with a voice full of concern.

Ah, yes, poor Rose, almost forgotten under the strenuous circumstances of the morning.

He shrugged helplessly.

“Not well, I’m afraid. The doctor claims she had a heart attack. He is giving her some medication but he confided in me that cases like Rose’s are hardly ever curable. We will have to see. She’s in the most Northern bedroom in order not to suffer too much from this summer’s heat.

Macy’s duties are now to take care of her. Oh yes, Mr. Biggles, the young lady that came to see you this morning, I think her name is Meg Mulligan, has been appointed to be her ladyship’s new maid.”

Biggles eyes widened.

“Already?”

“I told you that the girl had some sort of friendly relationship with the Viscountess!” Cook grumbled, “At least that takes care of the problem of a new maid. I understand that haughty, nifty Miss Trahern has run away since her mistress died this morning. You must not forget to check Lady McKenna’s jewelry box, maybe she stuck her hand in it before she went off.”

Hengist shook his head.

“Such thievery would get her an appointment with the hangman, Cook. I don’t think Lord McKenna had the

money to spend on a lot of jewelry, but we'll have milady check that box anyway, if it's any use. Thanks again for the tea; it's the best I've had since my army days."

He left with those flattering words, leaving Cook and the butler in morose silence.

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Chapter 29: DISCOVERIES

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Marguerite stared at the door of her husband's apartments.

She had been in there once or twice when her husband had not been home.

There had never been a real reason for her to be there. She had just entered his rooms because she had longed to experience something that had to do with her husband in the day-time. The difference in his behavior in the day-time had irked her. Yes, a difference of day and night, that was exactly the right thought, even if it expressed a not so comic pun.

He had behaved badly this morning when Rose fell ill, another pun, she registered, and he had not even shown up to commiserate when her mother had so unexpectedly died under such atrocious circumstances.

According to his valet he was sleeping and Hengist warned her that he had been imbibing and because of that he was not capable of even being remotely polite or compassionate or ... anything; anything but distant and cynical.

Well, maybe it was the right time now to show some courtesy to the wife, who had saved him from Debtor's Prison and ensured that he was able to lead a luxurious life without a worry in the world.

He may have made love to her half of the night, but for real marital relations one needed two persons to respect the rules. He'd had his blooming amorous ways with her, true, she enjoyed it obviously as much as he did, thoroughly

sinful, agreed, but if that was the only way he could express his feelings towards her, he was proving to be a damn poor husband indeed.

Good grief, another pun!

It did nag at her though, that there was really nothing strange about a husband who showed only appetite for the bedside part of the marriage.

Feelings for her? Where had that come from? Since when did she nurture a romantic outlook on life? Did her mother have feelings for her father, Lord Halkhead when she married him? How often had her mother called him a stupid besotted fool whom she had only married to get her butt away from the sheep at Halkhead's poor property? And ditto if it came to Lord McKenna. Feelings? Her mother would never have hemorrhaged to death with someone else's baby in her belly if she'd had even the slightest decent feelings for her elderly husband!

She did not want to ponder anymore on her impossible and inappropriate romantic notions so she opened the door with a thump.

He was lying naked on his bed, on his belly.

Marguerite almost stopped breathing when she saw the beautiful naked body of her husband for the very first time: he lay wide-legged, the front of his body pushed into the counterpane while his handsome face was snuggled into his pillow.

He breathed in small puffs and the air in the room stank of strong liquor.

She assumed he had been bathing, as the tips of his hair were wet and a towel was lying on the floor.

In a reflex she bent to pick it up, never taking her eyes from his smooth muscled back and his sculpted buttocks.

Oh, but her husband was beautiful! His skin was white as the marble statues of which some of the Greek heroes were made immortal, the ones that Lady Sophia had placed around her summerhouse. Marguerite had surreptitiously admired them, wondering if her husband would look like one. It had irked her that he only came to her in the dark, so that she had never been able to see him in the flesh, God it was a day for puns! But now that she'd had a real glimpse of him, she admitted he was absolutely mouth-watering!

When she quietly put the towel at the foot of the bed he slowly opened his eyes and rolled towards the side of the bed, where she was standing in amazed wonder.

She had never seen his naked body from the front and good God, he was impressive! His chest was like a chiseled statue's, entirely smooth and...

Was that what he looked like when he was aroused? She saw a thick pink pole arising from the dark blond curls that hid the apex of his thighs.

"Jesus Christ!" he croaked, when he noticed it was not John Row standing close to his bed.

Philip had been ready to indulge in a small tryst with his valet when he woke up, as his glorious Rick had presumably taken a day off to visit his mother, his bloody mother, for God's sake!

By the time Philip thought of taking one of the other footmen of 'Gents' into his lusty confidence at last, he had already been too drunk to move a muscle. Somebody had put him into his bed at Gents, but the moment he woke up, he started to drink again and then decided to go home to his new acquired residence, which had started to feel like home.

John had put him into a tub as soon as he had gotten into his bedroom, after the objectionable confrontation with his

wife and a protective and decidedly equally annoying Hengist.

Philip had fallen down on his bed after the refreshing cares of his ever voluble valet, remarking for the first time in weeks how well the man looked.

The moment before he fell into another alcoholic slumber he promised himself a little sentimental journey back into his valet's tender graces.

Rick was getting on his nerves anyway of late. Oh, he wanted that hunk badly, always! He guessed he had done himself the disservice of falling in love with him and God in heaven, that annoyed him most of all! Lord Philip Agnew, Viscount Morvern did not fall in love with footmen!

Marguerite gulped audibly, not understanding where her husband's hostility came from.

Philip gnashed his teeth as a headache speared through his skull when he suddenly moved to pick up his pillow, anything to hide his fast shriveling erection from the woman that was gaping at his crotch.

"Philip?"

"Get her out of here!" he bawled at a hastily appeared John Row, who had been pottering around his master's dressing room.

"Get out!" he cried at a shocked Marguerite, turning his body around, giving her another view of his slim and muscled backside.

"Ma'am?"

John had no clue how to handle this situation. After all, she was his master's Viscountess and worse; paying for everything in this very bedroom, including himself.

Marguerite blushed a fiery red, huffed and then took a dignified leave with a straight back and her head high.

How dare he! The miserable scoundrel!

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Although the doctor had given Rose some laudanum that morning she was awake when Marguerite tiptoed into her recently created sick-room.

Macy rose hastily. Sitting with Rose had bored her to tears and she wanted nothing more than a nice cuppa in the servant's parlor.

Marguerite hardly noticed Macy leaving. Her focus was only on her faithful servant.

“Does it still hurt?” she asked, grabbing a limp wrist.

“Ah... no, love.”

Rose had to whisper because her chest hurt like the very devil.

“Can I get you anything?”

Rose only shook her head.

“What's with your mum?”

Marguerite had to bend close to Rose's mouth as she was hardly audible.

“Mother died this morning, Rose. But let it not be ... Don't you worry about that! Major Agnew is taking care of things and Meg.”

“Meg... yes. Will she work for you, now?”

Marguerite nodded regretfully.

“Till you are well enough again, Rose.”

Rose shook her head.

“May have another one, Doctor said so. Won't stay long with you now.”

A tear slid along Marguerite's nose. She wiped it hastily away with her sleeve.

“Don't say that, Rose, please.”

Rose smiled weakly.

“At least I got you away from that f... f... fat man.”

“Yes, Rose,” Marguerite pressed Rose’s hand. “I’m glad he died, although I think I did a horrible thing to bury him at that place.”

Rose snorted softly.

“Just as well... Now no one will know.”

“No one will know what, Rose?”

Marguerite crept closer to Rose in alarm.

Rose’s eyes widened. Then she closed them.

“The poison...” she mumbled.

“Poison?”

In her mind’s eye Marguerite remembered her despicable husband puking and shitting like an animal, before his heart and liver gave up on him.

“You? No, Rose, say it isn’t true! It’s a deadly sin!”

Rose’s mouth lifted in a weak smile.

“After he hit you so hard you had to stay in for a week, remember? I found this shop, off the Gardens, the Green Cr... Cr... Crocodile. I had to pay the man a bit more than sh... shillings, but he’s nice enough. Gary Murray. If you ever need him, tell him you come from Rose...”

“Oh, God, but why would I need him, Rose? O, God, tell me it’s not true!”

“You’re such a wimp sometimes,” Rose murmured tenderly, her eyes still closed. “That man is no use to you either...”

“You don’t mean...”

Was Rose actually talking about Philip?

“Other one’s better... He’s a real man... Cherie. Need sleep... Talk later...”

Her sleep was instant.

Marguerite looked down on Rose's face that seemed remarkably young in her laudanum-induced slumber.

Rose poisoned the Fat Man? What did she mean with 'the other one's better'?

She brought her hands to her mouth as if she could hold back those terrible thoughts about Rose. The other man?

Marguerite's thoughts went back to the naked man she had seen on the bed.

Such a perfect body, how could Rose ever...

Some alarm bells started to clang in her head.

Such a perfect body?

-

It was just Hengist and Marguerite that evening sitting in a darkened dining room.

The servants had shrouded the house in black out of respect for the Viscountess' mother's untimely and rather messy demise.

Marguerite shivered and Hengist looked up from his dinner.

"Would you like me to rake up the fire a bit, milady?"

He frowned.

She was as white as a sheet. Had she come down with something as well?

"Just pour me some more wine, Major. That might bring the rosiness back to my cheeks. And let's not discuss my health, let's talk about you. You never tell me anything. I don't think my husband will come down for his supper, will he? I mean he was rather vengeful about you, wasn't he? So let's have an undisturbed conversation about Major Hengist Agnew tonight!"

One could doubt that Philip would make an appearance because he had left the house at six, dressed up in his evening finery.

Normal people might frown at a husband who was going out at his leisure even though his mother-in-law had just died that very day. Hengist doubted however, that his brother would hear one word of criticism about the matter. Philip was most definitely beyond caring.

Hengist gazed uncomfortably at the woman opposite him. She seemed to be in a strange mood.

They were in the small dining room tonight as Marguerite had more than once complained about the big dining room table that put such a distance between the diners and necessitated almost shouted conversations.

He wondered if the servants were plotting to put the two of them together more intimately when they were alone.

The honorable Stephen had written a note of excuse; there was no need for him to be in the house when his mother had been taken away for her final treatment.

Hengist wondered if Stevie's 'love' for his mother had been nothing but fear for the woman. He had hardly reacted in a heart-broken way about his mother's departure from this world.

"Talk about what, exactly, my lady?"

"Oh," she said nonchalantly, "about your time in the wars? Remember when you and I met on the road to London? Where did you go then?"

He suddenly felt as if ice was sliding down his spine.

"That was a bit of a wasted trip because soon afterward we had to be shipped up North again to Denmark. We wanted to keep the Danish fleet out of the hands of the French. The Frogs ran out of ships fast after the battle of

Trafalgar and they wanted the Danish fleet badly. The Danish Prince thought he could keep the fleet from the French himself and he remained stubborn in his conviction, so we had to fight him for it.”

Hengist sighed heavily. It had not been much of a real battle; it had been mere slaughter. It was inexperienced farmer’s boys fighting on wooden clogs against the professional ranks of the British army. Copenhagen was soon in ruins due to the British artillery; nothing to be proud of.

“And after Copenhagen?”

“We were sent to Portugal. That was not much of a success at first; almost the entire British army was pushed into the sea at La Coruna. My battalion had remained at Lisbon awaiting new recruits from the third regiment, so by chance we were still in Portugal. Wellesley wanted us to stay there until he got appointed general. Not much to tell, really.”

“I understand you were wounded a few times?”

She said it sweetly, touching her hair and brushing some crumbs off her lap.

“I was hewn by a French dragoon at Rolica,” he said evasively.

Marguerite widened her eyes. Of course, she already knew all that, she had boxes full of articles on the war, on him and the war. She just wanted him to tell her about it.

“Hewn?”

“That’s how they do it. French cavalry fight with sabers and they slash at the enemy with it. My horse went down. A bullet in his head and the Frog slashed at me.”

“Where?”

Hengist waited a second. He did not have a good feeling about her interrogation.

“My back. I was lucky he only opened up my skin. I was falling when he struck me, so it was a mere flesh wound.”

A wound that had opened up the skin from one end of his back to the other; luckily the dragoon had been killed by a musket ball. Hengist was able to creep away from the melee until someone of his regiment dragged him to the uncertain safety of the surgeon’s tent.

Marguerite moved her spoon through the cream sauce on her roast. Hengist looked at it as if he was mesmerized.

In the soft candle light she looked mouthwatering in her green silk dress that clung around her body. Her cleavage was high and inviting. The same round breasts that he had fondled and kissed last night as if it would be his last.

“That was the only wound you received?”

Her voice made him uncomfortable. What on earth was she aiming at?

“Every battle tends to leave a mark or more, my lady.”

She nodded, seemingly busy slicing her meat.

“I heard from the biddies that you were wounded at Talavera as well.”

Hengist put his serviette on the table.

“The biddies?”

“The old married or widowed women I frequently have tea with. They seem to know everything, especially now that Mrs. Clinton has come back to London. She has followed the drum, I gather, whatever that means. Her husband is a colonel. A nephew twice removed from General Clinton. I understand that Mrs. Clinton must have mentioned that occasionally about twenty times.”

She laughed suddenly.

“But why am I telling you that? Mrs. Clinton’s husband is a colonel in the 42nd, your regiment if I remember correctly.”

Hengist swallowed.

Damn Lily! Here in London having tea with his Cherie. God punish the bloody woman!

She would not have spilled the beans about him, would she? About the child she was carrying that may or may not be his, for Christ sake!

He dabbed at the sudden appearing sweat below his ear.

But of course, ladies’ teas were not like soldiers talk by a campfire. Lily would never admit in Polite Society that her child was not Clinton’s.

Marguerite watched him closely.

That Mrs. Clinton was Lady Bromley’s friend. She had boasted about knowing Hengist Agnew, the war hero. Had it not been her daughter’s name in the article about the so-called marriage?

“Another blasted dragoon at Talavera,” Hengist said hastily.

“Another slash?”

She could not help raising an eyebrow mockingly.

He nodded.

“Another slash, this time all the way over my midriff.”

She suddenly rose, almost pushing her chair against the buffet.

“Show it!” she ordered him curtly.

Hengist gaped at her and rose as well.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Denied,” she almost yelled at him.

“Now show me that scar!”

She started to rip at the white silk shirt he was wearing, tearing off his simple stock at the same time.

“Ma’am?”

“Don’t you ma’am me, you... you bastard!” she cried at him, pulling his shirt open to his waist.

“Isn’t that the scar?”

She pointed at his chest where a thick scar circled his upper body.

“Is it such a coincidence that the man who beds me so enthusiastically has a similar scar?”

“Oh, God in heaven!” Hengist mumbled.

He grabbed Marguerite by her shoulders with both hands, when she seemed ready to turn around and flee the room.

“Please, Marguerite, I can explain!”

“I’m sure you can!” she snarled, “Unhand me at once!”

Hengist lowered his arms slowly.

“Please... I can explain...”

“You already said that,” she growled.

She made a fist and hit him hard on his chin.

Then she raced from the room, shutting the door with a mighty crash.

Hengist touched his jaw, wondering if she had removed some teeth with that swing.

Then he smiled.

His kind of girl, that one!

He sat down to finish his meal.

No reason to lose his appetite over her discovery. He had already figured out that she would find out his deception one day and he was relieved that she knew, at last.

She’d come around for sure!

He grinned.

Women always did the opposite of what was expected and that one had become too fond of the shared pleasures with him. He thought of her moans and shrieks of last night.

The good Lord's teeth; she'd come back for more, he was certain of it!

And Cook had definitely surpassed herself tonight...

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Chapter 30: PREPARATIONS

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“She’ll be leaving for Edinburgh within a few days. She’s going to escort that corpse back to somewhere in Scotland. I don’t know. There must be a McKenna graveyard on the estate, if the Laird will allow her stupid remains to rest there.”

The Duke of Lindley shook his head.

“Foolish woman, that one; glad I did not touch her with a ten foot pole.”

“She offered herself to you, no doubt?”

Sophia scowled.

“Aren’t you exaggerating the size of your privates? Hardly ten feet, if a foot at all.”

The Duke grimaced.

“I love it when you are being vulgar, dear sister. Why the dark mood?”

Sophia looked into her wine glass, as if she admired the vintage of the Claret.

“You’ll do it when she’s out of town? When she leaves with her dead mother’s corpse?”

Richard nodded silently.

“I like her, Richard!” Sophia pleaded, “She’s so different from all the other socialites. Did I tell you she actually cried when she watched Romeo and Juliet?”

“About seventeen times,” the Duke answered evenly. “You’re not falling in love with her, I hope? My spies tell me she’s having a great time in the Viscount’s bed. Hardly your piece of pie.”

“Well, wouldn’t you like a bite of that yourself, brother?” Sophia scoffed.

“Rich and adoring bedside manners?”

The Duke raised a brow.

“Very unique indeed. The Prince promised me I could have her and it would please me greatly.”

“He can hardly give her to you by royal command. This is not the middle Ages. And her husband is not yet dead. One mistake and your whole scheme falls apart, Richard.”

The Duke opened a wooden box filled with cigars and presented it to his sister. She looked at it with some alarm.

“Go ahead. I know you indulge, you may as well do it openly,” he grinned.

Damn, but her brother was in a good mood, anticipating his next coup against an innocent girl.

She took a cigar and lit it with one of the twenty-four candles that adorned the table. Ah, but it would be a cold day in hell if she’d have him succeed in his nasty plan. There were quite some advantages to being the Duke of Lindley’s sister.

All it would take was some careful planning.

The Duke blew out a big spiral of smoke and looked at her.

“Forget it, sis, this one is absolutely mine. Even bedding the Prince won’t help you.”

Tears suddenly filled Sophia’s eyes.

“Please Richard, it’s only money. Don’t damn your eternal soul for it!”

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He only saw her again after the coffin had been brought to the house.

Biggles had it placed in a side-room draped with black and dark red curtains near the great hallway.

It was two days since their row in the dining room and he was shocked to see her so pale and diminutive while she stared at the closed coffin.

“I understand the lid is open and you can see her,” he croaked gravely, not really knowing what to say, anyway.

She was dressed in a severe black dress. The only ornament on her long neck was a strand of perfect white pearls.

She stepped away from the coffin, doubling the distance between them.

“I already saw her,” she said curtly. “I wish you good day, Major!”

He grabbed her wrist when she turned to leave.

“No. No, we need to talk.”

She looked at him with angry eyes.

“I don’t need to talk to you ever again, you hear! Unhand me!”

He grimaced and let go of the hand that felt brittle and dry. Nothing like the supple soft flesh he had adored those nights of erotic bliss.

He performed a short bow.

“As you wish, ma’am. I’ll leave the house today. I’ll stay on the Sea-anemone until it sails.”

“What?”

Already breaking her vow about not talking to him she held up her hand as if to stop him from going.

“I’m going alone, Major. I don’t need interfering people on this trip.”

“You are not going alone, ma’am. My brother refuses to leave London and your own brother has not shown himself

in three days. I'll be d... blasted if I'm going to let my sister-in-law travel alone on a sea-voyage in war-time. Don't worry. You and your maid will be staying in the owner's cabin which will be far away from wherever Captain Barnes will put me."

He was dressed in his kilt and in the colors of his regiment: dark green and black. He was wearing the full regalia of his majority, a red officer's sash on his hip and a heavy, long sword hanging on his side. A Klingenthal, just like his friend Lochiel had been carrying. It had been one of the last presents his mother had presented him with before he disappeared forever from her life.

Her gaze raked him and she could not suppress a feeling of elation.

He looked heroic and brave.

And he would go to Scotland with her. He would protect her with his bravery and that big sword of his.

She abruptly turned away from him, feeling his hunger for her.

It was all so very confusing.

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Meg had been made up to scratch from the start. They told her about Ian's love for Cook, which she found understandable.

They mentioned the honorable Stephen McKenna's probable inclinations for a good-looking apprentice of a famous architect, and the fact that he rented an apartment in Cowe Street right above the handsome apprentice's house. (This information came through a junior-footman who was assigned to bring laundry to-and-fro, food prepared by Cook and liquor.)

The strange comings and goings of the new master of the house were made known to her, to which were added the doubts about his inclinations towards women; his own wife in particular. The lecherous behavior of her mistress' mother before she so sadly died in a pool of blood was also conveyed.

There had been whispered declarations about the Viscountess' former life; about when she was married to a fat and wealthy merchant, but Meg had found it sensible to cut those rumors short. She knew quite a lot about those days, including her mistress' short affair with a certain young vicar. She deemed it best to keep her mouth closed about all this. She did not want the staff to speculate about them, either.

The housemaids wondered and giggled about the extremely handsome Major, and Meg shared their admiration. She was greatly impressed with the tall officer who seemed to look so similar to his brother, the Viscount.

The Major remained a mystery to her, because her mistress was very tight-lipped about him. Meg, who had learned a lot of patience in the years that lay behind her, bided her time. She had sensed from the beginning that her mistress and the Major were immersed in a secret, but she could never put her finger on it and the whole staff just lifted their shoulders in resigned mutuality.

She knew that Macy was half-way in love with the big officer, hoping he would invite her for a tryst, the best any chambermaid could hope for, but it seemed that the man remained way out of anyone's league.

She was packing her ladyship's trunk for the seven day's voyage up North, which was hardly an enormous effort; her ladyship was to wear only three black dresses,

required for mourning, which were hastily delivered by some specialized modiste, and that was going to be that.

As she would be accompanying her mistress to Scotland, Cook, in some state of housekeeping, had provided her with some additional clothes to her new grey dress, which she would wear as a lady's maid and companion.

The state of mourning in the house did not include any elaborate hairdressing, and as a laundress there was not one piece of clothing that she had never seen in her life. So it was easy enough to perform her day-to-day tasks.

The Viscountess' wishes were few; one had to bring her meals three times a day, all light and easily edible because her state of health involved a quickly upset stomach and the extra cup of tea now and then.

The Viscountess was to accompany her mother's body to Edinburgh by sea and if Meg understood things well enough the ship was one of the Viscountess' own shipping line.

Meg was very curious about sailing. She had been married to a boatswain, who never returned from sea, but apart from the small ferries she had occasionally taken over the Thames, her experience with sailing was limited.

Her mistress was not very forthcoming about the voyage to come, but Meg assumed that the Viscountess was very much distraught about her mother's death.

At Seven Dials, where she had lived for almost half her life, the death of a woman in her forties due to carrying or miscarrying was an almost normal occurrence.

Life was hard and cruel in London's slums, but of course, the pampered Quality had slightly better chances of surviving childbirth at middle age. Meg did admit that abortions were probably not such a daily occurrence with

the Quality, but she kept her mouth shut about that calamity without anybody urging her.

She went to see Rose who was lying restlessly in her bed.

There was no sign of Macy.

“I sent her downstairs.”

Rose had seen her looking for the upstairs maid.

“How’s my lady?”

Meg shrugged.

“Very upset, I’d say. She does not say much. She’s in her own parlor staring into the garden.”

“And the Major?”

Meg frowned at Rose. Her asking about the Major was strange. Rose was not saying a word about the Viscount.

“He’s left for the ship. I overheard him saying to Mr. Biggles that he was already off, but he wanted to be sure that milady was properly escorted to the wharf. He insisted on three footmen and an armed coachie.”

“They quarreled?”

Meg opened her eyes wide.

“The Major and milady? Why would they?”

Rose heaved a deep sigh and indicated Meg to take a chair.

“I’d better tell you Meg, now you’re to take care of her. And mind you, it was my fault entirely...”

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Chapter 31: ANOTHER VOYAGE AND A POOF'S ARREST

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“She’s not much of a sailor, Lady Morvern, is she now?”

Captain Barnes collapsed his telescope and put it in a deep pocket of his blue captain’s uniform coat.

Hengist stared at the coast of England on the port side of the Sea-anemone.

They were making good time, the handsome Captain had told him and they stayed very close to the shore to avoid any meetings with a French vessel.

They had left the mouth of the Thames last evening after the ship lifted anchor from the East India dock.

Hengist had helped Marguerite onto the moving ship because there was a breeze blowing.

It was an English day with grey clouds in the sky and sleet whipping the new passengers before they could retire to the owner’s cabin.

Marguerite had insisted that Meg should sleep in her prominent owner’s cabin, ignoring the Captain’s protests that the cabin boasted only one double bed and that a pallet for her maid would be dangerous.

She had insisted that the maid could share her bed; it was big enough.

He had not seen her come out ever since.

The remark only then hit home.

“What do you mean, not much of a sailor, Captain Barnes?”

Barnes grinned at the Major. It had pleased him inordinately to have the man back on his ship. Such a coincidence!

His ship needed to dock for repairs and for more than two months he was able to go to his mother's house in Newington and futilely pursue the lady whom he'd had his eye on for many a year for marital purposes.

Prudence Carrow did not mind his handsome face but she refused to marry a captain on a merchantman. She was not so desperate that she would sit at home and wait for a husband who would come home maybe once a year.

Nick Barnes had gotten the impression she was sweet on somebody else, richer and homier than he would ever be, so he had given up the quest for her hand.

Now he was back on board his ship scheduled for the Northern waters as far as the Baltic. His holds were almost empty apart from some parcels for Edinburgh and the coffin.

The shipyard's office had insisted he'd sail for the benefit of the owner who would do her sad duty and bring back her dead mother to the husband in Edinburgh.

He would go then to St. Petersburg to load priceless Russian furs, detouring alongside the Swedish coast to be back in time for the sale of the precious goods before a long cold winter started.

"She came up for some fresh air this morning and immediately puked her... ah... vomited over the railing. Her maid told me it has not been different since then."

Hengist frowned.

"I hope she is alright? There is hardly a swell..."

The Captain grinned and winked at Hengist.

"Meg told me she's in a specifically fragile condition."

“Fragile?”

Hengist looked non-plussed at the Captain.

“I understand you are going to be an uncle if all goes well. Good reasons for a toast tonight at supper, Major!”

Hengist felt the ship shift under his feet and wondered if that meant he was fainting.

Good Christ and all his angels in heaven! Cherie was pregnant! She was carrying his child!

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“Maybe you should go up on deck again, my lady.”

Meg threw the bowl with its bitter contents through the porthole, hoping it would not fly right back in.

Marguerite lay back in her pillows and groaned.

“The Captain told me you should come up and look at the horizon. That seems to settle your stomach better than lying here.”

Marguerite shook her head weakly.

“I’m fine here. Just get me some tea, Meg; the tea that Cook packed for us.”

Meg shrugged.

Just as well if milady drank something. Cook had packed two hampers that would last them for a few days; a ham, a nice wheel of Cheddar, some pastries, some white bread and milady’s favorite Indian tea. There were also some pear jellies. Cook had discovered they tended to stabilize Marguerite’s stomach during the mornings.

“Here, chew on this jelly-bean, milady, it will take the bitterness out of your mouth and Cook told me it will help you to get rid of this morning sickness. I’ll go up to the pantry and see if Jonessy can make you a proper tea.”

She put her new shawl around her shoulders and stroked it lovingly.

It was sky blue and did a lot for her matching eyes. Marguerite had, without sparing it a glance, taken it out of a cupboard and had given it to her. Meg knew now it had belonged to her mother and had accepted the expensive gift with a smile.

She was glad to leave the cabin for a while.

To her surprise she adored the fresh air of the sea and the grey swell of the water. There had not even been a minute of seasickness for her and she had started wondering if it was something her father had bestowed on her. Her mother had told her that it was a midshipman man on a naval ship who had impregnated her at the age of seventeen, married her and then had never returned from his voyage.

She clambered on to the deck, after her request to the ship's cook.

The Captain was on the afterdeck and beckoned her.

“The Major and I are worried about your mistress, Miss Mulligan.”

Meg smiled at him, showing him even teeth and a clear skin. That was what being a laundress did to a person: you were hardly ever dirty and for some reason your skin stayed young and appealing.

“I brought some of her own tea to the pantry, sir, and your cook is brewing it. She'll be fine in a jiffy, I hope. She should stop feeding the fishes soon, I'd say.”

Nick Barnes stared at the woman.

He'd had his fill of quite some nice, willing girls during his leave. He was a real prize right now; an available captain in his thirties.

After his futile attempt at seriousness with Miss Carrow, he had not been able to turn more than a minute's real attention to them, until this one came on board his ship.

She was lush and blond and very attractive. He was certain she aped the airs of her mistress, who was a real Viscountess and surely soon to be a countess, but she did it well, without arrogance or presumption. She was as fresh as the sea and last night in his bunk he had some lascivious thoughts about her that had much more to do with her tantalizing big breasts than marriage, but still, the thought had occurred to him. A Viscountess' maid, no make that a Viscountess' companion, or better still a countess' companion...

That would do fine within the social circles in which he and his mother found themselves in London.

His father had been a higher clerk at the Stephenson Lines, until an early death took him to his grave, but his mother had been far from destitute. Father had been a very prudent man and when he died, he left her a small legacy that was sufficient for her to live on, together with a part of his captain's wages.

He led a life of almost luxury himself with everything he managed to earn on the side: the extra tea-chests that were not included in his bills of lading, the jade, the ivory, and the bags of coffee beans...

Whores in the ports came cheap for him, when he allowed them business on board, so cheap that his condoms seemed like a luxury article too expensive for words, although he had hardly ever gone without them.

As a young lad, he had seen them die like flies, the ones that had been poxed. The Black Lion was a horrible death; slowly taking wits and sanity from a man.

His father had spent a shilling once to take him to Bedlam to look at the poxed insane. He had given him his first shield and told him never to go without. For once, he

had listened to his father, regretting he had earlier taken the girls at the wharf side inn without thinking about any protection for one moment. To his relief a few months later he had still been ‘clean.’

He peered down her pretty, blue shawl, hoping to see more of her cleavage.

She turned her wide blue eyes on him.

“It’s Mrs. Mulligan, sir. I’m a widow. My husband went missing at sea.”

She stopped talking suddenly as if she still had a problem mentioning him.

“I’m sorry,” he said blithely.

A widow; that was just as well! At least this beauty was not spoken for. And even better; she was no virgin or a simpering miss. He’d never had a virgin before in his life, true, but he was a man with an enormous appetite for the good lush flesh of women and he liked them to wholly participate in the act.

“Was he a captain like me?”

Ah, Meg thought, no one is like you! Who knew, if she played her cards right...

“A third lieutenant.”

That was honestly not that far from a boatswain’s position, if you looked at it, so she forgave herself the lie.

“We were both very young. He’s been missing for four years now.”

He took her arm when the ship shuddered over a bigger wave and she almost lost her footing.

She smelt of violet water and clean woman. With a skin like that, she could not be poxed after four years.

Oh, hallelujah; Nick Barnes was falling rapidly in love and in lust.

“Would your mistress be able to sup with me tonight? And if she doesn’t mind, will you join us too? It’s only you and the Major, and my officers.”

Meg's eyes widened. She was invited to the captain’s table? This captain’s table? Oh, cor, but she was glad now she’d had Mr. Biggles explain table manners to her when she was bored and looking for company in the house.

“Even if I have to drag milady, sir!” she promised.

He smiled broadly at her. His hand still held her elbow and another wave made it necessary that he gripped her around the waist. An hour-glass figure! She made his mouth water and he felt his dick swell in his trousers.

She suddenly turned around, escaping his warm hands.

“Tonight then, sir!”

He reddened when she walked to the galley. Had he heard her gasp? What if she had noticed his arousal?

He grinned again. Well, what if she had noticed? She was not some virgin miss, was she? God, he wanted her so much that it hurt!

-

Sophia put her glass down with a clink.

“We’ve been dining for the better part of half an hour and the only thing you do is pick at your food and scowl. Would you prefer me to take my pudding somewhere else so that you can have a bad mood in peace and quiet?”

Richard lifted his head. His sister was probably right; he must have been staring at his plate for a long time.

“Excuse me for my bad behavior, Sophia,” he answered unwillingly.

“It’s bad enough you cancelled our evening at the opera,” she said crisply. “I adore Mozart, you know, but I can hardly go unescorted.”

“What about Miss Martin? Now that she’s back she could accompany you again?”

“I’d rather go with you. Nora despises the opera; she’ll sit through it and yawn all the time. She’s in a black mood anyway now that her mother died before she could get home.”

“The Prince is apt to be there!”

She leaned forward with a furious look on her face. The opulent diamond necklace did nothing to hide her beautiful breasts encased in a low décolletage.

“What’s wrong, Richard? Last time I saw you like this you were accused of treason after you came back from Austria.”

Richard rested his chin in his hands.

“They’ve bungled Morvern’s arrest.”

He waited for Sophia’s inevitable “What?”

“He was lifted out of his bed by a Runner and his cronies this morning. He was asleep with a naked footman, presumably his lover. They brought him to the Old Bailey at once. The Runner said he would be charged with sodomy. Tonight...” Richard took out his watch, “they are going to arrest a whole gang of poofs in Vere Street.”

“Yes? And?”

Richard heaved a deep sigh.

“They should have done it the other way around. Get those Mollies from Vere Street first. Have him disappear within that crowd. No one would have been able to prove he was not with them!”

“Why?”

“Because...”

He motioned to a footman to place his pudding in front of him.

Until now he had no clue what he had been eating if he had eaten anything.

“They had arrested him at that High Quality Poof’s club Gents; which happens to be his own house! They dragged him out of his own bedroom, the fools! Do you think anybody at the House of Lords will condone one of their own to be dragged from his own bed in his own house on a charge of sodomy, even if that footman was buried in the man’s seed?”

She had the nerve to smile in triumph.

“What now?”

“I doubt we can bring him in front of a judge under the circumstances. So we’ll have him rot in the Old Bailey on trumped up charges until his wife comes back from her sad duties. Who knows, perhaps he will die of a disease or be murdered for...”

He looked up quickly when he sensed that she shook her head.

“God forbid you take that on yourself, Richard,” she whispered.

He lifted his hands.

“We are still in time for that opera. Don Giovanni, isn’t it? Then let’s go! I’m done with this day’s work.”

She nodded distractedly.

She’d have to write that letter after they came back from the opera. Marguerite would have to make a more or less about turn and should be back in about sixteen days. Dammit! Anything could happen to that Viscount in sixteen days!

-

Philip folded his hands behind his head and stretched on the small bed.

Lucifer, but this was an improvement after that cell with those dirty convicts! If only he could get rid of the smell in this foul place!

He felt for the bottle of brandy next to the cot, uncorked it and took a big swig. He moved his toes in his soft leather boots. With all the clothes and the hamper with food and wine that a shivering John Row had brought him that afternoon he should be fine for a while.

Christ, but this was a goddamn snitch he'd found himself in! They had lifted him from his bed at seven in the morning, probably knowing about his habit of going home before ten. He had not been given time to cover his nakedness and if it had not been for Butler himself, who had thrown him somebody's greatcoat, he would have been dragged naked around London in a covered carriage.

Damn, damn and damn again!

He was worried about Rick.

He assumed nobody had thought to pay for a solitary cell for the footman and to bring him food and clothes as well. Everybody knew that if you did not pay the jailers for a better place, you'd end up in a stinking space where a man could not stretch his body without sticking his feet in someone else's nose.

The indignity of it!

He took another long swallow of the first class stuff that came from his wife's house.

He did not even wish to contemplate what she would say or think about the charges that were to be put against him.

A sodomite. She'd married a sodomite!

But damn her anyway, if he remembered rightly she'd just left for Scotland with the corpse of her lecherous mother.

That fellow Lane, who ran the estate, would come back tomorrow, but there was not much he could do, Philip presumed. They had found him in that bedroom, asleep, but that Runner would no doubt swear he had been buggering Rick when he entered the room. A fine mess he found himself in!

He felt the drink get to him. At least he could drink as he pleased now; John would bring him another bottle tomorrow.

That stinking jailer would make him pay through the nose for his foodstuffs, clean clothes and the pleasure of a shave. At least he would die looking clean...

God damn it all to hell, where did that thought come from? He was not going to die at the gibbet, he just wasn't!

He wiped a tear from his face. Why were you always right, mother? Bloody, bloody hell!

-

There was a full moon and it shone on her pale face.

She was wearing a black fringed silk shawl around her shoulders that hid the daring cleavage of the dress.

He wondered about the lush display of her mourning clothes. Last time he had seen her she wore a dress that covered everything up to her chin, but then she'd not had supper with three admiring officers, a too-interested captain and two midshipmen, although the latter two had not been nearly sixteen.

Sitting at the table Meg had been demure and gracious; wallowing in Captain Barnes obvious interest in her.

She was glad that her mistress had eaten and had drunk a glass of wine which had been supplied by her own cook.

Marguerite was placed at the Captain's right, while Hengist was seated at his left. In this way they were forced to look straight at each other as the captain was heading the long mahogany table.

The first officer was placed next to Marguerite and was overwhelmed with the honor of sitting next to a real Viscountess. Meg was placed next to Hengist, as if the Captain deemed a Viscountess' companion above the rest of the officers.

Hengist smiled. It was clear that the Captain wanted Meg as close to him as possible.

After the meal, which was a bit stilted, the Captain suggested they'd go on deck since the weather had changed and it had become a beautiful summer night with the sun setting on the dark shapes of England's shore.

Barnes pretended he had to look into a few things before he clambered on deck, so Hengist was forced to take Marguerite's arm and lead her up the galley.

The first officer accompanied Meg, but once on deck he was quickly dispatched by a pleased Captain Barnes, who was now standing on the poop with a smiling Meg.

Hengist walked Marguerite to the front of the ship where the waves were cleaved by the tall merchantman.

"You are not cold?" he asked with a frown.

She just shook her head and looked out over the sea.

Hengist folded his hands behind his back. He wished they could talk about other things than banal civilities, but he resigned himself to the evident.

"Why did you do it?" she suddenly asked.

Hengist took a step closer to her as if he had not heard her.

“Did what, ma’am?”

“Don’t you ma’am me,” she hissed at him.

“You came to my bed from the first night of my marriage and I want to know why.”

He looked up at the dark sky.

“I did it because I could not help myself.”

“Help?”

“I did it, because it was a coincidence and I took the chance. Your maid thought I was your husband. I did it because I knew he would not come to your bed and I wanted you so badly.”

“You knew he would not come to my bed?”

Her voice sounded pained and incredulous.

He turned away from her. He did not want to see her face when he told her.

“My brother does not make love to women.”

“What?”

“My brother does not care a whit about women. He is only interested in his own... species. My brother only wants... My brother only has a taste for men.”

He listened to her gasp. It was clear she had never been educated in that sort of human behavior.

“I don’t understand you.”

He turned back to her.

“It is my understanding that my brother and yours have played out a fine piece of theatre, with you as the highest reward. I understand from Master Lane that my brother was destitute and needed cash very fast. So your brother probably insisted that Philip marry you to get him out of his dire straits. Knowing Philip he would not have spared a

thought over what might have been expected of him the first night after the nuptials. Philip is not really cruel, just very self-centered. I just happened to be back on the night of the wedding and, if I remember well, it was Stephen who had put me in the room next to yours, because my brother did not wish to move to the spouse's suite. Rose unknowingly did the rest. She told me to go into your room although you were already asleep. I was standing in the dark, readying myself for bed."

He coughed to hide his embarrassment when he remembered what he had really wanted to do.

"I am not certain that I would have stayed with you, if you had not woken up and invited me ... in. But there you were and there was my one chance in a life time to... to love you."

"Love?"

Her voice sounded bitter.

"I loved you from that day I saw you sitting on that pony," he admitted softly. "It was a stolen ride, I know, because you were riding astride and your dress was crumpled up so that I saw the scandalous sight of a bare thigh. I have loved you ever since. I could rescue you from those highwaymen because I did everything I could to coincide your schedule of that trip with my battalion. When you married that old fatso I was in torment, but on the other hand, I hoped he would die a quick death sometime soon, so that I could step in and marry you myself. I hoped you would not spurn an earl's son, albeit a second one, and a major to boot. But I turned up too late. You were married to Philip instead."

Her eyes gazed at him with bright curiosity when he told her all this.

Suddenly she stepped forward, leant against his chest and pulled her arms around his waist.

“Oh, Hengist,” she sighed, “don’t you know I dreamt about you for years as well? I kept track of everything about you or your regiment. I only married Philip after that advertisement in the paper. It said you married this Miss Bettina Clinton, Mrs. Clinton’s daughter. I gave up all hopes about you and when my mother insisted I marry Philip, I could see no reason to refuse. He is after all almost the spitting image of you.”

Hengist put his mouth to her crown and kissed it. He drew her harder against his chest and felt an elation he had never dared hope for.

“So you wanted me too?” he murmured.

She kissed his chest, her mouth landing on the silver button of his dark uniform coat.

“Much more now that I’m having your child!” she gushed.

He squeezed her against him.

“At least he will be an Agnew, although not a Morvern.”

She shrugged.

“You’ll be Morvern as soon as Philip inherits your father’s title. Do you think that brother of yours cares?”

He shook his head resolutely and took her mouth for a deep kiss.

“Is there any chance that I can visit you tonight?”

His voice trembled when he asked. It wasn’t as if he had the right to sleep with her.

She smiled impishly and his heart soared with love for her.

“I’ll have Meg thrown out.”

She looked at the two figures that were standing very close together at the railing at the lee side of the ship and giggled.

“I think she might want some privacy herself.”

-

Meg looked with big astonished eyes at the Captain, when he bent over her hand to kiss it. Oh, cor, nobody had ever kissed her hand! It was ever so romantic and gallant!

“Will you allow me to court you?” he asked eagerly.

“I know you must like your position with the Viscountess, but I would like to hope...”

“Oh, I... don’t know what to say to that!” she answered coquettishly, “I am not sure Milady would be very pleased...”

She congratulated herself that she sounded so ladylike. On the other hand she wondered where “courting” would lead them to and how it should be done. It sounded rather dull for a girl who’d liked to heat the sheets with her body warmth, and his.

“Meg! I need you to help me get ready for the night!”

Meg looked in alarm at her mistress. She had never sounded so impervious before.

She curtsied quickly at the Captain who looked at her with regret in his eyes.

“Captain!”

Again the haughty voice.

“I wonder if you can get my companion another cabin. I don’t think it’s a good arrangement to have her sleeping in my bed after all.”

Captain Barnes looked from the Viscountess to a smug Hengist.

“As I already remarked, my lady!”

He bowed to her.

“I’ll tell my steward to make preparations. It will only take a minute. The cabin next to my own is available.”

It was the second owner’s cabin that he normally used to hide his contraband in.

He peeked at Meg’s face and wondered if she was blushing.

He nodded at Hengist and the Viscountess and turned to look again at Meg. She had taken off her shawl and gave him the best view of her white and fleshy breasts.

He hoped that with that gesture she had meant an invitation; he was sore with eagerness for her. Court her indeed! If he could not bed her tonight he would explode!

-

Meg turned in her new bunk.

It was very roomy and definitely first class.

The steward had made quick work of it and after she had helped milady out of her dress and brushed her hair, one hundred strokes as usual, she had called the steward to bring her valise into her new sleeping quarters. By then the Viscountess had been reading in her bed by the light of one of those ship’s lanterns.

Meg wondered about her mistress’ mood. It was entirely opposite to the devastation that had marked her that morning.

She shrugged. Obviously the dinner had done her a world of good. People always reacted better with food in their belly.

She fingered the soft batiste of her new night shift, another present appearing from that specific cupboard.

A dead person’s clothes!

She tinkled a laugh; she could wear them any time. Beggars were never choosers.

She touched the cloth near her breasts and rubbed her finger alongside her nipple.

Oh God, she was hot for that man! It had been a while since Pom...

Just then, the door opened and he bashfully stood before her.

“I just meant to say good night...”

He sounded hoarse.

She could feel the heat radiating from him. She sat up and laughed.

“Well, good night then, sir!”

He looked startled at her and did not move.

“I told you I wished to court you. I still want to.”

“Court?” she asked innocently, bringing her hand back to her breast.

She heard him swallow.

“Will you marry me then, Mrs. Mulligan?”

“Marry?”

She felt a panicked confusion.

This man, this captain, asked her to marry him, her a lowly laundress out of London’s worst slums?

“Are you sure?” she asked, damn her honesty, “We... you don’t know me at all!”

By the light of the full moon shining through the porthole he looked at her for a long time. Then he sat slowly down on the bunk. She could feel his breath on her face; he was that close.

“We’ll make the announcement tomorrow night at supper and we’ll marry as soon as we reach Edinburgh, if you don’t mind.”

He sounded very final.

“What’s the hurry, Captain?”

She heard a tremble in her voice. People of the Quality married without having seen each other at all, so why was she protesting? In her circle people who slept together might or might not stick together. They hardly ever found their way to a vicar. She’d married Jack because marriage would give her right to a part of his bosun’s wages.

“Because I want you now!”

He made it sound like a simple logical statement.

“Ah, then have me now, Captain.”

She folded her arms around his neck and found his mouth. He tasted the way he looked; sea and wind and brandy and tobacco and big, big male.

His hand found the edge of her luxurious night shift and moved up a delicious thigh.

“I promise I’ll marry you,” he muttered.

He almost came out of his skin when her experienced hand touched the heavy bulge in his breeches.

He said it again when he lowered himself into her warm female softness. Meg only moaned with pleasure. She would see what the next day would bring; she was used to living one day at a time.

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“We’re making good time with this wind coming from the South-West.”

Nick Barnes handed Hengist a mug of coffee.

The big officer had been staring out over the sea. They drank in silence, both feeling elated, smug, a little tired and thoroughly satisfied.

“You don’t have to go that fast,” Hengist muttered. “We’re only taking back a corpse and I like the freedom that sailing on your ships brings me.”

When the Captain watched him in silence Hengist added hastily that the lady’s corpse had been prepared anyway.

“In that case....”

The Captain turned around and shouted at the First Officer who was on the easiest watch to change course 70 degrees, which would mean the ship would turn into the North East and take the wind at half. He also hollered at the Bosun to take in a few sails. The ship’s speed diminished at once.

“Just as well,” the Captain smiled, “I am going to announce our betrothal tonight.”

“What? With the...” Hengist almost said ‘the laundress.’

“Her ladyship’s companion,” the Captain nodded. “I ah... I sought her company last night and now I must take the consequences.”

Not with that one, you don’t have to, Hengist thought mockingly. He had recognized Meg for what she was; a laundress aiming to better herself when she could. But then she was a fine piece of a girl, clean and friendly and lush.

Cherie had told him that Meg did not want to come to work at her house at first because she had her hopes of a new man.

Meg was not a scheming girl. He admitted that she was obviously interested in Nick Barnes, so why not? Nick seemed not to be sorry to have bedded her last night.

He nodded.

“I can imagine you would. But are you certain? Marriage is for life you know, and I think you only met her one day and a half ago.”

Nick shrugged stubbornly.

“I have been stalking a decent lady in Newington for three years now, only seeing her at my mother’s teas when I was at home. She did not indulge in other pastimes than church and visit her late husband’s grave. It all turned into nothing. I slept with Meg Mulligan and I like her fine, she has good manners and is a Viscount’s companion. I don’t see any reason why not?”

Hengist laughed.

“Indeed, why not! I’ve known the Viscountess since she was a fourteen year old girl, but I always hesitated. Now I came back from Portugal to find her married to my brother. You might say I wasted my time, and for what?”

Ah, so that was the way the cookie crumbled. On the other hand, Nick had recognized the elation of a well bedded man this morning.

It was not his affair. He looked sideways at the big man next to him.

“Your brother does not care about his wife?”

Hengist stared into the sea again.

“Not a whit.”

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After Hengist left her bed Marguerite felt her morning sickness returning.

Oh God, would it never end? At least she managed to keep her stomach up right after she had sucked on a jelly bean.

Meg told her it was something that normally happened in the first three months and some fast counting convinced Marguerite that she would have a few more weeks to go.

Oh, well!

She had never felt as happy as she had this morning.

Hengist told her he loved her and to prove it he had loved her almost through the entire night. He had left the lantern burning which had been swinging in the middle of the bunk, declaring he wanted to see her when he made love to her.

It shocked her at first to see at last what all those movements in their nights together really looked like.

It pained her to see his scars in detail. They seemed not real at all when she could only put her fingers along them, but to actually see them made her shudder at the menace his profession had been to his life.

She had run her lips alongside the roughly stitched rims of flesh, knowing she could never make them disappear.

She loved him because of them. She loved him for his huge muscled body. She'd found that romantic love at last, that she had always craved.

Illegal, illegitimate love, but she did not wish to ponder on it. Not on this ship that moved like a cradle and put her back to sleep, after she had struggled back into her night shift.

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Chapter 32: EDINGBURGH

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Marguerite stared at the wagon that was brought to the shipyard to take her mother's body to Lord McKenna's townhouse.

It was a hearse; two black horses with black plumes on their heads were pulling it slowly onto the road towards the town.

She looked at her black gloved hands.

Her stepfather had not been present when the ship arrived at last, two days later than officially scheduled.

She wondered if he had known about her mother's sins and of her sudden death which was due to her irresponsible behavior and extramarital 'love.'

The thought depressed her. Wasn't that exactly what she had been doing of late? Unwittingly at first, and now, knowing it all too well and still not refraining from it.

She turned to Hengist when he came back on board after seeing the coffin off.

"He did not even send his steward," he grumbled disapprovingly.

Marguerite looked into his beloved face; the blond hairs now longer again were swinging in the wind.

His grey eyes fixed on her.

Now that she knew him so well she suddenly thought he was not like his brother at all. Ah, but then her whole attitude and all her senses were tuned to him; her man, not her husband, but her man.

Somebody was shouting at them from afar; a horseman wearing the livery of the house of the Earl of Loghaire.

Hengist squeezed his eyes at the man.

He rode a beautiful roan with such expertise; it could only be one of the stable boys. Most footmen were not able to ride such a horse if their life depended on it.

He frowned.

They were in Edinburgh to stay until after Lady McKenna's funeral, so what was the damn hurry? It would not be bad news about his father? But even that could wait until they arrived at the town house.

Somebody was being overzealous, no doubt.

Captain Barnes had just climbed the wooden gangway. He had personally seen the coffin off as a matter of pride. Now he was eager to go into town and find a priest to marry him to the delectable Meg. He would stay in Edinburgh as long as it would be necessary to find her ladyship another maid because no way in hell would he be handing over his love, Meg, to the Loghaires so that he had to sail on without her.

It was not unusual for a captain on a merchant ship to bring his own wife for a voyage and that was exactly what he planned to do.

Meg had been waiting for him at an unobtrusive spot near the entrance to the cabins.

She wore black now, just like her mistress. Only her new blue shawl added color to her shape.

She fixed her stare onto the horseman who jumped off his horse in apparent hurry, throwing the reins to a kid that was scurrying around the wharf.

A dark premonition descended on her.

The man ran up the gangway, producing a heavily sealed letter from his coat pocket.

“A letter for my Lady Morvern,” he gasped, out of breath, directing his steps at once at the only woman aboard who was entirely dressed in black.

Marguerite took the letter with nimble fingers.

No wonder the boy had been in such a rush to bring her the epistle; it wore the ducal seal of Lindley.

“It’s from Sophia,” she whispered scanning the thick paper and breaking the seal without an afterthought.

She suddenly grabbed the railing, almost dropping the letter.

“Oh my God! Oh Hengist, oh my God!”

Hengist stepped forward to put his arm around her in support.

The others looked at her with mounting worry; the stable lad with smugness, because he’d evidently brought such important tidings.

“It does not need to be answered now!” Hengist snapped noticing the lad’s curiosity.

He threw him a coin and signaled for him to go back to the horse.

The lad, recognizing the Earl’s son from last time he had been there, tugged his forelock and went, albeit reluctantly.

“It’s Philip,” Marguerite whispered.

Her face had taken a deathly pallor.

“Sophia writes he has been taken to Newgate Prison.”

Hengist almost tore the letter when he grabbed it from her hand.

He swore.

“The idiot! The blustering damn fool!”

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So now they would be returning to London, the four of them: the Sea-anemone would take them back with the late tide the next day.

Marguerite did not need to insist. She was the owner of the ship and Nick understood the need to go back and see how they could save the Viscount out of the strict law on capital crimes.

He had not bothered to find himself a man of the church as a good friend of his had been mooring in the Tyne and had declared being a captain he could marry Nick and Meg just as well.

Hengist found himself in a foul mood.

He had wanted to stay in Edinburgh for a month or so, staying in his father's house, creeping into Marguerite's bedroom every night, but now he would be going back to London instead, to face a scandal and his brother's humiliation.

The only thing that had calmed him a bit was that Lady Sophia had stated in her letter that the officials, for some reason, hesitated to bring Philip in front of a judge.

Someone must have buggered up then. It was not easy to bring a Viscount in front of a judge, the House of Lords was mostly adamant they handled their own affairs. The House of Lords...

"Let's go to my house, then," he insisted quietly.

"We can all have baths and some good food before we turn back to London. I gather you don't want to attend your mother's burial?"

Marguerite shook her head in misery.

"Not if we need to go back to London. Kenna is a long way from here. It might take us days only to get there with the hearse slowing us down."

Nick Barnes turned around and pointed at a ship that was moored close by.

“If we go onto the Amelia-Victoria first, the Captain can marry Meg and me right now. You won’t have a problem then when Meg and I stay at your house.”

“Are you certain you want to do it this way?” Hengist asked the eager Captain.

“Is there any other way then?” Nick asked, his voice full of scorn.

No one could hope for a real celebration when the Viscountess’ mother lay dead in a coffin waiting for transport to some godforsaken spot in the Scottish lowlands, while the Viscountess’ husband was languishing in a foul prison somewhere in London.

He’d be damned if he was going to let his bride-to-be stay somewhere else than at his ship and in his bed. Distance may make hearts grow fonder, but his fondness was now entirely based on the nights he had spent in this woman’s bed, and he wanted a lot more of it. He was hooked on her and he knew it and was not going to fight it.

When Mrs. Carrow told him she would not marry him, he had suddenly realized he felt very lonely of late and Meg was his medicine against that loneliness. He’d had his fill of loose women and he was going to attach his body and soul to this one. Damn the consequences!

-

Hengist opened the door of his father’s room softly.

It still had the pungent smell of somebody old, sick and bed-ridden.

Derrick showed up at the door and opened it wider when he saw the Earl’s son standing there.

Hengist walked to the bed. The sallow face of the old man was in deep rest and he looked questioningly at his father's valet.

“How is he doing?”

The thin man looked at him with a sad face.

“Not very well, sir. Doctor Prendergast says that the end is nearing. He hardly ever gets out of that sleep he is in and the doctor says that the fevers are overtaking him. We have a heck of a problem feeding him, you know; we pour some soup in him, but he can hardly swallow. The doctor is worried the food will go into his lungs and that will be fatal.”

Hengist shook his head.

Such a pathetic end for his big and blustering father: the bully, the womanizer, the barrier between two dukedoms, the impulsive rider, the eminent hunter, the truest Scott who refused ever to go down to the hated capital of the Sassenachs.

For some reason there had never been a lot of love lost between him and his father. Probably the Earl had bestowed all his love on the heir so there was nothing left for Hengist to spare; but still it was his father.

“Did you take care of him for tonight?”

Derrick nodded. There was hardly anything to do but clean his diaper and change the linens when the bed was fouled.

“As much as possible, sir.”

“Where is his ceremonial gear?”

Derrick looked open mouthed at Hengist.

“You mean the Earl's mantle and distinctions?”

Hengist suppressed his impatience.

This poor man had been working for his father for the larger part of forty years. He was getting very old and Hengist had to shrug away the feelings of doom about his father dying.

He nodded curtly.

“At Loghaire,” the valet mused. “It’s been years since he needed them. Yes, the last time was when he and milady had the official portrait painted.”

“Would you know where?” Hengist asked, looking down the bed.

“Of course,” the valet said, “I put them away myself.”

“Loghaire is more than a day’s ride...”

If one was quick on a good horse that was.

“Would you be able to fetch them if we asked one of the older maids to take care of the Earl in your absence?”

Derrick turned around and looked at the Earl. He knew exactly why Hengist was asking him for his master’s ceremonial clothes. He would be buried in them when...

The valet swallowed.

“I can send one of the footmen...”

Hengist looked closely at Derrick’s old shrunken face.

The valet shook his head.

“Impossible, master Hengist, those young 'uns wouldn't know what to take.”

Hengist sighed.

“I can send you in the travel coach. It takes a bit longer but you might be able to be back in three days. Better now than after... well, you know.”

The valet’s Adam’s apple moved up and down in his throat as if he was swallowing away his tears.

“Tonight, sir?”

Hengist shook his head. He had the man's age to consider.

"First light tomorrow. You'd better go and take a good night's rest. You'll need it. I'll ask Padding to send up someone as your replacement."

The valet looked back once more at the sleeping Earl and then shuffled towards the door.

"Mrs. Padding could do it," he suggested when he reached the door, "she's done it before ... when I was unwell and doctor Prendergast advised against me being near the Earl. A good night then to you, master Hengist."

Hengist stared after the old man; one down, one more to go.

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"Is something wrong?"

Marguerite put her hand on Hengist's muscled shoulder.

He had been sitting up in their bed for quite some time now.

He had gone to her room which had been conveniently close to his own, had undressed and then... nothing. He had stared into the dark shadows of the high ceiling, while plucking at the counterpane.

"My father is in a very bad way," he said gloomily, "it won't be long before Philip has to take over."

He suddenly looked at her, a twinkle coming back into his eyes.

"You'll be a countess soon, Cherie."

She pulled a face.

"Oh, Hengist, don't say those things!"

She'd rather be some major's wife than a countess and he knew it.

He leant back against his pillows.

“I apologize,” he whispered, “that was not... that was uncalled for.”

“Are you very upset about your father?”

Hengist shrugged.

“We all die, one day or another, but if it happens to your own father...”

He looked up sharply when a distracted sound escaped her.

“I’m sorry, Cherie, truly,” he said repentantly.

For God’s sake, how could he say that when she had just lost her mother in such an awful way.

“Let’s sleep, Hengist,” she urged him, “tomorrow there will be a lot to do before we go back.”

She bent to kiss him on his lips.

This would be the first night where they would sleep in the same bed and do just that; sleep. It was only fitting, she thought.

She blew out the candle next to the big bed and turned on her side.

It came as an afterthought.

“I love you...” he whispered.

A warm hand stroked over the soft linen of her nightshift, seeking a curved thigh.

She turned towards him.

“What? Now?”

“I need you, my love,” he groaned, “more than ever!”

Because tomorrow there would be another death and he needed the distraction of her delightful body.

Yes, tomorrow.

If there was only truth in the saying that tomorrow never comes! But the awful truth was that this tomorrow would be there soon enough.

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Hengist looked morosely at the slowly disappearing profile of Edinburgh.

At six o'clock the air was still grey-blue and clear. It had been a lovely July day and he regretted having to sail back to that foul big city, where his brother had been imprisoned for more than a week now.

The arrests of the mollies of Vere Street had been in all the important newspapers and Hengist worried if that was where Philip had been apprehended.

That Vere Street gathering had been called a low place where no one of any true virtue should enter, but Hengist knew his brother's taste for mischief and the unusual haunts. He would not mind places of depravity; on the contrary, he had always adored them!

At least the favorable wind on their trip from London had changed a bit to the West. If the ship made long stretches, partly sharp in the wind, they could make good speed again, according to Nick. The disadvantage was that they would have to sail further away from the coast, but they would have to take that risk in order to make good time.

Marguerite was standing so close to him that he could smell her light perfume.

He put his right arm around her, scoffing at the heavy sword at his side.

He had not yet gone down to his cabin to take it off.

Marguerite had teased him about the sword; gentlemen wore light sabers and not something that could be categorized with battle-axes and claymores.

Hengist disliked the smaller and slightly rounded swords that were the fashion with the English cavalry. The

Klingenthal had saved his life more than once and Hengist was inordinately attached to the weapon.

The wind played with his kilt and Marguerite's mouth curved in a smile.

Hengist only stared at the waves, deep in thought.

“Are you feeling better now?”

Hengist pulled her closer to his shoulder and hid his face in her dark hair. It had been coiffed in a more elaborate way and he felt combs and pins.

“Did you have Meg do your hair?”

Meg and Nick had slept at the town-house in one of the best guest rooms.

Hengist assumed that Nick had been right after all, marrying Meg before they had come to the house. Now Meg was Mrs. Nick Barnes, wife of a ship's captain, which had made it a hell of a lot easier to stay with the Captain in the opulent rooms and dine at the Earl's table.

She smiled at him.

“She insisted, even when I told her she should enjoy her wedding night to the full. Anyway, Nick had to get all the water and food he could put his hands on as he does not want to stop in Hull. So she said she had all the time in the world. Silly woman!”

She looked up at him.

“Why did you go back for your father's ring and seal? Should they not stay with him until the end?”

Hengist had left them at the main gate of the house, at the last minute before they went to the ship. He had shouted to them that they should go on. He would follow later because he had forgotten to bring a few important things.

Later he had produced the Earl's seal and ring from his uniform pocket.

“True,” he nodded curtly, his thoughts suddenly bleak, “yes, till the end.”

He looked away.

“Let’s go down. I feel like hiding myself in something warm and sweet.”

She grinned, not understanding his dark mood.

“You mean you want to eat that wedding cake now?”

He pushed her to the galley; “That, and you, of course.”

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Chapter 33: LONDON DRAMAS

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It was late at night when they came back to the house off Piccadilly.

Meg was to stay that last night on board, so only Hengist and Marguerite were descending from the hansom that Nick had hastily arranged for them at the port.

Meg had declared that she was not sorry to be leaving her duties of undressing milady to someone else, showing Marguerite that she had well understood the new situation with the Major. Marguerite had blushed profusely but Meg had whispered to her that the Major was the better man of the two brothers.

As most people of her days Meg did not feel a lot of affinity towards poofs.

When the door of the house was opened a woman came crying out of the house, throwing herself against Hengist's broad chest.

Marguerite stood stock still.

The woman was bawling like a banshee while fat tears streamed along her cheeks. She was probably not yet in her fifties. She would be attractive if not for the hot tears streaming from her eyes, reddening and puffing up her face.

She was dressed in the grey garb of a widow-for-years and clung to Hengist with all her might.

“You must save him, milord, save him, they are going to hang him!”

Hengist managed to get out of her clinging grasp and frowned at Biggles, who stood in the door opening and just looked apologetic.

“Mrs. Newton has been posting at this house for days now, sir. I might say I am glad you are at home. The place has been a mad house. Mrs. Newton, please go to the visitors drawing room! No doubt, the Major will hear your request as soon as he has been able to make himself at home. Good evening my lady, my excuses for the hassle, but... Is Meg not with you? Oh, my word, I’ll have to tell Macy to get up then, she went to bed a few hours ago! Ian, Ian...”

Marguerite stopped him.

“No need yet, Biggles. Thank you. How’s Rose by the way?”

She handed Ian her shawl and hat.

Biggles’ already long face sagged into a sad expression.

“No improvement, I fear, my lady. So let me wake Macy...”

“Not yet, Biggles! Bring some wine to the visitor’s drawing-room, three glasses if you please. Major, let’s hear this poor lady’s complaint so that she can go safely home. I daresay it’s beyond quite a lot of people’s bedtime.”

The woman sat down on a chair in the drawing room, sniffed and blew her nose in a tiny lace handkerchief.

“I am Mrs. Newton. It’s my son Rick, ma’am.”

She almost started to cry again.

“It seems he was arrested when in the service of the Viscount, your husband. He’s to be bound over to the criminal court of justice. They mean to hang him.”

Marguerite almost dropped the glass of wine a taciturn Hengist handed to her.

“Hang him? You must be mistaken, ma’am, surely they would not...”

Hengist put a hand on her shoulder.

“It is quite possible that Mrs. Newton’s son would be accused of a capital crime that is a hanging offence. Was your son at the Viscount’s residence when he was arrested?”

Mrs. Newton shuddered and almost started to cry again.

“He was at the usual address of his work, sir. He was taken to a place, some watchtower or other to await the arrests of people from V... Vere Street. He told me he was arrested early on Sunday morning and had to wait all day in that place. After they were brought in front of the magistrate on Tuesday, they were convicted to the pillory, but he was held apart as they said his crime was much more heinous than the others'. There were two more men held separately, one a drummer boy of not yet sixteen, even if they had not been at that Vere Street club at the moment the other men were picked up there by the Bow Street police.”

She started to cry again.

“Where is he now?” Hengist asked her quietly.

She crumpled her lace hand kerchief into a small ball.

“He’s been in Newgate since that Tuesday. I have not been able to visit him there as people warned me it is a foul place not fit for a...” she stopped for a second, as if hesitating to say the word, “...lady.”

“Let’s start at the beginning, Mrs. Newton,” Hengist said more suavely than he felt.

“Your son’s name is Rick Newton?”

Mrs. Newton blushed.

“His name is Richard Denning. His father was Squire Samuel Denning of Walford. We never married, although I thought we had. My father was the Mayor of Walford, that is how I knew Samuel, and we eloped and went through a wedding ceremony which proved to be a fake.”

Marguerite looked at the lady with a startled expression. It was every woman's nightmare: thinking to be wed to some rogue and then to find out that the wedding was staged.

She patted the woman's hand when Mrs. Newton started to snivel again. It took her a lot of fumbling before she was able to continue.

"My father was furious of course when I came home pregnant, but he was so much in the power of the Dennings that there was nothing to be done about it other than to have Richard at my parental home and claim he was my little brother. They bought colors for Samuel, the family was rather high and mighty and they did not want me as his bride. They had their expectations of a girl from the Quality. He died of the fevers when his ship sailed to the Americas. The horrid thing is that the family remained without issue and their land was inherited by some wastrel of a cousin. Denning's mother is still alive regretting everything they did to me... to us.

Mr. Newton asked my hand in marriage three years later and I kept him in the dark about Rick for years. He found out about it at the occasion of Mr. Denning's death. Richard is to be bequeathed the unentailed part of their estate when he reaches the age of thirty. He was furious and our marriage deteriorated. Mr. Newton was a merchant in wood for house building and we never had any children. He was angry that his money in the end might go to someone else's child, so he threw me out of the house. My mother left me a small cottage when she died. It's somewhere near Kensington, in the fields, and Richard came to live with me. When he turned sixteen he decided to take a position in one of the wealthier households."

She unfolded her crumpled handkerchief to wipe it alongside her eyes, because tears were threatening to fall all the time.

“I am afraid that the lord of the house took took advantage of Rick’s looks and youth. I am afraid he debauched my poor son.”

She looked pleadingly at Hengist.

“This Lord Lattimer was a known roué and I heard all sorts of rumors about his dissipation. I begged Rick to find himself something else, but he assured me the money was very good, at least the tips he got there.”

She wrung her hands, dropping the hand kerchief in her lap.

“I fear to think how he got those tips. We were basically poor and when I had my first illness, Rick insisted on taking care of the doctor’s bills. You see, I have acquired some sort of heart failure. I get medication from this very posh doctor that Rick found me.”

“Your husband did not support you, Mrs. Newton?”

Marguerite looked at the widow with pity in her eyes.

Mrs. Newton shook her head with scorn.

“No, on the contrary, he did everything to make my life difficult. It was a relief for me when he suddenly died, about two years ago. He made sure I was left out of his will. Not that I cared, of course.”

“Lattimer?” Hengist asked, “Not Lord Leonard Lattimer who died in that famed duel with Bernie Marks-Throckmorton four years ago?”

Mrs. Newton nodded.

“One and the same, sir! Rick went into someone else’s service, but I don’t think that was any better. He was

between jobs when that Mr. Burton asked him to work in that specific club.”

“Club?” Marguerite asked, “What club? “

Hengist coughed in his hand.

“I suppose my brother never told you that he turned the house at Upper Brook Street into a gentlemen’s club? I only know because I ended up there when I came to London in May.”

“Yes, well, that is where Rick was arrested.”

Mrs. Newton reached with a trembling hand for the glass of wine Hengist had put on a side table.

Hengist folded his hands behind his back.

“Thank you for sharing this with us. We will see to those problems first thing in the morning, but I must insist that Lady Morvern goes to bed now. She is in a delicate way and should have gone to sleep a long time ago. Are you staying somewhere in town, or do you have to go back to Kensington?”

Mrs. Nelson rose from her chair.

“I am staying with friends at the vicarage of Bloomsbury. I’ll take a hansom. I am certain they have waited up for me, they have done so for the last five days.”

“I’ll send a carriage to pick you up tomorrow, Mrs. Nelson. Let’s see; at ten o’clock? And of course I will ask my butler to warn the stable that you are to be taken home right now.”

At the woman’s protests Marguerite shook her head stubbornly.

“You are not to roam London in search of a vehicle to take you to Bloomsbury at this hour. Hengist, please ask Biggles to see to a ride home for Mrs. Newton. I’m going up now because I feel completely knackered.”

The morning would see their work cut out for them.

-

Hengist returned to the house in a foul mood.

He had talked to his brother who had acted as if the whole situation did not concern him at all and was adamant that Hengist should get him out of the prison that same day.

Hengist had conferred with Master Lane about the wisdom of trying to get his brother out of prison. Master Lane had shaken his head.

“No offence, Major, but something is extremely fishy about all of this.”

He had taken off his spectacles and had wiped them with a pristine handkerchief before continuing. “The Viscount has not been brought before a judge yet, but on the other hand there should be dozens of witnesses to his arrest. I wonder what they are waiting for. Surely you understand that it would not be wise to force the whole issue? The Viscount has not officially been charged for the capital crime. One wonders if they are afraid of the House of Lords, who might insist on handling this itself. The huge problem that has been created right now is that we have been left in limbo. I don’t know what steps to take. We don’t want the high words out, do we?”

His brother accused of sodomy? It was too terrible for words!

Hengist knew that the Quality would not take that lightly! Marguerite would be a pariah for the next fifty years and he ... God, he could already hear Wellesley’s snooty and arrogant voice when his rank was taken from him.

Oh, but his brother had brought them into one hell of a snitch!

The situation with Mrs. Newton's son had not proven to be any better. He was accused with the rest of that Vere Street gang of mollies as if he had been part of it.

At least Hengist was able to bribe a dirty jailer to get the boy into a 'private cell' with a cot, a table and chair.

The boy was tearful with gratitude when John Row brought him clean clothing, gave him a wash and a shave and a basket that contained a nourishing stew.

The boy was horribly thin after fifteen days of prison slop. Apart from the stew the basket had contained some white bread to appease his stomach and some port to 'bring some strength to his blood.' Cook had added a flask of beer, declaring that the water in that prison was probably dirtier than the Thames.

Rick Denning was trembling with fear and Master Lane agreed that his prospects were grim.

Hengist entered the parlor where Marguerite and Mrs. Newton were waiting for him. They both jumped up from their seats, a piece of embroidery falling from Marguerite's lap.

Mrs. Newton obviously had not been able to divert her attention.

He shook his head when he saw Mrs. Newton's hopeful expression.

"At least we were able to get him into a small space of his own," he tried to console her.

She started to cry pitifully and Marguerite took her by her shoulders and made her sit back on the settee again.

"Could I see him?" she asked, fumbling for her handkerchief.

He waited until she had finished blowing her nose, wondering how many tears a mother could spill for a son

who had walked an easy criminal path and now had to pay for it with his life.

“He has not yet been bound over to criminal court. There is no way you could enter that prison now, not under the circumstances he’s in. It may be something else when he gets ultimately convicted...”

Hengist knew he implied that the boy would be sentenced to death and it was only then that the mother would be allowed to say farewell to him.

She sagged against the back of the settee and Marguerite exclaimed that the poor soul had fainted.

“She should be put in a bed,” Marguerite decided, supporting Mrs. Newton’s lolling head, “she told me she did not sleep a wink last night.”

She looked a bit guiltily at Hengist. They both had slept like the dead after their hasty lovemaking. Hengist nowadays refused to close his eyes without having loved her at least once. Hengist had barred all the doors of their suite to avoid anybody coming in and seeing them in bed together, as he also stated that he would not be denied sleeping with her all night anymore.

The bad thing about that, Marguerite mused, was that he had seen her in the pitiful state of her morning sickness.

No woman liked to have the man she loved to see her throwing up.

He had shown tenderness and caring towards her instead of disgust; thank the Good Lord.

Biggles brought in three footmen, who all carried Mrs. Newton to a bedroom on the second floor.

“Couldn’t you have given that information a bit more carefully?” Marguerite hissed at Hengist when the servants all disappeared from the parlor.

Hengist sat heavily down on a chair. He was exhausted; nothing more wearying than bad news, on top of bad news.

“I could hardly tell her that her son would only come out of that prison in a coffin,” he mumbled.

Marguerite looked up sharply: “What did you just say?”

Hengist stared uncomprehendingly at her.

“He can only get out of that prison in a coffin, my love, two feet first.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, “But that is just it!”

-

Rose was sitting up in her bed, busily knitting something small and white when Marguerite came rushing into her room.

“Rose,” she said breathlessly, “that apothecary of yours near Convent Garden...”

“You mean Gary?” Rose asked blushing.

Gary Murray had only been in his fifties and had insisted that Rose, clean and rather fleshy, pay him for the expensive poison by means of a little tryst on the table of his laboratory. Afterward Rose had thought it rather smart of him: one indiscretion in exchange for another one. So the two people involved would keep their mouths shut about it. The poison for the Fat man had come dear enough, a whole pound for a small vial.

“I need something like the Romeo and Juliet p... poison.”

Marguerite looked around the room as if someone would be listening behind a curtain.

Rose put down her knitting needles.

“What? What sort of stuff is that, Cherie?”

Marguerite explained the part of the play where Romeo buys a poison that will make him look dead for some time, but that is meant to make him later rise again from death.

“I don’t know if he has it,” Rose said calmly, “but of course I can ask.”

“You’ll do no such thing, Rose,” Marguerite gasped. “You have to remain in your bed, Doctor Harmon’s orders.”

“I would not want you to be submitted to Gary’s not so obvious charms, Cherie. He is fifty years old with thoughts dirtier than the muck on a stable boy’s clogs. I’ll take the carriage to Covent Gardens, I can rest enough in your luxurious vehicle, and ask Gary for the ... ah...medication. Maybe he can order it. Would you mind telling me what it is for?”

Marguerite shook her head.

“I’ll tell you later, but not now. You must trust me on this.”

“Good.”

Rose pushed the counterpane away and climbed shakily out of bed.

“I may as well go now. Ask Ian to come with me to that shop. He has to carry the gold.”

Marguerite’s eyes widened.

“The gold?”

Rose lips lifted in a tiny smile.

“The gold, Cherie. Gary is no fool. It’s going to cost you.”

She tugged her best dress and some nice undies out of the cupboard. Just in case Gary insisted on more than gold.

-

Rose came back looking harassed.

The trip downtown had been more of a strain than she thought and Gary had indeed insisted on more than gold.

She had sent Ian to a pub opposite the apothecary and had followed Gary into the laboratory. Afterward she had paid two guineas in advance for the drug. Two more were to follow at delivery.

She had wondered about the amount of money a not so real poison would cost Cherie, when the poison she had bought for the Fat man had only cost one pound and a quick swive.

She hoped with a vengeance that the apothecary was not pox ridden; he must have done this sort of dealing with more than one female customer. On the other hand his teeth had not shown the blackness that Mercury, the only medicine known to be adequate against the pox would cause, so there was hope that her generosity would not be rewarded with a dirty and deadly disease.

“Two days.”

She sat down on the settee and Marguerite hastened to pour her a cup of tea.

“It’s something made of a puff fish, whatever that is, and it induces a coma or death, depending on how much you take of it. He said the Borgias used it often, whoever they are. He will send a message and I can pick it up in an alley close to that shop. God, I’m tired.”

Marguerite fetched the table bell and rang it.

“Do escort Rose back to her room, Biggles, and have a bath brought up.”

She looked askance at Rose who emptied her cup, took an angel cake from a dish and headed for the stairs.

Hengist, just coming out of the library, walked towards her.

She just nodded at him.

-

“It has to be diluted with water.”

Rose held up the vial that contained a greyish powder.

“Don’t drop it,” Marguerite smiled, looking at a silent Hengist.

“I informed Mrs. Newton of our plan, so that she won’t have a heart attack when she hears about the sudden death of her son.”

“How is she?”

Hengist poured himself some claret although it was only two o’clock in the afternoon.

Marguerite shrugged.

“Hopeful, I guess, but also afraid.”

Since her unfortunate faint Mrs. Newton had resided in the town house. She was staying in her room for most of the time as she did not want to impose too much.

“Well,” Hengist rose from his chair, “I’d better be going. I’ll see Rick first. Do I have to dilute it now, Rose?”

“Yes,” Rose agreed. “Tea will be fine, until the vial is full.” She opened the stopper and poured some luke-warm tea in the tube.

“Mind, you only administer him eight drops, so you better bring this tea spoon, sir. He’ll be out for about twenty-four hours. That should be enough to get him through the examiners and the gate.”

Hengist put the vial and the teaspoon in his pocket.

“Let’s pray they don’t give him to the body snatchers,” he mumbled.

At least, the fact that the boy was put in a private cell meant that he was backed up by money and the jailers preferred to squeeze more money out of a bereaved paying

family member, than to receive a few pence from the corpse sellers. Unclaimed corpses were mostly sold for scientific purposes.

“Godspeed, sir!” Rose murmured softly.

Marguerite only watched him walk into the hallway, regretting that at times like this she could not show him any affection.

-

Hengist almost bumped into a young man wearing the Loghaire livery. The man looked travel worn and tired. His horse was tethered to the railing of the small stairs to the servant’s quarters, further away.

“Is it truly you, milord? I have urgent tidings from... from Mr. Donaldson, sir.”

Hengist took a very deep breath. He wondered what had kept the correspondence from Edinburgh so long. It had been more than a week since he left the house.

“Did you come all the way from Edinburgh?” he asked the young man whom he recognized as the stable boy who had been riding to the wharf.

“Max Clare, isn’t it?”

He took the letter shaking his head. Clare was a noble name; he wondered how the lad had come by it.

Max tugged his forelock as in an afterthought.

“So I did, milord. It’s just that Bounty there threw a hoof when we were still in Scotland and I had to walk him about half a day before I could find a knowledgeable farrier. Then the rains in Yorkshire prevented me from going fast; I was afraid to hurt his legs in that muck and I lost my way in the moors. I could not ride him for more than eight hours, sir, I was afraid he’d get blown; he’s too good a horse for bad treatment.”

“Maybe the letter should have been sent by stage then,” Hengist wondered, not willing to criticize the young man.

He supposed it was just as well that the news had been delayed.

Stage horses were chosen for their stamina, and exchanged at the coaching inns, so that the coaches could travel for at least sixteen hours every day.

“Get yourself to the kitchen, lad, and ask the butler to give you some lodgings. You look as if you need a sleep!”

He took a guinea out of a pocket of his waistcoat and threw it at the boy who caught it with ease.

Marguerite had come into the hallway. She looked questioningly at the letter.

Hengist tore the envelope quickly open, scanned the letter and then sat down on the bench in the hallway.

“What is it?” Marguerite asked in alarm.

“Father died. Philip is the new Earl now!”

“What? But that means that...”

Hengist put a hand on her waist as if he wanted to kiss her.

“Yes,” he whispered at her, “that means that a judge won’t have power over him anymore. He’s a member of the House now and the House will want to judge him, if necessary.”

“Hengist... when exactly did he die?”

Her voice trembled when she looked up into his grey eyes.

“It says the evening that we left,” Hengist whispered, looking out into the garden, “they were too late to notify us, as we had already left with the tide.”

She grabbed Hengist arms.

“You didn’t...”

Hengist pulled himself away from her. Now was not the time for confessions, not with Max Clare, Biggles and Mrs. Newton watching them avidly.

He walked to the stables deep in thought.

He had been telling himself his father had been living like a plant, a vegetable, although the man had smiled the moment before Hengist had put the pillow over his face and pushed. His father's reaction had been feeble and he had stopped breathing within a minute or so.

Still, it had been patricide, even if he had done it to save Philip from the gallows.

He looked at his right hand, when he mounted Jason. In many countries they would cut off a father-murderer's hand before decapitating him.

He shivered.

At least his brother would be home free. The House would never take it upon itself to judge an earl for sodomy. They had refrained from doing so with William Beckford and his crimes had been far worse than sodomy.

He blinked. His mother had been right. Nothing good ever came of Philip. Now he was the Earl of Loghaire and God protect the people of the earldom, because Hengist's borrowed power was at an end now.

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"You did what?" Philip asked loudly when Hengist explained the commotion in the corridor after he had shouted that he had found prisoner Denning dead.

"You are helping him out of this place and leave me here to rot?"

Hengist gestured at Philip to keep his voice down. He started to try to explain the situation, but Philip had worked himself into a fine rage.

“Typical of you to... to only help that male whore! What’s to become of me, huh? Where’s that stuff! In your pocket, no doubt!”

Philip attacked Hengist’s waistcoat pocket ferociously. It was indeed the pocket in which Hengist had hidden the teaspoon and the vial.

He cursed his tailor for making the coat so fine that everything in a pocket bulged and showed.

“Philip, I...”

Philip pulled Hengist away when he dove for the vial.

“You bastard!”

He gnashed his teeth when he opened the vial.

“No, wait!”

Hengist shouted, understanding Philip’s intent, “Philip! No, there’s another solution...”

“I don’t think so!” Philip sneered.

He put the vial to his mouth and drank.

Hengist threw himself at him, knocking the vial from his hands. “You stupid idiot!”

Hengist bent down to the floor where the vial had fallen. There was clearly not a drop of the poison left.

“Oh, God, Philip, why did you do it? You’re the new earl, they cannot touch you now!”

Philip staggered to his cot, feeling immediately dizzy.

“Wha...?”

Hengist stared at his brother as he fell down onto the bed.

“You’re the new earl, Philip,” he whispered at Philip’s dazed face, “and God knows if you are ever going to wake up from that stuff. You took too much, you fool!”

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Chapter 34: PREPARATIONS FOR NEW LIVES

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“Of course I’ll help you!” Sophia said turning from a near desperate Marguerite.

She shook her head.

“So you don’t know when he will wake up? Are you certain he’s not dead?”

Marguerite tried to stir her tea, but the silver spoon with the Lindley crest clattered against the fine bone china.

“He’s been in this state for three days, but according to my maid he is not showing those... those spots that attest that he is not alive anymore. Please Lady Sophia! Help me find a place close to London where we can hide them.”

Philip was still in his deep coma, but Rick Denning had woken up in a bed at Marguerite’s house, almost twenty four hours after Hengist had given him the potion.

It had been very easy to bring both of the men home, albeit in a coffin.

The prison authorities had been embarrassed enough that an earl had died under the Newgate roof without any true allegations. That the catamite had died as well actually saved them the costs of a process and a hanging.

It was just that Philip would not wake up.

Hengist had decided that Philip could not stay in the house, if he was presumed dead.

He gnashed his teeth thinking of all the complications Philip had submerged them in due to his madcap actions.

Philip had been officially declared dead by the warden of the prison and there was nothing else but to advertise the new Earl’s untimely demise.

So what would happen if Philip did wake up?

Hengist looked somberly at his right hand. He had killed for his brother once, but he was not going to commit fratricide as well.

Damnation, if the fool had only listened to him! He had gone to the Green Crocodile himself and it had cost him two guineas and a lot of persuasion to get the information he needed.

Gary Murray had shrugged indifferently.

“He may be in a coma for a few more days, or even for months. There are cases known that people were buried and crawled out of their grave a few years later!”

Hengist had not believed the man. Everybody knew a body could not survive without food and water, let alone air. But he had grudgingly accepted the fact that his brother might never wake up again or wake up with death in his eyes, as the apothecary explained to him.

“The living dead,” Gary Murray had told him. “It may be just as well if he does not wake up anymore, because after so many days in the realm of Death he will never be the same. It’s as if they leave their wits behind, milord.”

They decided that they should find Philip a place where he could either wake up or die without a lot of people being the wiser.

They had to find Rick Denning and his mother a similar spot. His mother could not go back to her cottage with her son alive and well after the Newgate authorities had declared him dead.

Marguerite, very tired of all the bad happenings, had proposed that she would ask Lady Sophia’s help. They needed a place in the country without delay, something close to London but in a way remote enough.

Lady Sophia owned a house in Hampshire. That would do for the time being until they could find something permanent.

Marguerite hardly found the strength to make her curtsy to the Duke when he entered the drawing room. Sophia had sent her a look of warning, so she had not expostulated about the true situation with her husband and had accepted the Duke's condolences with a weary smile.

After they had sent the carriage with a morose Rick Denning, a happy Mrs. Newton and a surprised John Row off to Hampshire, Hengist started to make arrangements for the burial of his brother's coffin at a grave-yard in Hampstead.

At the last moment, he had bought a corpse from one of the body snatchers that remotely resembled Philip.

The connection with Mr. Melford came in very handy now. The corpse had been of one of London's rascals in the Rookeries and needed to be made presentable to resemble the deceased new Earl of Loghaire.

Mr. Melford was happy to oblige, albeit for an inordinate amount of money; he dressed the pseudo-Philip in his best finery, after a thorough wash, haircut and shave.

In the meantime a still comatose Philip had left the premises in the dark of the night in a rented ambulance.

Mr. Biggles and Ian were informed about the true situation and used their own creative minds to mislead the rest of the staff about their lord's demise and departure.

Hengist only shook his head and hoped that everything would work out well and that no doubt would assail the shocked Quality about all the shenanigans, which had been used to save his brother from the gibbet.

He rented a house near Lady Sophia's residence that had a garden house situated deep in the forest, where they could put Philip 'to rest' until he died or until he woke up.

John Row had declared that he would take care of his master's body until the time of a solution presented itself.

At least John Row and Rick Denning had taken a liking towards each other and now knowing all the circumstances Marguerite did not doubt that they would be the best of friends soon. Master Lane was to take care of the sale of Mrs. Newton's cottage. The widow had not cared less. She rather fancied a 'new' life with her son. Master Lane warned her that Rick would never be able to get his inheritance, now that he had been declared dead.

Mrs. Newton was too happy about her son's revival to care.

Hengist had 'inherited' his brother's town house, now the scorned gentlemen's club. He had ordered Master Lane to sell it and never look back. That had been easiest of all because Mr. Burton was already on his toes to buy the premises and start a real gentlemen's club there, without the hassle of male love, unless it would be with one of the girls being provided by the local madam.

When Marguerite was visited by the tea group, they tut-tutted at her, saying she needed the year of mourning badly now with the Earl's child on the way.

The thought made her happy. She was indeed carrying the Earl's child, albeit the newest one's.

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The sun played with the half-closed shutters, throwing little spears of light through the windows. There was a bit of a breeze that turned an altogether sultry day in one of the best days of summer.

The room in the summer house lay in a deep shade, keeping the warmth outside. It was an opulent room with a big bed.

The man on the bed stirred and opened his eyes. His vision was blurred and he blinked a few times. His hand, lying heavily on the silk sheets went to his throat when he tried to swallow. There was a short panic when he could not breathe at first, but the moment when he relaxed his throat and felt like sinking back into his long and deep sleep his breast heaved and his lungs were able to fill with air.

John Row, who had been guarding the man for three days now hurried to the bed.

“Milord! You are awake! Oh thank God!”

The man only swallowed again, and John ran to the side table to fill a cup with water.

“You must be parched!”

John lifted the man’s head and poured water through the man’s lips.

His eyes widened but he swallowed the water gratefully. It was a great effort for him and his head fell back on the pillows.

“Please stay awake, milord,” John pleaded with him, not knowing if this would be his lord’s last actions on this earth, or the start of a new life.

“He’s fine, John, don’t worry.”

Rick Denning, now again Richard Newton, a cousin of the widow who lived in the mansion, leaned against the doorpost of the summer house.

“It wasn’t... He’s not going to die, is he, Rick? He’s closed his eyes again.”

Rick laughed.

“He’s breathing clearly, John. I can see it from here. Thank God the stuff was not deadly!”

He grabbed John around the neck sharing his sudden joy.

John went very still. His master was not dead and that was the most important thing, but what now?

He gazed at Rick from under his lashes. Rick had told him everything about the Viscount and the situation at Gents and after that, they had become lovers. Rick was his peer and that had helped them to get into an easygoing relationship, sharing the cot behind the screen in the summer house.

But now everything was about to change!

Philip had never been an easy person to cope with before the catastrophic situation which had landed them here.

“Look,” Rick pointed, “he’s waking up again. We must get him some soup, he must be starving.”

He ran out of the shaded Louvre doors and through the formal gardens to the terrace of the sweet mansion that Hengist was on the verge of buying.

“Auntie, auntie,” he shouted at his mother, “he woke up! He just woke up. We need to get some food in him!”

His mother wrung her hands in front of her bosom.

“Oh,” she gasped, “thank God, I hoped and prayed!”

The soup was brought to the summerhouse in a sumptuous terrine. It was luke-warm. One could not know how hastily milord would drink it and one did not wish him to burn his mouth. The moment John kept the cup in front of milord’s face he grabbed it by both ears and slurped the whole contents in less than a minute. Then he threw the cup on the floor.

John and Rick looked in astonishment at the bone china soup cup that lay now shattered on the Persian carpet.

“What?”

The man made a grating sound.

“Do you think he wants more?” John Row asked with fear in his voice.

“I think he wants something else,” Rick grinned.

They both stared at the man as if asking his consent. He only stared back at them, clutching the sheets.

“I’ll get him some of the cold cuts the cook has left from lunch,” Rick decided, “I’ll be back in a trice.”

John kept on staring at his master, who cringed and wrung the sheets into a lump.

Dead eyes, apart from a wildness when he cringed and winced; dead eyes, like the Major had told him might happen if he woke up after such a long time.

Six days his master had been in the realm of the dead.

“Can you... can you hear me, milord?”

He approached the bed slowly.

The man in it did not react.

“Would you speak to me, please, milord?” John pleaded.

The man fell back into the pillows without so much of a sound.

Oh, my God, John thought, bringing a hand to his mouth; a living dead man!

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“You cannot just up and go away!”

Marguerite clutched the rim of the chair with both hands.

Hengist stood in front of her with a guilty look on his face.

“Wellington suddenly seems to want me back and I think I should oblige him.”

That had been a surprise.

The day before yesterday, at his brother’s so-called funeral, the Duke of Lindley had stressed to him how important it would be that Hengist stayed to govern his earldom with alacrity.

Hengist was not so certain of that. Master Lane had shown remarkable talents when it came to Marguerite’s possessions; which would revert back to her and the child that was growing in her womb. Master Lane would be happy to get his yearly income doubled and make some efforts for the administrative works of the earldom. It was hardly more than a courtesy title and a pile of rubble anyway.

There was something in the Duke’s attitude that had clanged alarm bells in Hengist’s head. He hated the Duke’s possessiveness towards Marguerite. She was a rich widow again and the Countess of Loghaire to boot. She would be a match to the Duke and he had shuddered with a sudden fear. She could marry as far up as she wished now as he had no claims on her. Even the child in her belly was officially his brother’s.

Nothing had truly changed.

Wellington had written him a personal letter on the eve of the disaster of Almeida. The city had blown up in a freak accident and there had been nothing left for the English constable but to give over the city to the French.

Now Wellington had to start all over again; defend Portugal against invasion and throw the French out of Spain.

He explained in his letter that he was going to form a fifth brigade for the time being for a defensive role in

Portugal. General Leith was to lead that brigade and wanted Hengist to become his senior staff-officer.

“I want to get away from here,” Hengist said stubbornly, not daring to look into his lover’s eyes.

His leave as sure as hell had not brought him what he had expected from it. It had turned him into a fake earl, because his brother was still alive and the stupidity of that same brother had prompted him to kill his own frail father. The unwillingness of his brother to bed his own bride had further turned him and Marguerite into adulterers.

Very nice results for a bit more than three months of work, he thought sardonically.

“What about me?” Marguerite asked petulantly.

Hengist clasped his hands behind his back. He was wearing his Black Guard uniform again. “You will be a duchess in a year’s time, if you want to,” he said softly.

Marguerite rose slowly from her chair.

“I don’t want to be a duchess. I am expecting the Earl of Loghaire’s child and I want the boy to have a father.”

That announcement managed to shock Hengist.

“How do you know it’s going to be a boy?”

Marguerite flashed an angry look at him.

“Women know those things. But that’s neither here nor there. If you go I’ll come with you. I’m not staying here to face the Quality alone. You and your brother brought all this on us. Now you make everything right for me.”

“Come with me?”

A bolt of joy speared through Hengist’s chest.

“But how? You’re still married to Philip. You cannot have things both ways you know!”

Marguerite lifted her chin.

“You are the Earl of Loghaire and I am the Countess of Loghaire. We will sort the rest out between the two of us. And that is final.”

She walked to the drawing room door with dignity.

“I’m going to pack now. I won’t need much because I gather we can buy all we need in Lisbon; the power of money, my love!”

Hengist stared at her disappearing back.

By God, but he was going to have it all ways! She was coming with him?

He suddenly barked a laugh, out of pure relief.

By God, his love was prepared to follow the drum!

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EPILOGUE

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Toulouse, 1814

Hengist groaned with pain when he tried to sit up in the bed.

Damnation, to take a wound after the war was over!

He looked with distaste at his right leg that was entirely covered in cotton rags.

Another great scar, he mused darkly. He must look like one of those darned dolls by now with ridges and signs of stitches everywhere in his body.

The man next to him groaned but did not wake up.

Poor devil, Hengist thought. Lord Major Kit Brondemeire very recently married a very rich 'glove,' which meant his brother the Marques of Andover had found him a rich, but slightly unsuitable bride, if one considered the Viscount's eternal state of utter financial depletion.

The surgeons tended to hiss through their teeth and shrug their shoulders whenever his friends came to ask them if their valiant friend would be improving soon. He suffered a head wound and a slash low at the shoulder near his chest. He was not to be moved for the time being until they were certain he did not suffer any neck injuries. Unlike Hengist he was racked with fevers, roaming in and out of consciousness.

Hengist stared out of the small window of the seminary of Toulouse, where the wounded officers were waiting for death to take them, or for transportation to Bordeaux in one of the French ambulances.

It had been a terrible battle, this last one; the one that had not been necessary at all.

Hengist had been a senior staff officer in Nairn's brigade with the Highlanders, as was requested by Wellington. He had been fed up with General Leith's fifth brigade, formed to watch the Torres Vedras lines in Portugal, and when at last the army turned east and crossed the Spanish border with France, he had asked for a post with his beloved, brave Highlanders, who were always in the midst of a battle when there was one. The Second Regiment of the 42nd lacked a colonel and Wellington, who secretly seemed to have a soft spot for the rugged Earl of Loghaire or even more so for the very beautiful and charming Scottish Countess, had allowed him to take the brevet position.

The job of the 42nd had been the hardest; beating the Frogs from the highest part of the Toulouse ridge and conquering and reconquering a redoubt which had changed hands in battle at least five times; to chase the Frogs into hiding in Toulouse and to find them gone the next day as Napoleon had abdicated his throne a week before the battle of Toulouse had taken place.

Hengist tried to turn in his bed to fetch a cup of water on the bed stand.

"You are not to move, my love!" a well-known melodious voice called out to him.

His eyes widened with pleasure.

"Cherie! You... what are you doing here, you are supposed to be in bed!"

He cast a worried look at the major on the other bed in the room, whom, after those noisy outbursts of affection only muttered something and slept on.

“I’m here to show my stubborn and irresponsible husband our daughter. Here she is, my love, not yet three days old, as a matter of fact.”

She stood close to him, bent over to kiss his lips briefly and put a small parcel in his arms: a white blanket showing a fluffy pink skull with tiny dark curls.

He stared at his newborn daughter in awe, tears filling his eyes.

“She’s gorgeous.”

He looked at his wife who still had the luminous figure of recently acquired motherhood.

“You should not be out of bed, Cherie,” he said reprovingly. “What if you get the milk fever?”

She sat gingerly on the chair next to him. He noticed it and wondered about the damage to her body the baby had done to her this time. The baby slept in his muscled arms against his broad naked chest.

“It was very easy this time, my love. She came within two hours of the pains. You are not to worry. Milk fever is not something one catches when one is outside of the bed. I thought of calling her Pippa, short for Philippa, what do you think?”

Hengist slipped his finger alongside his daughter’s cheek.

He was not certain they should call this precious child after his brother who now lived in close confinement in a house near the Scottish border.

Philip had never recovered from his self-induced coma. He was not able to speak anymore. When Hengist had asked an army doctor about men waking up from a coma not able to utter a normal word the doctor had looked doubtful and told Hengist that speech might never return in such a case.

“Something in their brain is destroyed, my lord. They don’t remember the words and so they are not able to talk.”

Philip was like a three-year-old toddler now, apart from his humongous sexual appetite. Rick and John still took care of him, but the removal to the tower-house was for their own and Philip’s security and safety.

“Should we?” he asked his wife who now started to show signs of tiredness.

She had followed the army to Toulouse on a day’s distance, surrounded by the faithful Ian and his beloved Cook and about six personal servants she had started to hire in Spain. There were two nurses, one for the young Lord Philip Arthur Agnew, Viscount Morvern, and another one for Leo Agnew, spare son to the Earl of Loghaire, and their third son Richard.

Hengist had taken Max the stable boy with him as his batman and had never regretted that decision.

He now wondered who had helped her with the birth of Pippa, worrying about the fact that he had been lying almost unconscious while his wife was giving birth to his daughter on that very important day.

He felt his shortcomings as a father and a husband keenly now that he was lying in this hospital.

He had explained to Cherie that he wanted one more chance as an active officer, which meant that he would lead a regiment in battle. Marguerite had been adamant that he might get himself killed and that she would be widowed for the third time in her life. He had not listened to her arguments and had taken the colonelcy with both hands.

Now he was lying in the hospital with a leg-wound that would take months to heal.

“I rented a lovely house here,” she said tentatively.

“Max and Ian will help to take you home. You should come home now, my darling, there's no reason to stay here. I think we could take better care of you there and we could share a sickbed together. Wellesley said we'd better stay in Toulouse until you are well enough to be moved. I'm told he's leaving for Bordeaux today.”

He bent to kiss her lips, trying to keep Pippa out of the crush and silently cursing the pain that stabbed through his leg.

“I love you, Cherie,” he said earnestly, “and I just love to share sickbeds with you.”

They had been sharing their lives for more than three long and happy years now.

Cherie had lived in a rented house North-East of Lisbon for almost two years, until Wellington saw the road to France opening. They had married in secrecy after Arthur's birth. The marriage had been without any of the sumptuous contracts which had marked Marguerite's marriage to Philip.

Hengist used to tease her that she had made him a rich man according to the law.

Marguerite always had qualms about the fact that Philip was still alive and that she would be living a lie married to Hengist, but he had told her she could not have things both ways, especially not when Leo had announced his coming existence only a few months after Arthur's birth. The possible bastardy of her new child overrode her qualms, and in the end there was nobody counting months on their fingers after the wedding ceremony because Lisbon was so conveniently far away from the ever-watchful eyes of the London Quality.

Meg, who had visited her several times in Lisbon, was disapproving about Leo's conception so close after Arthur's birth, and in San Jean de Luz, she had been frantic with worry when Marguerite was very heavy with the fourth child.

Hengist felt pangs of guilt about Marguerite's last pregnancy.

She had been truly following the drum at that time and the long days behind the lines of marching soldiers had not been easy on her. Now he was an invalid to boot, because he had wanted to see action in battle for a final time. He was away from her when she had birthed their daughter and to top it all they were stranded in Toulouse for a long time.

He shook his head. Life was not designed to have things going your way at all times, it seemed. At least they were all alive and healthy and he still had the love of his life by his side.

He had been a fool to go back to war just to prove his worth as a man and a soldier. He had everything a man could have asked from life and he had left all that just to be able to play the warrior again. And for what? A battle that should not have been fought. It was all madness!

He looked at his wife again. She would be his lode star from now on. Marguerite and their four children. No more war for him and no more battles. He'd had enough.

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Constance J. Hampton'
next book in
Wellington's Officers Series: Book 3

WEN LOVE IS WITHOUT REASON

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