

Mr Webster's Wager

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/13102758) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/13102758>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Society of Gentlemen - K. J. Charles
Relationship:	Gabriel Ashleigh/Francis Webster
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Yuletide Treat , Porn with Feelings
Language:	English
Collections:	Yuletide 2017
Stats:	Published: 2017-12-22 Words: 27,385 Chapters: 1/1

Mr Webster's Wager

by [Fahye](#)

Summary

"Double or nothing," said Webster abruptly.

"How exactly do you mean to double 'everything I had?'" said Ash. He meant it to come out level, but there was a quaver in his voice.

"One more trick," Webster said. "Play, and win or lose you will walk away with your fortune." Ash stared at him. Webster made an impatient gesture. "I don't want or need your money. Or your house. Or your coat and shirt, come to that."

It was an offer of princely generosity. Ash's mouth was dry. "And what would you have from me?" he asked.

Something flared in Webster's cool expression for a moment, like a shark flashing a fin in still waters. "A month," he said.

Notes

Many thanks to oliviagirce for the beta!

Ash laid down the king of diamonds.

Webster was very still. He'd been still the whole time they were playing; as far as Ash could see, he didn't have a single damned tell. Ash could feel his breathing shallow in his throat. If Webster had a diamond, he'd have to follow suit, and Ash was all but certain to win - his house, his whole life, given back to him by a single trick. But if Webster could trump it -

Right here, right now, over the table. Ash with his legs spread, getting fucked, crying Webster's name. That was the wager. Ash would have nothing left to call his own at all, not even his own body. He had no way to explain how hard he was in his trousers, how aware he was of the chill air against the naked skin of his chest. The shirt he'd lost on the last trick lay in a crumpled pile on Webster's side of the table next to the coat he'd sacrificed the round before.

The next card Webster played would decide whether he walked away a free man or worse than ruined. Ash knew what he *should* want to happen. How could Webster be taking this long over the play? Ash licked his dry lips and made himself meet the man's eyes.

Webster's expression flickered as their gazes met. He did not look down as he plucked one card out of his hand and slapped it down over Ash's king with a sound that was too loud in the quiet room. Ash looked down at it.

Ten of clubs. Trumped.

He'd lost.

He let out a long breath. He felt tears collecting at the corners of his eyes, even as his already stiff cock somehow grew even harder. He'd lost. His money, his home, his independence, himself - they all belonged to Webster now, and there was no doubt that this cold-eyed man would take his prize. There was a play Ash had been forced to read at school which he couldn't remember the name of, something about a merchant and a pound of flesh. He swallowed and gathered the remnants of his dignity. Whatever else happened to him, Lord Gabriel Ashleigh was still a gentleman.

"Well, then," he said, laying down his hand face-up so there could be no confusion. He looked up and forced a smile. "It seems I am at your disposal, sir."

Webster watched him and made no sound. His chilly gaze made Ash's skin prickle. His nipples were stiff buds and he saw Webster notice. Still he said nothing. What was he waiting for? Right here, right now, over the table: Webster's long fingers on his hips, Webster's cock buried inside him. The anticipation was starting to make Ash's hands shake.

"Double or nothing," said Webster abruptly.

"How exactly do you mean to double 'everything I had?'" said Ash. He meant it to come out level, but there was a quaver in his voice.

"One more trick," Webster said. "Play, and win or lose you will walk away with your fortune." Ash stared at him. Webster made an impatient gesture. "I don't want or need your money. Or your house. Or your coat and shirt, come to that."

It was an offer of princely generosity. Ash's mouth was dry. "And what would you have from me?" he asked.

Something flared in Webster's cool expression for a moment, like a shark flashing a fin in still waters. "A month," he said.

"What do you mean?" said Ash, though he was half sure he already knew. His cock was so hard in his tight trousers it was approaching the edge of pain.

"Yourself," said Webster, enunciating clearly, "*at my disposal*, as you put it, for one month. Your arse, your mouth, your hands, or any other part of you I choose to enjoy, ready and willing to be fucked whenever it pleases me to do so. Your company and your service as often as I wish to have them. Those are my terms. Win or lose, you regain your fortune. Win, and you need never hear from me again. Lose, and you are *mine*." There was the faintest of pauses. "For one month," Webster added.

Ash couldn't speak for a moment, could barely think past the sudden rush of terror and peculiar excitement that Webster's blunt speech provoked in him. He became aware that his mouth was hanging open foolishly and shut it with a click. Webster was watching him, waiting.

"Will you play, Lord Gabriel?" he demanded at last, while Ash was still struggling to compose himself.

Win or lose, you regain your fortune. Really Ash had no choice at all. But he did not feel like he was surrendering to an unspeakable coercion when he said, "Gladly," and managed to add with a smile, "if only because I am rather fond of that coat."

Webster blinked twice and nodded. He gathered up the scattered cards to shuffle and deal. His movements were sharp and precise. Ash picked up his cards, barely seeing them. His mind was full of that dangerous glimmer in Webster's eyes, of the precise cadence of his voice when he said the word *mine*. It wasn't until Webster remarked in rather curt tones that diamonds were trumps that Ash was recalled to the game.

He looked down at his hand and saw his betrayer the king of diamonds smiling his flat smile up at him, and along with him the queen and knave - all the face cards keeping court. The period of exchanges and discards handed Ash the ace to keep them company. It was an extraordinarily good hand: an unbeatable hand.

Win or lose, and Ash had won.

He glanced up and saw Webster watching him. When he was sober Ash had very few illusions about his abilities at the card table; he knew he had without a doubt given away *something*. He tried to keep calm. He lifted his brows, inviting Webster to begin.

Webster led with the eight of hearts. Ash laid down the knave. Webster added the king.

Ash swallowed, and swallowed again.

He dropped the rest of his cards face down on the table and looked up at Webster through his eyelashes. It was a trick he had seen boys for sale at molly houses use to greatly distracting effect on men they knew desired them. Webster must desire him; nothing else explained this extraordinary wager, or the chill steadiness of his gaze on Ash's naked skin. Ash's heart was pounding. He would not have believed himself capable of attempting a deception of this sort an hour ago.

"Your trick, Webster, I believe," he said. "Well played."

There was a moment of silence.

Webster let out a strangled oath. He rose to his feet in a controlled explosion of movement and came around the table. As Ash began to stand Webster's long-fingered hand seized the scruff of his neck, pulling him the rest of the way. Ash stumbled and knocked into the table. Webster shoved him back onto it, scattering the cards with Ash's abandoned winning hand lost among them. Ash let out a gasp as Webster leaned over him. Webster used his height to best advantage, one hand knotted into the curls at Ash's nape and the other sliding down his bare back before settling possessively at his hip. "Impossible boy," Webster growled. "Little wanton. Just as I suspected."

"On that table, I think you said," managed Ash, terrified excitement leaping in his throat. Webster's hands promised power without mercy. His cock pressed against Ash's thigh, plainly as interested in this matter as Ash's own. Webster made a low angry noise and claimed his mouth with a hard and demanding kiss. Ash kissed back desperately and heard an undignified high-pitched sound come from his own throat as Webster took a possessive hold of him between the legs. His hips jerked against Webster's hand. Ash tore himself away from the kiss long enough to say pleadingly, "Webster -"

"Francis," said Webster fiercely.

"Francis," Ash repeated obediently. He would obey anything just now if it got him the fucking he longed for.

But Francis let him go.

Ash gaped at him, still panting for breath, as Francis stepped back and adjusted his cuffs. There was still something hungry in his eyes when he looked at Ash, but he said, "No."

"But -"

"You're mine," said Francis. "For one month. I'll decide when I have you, and how."

"But -"

"Get dressed," Francis said. "I'll send for you when I want you." As if Ash were his servant. Ash nearly protested again, but Francis's eyes narrowed. "*Your company and your service,*

whenever I desire them, in exchange for your fortune," he said. "I honour my wagers. Will you?"

Ash flushed. "You needn't insult me," he said.

"Then you shall wait," said Francis. "Until I send for you." He swallowed, the first thing Ash had seen him do that looked like nerves. Then he came close again and brushed the stiff bulge in Ash's trousers with his fingertips. Ash found himself trying to rise on his toes, chasing the faint pressure, his mouth open. Francis looked down at him with an unreadable expression. "This is mine as well," he said. "You don't touch anyone else. No one else touches you."

"I understand," Ash said. He hadn't even thought of it. Going from this room to seek out easy company at Millay's seemed the height of madcap recklessness. Francis Webster was all too plainly a dangerous man.

"No one touches you," said Francis. He gave Ash's cock a little squeeze. "And you don't touch yourself. Is that plain? You won't come until I'm fucking you."

Ash moaned and shut his eyes and nodded. "How - how long," he managed, when Francis moved away. His eyes were still closed. He heard the sudden stillness as Francis stopped moving.

"Eager little beauty," Francis murmured at last, voice all but a purr. Ash opened his eyes again. Francis was looking at him with an undisguised hunger that was very nearly terrifying. "Never fear, Lord Gabriel," he said. "I have you for a month. I don't intend to waste my time."

Francis heard the front door close. He was still standing with his hand closed tight around the top of a chair, using his own furniture as an anchor to stop himself from dashing out into the street and commanding Gabriel to come back. Or not even getting that far. He was so aroused and feeling so uncharacteristically rash that he could imagine dragging the boy into some cutpurse alley and having him there, fucking him upright and brutal, the rough dirty stones of some pissed-on wall making a wreck of Lord Gabriel Ashleigh's gorgeous clothes.

The clothes Francis had won from him, stripped from him, and then given back to him.

The decision to make Gabriel leave had seemed, in the moment, just as mad and yet somehow just as necessary as the decision to make the wager in the first place. And then to double it with a proposal that, even between gentlemen of their particular inclination, was the sort of depraved idea that nearly anyone would balk at.

Gabriel hadn't balked.

Francis, who for thirty-two years had preserved his safety and his fortune by never acting in the heat of emotion, had thrown all of that out the window tonight. He'd acted on impulse, again and again. He could blame nothing except five years of desire, sharpened on a whetstone of brief glimpses and self-denial and discreet assignations with men who were not the one he wanted. He could blame... the feeling of Gabriel's hair curling silken between his fingers. The sight of his bare chest as it rose and fell with wariness, his nipples tight and yearning, a blatant invitation for Francis's fingertips and mouth. He would be sensitive there, Francis could tell. Not all men were. But his Gabriel would *moan*, when Francis teased those nubs.

He could have had that tonight. He could have fucked Gabriel over the dining table, finally buried himself in that nonpareil of an arse; he'd waited long enough. But he'd relished those held, tight moments across the card table: the uncertain glances, the way Gabriel had worried at his lower lip, the almost palpable desire hanging heavy in the air.

Francis had, in the end, found himself craving more of that bittersweet, searing anticipation. Craving it more than the momentary satisfaction of release. And the desperate look in Gabriel's eyes, when Francis had stopped and said *No*, had confirmed that it would be worth it.

Oh, he certainly did not plan to waste the month. But for the sake of that anticipation he could spare... a single day, yes, and perhaps even the night that followed it. Gabriel would be expecting Francis's summons from the moment he awoke tomorrow. The day would stretch on unbearably, hour after hour expecting a message and not receiving it, until he was ringing with the strain of his nerves. He might go to bed wondering if Francis had changed his mind and would not send for him at all. Wanting to touch himself but sweetly obedient to Francis's orders, even through his doubt.

That brought a possibility to mind. A compromise. A way for Francis to both prolong the exquisite torture he planned to inflict and to observe its effects closely.

Observation, that was the thing. Give Gabriel that one day of waiting, and then send for him in the evening and let him wait even longer - let *both* of them wait - Gabriel right there for Francis to devour every shift in his position, every hitch in his breath denoting discomfort.

And then?

Francis swallowed, hard, and released the deathgrip he'd been inflicting on his chair. *And then*. He'd been thinking for long months about how he would take Gabriel Ashleigh, the many ways he would work himself to completion in and on the boy's glorious body. Now that he had the sure reality ahead of him, he was paralysed, wavering, unable to choose which he would want *first*. Rationally he knew it shouldn't make a difference. He had a whole month; he would be able to indulge every fantasy twice over, if he so chose. But he could already tell the first time would be something he kept close to himself, a searing memory to warm him in the long, cold nights when the month was over. He hadn't planned any of the rest of this absurd situation. This, he could plan, and to perfection.

Francis climbed the stairs to his bedchamber, finding the activity - and the snug fit of his buckskins - far more uncomfortable than usual.

His valet couldn't hold a candle to Richard's Cyprian, but the man at least knew how to dress Francis's lean height to best effect and had given up trying to introduce colourful fripperies into the sombre palette that Francis preferred. And he was a thorough professional. He would never dream of letting so much as a glance or cough during the undressing process indicate his awareness that his master was sporting a painful cockstand.

Alone in his candlelit room, Francis let his mind return like a compass needle to the lodestone of obsession. His hand stole beneath his bedclothes and he let himself take his prick in hand, at last. He had been so aroused for so long that this would be over quickly.

So. He would summon Gabriel somewhere - the club, he thought, with a thrill that felt closer to shame than anything he'd managed thus far. Public, yet not public. His prize on display, even if nobody but the two of them knew the whole truth of it.

And then?

A sudden pang of frustration went through him. It was a dramatic annoyance, a minor tragedy, that the notes he would send could contain nothing more than a brief statement of time and place. He would be able to make Gabriel's nerves sing like a violin if he could set out explicitly what would be expected: fill the boy's head with images, bring him to his knees with wanting.

You will arrive at my house with the morning post. You will fit yourself under my desk, nice and neat, and unbutton my trousers. While I open my letters, read them, and compose my replies, you will be between my legs, pleasuring my prick with your mouth. And once I've spent into your throat, you won't move except to swallow. You'll stay there. You'll use your mouth for nothing but keeping my prick warm until it's hard again; then you'll use it to beg me nicely for the fucking you deserve, and I'll have you bent over my desk.

Francis choked back a curse as lightning curled urgently through his body, warning. He delivered a punishing squeeze to the base of his length. Not yet.

I will bury my face between the globes of that perfect arse and work you over with my tongue until you sob. Then I'll have you astride my lap, riding me, fucking yourself upon me. My hands on your shoulders, driving you down; my mouth dipping to tease at your nipples. You will be hard and leaking against my stomach as you gasp for permission to come and I say: No, my Gabriel. Not yet.

Francis abandoned himself to the inevitable - he could not have stopped his hand from moving now if he'd been offered a peerage to do so. His heart pounded painfully in his chest and his breath was an uneven rasp.

There is a certain glass object I picked up in a strange small shop on the Continent. I can't recall which city. You will oil it up and keep it in yourself for hours, for a full day, going about your business and keeping company with men who have no inkling of what you are experiencing. That night I will strip you naked and tie you to my bed, face-down. I will work the thing in and out of you while you shudder and plead, until you're loud enough that I must stifle your mouth with my prick. That's how you'll come: bound and untouched, filled from both ends, as I kneel in front of you.

Release took him all at once, bone-shaking as a carriage over rough ground, wiping Francis clean of everything but blind pleasure and sensation. He was panting when he came back to himself.

With the edge thus taken off his own overpowering need, Francis's thoughts returned to linger over the first orgasm he would bestow upon the man he'd won, after leaving him in denial for a day. How those madder blue eyes would widen in desperation, or leak those damnably enticing tears. The cries he would coax from those pouting lips.

You'll come when I'm fucking you.

Yes. That was certain. The next time Lord Gabriel Ashleigh came would be when he was impaled on Francis's cock, and he would have no coherent words left in him except Francis's own name.

It was in a state of some surprise that Ash was led through Quex's to the private rooms, the exclusive haunt of the Ricardians. Whatever he had expected from Francis's brief summons, it was not this. His brother Mal would have cheerfully killed to be welcomed into the bosom of their fashionable, untouchable set in this way. Ash did not know what to expect at all.

"Ah, so it is true," said Mr Julius Norreys as Ash walked in, trying his best to look as if he were sure of his welcome. "Your fair tormentor at last, Francis. I congratulate you."

"Julius," said Lord Richard Vane sharply. Then he turned to greet Ash, as kind as could be. Ash said most of the right things somehow. There were a few other men hanging around, most of them uninterested in Ash or pretending to be, though Sir Absalom Lockwood greeted him kindly. Francis was there too, lounging in a chair near the fireplace, one shining boot on the floor and the other crossed over his knee. Being seated should have robbed him of some of the advantages of his lean height, but instead Ash was only very aware of his long legs and the way the firelight was reflected in his half-lidded eyes.

He did not stand in greeting even when Ash made his nervous way across to him. He only looked up at Ash – and up, and up, gaze travelling slowly over every inch of Ash's body. It was a crude and insolent stare, full of frank certainty. Ash's face went hot even as his whole body stiffened. Christ, Francis's *friends* were in the room. "Webster," he said.

"Did you forget my name?" asked Francis.

It felt too private to say here. *Francis* was the man whom Ash would cheerfully have begged to fuck him over a table. He hesitated.

"Francis," prompted the other, patiently.

"Francis," Ash repeated, hearing the breathy quality of his own voice. God, *God*.

"You may as well sit," Francis said.

"Sit where?" said Ash. He meant it to be pointed. In the pause that followed, while Francis looked at him, he realised it had sounded plaintive. There were other chairs set about the fireplace, but they were all taken, and some had been dragged out of place to form little cozes as men talked quietly together.

The moment lasted just long enough for Ash to begin to feel foolish. Then Francis gestured to the floor at his feet. "Sit, Gabriel," he said. At whatever expression was on Ash's face he added, "No one will think anything of it here, I assure you."

How it was possible that no one should think anything of Ash curled up at Francis's feet like a – Ash's mind balked before he could form a comparison. But he did not try to demur. He was Francis's for the month, after all. If he had not wanted that, he could have told the truth, and won, and walked away from the man without looking back. This was his just reward for being a madcap as usual.

Nevertheless he was conscious of a rushing sound in his ears as he took his place on the floor where Francis had indicated. Francis uncrossed his booted legs and leaned forward in his chair to hand Ash a glass of – Ash took a mindless gulp – a very good wine that deserved better than gulping. His thin lips were very slightly curved. He was smiling. His fingers brushed Ash's ear as he pulled away. Just like that Ash was suddenly and dizzyingly aroused, his cock starting to come to attention in his tight trousers, his nipples stiffening, the warmth of the room and the sweetness of the wine pulling his senses awry.

And in that state he remained, for what seemed like many hours though it could not possibly have been so long, for a moderately convivial evening with the Ricardians.

Men came and went, drinking wine, conversing in good-humoured tones, occasionally appealing to Francis for his opinion. Ash, who normally counted himself a friendly sort, could barely muster up a word to speak to any of them. All his attention was on Francis, long-limbed and quiet and entirely present, not ignoring him or turning away but *there*, somehow keeping Ash on the floor at his feet as surely as if he were holding him down.

Ash did not notice himself shifting closer to Francis's chair until he was already leaning against it. Well, where was the harm in that? Something to lean on was the least the man owed him, after putting him on the floor so summarily. He was pleased enough with this reasoning to relax and even venture to join in the conversation that Dominic Frey and Lord Richard were currently having with – well, mostly with each other, but both of them occasionally called upon Francis for support. They did not seem to mind Ash chiming in either. After a while Francis's hand slipped into his hair. His long fingers scraped lazily through Ash's curls. Neither Frey nor Lord Richard seemed to notice. Ash soon stopped speaking to either of them. It was not very easy to think of coherent things to say when his whole body was alert to nothing but that slow thoughtful touch.

"I don't suppose we can tempt you to cards tonight, Francis," said Frey with an amused glint in his eye as he and Lord Richard stood up. "We'll take our leave."

"Not tonight, Dominic, no," said Francis. "Good night."

Then they were gone, and Ash looked up and realised that they had been the last of the company, and that now he and Francis were alone.

"My God," said Francis thickly, as if he were continuing a conversation already in progress, "if I had known how well it would suit you to be at my feet, I should have had you there years ago."

"Some of them must have known," said Ash, feeling faintly chilly as reality started to set back in. The fire was dying down, and his last glass of wine had been some time ago, and he had spent an evening making a fool of himself in front of Francis's friends: a fashionable, knowing, potentially dangerous set, whom Ash's own brother counted as enemies.

Francis gave a brief bark of a laugh. "I promise you that no man here will ever know the exact terms of our agreement." He added in rather soberer tones, "Richard would have me thrown out." A pause. "And horsewhipped, perhaps."

"I meant –" said Ash.

"You meant they must have known I was going to fuck you tonight?" Francis said. "Well, of course they knew. How could they not, when you look at me that way? What man could resist you? Sweet Christ, look at you. You should have been naked; I would have liked you naked. Richard would have been a little shocked, I suppose."

His words struck Ash to the quick. In Francis's frankly desirous eyes he saw himself as he might have been, bare in front of that company, plainly aroused, waiting to be fucked. Although Ash's tastes were deviant by most standards, he did not normally consider himself so deviant as all that; but the hot embarrassment that flooded him felt very much like pleasure. All uncertainty was forgotten. "Well," he said, grinning up at Francis, "better late than never, surely?"

Francis swore and stood up at last, revealing with the change of position that he was in no better state than Ash; indeed, his tight buckskins looked quite uncomfortably strained around the crotch. He got Ash on his feet as well, the better to help him off with his well-fitted coat, and then continued to assist him in undressing. It was the same service that Ash's valet performed for him daily, but Francis did not make it feel that way. He hardly seemed to be doing Ash a service at all. Wherever his long fingers touched Ash's skin, even through the fabric of his clothing, Ash felt a shiver go through him; and Francis's eyes were intent on his body, flicking up now and again to his face, looks of possessive admiration that no servant would ever dare to give his master.

At last Ash stood naked in front of the fireplace, shivering a little though the room was warm. Francis reached out and took his face between his hands and pulled him into a long, deep, thorough kiss. Ash melted against him, his nude body pressed into the heat of Francis's clothed form, his senses swimming. Francis's mouth was hot and his tongue pushed deep, tasting Ash with confidence, like a promise and a hint of the fucking to come. "My God, Francis," Ash managed to say. "Francis, Francis, *please*." He'd been waiting all day.

"Tell me," Francis said, "when I sent you away last night with your eager prick straining against your clothing, did you do as I told you and keep your hands to yourself?" He was still

cradling Ash's face in his hands. His eyes were intent. "Did you touch yourself, Gabriel?"

It took Ash a moment to remember how to think, and then at once he was indignant. "No, I damned well didn't," he said. "We had a wager, didn't we? I wouldn't break the terms like that." Something queer happened to Francis's expression. Ash couldn't place the look and feared he was being laughed at. It seemed the outside of unfair, after a night and a day of distracted remembering and an entire evening at Francis's feet. "You needn't smile. I had a hard time of it, I'll have you know."

Now Francis definitely was smiling. "I'm sure you did," he said gravely. He dropped another kiss on Ash's mouth. "Well done."

Ash blinked. There was no reason Francis's approval should make something hot curl in his chest. "Well, I –"

Another kiss silenced him. "Very well done," Francis said firmly, and he dropped his hands from Ash's face to his bare buttocks and gave him a firm squeeze. Ash yelped in surprise. His cock twitched, which Francis certainly felt, pressed together as they were. "I promised you would come when I was fucking you," Francis said. "And you've earned your fucking, Gabriel. Hands and knees."

Ash crumpled to the floor with undignified haste. In other circumstances he might have put up a protest – he might be a rattle but there were *limits*, and not half an hour ago these rooms had been full of Francis's friends, any one of whom might walk back in whenever he pleased – but this was not one of Ash's cheerful, practical liaisons. There had been no limits set on the terms of the wager Ash had willingly lost. He belonged to Francis. If Francis chose to strip him naked in a public place and then fuck him on the floor, that was entirely his affair. If it had been another man, Ash might have hesitated anyway; but a man like Francis Webster, cool-headed and circumspect, did not make mistakes.

And the truth was that something about the whole affair had Ash's heart in his throat. The terror and excitement of the night before, when he had faced Francis across the gaming table, were roaring back into him in full measure. There was nothing that Francis could not do to him, nothing at all, and Ash liked it.

He crouched on his hands and knees in front of the dimly glowing fireplace while Francis moved around behind him. His cockstand was stiff between his legs, and he was tempted to grasp himself, but the memory of Francis's instructions stayed him. The temptation only grew worse the longer he waited and the longer the silence stretched. When Ash's arousal and impatience got the better of him he choked, "Francis, please."

Francis knelt behind him, visible only as a solid shape in the corner of Ash's eye. He had been fetching oil. There was plainly a great deal about the private rooms at Quex's that Ash did not know, but he had no thoughts to spare for curiosity, because Francis was tracing the crack of his arse with a slicked finger, and the tiny sensation was making Ash shudder so hard that he thought he might die of desire before he ever felt Francis's prick in him. "You need not be gentle," he said, shifting and wriggling, trying to follow the touches. "Fuck me, Francis. I am *ready*, I have been *waiting* –"

"I know," said Francis. He put his free hand on Ash's hip, a tight grip that said as plainly as words that he should hold still. "I watched you wait, Gabriel. Your breath caught every time I touched you. I think with a little encouragement you would have gladly brought yourself off just rubbing your throbbing prick against my leg."

No such thing would ever have occurred to Ash, but he made a strangled noise as he pictured himself thrusting helplessly against Francis's polished boots. He was starting to suspect Francis of some sort of supernatural capability. None of the companions with whom Ash had engaged in bedroom sport on previous occasions had been able to make him see visions of obscenity this way.

"And I am not being gentle," said Francis, lying through his teeth as he continued that agonisingly slow and delicate investigation of Ash's rear with his single slicked finger. "It is perfectly plain that you could take my prick to the hilt without hesitation, you shameless creature. I have no need to be gentle with you. I am pleasing myself."

"I don't see why you couldn't please yourself by fucking me properly – *ah*," cried Ash, as that long finger penetrated him at last, sliding in deep and touching the spot inside that made him forget everything but sensation. "Oh God, Francis, please, please."

"My God, you beg sweetly," said Francis. "I mean to hear it every time I have you. Every day of this month you will cry my name and beg me to ride your beautiful arse the way you so badly need, and *that*," with a vicious twist of his finger inside that made Ash wail and collapse forward onto his elbows, face on the floor, legs spreading wide, "is what pleases me."

Ash's prick was leaking and his breaths were coming in little gasps. He let out a moan that was half relief when Francis took a firm hold of his hips and guided his oiled cock into him at last. He had been thinking of nothing but this stretch and fullness for what seemed now like about a hundred years. Francis with his impossible patience still somehow took his time about it. When Ash whimpered and tried to move, tried to fuck himself back onto the prick that was all-too-slowly *finally* taking him, Francis held him still with that firm grip on his hips and said, "Let me." Ash whined. Francis said, "*Mine*, Gabriel, do you remember? Let me have you."

Ash surrendered. He pressed his cheek to the rug, knotting his fingers in its weave, and let Francis have him just the way he pleased; let Francis fuck into him at that same slow unbearable pace and then begin at last to move, fucking Ash with steady relentless thrusts, while Ash could do nothing but cry out under him. His balls were starting to hurt from the duration of his frustrated arousal. "May I," he asked, already twisting his body so he could get a hand free to touch himself.

Francis's hand left Ash's hip to catch his wrist. The movement changed the angle of his prick and Ash wailed as pleasure spiked through him. "No," Francis breathed, his mouth hot by Ash's ear. Francis's long body was covering his as he rocked inside him. He was still clothed, and Ash could feel the fine weave of Francis's shirt dragging against his skin. "You don't need that, lovely boy. You'll come on my cock alone."

Ash whimpered a protest, unable to form words. Francis, the bastard, *laughed*. Ash felt the shiver of his chuckle go through him where their bodies were flush together. He would have cursed if he could have remembered how. Francis kissed his ear, which was a much more interesting sensation than Ash would ever have suspected, and then abruptly he knelt up and pulled Ash backwards by the hips, forcing his cock deep, and began to fuck him in earnest.

Ash howled, forgetting where he was, forgetting everything but Francis's prick inside him. The punishing pace of the fucking overwhelmed him in moments. Then at last, after a night and a day of waiting and an evening of dazzling frustration, he spent without being touched: purely from having Francis ride his arse, just as Francis had told him he would.

Francis took him to a waiting bedroom – there was plainly a *great deal* Ash did not know about Quex's – and had him lie down there. Ash did not have so much as a night shirt, nor did Francis seem inclined to make one appear from somewhere, but in truth the room was warm and he felt deliciously wrung out. His eyes were already slipping closed as Francis stripped off and lay down beside him. He felt Francis's touch in his hair and turned blindly towards it, pressing his face into the palm of Francis's hand.

"Gabriel," Francis said, but if he said anything else Ash did not hear it, because he was fast falling into a deep sated sleep.

He woke from a confused erotic dream already on the edge of climax, and Francis was there half-limned by candlelight, watching him with an air of pleased possession, with his hand moving firmly on Ash's engorged prick. "Oh, oh," cried Ash, thrusting wildly. To have such a frightful liberty taken with his sleeping person might have concerned him had he been in a more lucid state, but just then it seemed both natural and ideal that he should wake to Francis's hands on him. He came in a few instants, his body seizing and his breath catching on a near-soundless sigh, and Francis stroked him firmly through it.

Ash blinked up at him in a daze for a moment or two after, and then could not help but chuckle with delight. Two days ago he had woken with a frightful head and a terrible knowledge of his own ruin: and now this.

Francis smiled at his laughter. "How remarkably beautiful you are," he said, as if it was the sort of thing one *could* say. "The Italian masters would gladly have taken you as a model for your namesake. Every part of you angelic, save your mouth."

"What's the matter with my mouth?" said Ash.

Francis lifted an eyebrow, and then he reached out and traced Ash's lips with fingers still wet with Ash's own seed. Ash could have put out his tongue and tasted himself. "A cupid's bow,

made for kissing at the least," said Francis in a voice that had dropped low. Ash was not a schoolboy any longer and could not gain another cockstand quite so quickly, but something deep in his belly gave a lurch as his body alerted him of its inclination to try. "I shall have you suck me before I send you away," Francis said.

"Oh Lord," said Ash. He lifted his head to take those long fingers in, tasting salt and himself, making Francis breathe in sharply. He slid his fingers leisurely over Ash's tongue for a moment or two. Ash, who had used his mouth occasionally as a favour to a friend but had far more often simply received a gamahuching without complications from the professionals he frequented, felt for the first time in his life an urgent desire to have someone's prick shoved as far down his throat as it could possibly go.

"Come now, Gabriel," Francis said at last. "Let me see you on your knees."

Ash's prick did its manful best to come to attention. He scrambled gracelessly off the bed and half fell onto the floor, where he was at once bracketed by Francis's long legs swinging down to settle on either side of him. Ash in the midst of the confusion and arousal of his waking had only registered that Francis too was unclothed, but now that Francis's long well-shaped cockstand was bobbing at eye-level he could hardly think of anything else. It was the first time Ash had seen him fully naked. His hands fell naturally onto Francis's thighs as he knelt and looked up at the lean body of the man who presently owned him.

Owned him. Ash could not say where the thought had come from, but it was very much in his mind. His mouth was dry. He licked his lips.

Francis's expression changed a little. He put a hand into Ash's curls: neither holding nor pushing, only there. They stared at one another, Ash on his knees and Francis above him with his stiff prick almost brushing Ash's cheek. "Madder blue," said Francis.

"What?" said Ash.

"Your eyes," Francis said. "The precise shade. It is striking, and most unusual." Ash gaped at him a little, feeling an unlikely blush heating his face. "And now, Gabriel," Francis carried on with sudden briskness, "why not use that less than angelic mouth of yours to some purpose? I have often thought how well it would become you to have your pretty lips stretched around my prick, so –"

He cut off with a stifled oath as Ash leaned forward and took him in.

He tried at first to take Francis's cock whole, the way a rare few molly boys had done for Ash when tipped extra for it. He was driven by some combination of eagerness to please and a hope of showing off, but the attempt was doomed to failure: Francis's length was too much for him, and he choked a little and pulled back, tears gathering at the corners of his eyes.

"Slower," Francis commanded. His fingers tightened soothingly in Ash's hair. "You have no patience at all, do you, greedy infant? But if I wanted you mindlessly fucking yourself on my prick, I would have had your arse again."

The words were harsh but the tone was not, and neither was the look in Francis's eyes as he encouraged Ash to dip his head and take just the tip of Francis's length into his mouth. "Gently now," he instructed. "And now let go. Kiss it – ah, just so." Ash almost felt foolish, laying near-chaste kisses on the slick head of Francis's swollen prick, but Francis sounded pleased with him, and that overwhelmed any uncertainty. "Again," he said. "And again. Now part your lips a little. Lick them, and me – yes, Gabriel. Very well done. Now you may take me into your mouth again, and seal your lips about my length, and suck." Ash made a faint noise as he did so, and had to spread his legs a little as he knelt to accommodate his renewed stiffness. Francis noticed. "There is no satisfying you," he said, but it was said with pleasure, not mockery. "Keep your hands on my thighs, Gabriel. I want you thinking of nothing but my prick between your lips. My God, how obscene you look."

Ash moaned around his mouthful. He thought the obscenity of his appearance could be nothing to the stream of frank lustful instructions that Francis poured over him. His voice grew deeper and warmer as Ash worked on his prick, kissing and licking and sucking obediently, rewarded by the sensation of Francis's hands tugging convulsively at his curls and the ever-stronger taste of his arousal on Ash's tongue. Every time Ash bent to wrap his lips around Francis's cock and suck in earnest, Francis's hands in his hair pulled him down a little further on it. To begin with he took no more than the head, but before long Francis was thrusting deep into his mouth; and although Ash still felt the panicky edge of a choking about to come, he no longer needed or wanted to get away.

"Very good, Gabriel," Francis said breathlessly at last, "you have the way of it: use your lips and tongue to entice me, and I will satisfy myself buried in your throat."

Ash groaned and opened his mouth and did as he was told.

He was rewarded for his efforts at last when Francis came down his throat and commanded him to swallow. Then he had Ash abuse himself with his own hand, there on the floor at Francis's feet while Francis watched, and then at last he bade him get dressed and return home.

"I will send for you when I want you," he said.

"Tomorrow?" said Ash.

The way Francis looked at him felt like a slow lascivious caress. "I think that is very likely," he said.

Tomorrow!

Francis thought of it sometimes in the days that followed, that eager barely-concealed plea: the absurd sincerity of it, as if Gabriel really believed there was any possibility Francis would waste an hour of this short month, or willingly go a day without touching him.

Tonight, they had stayed late enough at the club that the house was dark, and Francis's butler stifled a yawn as he opened the door with a candle in hand. He was the only servant still awake; Francis had been moneyed for long enough that he was comfortable having servants, but he drew the line at making them kick their heels long past midnight just because he was out enjoying himself, so he had standing orders for the household to take itself off to bed at a reasonable hour. He had not lost the use of his hands when he became rich, after all. He was still capable of undressing himself.

Tonight's lateness hadn't even been due to anything in particular. It had just been an unusually pleasant, sparkling sort of night; Richard had been relaxed, Dominic animated, and Julius had managed to stay on the less obnoxious side of his usual behaviour. They'd drunk, and played cards, and talked of everything under the sun. Gabriel had been laughing, daringly needling Julius in a friendly way, and tipping his head from time to time into Francis's hand. Already the fact of him sitting at Francis's feet had become so commonplace that none of the Ricardians batted an eye.

Gabriel had darted a questioning look at him, when everyone was gathering themselves to leave, but Francis had already had Gabriel three times during the day - three! like boys fresh out of school! - and he was feeling quite content to leave it at that. They'd made their way back to Francis's house together, and Francis had no thought in his mind beyond the pleasurable anticipation of them curling up between the sheets together to sleep.

"Thank you, Harwood," said Francis. "I can lock up, and Lord Gabriel and I will manage ourselves from here. You get to bed."

"Thank you, sir." The butler nodded to them both and melted away towards the servants' quarters at the back of the house.

Gabriel was, officially, paying Francis a visit of a few days' duration. He was having the wallpaper redone in his own townhouse, and pleading - a convenient excuse - a sensitivity to the smell of the glue.

Francis had chosen colour of the wallpaper. He knew, even as it happened, that he probably should not have done it. That same day he'd had his prick halfway down the boy's throat as Gabriel lay half-propped on pillows - and yet the most dangerous, thrilling moment had been when Gabriel was frowning good-naturedly over samples in the shop, clearly about to choose something on the basis of its name or just close his eyes and point at random, and Francis had leaned over his shoulder and said, *That one would look very well in your bedchamber, I think.*

Gabriel had agreed at once, quite cheerfully. He had probably not thought anything of it, except as a ruse for him to be in Francis's house, perpetually available and at the mercy of Francis's whims, and secretly sleeping in Francis's bed.

But Francis had looked at the pale frost-grey paper with its cornflower blue pattern, and thought of how it would be something of *him*, something in Gabriel's house that held his fingerprints, long after the last scent of him had been bathed away and the last of the marks on Gabriel's hips had faded.

Yes. Dangerous.

And now Francis was, impossibly, growing hard again at the mere thought of it. The house was very dark as they climbed the stairs, but moonlight spilled in through a window and illuminated the landing at the top. The silvery glow made a fairy-ring riot of Gabriel's fair curls.

"Stop," Francis heard himself say, dry-mouthed. "I want you here."

Gabriel stopped at once, and turned to look at him. "Here?"

"Over that banister. Right now."

The sliver of Gabriel's throat visible above his neckcloth moved nervously as he swallowed. But he said, "God. Yes, Francis," and was already unbuttoning the front of his trousers, easing his clothes down, baring his pale skin to the covetous eyes of the moon and of Francis himself as he turned to face the wooden banister.

Francis was not all the way hard yet - indeed, he was still marvelling that he *could* be, after the day's exertions. But he'd unbuttoned as Gabriel was doing so, and now he worked himself briskly with one hand. He stepped up behind Gabriel, aligned himself, and slid easily home without so much as a warning. Gabriel made a low sound that Francis felt deep in his gut. Francis put his own hands on the polished railing, trapping the boy within the bracket of his arms.

"Smooth as butter, you eager little tart," he breathed. "There could have been ten men here before me this evening."

The next sound that Gabriel made was unmistakably a protest. Francis set his mouth next to Gabriel's ear. "*Shh*," he said, a warning.

Gabriel shivered all over, but when he spoke it was in a whisper. "You know I haven't had anyone but you." He still sounded faintly indignant, but the words sent a flood of desire through Francis. He felt himself stiffen further inside the hot glove of Gabriel's arse. He felt rather than heard the almost dreamy sigh as Gabriel adjusted his weight, settling himself back against Francis, tilting his head sideways in the crook of Francis's neck.

Francis tilted his own face down and kissed Gabriel. Holding himself still, when every part of his body cried out to move, was straining his formidable willpower. "You know what to do, my dear," he said softly.

Immediately: "Please, Francis."

"Please what?"

"Please fuck me." The skin of Gabriel's neck was hot and there was a moonlit flush to his complexion. His eyes darted around, taking in the walls of Francis's house, the dim corridor to their right leading to the bedchamber, the open space of the stairwell and the dark lower floor of the house.

Francis made his voice a stern caress. "Here? Out in the open, where any member of my household might see you, if they were awake to do so?"

Gabriel whimpered and his hips bucked as though he couldn't help himself. The arch of his body, the dip of his back above where Francis was buried inside him, was like art: the lush, chiselled curve of a marble statue. Francis imagined for an insane moment how they would look, observed from a few paces away.

"Oh, Christ," Gabriel panted. "Francis. Yes. I want that. I want you. I always want you. I love - the way you feel inside me."

Francis rewarded that candour with a couple of slow thrusts, little more than a nudge of his hips. He said, "Mm. Good. Tell me more about what you like."

A pause. There was an odd, soft note in Gabriel's voice when he spoke, but he was still his own plain-spoken self. "I like knowing what to do, and precisely how I can give you what you want. I like... that it's easy. You tell me when I've done well."

Francis's heart gave a pound. His skin felt tight. "And you do, my Gabriel. You do so well for me."

He shoved forward with more force, one hand tight on Gabriel's hip. When Gabriel moaned, Francis used the other hand to tilt his jaw and kissed him, deep thrusts of his tongue fucking that sweet, pliant mouth in time with the fucking being delivered to Gabriel's arse.

When Francis pulled away, he whispered, "You will be quiet. For me."

Gabriel nodded. He was gripping the railing with both hands, knowing without having to be told that he would not touch himself unless Francis allowed it.

There was something to be said for multiple rounds in a single day, Francis reflected. His nerves were sluggish, far from the hair-trigger of the early morning, arousal a slow smouldering fire in his belly. He felt he could go on like this for hours, filling the night with nothing but the perfect sensation of Gabriel's arse clutching at him, the dull slap of flesh on flesh, and the choked breathy sounds of Gabriel obediently trying to hold himself silent.

Gabriel was not always successful. When he let out a particularly loud moan, Francis lifted two fingers to his mouth and Gabriel took them in with an eagerness that was nearly gratitude, laving them clumsily with his tongue. His breath was hot around them, forced out of him in whining puffs by the punishing force of every thrust.

"You are doing so well," Francis murmured. He felt light-headed, powerful, surging with it. Words spilled from him. "You are exactly what I need. So well behaved. So eager to earn your fucking. Always ready for me, just like tonight. Just for me. You are entirely mine, Gabriel Ashleigh."

Gabriel made a sound that might have been speech, and Francis removed his wet fingers from his mouth at once. After some throat-clearing came the words, very soft: "Yes, Francis. Yours."

Francis hissed a curse, something inside him shattering like glass. Now he rode in earnest, pulling Gabriel back onto him until Gabriel was still clinging to the railing but bent nearly double at the hips, arse canted back, all the better for Francis to slam into him. All sluggishness was gone, now. Desire rose in Francis as an unstoppable wave. Just before it overcame him he leaned forward, plastering himself over Gabriel's back to bite at his shoulder through the fabric as he shook, hips stuttering, pouring his release into Gabriel.

He might even have done damage to the man's coat. That was all right, Francis thought hazily, straightening up and blinking against the sparks of light that filled his vision. He would buy Gabriel another one. He would choose the fabric himself.

Francis could tell by the shivers and the painful shake of breath that Gabriel hadn't reached his own orgasm. He was still clutching the banister, his fingers like stiff white twigs.

Francis pulled himself out with care. He swept some curls aside to kiss Gabriel's earlobe. "Stay quiet for just a little longer, my dear," he said softly.

Then he turned Gabriel around with a hand at his shoulder, so that Gabriel's back was to the banister, and fell to his knees.

Gabriel's shuddering groan as Francis took the dripping length of him into his mouth was cut off abruptly. When Francis looked up, Gabriel had the side of his own hand in his mouth, stifling. His eyes above it looked enormous, slate-lovely in the moonlight, like puddles after rain.

Francis sucked hard, not bothering with finesse, his thumbs soft and permissive in the hollows of Gabriel's hips. Before he could have counted ten he felt Gabriel's fat prick stiffen and pulse in his mouth, spilling a gush of fluid which Francis carefully swallowed.

Then he wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and stood.

"I thought that might be preferable to the cleaning job that would be required if you'd been poking through the banister," he said, somehow managing to keep his voice level and grave.

Gabriel gave a quiet, disbelieving snort of happy laughter. They were both standing sated and still half-exposed in the moonlight. Francis pulled Gabriel close, put his hands to his cheeks and kissed him, slow and passionate.

"Come to bed, my Gabriel," he said.

Gabriel was still breathing hard, his eyes hooded with sleepy pleasure.

He said, "Yes, Francis."

Francis was really frightfully clever. Ash had always had an idea that he must be, but he had not known how deep the fellow's still waters really ran. He would never have thought of

anything so unexceptionable as having new wallpaper hung as an excuse to send him to Francis's townhouse for a few days. Mal had sent him a rather poisonous note after he found out, saying stiffly that a brother's first port of call in such a storm should be his brother, but since Ash couldn't think of anything worse than visiting at Mal's and would never have done it anyway – sooner stay in a hotel than that! – he ignored it.

Only Ash and Francis knew, of course, that the real reason Ash was in Francis's house was so that Francis could use the rights he had won as freely as he liked. There was a connecting passage between their bedchambers, and Ash had not slept in his own bed yet. Francis kept him close, the better – he said – to enjoy what was his.

It was not all illegal pursuits. Half the time Ash was in Francis's room they were merely playing cards: Francis wrapped in a robe of rich soft fabric that Ash had learned was a joy to rest his cheek against, and Ash naked or half-naked at his feet, with his hand in plain view so that Francis could advise him on his play. Francis was as strict as any schoolmaster, and had Ash counting and memorising like a regular sharp. When he did well he was rewarded with caresses; when he did *very* well, Francis would lay him out on the bed and fuck him blind. Ash was astonished when after several nights of this he found himself able to win a *parti* or two at Quex's against some of Francis's equally clever friends. Francis looked profoundly satisfied.

"It was half luck," said Ash afterwards.

"All card games are half luck; the rest is strategy, and you are learning very quickly, Gabriel," said Francis. He kissed Ash's cheek and then his mouth. "All you required was a little instruction. I curse whoever it was who made you believe yourself too much of an idiot to play well."

"It was Mal, I daresay," said Ash. It was a brother's place to introduce a stripling to the gaming hells, but now Ash thought about it, Mal had only really stood back and laughed as he floundered.

Francis growled in irritation, right by Ash's ear. It made Ash shiver. He was half-stripped already, his torso bare to the room; one of Francis's wandering hands had been returning, again and again, to flick his nipple as they conversed. "You will not ruin yourself again if I have anything to say about it," he said, and Ash let out a faint helpless moan as Francis took his nipple between finger and thumb and pinched. "No other man will ever have the opportunity to win you as I did."

"You could still do it again," said Ash breathlessly, "if you wanted."

He did not know quite how he meant it, only that he was fairly sure he could not win at cards against Francis without an extraordinary run of good luck - if for no other reason than that facing Francis across a table was probably always going to give him a distractingly immediate cockstand now. Francis gave him a dark look. "I do not intend to acquire a habit of ruining beautiful young men," he said.

Ash could not work out how to say that he did not want Francis to do that; that he only really wanted Francis to ruin *him*, but that he might do so as often as he liked. In fact, Ash was

beginning to wonder if he was already somehow ruined for good by Francis, after a bare two weeks of being tormented with desire and praised when he did well and fucked like he'd never been fucked before. He'd thought of himself as a knowing sort when it came to relations of this kind. Being Francis's possession had made it plain that he knew next to nothing.

"Come to bed, Gabriel," Francis said. "You earned a reward tonight."

Ash finished stripping and flung himself down with alacrity, rolling his eyes when Francis smiled at his eagerness. "You can't expect me to play coy when you say *that*," he said.

"Gabriel, by now I have stopped expecting you to be coy under any circumstances at all," said Francis. "You are a shameless and thoroughgoing little wanton and you know it. Turn over and spread your legs for me."

Ash did so, stretching luxuriously as he turned, feeling entirely at his ease among Francis's gloriously soft bed linens. He heard Francis's sharp intake of breath and grinned to himself, burying his face in the pillows and hitching his hips up to display himself. "Look at you, you little tart. I could not pay for better," Francis said.

Ash heard the rustle as he discarded his robe and waited in happy confidence for the first touch. He had learned that it pleased Francis to put his fingers inside before fucking him, taking his time, and Ash had grown to enjoy the pace and the seemingly endless anticipation that came with it. The mattress dipped as Francis sat behind him. He stroked the curve of Ash's buttock lightly. Ash shivered. "Francis," he whined.

"I do not as a rule have any interest in Dominic's tastes," said Francis thoughtfully, "even in the reverse, but you present such an extraordinary picture that I think —"

Before Ash could ask what on earth he meant by *Dominic's tastes*, Francis drew back his hand and brought it down in a resounding smack against Ash's right buttock. Ash cried out in shock. It hurt, a sharp immediate sting that gave way to a hot ache. Francis made a pleased sound and reached out to touch the place he had slapped. "There," he said. "Nicely pink, just as I thought; a complexion as fair as yours colours beautifully. You will be wearing my handprint on your arse for a day or two at least."

Ash moaned as he understood; his arse still ached from the slap, but the ache was settling and changing into something diffuse and heated, and he rather thought he would not mind if Francis hit him again. He shifted against the sheets. Francis's hand settled heavy on his hip to hold him still. "Patience," he said.

"You'll drive me mad with your patience," said Ash. "Please."

"Please what?"

Hit me, fuck me, do anything you want to me. "Please, Francis," Ash said.

Then Francis used his hands to spread Ash's buttocks wide, making him feel as exposed as he had ever been, and dropped a light kiss on his right arsecheek, just where his slap had landed.

Ash squirmed in frustration and then yelped when Francis bit him there. A fresh wave of heat poured through him. Francis gave the spot another soothing kiss, opening his mouth against Ash's skin, making Ash feel shivery. "Hands above your head, Gabriel," he said.

Ash did it. "I –" he began.

Francis licked a broad stripe along the crack of his arse and Ash entirely forgot what he had been going to say.

He cried out. Francis made a low sound in answer and dipped his head again. A shudder went through Ash's body as he felt the wet heat of Francis's tongue against the sensitive flesh around his hole. He had never felt anything like it before. He found he was desperately trying to spread his legs further apart and expose himself more entirely to that slick merciless touch. Francis was brutal in his assault, holding Ash in place no matter how he squirmed, licking him there over and over while Ash shook apart under his obscene caresses. Ash's prick dripped with his arousal, but Francis never touched it. There was nothing but the inadequate friction of the bedclothes to rub himself against. His hands opened and shut on nothing; he had to grab hold of first the sheets and then his own hair to keep from grasping himself. Francis made an approving sound and redoubled his efforts: Ash wailed, helpless, as he felt Francis's tongue stab past the tight ring of muscle and slip inside him. "Please," he heard himself chanting, "please, please, please, please –"

Francis took his mouth away and Ash whimpered in protest. "Do you really mean to bring yourself off rubbing against the sheets like a guilty schoolboy while I do this?" he said. "You may do so if you wish, but I will be disappointed if you deny me the pleasure of fellating you afterwards."

"*Francis.*"

"Up on your knees, Gabriel, if you mean to endure," murmured Francis. "I know you are capable."

Ash took a deep heaving breath and forced himself onto his knees and elbows. He put his face into the pillow and his hands back into his own hair to keep them out of trouble. Francis squeezed his thigh in a pleased way. Francis was a cruel merciless torturing *cur*, and Ash turned his head sideways and told him so.

Francis laughed, and spread Ash's buttocks with his hands once more, and put his mouth on him again.

Now it truly was unbearable, without even the faint relief of the sheets for Ash to rub his needy cock against. Now there was nothing to think of but the wicked motions of Francis's tongue as it caressed him in his most sensitive and hidden parts. Soon Ash was crying out mindlessly again. He began to beg, but before long it was nearly impossible to form the words, and his pleas were interspersed with helpless moans that soon gave way to long shuddering gasps, nearly sobs. At the end they *were* sobs, or as near as made no difference. The pillow Ash had pressed his face into was wet with tears, and still Francis's mouth continued its wicked work, forcing pleasure upon pleasure through Ash's blazing nerves. "I can't, I can't," Ash cried brokenly at last, his voice barely above a whisper, "Francis, please, I

can't." He did not fully know himself what it was he could not do, only that he felt his whole body as it were a fine thread stretched nearly to breaking.

Francis lifted his head away and Ash whimpered in relief and loss together. "Oh, my dear," Francis said. There was a strange note in his voice that spoke of something akin to awe, but Ash barely heard it. He did not try to move. He was not entirely sure he *could*. He heard Francis stand and move away, and the opening of a drawer and the clink of glass. Oh God, yes, Ash thought, and tried to say, but his words came out slurred. Being fucked, with Francis's cock filling him and Francis's body pressed soothingly all along his back and Francis's hand wrapped firmly around his aching prick, sounded like a tremendous relief.

But Francis had not only been fetching oil. He came back and nudged Ash's side until Ash turned over and blinked up at him, feeling dazed and heavy and somehow even more naked than usual. Francis showed him what he was holding and Ash tried to understand what it was, but it took him a moment to put it together: the object was made of some sort of clouded glass, lovely as most of the things Francis owned were lovely, and flared out in the middle and then narrowed again before it came to a kind of handle. Ash's lips parted when he recognised the *condouceur* for what it was. It had a different sort of shape to the few he had seen before.

"Shall I put it inside you?" Francis said in a low voice.

"Yes," said Ash. "Yes."

Francis oiled it up and did so, and Ash arched his back as he felt the smooth shape of the thing settle into place inside him. Francis brought him off with one hand on his cock and the other working the toy. He talked to Ash as he did it, telling him how lovely he looked and how well he had done, first at cards and then in bed, and then informing him that he should have a toy filling him all the time, keeping him open for Francis all the time, so that Francis would always be touching Ash in some way, and so that both of them would always know – and at that Ash spent all over himself. "I meant to finish you off with my mouth," Francis said, sounding slightly put out.

"Oh, you did," said Ash with tremendous satisfaction.

He was sated and half-asleep after that, but he invited Francis to fuck him Oxford-style between the thighs, which Francis did with evident pleasure. They slept at last in one another's arms, which Ash had always found damned awkward and uncomfortable before, but now he rather liked it.

In the morning Ash had to bid Francis farewell until evening and return home to a house now entirely hung with new wallpaper. He stepped through the door and stopped, arrested. He had not realised, when he cheerfully let Francis make the decisions that were boring him, how it would be to pass his days surrounded by Francis's taste, Francis's judgment, and Francis's unerring eye for colour. Every room now seemed to speak of him. Ash did not know how he was going to bear it when the month was up. Perhaps he would have to redecorate the house again.

Around luncheon a servant turned up with a neatly sealed parcel and Mr Webster's compliments. Ash did not think he had forgotten any of his possessions, but it would not be unlike him to leave things lying about. He opened the parcel when the footman had departed and his breath caught.

You may do as we discussed, if you so choose, said a note in Francis's forceful scrawl tucked into the box. Ash stared at the *condouneur*, feeling his face go flushed and his trousers go tight. He imagined having it in him all day, the way Francis had talked about. It was one thing to spin obscene fantasies, and quite another to actually do the thing. It would be impossibly distracting. It would be madness.

But he thought of the curl of heat inside him every time he won Francis's approval, and of the sharp intake of breath that Ash sometimes wrung from him when he did something Francis liked, and he knew that sooner or later he would do it.

The room at Quex's was not elaborate; none of the few bedrooms were, really, as it was still a *club* before it was anything else. But it was comfortable, and Richard's arrangement with Quex and Shakespeare was such that certain allowances could be made. Certain boundaries stretched.

Francis touched the sturdy frame of the bed and tested the firmness of the pillows, followed by the mattress. Partly, he wanted to be certain of their comfort. Partly it was to allow Gabriel to watch Francis's hand: to provide a pause of drawn-out silence in which Gabriel could do nothing but begin to speculate, and Francis could make a show of pretending that Gabriel was not watching him with that hot, eager trust in his blue eyes.

Of course it was pretence; it could hardly be otherwise. It had been weeks - from another angle of truth, it had been *years* - since Francis was able to be in a room with Gabriel Ashleigh without being acutely aware of the man's presence. Even now he could hear the change in Gabriel's breathing as Francis wrapped considering fingers around the bed frame and tugged as though worried it might give way. Cast iron. Absurd.

But no more absurd than the hungry excitement that rose in Francis's breast when he turned back around and allowed himself to look at his prize. His Gabriel. Smiling, hot-eyed, waiting to be told.

Francis smiled in return and left the bed alone. For a few minutes he simply drew Gabriel close and kissed him, luxuriating in the familiarity of it. Weeks ago - and yes, years ago, those angles seeming keener and keener - he would have thought he could want nothing more than this: the intimate knowledge of how to make Gabriel Ashleigh moan and melt against him, gone incoherent with longing, from nothing more than the precise application of tongue and lips and hands.

Now, Francis knew, with something close to despair, that there would never be an end to the things he wanted.

They kissed until Francis could feel Gabriel's breath coming quickly.

Francis said, "There's paper and pen in the drawer of that table." Another careful preparation. "I want you to send notes cancelling your appointments for the rest of the day."

Gabriel said, "I don't have any."

Francis frowned. "None?" It was not quite three o'clock.

"You know how I am, I've never been much of a one for planning ahead."

"Gabriel," said Francis.

The self-deprecating cheer, slightly forced, melted into an embarrassed shrug. Gabriel didn't look unhappy, though. "You want me to be available. I suppose I'm in the habit of the thing now."

"I never wished for you to give up your social entertainments entirely," said Francis, and even as the words left his lips he knew them to be untrue. He had not *meant* for Gabriel to spring-clean his life for this month, sweep it bare of everything except Francis. But *wished* it? Yes. Yes.

He could not wipe Gabriel's world clean and claim it for himself. But today, he was going to do his best to work that same act on Gabriel's mind.

He added, more lightly, "Whatever must your friends think?"

"They know I've somehow gotten in with the Ricardians." Gabriel trailed fingers down the side of Francis's face, brushing back a small piece of hair that Francis had not felt come errant. "And they think I've met someone and formed a *tendre*. A dancer, perhaps."

Francis looked down his own body and back up again, pointedly meeting Gabriel's humour with his own. They shared a smile at the idea of it.

Francis said, gravely, "I would not make a proficient dancer."

Mischief danced in Gabriel's eyes. "You have the legs for it."

Francis left him and went to feel beneath the pillows on the bed for the next of his preparations. The few lengths of material looked like sashes that had gone thin and faded, the material worn to softness. He ran one of the sashes through his hands and then wrapped it in slow loops; Gabriel's eyes followed the movements. Gabriel's lower lip was caught between his teeth.

"Undress," Francis said.

Gabriel had half a cockstand already, revealed to Francis's gaze when he unbuttoned his trousers. Francis helped him; they were, the both of them, becoming half-serviceable valets, what with how often they assisted one another in and out of clothing. Although Francis very

much doubted that Gabriel's valet included a great number of 'accidental' caresses, careful brushes of fingertips against places that Francis knew to be sensitive.

"On the bed?" Gabriel asked, when he was entirely naked. Francis couldn't suppress another smile at the eagerness in his voice.

"On the bed," he agreed.

It was important for Francis to do this correctly. He'd practiced the knots: firm but not of the type to be pulled dangerously tight when resistance was applied; because it *would* be applied. Enough slack in the fabric, at each wrist and each ankle, that Gabriel could move and give relief to his joints; not enough that he could turn over entirely, and certainly not enough that he could reach down and touch himself.

Francis, fully clothed, sat on the bed when he was content with his handiwork. He stroked a hand over Gabriel's hair, then used the same hand to give Gabriel's firm cock a few tugs, working him gently to a fuller hardness.

"You look sublime, my Gabriel," he said. "Stretched out like this."

Gabriel stretched a little more. It was unquestionably a preening kind of movement. There was nothing coy about it, just a pure satisfaction in having captured Francis's attention so completely.

"Unable to go anywhere," escaped - perhaps unwisely - from between Francis's lips. He would have drawn it back in again if he could, but Gabriel was still bright-eyed with pleased anticipation, so Francis contented himself with leaning down to kiss him: full-mouthed, demanding, grateful.

Then Francis pulled out the last piece of fabric and held it stretched out, hovering just above Gabriel's forehead. The rise and fall of Gabriel's bare chest became more pronounced, and a touch faster, as he lifted his gaze to it. They had discussed this, once. Francis had muttered it into Gabriel's ear as he fucked him mercilessly against a wall, praising the boy's sensitivity with one breath and threatening to test its limits with the next. *What if I took your sight away. What if you could only hear me, feel me.*

Francis raised his eyebrows, a question, and Gabriel nodded. Francis took as much care fastening the blindfold as he had with the restraints, gentle over Gabriel's ears, making sure none of the unruly gold curls were tangled in the knot in such a way that they might pull painfully. He smoothed his thumb over Gabriel's cheekbone, beneath the fabric, when he was done.

"Stay," Francis said, barely keeping the hiss from his voice.

And then he stood up from the bed and left the room, closing the door behind him.

He took a deep breath, and then another, and went to find a card game. It was earlier in the day than he usually attended Quex's; he'd crammed all of his day's work into the morning. Only half of his mind had been on his business, if he was honest. He'd found himself

checking the same column of numbers three times, distracted, part of his mind planning this and refining the plan.

Time moved like the passage of clouds. Francis checked his watch often enough that he could see the other men at the table presuming it to be either a tell or a stab at feigning one. He won and lost an equal number of hands before he allowed himself to bow out, and to walk back to the bedroom.

Against all reason he wished he could split himself in two, so that one version of himself could have remained in the room and thereby seen the sudden tensing of Gabriel's body when the first click of the opening door sounded. By the time Francis stepped inside, Gabriel had turned his head to the door. He looked as helpless and as delectable as he had when Francis had left, though his cockstand had flagged.

"Francis," Gabriel said. It was not a question. It had not entered his mind that Francis would allow anyone else into this room; and indeed, Francis would have dispassionately taken a knife to any other man daring to intrude on the tableau that Francis had created for his own eyes alone.

When the blindfold came off, Gabriel blinked hard against the light.

"Are you feeling well?" Francis inquired. "Thirsty?"

"Bored." A quick grin. "This is a club, isn't it? Are you here to entertain me?"

Francis pressed a single finger against that grin, a playful warning, and then moved himself into position on the bed. He had considered leaving the blindfold on, but had weakened; he so loved seeing Gabriel's face when Francis did this. He kept flicking looks up Gabriel's body, hungrily watching, as he took Gabriel's prick into his mouth.

"Ah," Gabriel gasped. "*Francis.*"

Francis was ready for the movement, the way all of Gabriel's limbs tried to bend - came up against their restraints - and then adjusted, using them as anchors. Gabriel's hips jerked and Francis took him deeper for a few seconds, then settled to a deliberate effort. He was growing hard himself and ruthlessly ignored the sparks of delicious discomfort whenever his own motions held him pressed against his trousers.

Soon, Gabriel's rendition of *god oh god oh yes* began to fracture into panting breaths, and tension built in the muscles of his stomach beneath Francis's steadying hand.

Francis stopped.

He straightened, breaking contact entirely, and watched Gabriel breathe himself unsteadily down from the peak. It was hard to choose where to look: the obscene, wet jut of Gabriel's cock? The wild look in his eyes? The gentle bulge of muscle in his arms where he clutched at the restraints for support?

"You utter arse, Francis," Gabriel said, plaintive.

Francis smiled. "Patience."

His hands did not shake even a little, retying the blindfold. He remembered how sweetly Gabriel had fallen apart beneath his tongue, when Francis had first introduced him to the new sensation; he remembered the incredulity of power that had sung along Francis's veins like the best port. *Patience*. For the both of them.

"How -" Gabriel licked his lips. "How long?"

"I directed you to cancel your plans, Gabriel. If I wished it, I could keep you here for the rest of the day..." with a careful, gentle stroke up the length of Gabriel's closest leg "...and all of the night..." and back down again, right down to the restraint at the ankle "...entirely at my disposal."

It was harder to concentrate, this time, when Francis was away from the room. His watch burned a heavier weight in his pocket. He lost and won an irrelevant number of hands of piquet. It was as though some invisible thread, longer and more binding than the pieces of fabric around Gabriel's wrists, held Francis tethered to the room and the bed where Gabriel was waiting. It tugged at him with each beat of his heart. He had to bite the inside of his cheek to ignore it.

This time, Gabriel was still hard when Francis returned. He gave a little gasp when his eyes were uncovered, as though he'd been underwater all that time. He turned his cheek into Francis's fingers like a cat.

Francis heard himself say, "What are you thinking of, when I'm not here with you?"

A very slight, and slightly sarcastic, tilt of Gabriel's chin. Something relaxed in Francis to see it.

"You," he said simply.

"Indeed," said Francis, raking his nails through those curls, which were flattened and sweat-damp at the roots. "I have some sympathy. I can hardly keep my mind on my cards when I know you're here, you little wanton, just as I left you. It is inconvenient; I cannot play with a cockstand."

"You liar," Gabriel said with a bit of a grin. "I know you can."

Francis gave a small tug, enough to win himself another gasp. "Perhaps I will rid myself of this physical distraction, and embellish my picture, all at once."

He stood. He had not meant to make a show of it, the simple act of unbuttoning, but Gabriel shifted on the bed and his eyes followed every motion of Francis's fingers as Francis finally allowed his aching cock to sit clear of his clothes. Tension shook in Francis as he stroked himself.

"What do you think?" he murmured. If gazes were truly as hot as they felt, he would have seared a line across Gabriel's bare skin. They would be immolated, the both of them. "Where

shall I mark you, my Gabriel?"

"I," Gabriel said, and fell silent. His eyes were huge. He was flushed nearly down to his navel.

This was far better than it had any right to be. They were not even touching, and yet Gabriel was straining now, panting, as though Francis's hand was exploring his body and not bringing himself to what was, in the end, a brisk and overwhelming release.

"There, you shameless creature," said Francis, when he had his breath again. The evidence of his release gleamed in messy streaks across Gabriel's chest. Francis felt dizzy just to see it. "Now you are adorned as you should be."

A strangled whimper came from Gabriel. He lifted his head from the pillows to stare at his own chest. "Christ, Francis," he whispered thickly. "I can't -"

"You can," said Francis.

Despite his own claims, the physical release brought him barely any reprieve from the flood of urges and images intruding on his concentration. Rather than inflict his company upon acquaintances, he asked for coffee and sat down in one of the larger armchairs near the fire, with the first book his hand touched on the shelf. It was a book of poetry. Francis's eyes marched down the lines of it, unseeing, like exhausted soldiers.

You, Gabriel had said, and Francis was confident of its truth. His thoughts flashed like mirrors set at angles: imagining what Gabriel was imagining. The anticipation was always the key, and had been since the very first night. This was just...refining it.

Francis lasted barely a quarter of an hour before he slammed the book shut, rose to his feet, and returned to the room.

"Touch me," Gabriel said, as soon as the door closed, "*please*." His voice sounded raw, scraped-dry.

"You do beg so prettily," said Francis. He clasped his hands behind his back and squeezed them, finding control.

"Please," again.

Francis felt the side of his mouth tick up. He went to the basin in the room's corner and brought a dampened cloth to the bed. Gabriel's breath caught at the first touch of it against his skin, then settled to an openly grateful moan. Francis washed him carefully: not just the stickiness now dried on his chest, but soothing stokes up and down his limbs and across his brow. He rubbed in gentle circles over Gabriel's nipples, winning more moans. The only place he avoided was Gabriel's cock, which nevertheless twitched whenever Francis's hands drew near to it.

Next, the blindfold came off, and Francis fetched a cup of water. "Drink," Francis commanded, and oversaw the consumption of a few mouthfuls.

Then he oiled his fingers, methodically, where Gabriel could see.

"Oh, you bastard," Gabriel said weakly.

"You little tart," Francis threw back. "Your legs are already falling apart, aren't they? Look at how your hips are moving. You need a fucking more than you needed that water."

"Yes. And you won't give it to me."

In response, Francis gave him a single finger, with the slow inexorable rhythm that he knew drove Gabriel out of his mind. He watched the play of muscle, listened to the hitches of breath. Once, twice, he brought Gabriel to the edge and then refused to let him pass over it, no matter the prettiness of his begging. No matter the painful pound of Francis's own heart and the fact that he was already growing hard again in his trousers.

His hands shook as he washed them. They had steadied by the time he closed the door.

When he returned, Gabriel had cried through the blindfold.

Francis felt buffeted by twin winds: he wanted to relent, to draw the boy close and give him everything he deserved, wrap him in wool and warmth and tenderness.

He also wanted to stare at the tear-matted lashes around those madder blue eyes until the sun rose the next morning.

Gabriel sobbed again, shamelessly loud, when Francis took hold of his prick. It was hot in Francis's palm, with tiny throbs of blood betraying Gabriel's racing pulse. The speed with which Gabriel drew close to release when Francis stroked him meant that Francis abandoned that effort and concentrated on Gabriel's nipples instead, giving teasing licks and soft tugs with his lips. He was careful.

"I can't. Francis, I *can't*, please, I can't bear it -"

"I think you can," said Francis. He kissed the space over Gabriel's sternum, right in the centre of his chest. Gabriel's wrung-out voice had sounded like the prayer of a broken man, but with this action Francis was the one who felt like a pilgrim, bending to hope for salvation by kissing the statue of a saint. "I think you can endure. You are amazingly strong, my Gabriel, my dear. You do not have to believe it. But you will let me believe it for you."

Francis lifted his head. He inhaled fully, and exhaled again. Gabriel nodded, accepting the command.

Francis kissed his mouth savagely once the blindfold was on, and left the room feeling light-headed and far more pagan than pilgrim, now: a god from a story. Lightning crackling between his palms. Something like that.

It was well and truly evening by now, and the Ricardians had ensconced themselves in one of their favoured smaller rooms. Quex must have hinted, at least a little, at what was happening, because Dominic was giving Francis the kind of look he never had before: nonplussed, and

edged with a hunger that Francis would have found flattering if it didn't so obviously have nothing to do with Francis at all.

"Evening, Webster," drawled Julius. *He* was wearing one of his looks like a sword drawn on a theatrical stage: sharp and gleaming but all for show, with no damage intended.

"Good evening," said Francis readily, and sat down to beat the man at cards.

Well. That was the plan. In short order he found himself losing, and more than that, losing the thread of conversations halfway through.

"Honestly," said Julius, pausing with his hand of cards tilted towards the polished surface of the table. "My dear fellow, this is becoming embarrassing. Do cry off before I have your entire enterprise from you because you can't count your own trumps. What would *I* do with a dozen weaving workshops?"

"Dress yourself in even poorer taste?" said Francis.

A delighted gasp from Julius; he clutched a hand to his violet waistcoat, and closed his eyes like a man struck a deadly blow. One eye cracked open again almost at once. "Not up to your usual standards of warfare, I must say," he said, all silken venom.

"Julius has a point," put in Richard. "Besides, it's one thing having him at your feet when both of you are present and conversing. Do us the courtesy of *being* here, if you're going to be here. If you need the break, that's all very well. But we're your friends, not a dunking in ice water."

His tone was mild but inarguable, and Francis felt a quick pulse of shame beneath his skin. It was banished, trod underfoot, as he paid a quick visit to Quex's kitchen for a tray of food, which he carried back into the bedroom. There was a wooden click as he set the tray down, and a metallic one as he locked the door. Neither of them gained a response from Gabriel, who lay still and - *relaxed*, Francis would have thought, except that surely no man would be able to fall all the way asleep with his cock leaking and stiff against his stomach. But he breathed evenly and there was no tension in the angle of his limbs.

"Gabriel," Francis murmured.

"Yes," Gabriel said. The smile on his face was strained; *that* was where the tension was, and Francis was seized with the blind urge to taste it.

He pulled the blindfold off; this time he folded it, with care, and set it aside with a gesture that he hoped bespoke finality. They were done with it.

"You have been so very, very good," he said. Something rough growled in his throat and tried to leap out. Gabriel shivered all over as though it had. Francis removed his own boots with impatient tugs, his socks, his trousers, his collar and cravat and waistcoat. All of these he folded neatly.

At last he unbuttoned his own cuffs and lay down, stretched out next to Gabriel, careful with his elbow and knees where Gabriel's arm and leg were still held in place. He claimed Gabriel's lush mouth in a kiss that dissolved into more praises, in between the hot strokes of his tongue against Gabriel's own.

"So good," he murmured, "that I shall let you decide how you would like to spend."

Gabriel's kiss-swollen lips parted; he looked dazed and almost as though Francis had asked him to translate a passage from the Greek, rather than name his own pleasure. Then he burst out, nakedly desperate: "Please fuck me now, Francis. You must. I think I'll go mad. Even more mad."

Francis touched the nearest fabric knot. "Shall I untie them now?"

Without hesitation, Gabriel shook his head. Something cracked like a log thrown onto fire, deep in Francis's chest. He found himself thinking, very clear and yet very distant, the shout of someone falling through thin air from a cliff: *I shall never come back from this.*

Gabriel said, "I can do it. If you're here, if you're -"

"I'm here."

Given the restraints, it was easiest to do this face-to-face, which still felt rather a novelty. It wasn't often that Francis could resist that temptation of having that glorious arse in front of him, to be squeezed or bitten or admired, or reddened with slaps as he fucked into it. But there was something equally glorious in the deliberate action of taking hold of Gabriel's thighs and spreading them, pushing them up as far as the slack in the fabric would allow. Francis picked up a pillow and worked it beneath Gabriel's hips.

He was near-mad with waiting himself. He did not drag the business out. A quick positioning of himself, guiding his own stiff prick to nudge against Gabriel's entrance - another keening sob from Gabriel - and then he was shoving in, one hard remorseless stroke that made them both cry out at once.

"Yes," Gabriel moaned. "Please -"

Francis thought to praise him again, to tell him how beautiful he was, how strong and patient and sweet. But his body swept onwards like a tide lifting a small boat: claiming, spearing, fucking into Gabriel again and again. Only hard pants of triumph fell from Francis's lips, as a pleasure so intense it was very close to pain grabbed hold of his guts and greyed his vision.

Gabriel was loud in his own way; he was not given to intelligible speech, but he gave broken exhortations and wailed shamelessly in between. And when he spent, sudden and hot between them, he shouted Francis's name.

Francis leaned down and kissed him, savage and off-centre, barely holding himself up on his forearms where they were braced on either side of Gabriel's head. It took only one more stroke into that tight, torturous, incomparable heat before he too was consumed by his release.

They lay locked together, breathing the same air, for the long moments it took for Francis to regather his faculties and gently uncouple them. His legs were as jellyish as though he had been the one tied to a bed for hours.

He climbed from the bed and removed his shirt, the only stitch of clothing that remained between the two of them, and which was now creased and sweat-marked.

He felt unaccountably shy and odd, wandering about this room undressed. They had both of them been casually naked, often for the greater part of a day, but it had always been in one of their own houses. Something about the knowledge that this was a borrowed room, and borrowed solely for this purpose, was both unsettling and arousing.

Francis brought the tray of food to the bed. He was ravenous, and after a few tentative bites at a piece of cheese, Gabriel seemed to awaken to his own hunger and made his way contentedly through two thick slices of cold terrine on bread, a generous glass of port, most of the cheese, a bunch of grapes, and a plate full of lemon biscuits. The dusted sugar from the biscuits was all over him, and a fair amount of it on Francis, by the time their meal was done. Francis fetched the wet cloth again, and rid them both of stickiness.

Then Gabriel stretched, looking entirely sated, and curled himself into Francis where he was sitting up against the pillows. He bent both of his legs across Francis's as though it was his intention to keep *Francis* trapped, now. Francis wrapped an arm around him and made small circles with his palm on the side of Gabriel's arm, aimless, but taking comfort from the sheer act of remaining connected.

Gabriel rubbed absently at one of his own wrists. There were no bruises there, nor on his ankles, and Francis did not think any would appear.

Francis said, "How do you feel?"

"There were a few moments when I felt like if my hands were free, I'd take a swing at you," Gabriel said. "But I knew you'd make it come out all right in the end." He yawned. "Christ, I didn't know I could spend that hard. It felt like a cricket ball to the skull. Only - incredible."

"You were. Incredible."

Gabriel smiled and tucked his face into Francis's neck, making a wordless sound against his skin. It was a content noise, soft and trusting. Trusting, even though Francis was the man who had somehow convinced him that it was a good thing - *incredible* - to be trussed to a bed for hours and abandoned for half of that time.

And all Francis could think was that he'd have liked it all the more if there were bruises to show for it.

At your disposal. Gabriel had said it on the night this all started, but he couldn't have known the half of it. He *couldn't* have known what he was entering into when he agreed to this wager: the depths and heights of what Francis would demand of him, knowing him to be sweet-natured and compliant and laid temptingly open for ruin in every imaginable way.

Framed in those terms it was barely better than coercion.

Francis began to pull away, suddenly sick to his stomach. A furrow appeared on Gabriel's brow and his arm, loose across Francis's body, tightened.

"Stay," Gabriel mumbled. He barely sounded awake.

Francis exhaled through his nose and forced himself to relax. None of this was Gabriel's fault. Francis knew how to gather his emotions like fish in a net and keep them contained; he'd had it battered into him at school and it had served him well ever since, at business table and card table both. At the end of the month Gabriel would be free of him. The fact that Francis had entangled himself, doomed himself well and truly, would not be allowed to flash so much as a single fin outside the net.

"Of course, my dear," he said.

Near the end of the third week of their month Francis took his hand from Ash's hair in the midst of one of their evening lessons in gambling and said, "Get up, Gabriel, and put some clothes on."

Ash blinked at him. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all," Francis said. "On the contrary; you are so much improved that I believe you might actually be able to give me a game. And if we are to play in earnest, I must insist that you are clothed at least on your lower half. It will be altogether impossible to resist the urge to take you over the table otherwise."

"I don't see what's wrong with that," said Ash. They had fucked earlier, and that morning as well, but there was something delicious about the unhurried way Francis rode him when he had already spent a time or two: it made him fuck without the edge of his usual tight control, only a slow enjoyment of Ash's body.

Francis laughed. "You really are insatiate," he said. "Perhaps we can wager for it."

"Well, if you put it like *that*," said Ash, and pulled on his drawers.

Then he played piquet with Francis – played properly, without Francis looking at his hand and lecturing him the whole time – for the first time since the awful night when he'd lost his fortune. They wagered shillings to begin with. Ash was startled to find himself enjoying the game. He played cards because everyone did, but he'd never been any sort of gamester; the complexities of remembering and guessing had always exhausted him, and the slow tension of play made him feel a little sick.

But it was different when he was facing Francis, who complimented him freely on good play and who plainly enjoyed the pastime so much himself. Ash sat opposite him and watched the quick confidence of his hands as he shuffled, cut and dealt, and the gleam of pleasure in his

eyes as he played, and thought that Francis Webster was really the most handsome fellow who'd ever taken him to bed. He was swathed in that robe of his which Ash liked so much, the soft one. After a few hands Ash slumped in his chair a little, the better to slide his bare foot under the hem and rest it against the side of Francis's leg. He liked to be touching him. Francis favoured him with a glimmer of a smile, as if to say he understood entirely.

Of course Ash still lost considerably more than he won. The pile of shillings in front of Francis grew and grew. But Ash felt buoyed with triumph every time he managed to claim a few back and earn a nod of approval from his opponent, and once he even took Francis by surprise and carried off a trick Francis hadn't expected to lose. "Well done, Gabriel," said Francis. "How on earth did you manage that?"

"You were smiling," said Ash. "Not so as anyone else would notice, I suppose, so you needn't worry at Quex's; but I saw."

"I must not play against you in public," said Francis. "I will lose my reputation. Another hand?"

"I'm down to my last shilling once you take these back," said Ash, claiming the two from Francis's pile he had just earned.

Francis said, "Then you may play for kisses."

The notion struck Ash as delightful. "How much are they worth?" he asked.

"A shilling for a kiss," said Francis, "if the rate seems fair to you."

Ash took his last three shillings and set them aside. "I'll keep these, then," he said. "I might need them." He nodded at Francis. "Shall we play?"

Francis lifted an eyebrow and set a coin down between them.

Ash kissed his fingers and then touched them to the table. "There," he said.

Francis laughed. "Very proper," he said. "Carry on."

Ash wasn't surprised to lose the trick. "Will you have your winnings now, or paid in full afterwards?" he asked.

"Now," said Francis. He sat back in his chair, plainly not meaning to move. Ash had to get to his feet, come round the table, and bend to catch his mouth. Francis's lips were only a little parted, and he made no move to deepen or prolong the kiss. He did put a hand on Ash's bare shoulder to hold him steady. Ash felt his breath catch at some indefinable feeling that seemed to be hanging around him, ready to wash through him like a wave. Francis's mouth was gentle under his as he returned the kiss.

Ash pulled away with a very slight exhale. "There," he said. His voice was breathless.

"Quite," said Francis, plainly meaning nothing by it at all. His gaze was fixed on Ash's face and there was something queer in his look. At last he straightened up in his seat and said,

"Let us continue."

Ash returned to his side of the table and sat down hard.

They played for Ash's kisses after that. Ash carried on losing more than he won; he gained a few shillings, but far more often after a trick he would have to go to Francis and give him another kiss. They spoke very little while they played. The air between them grew heavy, near as heavy as it had been the night Francis won possession of Ash for the month – but it was a heaviness of another sort, and Ash felt no rush of excited fear at it. Instead it seemed to press him down with some obscure happiness. He varied the kisses he gave Francis, kissing his forehead and his cheek and his hand and once his nose, which made Francis laugh. Francis objected to none of Ash's choices, and only kept looking at him in that queer way, and setting his hand to Ash's shoulder or into his hair to hold him steady.

After a time they switched to deeper play; Francis wagered five shillings at a time, and when Ash lost he went and sat in Francis's lap with Francis's arms around him and was kissed as deeply and thoroughly as he ever had been in his life. Then at last desire began to make itself felt in earnest. Ash could not but notice Francis's arousal in such a position, and Francis in turn was plainly aware of Ash's cock growing stiff in answer. Ash stopped trying to play in the careful way Francis had taken so much trouble to teach him, and wagered carelessly, hoping to lose so he could be held in Francis's arms again. Francis knew it, too, and his eyes narrowed, but he did not call a halt to the game.

At last he pushed his whole pile of shillings into the middle of the table.

"I don't really need the money," Ash heard himself say.

Francis's eyes glittered in the firelight. "What would you have me stake instead?" he asked.

Ash licked his lips, thinking. He seemed to want everything at once: it was impossible to choose. Somehow it seemed important to choose properly, even though he did not think he had much chance of winning.

Another month, he thought. But he could not say that. What sort of gentleman *wanted* to hand himself over so entirely?

And besides, what if Francis said no?

Then he thought of – that day, when Francis had kept him blind and waiting for so long. Ash did not think about it very often. The memory of it had a strange weight of its own, and seemed to pull all his thoughts astray whenever he drew near to considering it. He had a queer sort of feeling that it was the same way for Francis. Francis liked to talk while he fucked, praising and teasing and reminding Ash of all sorts of gloriously wicked things they'd done, but that day alone was the one thing he never brought up.

If Ash asked –

It would be almost the same as asking for another month, somehow. Ash felt sure of it. So he didn't ask.

"Your mouth on me again," he said at last. "As you did before. And you'll fuck me afterwards, and bring me off with your hand."

"You are referring to the anilingus?" said Francis.

"Is that what it's called?" said Ash. "Yes. That's what I want."

Francis nodded. "Very well. And in return —"

He halted. *Another month, another month!* thought Ash, as if by thinking it hard enough he could will Francis to say it. The end of their original wager seemed to him after this evening's delight to be looming in the most horrible way. Let Francis demand another month from him; unlike Ash, he would have no difficulty saying it. When Francis knew what he wanted, he took it. And Ash could not think of anything he would be gladder to hear.

But instead Francis said abruptly, "Have you ever worn earrings?"

"No," said Ash. He touched his earlobe; he had learned from the nips of Francis's teeth that they were sensitive. "Would you like me to?"

Francis shook his head slightly. He said, "There is a certain establishment I happen to know of, frequented primarily by sailors. The proprietor is experienced with a variety of decorations. It is not your ears I would like to see adorned."

Ash hadn't the faintest idea what he was talking about, and pulled a face to say so. Francis laughed a little. He stood for the first time since they had started playing and came over to Ash, crouched by his chair and looked up at him. Then he set his hands on Ash's bare flanks, running them up his side until they settled on his chest. One of his thumbs brushed Ash's nipple and then rested there caressingly. "Here," Francis said.

Ash's breath caught.

"I understand the effect is one of remarkable sensitivity," Francis said. He began to toy with Ash's nipple, coaxing it to stiffness, making Ash tremble. "You already respond charmingly when I touch you this way. I wonder how much more you could bear?" He took his hands away and knelt there looking up at Ash. "Will you play?" he asked.

Ash said, "You needn't make it a wager."

Francis frowned at him.

"I'll do it if you tell me to," said Ash. "If that's what you want. I will. I'm yours, aren't I?" For the month; and as it hurtled towards the end Ash wanted with sudden decision to do as Francis suggested, and have his person decorated according to Francis's taste just as his house had been. It would be an enduring mark, not like the sweet aches Ash loved which faded day by day. It would be *something*.

Francis stood up. For a moment Ash could not see his expression.

Then he said suddenly, "On reflection, I find that I am tired of cards."

"You're never tired of cards!" protested Ash.

"Tonight I am," Francis said. "And you have given me a pleasant game, as I hoped you would. Come to bed, Gabriel."

"But –"

Francis hauled him to his feet and quieted him with a firm kiss. "Come to bed," he said again. "And I will use my mouth on you and then fuck your splendid arse just as you wished. Let me hear no arguments."

"I'm not going to argue with that," said Ash. "I'm not *that* stupid."

Francis looked as if he were about to speak, and then visibly changed his mind. He took Ash by the hand instead and led him to the bed, where he proceeded to give Ash a glorious arse-licking followed by a damn good tugging. Ash fell asleep at once afterwards, and slept the deep dreamless sleep of an entirely contented man. He woke once in the night when he heard or felt Francis get out of the bed, and reached for him with a tired murmur. Francis caressed him soothingly and then went on with whatever it was he was doing. Ash went back to sleep.

Francis was not sleeping well, lately. He sat awake and watched Gabriel's chest rise and fall. Sometimes he permitted obscene fantasies to play out in his mind, but it grew more and more impossible to enjoy them. It was plain that Gabriel would refuse him nothing while the terms of their wager held; and though the conjurings of Francis's hungry imagination could once have supposed nothing more desirable than Gabriel Ashleigh's total submission, now shame along with a deeper longing coiled itself through and through his thoughts and left a bitter taste in his mouth.

He had thought himself a better man than this.

He had his control – or, no, be honest: he had lost it, but he could summon it again. If Gabriel would not balk, at least Francis could put a rein on himself and his own appalling greed. And perhaps –

Francis did not often permit himself to indulge the *and perhaps*, but there were moments when he could not escape it. And perhaps, when the wager was ended, things could change. Gabriel's nature was cheerful and kind and above all supremely generous. In all Francis's years of stifled lust, it had never occurred to him to wish for his object's mere *friendship*. Now, in the dark watches of the night, he offered the hope of it to himself as a nurse might offer a sop to a screaming child.

Perhaps.

In the final week of the wagered month, Francis invited Ash to spend a few days in the country. Or rather, Lord Richard Vane did, but Ash had no illusions about his place among the Ricardians and knew his invitation came at Francis's behest. By now he had worked out the remarkable and dangerous secret which bound together the fashionable gentlemen of Quex's. In the privacy of their own society they were quite open about it, and indeed if Ash had not been so thoroughly overwhelmed by Francis's nearness and touch on that first night sitting at his feet, he would have caught it then just from Norreys' sharp-edged teasing. As it was it had taken him several days to remember *your fair tormentor at last, Francis* and realise just what Norreys must have meant by it.

Arrandene, Richard's establishment just north of London, was arranged perfectly for the convenience of Richard and his friends. Discreet servants, reliable privacy, and understanding company all together made Ash feel a little as if he were visiting some sort of paradise. There was no longer any need for even the slightest pretence or self-restraint. Every one of the Ricardians knew what Ash was to Francis, and Francis to Ash, and none of them raised an eyebrow at it. They did tease, but it was Francis in the main whom they took as their victim; Ash was received with every consideration. On the one occasion Norreys hurled a cutting remark like a stray dagger in Ash's direction, Ash didn't mind it in the least. It was the way Norreys treated everyone, even Richard himself, and it made him feel welcomed rather than scorned. But Francis bristled and gave the man a sharp set-down.

Norreys did not like that. "How startling to see you infatuated, my dear sir," he said lazily. "I suppose Cupid may make fools of even the soberest of us. Have you replaced his entire wardrobe with cloth from your own warehouses yet, or are you trying to be subtle about it?" Ash was indeed wearing a new coat, one that Francis had said would suit him. "I must say it's a damned odd way of getting at Maltravers," Norreys said, and at that Francis rose to his feet with a dangerous air.

Ash saw Richard look from one to the other with a frown. Norreys was smiling as triumphantly as if he'd won something. Ash reached for Francis's arm and said, "Francis, do leave off. You know I don't mind Julius's nonsense."

"This has nothing to do with Maltravers," said Francis.

"Oh, no one cares about Mal!" Ash said, before Norreys could open his mouth and say whatever it was that was glimmering mischievously in his eyes. "And you could hardly *get at him* through me anyway, since he only remembers I exist when he wants to be irritated. Leave off, do. Come for a walk with me."

Norreys lifted his brows. Francis seemed about to speak. Then he breathed out sharply through his nose and let Ash take his arm.

Ash grinned up at him as he steered him outside and started talking about whatever came into his head – snuff, as it happened. Some of his friends took it; Ash didn't half mind the stuff himself; he'd seen a pretty silver snuffbox the other day which Francis might have fancied –

"I dislike the habit," said Francis abruptly, when they were already halfway down the lime avenue. "Nor would it suit you. It stains the lips and teeth abominably."

"Well, maybe I won't, then," said Ash cheerfully, feeling relieved. Francis was no longer nearly so stiff, which was all he had wanted.

"You may do as you please, of course," Francis said.

"Not *this* month," said Ash, and nudged Francis's side. Francis looked down at him gravely and did not answer. "But I don't want stained teeth in any case. It's a good thing I asked you about it. Oh, that's the lake!"

"So it is," said Francis. "I believe it was in just that spot yesterday as well."

Ash ignored him serenely. "I say, I'd like to swim," he said. "Do you think Richard would mind if I jumped in his lake?"

"Not at all."

"Would *you* mind?"

"I shall not join you," Francis said.

"You needn't; but it's been hot this week. You'll mind my clothes, though, won't you?"

"Gabriel," Francis said.

"Or I could sit here prattling if you like," Ash said, bestowing his best dimpled smile on him. "Only you don't seem to me to be in the mood for it."

Francis caught Ash's face in his hands and kissed him. "I am very fond of your prattle," he said, and his earlier stiffness was almost entirely gone. "Go. Swim to your heart's content. I would not dream of standing between a healthy young animal and the exercise which delights him."

Ash stripped to his skin, which was one of the many pleasures of a party of friends with no ladies present, and went for a swim in Arrandene's little lake. He was an enthusiastic swimmer rather than a skilled one, but he crossed the water with energy and a good deal of splashing, came up on the other side feeling pleasantly warmed by the exercise, and looked back to see that Francis had seated himself on the lakeshore and was waiting for him patiently. Ash waved at him. After a moment Francis lifted his hand in return. Ash dived back under the water and plunged as best he could back in his direction.

He came out of the lake laughing a little and shaking droplets of water out of his wet curls. He no longer felt the slightest bit self-conscious about having Francis see him stripped bare, which was just as well. Francis was already looking at him with the intimate gaze of a man who knew what he wanted. Ash started towards him. "Hold there," Francis said hoarsely.

Ash stopped where he was. He stood still and let Francis look his fill. He felt himself helplessly starting to blush – not from nervousness, but from rising awareness. They were alone, and Ash was naked and Francis was not, and Francis had given him a command, and all those things together had been the pattern of Ash's desires for weeks now.

After a moment Francis got up and came to him. He put his hand on Ash's prick and gave it a couple of slow pulls. Ash groaned and swayed forward, putting his arm up around Francis's shoulders, leaning into the warmth and heat of him.

"I'll get you wet," he said belatedly, when he was already pressed against Francis from thighs to chest.

Francis laughed low and deep, a sound which shot straight through Ash and sent his cock from mildly to decidedly interested in the whole affair. He fumbled between them for the fastenings of Francis's trousers. Francis bore him down into the soft grass.

Ash had never engaged in this sort of activity in the open air before, but he decided that he liked it immensely. The heat of the day was drying the lakewater on his skin, and the air was fresh and clean, and Francis was right there above him with his entire attention focused on Ash alone. Ash let his legs fall open and cradled Francis between them, mouthing at the skin of his jaw above the points of his collar. Francis let out a harsh shuddering breath and reached down to take both their cocks in hand.

What followed was more like the urgent fumbling of adolescents than the sophisticated sport of two grown men engaged in the obscene consequences of a highly deviant wager. It was fast and messy and thoughtless and Ash enjoyed it very much. Afterwards he stretched out in the grass, grinning up at the blue sky, and Francis said, "Alas! My coat!"

"You should have taken it off," said Ash. "I took *mine* off."

"I noticed," said Francis. "In fact I am still noticing. Splendid creature! You might be Apollo by the banks of the Eurotas."

Ash strained his memory and was astonished to discover he did actually know that one.

"With his bosom friend, wasn't he?" he said. "I remember because the schoolmaster had us skip lines – such a relief! Were they particular friends, then?"

"They were lovers," said Francis. "I read the omitted lines with interest. It remains one of my few pleasant memories from my schooldays."

Ash rolled over and looked at him with admiration. Fancy reading more Latin than you had to! "You really are the cleverest fellow," he said. "I daresay that's why Mal took a dislike to you in the first place. He's always hated for anyone to be better than him."

"Lord Maltravers has never considered me his *better*," said Francis. There was an unpleasant twist at the corner of his mouth which someone even stupider than Ash might have mistaken for a smile.

"Oh, he'd never say so, of course. But anyone can see you're worth six of him," said Ash. He sat up and looked at the pile of his clothes. "I suppose I should get dressed," he said sadly, and reached for his underthings.

Francis said abruptly, "My interest in you has nothing to do with my quarrel with your brother."

Ash blinked at him, halfway through pulling on his drawers. "I didn't think it did," he said.

"Good," said Francis. "Nonetheless I felt it needed saying." He sighed and got to his feet. Ash finished getting dressed, although he left his coat off. He looked thoroughly discreditable, and no doubt mildly debauched, but the Ricardians wouldn't mind. "Thank you for not permitting me to rise to Norreys' bait," Francis said, offering his arm. Ash took it. "He is a friend, albeit a trying one."

"Oh, not at all, not at all! Think nothing of it," said Ash.

Francis smiled. "You are more tactful than many give you credit for, Ash," he said.

Ash paused.

"What?" he said.

"Well –"

"No," said Ash, frowning at him. "What did you call me?"

"I know you dislike your Christian name," said Francis.

Ash had always considered *Gabriel* embarrassing. His mother had chosen it in a romantic fit; his father disliked it; Mal grimaced every time he had to say it and had abandoned its use entirely in adulthood. Everyone called him Ash, *everyone*. Even most of the ladies of his acquaintance called him Ash – or, if they found the informality too much, *Ashleigh*, but only the very youngest or the most proper fell back on *Lord Gabriel*. But Francis had never used the nickname. He had plainly told Ash at the start that he had no intention of doing so.

"You don't call me Ash," Ash said.

"It is your name," Francis said. "The name you prefer."

"I suppose it is; but to tell you the truth, from you I don't like it above half. Of course it's what my friends use, but you said from the first you didn't want to be my friend, didn't you? And I'm..."

Ash trailed off. There had to be a word for what he was, for the way he felt when Francis called him by his name, but he could not think of what it might be. The thought of being just *Ash* to Francis, though – Ash the rattle, the brat, the silly hound, the cheerful young idiot – the very idea made him feel as though the ground had begun to collapse underneath him. There were rules that went with this business between them, rules that neither of them had ever quite said but which Ash had come to count on. Francis did not want to be his friend. Francis looked at him differently to the way other people did. Francis called him Gabriel.

Francis was patiently waiting for him to finish his sentence. No doubt he thought Ash was behaving jolly queerly, kicking up a fuss about nothing. But the more Ash thought about losing the sound of his name said in Francis's voice, the more he hated it. "I'm accustomed," he said decisively at last. "There's no call to start changing things around now."

"Very well," said Francis, and seemed prepared to let the matter drop. They were coming up to the house now. "In any case, you had better change for dinner." He grimaced. "And I should do likewise."

"Next time I'll remind you to take your coat off," said Ash consolingly.

Francis only smiled a little, as if he were thinking of something else entirely. But in the entrance hall he pulled Ash abruptly against him and kissed him. It was a harder kiss than Ash expected, a kiss that promised a viciously delightful *later*. Ash gasped into it, bucked unconsciously against Francis's thigh, stumbled a little when Francis pulled away, and gave him a beseeching look.

"Patience, Gabriel," Francis said. "You'll get your fucking when I give it to you."

Ash groaned piteously, knowing he was now going to be halfway erect all the way through dinner with the Ricardians and port and cards afterwards, just waiting for Francis to decide when they had been pleasant company for long enough to satisfy whatever arcane standard of good conduct it was that he kept in his head and applied even to country parties with his friends. "You just like to watch me suffer," he accused.

"Perhaps," Francis said, with a queer little smile.

Not friendship, then. No.

Francis did not let himself think on it anymore. The month was nearly ended. Let it end.

After the Arrandene visit Ash did not see Francis for a day or two. Francis had said he had business to attend to. It was the longest Ash had been parted from him all month. He rode in Hyde Park, called on a few friends, went boxing, and then spent the rest of the hours wondering what on earth he had filled his days with before there was Francis to think of. He had never realised Chamford House was such a mausoleum. Francis's townhouse was much more modest, and Ash liked it much better. Half a dozen times he nearly went and presented himself on the doorstep; but Francis had said he would be busy, and Ash had known since earliest youth that no one liked to have someone chattering away and getting underfoot when they had more important matters to see to.

On the third day, Francis sent his card in the morning and then turned up in person just before noon. Ash rose to his feet with a peculiar feeling of relief when he was shown into the parlour, and came forward with his hand outstretched to greet him.

Francis did not take his hand.

Ash blinked at him and let it drop. "Francis?" he said.

"Lord Gabriel," said Francis. He was still wearing his hat and greatcoat, as if he did not mean to stay for long.

"Francis, what's the matter?"

"You have kept the terms of our wager admirably," said Francis. "And now they are fulfilled. It seemed appropriate to come here and take my leave of you."

Ash stepped back as if from a blow. In the delightful days at Arrandene he had let the thought of the end of the month slip from his mind. It had seemed impossible that there ever really could be an end to this. Francis wanted him. He was *sure* Francis still wanted him. No one called a man Apollo by the banks of wherever-it-was and then three days later stopped wanting him! Or perhaps some people might, but not *Francis*. Ash met his eyes, saw the flicker in them as Francis looked at him, and was certain.

Well, if the *wager* was the problem –

"Shall we play again?" he said. A week ago he had hesitated at the thought of staking another month as Francis's own possession. A week ago he had not been faced so baldly with the alternative. "I've a pack of cards –"

"No," Francis said. "This business has reached its natural end."

"But," said Ash. Once again he felt as though the ground was falling away beneath his feet, as he had when Francis had tried to abandon the use of his name. He reached out.

Francis pulled away. "Sit down," he said. Ash did it without thinking, still staring at him. Francis's mouth went tight. "We cannot go on as we have been, Lord Gabriel," he said quietly and firmly. "Surely you see that."

"Don't you want me any more?" Ash blurted, and blushed to hear how plaintive he sounded.

Francis looked away.

"*Francis* –"

"Have I not done enough?" Francis said abruptly, still not looking at him. There was a strained note in his voice that Ash had never heard. "How many times, how many ways must I ruin you? I am already ashamed of myself. Permit me to salvage whatever scraps of honourable conduct I can. The business is ended, and I will not impose myself on you again. I beg you, do not test me, for I fear I will fail the test. Take your freedom and go your ways, Lord Gabriel, and beware of the gaming tables in future. I will bid you farewell now."

"What are you *talking* about?" said Ash, utterly bewildered.

Francis rounded on him with an angry look. "I am talking about this month," he spat. "I am talking about *myself*. I have used you most abominably. I have taken advantage of your

inexperience, and abused your trust, and exposed you to men you barely knew in ways you were not prepared for and could not defend yourself from –"

"What do you mean, my *inexperience*?" demanded Ash, starting to grow upset. "I'm a grown man, Francis, not a schoolroom chit you seduced like the villain of some Cheltenham tragedy. I'm twenty-six years old, by God!"

"You might as well be a schoolroom chit for all you seem to know of the world," retorted Francis. "You have never had a real lover; that was obvious from the first time I fucked you. You have conducted your affairs almost entirely through comfortably anonymous encounters. Nor are you familiar with the costs and risks of an entanglement. I should have known how easily you would develop an infatuation. I *did* know. I have taken advantage of you in that way as well."

"Wait just a moment!" said Ash.

But Francis swept on inexorably. "I allowed myself to lose control, and I permitted myself to be driven by obsession. I coerced you cruelly from the first, and every time my better instincts tried to check me I found myself choosing the selfish course again. It is not pleasant to realise," he added bitterly, "that your brother was right about me all along."

"Mal's never been right about anything in his life," said Ash, staring, "least of all you."

"He accused me of lacking the true character of a gentleman and he was correct," said Francis. "Richard very properly upbraided me on my conduct on that first night when I took everything you had in a fit of frustration and rage. I resolved to correct my error but instead compounded it. You had no choice at all but to accept the unspeakable wagers I forced on you. A better man would have approached you correctly, but I could not bear to be denied and so I took a course that was barely distinguishable from rape. I am disgusted with myself when I think of it, and men I admire and respect, men like Richard Vane, would certainly shun me if they knew the whole."

"But you didn't," said Ash.

"You are not thinking clearly," Francis said. "I am glad – I am relieved – that our encounters have not been hateful to you; but they should never have happened. Now that the whole affair is ended you will quickly discover reasons to dislike me as you should. I believe in your heart you already know that no friendship can exist between us after all I have done to you." He stepped back. He adjusted his hat. "I can offer you only my apologies, with sincere goodwill," he said. "I wish you all the best." There was an awkward pause when he finished speaking, as if he had meant to address Ash by name and then stopped himself at the last moment. *Gabriel, Gabriel*, the three syllables of Ash's undeniably silly name given weight and loveliness by Francis's deep voice. Ash sat frozen, waiting for it.

Francis left.

Ash stared at the door.

All at once he jumped to his feet. He would look a fool, running out into the street to yap at Francis's heels like an idiot puppy. Francis would look at him coldly, and say something cutting, and walk away, no matter what he really thought of the matter – Francis's pride would never give an inch in public. Ash knew this, and yet also knew that he could not bear to do anything else. He dashed out of his own front door and ran straight into his brother.

It was a bodily collision characterised by ungainly waving of limbs in all directions. Mal caught himself on the doorpost. Ash nearly fell face first into the dust of the street. His brother gave him an unfriendly look.

"What was Webster doing here?" he demanded. "I never imagined a day would come when jumped-up factory scum like that would give me the cut direct on my own brother's doorstep. You should have told me from the first how he came to get his hooks in you; I'll not save you from your own damned foolishness, but Webster's hated me for years, and fellows of his type do nothing but scheme against their betters all day long. I don't doubt he saw a chance to get at me by ruining you. I'm damn sure he plays with marked cards. No honest man wins as often as he does."

"He wins because he plays better than anyone," Ash said hotly, "and he doesn't *scheme*, and it's the outside of enough to go around accusing a man of cheating at cards just because you don't like him – oh, damn you, Mal, what do you want?" There was no sign of Francis on the street. He must have stepped straight into a waiting hackney. Ash would never catch up with him now.

What Mal wanted, it turned out, was to have an excruciating conversation with Ash about letting himself be taken advantage of and turned into a pawn in another man's feud. He also wanted to ask a number of searching questions about the Ricardians and Ash's new-found friendship with them. Ash's thoughts were entirely on Francis the whole time, running over and over that hideous final conversation. He had no idea what he was saying in response to Mal's nonsense, and felt deeply grateful that Mal was entirely too self-involved to guess what really disqualified him for membership in the exclusive set he envied so much.

"Hmph!" said Mal at last when he got up – thank God – to leave. "Well, you seem to have got yourself disentangled somehow, though I don't doubt that's Vane's influence – *he* at least is good *ton*. You had better stay disentangled, and keep out of my quarrels. You're far too stupid to be a match for the likes of Francis Webster. What was it we called him in school? Spinning Jenny, that was it." He gave an ugly laugh. "He spun a fine web for you, didn't he? It would have served you right to go and live in penury on the Continent; but that greedy spider claims Chamford House over my dead body." Rather grudgingly he added, "The new wallpaper will do very well, at least. I would never have suspected you of having any taste."

With that unusually complimentary farewell he was gone, finally. Ash went up to his own bedchamber, where he sat surrounded by his own things and the wallpaper Francis had chosen, and put his head in his hands. He thought again of Francis saying stiffly *I wish you all the best*, and the awful pause that should have been Ash's name.

Francis might never call Ash by his name again.

It was no use trying to run after him now. He would have gone already to his house hung with rare fabrics and filled with beautiful things, and if Ash went there and hung on the knocker the excruciatingly correct Harwood would tell him that Mr Webster was not at home. Francis would be there alone, thinking all sorts of sickening things about himself that Ash had had no idea about. And Ash would have to come back here alone, too, and never hear his name from Francis's lips again, never touch him, or kiss him, or make him laugh, or be counted among the beautiful things that Francis loved –

Ash wept for a while, unselfconscious as a child.

It was evening when he looked up at last. His chest felt hollow and cold as if it were a fireplace someone had doused and then scraped clean even of ashes. His head hurt and his whole body was stiff. Ash had not cried that way in years. It was not just his own unhappiness that weighed on him; it was remembering the bitterness in Francis's voice, the grief on his face when he looked at Ash, as if Ash were something terrible that he had done and could hardly bear. He was so unhappy. Ash had had no idea he was so unhappy. He hadn't said a thing about it. And then he'd told Ash he was *infatuated*, and *not thinking clearly*.

Ash had never felt more clear about anything in his life than he felt about Francis.

His insides were not entirely cold after all. Something was smouldering there; something that felt, in this moment, rather like anger. Ash very seldom got angry. It never really seemed worth all the fuss. But for Francis to look him in the face and tell him he might as well be a *child* –

Ash stood up. He bit his lip. Francis would no doubt turn him away from his home; but he would not be at home, not tonight, not in the mood he was in. Francis would want to play cards, and when Francis felt like playing deep he went to Quex's – where he felt safe, where his friends were, where the vast majority of his potential opponents had enough skill to give him a challenge and could afford the stakes that Francis found interesting.

Ash rang for his valet.

At Quex's he was turned away at the door. He'd been half expecting it. The gaming hell was an exclusive one, a fashionable one, and it was not the first time Ash had been denied entry. Moreover, it was run on Lord Richard Vane's money, for the benefit of the Ricardians. Of course Francis would have arranged that Ash should not trouble him here again. But tonight Ash was in no mood to laugh and move on to some friendlier establishment. "Get me Quex," he said to the doorman. He did not smile. He did not pretend patience. *You are the Duke of Warminster's son; act like it*, said Mal in the back of his head, and Ash was ashamed, but the heat inside him kept him from backing down.

The doorman looked him up and down, visibly decided that Ash was more trouble than he could afford, and got Quex.

Quex, as proprietor of a gaming hell, had dealt with several ill-tempered gentlemen of birth in his time. He looked much less ready than the doorman to be bowled over by Ash's bad manners. He also poured the drinks in the private rooms, and so had seen Ash sitting on the floor at Francis's feet nearly every night for a month. Ash remembered this with a sudden flush as Quex waited, with a solemn unreadable look, for Ash to speak first.

"I know, I know," said Ash after a moment in which he felt very ashamed of himself indeed. "Tell your man I'm sorry – oh, wait, and," he fumbled for his purse and put a coin into Quex's hand; that would be a more acceptable apology than words alone. "But I had to," he explained. "I suppose I'm banned from the club?"

Quex gave a very slight bow. "My lord," he said, with exactly the right tone of firm commiseration.

"Well," said Ash, "it won't do, you see."

"The decision does not rest with me," said Quex.

"I know," said Ash. "Is Richard in there? I want to talk to him."

Quex gave Ash to understand that he could not possibly comment on whether Lord Richard Vane was present in the club or not, and in any case he would by no means disturb his noble patron merely to satisfy the demands of an arrogant young puppy hanging around on the doorstep making a fool of himself. It was done with utmost tact and grace, while contriving to make Ash feel that he was embarrassing himself and everyone else in the most unforgiveable way. On any other night it would have got rid of Ash quite comprehensively.

Tonight Ash said, "I'll wait."

He sat on an uncomfortable chair in an anteroom, waiting, for nearly half an hour. If he hadn't been the Duke of Warminster's son, he had no doubt he would have been out in the street. At last Richard's large solid form appeared in the doorway. Ash rose to greet him. He'd been thinking hard for the whole half hour – so hard his head ached a little – and there was a slow fire of determination still burning inside him. Richard was frowning. "Ashleigh," he said, a kind of compromise between the friendly *Ash* and the uncomfortable *Lord Gabriel*.

"Vane," replied Ash in kind, and then felt quite frustrated with the whole stupid thing – he'd conversed with this man near nightly, he'd been a guest in his *house* – and said, "Oh, Richard, for God's sake, tell them to let me in. I have to talk to Francis."

Richard cleared his throat. "I know nothing to your discredit, Ashleigh," he said. "But Francis has been a friend for many years, and he is not a man who forms friendships easily. I must be his ally in this matter. If you have chosen to end your association with him, that is entirely your affair, but as for entrance to the club –"

"Is that what he said?" demanded Ash.

Richard paused. "That is what I was given to understand," he said.

"But he didn't quite say so, did he, because Francis wouldn't tell you a lie if he could help it," said Ash. The determination burning in his belly was settling into something bright and steady. "And now he's sitting in there in a towering sulk playing as deep as he can go and snapping the nose off anyone who tries to be a friend to him, isn't he?"

"I believe Dominic was quite put out," said Richard after a moment. "Francis's set-downs are always sharp, but he seldom bestows them on us."

"Let me speak to him," said Ash. "Please."

Richard considered. After a moment he said, "I think, Ash, that he will be no kinder to you than he was to any of us."

"I don't give a fig for his temper," said Ash. "I'm not scared of Francis." He could not imagine anything more absurd than being scared of Francis. Francis took more care over Ash than anyone ever had. Ash had survived his family's indifference and Mal's unloving version of brotherhood and nearly three decades of life without anyone who really thought much of him one way or the other apart from his dead Aunt Lucie, and yet somehow Francis thought that Ash would be better off without *him*. "He needs to hear me out," he said. "He might not think it, but it's true, and I won't leave him alone until he does."

"I won't inquire into the cause of your quarrel," began Richard.

"We didn't *quarrel*," interrupted Ash. "He thinks I don't love him, and I do."

It came clear in his head as he said it. Ash hadn't really thought at all about what he felt about Francis, being too busy with feeling it, but of course he loved him. Francis had even noticed, hadn't he? Only he'd called it a mere infatuation, because otherwise it didn't fit with Francis's idiotic fit of self-disgust. Ash had never realised before how inconvenient it was being clever, but it was plainly Francis's cleverness which had got him all tangled up in this stupid way: he'd spent entirely too much time thinking about things, and so tied himself in a knot. And now he was in the knot he meant to stay there, because –

"He's a stubborn ass," Ash said aloud, explaining the whole thing, he felt, quite neatly.

Richard gave a small cough and did not disagree. Instead he rang the bell. Quex appeared almost at once.

"Lord Gabriel is to be admitted to the club this evening," Richard said.

"Very good, sir," said Quex. "And the private rooms?"

Richard gave a small nod, and Quex bowed and removed himself. "If a dramatic scene erupts, the private rooms are a more appropriate venue for it," Richard said. "I feel we had better be prepared for the possibility."

"I shan't make a scene," Ash said. "Francis might."

"I beg your pardon," said Richard. "I did not mean to imply otherwise. Recall that I know Francis, I daresay, as well as anyone does." He gave Ash a nod and a very slight smile. Ash

felt reassured, and even buoyed, as he entered the dim halls of the gaming hell.

Francis was playing piquet with Sir Absalom Lockwood. The heap of tokens and notes of hand in front of him said he had been playing for some time. The corresponding pile in front of Lockwood told its own tale: Francis had been losing more than he usually did.

Lockwood looked up when Ash came and stood over them. Francis did not. "Forgive my interruption, sir," Ash said. "But I believe Mr Webster owes me a game."

He saw Francis go still. Even then he did not look up. He fixed his gaze on the cards as if some remarkable tale was written on the pasteboard. Ash looked down at the top of his head and felt more determined than ever. Francis would look him in the eye at least before he was through. Francis owed him that.

Lockwood looked between them and sighed. "Damn your luck, Webster," he said as he pocketed his winnings and vacated his seat.

Ash did not take it immediately. He waited. Still Francis did not look at him. From anyone else it would have been offensively bad manners. From Francis it made Ash's heart ache miserably. Still, he felt he could do nothing but wait – and wait, and wait, as he had so often waited on Francis's pleasure this month –

That was the thought that shoved him into activity. He threw himself down into the seat opposite Francis, just as he had that night a month ago when he would have done anything, anything at all, to get Francis's attention – when he'd ruined himself trying. Francis looked at him at last, and the look in his eyes said he was remembering that night just as Ash was. Ash said, "Deal."

Francis made no move to pick up the cards.

"You *owe me this*," said Ash.

"Not here," Francis said.

"The private rooms, then," said Ash. Francis started to say something. "Yes, I know you had Richard ban me. I changed his mind."

Francis stilled, but said only, "Very well."

The private rooms were as comfortable and quiet as they always were, but Ash saw them tonight with different eyes. This was not Francis's erstwhile domain, the place where Ash had sat at his temporary master's feet like a dog. Rather it was a battlefield, for a battle Ash meant to fight as if his life depended on it. He marched Francis mercilessly to the tables. He had sat here before, playing against Dominic, against Lockwood, against a handful of others; but then Francis had been at his shoulder, watching patiently, murmuring words of advice when the strain of observing Ash's incompetence got the better of him. Now he sat down

opposite Ash and swallowed. Ash watched the line of his throat, the pinched quality of his expression, the tightness around his thin lips.

Francis said, "What game?"

"Piquet, of course," said Ash. "It's your game, isn't it?"

Francis did not reply. He dealt them each their hands in silence. Ash felt the sick tension of the table try to claim him, but he shook it off. He had no time to be afraid.

They made their calls, accounted their points. Ash's hand was not splendid, but it was not so terribly bad. Francis carried off the first trick. Ash took the second, and the one after that. A terrible suspicion began to grow in him. Francis won the fourth trick, and ceded the fifth. When he lost the sixth Ash put his cards down and glared at him.

It took Francis a moment to notice. He seemed absorbed entirely in his hand. He'd barely looked up the whole time they were playing. But when Ash's next card failed to appear on the table between them he had to lift his head. "My lord," he said.

"You don't think very much of me at all, do you?" Ash said. His chest was tight with unhappiness and anger. "Somehow I thought you did." Francis instructing him in piquet, strict as a schoolmaster, and praising him when he did well: Ash had been sure it was real. "Did I really win anything, those nights, or did you tell your friends to take pity on me so you could indulge me afterwards?"

"I cannot tell what you mean, sir," said Francis.

"I know you're holding three kings," said Ash. "You never forget a call or a discard: I daresay you could tell me my hand without looking at it, which I could scarcely do myself. You should have won that trick. Why didn't you?"

Francis said nothing. Ash felt cold all over as he realised what he was thinking. "Is this supposed to be an *apology*?" he demanded. "Because I'd rather have you spit on me than hand me a fortune out of pity. I don't want or need your money – any more than you ever required mine."

Francis was very still. Finally he put his cards on the table, face up, and the three kings were there just as Ash had thought. "I must apologise," he said. "You are quite correct. It was an improper impulse on my part. A gentleman should play the cards he has been dealt to the best of his ability. You have never been dishonest in our intercourse; you would not stoop so low under any circumstances." He did not meet Ash's eyes as he added, "Your play has improved a great deal. You have no reason to believe me, but for whatever my assurances are worth I promise that no one was taking pity on you on the occasions to which you refer."

Ash felt a sudden crash of relief at his words. It *had* been real. And in that moment of relief his anger lifted away. He seemed to see Francis's unhappiness like an ugly coat he was insisting on wearing, and in the same moment he knew exactly what to do about it.

He said, "But I have, you know."

"I do not understand you," Francis said.

"Been dishonest, I mean," said Ash. "Lied. I confess I haven't thought about it in weeks, but if I'd known it was eating at you this way I would have said something. You should have *told* me."

"Lord Gabriel," said Francis, and then broke off. But at least he was looking at Ash now; and something in Ash's heart thrilled at the sound of Francis saying his name.

He put his own cards aside and met Francis's eyes. "I'm ashamed of myself for it now," he confessed. "I didn't know you then, you see. If I'd known you better I would have known all I had to do was ask. But it's never been that way with anyone else. And you said you'd take me, and I wanted it so much."

"Gabriel," said Francis, nearly a croak.

"Do you remember when you said to me that all games are half luck and half strategy? I haven't a head for strategy at all now, and I'd less then," said Ash, "but d'you recall, we were playing *écarté* – to give me a chance."

"And still you kept losing," Francis said.

"It was hard to think straight with you looking at me like you meant to eat me for dinner and make me like it," said Ash. "But even I can't lose a single trick at *écarté* when you deal me the king, queen and ace of trumps. So you see I lied, Francis. You said you'd take me if I lost, and I wanted to lose; but I had a handful of diamonds."

There was a long moment of silence.

"You are the most extraordinarily silly brat," breathed Francis. "You are the very essence of mad impulse. What were you thinking? If I had been a man of more unscrupulous character –"

"I was thinking you'd fuck me so well I couldn't see," said Ash, "and I was right, wasn't I? And I knew perfectly well you wouldn't do me any harm, so don't look at me like that."

"What did you know of me then?"

"I knew my brother thought you weren't a gentleman," said Ash. He shrugged, and gave his best disarming smile. "And Mal's always wrong. Do you know what he said to me today?"

"I have never had any interest in the opinions of your oafish brother," said Francis. "Least of all on myself."

"He actually managed to give you a compliment, although to be fair to him it was an accident. And he told me to stay away from you because you're a clever sort – a regular Machiavelli, in fact – and I'm too stupid to see through it." Francis's thin lips tightened, and he looked as if he were about to speak. Ash paused and raised his brows.

"You are not stupid, Gabriel," Francis said at once. "You are a scatterbrain, but not a fool."

Was that all he had to say? "I *know* that," Ash said impatiently. "What I don't understand is why you and Mal seem to agree on the first part - that you trapped me in some sort of monstrous web, I mean, as if I hadn't the faintest idea what I was doing. I do some damn silly things now and again, certainly where you're concerned, but I haven't been drunk all month – no, not even on the fucking; even *you* can't keep me insensate all the time. And if I really hadn't wanted any of it, well, you may be taller than me, but you're not exactly a big fellow, and you don't box or fence; I daresay I could knock you down."

"You were bound by a dreadful coercion," said Francis.

"What coercion? You'd already given me back my fortune; it was mine whether I won or lost, so long as I played the trick. And you meant to do that in any case, didn't you? It was the whole reason you invited me to your house that night. You're a gamester, but you're not the sort of man who goes around ruining drunken idiots – even drunken idiots who heartily deserve it."

Francis did not deny it. Instead he said, "Your word of honour –"

"Francis," said Ash, "I *cheated at cards* to get your prick in me."

Francis said nothing.

"I wanted you. I wanted all of it. I've never wanted anything more."

"The things I have done," Francis said after a moment. "The way I have treated you –"

Ash let himself remember some of the things Francis had done, and the ways Francis had treated him. He let himself think, as he very seldom let himself think, of the day Francis had tied him down and made him blindly wait and wait; and he let the strength of that thought show on his face. Francis made a choked noise. "*Gabriel*, for God's sake, be serious," he said. "You deserve better than a lover who uses you like a cheap prostitute."

"Like a very expensive prostitute," Ash corrected cheerfully. "Francis, you were *there*. You must know I liked it."

Francis coughed. "That is nothing to the point," he said.

"Oh, I think it is very much to the point," Ash said. "Unless – is that really how you think of me?"

"Of course not!"

"So it was a game," Ash said. "A game we both enjoyed, I thought. If I'd known you hated it I wouldn't have kept playing. I'm sorry for that."

"You should not be apologising to me," Francis said.

"I think I should. I'm sorry I lied to you, at least. I think you'd be in less of a coil now if I'd been honest, and I hate to see you unhappy." Ash threw the last vestiges of caution to the wind and added, "I love you, you see."

Francis shook his head.

Ash glared at him. "Tell me I'm a silly brat if you like, but don't tell me I don't know my own mind. I love you."

"Let us call this whole business a game, if you are sure of it," Francis said after a moment. "It follows that you cannot know your mind with any certainty, Gabriel. I am not the man who has had you this month. I do not wish to be that man."

"I love the man who taught me to play piquet," Ash said. "Who took his time with me, when no one ever thought it worth the trouble before. That wasn't just the game, Francis, and you won't convince me otherwise. And yes, I *know* there's more of you to know. I want to know it. I want everything you'll give me; and if I thought it would work, I'd give you my house and my fortune and the coat off my back and all the rest of my wardrobe too, if only you'd take me into the bargain."

The words hung between them. Francis looked away and was quiet for a long moment. Ash watched the slight working of his mouth, the white-knuckled stillness of his long fingers. In a flash of perception he realised that Francis must have schooled himself to handle cards, so as to have something to do with his hands. His manners were impeccable, but they were not easy. The Francis Ash was familiar with, sardonic, poetic, comfortable, had never been seen in company and never would be. He belonged to Ash alone.

When Francis spoke at last it was with a palpable effort. "I have not disliked this game of ours, Gabriel," he said. "I fear the case is opposite, and I have liked it too much. It was your beauty I craved at first – and have craved, I suppose, for some time, ever since you first attempted to claim my attention by insulting me to my face when you were fresh on the town."

Ash felt a hot blush stain his cheeks. "I never meant –"

"You never *thought*," corrected Francis. "But I know what it looks like when a cocksure boy tries to flirt by making himself obnoxious, my dear. It is immaterial now. What I meant to say was..."

He trailed off, gathering his thoughts. Ash bit the inside of his cheek trying to push down his impatience. For Francis he could wait.

"You are very beautiful," Francis said at last, with the abrupt frankness that no longer took Ash aback. "I felt half mad with it. I desired to possess you in the most selfish way – as if I could hang you on my wall and declare you my own. But I realise now that I was a fool to value you so little. Beauty can be had for a price, and you, my Gabriel, are beyond price. I should have known it that night when you came to me and spoke in full honesty – of your responsibility, of your regret – refusing to wager a penny if you knew you could not pay it, and making your apology for an incident half a decade gone not for the sake of winning my goodwill but because you considered it just. Nothing in our acquaintance since has changed the high opinion of you which I acquired then. You are a man of open, sincere, and honourable character," Ash opened his mouth and Francis gestured him to silence –

notwithstanding your occasional fits of thoughtlessness; when you err you seek to mend it, and when you do well you are generous in your happiness. I admire you most sincerely."

"Francis," said Ash.

Francis kept talking. He was biting off his words now as precisely as if he were facing judge and jury across the gaming table instead of a man who loved him. "It is because I have come to care for you, Gabriel," he said, "that I cannot think it prudent in you to throw your affections away on a man as proud, jealous, and solitary as myself. If I am in truth the first to take his time over you, that only speaks to the stupidity of those who have come before me. I certainly shall not be the last. Many will love you: I think anyone who truly knows you must love you. Do not spend yourself so easily." He favoured Ash with a thin ironic smile and added, "I am, as you know, a son of industry; and it is therefore with the expertise of the tradesman that I can inform you that it is never wise to exchange gold for dross."

"*Francis*," said Ash. There was an extraordinary joy bubbling up inside him. "Do stop talking and talking and let me get a word in edgeways."

Francis paused. Ash could not help but laugh at his momentary look of irritation at being interrupted before he schooled his expression into polite inquiry.

"You do go on," he said fondly. "But I'm not one for making difficulties, you know that. I love you and you love me – you just said so, and you meant it, didn't you? You wouldn't lie to me."

"Have you listened to a word I said?" demanded Francis.

"I heard the parts that mattered," said Ash. "I propose a wager."

"No," said Francis.

Ash carried on as if he hadn't heard. "We'll have to play *écarté*, because I'd probably lose anything else. One trick. If you win, you can keep me. Hung on your wall if you like, though I'd rather it was in your bed." He gave it a moment to sink in and was rewarded by the look on Francis's face: half panicked, half hungry. Then he carried on: "And if I win, I'm going to take you into the bedroom through there and fuck you. And when I'm fucking you, you'll tell me exactly how you like it, and that's how I'll do it. That's what *I* want."

"Gabriel," breathed Francis.

"And then tomorrow night we'll play again," Ash said.

"For the same stakes?"

Ash shrugged and smiled. "Unless we think of better ones."

There was a pause.

"You do realise, my dear," said Francis, "that if you mean to hang the matter on a question of cards, you have given me a decided advantage." The look in his eyes belied the lightness of

his words. No one before had ever looked at Ash with such sincere and strong affection.

Ash only grinned. Under the table he nudged the toe of his boot gently against Francis's calf. "Really, Francis?" he said. "I had no idea."

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