
A woman with blonde hair in a bun, wearing a red off-the-shoulder dress with a gold belt, stands in a gothic cathedral. The scene is decorated with snow and white lights. A green cloth is draped over a bench behind her. The background features large gothic arches and stained glass windows.

A SEVEN OMEGAS
FOR SEVEN ALPHAS
HISTORICAL PREQUEL

The Duke's
CHRISTMAS
REJECTION

VIVIAN MURDOCH



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THE DUKE'S CHRISTMAS
REJECTION

SEVEN OMEGAS FOR SEVEN ALPHAS
DARKVERSE ROMANCE

BOOK ONE



VIVIAN MURDOCH

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This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed in this novel are fictitious and are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead are entirely coincidental.

*This book is dedicated to all of us that like historical romance
but want it smutty.*

Husdom

Thank you for being my guiding light, my northern star, my everything. Also thank you for keeping the cats occupied so I can work. Seriously though, without you, none of this would be possible.

My Awesome Alphas

You guys continue to amaze me and rock the socks. Thank you so much for being my sounding board, supplying me with memes and gifs, and all around being such awesome friends.

Ashley, Alexis, Bianca, Rita you guys rock my socks.

Betas that are the Bestest

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Shout Out

No histrom can be complete without a huge thanks to Golden Angel. You tirelessly answered my questions and shored up my belief that this story is going to rock.

Thank you Raisa for being the mama bear and kick in the pants I need on several occasions.

Map of AR Regency England



LIST OF DUKES

House Barrington

- Lewis Barrington Duke of Whiteport
- Charles Barrington Duke of Norhaven - Previously Earl of Glendale

House Harding

- Joseph Harding Duke of Foxford

House Dowding

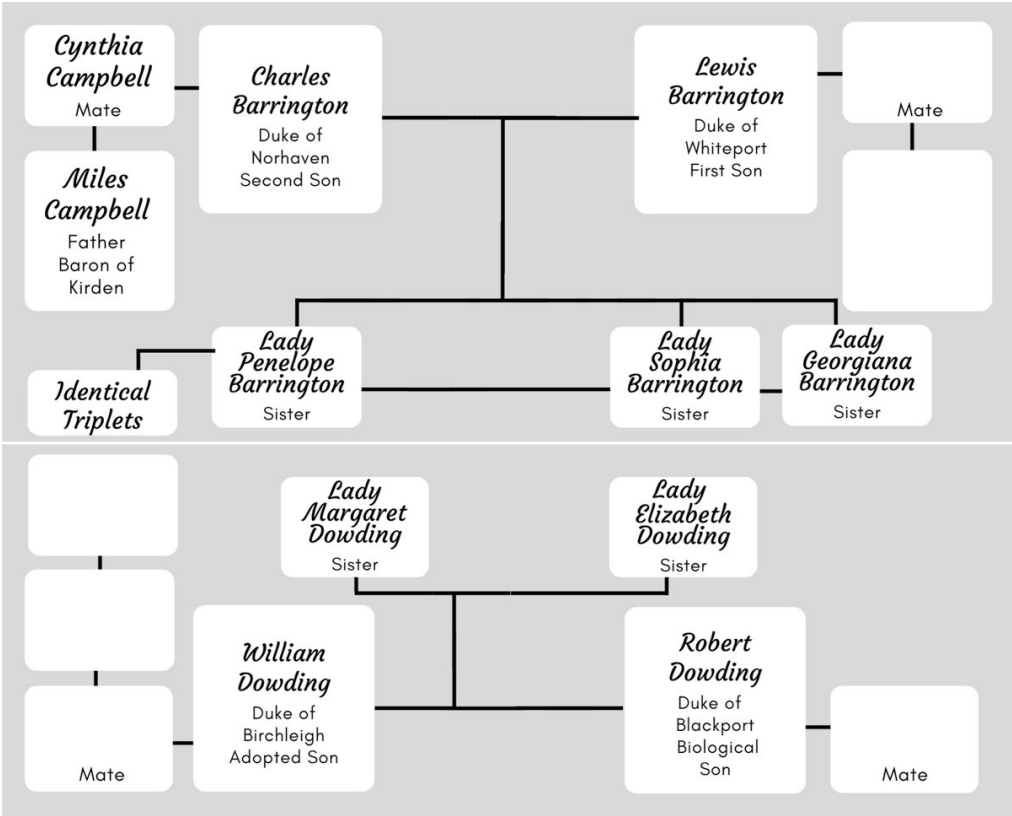
- Robert Dowding Duke of Blackport
- William Dowding Duke of Birchleigh - Adopted Son - Previously Earl of Hazelwick

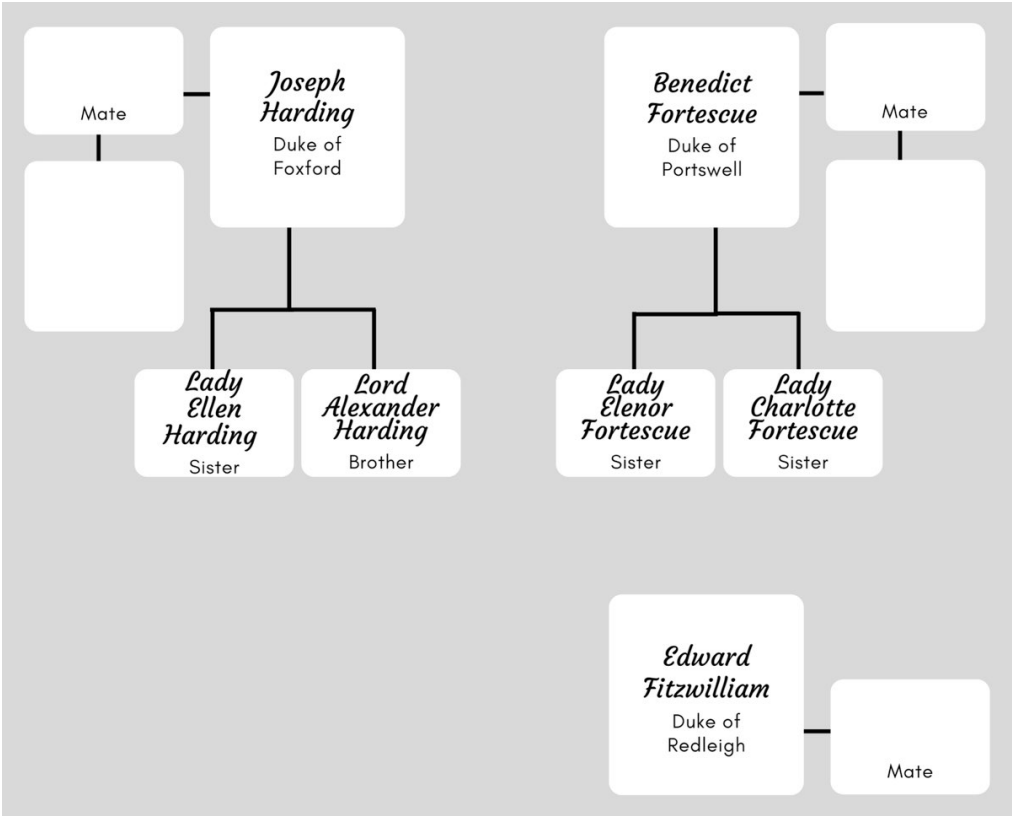
House Fitzwilliam

- Edward Fitzwilliam Duke of Redleigh

House Fortescue

- Benedict Fortescue Duke of Portswell





TRIGGER WARNINGS

Warning!!!

THIS BOOK IS INTENDED FOR ADULT AUDIENCES AND CONTAINS ADULT THEMES. THE ACTS IN THIS BOOK ARE NOT MEANT TO DEPICT AN ACTUAL DYNAMIC AND CAN BE DANGEROUS IF DONE INCORRECTLY. PLEASE PLAY RESPONSIBLY. AUTHOR IS NOT HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR READERS' ACTIONS.

Kinks, Fetishes, Triggers:

Includes not limited to...

MILD BLACKMAIL, SELF PLEASURE, VOYEURISM,
HUMILIATION, DEGRADING NAMES

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CHAPTER 1



Cynthia

“If I see you put one more bit of fruit into that mouth of yours, missy, I’m going in after it.” Glancing up at the cook, I can’t help the small grin that crosses my face.

She stands there, stern, yet a tiny smile teases the edges of her lips as she frowns at the triplets hovering over the counter. We are supposed to make the batter for the Twelfth Night cake; however, we all have been indulging far too much in the consumption of the small morsels of dried fruit.

Reaching over, I wait until the cook turns her face before snagging a plump currant and shoving it past my lips. The trio giggle, hiding their own morsels before sliding them into their mouths. Their lips stained a bright purple, they proceed to make the most horrendous faces at her.

“Don’t think I didn’t see that. You keep eating, and there will be none left for the cake. How will you explain that to your guests?”

“Well,” Penelope mutters around her treat. “I would say to ask Cynthia. She is, after all, part of that exhaustive guest list.”

All eyes turn to me, putting me squarely in the spotlight—a place I so loath to be. Narrowing my eyes, I glare at my

long-time friend before sticking my tongue out in the most unladylike manner. Whatever would my mama say?

“Feel free to leave me out of the discussion,” I retort, shaking my head. “I’m not held in such high esteem as to warrant such special treatment.”

“Nonsense,” Sophia chimes in as she and Georgiana step over to me, arms crossed. “As our friend, you are a most welcomed guest. Anyone to say otherwise is a fool.”

“Exactly.” Penelope nods, snatching another piece of fruit. This time, however, it’s one of the dried sultanas.

“You will be the death of me, girl,” the cook cries, swatting her hand. “We don’t have many of these left, and I refuse to serve a lackluster cake to the newly appointed duke.”

The room goes silent for a moment as the triplets take their place near the batter once more. Though tonight is all about celebration and making merry, there’s still no denying the true reason we’re all here. His Grace, the Duke of Norhaven, though the triplets insist on informally calling him Charles, is set to arrive at any moment, allowing us the honor of welcoming him in his new role.

My heart flutters as I conjure up an image of his face. Though it’s been a good year or so since I’ve seen him, I’ve never been able to put him out of my mind. It’s inappropriate, to be sure, but growing up as friends with his sisters has offered a perfect opportunity to study him from afar.

That is, however, in the brief moments when he was home. The stories he told of far-off places such as India were always dazzling and full of intrigue. My heart pounded every time he opened his mouth. Or was it that he was speaking with such passion that did it?

Groaning to myself, I force my mind to stop wandering and back onto the task at hand. Though I've never spoken to anyone of the feelings that tear at my heart and beat at my breasts, they're there all the same. But he has always been this older, unattainable paragon that I put on a pedestal, just waiting for the day when he'll finally notice me as something other than an extra sister that drives him mad.

Sure, he's indulgent enough, playful enough, but nothing that I can cling to and hope for. Knowing him and his steadfast penchant for honor, he's never allowed himself to even entertain the idea of mating me. Perhaps once he sees me as the adult omega I now am, he'll be willing to at least consider the idea of marriage. Though deep inside, I know it's far beyond foolish to get my hopes up.

If only I could have had my coming out the moment I turned eighteen. I might have already caught the eye of a willing Alpha and driven this infatuation out of my mind. But as it is, my mind has been allowed to wander, to hope, and to dream. What is truly in my heart of hearts is to be mated to the Duke of Norhaven. No other Alpha, at least that I have seen, will be able to measure up.

To blazes with Mama's views on things. I don't care what the Ton thinks; there should be another way. But, as with tradition, Mama won't even allow me the option of having my coming out until I'm right at the cusp of my heat, and so far, there's no sign of that happening.

What can be so terribly broken in me that I don't have the scent of an omega that is of age? No matter what I've tried, I still smell like a child. At least, that's how the other Alphas act around me. I know so little about how any of this works, and Mama is as tight-lipped as ever.

A heavy sigh drifts through my lips as I look over at the cook bustling about, paying no mind to the tormenting thoughts rioting through my brain. I'm so desperate to have a house of my own, to have a family, but how am I to catch the eye of the duke, or any Alpha for that matter, if Mama keeps me away from the Ton? It makes absolutely no sense.

That's why tonight is so important. She won't be here to interfere, to keep the other Alphas of the various families from seeing me. Deep in thought, I grab another piece of fruit, not realizing that I also grabbed a sultana with it. And so quickly after the cook had her little speech.

Guilt slams into me as the sweet flavor assaults my tongue. The triplets, however, simply cover their mouths and titter as they plop more of the dried fruit into the batter. Before I can apologize, Penelope winks at me and shakes her head.

"How shall we make this Twelfth Night cake?" she calls out, drawing any attention off of me. "I propose instead of a bean and pea, we place in two beans. Won't that be a lark?"

The cook harrumphs as she shakes out her apron. "Two beans? Who ever heard of such foolishness?"

"Think about it!" Penelope continues, impassioned. "When one male gets the bean and the female gets the bean, it would be so amusing. Besides, isn't that what Twelfth Night is all about? Frivolity and fun?"

"That it is, miss, but remember, as the firstborn daughter of a duke, you have more responsibility. What would the others think? It is your duty as mistress of this household to retain some standards."

From the corner of my eye, I watch as Penelope slumps forward, blocking herself from the cook's view as she mimics

her. Things to be done in secret so no one sees or knows. Unfortunately, I understand that concept just as well as they do. As the only daughter to a baron, and an omega on top of that, I have to be sacrosanct in everything.

“This line of conversation is boring. I say let us change the subject to something far more fun.” Turning, she spears me with a conspiratorial grin. “Do you have your eye on anyone tonight? I shall not allow you to go through the night without having at least one dance.”

“Oh yes,” Sophie chimes in, laughing and clapping her hands. “Our Cynthia does the quadrille quite nicely, does she not? Oh, oh. And you must have her sing and play the pianoforte for the guests. That will get them in the jolliest of moods!”

Heat climbs my cheeks as I stir in the flour, doing my utmost to keep my mind on the task at hand and not the tall, dark Alpha that haunts my very dreams. The triplets wouldn't understand. The things their brother does to my mind are not something that I can share with them. It would be far too awkward for all parties involved.

“She does have someone,” Georgiana cries out, setting down her spoon. “Just look at her face. That's a love blush if I've ever seen one.”

“Please, I beg of you to leave off. I am merely warm from the cooking fire. It's nothing of import.”

“Ooh, a scandal.” Penelope steps forward, her gaze hungry for gossip I have no desire to impart. “You must tell me. As your best friend in all the world, you have to tell me who the man is that makes you blush so. Is he an Alpha?”

“Well, of course, he would be an Alpha.” Georgiana yawns, clearly bored with the line of inquiry. “An omega of the right age and station hopes to marry an Alpha.”

“Yes,” Penelope hisses back, clearly disgruntled by her sister’s lack of caring. “But for all you know, she could be pining for some strapping beta. Perhaps one of the men that tends the horses, or a blacksmith perhaps. Not every omega wants to be with an Alpha brute.”

Sophia steps forward as well, a deep frown marring her clear face. “Take care, sister. Our brothers could take offense at that. The last thing you want is to be put over our brother, Lewis’s, knee. You won’t sit right for days after.”

Scowling, Penelope shakes her head, the action causing her golden ringlets to dance around. “He’s always finding some reason to punish me. I dare say he enjoys it.”

The cook snorts, taking a wooden spoon to the back of her hand as she reaches for yet another sultana. “He doesn’t have to enjoy it for him to employ it as often as he does. You stir up that result all on your own.”

A soft chuckle lodges in my chest as Penelope shoots her a mean look, complete with her tongue sticking out as if she were a pup. For all of her ten and seven years, she still behaves quite childishly. Then again, it’s that part of her that makes us such vast friends—it’s her childlike mannerisms that allow me to relax and enjoy myself. A far cry from the cold, sterile home from which I hail.

“Enough of this stalling, and avoidance, Cynthia. You never said which man, Alpha or otherwise, has captured your heart. I demand to know the secret.”

CHAPTER 2



Cynthia

The three and the cook stare at me, studying my face. There's no hiding it now as the heat continues to climb up to my forehead and down my neck. No doubt, I'm as red as a freshly plucked rose.

Stepping forward, I hold my hands out to plead with them, but misstep, slamming into the cook and her large bowl of sifted flour. Like some ill-fated comedy of errors, the bowl flies up, tipping out so that none of us leave unscathed.

Terror grips me as I stare at the dusty faces surrounding me. I tried so hard to be a help and not a hindrance, and yet... Tears sting my eyes as I attempt to brush off as much as I can, bemoaning the fact that I only packed so many dresses with me. There's no way this will come out easily.

Bracing, I wait for the tongue-lashing that's sure to come, but it never does. Instead, all three girls and the cook throw their heads back and laugh. The strange melodic sound tinkles about my ears, filling my soul with mirth. This is why I come here to stay with them as often as I do. This is why I want so desperately to be in this family.

Unable to resist, I join in, my laugh blending in with theirs as if I was meant to be a part of it forever. Hope grips me,

refusing to let go. Glancing from one to the other, my laughter just comes in harder spurts. How ridiculous we all look.

“Go on now.” The cook chuckles, handing me a pea and Penelope a bean. “Put this in the batter and I’ll finish up. You four will need a lot of work to look presentable for tonight.”

Holding the pea close to my chest, I whisper up a small festive prayer that the Duke of Norhaven would see fit to choose me as his bride. Perhaps with a little holiday magic, we’ll both end up with the dried beans and spend a wonderful evening together.

With a soft kiss, I drop it down onto my side of the mold while Penelope does the same with her bean. My actions, unfortunately, are not lost on her. “So it *is* someone under this roof then,” she exclaims, her eyes dancing. “Tell me who it is so that I may implore Mama to help. She is quite the matchmaker you know. So very good at it.”

“Is she truly?” I tease back. “And that’s why both of your brothers now have mates?”

“It’s not her fault they’re confirmed bachelors. But think of all the couples she’s had a hand in setting up.”

Tapping my lips as if deep in thought, I look toward the sky. “None come to mind.”

“Why you-” Penelope swipes at me, her hand barely missing the front of my gown. Laughing, I whirl away from her, dancing just out of reach. “I’ll get you!”

“You have to catch me first.” Darting out of the kitchen, I make my way to the main stairs.

In this moment, I don’t care what anyone thinks. The peals of laughter behind me are all that matters. Here, I am free. Free from my mother and her exacting rule. Free from the

bleak future that stretches out in front of me. Free from the stress of learning how to manage a household under her tyrannical, ever-watchful eye.

I run, not caring that white powder follows me in my wake. Though I loathe the idea of servants having to clean up after me, it just feels too good to stop. Perhaps I can aid them later after everyone else is down for the night.

Norhaven flashes through my mind—his smile, his gruff laugh, the easy way in which he teases his sisters. The ways in which he's teased me. An odd tingling sparks between my thighs as my legs rub together. It's a curious ailment, one that I've never spoken of to anyone.

Unfortunately, it seems to be all the more present whenever Norhaven is at the forefront of my mind. Perhaps it's some lover's malady, a reminder to remain pure or suffer the consequences.

But oh, how I wish to indulge in what my brain conjures up—his hand grazing mine as we promenade, perhaps a slight brush of lips against the top of my hand, or soft whispers shared in secret as others look on. Dear God, the very idea of him dancing with me, holding me close enough that the heat of his body overwhelms mine.

The last time we danced, I was but a child in his eyes. Now that I'm a woman, surely he will take it far more seriously. One can hope at least.

Deep in my thoughts, I barrel forward, paying no heed to what's in front of me. I turn to glance back at Penelope, laughing at her scrambling to catch up. And that's when my body collides with another, smacking so hard I stumble out of control.

Strong hands grasp my arms for a brief moment before they draw me in closer, stabilizing me. The intoxicating scent of leather, laced with a hint of tobacco and gunpowder, assault my nose, making my heart pound in my chest. I know that smell. I've daydreamed about that smell.

Looking up, I stare into Norhaven's bright blue eyes, stunned at the crystal clarity of their depths. That tingling begins again, but this time, it morphs into a throbbing that pulses in time with my heartbeat. He blinks at me, his nose quivering as he scents the air.

In almost imperceptible increments, his eyes darken as his pupils grow large. However, in an instant, they're back to normal, causing me to wonder if I imagined it. Wrapping his hands around my arms, he pushes me back and stares at my gown before looking down at his jacket and breeches.

White coats us both in a comical fashion, sending Penelope, Sophia, and Georgiana into fits of laughter. I chuckle as well until I look back at Norhaven, watching as his eyes darken once more. Any trace of humor dries up in the heat of his gaze.

"Sorry, Your Grace," I murmur, dipping down into a curtsy.

The three girls gather behind me, murmuring their own acknowledgments as they curtsy as well. When Norhaven leans forward, his eyes trail down the front of my afternoon dress, and for a moment, I'm unable to breathe. My breasts push against the front of my stays as my vision swims, but I don't allow myself to give in and faint. That would be far too embarrassing.

"I see you four are starting the festivities early. Whatever shall I tell my manservant when he sees the mess you've

made?”

“My most humblest apologies, Your Grace. It was never my intention to sully you.”

He leans forward, his lips so close to mine...too close. “I could always just acquire the funds from you to procure another one.”

My stomach plummets, sending nausea rolling through me. There is no way I can keep that sort of sum from Mama. Something fit for a duke is sure to be pricey indeed. No doubt my fear permeates the air, for all too soon, his nose twitches and he frowns.

“Steady, Miss Cynthia. You act as if I’ve asked for your execution. No doubt my manservant is skilled enough to get out even the toughest stains. Though I suggest you be far more careful in the future.”

“Please, Charles,” Penelope snickers, pushing in between us. “Next you’ll threaten her with a lecture and a switching.”

Norhaven slides his heated gaze to me, pinning me with the intensity of his stare. “Now that is an idea. What say you, Miss Cynthia? Would a swift punishment alleviate the discomfort I see in your eyes?”

The world spins for a moment as I ponder his words. Would he truly do something like that to me? I shouldn’t hope for that at all. Even being switched by my mother was a heinous, painful affair.

“Your Grace,” I begin, my lips trembling. “I would prefer some other way to atone for my actions than to be switched.”

He leans in, ignoring his sisters as they watch us. “It wouldn’t have to be a switch.” His voice is low and soft, but I feel every syllable as if it’s striking against my skin. “I also

have a crop, tawse, cane, or whip at my disposal. Do any of these sound more to your liking?”

This time, Sophia squeezes in between us, her movements frantic. “Not the tawse. Please don’t do that to her.”

I look over at her, my eyes widening. I’ve never heard of a tawse, but it sounds absolutely dreadful. Sophia isn’t one to give into hysterics, and so I wonder just how bad it must be. Sliding my hands behind me, I wring my fingers together where the duke cannot see.

“And since when has one ever been used on you? Hmm?” Penelope butts in, breaking a bit of the tension. “Out of the three of us, I have received the bulk of the discipline, and not once has Lewis used that one on me. Threatened, to be sure, but come now.”

“It doesn’t have to be used on me to know how bad it is,” Sophia hisses, her eyes narrowing like a cat. “I have heard stories from one who has.”

“Confound it all,” Penelope curses under her breath, earning a stern frown from Norhaven. “If you’ve been gossiping with Charlotte, I would not believe one word that drips from those mawkish lips of hers.”

Sophia looms forward, her eyes sparking with anger. I’m just relieved that the attention seems to be off of me for the moment. I’m more than happy to allow them to battle it out if it means my backside is saved.

Norhaven leans back, a smile tugging at his lips. “I can assure you, my most dramatic siblings,” he interrupts, “that it is all in jest. I do not have the proper permission to physically discipline anything on Miss Cynthia’s person. Whether warranted or not.”

An exhale flutters through my lips at his words, but it doesn't stop the pounding of my heart. What will the duke think once he sees the havoc we've created in our wake? Best to be far away from him when that happens.

Giving him another curtsy, I nod and ease myself around his body. "In that case, Your Grace, if you are not planning on thrashing me, I shall prepare for tonight's festivities. Until this evening."

At first, he refuses to move, simply staring at me as our bodies come perilously close. Once more, he scents the air, watching my reaction to such a blatant act. Thankfully, the trio pushes at him, forcing him to the side.

"She will be there anon, good brother," Penelope teases. "You are more than welcome to stare at her then. Besides, shouldn't your valet have a look at your soiled waistcoat?"

"Indeed. Anon." With a brisk nod of his head, he turns on his heel, disappearing into another part of the house.

Penelope's excited squeals pierce my ears, setting my head to aching "I knew you had feelings of an illicit nature, but I never knew it was with our brother. Tell me truthfully, are you to be my sister?"

Heat climbs up my cheeks as I turn to examine the flour on my sleeve. "In truth, there has been no understanding. I doubt that he even sees me in such a light."

"Come now." She scoffs, threading her arm with mine. "He is a blind fool if he does not notice your amazing qualities. Why, I will make a wager with you that he will ask for your hand by the end of tonight. It is Twelfth Night, after all. A day for miracles."

"Yes. A proposal would be miraculous indeed."

CHAPTER 3



Charles

My cock lengthens, pressing against the front of my trousers as I watch my sisters and Miss Cynthia ascend the stairs, her flaxen hair swaying behind her. The moment she's allowed to come to court, she'll be an Incomparable indeed. That is if her station does not preclude her.

Deep in the shadows, they cannot see me, but I can hear every nonsensical word that pours from Penelope's lips. The nerve of that chit, marrying me off when that is the last thing on my mind. Miss Cynthia is a maddening distraction, to be sure, but she's still so very innocent.

It's not surprising in the least, however, seeing as she always managed to find a way to be in my presence. Though it could be laughed off as simply the right place and right time, especially with my siblings wandering about, there was no mistaking how her gaze always met with mine. There was always a hunger there, a desire, one that I brushed to the side as a simple schoolgirl crush. Unfortunately, that seems to be far from the truth.

With my predilections, however, I cannot harbor innocence. Though that may be seen as a desirable trait to many of the Alphas, it's not for me. I want a mate that can take

everything I give her and beg for more. What would Miss Cynthia know of pain or the desire to receive it?

No doubt the young miss would go crying off to her mother, clasping back onto those apron strings. It's a liability I do not wish to court. Still though... The very thought of her in irons, chained to my bed as I bring forth red stripes of painful passion is very tempting indeed.

Perhaps I should have pushed harder to punish the little errant omega. Just picturing her naked backside striped in red is enough for everything to clench up, sending precum pearling at my tip. Though her eyes were frightened, she didn't have the air of terror around her. Instead, there was just a hint of arousal, a whiff, a flicker, a scent that other Alphas might have overlooked. But not me.

Shaking my head, I push away from the wall, unwilling to allow my brain to go down these avenues any longer. I cannot and will not be her Alpha. There is no way in hell I can defile her in the ways I long to. My honor demands it, so much so that even a heat will not sway me to her side.

I grit my teeth and slam my fist against the wall as another whiff of her potent scent—fucking peonies and parchment—assaults my nose. However, for one that smells as delicious as she, I might be inclined to make an exception. Groaning, I drop my hand lower to rub the aching organ that's causing me so much trouble.

I never expected little Miss Cynthia to grow up into such a fetching young woman. By the scent swirling around her, she's certainly of age for me to take as a mate. Bollocks. I should have never come back. If I had known I would be tempted so, I would have stayed far away.

I brush at the front of my jacket, sighing as the white powder drifts to the floor. She's just as green as my sisters, and I have no desire to see them married to the likes of someone like me. I just have to keep her in that position, look upon her as one of the family. Truthfully, it's the only way to keep my sanity.

Battle plans and strategies are far easier than navigating these women, especially when they have marriage on their minds. If only I hadn't acted so bravely, defending the former Norhaven with my troops. Maybe the king wouldn't have cursed me with this title that is far more admirable than Colonel.

Though, to be sure, there are several ladies attracted to scarlet red and flashy buttons—camp followers—but all that pales in comparison to a duke. Now, I'm no longer allowed to continue my former occupation. I must set up a damned house at Langwell Grove and oversee the lands, something that was never mine to manage.

It would be easy enough to ask Lewis about the running of an estate, but to do so would show just how woefully ignorant I am. That and further proof that I never paid attention to Father unless he was speaking directly to me. But what is to be done? The king has commanded, and so, I must obey, garnering unwarranted attraction in the meantime. Heaven help the next season when the bloodthirsty Mamas know about my rise in title.

“Ahh. There he is. Man of the hour,” my brother bellows, interrupting my thoughts. “How fares the new Duke of Norhaven?”

Fixing my lips into a false smile, I turn, facing Lewis, forcing out every last thought of the omega that still tries to

niggle at my brain. “Still doesn’t feel all that real, Whiteport. In truth, I much more prefer my formal title, Glendale.”

Lewis chuckles and throws his arms open for a hug just moments before he looks down at the disarray of my shirt and jacket. “And slip away into anonymity? The second-born son of a duke? For shame, Charles.” He chuckles, looking me up and down. “Becoming a duke... suits you. Already you have encountered your first debacle.”

“So it would seem,” I joke back, lips turned down into a comical frown.

However, the debacle in question is not, in fact, the flour adhering to my clothes, but instead, a young omega whose face refuses to leave my mind. Quite a conundrum indeed. Flour is a far easier mess to clean up than a ruined woman.

With a soft, disgruntled noise, my brother claps his hand on the back of my shoulder, sending yet another shower of flour to the floor. At this rate, there will be more flour on the floor than is on my person.

“You should know since Father died that we do not stand on the formality of titles here, Charles.”

“Our sisters would be inclined to agree with that sentiment.”

“So they’re the ones that sullied your clothes. I’m not surprised in the least.”

Again, my mind drifts back to the young girl. What sort of spell does this temptress hold over me? Reaching up, I dust off again, chuckling as even more powder drifts in the air.

“Might I freshen up before meeting back with you?”

“Of course. Lord Hazelwick, Blackport, Redleigh, Foxford, and Portswell are already here. Several are in their cups, and I am game to see just how loose their wallets are. I need you by my side to aid in this endeavor, seeing as the dice seem to always favor you as opposed to me.”

A distraction. Just what I need. “Very well, brother. Let me get into a far more agreeable attire and I shall be down there post haste.”

Turning, I take the very same stairs as the gaggle of girls, doing my utmost to not breathe in Miss Cynthia’s intoxicating scent. However, I am not nearly as immune as I wish to be. Every inhale is laced with the potent smell of her body, and every exhale merely swirls it about, giving it new life.

When I finally make it to Norhaven, I will set out a decree that no peony shall be allowed to bloom on its premises. Turning at the opposite end of the staircase, I storm over to my room, tugging at my cravat in the process. It’s too hot, too stifling. I need to breathe untainted air, to get my head on straight. Slamming open my door, I shuck my jacket, sending up a billow of white powder.

“Your Grace,” my valet murmurs, sliding into the room. “We’ve been expecting you. Shall I draw your bath?”

Though the idea of sinking below the hot surface as I stroke my member is far more appealing than chancing another run-in with the vixen that vexes me, it will take far more time than I wish to waste. “No need. I simply need a new set of clothes.”

“Very good, Your Grace.”



THE MOMENT I open the door, loud cheers and shouts greet my ears. It's all still so new. Though I now carry the title Duke of Norhaven, it somehow doesn't feel real. I should be strategizing, planning the next battle, not worrying about getting my new house in order.

Flitting my glance around the former smoking room, my lips turn up into a wry smile. Seems my brother changed this room while I was away at war. Now, it's almost indistinguishable from a gaming hell. For all the responsibility that rests on his shoulders, however, I don't begrudge him this indulgence.

"Norhaven," Foxford, cries out, dropping his cue on the billiard table. "Hell and damnation. We've waited for hours for you to arrive. Was your horse lame?" His green eyes flicker in the light, mirth dancing in their depths.

As much as I wish to engage with his merriment, I simply don't feel it. Now that I'm here in a safe space, exhaustion seeps into my bones. I fear I am not in a congenial enough mood for his mischievous antics.

Lord Hazelwick straightens, his red hair ablaze like the imp he portrays. Mischief lights up his face as a smile tugs at his lips. "No doubt he whiled away the time betwixt a woman's thighs. Tell me, Norhaven, was she any good? Is this a new club I am to frequent?"

Laughter fills the air as I look around the room at the men I went to the Alpha training school with. Though we are all

different, we still manage to be a congenial group. And now, save Lord Hazelwick, we are all dukes, either by birth or by decree, laden with responsibilities. No more, can we be carefree school lads, running about without a care in the world.

Shaking my head, I nod over to Lord Hazelwick, a ghost of a smile turning my mouth. "I'd stick with Vine and Thornes if I were you. The ladies already know your penchant for violence and have made peace with God for the atrocities you emblazon on their bodies."

He scoffs and leans forward again to take his shot. "You speak as if you're so different from me. Wasn't your last call marked by a visit from Madame Douler herself?" His potent words slither out, belied by a quick wink, his green eyes shining like a cat that ate the canary.

Grinding my teeth, I tug at my cravat. "It was a misunderstanding. The chit was given to me with no preparation concerning my tastes. Turns out she was new and untried. That mistake will not happen again. As it was, I did not harm the girl, only frightened her."

CHAPTER 4



Charles

From over in the corner of the room, Redleigh glances up from his cup, his scarred face partly shadowed by the flickering fire. “At least you frighten women with your actions and not your appearance. You should be grateful, Norhaven.”

An exasperated sigh flits through my lips. “I am neither grateful nor ungrateful. And when will you realize it is not that one scar that lines your face but your reclusivity that makes the ladies and mamas flee from your presence? By God, man, you live as though you are some beast locked away in a tower.”

He scowls at me and remains silent, opting to stare at the fire instead of facing me with a rebuttal. Turning my attention back to my brother, I watch as he, Blackport, and Portswell continue their game of hazard.

Lewis was not wrong. Both men already look soused, their cheeks a light pink as they toss the dice, losing every time. In fact, I can barely make out Portswell’s brown eyes in the dim light. They’re glazed over from imbibing far too much drink. In direct opposition, Blackport, the only man I know that can

out-drink a sailor, still holds intelligence in his sharp, blue eyes.

My brother, the cool, shrewd, level-headed man that he is, simply rakes them over the coals. They should know better than to drink while playing with him, alert or not. Though, honestly, if it were not my brother and some other man, I might accuse him of false dice with how easily he's taking their coin.

Bored with their choice of game, I turn my attention to other matters. "Is there not to be an eighth?" I scour the room, seeking out the newly appointed Lord Middlehey. "You all boasted of his ability to make merry, and yet he seems to be absent."

Foxford shrugs, a hint of malice glimmering in his eyes. "Seems he's been called back away to Harhurst Hall. The cousin he's inherited is giving him quite the fit. I suspect we will not see him until the season. That is if she can stop playing the shrew and actually become agreeable enough to have a coming out. I plan to visit him during the little season to see if I can somehow assist."

Hazlewick chortles, striking his ball with the cue. "You? Assist? No doubt you mean to help her out of her clothes. Perhaps you desire to take a tawse to her perfectly rounded backside?"

"Nothing of the sort. Middlehey has had a hard time of it, and I merely wish to get him settled. It's his first title and, from what I understand, he was left with a mess of an estate. No funds, everything squandered. He needs all the assistance he can receive."

"Speaking of squandering," Lewis interrupts. "Charles, join me in a game of piquet. I grow tired of robbing these

buffoons of their blunt.”

Despite their protests, both look visibly relieved, opting to saunter over to the billiard table to watch Foxford and Lord Hazelwick finish their game. Shaking my head, I sit down at the small table and watch as Lewis prepares the deck.

“Tell me honestly, brother.” He pauses for a moment, as if gathering either his thoughts or courage. “Are you settling in well with your role?”

“I would answer if I had a chance to. As it is, I’ve come directly here. Our sisters insisted that I make an appearance in time for Twelfth Night, and so I made it my mission to arrive, despite the damming snow and ice roads.”

“Yes. They seem quite adamant, though I cannot fathom why. They have not revealed it to me in any case.”

Smile tilting my lips, I conjure up the image of the omega who continues to plague my mind and the pretty blush that so easily crossed her face. “I believe I know. Seems to me they have designs on matching me with Miss Cynthia. In truth, I believe they hope the magic of this holiday will be the perfect backdrop for a proposal.”

Lewis stops, his body tensing. “But of course, you cannot marry her.”

“And why is that? You have an eye on the lady yourself?” My voice remains neutral, teasing even, however, deep inside, my stomach clenches as a flash of anger burns through me.

It is an odd and most unwelcome feeling. Has that vixen truly embedded herself in my brain that just the mere thought of another suitor sets my blood to boiling? Or is it that it’s my brother expressing an interest that has my vision blurring so?

“Nothing of the sort.” He scoffs, once more working through the cards. “Her station precludes any sort of interaction. If I am ever to wed, it will be with an Incomparable of the season and not some daughter of an unknown baron.”

“And what if your ‘Incomparable’ just happens to be such a daughter?” Foxford pipes up, all men taking an interest in our intimate conversation. “Stranger things have happened. I never even try to imagine what goes on in the Queen Omega’s mind when she chooses her diamond.”

“Then I will just have to wait for the next season,” Lewis grinds out, dealing the cards between us. “I refuse to allow Oxby Manor to be run by someone that cannot even fathom how a household should work. What knowledge does the daughter of a baron even have?”

“Surely, brother, you cannot mean to tell me that they know nothing,” I retort, somehow feeling the tiniest niggle of irritation at his prejudice. “They are still trained as well as any future duchess.” I long to rub at my chest to dispel the dread I feel thumping through my heart.

“Come now. Surely you cannot be that naive. The daughter of a baron is not afforded the same luxuries or the same breeding. No. I cannot allow the Barrington name to be given to someone that is unable to uphold the heavy yoke we need to bear.”

“Is the yoke all that heavy? Or do you insist on making it so? That is the important question.”

With a sigh, he sets down his cards and leans forward, spearing me with an intense stare. “We have a duty and an obligation to run our lands to the best of our ability. It is not just us, our family, that have to be tended to. There are

workers of all stations that depend on me, and now you when you take your seat at Langwell Grove.”

My body stills as his words sink in. As a soldier and second son, I’ve never had to think of such things. I was never meant to be a duke, and yet, by a stroke of the quill, the burden has been thrust upon me.

When Father was alive, he tended to everything with a shrewdness and grace I’d never known before. And when he passed, my brother took on that role willingly, without complaint. It is his birthright, and as such, he takes it far more seriously than I could ever.

Now, it is my turn. No longer can I go to war, caring only for the men under me. Until now, I never truly thought about the repercussions. Anger burns in my gut, just as strong as the brandy singeing my throat. I continue to mull over his words, irritated at what this ‘honor’ is costing me.

Though I am not of a marriage mind, I am still disheartened to know that Miss Cynthia is an illogical choice. As much as her scent calls to me, as much as the idea of forbidden fruit is intriguing, I must put Miss Cynthia out of my mind. Unfortunately, my brother, the arrogant ass that he is, is right.

I shall never admit it to him, thus causing his head to swell even further and make him far more insufferable, but I need to focus on someone well acquainted with the duties that befall a duchess. Truthfully, I now worry that the daughter of a baron cannot give me what I need. Just like in battle, I must see to duty first and affection second.

“Come now,” Foxford jabs. “You think to outmaneuver these conniving mamas? They will throw every daughter at

you, omega or otherwise. I wager not even you can outsmart them.”

“Let them try,” Lewis growls out, his chest vibrating with irritation. “I shall not be made a fool by some chit in a skirt, no matter how pretty.”

Foxford continues, pressing his luck as the others gather around. “Care to make a bet?” He pauses gesturing to all of us. “Let us make this a wager for all.” We watch, dumbstruck as he walks over to an ornate vase and moves it over to our card table.

“You wish to bet me my own vase, Foxford? I knew you could be daft but-”

“No, Whiteport,” he snaps. “We shall all make an accord. For each one that gets married, they must put a thousand pounds into this vase. The last of us to wed gets all the money.”

“Are you quite mad?” Blackport retorts. “A thousand pounds each to stay a bachelor the longest? And I supposed as the proponent of this bet, you have a sure-fire way of remaining unattached?”

He raises his hands, a grin widening on his face. “I assure you I am in the same boat as you six. I have neither special means nor methods to avoid the ravenous mamas of the Ton, but a sheer iron will to win all the money.”

“Fat chance.” We all turn and stare at the taciturn Redleigh. “With a face like mine, I will win that money for sure.”

“And what of your ward?” I remark, trying in vain to remember her age and face.

For a moment, he remains silent, staring back into the fire, but there's no mistaking the hard set of his shoulders. "She cowers from me, staying hidden in her rooms day and night. Not even the promise of a ball has tempted her to come forth."

Lewis frowns. "Then perhaps we should send our sisters to stay with you for a bit, with their governess, of course, luring the recalcitrant miss out of the shadows. They are quite adept at causing a ruckus."

"No need. But I thank you for your consideration. She will either step in line or find herself at the mercy of my strap. This insolence has gone on far too long." Despite the resolute tone in his voice, Redleigh looks far too uncomfortable, as if the idea is abhorrent to him, but in ways that have nothing to do with discipline.

It's not a foreign feeling. The same uneasy arousal clenches my insides every time I think about taking the clumsy, errant Miss Cynthia in hand. Perhaps it is the same with him.

Needing to break the tense silence, I stand up. "I am in accord."

"Excellent!" Foxford laughs, reaching out to shake my hand. "May the best bachelor win!"

CHAPTER 5



Cynthia

As everyone gathers in the main hall, I cast my gaze about, seeking Norhaven; however, he doesn't seem to be in attendance. Unease curls through my midsection as my mind races. Did I ruin his jacket beyond repair? Has something happened to him?

Eventually, a figure shifts from the shadows, revealing the duke in question. He looks positively resplendent with his black hair tousled about his head, almost as if awakening from a deep slumber. Again, heat licks up my cheeks as I push the thought of him in his bedchambers from my mind.

When he glances over at me, however, the heat drifts somewhere far lower, bringing about that maddening tingle between my thighs once more. I cannot fathom what it is that ails me, but it only seems to happen when the duke is nearby. Does my body know him to be my true love match? Nothing else seems to make any sense.

Before I can dip into a curtsy, acknowledging his interest, he turns away, jaw set into a firm line. Sorrow beats at my breasts as I sink back into the line, forcing my gaze away from him. Then he is still angry at me. Is there nothing I can do to

make amends? If it's coin he wants, I'll have to find some way to procure it.

"All right, everyone," Penelope shrieks, making me flinch. "We have all had our bout of fun, but now it is time for the bean and pea. I can tell you a lot of heart went into this cake." She pauses, racing over to pull me into the center of the room.

My fingers shake as I allow her to drag me forward, keeping my eyes trained on the floor. The last thing I need is to bring attention back to me when all I want to do is forget this very night.

Penelope continues, oblivious of my discomfort. "Our very own Miss Cynthia has placed the pea, whereas I have placed the bean." For a moment, she rambles on, extolling my virtues for anyone who will listen, even though there's only one Alpha I care about taking notice. "Remember, those who get the bean and pea are king and queen of the night. So do please act accordingly, and if in enacting your roles, you happen to slide under some mistletoe, then so be it!"

Stifling a groan, I yank away from her and sink back into the shadows, my face ablaze. She has no inkling of the humiliation she just put me through. Now, all eyes are on me—curious gazes that follow my every move. Penelope all but said I was of a marrying mind and fair game.

But I'm not. I'm only open to one Alpha's suit, and that's Norhaven. It's bad enough that he all but ignored me while we were playing other games, but this is far too much. Now, he looks upon me with scorn, as if my merits are merely window dressing to an empty head.

Penelope opens her mouth, about to say something else when the cook bustles in, followed by servants armed with trays. The men line up on one side of the room, and I follow

the ladies, gathering on the opposite side. From out of every door, more servants and workers bustle in, taking their spots on either side.

No one speaks as the trays go by with everyone picking up a slice but me. As the servant pauses before me, I just can't bring myself to grab a piece. Right now, I feel nothing but abject sorrow and humiliation. In fact, it would have been better if the duke did punish me. That way, I wouldn't be carrying around his ire like a mantle.

"Grab your slice, Cyn," Penelope hisses, grabbing the one closest to her. "Everyone gets one."

"You do realize I actually don't like fruit in my cake, right?" I lie, stalling for time.

With a heavy sigh, she grabs another slice and thrusts it into my hands. "Whether you like it or not is of no consequence. I just want to see if you manage to get the pea!"

The dreaded pea. What once had been something so exciting mere hours ago causes my head to pound and my stomach to churn. Nausea climbs up my throat as my nerves overtake me, causing the very idea of putting yet one more sugary morsel into my mouth revolting.

What's there already sits like heavy lead, refusing to budge. Still, though, she continues to thrust the plate forward, garnering curious stares from onlookers. I don't want to cause a spectacle, or heaven forbid, be exiled from the house for some reason, so I grab the plate and stare down at the cake. All around me, people bite down, casting out groans of dismay as their labors turn up empty. Glancing up, I catch the duke's eye.

He locks his gaze with me, his countenance both serious and sullen. Just the heat of his stare makes my heart beat in my

chest hard enough that I worry others will hear it. But I don't dare look away. He's mesmerizing, rooting me to the spot.

With slow, languid movements, he draws the cake to his lips, snaking his tongue out to wet his bottom lip. My stomach flips as I watch him devour the morsel. There's something wholly inappropriate about how he's eating it, but I haven't the faintest notion what it is. All I know is that watching him seems to be the same as intruding on a private moment in which I have no business.

Turning my gaze back down to the cake, I ignore the burning of my body, determined to eat it, and quit this place. I'm sure I can feign a headache or some other malady that will allow me the freedom to slip out. But as my teeth sink into the cake, my heart stops.

The pea.

Looking up, I watch as the duke extracts the bean from his lips, scowling at it as if it is some curse put upon him. The plate shakes in my hands as I too pull the pea out and set it on the plate. Perhaps no one will notice. It's such a small bean in comparison to his. I should be able to hide it easily.

"Oh what fortunate news! How is it that my friend has found the pea!"

Penelope's exclamation ruins any chance of me slipping out of this situation unscathed. Before I can respond, she tugs on my hand, drawing me out into the center of the room. A servant takes my plate, leaving me with no form of defense, nothing with which I can hide behind.

"Come now," she continues, circling me. "Someone must have found the bean. Who will dance with our beloved queen tonight?"

The men shuffle about, each looking at the plate next to them. I know it's Norhaven that is in possession, but the question is, why hasn't he come forth?

"I say, Norhaven," Foxford blurts out gleefully. "Is that not a bean I spy on your plate?"

"Is it? That is my mistake. I thought I had merely bitten into some overly dried fruit." The lie slips so seamlessly through his lips, as if it's second nature.

"It is a yuletide miracle," Penelope screeches, earning a wince from me. "What better pairing of King and Queen than my best friend and my brother? Why, it's positively providential!"

"As it is with gambling, little sister," he grumbles, refusing to even look at me. "Providence has absolutely nothing to do with it. It is all chance." Handing his plate to one of the servants, he prowls forward, once more locking eyes with me.

There's still anger there, but this time, there's something else. If only I could discern it. "I would be honored to be your queen, Your Grace." Penelope slips away, leaving just us two in the middle of the floor.

He doesn't say a word. His demeanor is stiff, unyielding. Eventually, he bows, eliciting claps and cheers from all those around us. The icy band around my heart loosens as he extends his hand for a dance. For a moment, I thought he was going to reject me outright, casting me out in the sight of his friends and family.

His rich scent tickles my nose as we get into formation to do a simple allemande, and all I can think about is his broad shoulders, thick lips, and unruly hair. Despite everything that's gone wrong this evening, he's still a sight to behold.

“Your Grace-”

The moment the words leave my lips, he turns me about, a touch rougher than I expected, cutting me off. Then I suppose he’s still a little upset with me. Biting down on my lower lip, I continue with the steps, relishing in every touch that I’m able to receive. At least those are not outright hostile.

As we dance, my thoughts and fears wash away, allowing room for hope to blossom once more. Though he does not regard me with kind eyes, they no longer spit venom, which, in my mind, means success. His touch is light, barely there, but still, I can feel it branding me, tying me ever closer to him.

However, all too soon, the music fades, and I stand there in front of him, watching him bow and leave as others take the floor. There must be something I can do to make this right, to show him that I’m far better than what he thinks of me.

Begging off the next dance, I follow him to a corner, stopping when he turns and scowls at me. “Please, Your Grace.” I’m not sure if I’m emboldened by the holiday, the small bits of claret I was able to procure, or just the knowledge that this is my one chance to make him notice me, but I press my luck, forcing him to acknowledge me.

“Are you sure you want to be seen here with me? A man and a woman off in a corner can be cause for gossip indeed.”

I glance around, noting that no one is paying us the least bit of attention. Rallying my strength, I continue my suit. “My king,” I tease, attempting to lighten the mood. “Does not being your queen entitle me to one kiss? Even if it is just a chaste one?” My cheeks pinken as I realize exactly what I just requested.

What in the blazes is wrong with me? Lips trembling, I bring my gaze up to see how my question landed, but he's like a statue—barely moving, barely breathing. Have I just jeopardized any future with him?

He peers down at me, his eyes dilating for a moment, but just like in the hall, they return to normal so quickly that I'm left wondering if it's just a trick of the light. My heart pounds while he contemplates me, studying me as if I am nothing more than an insect or strange flower. It feels both unnerving and odd to be under such scrutiny.

“How bold of you to request so intimate an action from me. Have you no propriety at all?” His harsh words burn my ears, setting my stomach churning.

“Forgive me, Your Grace. I only thought-”

“You are my queen in name only, for the sake of the game, and nothing more.”

I step back, my heart pounding in my chest. Have I truly imagined our interactions? Though they were not rife with affection, there was still a part of me that hoped... My world begins to crumble; however, I cannot leave until I truly know that I have no chance.

“I know you have not been in my presence for nearly a year, but before then... I thought we were at least amiable.”

He sneers down at me, the stony facade coming back up. “You are but a child. I looked upon you as if you were a sister. Nothing more.”

Rising, I pull my shoulders back, thrusting out my chest. The moment my breasts press against the fabric of my dress, his eyes drift lower, darkening at the accidental display. This should prove I have not imagined our connection, yet there is

no way I can say as such without calling even more attention to his lingering gaze.

“I am eighteen. No longer a child. I daresay, I’m more than enough woman to garner the affections of a man.”

His lips curl up into a feral smile, sending currents of electricity down my spine. “Oh? You are a woman then? Does that mean you know what it is a man desires? Craves? And here I thought you were an innocent. Am I to believe that you’ve been tainted?” He tsks softly, shaking his head. “For shame.”

My mouth drops open, anger burning through me at his accusation. “How dare you assume as such. Is this some sort of punishment? Is that why you treat me so cruelly?”

“Oh, my dearest Miss Cynthia.” His words flow around me like butter melting across a morning biscuit, setting my stomach to fluttering. “Though I do punish with my words, that is not the mode in which I like to exact my vengeance. You see.” Norhaven pauses for a moment, stealing a caress as he slides his index finger over the lace at the top of my bodice. “I like to take a more hands-on approach. Is that what you would like from me? To turn you over my lap like some errant little girl?”

The world stops as his touch scatters my thoughts. No longer can I hear the music tinkling in the background. It’s nothing but Norhaven and me. My breath comes in harried gasps as I stare up into his face, trying my best to discern the darkness I see in his gaze.

“But, Your Grace, have I not apologized? Do- Do you really need to punish me for us to make amends?” The very idea of him putting me on his lap, touching my body in a way that no one else has, sends my pulse skyrocketing, throbbing

in that hidden place between my thighs. But still, the very idea is so improper, so out of the realm of possibility. There has to be another way. “I haven’t the money-”

“I didn’t ask you for money. Did I?” Norhaven’s voice deepens, taking on an almost musical quality.

Despite myself, I find my body swaying toward him, wanting just one more illicit touch, something to ease the ache that’s building. I have no earthly idea what’s happening to me, but something deep down tells me that he can fix it. He’s the one that can make all of this better.

Is it, perhaps, some odd side effect of guilt? Should I take the penance he’s offering and be done with it? Knowing Norhaven, he would find a way to keep it from descending beyond the pale.

“I- I realize that I have many faults, Your Grace. I am not blind to my own failings. I’m also very much aware that I can be, at times, inappropriate—still playing and taking no heed of where I’m going or who I’m to inconvenience with my actions. If you think taking me in hand will help curb these tendencies, turning me into a better, more refined woman, someone worthy of you. Then please, Your Grace.” I curtsy as elegantly as I know how. “Punish me.”

Time stands still as he stares at me. I feel his eyes burning into the top of my head, yet still, I never falter. If this is the price I must pay, then I have to swallow my pride and the discomfort of prostrating myself before him.

Norhaven’s fingers slide under my chin, urging me up. This time, there’s no mistaking the dark orbs that are now his eyes. There is hardly any trace of the crystalline blue that normally sears me to my core. I’ve never seen him like this, so animalistic.

“You would offer yourself to me for punishment? Willingly?”

“If that is what you wish, Your Grace.”

He drops his hand as if he were burnt. For a moment, they twitch by his side, as if to reach out and touch me again, and though I anticipate it, long for it even, it never happens. Instead, he keeps them by his side and steps back.

In that instant, the moment between us, the heat that rooted me to the spot is gone, leaving an icy, cold chasm. “You are the daughter of a baron,” he continues after a few agonizing moments, his gaze tipping up so that he’s no longer looking at me but over me. “It is foolish for you to think that I could harbor an interest in someone of your station. I danced with you, for the sake of tradition, but do not mistake my friendship or the familiarity you have with my family to cloud your vision.”

Shock floods my system until I can no longer understand his words. “But Your Gra-”

“For your sake, I request that you do not pursue me.”

Without allowing me to respond, he turns on his heel and storms away. I stand there, my world shattering as the reality comes barreling through. It matters not that he and I are supposed to be King and Queen of Twelfth Night; I have earned the rank of a fool. However, knowing this and accepting it are two vastly different things.

Patting my cheeks, I will the tears to stay at bay. As much as I wish to, I cannot permit myself to fall apart in front of all these people. Instead, I hold my head high and walk back into the fray, focusing on the merriment around me instead of my heart cracking in two.

Before I can slink off and lick my wounds, however, another Alpha approaches and bows before me. Redleigh smiles for a moment, erasing any hellacious expression on his face. Even with the scar, the smile alone makes him so much more approachable. Though, it is soon gone, replaced once more with a scowl.

“Might I be allowed a dance with such a fine queen?”

I glance over at Norhaven, skulking about in the crowd, needing to see his response to this request. He says nothing, yet glowers at us, as if we’re going against some unsaid wish. But he didn’t want me. He made it clear that I was nothing to him. Why deny me a chance to salvage this night?

Tears burn in my eyes as I sink into a curtsy. “I would be honored, Your Grace.”

Soon, faint music fills the room as the others join in a country dance. I apply myself to the steps, forcing my brain off of the humiliation I endured at Norhaven’s hands and onto showing my host that I am capable of being agreeable. But soon, I know I’ll excuse myself and race away to the library to cry in secret, hiding my shame.

CHAPTER 6



Charles

A growl hums in my throat as I watch Redleigh touch hands with Miss Cynthia. Nothing he does is improper; however, that doesn't stop me from wanting to storm onto the ballroom floor and thrash him in front of the others. It's a feral jealousy that has no place here.

What has happened to me? Why do I feel this burning need to stake my claim, forcing her to remain by my side for all eternity? It must be her scent. That's the only thing I can blame at the moment. Though, if I'm being honest, the curvaceous flow of her body is nothing to sneer at.

Somehow, she went from a wilting flower to a rose in her own right. The wonders of an omega's body and how it blossoms as they come of age never cease to amaze me. But this time, I can't stand by and admire it. To do so would force me to lose my sanity.

Turning from the joyous celebration before me, I pause to glance over at Miss Cynthia one final time. The look on her face, the sheer pain and remorse, gut me like a knife. Though she does not shed a tear, her eyes shine brightly in the candlelight. Too brightly.

Luckily for both of us, it seems as if no one else is noticing, concentrating more on the festivities than the omega that manages to appear alone in a crowd of people. Seeing her there, withering before my very eyes... It's almost too much to bear.

My gaze turns and lands on Lewis, watching his easy smile, the carefree way he's winding in and out from between the dancing partners, laughing as if everything is how it should be. Never once will he realize how his actions impact others. The words he says, the pronouncements he makes. I was happy before he reminded me of just what my duty was, and now that I know, I can no longer play blind and dumb.

Despite the moment she and I shared, I cannot, will not entertain the idea of defiling so delicate a flower. She offered herself up for punishment, not knowing the type of monster I can be, not understanding the depraved need that slithers through my veins. I certainly will not speak of it, and I know Miss Cynthia never will either.

Perhaps it's better this way. Deep down, I've always known that she wasn't the one for me. If such a simple rebuff sends her into near tears, she could never handle my degrading tongue, my need for exacting dominance. No. As pretty as Miss Cynthia is, as much as I desire to devour her—body and soul—she will never be the one to complete me.

For now, I just need to find someone who can handle me. All of me. Vine and Thornes is out due to the weather, so I'll have to make do with someone tried and true, someone that I know can get me where I need to go. Melissa should do nicely.

Gripping my hands into fists, I exit the foyer, storming over to where I know the servants are eating their supper. The moment I appear in the doorframe, they stop their mindless

chatting and gasp before standing and bowing. Melissa gazes up at me from underneath her lashes, a knowing grin teasing the edges of her mouth.

“Your Grace,” the housekeeper exclaims, fluttering into the room. “I did not expect for you to be here. If there is a need, allow me to fill it. You should not be conversing with the servants.”

I pin her with an exacting glare, raising my eyebrow for full effect. “Are you now lecturing me on what I can and cannot do inside my ancestral home?”

“No, Your Grace,” she babbles, bowing once more before. “Nothing of the sort. I am merely pointing out that you do not have to demean yourself by being here.”

“And I can assure you, housekeeper, that I am very well aware of what would be demeaning. This is not it. I require the presence of...” I trail my gaze around the room, playing at choosing between the wide-eyed faces. “Her. The ladies require a maid for their next round of games, and I offered to choose one for them.”

“Very good, Your Grace. Melissa, you are excused. I will have one of the other girls see to your duties.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Richardson. I shall endeavor to be back posthaste.”

“You will take as long as your presence is required. No more and no less,” the housekeeper replies, her lips set into a stern frown.

Stifling a chuckle, I watch as Melissa’s eyes dilate, revealing just how much she craves an acerbic tone. I crook my finger at her, my balls clenching as she saunters forward, her hips rolling. Tonight, though beta that she may be, she will

be the one to drown out my anger and frustration, my impotent rage at not being able to claim the omega with flaxen hair and piercing green eyes.

Once we are far enough away, safe from prying eyes, I shove Melissa against the wall, nearly groaning at her gasp of pleasure from the blow. “You are to go into the library. I want you to prepare yourself for me. Stroke that cunt of yours like the woman of easy virtue you are. I will be there anon.”

Stepping back into the ballroom, I glance about, seeking out the maddening vixen, but she is nowhere to be found. No doubt my refusal was far too much for her to handle, confirming once more that I have made the prudent choice. Resting my hand on my heart, I rub it for a moment, wishing I wasn't right.

Not wanting to attract attention to my whereabouts, I join in a dance, throwing my head back and laughing with the rest of them, making merry despite Penelope's cruel gaze every time I catch her eye. She will just have to make herself content. She is not the madame matchmaker she purports to be.

Resigning myself to one more dance, I meet up with my sister, stifling the urge to roll my eyes as she grips my hand with such strength and violence. “I do believe you might need a revisit from the dance instructor. The way you use your hand is most inappropriate.”

“Inappropriate?” she snaps out in a harsh whisper, squeezing her hand even tighter. “What about what you did to poor Cynthia?”

“What do you claim I did to her? Have I harmed her person somehow? Or were you perhaps watching someone else?”

“You must have done something. You spoke to her, and the next thing I know, she’s no longer the jolly friend I’ve come to love but instead a shell, crushed and hurt. What did you say, brother?”

We pause as our steps drag us apart, only to come back once more. “I simply told her that I am to be engaged elsewhere and for her to enjoy the party. And as you see, Redleigh more than obliged in taking the next dance. So no harm seems to have been done.”

“Brother, please reconsider. Cynthia has feelings for you.”

Peering down into her wide blue eyes, I sigh and twirl her around. “That may be but know full well that I cannot make such a momentous decision based solely on the feelings of another.”

“But that one dance. Couldn’t you have-”

“No, Pen,” I interrupt. “To do more would have made things worse. It would have been me toying with her affections, allowing her to continue this infatuation when all it would do would lead to more heartache for her. Best allow her one miserable night than months of fractious agony.”

She sighs and pulls away from me, curtsying as the dance ends. I can see the hurt in her eyes, the reproach. Has Miss Cynthia been holding a torch for me far longer than I realized? No matter, what’s done is done. Nodding my head, I extricate myself from the group and make my way toward the library.

Now, more than ever, I need to get my frustrations out before it forces me to do something that cannot be undone. I need to turn my mind toward Melissa and off of the haunting image of Miss Cynthia on her knees, mouth opened, just waiting for my cock.

Would her slick flow for me? Would she wait with bated breath as I slid my tip inside, smearing my essence across her tongue? Knowing her, she'd take my cock with a sigh of thanks across her lips, but then, any woman could do that. It takes someone special to take my cock up their arse and my tawse across their backside.

CHAPTER 7



Cynthia

A thick, honeyed scent fills the room as I lurk in the shadows, watching the maid upon the desk. She cannot see me where I'm at, but I have the perfect vantage point to watch everything she's doing. Truthfully, I'm grateful for the distraction. One can only cry so much before it gives them a headache.

Instead of sniffing in self-loathing, I watch, dumbstruck, as she sits down on top of the desk and leans back, spreading her thighs wide. Nothing resides under her skirt in the way of drawers, so I am able to see every inch of her. Thick hair surrounds her sex, far darker than mine—not that I spend much time studying my own anatomy.

That part, however, isn't what intrigues me so. She dips her fingers down, sliding them over her glistening slit before parting the folds at the juncture of her thighs, showing me a part of a woman I have never seen before. Is that what mine looks like?

My cheeks burn as the desire to touch myself in that very same fashion fills my body, tightening my nipples. I can hardly breathe as she grazes the top of her opening with her

fingers. Her moans pour out, twisting my insides in an odd fashion.

Soon, her body bucks in the air, her hips undulating up and down as her pained cries reach a higher frenzy. I cannot understand what's happening, and I long to go to her, to make sure she's uninjured or daft in the head, but the moment I shift, the library doors slam open, freezing me to the spot.

Even without seeing the massive man that enters, I know him by scent—that alluring mix of leather and smoke. Norhaven strides forward, his eyes locked onto the maid. Relief floods my veins until my fingers begin to throb and my vision hazes. He will know what to do. I'm sure of it.

“Don't tell me you're so close to your pinnacle already,” he growls, the sound zipping down to where the maid continues to stroke. “I told you to prepare yourself, not get all the way there.”

“But Your Grace,” she gasps. “I know how you like to tease. I merely wanted to complete one round on my own to make it easier when you join in.”

He steps forward and grips her chin in his grasp, forcing her lips to part. My heart flutters at the rough way he handles her, but for some reason, I'm unable to find it in me to be disgusted by his actions. Instead, I'm intrigued, curious, and more than a little flustered. Jealousy beats at my chest as he handles her, touching her in ways that I would love to indulge in.

My body tingles all over as he shoves his thick fingers in her mouth, forcing them deep enough that I can hear her gag. I should be repulsed. I should be scandalized, but for once, I may find out what it is that happens between men and women in secret. Mama has rebuffed every question, refused to give

me any answers, but here, unfolding before me, is the greatest education of my life.

Unfortunately, that quest for knowledge is the only thing keeping me together at the moment. My heart squeezes until it hurts, a physical pain brought about by emotional turmoil. Here she is, a maid, allowed to indulge in things that I have no words for, no concept of, and yet, I, the daughter of a baron, am forced to go without simply because of my station.

Am I not higher than she? Am I not more capable and willing to give him anything he asks? Silent tears drip down my cheeks as I watch the lurid display, both disgusted with myself and filled with such longing that it's difficult to breathe. My fingers tear at my dress, something to occupy my hands as he touches her, branding her with his desires.

Closing my eyes, I take in a deep breath, forcing my mind to see things clearly, to look at things with a cold, calculated eye. It is because I am the daughter of a baron that I cannot indulge in whatever type of play this is. By rebuffing me, Norhaven has allowed me to continue in society, eligible for some other man to court me.

It's clear the things he's doing to her, he's unable to do to me based on the laws of propriety. Though it ravages my soul that he's indulging with this maid instead of exploring these passions with me, I cannot deny how fascinating I find it. Shoving the pain and hurt to the furthest recesses of my mind, I look upon the scene with a curious mind, taking what knowledge I can from this illicit fete.

After forcing her to swallow his fingers, he pulls them out, sliding his other hand up and curling around her throat. Even from where I'm hiding, I can hear her pained gasps, her wheezing breaths as he cuts off her air supply. In kind, I too

wrap my fingers around my throat, trying to get a sense of what he might be doing to her.

Though I cannot squeeze myself hard enough to deny my body oxygen, just the sensation of my hand around the column of my neck is enough for even more wetness to coat my drawers. I gasp right along with the maid as I draw in ragged breaths. Unbidden, my fingers slide down the front of my gown, grazing my hardened nipples.

Pleasure I've never known before zips through my body, enlivening me with just that simple touch. This is simply marvelous. Why on earth would they keep something so amazing out of our grasp?

“Your pleasure is mine,” Norhaven bites out. “I control every bit of you, and that includes the things that make you scream out in release.”

Though he's saying it to the maid, it feels like he's saying it to me, explaining why we are not taught the joys of a woman's body. My satisfaction belongs to my husband, and not me. But still, is there really any harm in learning what I can then practicing when I'm married?

He pulls back, dragging the maid off of the desk, only to whirl her around so that she's bent over, her naked bottom wagging behind her. “Want me to hurt you, my little pain slut? My whore of avarice?”

His words blister my ears, and though I expect the maid to find her own issue with them, she simply cries out, begging him, beseeching him to harm her. What sort of madness is this?

With strong, powerful strides, Norhaven makes his way around the desk and hunches down, fiddling with something

underneath. Soon, he lifts an object that I do not recognize. It's made of leather, but that's all I can tell. The forked tongue looks wicked, mimicking the maid's spread quim. Perhaps it is something to aid her down there.

A loud, thunderous crack meets my ears along with the harsh cry of the maid. Before I can even make sense of what I'm seeing, Norhaven strikes her again, the red angry slash standing out stark against her pale skin. Her bottom appears inflamed, and yet, she cries out, not in pain, but in pleasure.

None of this makes sense. Nothing that's happening should cause such noises to pour past her lips. Is there something I'm missing? Something I'm still not understanding? Despite the confusion, there is still the undeniable sensation of heat throbbing between my thighs.

CHAPTER 8



Charles

The maid quivers beneath me, her body slick with sweat as she meets every blow. Undoubtedly, she's been needing this release for some time, and I have not been able to indulge her. Perhaps after tonight, I'll be able to persuade her to give up her employment here and join the Rose and Thorne. All her needs and more will be met, and she won't have to apply herself to menial work to receive it.

"Stroke yourself," I growl, reaching between us to free the fall of my trousers, allowing the flap to open as the garment sits low on my hips.

She's so wet, so ready, but still, I want to make her suffer, to impart some of the frustration that broils through me from the interactions with Miss Cynthia. Striking her flesh again, I listen to the delicious wails, watch as more arousal gathers on her lower lips.

As a beta, she's not nearly as wet as I would like, but that will improve once I have an omega of my own. Unbidden, Miss Cynthia's face pops into my head again. Her full lips, the pert upturn to her nose, and those luminous green eyes that stared up at me, watering with unshed tears.

Though that's not the way I wanted to make her cry, seeing them glisten did things to me—still does. Sliding my fingers across the maid's hot flesh, I picture Miss Cynthia in her place, lying there, taking my aggression as I pour it out onto her willing body. My cock jerks, brushing against the hem of my shirt, dragging a ragged moan from my lips.

Gods, my mind must be truly slipping from me. Amongst the scent of our combined arousal is a faint whiff of something altogether different. Wholly Miss Cynthia. The scent of peony fills the room, but this time, it's deeper and far more potent. Pulling back, I ignore Melissa's squirm of need and glance around, nose tipped into the air.

It can't be my imagination. There's no way she's infiltrated my body this much. But try as I might, I can't find any evidence of her being with us in the room. It would be just like that meddling little omega to hide away, seeing things her delicate eyes should not.

Once more, I apply myself to the maid in front of me, slipping my hand down to smack the swell of her plump lower lips. With each strike, my fingers come away sodden, nearly dripping with her arousal. As I drift them up higher to graze the delicate skin of her bottom hole, that's when I hear it.

We are certainly not alone. Off in a shadowed corner, the sound of sliding books catches my attention. Melissa is too far gone to notice, but I do. Turning my gaze, I stare at the spot, barely making out the small form huddled there. My brain wasn't playing tricks on me after all.

Miss Cynthia is indeed watching us, and based on the delicious scent wafting towards me, she's enjoying it. Such a scandalous, deviant little omega, to not have made herself

known the minute Melissa started touching herself inappropriately.

So she likes to watch, does she? I wonder how she would fare at Rose and Thorne. Would she enjoy seeing the other submissives taken in hand? Would it make her sopping as she squirms on my lap, her cunny crying out for my cock as I deny her release?

Eyes boring into the inky darkness, I pull away from the maid, refusing to button my clothing. “Right yourself, Melissa, and leave me.”

She pauses, her body rigid. “Your Grace?”

“I will not repeat myself.” With a flurry of movement, she pulls up her drawers and ties them before smoothing down her dress. “Tell Lady Penelope that you are there to assist her in whatever she needs done, then return to your duties. If you have a need to find release, you have my permission.”

Not giving her another glance, I prowl forward, my balls drawing up at the soft gasp coming from the corner. Her arousal is far stronger now, tempered with a bite of fear—the most delectable combination. Whatever shall I do with my wayward little omega?

Pausing, I pull back, detesting the fact that my brain dared to slip and think of her as mine. She will never be my anything. She can’t be. And after tonight, she will never see me again. Not if I have anything to do with it.

Once she’s married off to some nice baron or viscount, I might consider coming back into her company, but right now, it’s far too dangerous. Lips tilting up into a feral smirk, I walk back closer to the desk, back in the light where she can see me better.

“I know you’re here, Miss Cynthia. I can smell the scent of your honeyed quim from across the room. Come and face me.”

Moments go by where all I can hear is her haggard breath. No longer does the room smell of blooming flowers and elicit words scribbled in secret. Now, it takes on the taint of true terror. I want the omega to be uneasy, but never this afraid.

“I will not harm you if that is your concern.”

“Y- You won’t use your,” she pauses as if searching for the word. “Tawse?” The plaintive voice cries out amidst even more shuffling, no doubt remembering the spectacle Sophia made earlier at the mention of that implement.

Unable to contain myself, a hoarse laugh erupts from my throat, surprising even me. “Not just yet.” I hold up the implement in question. “Just so you have a visual to go with the word, this is a Scottish tawse.” Shaking my head, I make a grand gesture of putting it away. “I am now unarmed. Come and face me.”

A few tense moments go by, and soon, she comes out of her hiding spot, face as red as any rose I’ve ever seen. How I want to slide my fingers across those crimson cheeks, brushing away any errant tears that might fall. Miss Cynthia stands before me, her body tense as she wrings her fingers in front of her.

“Am I ruined?”

Those three words, spoken with such heartache rip at me, tugging at my defenses. At least one thing is certain, however. She didn’t plan this to trap me, forcing me to regard her even more. If only she wasn’t the daughter of a baron. If only our stations didn’t require such separation.

Now that I know she is inclined towards my brand of possession, the only thing keeping us apart is duty. And for the first time in my life, I curse the Alpha King that makes me wear so heavy a crown. It doesn't matter that Lewis has resigned himself to this fate. I never dreamed of such a life.

When I planned to settle down, it was going to be with a woman I loved and not a woman who gave me what my title and lands needed. Staring down at the little omega, her eyes welling up as she contemplates her fate, it seals it for me. I will allow one small indulgence, but after that, I will quit myself of my family and her for as long as it takes.

“As long as no one sees us, and your lips remain silent, you will not be ruined. What I'm about to do, you must never tell a soul, or else, you will never marry someone of any station. Is that clear?”

She nods, her eyes somehow even wider and far more innocent than they have any right to be.

“I want your words, Miss Cynthia. Be sure to enunciate them clearly for me.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” she whispers, sinking into a low curtsy.

Blackmail, pure and simple. A threat to keep her quiet as I slake my lusts. I'm the lowest form of blackguard, a cad of the highest degree, and yet, I cannot find it within me to care. If I am to leave her, at least I will part knowing she has the knowledge necessary to not be alarmed when she does, in fact, marry someone else.

The infuriating thought alone is almost enough to make me flaccid, yet just staring at Miss Cynthia, studying the curve of her cheek, the heightened color in her face... It's enough to keep me rock solid. Peering down at the impressionable

omega, I tug the ends of my shirt out of my pants, allowing them to dangle to the side. Jealousy beats at my chest, causing my vision to waver for a moment, but I swallow it down.

“But, Your Grace,” she gasps, averting her eyes.

“No,” I growl out, infusing my iron will into my voice. “You will look at me as I pleasure myself. I want you to see what it is you do to me. I want you to observe the reason I cannot be in your presence. You vex me, my dear girl, in a way that no other omega has.”

Sliding my hand lower, I push back my shirt, revealing my staff to her. Instead of breaking down as I expect her to do, she lowers herself, staring at my member from every angle.

“Y- Your Grace?”

“Yes?” I hedge, not knowing where her line of inquiry will lead.

“Does it hurt?”

Chuckling, I grip my fingers around the base, choking my cock as I tip my head back and moan. “Not in the slightest. In fact, by touching myself like so, or in other ways that you will discover once you are wed, it feels downright amazing.”

She pulls back, studying my moves as if there is to be an exam afterward. Having her watch me like this is an erotic thrill I never knew I wanted to experience. In all my years of indulging in the solitary vice with just my hand and imagination, this is by far the most pleasurable. I can see it in her expression, the curious wonderment as her eyes drift up and down with my movements, that it’s appealing to her as well.

Groaning, I tip my head back, pumping in earnest as I keep the image of her in the forefront. I must make this quick,

otherwise the chance of us being discovered rises dramatically. I want to stop, to pull away and extricate myself from the situation, but I am arrested by the simple act of hearing the uneven timber of her breathing, the scent of her arousal that perfumes the air.

Soon, however, the scent morphs, turning into something far more sour, something akin to fear. “Your Grace,” she gasps. Looking down, I watch as her eyes grow, her expression horrified as she stares at me. This isn’t the reaction I want at all. “Are you ill?”

Pausing, I grip myself and tilt my head to the side. “No, you silly girl. Whyever would you think that?”

Finger trembling, she points at my knot before looking back up at me. “I- I have beheld animals with a similar affliction, though never situated between their thighs. Unfortunately, they had to be put down.” After a moment or two, she takes in a dramatic breath. “Are you to die? Is that why you wish to not marry? To relieve me of the burden of becoming a widow?”

I stand there, mouth agape as tears start to gather in her eyes. “Of all the-” Words escape me as I tuck my flagging member into my pants, the mood thoroughly ruined by the despair that’s flowing off of her. “Now, more than ever, I detest the fact that omegas are kept in the dark. “I am as healthy as ever.”

“Was it from the war then? Were you injured?”

She peers up at me with such unabashed worry that for a moment, I want nothing more than to scoop her into my arms and kiss every errant thought from her head.

“No,” I murmur, tucking in my shirt and buttoning my fall. This foolishness has gone on for long enough. It was stupid of me to attempt this, putting both of us at risk. “It’s not from the war. When you marry, if you are lucky enough for an Alpha, he will be able to explain the nuances of his anatomy.”

She looks at me, dumbstruck for a moment, and again I curse whatever passes for an education. “But I am an omega. I will certainly receive my own Alpha.”

“Is that the lie they’re feeding you? Using falsehoods to keep you in line as the perfect, pristine omega? Your dynamic outnumbers us by fifty to one, at least.”

Her eyes widen, horror shining in her depths. Someone had to disabuse her of these romantic notions; it might as well be me. No doubt she already hates me with a fiery passion. What’s the harm in fanning the flames a bit?

Tugging on my jacket, I shake my head and continue. “As to why I’m not marrying you, it is simply because you cannot give me what I need.” Unfortunately, it’s true.

The longer I’m in her presence, the more I realize just how much I let myself go. I need an experienced submissive, not the wide-eyed, moon-calved girl that’s staring up at me, hurt shimmering in her eyes. The best I can hope for is an agreeable match with my nights spent at Rose and Thorne to slack my lust. An heir and a spare, and then I’m free.

But, hell and damnation, I want more than that. As a man that’s used to being in complete control of my life, enduring in this quagmire where I’m forced to stand still and no longer move about freely is tantamount to death itself. Reaching out, I slide my fingertips across Miss Cynthia’s cheek, allowing me one simple pleasure before I run.

Her lashes lower as she leans into the touch. A soft moan escapes her lips, so low I'm not sure if I actually heard it, or if it was simply my heart mourning the loss of her touch. So responsive, so willing, yet the completely wrong person for me.

I've never run from anything before, and I'm loath to start it now. The only consolation is that by running this once, I'll be fixing myself toward the honorable path, the dutiful path. I've already corrupted this innocent enough and will have to find a way to atone for my sins.

Unable to take her crestfallen countenance any longer, I turn on my heel and storm out of the library, slamming the door shut behind me. I want to quit this fete so desperately, and yet, I cannot find a way to do so that won't cast scandal upon either my family or me.

Turning down the familiar halls, I pace back and forth outside of my study for several moments, wracking my brain. When the idea hits me like a bolt of lightning, I race inside and sit down at my desk. With the fireplace lit, it takes me no time to find my matches and light the nearby candle.

With a quick scrawl, I write out a letter, detailing my need to return to Langwell Grove. Something dire enough that I need to leave immediately, but not bad enough that my friends and family feel obligated to help. It takes me several moments, but once it's the way I like it, I fold it up and seal it with a long-forgotten seal, dragging it through the wax until it's indistinguishable.

Letter in hand, I blow out the candle and sneak over to the servant's entrance, using the hidden tunnels to take me the other way around, this way it can appear as though I've passed the butler before reentering the party.

CHAPTER 9



Cynthia

The library is quiet as I stand there, unsure of how long I'm supposed to stay until I'm found. With Norhaven long gone, I should be okay to leave. Right? Uncertainty eats at my brain as I pace back and forth, my thoughts flying about with nowhere to land. Until that bulbous thing appeared at the base of his staff, I was quite enjoying the show he was providing.

It was stupid of me to make such a comment, but I was very worried for him. How am I to know what is normal or not? It's not as if there are manuals passed around, diagrams for us to study. If so, this would not have been such a humiliating encounter.

Grabbing a nearby book, I sit in the chair and flip through the pages, my eyes not seeing the words. I'm too preoccupied with images of Norhaven's member, how it seemed to pulse at his touch. It was far more arousing than anything I've ever encountered, almost more so than his rough treatment of the maid.

Lost in thought, I almost miss the door opening, startled as Penelope appears by my side. "Where have you been? I've been searching everywhere for you."

Heat tinges my cheeks as I lay the book in my lap. “Do forgive me for worrying you, but I decided to find solace in the library. It’s always so empty and perfect for hiding away.”

Her eyes glimmer a moment before she extends her hand to help me up. “Though I’m not sure what the oaf did to upset you, you needn’t worry about him any longer. He’s not here.”

My heart freezes in my chest, stuttering for a moment. “He’s not?”

“Unfortunately, he was called away to Langwell Grove and had to leave this very minute. He won’t be here to suffer the tongue lashing I was preparing for treating a treasured guest this way.”

Tears burning my eyes, I reach out and grip her hand. “Do not be wroth on my account. All is well. I’m just tired from all the celebration. Perhaps if I retire to my bedchambers early, I’ll be in better spirits tomorrow.”

“If you’re certain...”

“I am.” Leaning forward, I kiss her cheek and slip out of the room, my nerves zinging with each step.

He said I couldn’t give him what he needed, but when did he ever give me the chance? More than that, he never once told me what I needed to do to give him that. It’s not fair. None of this is fair.

Slipping into my room, I call my lady’s maid over, requesting a hot bath. If anything will calm my nerves and help me think, it’s that. I watch as bucket after bucket is poured in, contemplating my choices.

What should I do? If I say nothing, then both of us are free to pursue others; however, all I have to do is confide in Pen, and she’ll make sure Norhaven marches me down the aisle. As

tempting as that is, though, I don't want a marriage like that. I don't want to force his hand, giving him cause to hate me.

Once the other maids exit the room, leaving just my lady's maid, I slip into the steamy water and sigh. "I do not require your assistance with my bath. Please leave me alone for a bit."

With a soft curtsy, she too leaves the room, and I am once more alone with my thoughts. Closing my eyes, I conjure up the image of the maid, her legs splayed as she touched herself. Perhaps this is what the duke was referring to, that I cannot see to his needs the way she can.

Drifting my hand down, I skim my fingers over my nipples, sighing as they tighten under my touch. Did they always do that? Or is this a new sensation, unlocked by the illicit scenes that played out in the library?

From there, I go lower, down to the area that I only touch to clean. Never once did it make me cry out the way the maid did. Is there some secret to discover? Some hidden part? Or is it that I am not equipped with the same anatomy as a beta, and thus am unable to reach the same heights as she?

My blood flows thick and hot through my veins, my heart pounding so loudly that it thumps in my ears. The maid used two fingers, if I recall correctly, positioning them at the top of her sex, the apex between her thighs. Squeezing my eyes shut, I graze my lower lips, shocked by just how sensitive they feel.

And that's when my fingers brush it. I haven't a name for the bundle of nerves that nearly leap at my touch, but pleasure courses through my body, sending jolts of lightning through me. This! This is what the maid must have been feeling. Providence, but it feels divine.

Easing a bit lower, I trail my fingers through the water, unsure of the odd liquid that coats my fingers. It's thicker, yet slick, something I haven't experienced before, yet it's coming out of me, as if it's part of me somehow. It's all too curious, and I wish now, more than ever, that I could find Norhaven and beg him to tell me more, tell me why I feel these things... why my body burns at the mere thought of him.

The thought of him, standing before me, wicked tawse in his hand as he strokes himself sends tingles of anticipation through me. I shouldn't want to think about the pain he can deliver, and yet, it's all I'm fixated on. Perhaps it's because, deep down, I know I'm doing something naughty and want to atone for it.

One thing I know for certain—Norhaven will give me pain, and I will accept it, possibly even like it. I just need to convince him that I can do this for him, that I can be the vessel in which he pours out his ire. I will endure all that or more.

Groaning, I tilt my head back, letting it rest against the warm copper as I roughen my touch, gasping as the pleasure nearly doubles. My fingers feel numb as my heart begins to race. I stroke myself faster, biting back a louder moan as my hips surge up of their own accord.

With my free hand, I drape it over my head, gripping the edge of the tub as my body undulates through the water, sending small waves splashing over the sides. But I can't care about that now, not when I'm so close to some unknown destination.

The sensations build, clenching my insides as I barrel forward. Biting down on my lower lips, my nails scrabble over the metal as that small nub begins to swell and throb. This is wrong. This is so very, very wrong. I know this. Deep inside, I

know I shouldn't be. But it's that wrongness that makes it feel so very right.

Once more, Norhaven flashes through my mind, his gruff voice growling in my ear, urging me to continue, to find out what happens at the end. It's an almost audible sound, the rasp of his breath against my cheek, the heat of his fingers against my skin.

When the pinnacle hits, my world stops for a moment. I'm unable to think, unable to breathe. Pure feeling flows through me, bowing my body up. The moans I've been holding back release on a scream, sending the lady's maid flying into the room. Thankfully, I have enough wits about me to remove my hand, hiding the evidence of any wrongdoing.

"A spider!" I manage to scream, rocking back in the tub as if afraid. "I- I think it went out the door."

With a swift nod, she ducks out of the room, leaving me to catch my breath. With trembling fingers, I rest my hand over my heart, feeling the pounding as I lay there. The duke is convinced that I cannot give him what he needs, but if it's this, I will practice every day, torturing my body with unspeakable pleasure until I'm finally good enough to win his heart.

Because make no mistake, I am irrevocably tied to the Duke of Norhaven, and nothing will stop me from pursuing him as my husband. Though he may have ruined me for all men, he is the perfect match for me, the one Alpha that can take me to heights I've never even dreamed of before. And I do so love a challenge.

CHAPTER 10



Charles

The wind is bitter cold as I take Erebus, my black stallion, back into the stable. For all this ruse, there is no way I can make it anywhere in this tempest. It's far too treacherous with the ice and snow. Damnation. All I want is to be free of this maddening vixen, and yet, even the weather is set to hold me back.

Glancing up at the dark, billowy heavens, I squint my eyes, wondering if it's even worth incurring the wrath of God to curse him in this moment. It must be all his doing. When I first set out, it was bearable—frigid, but manageable. However, the further I drove my steed, the worse it became, as if everything was conspiring against me.

I grip the reins in my hand and start the humiliating trek back to the barn. The grooms snap to attention, their eyes mirroring their surprise. As the nearest one reaches for my horse, I pull back, forcing my face into a mask of jovial good will.

“No need. I have everything well in hand. As you well know, he responds better to me. Go inside and enjoy the party. I am quite sure you wish to be out of the cold.” They shuffle

about, rubbing their hands together, but refrain from actually complaining.

More so, they also refuse to budge. This is the very last thing I need. Pulling up to my full height, I glare at the trio, infusing the remaining vestiges of ire into my expression. “You will leave me to tend to my horse. When you go inside, you will tell no one that I am here. If I catch even a murmur of conversation, you will no longer serve the house of Barrington. Am I quite clear?”

They nod, their bodies frantic as they nearly trip over each other in their haste to leave my presence. I never enjoy endangering anyone’s livelihood, but I am not in the mood to play games tonight. Once alone, I glance back over at Erebus and heave a weary sigh.

It’s not often I will admit to any folly, but tonight, I have made quite a mess of things. It should have been Miss Cynthia that was forced to flee into the icy darkness and not I. This is my homestead, my ancestral seat. The moment I realized she was skulking about in the library, I should have turned her out then and there.

But no. My sense of duty and generosity wouldn’t allow her to suffer such deleterious temperatures. I can’t say that it’s my honor that allowed her to stay, for it is clear that I have none.

I am a cad, no worse than those rakes that play about with innocent young girls, ruining them then leaving them to pick up the pieces. I allowed my hormones to have free rein, and as such, played the fool and messed around in ways that I shouldn’t have. And now, because of my complete stupidity, because I took liberties with a woman I had no right to, I am

forced to find shelter in the freezing bowels of my home instead of enjoying a nice bath or warm fire.

Clucking my tongue, I urge Erebus forward, leading him into an empty stall. I pull off his saddle and remove his bridle, placing them in their spots before easing a sugar cube out of my pocket. His warm lips feather over my palm as he takes it from me, bobbing his head in satisfaction.

Perhaps he'll forgive me for dragging him out into the cold after all. Stifling a chuckle, I give my equine friend a soft pat before draping him with a thick blanket. As I drift my hand down his mane, a soft sound catches my attention—Erebus's as well.

His ears prick as he tosses his head back and forth, a light nickering sound filling in the silence. I ease back next to him, patting him in hopes he'll calm back down and not draw any undue attention to my presence. However, if it's those grooms again... Heaven help what I plan to do.

But it isn't. Because that's exactly how my night is going. Before I can even see the interloper, a whiff of peony assaults my nose, but this time, there's something more to it—a bite of decadence, an unholy scent that drives me mad.

It's like honey spilling over warmed chocolate, a scent that makes my mouth water and my cock throb. Easing around Erebus, I watch as Cynthia walks down the stalls, her eyes searching for something. Then, a soft smile eases over her lips as she stops a few down from me to admire the docile mare I know is housed inside.

She coos and fusses over the horse, chuckling when the mare's thick lips dance over her skin, no doubt looking for a treat. Ever the mindful omega, she slips her hand inside her redingote and pulls out a slice of apple, giggling as the mare

devours it. Still not satisfied, the older horse continues to nose about until finally finding its prize—a sugar cube of her own.

My heart thaws a bit as I watch her stroking the mare's muzzle, tenderness infusing me when it has absolutely no right to sway my resolution to be free of her. How easy could it be to have her in my stables, tending our horses after we come back from an exhaustive ride?

Would she put up a fuss if I tossed her into the hay, chaining her to the wall like a prized stallion, and rode her to our mutual completion? Would I want her to? Reaching down, I rub my cock, stifling a groan as the lurid image runs through my brain unchecked.

I could have her now. I could throw her down and fuck her, taking the sweet innocence that clings to her like a second skin. But then where would that leave us? It was made abundantly clear to me that she is not the one suitable to be Duchess of Norhaven, and I cannot abide the idea of keeping a mistress when I am married.

Though I'm not naïve enough to believe in a love match, I still want to give my bride, whoever she is, the honor of a respectable man, not one given to chasing the skirts of others. It is a duty, chaining myself to the ennui of monogamy, that I must suffer if I am to have a woman worthy of carrying the duchess title.

No doubt it's more a matter of finding a woman I can tolerate, seeing as no omega of good breeding will be able to handle the dark desires I have blazing in my heart. In this way, it's probably better not to marry at all until I get it out of my system in its entirety, visiting Rose and Thorne until the very idea of depravity becomes mundane and no longer holds luster.

Once more, anger surges through me, mostly directed at my brother and the king. If only I were still a mere second son, a lord, someone of no importance at all. Then, I could indulge, making this little omega mine, causing more of that wide-eyed wonder to cross her face.

Next to me, Erebus shuffles about, my fury causing him to become uneasy. For the sake of not being found out, I have to keep my emotions in check. Now, more than ever, I need to be calm so she can leave without investigating further.

“Have you been well?” Her voice pierces the night, soft and melodic, husky even, as if she’s just awoken from a good hard fucking. My balls clench at the sound. “I’m sorry I haven’t visited you as much as I wanted. I’ve been... preoccupied.”

A shiver of want slithers down my spine at her words. I know exactly how she’s been preoccupied, and if she hadn’t shown such fear and revulsion at my knot, she might have been occupied a bit longer.

“Can you keep a secret?” Erebus and I both lean forward, as if my horse is also hanging on her very word. “I saw something I shouldn’t have, and now, I cannot drive it from my mind. Norhaven told me not to tell anyone, but you cannot talk. Besides, I’m sure if I keep giving you treats, it will keep you loyal to me. Isn’t that right?”

Holding my breath, I wait for her to continue. What scandalous words will fall from her lips? The little minx might be obeying my word in its literal sense, but she still skirts far too close to defying me for comfort. In the shadows, I continue to scent the air, making sure she’s not caught unawares by some unsuspecting groom or sneaky interloper.

“I saw him with the maid.” The horse nickers softly, as if asking her to continue... the nosey horse. “He did things to her... hurt her. But, somehow she liked it. I don’t understand any of it, but I wanted it. I wanted to feel what she felt. I think he would have indulged. If only... if only I didn’t inquire as to the growth between his legs. I never knew he would be so sensitive.”

My irritation flares as I listen to her describing my damned knot. She leaves no detail out, waxing poetic about something she doesn’t understand. There’s still a part of her that’s concerned for me, and it should be touching. But, it’s so ridiculous, so laughable despite the seriousness.

A long pause stretches out as she continues to absently rub the horse’s nose. “I think I’ve fallen for him Nutmeg,” she whispers into her mane as she throws her arms around the mare’s neck and holds on. “But he doesn’t want me. I repulse him. I- Even if I do everything right, I’ve angered him. He will not want me. Despite training for him, preparing myself for him, I fear it will never be enough.”

Soft sounds of crying fill the night, slamming into me with a force I’d rather not acknowledge. I pull back, mulling over her words. What can she possibly mean? As much as I want her to continue, I cannot allow her to carry on like this. Her tears beat at me, stirring some nameless emotion that should stay buried deep within my heart.

Pulling out of the shadows, I clear my throat, my cock twitching as she jumps, her eyes widening as she sees me stepping even closer. “Y- Your Grace,” she stammers, nearly tripping over herself as she tries to curtsy.

In that moment, all gentlemanly desires flee. All I see before me is a scared little rabbit, a delicate flower that

trembles in my wake. It's heady, erotic, and everything I've wanted in a prey.

But this isn't Rose and Thorne. She's not one of the practiced women putting on an act meant to arouse. Her unease sours the air, driving away the delicious scent of her arousal. All around me, the horses grow restless, the soft nickering drowning out the beating of her heart.

"Seems you cannot keep those beautiful lips shut, can you Miss Cynthia?"

She shies away from me, her hand trembling as she lays it over her heart. "I haven't breathed a word to anyone. J- Just a horse. A horse that cannot repeat a single thing I say."

"Yes," I breathe, slowly, inexorably filling the gap between us. "But you never know who may lurk in the shadows, waiting to take your bit of gossip and run with it. Why, if I were one of the grooms, what would you have done then?"

She stills, as realization seems to dawn on her. "I- I. You must forgive me, Your Grace."

"I've already forgiven you once tonight, Miss Cynthia, and I have still yet to receive recompense. Suppose I help you quell your wayward tongue with a taste of my leather?" I pause as the words tumble from my lips.

Am I mad? Surely only a daft man would make such a proposition when his grasp on civility is so tenuous. Where are we to go from here? Can I truly stop at disciplining her and not go all the way?

"You vex me, Miss Cynthia," I murmur, reaching out to grab her arm. "You are a maddening distraction, a vice I cannot seem to quit."

“Then don’t,” she whimpers back, her eyes shining. “I’ll do what you wish. I’ll obey your every command. Just please.” At my silence, she blinks up at me before looking around helplessly. “I’ll practice some more. I’ll teach myself how to give you what that maid did.”

Her words click about in my mind. “Practice what, exactly.”

For a moment, it seems as if she won’t answer me. Her cheeks flush a bright pink as she looks down. “I- I touched myself. Just like she did. I hoped to someday surprise you to-”

“Show me,” I growl, unable to formulate a full sentence.

“Your Grace?”

“There is no way you understand what you’re saying. I demand for you to show me what you think it is that I want from you.”

Soft whimpers spill from her lips as she pulls herself out of my grasp. “Here, Your Grace?”

I glance about, tipping my nose in the air. This is dangerous. At any point, either of us can get caught in this game, and yet, the rational part of me is slowly slipping, driven away by the maddening scent between her thighs.

“No one will dare approach. Now, I will not ask you again. Either show me, or suffer the consequences of disobedience.”

CHAPTER 11



Cynthia

Do I dare? If our foray in the library didn't ruin me, surely this will. How many times can we tempt fate? Unsure of what to do, I glance back over at the stable entrance, my brain desperately trying to come up with a solution.

"Fine," he grinds out, the gravelly sound of his voice washing over me until I start to throb once more.

I thought satisfying myself in the tub would be enough, but I'm wrong. So very very wrong. With just the sound of his displeasure, my body aches and burns, desperate for more illicit touches.

Before I can say anything or even protest, he grabs my arm once more and drags me into an empty stall. I open my mouth to cry out, but his lips are there, crushing into mine, silencing everything until all I can do is whimper under the onslaught.

"What spell do you weave around me," he rasps against my neck, his teeth grazing the delicate column. "Are you a witch in disguise, set to lay me low with your innocent seduction?"

His words are meaningless as I writhe under his rough touch. I want more. So much more. If only I knew what it was

my body craved. But I don't. I can't. To do so would mean that I'm ruined.

Sorrow lances through me as he pulls back, staring down at me as his hand reaches to the side of the stall. "You owe me a punishment, do you not?"

My mind freezes for a moment, taking an eternity to go back to where I once begged him to discipline me, that way things can be well between us. Is this the same thing he's offering? Or is there something else hidden behind his demand?

"If that is what you wish -"

"I don't give a horse's bollocks what I wish," he growls out, his words hard steel wrapped in the softest velvet. "What is it you wish, little flower? What do you crave, you maddening vixen who smells of peony and desire? What do you wish of me?"

"Please," I whimper out. "Please punish me. Make all of this stop. I cannot bear it any longer."

"Your wish is my command."

Before I can even think, he turns me over, tossing me down onto the hay. He doesn't even give me a chance to cry out, to change my mind, before his rough hands flip up my redingote. An icy chill slices through my body as the one thing that separates me from the elements is shoved up my body.

"How scandalous, Miss Cynthia. Seems to me you've left a few garments upstairs in your room. How naughty of you to come down in just your redingote and nothing else. Suppose one of the grooms caught a glimpse of something he shouldn't have?"

There's a note to his voice, an angry quaver as he studies my naked backside. But what does he care? He's made it abundantly clear that he does not want me. Once more, sorrow worms its way in, shattering the surrounding illusion.

“But more than that, do you care nothing of your health? Surely even one as common as the daughter of a baron is familiar with the muslin disease. Why, your very skin is dotted with bumps as it tries so desperately to warm itself. If I had known you wore so few layers-”

“Then what? It's not as if you own me. It's not as if my body should be of any concern to you.” I move to get up, but his hand is there, pushing me back down.

“That is where you are most certainly incorrect, Miss Cynthia. While you are here, under my hand, your body is indeed of great interest to me. As far as owning it, however, that is not a task I willfully take on.”

Once more, I move, anger and hurt coalescing into one massive knot of pain in my chest, but still he keeps his hand firm on my person. I cannot fight him; I know I can't. He's not only much bigger and much stronger, but part of me doesn't want to win this game. I want to see its conclusion, even if it kills me.

The first strike of leather against my skin steals my breath away. It is unexpected, giving me no ability to brace myself. The sensation is wholly unfamiliar—fire and warmth with a sting I will not soon forget. Even when mama chastised me, it was never like this. She never once took an implement to my backside, leaving me vulnerable to this form of attack, unprepared.

Another strike of the crop kissing my other cheek, and my body flies into action. I squirm, pulling forward, my fingers

finding no real purchase in the sifting hay. Norhaven's dark chuckle floods my ears, making the pain morph into something else, a pleasure beneath the sharp bite.

He picks me up with one arm, cradling me against his body as he sits down on a nearby stool, but far too soon, he shifts me again, putting me over his lap. His thighs are like steel beneath me, unyielding, unmoving. Soon, he smacks my flesh again, painting my backside with his displeasure.

I kick out, unable to handle the maelstrom of feelings and sensations flooding through me, but Norhaven doesn't even allow me that freedom. He captures my legs with his own, tipping me forward even more, until I'm bracing against the ground with my hands.

He tosses the crop down with a soft clatter, and I sigh, thinking my punishment is soon to be over. But that is far from the truth. He continues on, but this time, with his hand. It's far more intimate, far more scandalous, and far more arousing. Though it hurts just as badly, his hand causes my body to burn. Arousal gathers at the juncture of my thighs as I feel him harden against me.

Memories of the library, of how roughly he handled the maid flood my brain. He enjoys this. He enjoys causing pain and discomfort. Somehow, that knowledge fuels my body, causing even more heat to flood my system until my muscles clench and strain against him in need.

Dumping me off of his lap, Norhaven stares down at me, his eyes completely black as he fiddles with the front of his trousers. "Show me."

This time, I'm unable to resist him. I need release again, far more desperately than before. However, deep inside,

there's still that embarrassment that slithers through me, staying my hand.

Turning, I move to pull my redingote down, to at least hide such an intimate part of me, but Norhaven will have none of it. With a loud snarl that produces even more of that unfamiliar fluid, he tears the fabric away.

“I will see you. Every fucking inch of you. Now, touch yourself.”

I stare up into his eyes, arrested by the heat of his gaze. Reaching down, I slide my fingertips over that aching bundle of nerves, touching myself like I did in the bath, like the maid did in the library. Norhaven must like what he sees because a soft growl of satisfaction pours from his lips, drowning me in that heavenly sound.

Stroking faster, I arch up, a whimper of pleasure on my lips. But, just like in the tub, I bite down on my lower lip, keeping the sounds to myself. Norhaven pulls his member out and runs his hand down the length and back up to the top. Every touch seems to make it ripple and jerk in his hands.

Seeing him like this, watching his fingers move over his body arouses me even further. My hips buck of their own accord as my inner walls clench. As good as this feels, something is still missing, some secret part, some component that Norhaven knows about but is not sharing.

I feel empty somehow, craving the unknown. But more than that, I want him to kiss me again, to drive out all these maddening thoughts until I can just feel. But he doesn't. He stays aloft, stroking himself as he watches me.

Closing my eyes, I let my other senses take hold—the feel of my fingertips on my body, the sound of Norhaven's soft

grunts as they puncture the air. My body ripples as that intense sensation once more begins to take over, bowing my body as if it has a life of its own.

My lips drop open as my body starts to fly apart, and Norhaven falls to his knees between my splayed thighs. With his free hand, he reaches forward, wrapping his fingers around my mouth.

“Quiet now,” he warns. “I cannot have you giving us away as you reach your pinnacle.” With renewed vigor, he continues to glide his hand up and down his member, his knuckles brushing against the backs of my fingers.

It’s all so overwhelming. I cry out, my sounds muffled by his strong fingers. Uninhibited, I continue to moan as pleasure courses through my body. His low grunts intermingle with the stifled sounds as we both continue, straining for completion.

The moment my release hits, my hips surge up, bumping into his hand. I pull away, to give my body some relief, but Norhaven doesn’t allow me to. “Keep touching yourself,” he groans. “Do not stop until I’m finished.”

I wail beneath his fingers, unsure if I can do as he asks. Already, the bundle of nerves feel raw and overstimulated. But I have no choice but to obey his commands, wanting to please him more than see to my own comfort.

Again, as I touch myself, the pleasure starts to build. How is this possible? Can a woman reach her pinnacle more than once? Norhaven stares me down, his grunts turning into soft growls that force me to comply. The ecstasy is sharper this time as it burns through me.

It’s white-hot pleasure that twists and turns my body, forcing me to cry out again and again as another release

crashes into me. I want to stop, but I don't dare. The last thing I want to do right now is disappoint him.

Once more, my body bows up as another wave slams into me, stealing my breath. At that moment, Norhaven freezes, groaning into my ear as something hot splashes against my thigh. This unknown fluid scalds me, a stark difference between the cold air.

When he pulls back, several moments later, he pulls my fingers away from my body and lifts his hand from my mouth. "Good fucking girl," he growls, running his thumb over my bottom lip.

The words flutter through me, renewing the need for release. We sit there staring at each other, neither of us talking. Then, as if he suddenly realizes the predicament we're in, he pulls back, his pupils contracting until his blue eyes are once more visible.

"My apologies, Miss Cynthia. It seems as if I allowed us to get too carried away."

"But Your Grace—"

"No," he thunders, pulling away as he readjusts his trousers, his member once more deflating. "I cannot allow this to continue. We have already gone too far."

"Then take me all the way. Make me your wife. I promise I'll obey you. I'll let you punish me. Please." I detest the fact that I'm begging, but I know no other way. "We both want this."

Norhaven whirls around, his eyes flashing with some unnamed emotion. "You want this. As a duke... I can't want this. I can't want you, Cynthia." His voice is hoarse, thick with emotion. "It doesn't matter what either of us want at this point.

I have my duty, and it precludes me from someone like you. Forgive me for the liberties I've taken with your person. It will never happen again."

He turns and leaves, my heart cracking in two as I listen to his steps fade into the distance. It can't be this way. It can't end like this. I wrap my arms around my waist, sobbing as I sit there and rock.

Time means nothing as the gathering cold wraps its icy chill around me. It's not until I'm hoarse and wrung out that I pull myself up out of the hay and straighten my redingote, hiding the evidence of our tryst.

His fluids lay hardened on my skin, rasping with every step I take, reminding me of the euphoria I found in his arms. This can't be the end. I won't let it. Now that he's a duke, he'll have to make appearances at the various balls. I will force my mama to see reason and let me have my coming out.

Once he sees that I can purport myself as a proper lady, he'll take me to be his wife. Wiping away the last of my tears, I straighten my shoulders and hold my head high. Perhaps I can even earn the coveted title of Incomparable. Then, he'll have no choice but to see me as an omega who will make him a fine duchess.

Ducking into the house, I feel my way around the servants' halls, keeping myself in the shadows until I get back into my room. Though the rest of the house is settling down, I find that I am unable to sleep.

Norhaven may think he can cast me aside, forcing our feelings to the wayside, but somehow, someday, I'll prove to him that I'm his match in every way. If pain is what he desires, then I'll figure out some way to learn to take it. He wants me;

his eyes said it all. Now, I just have to convince his errant sense of duty.

THE END

CYNTHIA AND CHARLES WILL RETURN. Make sure to join my [newsletter](#) to stay up to date with all my new releases. Please continue reading to find out the next duke to face the perils of matrimony.

EPILOGUE



Joseph

Hell and damnation. Plopping myself in front of the fire, I reread the letter, my anger growing with each sentence. How is it that someone as amiable as Lord Middlehey is to be saddled with such a wretch for a cousin? Despite everything he does for her, she fights him, spending coin she no longer has.

If only he felt safe enough in his own title to take the girl to task. Unfortunately, she will end up running the coffers dry if he allows her. Shaking my head, I toss the scrap into the fire and uncork my bottle of brandy, gulping down a mouthful in one go.

Were I the one in charge of her, I would lay my tawse upon her bed, holding her to task for every purchase, every farthing that slipped through her fingers. As it is, unless Lord Middlehey grants me the authority, my hands are tied, forced to watch a good man go to ruin.

The best option, of course, would be to force her into coming out, putting her up on the marriage mart. As long as she's not unfortunate of face, she should be saddled off with some unsuspecting dicked-in-the-nob that cares only about an heir and not about the chit that issues them.

Taking another swallow, I stare at the fire, my mind racing. The Little Season will be upon us shortly, and the bloodthirsty mamas will be out in full force, circling like the vultures they are. Hopefully, that will aid our endeavors more than hinder them.

Perhaps this is a blessing in disguise. If I'm too busy helping the hellion out, then I will not have time for title chasers. I will be seen as the most honorable man, and yet understood for declining offers of marriage. I do so love when a plan comes together in the most perfect way, and the idea of all that coin is worth the effort.

WILL JOSEPH, Duke of Foxford, be able to escape the marriage mart unscathed? Or will he be the first to succumb? Find out in **The Duke's Unwilling Bride**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vivian is a sassy romance writer that likes to brat just as much as she writes. As a fly-by-the-seat-of-her-pants author, she's usually working furiously into the night when her creative juices hit her the hardest. Her books like to take you to the dark side and force you to dip your toes in, but don't drown you. She loves writing alphaholes, anti-heroes, and heroes you just love to hate. She likes to try out everything she's putting her heroines through, so the phrase "for science" is used in her house a lot! When she's not writing, you can probably find her playing Animal Crossing or tormenting her cats and Husdom.



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