







# Centerpiece (Infinite Grace #2)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** The accused... well... the actual thief known as Agreeable needs to hide after his friends caused a bit of a ruckus in the market.

Which is why he's in disguise in a stolen dress when he slips into a room at the inn that should have been empty, but instead holds a wealthy merchant named Holburn—the strangest man Agreeable has ever met.

Agreeable, a farmer-turned-thief through circumstance, mocked and scorned throughout the region for his tendency to be too friendly and “agreeable” with anyone who asks, has no idea what to make of the man.

Holburn is complicated as only the rich can be, and full of notions about how Agreeable should be treated better by both the law and everyone else.

He's stranger still for choosing to help an accused thief stay hidden.

He's attractive—even someone less agreeable than Agreeable would say so—and compelling enough that, in only a few hours, he has Agreeable wishing for another life.

A life where he might be known by his real name, and have a job that brings respect, and where he might also share the bed of his remarkable protector.

But Holburn has secrets, not the least of which is a wife who might be as strange and wonderful as he is, and lives in a world that is far beyond Agreeable's reach.

Agreeable is a failed farmer, a useless thief, and a slut somewhat confused about his gender now that he has the dress on and finds he likes being called a good girl.

A few hours with Holburn are all he can ever have.

Holburn seems to believe otherwise.

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*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:16 am*

The first floor of the inn was not as crowded as it might have been for a more thriving market week, which was unfortunate both for the innkeeper and for Agreeable.

Betram would miss the paying customers, but Agreeable had been hoping to hide among the crowd.

He was known enough in this town to draw comments even before the ruckus in the market earlier and the bailiff prowling after him now.

With few other options, Agreeable pulled the hood of his borrowed cowl over his forehead, praying that and the prettily stitched crimson scarf tied over his hair would keep most of his face hidden.

Then he skirted the half empty tables near the central fireplace to head to the back stairs that led to the rooms for rent on the two upper floors.

He nearly tripped on the first stair, startled by the pair of armed figures coming down toward him.

Armed guards weren't all that unusual, not during market week at least, but they usually wore some indication of who they worked for, be it a sheriff, a wealthy merchant, or a lord.

These two wore no colored tabards or heraldry.

But even with no signs of being the sort of well-trained and higher-earning guards to

accompany nobles, they nodded politely to Agreeable and stood aside to let him pass.

With manners like that, Agreeable would wager coin he'd never have that they worked for someone very wealthy.

Perhaps the Count had decided to visit the market. If so, his guards should have been wearing yellow tabards, but all that really mattered to Agreeable was that these two guards were not working for the sheriff or the local bailiff. Although that might change at any moment.

Once the guards were out of sight, Agreeable darted up the rest of the steps to the second floor, twice stepping on his hem before he realized he ought to hold up his skirt as he had seen some women do.

The fabric no longer swished against his ankles that way, but at least he wouldn't fall.

Out of sight of the guards, he poked at his chest where his rolled-up clothing served as a bosom, and then, hearing one of the guards swear and start back up the stairs behind him, ducked into the first room he came to.

The sun had set only moments before, but a fire in the room's fireplace was the source of light, not the room's single, though wide, window.

Before the fireplace was a clean hearth, and near the window, a bureau set with towels and a washbasin.

Several travel packs and a small chest were at the foot of the bureau, and along the far wall was a high bed, big enough for three at least and covered in fine bedding.

He had stumbled into the inn's best room, Agreeable realized immediately, only moments before also realizing that the room had not been empty.

The guest who should have been downstairs helping himself to ale or a meal was in the shadowed corner nearly hidden from view by a corner of the fireplace mantle, in a chair Agreeable hadn't immediately noticed, bent over as if to unlace his boots.

In the firelight, the man had a warm color to his cheeks and dark, dark eyes that stayed fixed upon Agreeable as Agreeable trembled like a rabbit against the door.

Then the man stood, as tall and reaching as an oak, his near-black hair curling to fall around his ears and down against his neck.

The curls gleamed by firelight almost as much as his eyes did.

Together they were lovely, although Agreeable wouldn't have said they made this fellow a handsome man.

Many in the village where Agreeable had been raised regarded Eamon or Wilf as handsome, and they were burly, broad sorts with ready smiles and bodies meant for farmwork or fucking.

All the same, Agreeable stared at this man, thinking with some distraction that this man did not look like someone who knew how to plough, but then also thinking that ploughing had come into his mind regardless.

The man's dark, snug doublet and breeches were unadorned, nothing at all like what wealthy merchants or even the few minor lords or ladies that Agreeable had glimpsed in his life had worn.

The man's boots might have been dusty from travel but the rest of him wasn't.

Everything on the man's back looked well-made and not well worn.

He was perhaps studying Agreeable freckled cheeks the way Agreeable was studying his neatly shaven jaw and upper lip, and then his lips alone, which were not too full but not too slender.

A sensible mouth despite the generous curve to it, Agreeable decided, although he couldn't have said why.

At least the man wasn't someone local. Someone here for the market, most likely.

He wouldn't know who had just stumbled into his room.

Agreeable unclenched his hands, allowing his skirt to fall to where it should have been if he were truly the sort of woman who took the teachings of the Church seriously and tried to dress like a priest or a priest-mage with skirts that almost brushed the ground.

The Church didn't even let women be priests, so he'd never understood why those women would bother.

Plenty of women didn't. But he really shouldn't be wasting time thinking of it now.

He cleared his throat and remembered just in time to soften his voice, although he didn't have to soften it much.

"Let me explain."

The man didn't even blink. Agreeable found himself reaching up for the ends of the scarf to run them nervously through his fingers.

"Or I could leave?" he offered, already turning around, only to jump when someone rapped on the door as he reached for the handle.

“Sir?” called the person on the other side.

Betram the innkeeper, unless Agreeable was mistaken.

“There’s a bailiff here looking for a thief who was seen in the market earlier today.

Sorry to trouble you, sir, but he’s only wanting to know if you’ve been disturbed by anyone or noticed anything off. ”

Agreeable slapped a hand over his mouth although his squeak was audible to the other man and possibly to the innkeeper and bailiff in the hall. He widened his eyes and looked across the room to the darkened corner.

“A thief?” The man answered to be heard through the door, expressing the correct amount of shocked decency in a mellow, pleasant voice.

“My word.” He moved forward as he spoke, eyes never leaving Agreeable even while he continued to speak to those outside.

“What was stolen? It must be serious to have the bailiff hard at work so many hours later.”

Agreeable opened his mouth, closed it, then dropped his hands in order to hold them both out and show they were empty.

It was true enough. It hadn’t been his deed today, only his luck to be the one seen as guilty.

“A handful of coins and a bag of spices from one of the market vendors.”

At that answer, the man stopped in front of Agreeable to peer down at him from what



seemed a great height.

The man was not broad, not overly so, but he did stand straight and he did have shoulders.

Not that Agreeable would have tried to push past him.

He was not one to fight. That had never been his sort of trouble.

Riley had been the one to take the coin purse; Agreeable had no idea who had taken the spices.

None of the lads were cooks of any note, but maybe Wilf had wanted to please his ma.

Or maybe someone else in the crowd had taken advantage of the confusion and nicked the spices for themselves.

Why not, with a bunch of thieves or Agreeable to take the blame?

People had seen Agreeable in the market, so he would be the one blamed.

He had a reputation that some liked well enough, some thought funny, and some thought deserved all the scorn the Church could heap on him.

So he was often noticed, even when just wandering the market to see the sights.

The others too but him the most, and he was the easiest caught. The one who wouldn't fight.

Perhaps that was why the others had left him there.

Perhaps that was even why they'd brought him—an unhappy thought that Agreeable had no time to dwell upon.

Anyway, what was there to be done about it?

When this was over, if he got out of the soup, he would return to the woods to stay with them and never ask why no one had stayed to help him.

That was his only real option if the bailiff didn't decide to make the punishment more severe this time.

Which he might. There had been some... mess.

“Was anyone hurt?” the man in front of Agreeable called out, still making no move to open the door.

Agreeable winced.

“Some stalls were knocked over. A good many bruises were had, I'm sure.” Betram seemed more thoughtful than angry. The bailiff, however, took the matter more seriously. Agreeable supposed that was what bailiffs ought to do. Couldn't blame the man for that.

“A priest's dignity was insulted,” the bailiff huffed.

Dark eyes seemed to sharpen. Agreeable would have been pinned to the door by them if he hadn't already been there. He swallowed and finally stopped his legs from trembling but had no answer, even if he could have spoken without being heard. He splayed his hands helplessly.

“Wouldn't your thief have run off by now?”

” the man called out again. Agreeable gazed at him in confused astonishment, noting absently that those eyes were a deep red-brown.

In daylight, they would be beautiful. The man might loop red ribbon through his curls and then it wouldn’t matter if he was not broadly, plainly handsome; he would be a jewel.

Not that his looks seem to be a concern to him at the moment, his attention on Agreeable, his words directed to those beyond the door.

“To the forest or some other near-lawless place?”

He had an accent like someone who did business in the capital or some other city full of nobles and trouble.

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“This one makes friends, in town and elsewhere.” Betram laughed. The bailiff did as well, hearty chuckles that made Agreeable shut his mouth.

He had not looked away from the man but was nonetheless startled when the man was suddenly before him and very close.

Agreeable was urged to the side before he had time to truly react, and stayed there, frozen and foolish, when his tall, dark-eyed, strangely mild captor stood in front of the door he had just opened, blocking all view of the room from the hall.

“I believe I saw some of the commotion,” the man remarked, not a hint of anything in his soothing voice. “I thought the thief was caught at the time.”

“Accused a priest of it!” The bailiff was outraged. “Then ran while everyone was leaping to stop the priest!”

Agreeable would swear his tall captor’s lip twitched, perhaps amused, perhaps trying not to comment. He didn’t spare Agreeable a glance, but Agreeable shrugged to indicate that he’d had no choice in the matter. And the priest had been fine. Even the bailiff had only been worried over his dignity.

Agreeable’s captor, or maybe, possibly, hopefully, his savior, raised his chin and murmured, “I certainly hope justice will be done, and wish you both well in the search for it.” He closed the door before Betram or the bailiff could react, then held up a hand, silencing Agreeable who was too stunned to speak anyway.

He tipped his head, clearly listening to make sure they were alone before he finally

lowered his hand.

He didn't give Agreeable a chance to think of what to say. "Why accuse the priest?"

"I was being chased," Agreeable explained with only a small moment of stuttering hesitation.

He realized he was gazing into the man's eyes and forced his head down.

"I needed a distraction. The priest was mostly a shroud of brown cloth some distance away. He could have been anyone at first glance." When there was no response, Agreeable looked up.

"I knew they'd let him go once they saw his face.

A few moments of trouble at most. And priests are supposed to forgive. They say so all the time."

One side of the sensible, generous mouth twitched up again. But only for half a moment. "Did you steal the coin?"

Agreeable was already shaking his head. "No."

The lip twitch did not return. "But you know who did."

Agreeable noisily caught his breath, glanced away, then glanced back up. "I didn't see it happen," he hedged.

"Who was the coin from?" A strange question. Agreeable wasn't sure that mattered, but had no choice but to answer.

“A different priest, I believe.” He mumbled it, then chewed his lower lip.

Dark eyebrows flew up. “Where did a priest get coin enough to steal?”

Agreeable scoffed like the fool he was. But the man was a stranger to the area, so perhaps Agreeable ought to explain.

Still, as he peered up, he tried to make his words harmless, true though they were.

“The priests have a large property here. They sell their excess crops to the Count. He favors them.”

The man frowned, a ferocious look for a jewel. It set Agreeable’s legs to trembling again. “The priests are supposed to give their excess to those in need.”

He truly wasn’t from the area. Agreeable nodded, then also shook his head. “If you consider it like that, we—they, the thieves, I mean—were just taking back what should have been theirs to begin with.”

The man narrowed his eyes, and his lips twitched up only to blossom into a full smile for one fleeting moment.

“Then the coin was taken to purchase food?” His voice held something in it that said he knew very well that was not the main reason the coin had been taken.

Agreeable gave him one, then two, suspicious looks, but answered. “For whatever is needed. Likely some ale too. Or are good times only for those who own land?”

That did not earn him a smile, but though he waited, the man showed no sign of outrage.

He glanced to the side, giving Agreeable a moment to breathe.

“It’s market week here for the neighboring towns, but I noticed the market was.

.. subdued.” He paused and stared back at Agreeable, who probably looked as lost as a fish in a field.

“That means quiet.” The man rolled one wrist. “I expected more sellers and a bustling town.”

“Oh.” Agreeable was only slightly embarrassed to have not known the word but resolved to use it in the future if he could. Subdued . Wouldn’t he be the fancy one? “It costs too much. There’s pretty things in the market but who’s the money to buy them? Or spare goods to trade?”

The man stepped back. Agreeable, as he had expected, was indeed pinned to the door by lovely eyes alone. His legs trembled again. It wasn’t with fear.

“If the priests are not sharing, then the local lords should be. They take vows when they claim their titles before the King.”

Agreeable raised his eyebrows. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“It’s written in the....” The man cut himself off and looked to the fire.

He had a plain-seeming ring on one finger.

His doublet had a collar, fastened with one loose button.

He wore no lace, and the fabric wasn’t printed or embroidered, but the button looked to be mother-of-pearl.

A wealthy traveler, then, likely a merchant.

“I apologize,” he spoke suddenly, leaving Agreeable speechless. “I didn’t mean to sound insulting.”

“‘S fine,” Agreeable mumbled, because he wasn’t insulted. “Don’t need to read to sow or harvest.”

Those eyes returned to him. “You’re a farmer?”

It was Agreeable’s turn to look at the fire.

“Used to be.” He let the memories go with a long sigh, then glanced back.

“The priests do a much better job with the land, if it matters to anyone. And a lot of those that used to work it serve in their kitchens now, which is easier, all in all. Except for the feast days. Priests do love a feast when they aren’t the ones preparing for it. ”

“So then where do...?” The man stopped himself again, and rubbed his chin as if not too long ago he’d had a short, fashionable beard to scratch when he felt thoughtful. “Does this lord allow hunting on the wild lands, or the gathering of wood?”

Agreeable snorted. It didn’t quite make the man smile, but it was more than a mere lip twitch.

Yet the eyebrows remained knitted in thought or displeasure. “Should I ask if he provides food from his farms? Or lowered your taxes to make up for your inability to hunt?”

“You ask questions you must know the answers to,” Agreeable observed, then



widened his eyes to appear innocent when the man's gaze sharpened.

"The tales are that our count has ambitions toward court, and wishes to invite the King, or at least the Duke of this region, here, and is planning to impress him with the vastness and wealth of his estates. Or so it is said."

Although the old Duke had died, so it would likely be another winter at least before the Count could convince the new Duke to visit. If he could. He'd never gotten the last one to visit. A bit sad, that. All his efforts and nothing to show for it.

Either Agreeable's answer had satisfied or the man had decided the truth on his own. He gave one short nod. "That explains why the market was not as busy as I'd expected."

"It all affects even the merchants too?" Agreeable hadn't thought about it before, but of course it would. He sympathized. "That's lords for you. What can you do?"

"Steal apparently," the man returned, dead serious as far as Agreeable could tell. "Until you are caught." Agreeable suddenly realized why the man was so serious. "And the punishment here? It's hanging in some places."

Agreeable awkwardly scratched the side of his neck, remembered the scarf was still there, and began to pet it as though it was a lock of hair, perhaps a lovely thick curl like this man had, but much longer.

"Sometimes that here as well. Or you lose a hand. Or an ear. Most often a beating. The bailiff might be merciful, in his way."

"Have you been beaten?"

"Cheeky," Agreeable answered without thought, then sucked in a breath. "That would

mean admitting to stealing and then another beating, unless I trusted you.”

The man crossed his arms. “I spared you just now.”

“And for what reason?” Agreeable met those lovely eyes and let himself tremble. Very fierce, the man was, all because Agreeable had possibly taken a beating or two.

But the man’s head went back as if Agreeable had surprised him. Not offended, not pleased. Only surprised. Agreeable sank against the door and puffed out a sigh.

The man scarcely seemed to notice. “I should demand a service, shouldn’t I?

That would be expected. Very well.” Agreeable nearly asked who the man was speaking to in his capital, courtly, noble voice, using such words and phrases, but didn’t get a chance to.

“I planned to eat in my room tonight. As payment, you will join me and tell me more tales of this lord and this place.”

Agreeable stared until he noticed he was staring.

He was lost again. “No one wants to listen to me talk,” he said without thinking, although he hadn’t believed his jewel of a merchant had been after a tumble.

The man had a way about him. And Agreeable was.

.. not handsome. Nor was he truly pretty, as lasses and some lads could be.

He was comely enough. That was what most said, with speckled cheeks, bright eyes, and a ripe mouth.

Even those that claimed they didn't like lads were inclined to have a go.

Agreeable was, well, agreeable . Friendly and very willing.

But people would ask for that before they'd want Agreeable's thoughts on anything. Maybe it was the dim light, or the scarf hiding his hair from view, so the man hadn't thought of a more obvious use for him.

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Or maybe the man didn't care for lasses.

Agreeable abruptly remembered he was supposed to be a lass, with a false bosom and a skirt.

A shame the lovely fellow wasn't interested.

Agreeable had always thought he would have done well as a lass.

A mouth was a mouth, after all, although perhaps a woman might get treated differently on her knees than Agreeable did.

Or perhaps not. Maybe this man would have been gentle with anyone.

Or perhaps not.

Agreeable reconsidered the man watching him muse about skirts and having his mouth taken, and felt himself grow hot beneath his clothes. Blushing like a lass now too. He gripped the ends of the scarf again.

"Don't you have to go take care of things in the market? Or talk with other merchants?" Merchants always seemed to do that, share meals and wine while clapping each other on the back.

"Merchants?" The man glanced down over his breeches and doublet. "No," he said slowly, "I'm not here to sell anything. I stopped to see the market."

“And paid for a whole room for just yourself?” Agreeable nearly screeched it, unable to be soft. “Spending like that without being concerned about profit?” He opened and shut his mouth. “How rich are you?”

He looked over the doublet and breeches again. He could see now that the cloth was likely fine, and dye in that dark of a black could not have been cheap. The cloth would have to be re-dyed often to keep that midnight shade.

“Um,” he added when the man didn’t seem pleased by Agreeable’s foolish questions. “I wouldn’t know if you told me anyway.” He wondered if he should attempt a curtsy but just bowed his head. “Coin in the sort of amounts you might be used to would make no sense to me.”

There was a long, deep sigh. “I apologize again.”

“That also makes no sense to me,” Agreeable admitted. “But if you want me to talk while you eat, then I can. However, I must tell you that I’m not someone people go to for knowledge.”

“Well—” the man uncrossed his arms “—I’ve found that I get more truth from people who have no reason to lie.

Oh, you have reasons,” he went on, that hint of a smile reappearing under Agreeable’s rapt attention, “but that’s to lie in general.

Not about this. Though you perhaps should have. What if I were a friend of your count?”

“I said nothing but the truth!” Agreeable blurted immediately, leaving the door to make his case, then stopping with a shiver. “Are you?”

“Never met him,” the man responded, unfurling his brow.

“Stay out of sight and be silent,” he ordered, and then went to the door again, this time slipping outside.

Agreeable fussed with his scarf, ensuring it was firmly in place, and then the man was back.

“The food should arrive shortly. You should... hmm.”

“I can hide behind the bed,” Agreeable volunteered. “Was it clear downstairs? Is the bailiff still around?”

“I didn’t go all the way downstairs.” The man turned away to consider the room.

The space behind the bed was really all there was for a hiding place.

“The bailiff and innkeeper seemed to know you well. They insinuated,” he paused, then used a word Agreeable recognized, “they hinted that they knew you well . That many did.”

Some didn’t like women who were widely known.

Agreeable was a woman at the moment. Well, he was and he wasn’t.

But some also liked to laugh at men who were widely known.

Some didn’t like men knowing each other—but those were usually Church followers, and Agreeable had seen the way some of the priests looked at each other, so he didn’t respect that even a little.

He shrugged though the man couldn't see. "I'm agreeable."

The small laugh surprised him. "Must be, to have drawn attention in the market even before the chaos you caused."

Agreeable cleared his throat. "I didn't cause all of the chaos."

"Your friends did," the man guessed, turned back to Agreeable at last. "The ones you're protecting. Though they left you."

"Well, that's.... They would have.... It's.

..." Agreeable tried to cross his arms and then had to worry over his bosom.

If he put his arms beneath it, he would be pushing it out like the creature of suspect morals everyone believed him to be.

He cupped the side of one cloth breast, looked up into intent, jewel-like eyes, and quickly dropped his arms. "They might have faced more than a beating."

"So might you have," the man replied. "They left you."

"Well, they are all that I.... They're friends. In a sense. So... so...." Agreeable lowered his shoulders. "It's no good to speak of it."

"I apologize if my words stung."

"You know they stung." Agreeable pursed his lips. "And it's funny, you apologizing to me. I'm nothing."

"Your friends, or lovers, are disrespectful cads if they've convinced you of that.

” The man smiled when Agreeable gaped at him.

It was not the warm smile from before. “That, I won’t apologize for.

Ah.” A knock on the door sent him in that direction, but he didn’t open it until Agreeable had scurried across the room to duck between the bed and the wall.

The bed frame was solid. The bedding quality.

Agreeable heard footsteps and voices and the rattle of crockery, but saw nothing except the ceiling of the room.

When the door closed again, he stayed put, and flushed hotly for no reason he could name when the man said, “Very good of you to wait, but you may come out now.”

Betram or someone from the kitchens had brought a small table and set it before the fire.

It was laden with dishes, a bottle, and a jug.

The food smelled like chicken with herbs.

The man made no move to tear into it, however.

He held out a towel when Agreeable tried to slip past him and leave him to his meal, then coughed.

It wasn’t a real cough, but rather a delicate one. “Forgive me, but I asked them for some hot water in case you’d like to wash up.”

“Bathed in the river two days ago,” Agreeable informed him, not with ill will, then



paused. “Hot water?”

The man gestured to the jug, which was steaming now that Agreeable took a better look at it, and an empty bowl.

Agreeable should have been embarrassed, but he was hardly a rich sort with the time and servants to arrange baths all the time. Especially with warm water.

“I did run around a lot today,” he allowed generously, pausing again when he noticed the sliver of soap waiting for him in the bowl. Between that and the heated water, he wasn’t going to waste his chance. “And the warm water is a treat, so thank you.”

He got a smile, a full one, fit to steal his breath, but then it was gone, the man stepping aside and turning to face the wall.

Because oh yes, they were a bit more shy than regular folk, the wealthy. Had their big houses with doors and many rooms and whatnot. And Agreeable was a good woman dressing to please the Church. That meant modesty.

He removed the cowl first, setting it carefully aside since it had been clean and on a wash line when he’d nicked it, like the rest of his clothes.

Then he washed his face and his neck, pausing to tie his scarf in place again, and then his hands, before giving himself a wipe beneath his clothes.

He didn’t think he was expected to fully undress.

.. although then he worried that he was.

And then that a bath did mean the man had a fuck on his mind, so he quickly splashed the last of the warm water into the bowl to scrub the rest of him as well.

In case, like. The man was a jewel and Agreeable was hardly going to say no.

“You’re on your way somewhere, then?” Agreeable asked while he scrubbed, keeping an eye on the man though he made no move to turn around.

Trusting. What if Agreeable was a liar and did want to rob him? What if he had a knife? There was one on the table, in fact.

That should not have warmed Agreeable even more, this fellow ready to have faith in him. It was only that he believed Agreeable to be a lass. That was all. That was why he was turned around as well, manners like a hero in a story, but because he thought Agreeable was a woman.

Of course, he also thought Agreeable was a thief yet was affording him the same respect anyway.

That did something strange and unspeakable to Agreeable’s insides. He tried to push past it.

“You’re on your way somewhere and stopped when you heard there was a market?” he pressed, staring with some dismay at the now-dirty water in the bowl. But at least his hands smelled of soap.

“Yes. I am due to return home.”

“And you’re not eager to get back there?” People could have many reasons for that. It wasn’t Agreeable’s business. But he got an answer.

“I love my home. But this time, the journey feels heavier. My grandfather died not long ago,” the man explained, stopping Agreeable with his hands over his mouth to enjoy the smell of the soap.

“I am sorry.” He truly was. The emotion in the man’s voice said he had cared for his grandfather.

“It wasn’t unexpected. But... he more or less raised me.” It emerged with a sigh.

Agreeable understood. “The place will be strange with him gone. A hole where he ought to be. With my da, it was like that. Of course, I wasn’t fit to manage a whole farm, and the Church claimed the land not long after that anyway.

So it’s more the memory of him now. And worry that he’d be upset with me for failing, even though there’s little I could do against a few bad years and the Church. ”

“I’m sorry.” The man bowed his head for a moment, and Agreeable realized he had a rosary in his pocket, part of the string of beads visible as he rolled them between his fingers.

Enchanted beads at that, glittering with blessings someone had paid well for.

“It’s like that, isn’t it? Loving them but also always wondering if we will do right by their memory. ”

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“ Well .” Agreeable frowned, wishing he had a rosary too, if only to play with something as he thought.

Maybe that was what the beads were really for.

“I didn’t know your grandfather, as you’d expect.

But you’ve been all right to me, so far.

Fair. More than fair, really. Kind as well.

So if that would suit him, then I’d say you’re honoring him all right. ”

The man turned as if to look at Agreeable, then seemed to realize what he’d done and turned back.

“Sorry. But... thank you . Thank you for saying that. He would have stepped in for you. It’s what I thought of when I did it.

And that no one with eyes like yours could be a very good thief.

You’re not even a good liar—and he would have noticed that too. So thank you.”

“Ah,” said Agreeable with his insides going topsy-turvy and his skin aflame. “I’m done, if you’d like to enjoy your meal now.”

He skittered back to sit on the edge of the bed, kicking his legs to feel the brush of the

skirt on his ankles and trying to keep his hands together in his lap. He left the cowl beside him. He was warmer now and the scarf ought to be enough to hide his short hair.

The man faced him again, considering Agreeable for several long moments as if a quick bath had changed Agreeable into someone worth staring at.

Then the man's attention was on the table and the food.

He hesitated before pulling the chair from the corner to put it in arm's length of the table, then took one of the plates laden with potatoes, chicken, and Betram's wife's somewhat burned rolls, and a fork.

Betram knew when he had a quality guest, no matter how simply the man dressed; he'd given him a fork. Agreeable debated asking for a roll when the man had finished eating, but kept his mouth firmly shut even while his stomach grumbled.

The man stopped in the middle of his first mouthful, which he had raised delicately to his lips with the fork, not once getting gravy or anything else on his fingers.

He swallowed, then gestured with the hand holding the fork.

"Help yourself. There is a plate for you as well. I wouldn't.

..." He paused for whatever Agreeable's face looked like.

"I invited you to join me for dinner, not to watch me eat. Unless you aren't hungry. ..."

"No, no. I'm hungry!" Agreeable didn't move except to extend his arms in a nervous, pleading sort of way. "I just didn't expect.... The butter too?" He nodded toward the

tiny dish overflowing with a slab of pale-yellow Heaven.

He first got a deep sigh for an answer, and then, “The butter too. Whatever you like,” in a warm, rich voice that would have had Agreeable trembling again if he hadn’t been so preoccupied to slathering butter over several rolls.

He didn’t shovel them all into his mouth at once because being around someone with delicate manners made him go slower than that.

But it was a struggle. He had two, exhaled and licked his lips with pleasure, and then would have been content but the man said, “Take a plate and eat your fill,” in that same voice, and Agreeable wouldn’t have been able to say no even if he’d had a feast day meal already.

He picked up a fork, for there were two, then set it down again. “I wouldn’t be as neat as you with it,” he admitted sheepishly. “And I’m too hungry to bother. I ran about a lot today.”

It earned him a small smile. “I’m sure you did. Eat. There’s wine as well, if that’s to your taste.”

Wine was also for feast days, or at least not for every day, despite the vineyards all around them.

Agreeable gave him a smile between bites of potato and more butter, and was so distracted by the taste he nearly forgot the purpose of the dinner aside from turning an empty stomach into a full one.

“What are you called? Or, if you are concerned with the truth getting out, what should I call you?” The man cleaned his plate but didn’t reach for more, except to take a small sprig of grapes and eat them one by one, delicate even with no forks

involved.

“Agreeable,” Agreeable said absently, then flinched, for that name would surely get him caught if the man revealed it to anyone.

The man raised his eyebrows. “That wasn’t a joke earlier? That’s what people call you?”

“Um.” Agreeable hadn’t even had a drop of wine. “Some do. It’s not cruelly meant. Well, not for all of them, I expect.”

“But for enough of them.” The man slowly inclined his head. “And villages are small. And you attract notice.”

“I do?” Agreeable stopped, then focused on his plate, using another buttered roll to clean up the gravy. “Should I call you anything?” He peered over. “It doesn’t have to be your true name, either. I could understand not wanting to be connected to me.”

The man leaned over to pour himself half a cup of wine and took a drink. “My name is Holburn.”

A warm name.

Agreeable nodded. “I thank you for the meal, Holburn, as well as the protection.” He didn’t mention repayment.

He had only one thing to offer and that didn’t seem to be wanted.

Holburn had asked for something else. “My ma might call you a good man,” Agreeable informed him.

“She works for the Count. Most from my village do now.”

“Why not you too?” A sensible question.

Agreeable shrugged. “I’m not trained in the ways of a grand house, and I was taught to farm, not to cook or smith or anything useful in a home.”

“All of you in the same situation, then? You and your not-thief friends?”

Another sensible question. Agreeable couldn’t be angry about it.

“You’re a sharp man, too. Your grandfather raised you well. And yes, I suppose that’s so. Where were we to go? We can be hired for the fields, but that’s not year-round, is it? And it’s a strange thing, tending to fields that used to be yours.”

“I imagine it would be.” Holburn had another sip.

“Eat and drink your fill. Don’t worry about me.

” Agreeable nodded and helped himself to more bread and gravy and a small bit of wine.

“Now,” Holburn continued, “you could be trained for work in a grand house. Not to offend you, but many lords and ladies prefer to have staff who are pleasing to the eye. Though I suppose there’s some danger there. ”

“Pleasing to the eye?” Agreeable sat up. “Am I?”

He received a puzzled frown. “Surely you knew that, if you are so sought after.”

Agreeable stared at him and then away from him, to the fire. “No one’s ever said. It’s



more that I'm there, you see. Pleasing?" He looked back. "Am I really?"

"Yes." Boldly stated, although Holburn did not go on to say why. "Your friends are true cads, exactly as I first named them."

Agreeable started to argue, but had nothing to say.

He poked at his plate, the gravy-soaked hunk of bread, then tore that into small pieces to try to eat as delicately as possible.

When he was done, he put the plate on the table, had another sip of wine, cleaned his hands on the damp towel as if he were a good and well-mannered lass, and sat back.

"I don't know what else to tell you of the Count.

I've only seen him in passing, or heard whatever my ma or his other servants have said. "

"Does he treat them well? Pay them properly? Reward years of service?" Holburn tossed out questions quick as lightning strikes. "Do his guards act well? Does he start fights with his neighbors? How was he with the Duke of this region?"

"I guess you'd need to know all of that if you wanted to do business here," Agreeable mused aloud, although he frowned as he thought it all over.

"His pay is all right. Though I don't know what I'm supposed to compare it to.

I do worry what will happen when Ma gets too elderly for the hard work of the kitchens.

Though I try not to think on it, because where am I to house her?

I've no house at all. Just a place in the woods under a tree. ”

Holburn scowled. It was the least jewel-like he'd been so far. Agreeable had an urge to smooth away the scowl with a gentle touch. He'd seen a woman do that once. She'd been seated on her sweetheart's lap while petting his frowns away.

“So, you don't feel he's treated you or anyone fairly.

” Holburn declared it with confidence. Agreeable had said no such thing but it had perhaps been in his heart.

“And I can't say that you're wrong. Not if there is a village's worth of people living without houses while the Church has extra coin at his say-so. And this is to impress the Duke?”

Agreeable shrugged again. “So they say. There's been no visit from the Duke in my lifetime. And no invite for the Count to go visit him. Not that I've heard of.”

Holburn continued to scowl. “And the punishing of thieves with beatings or worse also goes on, despite the obvious cause?”

“Obvious cause?” Agreeable stared without blinking. “You are likely very wealthy, so perhaps you can escape most consequences. But you should be careful when you say such things.”

Holburn's scowl deepened, then slipped away as if it had never been. “I didn't mean to worry you, Agreeable. I apologize.”

Agreeable opened his mouth but only a strained squeak emerged. He coughed and tried again. “You keep apologizing to me.”

“I do not say that everyone in the country is like me.” Holburn spoke as softly as Agreeable.

“I only say that things in the rest of the country are not as they are here. And I am sorry you haven’t known that, and that you have lived such a life.

Although you have stayed honest—as honest as an accused thief might be—and worried for the life of a stranger, and sweet in your manner.

If that is the doing of your parents, know that I think they are proud of you. Or should be.”

Agreeable drew in a breath and then could not speak. He lowered his head and stilled his kicking feet and finally let the breath out. “I will never be the same after that, Holburn.”

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“Should I apologize again?”

Agreeable hesitated, then shook his head. “Is it truly different elsewhere?” That was a less upsetting topic, though only slightly.

“Depends on the nobles and the region. The King doesn’t want anyone else to be too powerful and demands visits from his Dukes a few times a year.

But mostly he leaves each Duke to rule their regions as they see fit.

Some closely follow the Church, some leave it to itself but pay it little mind.

Most would not care about some peasants with no homes—but some would.

And some would be greatly bothered by a Count with plentiful wealth that has not been shared with his people—or with the Duke and the King as it should be.”

“That makes more sense, then.” Agreeable felt a bit of his tension leave him.

“Nobles mad at other nobles over money. That seems like something they’d do.

With us as an afterthought.” He stopped, guilty, then remembered it was Holburn, who twitched his lips into a familiar half smile.

“What do you think of the Church? Begging your pardon if you’re one for deep faith. I clearly am not.”

“Why would you be, when all you know of faith is what has been taught to you by greedy priests?” Holburn said another startling thing, then shrugged.

“I am not privy to inner workings of the Church itself. It helps some, and when they share their resources as they ought, the Church is a good thing. But I also think most people are fine and moral when left to their own devices. God and the heavens are the sphere of priests and their mages. I am far more interested in the tangible—touchable—world around me.”

“Touchable is a good word.” Agreeable considered it. “And tangible as well.” Another new word. He repeated it in his mind so he wouldn’t forget it.

Holburn twitched another smile. “You learn well, no matter what you might think of yourself. You should go to a lord’s house and ask for work. They can train you. You might need a different name, however.”

Agreeable crossed his arms and felt his foot twitch in a kick. “You’re saying I should leave this place.”

“If they won’t help you or take you seriously here. But I only say it’s something you might do, if you like.”

“You say things like that and...” Agreeable stopped himself and wrinkled his nose.

That made Holburn smile for some unknown reason.

“There are roads,” Agreeable said instead.

“I’ve wondered about them. I suppose I just dreamed that everywhere was the same.

But it must not be, because you came from somewhere, and you’re not like anyone

here.”

Holburn’s eyebrows flew up but he sat very still. Eventually, he put one hand to the side of his face. “I think you made me blush,” he murmured as if amazed. “Good girl.”

Agreeable’s foot kicked out again, his limbs suddenly full of jitters and the scarf prickling around his neck as if he was too hot.

He looked away. “I’m not so good.” His voice sounded strange, soft and hazy. “I like being had, remember?”

He looked back when there was silence.

“That is not a sin, no matter what they might tell you,” Holburn said when their eyes met.

“And even if it were, they are supposed to offer you love and forgiveness. Anyway,” he continued while Agreeable’s throat locked and his eyes stung, “that is only one way. The older ways still live on where I am from. And those in the capital do as they please. As long as you strive to be a kind person, then rest shouldn’t matter.

That’s what my grandfather always said.”

“I think I will say it now too, if you don’t mind.” Agreeable wiped at his cheeks, which were thankfully dry, then fiddled with his skirt. “You’re not a usual sort of person.”

“I’ve been told that,” Holburn answered dryly. “Very appealing to some, less so to others. To most, if I’m honest.”

Agreeable thought Holburn was very appealing, even if Holburn hadn't struck him as handsome in the first moments of seeing him.

"Did you have anything else you wanted to ask me? About anything at all?" he wondered, reluctant to move and not only because of what he might face downstairs.

"I can tell you about fishing. Or mending. Or how to dry herbs. Don't imagine you have much use for that sort of knowledge.

Everyone here already knows those things, of course. But I've not much else to offer."

Holburn put his elbows on the arms of the chair and steeped his fingers. He looked a little silly that way but also half a step away from prayer. Agreeable realized the posture meant Holburn was thinking, so didn't comment, waiting for him to speak.

"May I ask you a very personal question, Agreeable?"

Agreeable nodded without worry. "I've no secrets."

He remembered he had a fairly large secret only after he'd said it.

Holburn met his eyes again. "Do you have anyone... I mean, do you have anyone different from the others? Someone special?"

"Like a sweetheart?" Agreeable shook his head. "No one would, knowing about everyone else."

"Hmm." Holburn hummed again. "I assure you that some would. Some are even rather fond of such people, and such arrangements. You might even find those people someday."

“If I leave here.” Agreeable understood. “People who don’t mind, ah,” he tried to think of nicer words but had none, “what a keyhole I am? Who might even be fond of that?”

“If that’s what you’d like. Or if you wanted some other sort of arrangement... I assure you the world holds all sorts of people.”

“More people like you?” Agreeable wondered, almost shy.

Holburn threw his head back to laugh as if delighted. “Don’t think I’m perfect simply because I was nice to you.”

“Are you not nice, sometimes?” Agreeable didn’t mean to smile back at him, or to make his tone warmer, but he thought anyone would have done the same in his place.

“I can be a cold bastard.” Holburn smiled again.

“And I can be a devil, or so Aliette has said when in a temper. But to most I am not anything. A stranger at best. Perhaps a thoughtful employer, or someone who as a child once nearly got stuck up a chimney—I was trying to escape the nursery—and sent the whole household into a panic, and they’ve never let me forget it. ”

Agreeable imagined Holburn with soot and ash all over his face and his fine clothes and laughed himself silly.

To gentle that, when his laughter had faded, he offered a small story.

“A friend and I made our own cider once, when we weren’t more than thirteen years.

Fell asleep in the fields and were sick for days. People still jest about it.”



“Ah, to be young again.” Holburn sighed as though he was ancient. But then, he was taking on his grandfather’s house and his work. That would put a weight on anyone’s bones.

“They like you in your household, at least.” Agreeable was certain of that. “You’ll be among friends.”

“You are a sweet creature. If I were in the capital, I’d have to suspect you of trying to trick me or flatter me falsely, but we are here, and you are Agreeable, the honest thief.” Holburn continued to show delight.

Agreeable glanced down—a demure lass in spirit—and then up again. “Don’t need to lie to steal.”

He liked earning smiles but he enjoyed earning laughter more. “You’re right. I apologize. You are Agreeable, honest and true.”

“I’m not entirely honest,” Agreeable had to admit.

“And I can be a cold bastard,” Holburn returned.

Agreeable shrugged. “I don’t think I mind.”

That was maybe a little too warmly said, but Agreeable wasn’t much good at hiding things.

Here he was, halfway to offering himself for a tumble—again—and only barely remembering that he was supposed to be a woman in time to stop himself.

Anyway, whether or not Holburn wanted a woman, he didn’t want Agreeable.

He accepted how Agreeable was, but that didn't mean he wanted him.

Her , Agreeable corrected himself, then paused. Him , even if the way Holburn called him a good girl had made his cock plump.

He looked away and cleared his throat. "Do you think it's clear out there? Or that maybe enough people are downstairs that they won't notice me?"

"No. But there is another small staircase at the end of the hall leading to the privies. If you turn, there is a path that leads outside if you need another exit."

"You are too helpful." Agreeable huffed and fiddled with his skirt again, thinking that he ought to have stolen an apron as well, and then that fiddling with his apron when flustered was something his ma used to do when his da would call her lovely or bring her a posy of flowers.

"If they catch me, I won't mention you."

"If they catch you, I will hear about it." Holburn's smile left him at last. "Are you going to go, then?"

"Well, I'll try." Agreeable chewed his lip, then got to his feet. "Thank you again for the food. And the rescue, sir."

"Why did you stay in town?" Holburn wondered, rising to his feet as well. "Why not just run away?"

"They were after me, and I figured I'd go through town and take the long way back to the woods. Only everyone kept noticing me."

"Yes," Holburn agreed, "you draw the eye."

Agreeable could feel himself blushing like a maiden and didn't know what to do with himself. He ducked his head and wobbled toward the door on trembling legs.

“See, now I don't know what to make of that,” he confessed with his gaze safely on the door. “But I should stop troubling you. You travelled, didn't you? You must be tired. And I took half your food.”

“I ordered more than I needed.” Holburn was close at his back. His tone was amused, but when Agreeable reached the door and finally turned around, there wasn't even a hint of a smile at his mouth. “Be careful. I'd hate to hear that something had happened to you.”

It was the kind of thing that Agreeable would have liked to have heard from one of the lads. He nodded. His voice was tight. “You'll do well at your home. I know you will. You're a respectful person.”

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“Am I?” Tall as an oak again, Holburn could have reached out and trapped Agreeable against the door.

Agreeable tipped his head up to look into eyes of warm red-brown one more time. “You’re kind.”

“I am not.” Holburn didn’t look away. “Not always.”

Agreeable stilled his trembling as best he could and lowered his head again as he reached for the handle. Then he slipped out from under the arm Holburn had raised to lean against the doorframe and opened the door to peer outside.

One of the large, armed figures from earlier slouched against the wall at the top of the stairs leading to the first floor.

Agreeable quickly shut the door and spun around. Startled, Holburn stepped back and withdrew his arm.

“A guard,” Agreeable explained before Holburn could ask. “Damn my luck.”

“A guard?” Holburn repeated with a small frown and a darted glance toward the door. “But not the bailiff?”

“No. Not wearing any colors either, but I know a guard when I see one. Maybe the Count heard of the situation and offered his guards to help the bailiff. Him, or one of the other local lords.”

Holburn stared at Agreeable for another moment, then gently urged him to the side in order to crack the door to look out as well.

“Hmm.” He closed the door without a sound, then paused before looking to Agreeable.

“I see what you mean. Now, now.” He put one hand to Agreeable’s shoulder, only for a moment, but Agreeable sank on his heels and closed his mouth to wait.

“I have a suggestion.” Holburn paused again but Agreeable continued to wait, flushing when this made Holburn twitch another half smile.

“In consideration of your safety, I’d recommend that you wait here for the night, and in the morning, we’ll better consider situations for you. ”

“What? No.” Agreeable shook his head while he was still able to refuse such a lovely offer. “Betram will lock the doors in a few hours. I’ll have to slip out before then. And I’m not going to bother you more. What if they accuse you of helping me?”

Holburn glanced to the side and twisted his lips in a funny little grimace. “I don’t think that will happen. And... I should say, that guard might only be there to guard some other visitor and have nothing to do with you.”

“But he might also have everything to do with me. And if they’re that angry, maybe this time they’ll hang me.”

“So they did beat you before.” Holburn pinned Agreeable to the door with a furious look.

Agreeable opened and shut his mouth. He exhaled through his nose. “That doesn’t matter now.”

“Beating or hanging, you’re better served staying here tonight and allowing me to help smuggle you out in the morning. Now, be a good lass and go sit in the chair while I think this over. Have some more butter.”

“You’re not a lord, you know,” Agreeable said, already breathless as he crossed the room to help himself to the last roll and a generous smear of butter before plopping into the chair by the fire.

“Hmm,” Holburn said again, considering Agreeable with an unsettling amount of attention.

“Unless you are hiding coins and spices in your clothes, they have no proof you’ve done anything.

But proof doesn’t matter to some. To them, reputation and appearance matter.

Therefore, you have no chance with them but you have a chance with me.”

Agreeable stopped with a dollop of butter at the side of his mouth. “Sharp, aren’t you?”

“I told you I wasn’t always kind.” Holburn nodded as if he’d settled on a decision.

“You stay here for now. Have the bed. I’ll take the chair.”

“Daft.” Agreeable surprised himself by saying it and also by how little he was surprised by Holburn’s suggestion. “Giving up that fine bed for me when I can have the floor. The fire is warm enough. Warmer than moss and leaves, to be sure. But aren’t you worried I’ll kill you in your sleep?”

Holburn scoffed. “Rob me, perhaps, but not kill me. And with robbery, you’d have trouble getting rid of anything you took from me.

This place is too small. They'd find it, and you, only too quickly.

For something like that, your count might even be motivated to search the woods.

And I doubt he'd care which thief he caught. "

That enchanted rosary alone would call for such a search. And Holburn was right about the Count's response.

Agreeable made a face anyway. "Sharp again."

"Regrettable at times, but yes." Holburn was an oak in manner as well; hard and stubborn. "You are a guest. You will take the bed."

Agreeable glanced to it. "It is soft, I'm certain. But could I sleep in it? Will I sleep at all with the bailiff on my mind? I think not. So you will take the bed you paid for, and if you truly feel that I deserve the rights of a guest, I can take one of your blankets here in this chair."

Holburn tilted his head down and to the side. "So you are not always agreeable."

Agreeable arranged himself in the chair like he was in a church pew: back straight, hands together, feet nearly on the floor. "You have already gifted me much and you deserve your sleep. This will do well for me."

"I was worried I would trample over your desires." Holburn gave in with a frown and then a sudden, rueful smile. "Yet I remain irked that you are not so easily trampled."

"I can say no." Agreeable kicked his feet again. "I just like to say yes."

"So you've said, or hinted." Holburn sat on the edge of the bed to consider him, then

bent over to remove his boots. “But if I may, perhaps reconsider saying yes to those who left you to swing.”

There was that.

Agreeable wrinkled his nose. “I see your meaning. But sometimes I get an itch and there’s nothing for it but to let them all have me.” He sighed it.

Holburn’s second boot thudded to the floor. “All of them?” He stared over through his curls. “At once?”

“In turns.” Agreeable sighed that too. “They aren’t all good, but some are. And it helps the itch. But you’re right. They did leave me. They couldn’t have saved me, but they could have warned me what they were planning at least.”

“At least.” Holburn moved on to the buttons of his doublet, baring the white chemise underneath and part of his throat.

“You’re calm about it, them having me. Or quiet, if not calm.” Agreeable had expected that and yet it still stole his breath.

“If you ever attend a party in the capital, you’ll understand why.” Holburn stripped off the doublet and walked to the bureau to leave it on the top.

“Does no one listen to the Church?” Agreeable asked, a little faint to consider what Holburn was not saying, but maybe also for the loose sway of Holburn’s chemise around a chest more substantial than the color and cut of his doublet had suggested.

Holburn laughed while removing his belt. “They listen. Most just do what they please when no priests are around.”



“Do you?”

Holburn didn't scold Agreeable for the question. He merely shrugged and sat on the bed to remove his breeches, leaving him in his chemise and stockings. Agreeable ought to turn away as Holburn had done. He didn't.

“I have in the past,” Holburn said, as if answering another question entirely, or feeling that he must be careful, as if Agreeable would mind his true answer, whatever it was. “And do still, on occasion. Though I suspect I won't have much time for that anymore.”

He was too cautious. Now Agreeable had a new sort of itch to discover exactly what Holburn had done at capital parties or elsewhere.

“Do you have someone? Someone special, as you said?” He didn't frown as he asked, but he did smooth the skirt over his knees a few times, needing to do something with his hands.

“Yes. She also likes to tell me no. Says it's good for me to hear it from time to time.” Holburn didn't sound angry about it as some men did when women stood up to them.

“She may be right. I don't imagine many would tell you no. You're very persuasive.” Which might be why some thought of him as a devil. Agreeable enjoyed the idea. “You must be a danger at those parties of yours.”

“Of mine?” Holburn scoffed lightly, but met Agreeable's gaze before twitching another smile. “I don't know what you mean.”

Lying was supposed to be a sin too, not that Agreeable cared much about that.

“And she doesn't mind? I suppose she mustn't,” Agreeable reasoned aloud, “since

you said she tells you no when she pleases to. Oh.” Agreeable jerked upright. “Does she join you? Aren’t you worried over children?”

“Precautions are taken,” Holburn said, scandalously unconcerned with his words.

But then, he’d have the funds to pay a mage, if he found one that hadn’t been dragged into the priesthood.

Mages could arrange such things, or so Agreeable had heard.

That was alleged to be sinful as well, although Agreeable had yet to hear any priest explain why.

And like most things, what was sinful for villagers and farmers wasn’t all that sinful if a person had enough coin or land to their name.

“Is she lovely as well as strong-willed? As lovely as you?” Agreeable gripped handfuls of his skirt tight enough to hike it up past his ankles. He forced his hands to relax. “I mean, well, you are a jewel. But you must know that.”

Holburn stopped at the side of the bed. “I’m an oddity, a lumpy dark pearl. But jewel sounds much better. Thank you. And no, Aliette is far lovelier than I am. A beauty and a wit, and for some reason, fond of me.”

Something twisted in Agreeable’s chest but did not hurt. There was only a sort of pressure, like a held-in sigh.

“Two jewels, then.” Agreeable bobbed his head to show how fine he was to hear that.

Holburn dragged a blanket from the bed and brought it to him. “If you insist upon the chair, then here is your blanket. Will you stay the whole night?”

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“I....” The blanket tumbled onto Agreeable’s lap, giving him something to hold to as he looked up.

Part of Holburn’s chest was visible where his chemise’s laces were open.

He was pale, as one might expect from someone who had never tilled a field.

His chest hair was dark. Agreeable forced his gaze up.

“I will try. But if it seems safe, I’ll go. I don’t want to trouble you more.”

“And I think that’s foolish, but short of tying you to the chair or the bed, I have no way to stop you.” Holburn turned away, his chemise very thin in the firelight, and Agreeable was left dry-mouthed and breathless as Holburn returned to the bed to get beneath the remaining blankets.

He sat with his back to the headboard instead of lying down, but arranged the blankets and closed his eyes.

“Will you sleep sitting up like that?” Agreeable wondered in disbelief.

“Will you?” Holburn returned without even cracking an eye. “Are you wrinkling your adorable nose at me?”

Agreeable reached up to still his nose, just in case he had been, then poked the end. Adorable ?

“I am exhausted from riding most of the day,” Holburn went on, keeping his eyes shut despite the thief in the room with him.

“But I’m not quite ready for sleep. Tell me, if you don’t mind, how long have you lived as you do?”

Wait.” He blinked his eyes open. “How old are you? I’ve been guessing no more than nineteen. ”

“Twenty-one years,” Agreeable corrected him, not offended. He wasn’t small but he was a light-boned thing, rather like a bird. “And it’s been near five years, I think.”

“What about winters?” Holburn pressed, then tossed his head. “It’s probably better if you don’t tell me now. I’ll never sleep.”

“You’re a strange one, Holburn,” Agreeable told him, fond and not hiding it.

“The Church has a roof.” Holburn was stern. “They should be allowing parishioners in need to sleep under it. Someone ought to remind them.”

“Unless you are a bishop, I don’t see how you can ensure that.”

“I can know a bishop,” Holburn grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest. Agreeable must have heard him wrong.

He gave Holburn a long study but Holburn only glared back.

“I can also say that the nobles who own the lands here are supposed to grant you care as well. That was the bargain made centuries ago.”

“Was it?” Agreeable wondered, attempting to be polite so Holburn might calm and

eventually sleep. “Perhaps they have forgotten or cannot read where it was written. Do all nobles need to read?”

“Are you teasing me?” Holburn didn’t uncross his arms. His lower lip looked to be inching out, making him seem a touch sulky. It was no wonder his Aliette thought he needed to be told no now and then.

“Are you going to challenge the Church, the Count, and every local lord?” Agreeable smiled, no less fond to learn more of Holburn’s strange stubbornness.

“Exhaust yourself for no reason? Small kindnesses in the face of that are enough, I think. They’re all anyone could do. More than most would bother with.”

“Teasing.” Holburn slouched into the pillows between him and the headboard.

“I suppose I am.” Agreeable considered it. That would be daring, or foolish, with anyone else. But the sulking jewel in the bed did not feel like a threat. “You should speak of other things if you want to get any rest. You could answer my questions. I want to know more about your capital parties.”

A silence fell between them, with only the crackling fire to break it until Holburn exhaled long and slow. “Yes, there were some like you there.”

Agreeable jerked with surprise at having his question guessed before he could voice it, then yanked the blanket up to his chest. “What do you mean?”

“Some who are very agreeable.”

The sudden tightness in Agreeable’s throat didn’t go away as he grew hot. “In all finery? Among tables laden with meat and fruit? On beds as nice as that one?”

“Nicer.” Holburn was back to holding Agreeable still with his attention alone. “Larger as well. Is that a dream of yours? To be a centerpiece at such a party?”

Agreeable wasn't quite certain what a centerpiece was but center told him something. “I don't know. Maybe. Or....” He would have bitten his tongue with anyone else. “It's more the idea of it. I've no notion what that might truly be like. It's hardly the lads by the fire, is it?”

Holburn made a hoarse noise, then cleared his throat. “And I've no notion what the lads by the fire are like, although I can make some guesses.”

He undoubtedly could. If his guesses were ‘rough and sometimes regrettably quick,’ then they were right. Nothing said the wealthy would do any better, though their beds might be softer.

“Is that all you like?” Holburn carried on, as if this was more restful talk to him than the Church's failings.

Perhaps it was. Agreeable was the one bunching the blanket in his lap as he considered Holburn watching as Agreeable was had multiple times, in the woods or anywhere else, and then deciding that, should such a dream ever come to pass, Holburn should be the first and last to touch him.

“It's all I'm like to get,” Agreeable informed him huskily. “No one has ever hinted for anything else.”

“Asses,” Holburn declared, certain. “Do you even like being called Agreeable?”

Agreeable opened his mouth. “No,” slipped out before he could think on it. “But, Holburn, you've got to stop sticking up for me. I don't know what to do with that.”

“All the more reason to keep doing it,” Holburn informed him with his nose in the air, and oh, Agreeable had a moment of sympathy for the lovely Aliette. It would take someone smart and beautiful to keep Holburn out of trouble if he was always like this.

“They aren’t so bad, the lads,” Agreeable tried again. “You have an odd view of them, that’s all.”

“Do they steal with use of force as well? Or is it only nicking coin and spices from market stalls and priests?”

Once again, Agreeable found himself about to speak and then saying something he hadn’t intended to. “Not yet.” He clenched his hands. “That is, they can be rough-like with drink in them, at times. But bashing travelers is not their way.”

“ Yet ,” Holburn added.

Whether or not the action was adorable, Agreeable wrinkled his nose. “Surely the fault lies with the Count and the Church, then, if what you say is true.”

“Clever girl.” Holburn uncrossed his arms to point at Agreeable. “They won’t see it that way.”

“No.” Agreeable briefly worried his bottom lip. “Since you asked, how old are you ?”

Holburn gestured loosely, the movement impossibly graceful. “Too young to many. Eight and twenty if it please you. Shortly to be nine and twenty, but still too young for what I...” He stopped there. “Does it matter?”

“My ma says men don’t grow out of their foolishness until they have some grey in their hair. But she says that about most lasses too.” Agreeable was forced to admit

that to be fair to the absent Aliette. “But I suspect you’d be a danger at any age.”

“A danger?” Holburn scoffed, half turned away, then glanced back. “I’m just a man.”

Agreeable doubted that very much. A man comfortable enough to speak as he did must occupy a strange but powerful place in the world.

If Agreeable were in a folk tale, Holburn would be a king in disguise.

But even a disguised king would have guards, and certainly wouldn’t have fed Agreeable in exchange for information.

A king wouldn’t have needed to exchange anything.

He would have demanded. At least, based on what Agreeable had seen of other lords, a king would.

Agreeable kept his thoughts of fairy stories to himself, but then spoke foolishly anyway. “If you are a just a man, and I draw the eye, then why didn’t you take me up on my offer of payment?”

He nearly bit his tongue, although he was certain now that Holburn had read Agreeable’s desires and had chosen to ignore them. Holburn was too clever to have missed them. But embarrassment made Agreeable glance away before their eyes could meet.

“That wouldn’t have been payment.” Holburn was quiet.

“It would have been extortion.” He blew out a vexed breath and then spoke again before Agreeable had looked back at him.



“It would have been taken through force, even if it didn’t seem so.

” He explained extortion , but still didn’t make any sense, which might have been why he went on.

“Your choice was a beating, losing a hand, or hanging, or allowing me to use you. Do you see?”

Agreeable had wanted to be used, but couldn’t manage to get the argument out with hanging still in the air. “I suppose it was,” he allowed, “as you say. This extortion .” He tripped only a little over the word.

Holburn swept onward like winds before a storm, as seemed to be his way. “And your friends, your lads. Would you be welcome among them if you were not so agreeable?”

“You don’t want to approve of them,” Agreeable grumbled under his breath. “They all are.... If I were a better thief, or a better hunter, certainly I’d be welcome. Probably even without that.”

“ Probably .” Holburn was dry as dust.

“I see what you’re saying,” Agreeable informed him, because he did and he was full of feelings with no name that he knew. “But I really don’t mind.”

“ I mind.” Agreeable’s stubborn jewel insisted. “I’d rather not have someone merely agreeable . Or, if I did hire someone, I’d want it to be an exchange done honestly and not done out of fear of pain or death.”

He was frustrating . He either made sense or he could convince Agreeable of anything.

“Not exactly flattering, is it?” Agreeable would grant him that much. “To be only a choice slightly better than death?”

“No.” Holburn eased back against his pillow. “So you understand now? No insult was intended.”

## Page 8

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Agreeable kept his grip on the blanket over his lap.

“I wasn’t insulted. But...” He worried his lip for another moment.

Holburn had flattered him. He ought to try the same.

“From the start, I was thinking of you and ploughing. It wasn’t a hardship to offer.

Are you going to try to sleep now?” He rushed out the question before Holburn’s silence could go on any longer.

“I should.” Holburn didn’t sound pleased by the idea. Maybe he thought sleep wouldn’t come easy.

Agreeable’s wouldn’t. Partly that was due to worry over trying to sneak away later. But mostly it was realizing that Holburn had considered fucking him and had wanted to, even if he had believed it wouldn’t be right to do so.

Even hotter than before, Agreeable threw the blanket over the back of the chair.

“You’re like priests should be,” he decided aloud, marveling at this fact but also annoyed by it.

“And prettier than most of them.” His insides were quaking at the thought of Holburn wanting to do right by him while also wanting to tumble him.

“I could help settle your mind, if you like. Because I want to. Because I have wanted

to. Since you first got me against the door, I did.” Holburn’s heavy focus was making Agreeable’s head swim.

“I imagined using my mouth on you. That’s more than just being agreeable, isn’t it?”

Holburn sat there, burning at Agreeable from across the room, but didn’t move.  
“Yes.”

Agreeable felt a frown start to form. “You still don’t—oh.

If you come to me , you still won’t be sure.

And if you tell me to go to you , you have the same problem.

” He reasoned it out loud, confused and trembling inside for Holburn’s strange, good notions and for what Agreeable was going to have to do about them: he would have to go to Holburn and perhaps state his desires again.

He might not have ever done that, with anyone.

Holburn was dangerous, opening Agreeable up to new ideas like this.

But instead of continuing to shake like a scared rabbit, Agreeable rose, smacking the palm of one hand against his thigh to help banish the weakness carrying all through him.

“That you’re concerned... it’s doing things to me.

” He revealed it breathlessly once at the side of the bed, already moving to put a knee to the mattress.

Then the soft give and the fine blanket stopped him and gave him a new worry, and he dropped to the floor to remove his shoes.

His cheeks flamed when he stood back up, but Holburn was smiling.

“I could have taken care of any damages.”

Agreeable shook his head; he could be stubborn too.

But then Holburn tossed aside the blankets over his lap and his chemise was thin enough to show how much he liked the idea of Agreeable in his fine, soft bed with him, and that was something too.

Something to make Agreeable briefly press his thighs together like an excited maid on her wedding night.

Oh, plenty got hard before having a go with him, but for whatever hole he offered; never from anticipating him like this. Holburn wanted Agreeable here as much as he wanted Agreeable to desire him in return.

Agreeable clambered onto the bed, knees catching on his skirt so he fell onto hands and elbows with his face nearly planted onto Holburn's thigh.

It scarcely slowed him. Agreeable brushed aside the scarf ends now impeding him and burrowed beneath the linen of the chemise to get as much cock in his mouth as he could.

Holburn hissed, a wonderfully surprised sound as if even he hadn't expected Agreeable's eagerness.

He wasn't all-knowing and wise. He was just a man as he'd said, tugging his shirt up

with one hand while reaching for Agreeable with the other, swearing words no man of faith should know when Agreeable shifted farther onto the bed to take his prick into his throat and feel the tickle of short hairs against his nose.

Holburn neither pushed him down to keep him there nor hauled him back up. His hand clenched and unfurled over the top of the scarf, and then he sighed and said, “Eager creature. If I were in your lads’ place, I would take this every night.”

Lust spiked in Agreeable’s belly, dripping heavy into his blood like candlewax.

He pulled back to catch his breath, his head at Holburn’s hip, although he couldn’t say if Holburn had urged him to lie like that.

He felt Holburn’s touch through the scarf, soft and appreciative. Agreeable’s eyes stung.

“Good girl?” he heard himself ask, shivering despite the heat because even saying it himself pleased him although he didn’t know why.

Holburn could have pushed him back to work at his cock and Agreeable would have welcomed it, but his quiet tsk and thumb at Agreeable’s cheek kept Agreeable silent and near-content.

Holburn put his fingers to Agreeable’s lips, which Agreeable parted for him to remind him his mouth remained empty.

Yet Agreeable didn’t complain at the slight intrusion.

He sucked on the tips he was given and was generous with his tongue and attention.

Whenever Holburn withdrew them to trace his lips or to tease him, Agreeable waited,

strangely calm, mouth open, for them to return.

“Do they take your mouth or do you use your mouth as you please?” Holburn wondered, wet fingertips finding the freckles over the bridge of Agreeable’s nose.

“Either,” Agreeable managed to answer, although the truth was more the first than the second.

They got impatient to spend, or didn’t want some of the others to think they enjoyed it as much as they did—because it was Agreeable, and not because it was simply a mouth.

But Agreeable was a good mouth, he realized, working his tongue along Holburn’s fingers when Holburn offered them again.

He could have been good for them if they had wanted it.

He licked, and sucked, and waited when he was expected to wait, slowly curling down onto the mattress to better rest against Holburn’s hip.

He’d meant to be used, and still shuddered to imagine choking, his eyes wet, Holburn’s hands at the back of his head holding him down.

But this was new, and good, and worrying.

He wouldn’t be the same after this, Agreeable realized all over again, and pulled away from Holburn’s fingers to whine at last.

“I meant to offer my mouth as home for your cock,” he explained, although his throat was tight now, and the words were strained, and Holburn undoubtedly knew why Agreeable had come to his bed.

Agreeable had walked knowingly to his fate, though tame foxes ended up in snares.

A sad end, he'd always thought. They were beautiful things, for all the trouble they caused.

"Beautiful." Holburn startled him with that word nearly as Agreeable thought it. "Is that all you wanted to offer me? A home in your mouth?"

Agreeable shook for Holburn to see and feel. "I want you to have me." He would have felt no shame to say it to anyone, but especially not to Holburn, who would not be surprised and might even be pleased.

Warm and dangerous, Holburn moved, and Agreeable, dazed and unsteady, was on his back on the bed within moments, Holburn settling over him.

Holburn was good and hard now, excited at the thought of a fuck, and Agreeable rolled his hips to feel the pressure of Holburn's cock against his through his skirt.

A heartbeat later, he stuttered to a stop, his eyes wide and fixed on Holburn as Holburn raised his head to study him.

Holburn's curls were askew. Agreeable didn't remember touching his hair and started to reach up to sweep the curls from Holburn's face but then stopped again, his hand in the air between them. He dropped it when Holburn moved back onto his knees.

Agreeable swallowed. "Let me explain."

Holburn put his hands on Agreeable's ankles, first over the skirt, then below it, pushing the skirt slowly upward as he moved his hands to Agreeable's knees.

He looked into Agreeable's eyes as he did it, not even glancing away when he



smoothed his palms over Agreeable's quivering thighs or as he urged them farther apart.

Agreeable, still trembling, obediently bent his knees to grant Holburn more room, but his chest was tight.

"Holburn."

Under the skirt, Holburn traced the length of Agreeable's cock, not once but twice, and then again. "Good girl."

Agreeable closed his eyes and moaned. He turned his head but lay there shivering as his skirt was lifted and his legs arranged to fit the man between them.

"I'm not." A foolish thing to argue when Holburn could see and feel that for himself. "Not a girl."

"Then what are you?" Holburn had a sure, firm grip, like a man who often had other men and knew what to do.

Agreeable panted as he opened his eyes. "I'm a lad.

A good lad. A good boy." His hands were restless, first holding to the mattress, then tugging at his dress.

He was hot and the bodice was tight, and his clothing still trapped beneath that rubbed against his nipples.

He wanted to feel cool air on his skin but also offer the rest of him to Holburn's hands and his warm gaze.

Like a milkmaid in a barn tumble, he was, skirt up, bodice down, but with no breasts to bounce and push up toward Holburn's hands.

"But I..." Between that idea and the work of Holburn's hand on his cock, he couldn't think.

"I like it when I'm your good lass. I can be your good lass. Please, Holburn."

He tugged the bodice to the side, yanking at the front lacing until he was close to ripping it. Holburn stopped him with gentle touches and then a kiss brushed across his mouth.

"Careful," Holburn warned, pulling on one of the laces to loosen it for him. "Bare yourself for me while you wait. Can you do that for me?" He bestowed another kiss on Agreeable's mouth when Agreeable nodded forcefully.

Agreeable didn't even consider why he would be waiting until Holburn was off the bed.

By then, the bodice was gaping and Agreeable was tossing his hidden breeches and shirt to the floor.

He cupped his breasts—no, not breasts, for he had a flat chest. But many women had those too, and his nipples liked the attention, and he thought he ought to feel shy and maidenly with his dress like this, and his knees up, and his prick red and standing.

He was anything but shy when Holburn returned to him, kneeling between his thighs without any further bothering over whether or not Agreeable wanted this.

He stroked Agreeable's cock again, watching Agreeable react as though the sight was enough for him, although Holburn was hard as a post too.

He said not a word about Agreeable thumbing his nipples but he watched intently.

And when Agreeable finally had to stop or shake apart right then, Holburn left off caressing Agreeable's prick, and smiled down at him, knowing and pleased.

"Beg me again."

Agreeable didn't hesitate. "Please. I need you to."

"Good lass," Holburn answered easily, strangely slippery hands caressing the inside of Agreeable's thighs and then pressing against his hole. "Good lad," he added, in a softer voice, fingers teasing when they could have been taking.

He pushed his fingers in while Agreeable was still shaking from the praise, and it burned as it always did, but then also, it didn't.

Agreeable took Holburn to the knuckles with startling ease, and tossed his head back to frown in confusion but didn't protest. The wet feel was all over his thighs and dripped to his balls.

He'd make a mess of the fine bedding, but Holburn had promised to take care of any damages.

He'd said so, and therefore, Agreeable could be a mess for him as Holburn must want him to be— her to be.

Agreeable didn't know which he was or wanted to be more, but didn't care which when both made him ache.

"Please." He had been told to beg, and he liked it, even liked that Holburn laughed and quietly reminded him that Agreeable was supposed to be hiding in this room.

Holburn's laugh was lovely, and he was getting Agreeable wet before he ploughed him, and he needn't have bothered but it felt good.

Agreeable laughed breathlessly back at him and returned to touching himself, biting his lip so he wouldn't moan too loudly.

He had been taken rough-like many, many times, and liked it for most of them, even the times he was sore after.

But he was Holburn's good lass for the night.

A good lad with his cock in his hand and his knees bent, and she was dripping wet and empty so she said it again.

"Please. Holburn, I can take you. Please."

Holburn shushed him again with a kiss to his knee that startled Agreeable into silence.

But Holburn took Agreeable at his word, and entered him in one slow, sure drive forward, a slick hand on Agreeable's hip to hold him when Agreeable shut his eyes and ground out a raw, shocked noise.

The taking was easy and yet it still surprised him.

Holburn kissed his mouth until Agreeable's eyes opened. He was a wondrous but strange man. A jewel who could have Agreeable however he wished.

Something Agreeable told him in a whisper against his lips. "However you like. I will stay and be yours until I am sore. Until I can't move and they will hang me."

“No.” Holburn, the very devil, kissed him again. He left Agreeable to whimper. “That they will not do. But you will stay and be mine, Agreeable.”

“Remi.” Agreeable closed her eyes and accepted another kiss.

They were no longer soft kisses but they had the same effect on her insides.

He squeezed his thighs around Holburn and Holburn shifted, rocking gently into him and making him gasp.

“Remi, please. I am not agreeable now. You must see. I want you.”

“Remi,” Holburn agreed, tugging the scarf down to bare the bird’s nest of Remi’s short brown hair, then pulling one of Remi’s legs over his shoulder.

Remi scrambled to get a hold of him, fingers sliding over delicate linen until she was nearly clawing at shoulders of oak.

“Remi,” Holburn’s voice was smoky, “are you ready?”

Remi nodded before opening his eyes, although he would never be the same. “Now, please.”

“Anything for my good girl.” Holburn set him afire with words, roughly kissed his open, hungry mouth before Remi’s startled moan reached the ceiling, then began to fuck him as though Remi was entirely for his pleasure.

As though that was Remi’s pleasure too and he knew it.

As though Remi was his for the night, and he would make proper use of his girl. Of him. Of Remi .

Remi turned his head to moan into the back of one hand. He left the other at Holburn's shoulder, grip tight in his chemise, and held on.

He would never be the same.

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## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:16 am*

A greeable woke to the absence of damp air and birdsong and knew where he was before he opened his eyes.

The mattress was soft beneath him, Holburn breathed quietly in and out behind him, and Agreeable was as well-used as if all of the lads had had him.

Well, all of the lads with a mind to be good at fucking.

He was also naked, and yet still warm. The fire hadn't died in the hours he'd slept, although it was low.

He wondered if Holburn had risen to add logs to it in when he hadn't been spreading Agreeable's legs to have him again or pressing Agreeable down while Agreeable had whimpered and hadn't spent and loved every moment of it.

Holburn had no right to be such a force. He'd never know what he'd done to Agreeable.

To Remi , Agreeable thought reverently to himself in the growing light of dawn.

The town would be waking up soon. Betram or his wife would have been up to use the ovens for some time. The doors would be unlocked, the hallway likely empty. Agreeable should go while he could.

He rolled his aching body to the side of the bed and slid his feet to the floor. He had marks along his thighs but no slippery mess or dried seed. Had Holburn cleaned him too? When Remi had told him to use him as he pleased, he hadn't intended that.

Remi glanced over his shoulder to study the line of Holburn's back.

The chemise had disappeared in the night.

Holburn was pale as a lord. His skin was smooth, Remi remembered, but didn't allow himself another touch.

He turned to consider the clothing scattered across the floor and smiled despite himself.

The dress was a simple matter to slip over his head, the laces a bit more complicated with how Agreeable had disturbed them last night.

The scarf was on the bed, but he snatched it up and had it in place before he found his cowl.

He took some of the grapes for his breakfast and ate them as he watched Holburn sleep.

They would never meet again. That was certain and for the best, for Agreeable was foolish, and there were only so many dreams he could talk himself out of.

In the world as it was, Agreeable would die in the woods or on the gallows someday, hopefully with a few coins to leave to his ma, and Holburn would perhaps marry his Aliette and return to the capital.

Holburn had given him a few hours of something else, and that was a blessing, even if it not one any priest-mage would consider making.

Agreeable swallowed the last of the tasteless grapes and made himself move to the door.



He cracked it open to peer down the hall, met the startled gaze of a large, armed figure standing next to another large, armed figure, let out a sound rather like a toad that had been stepped on, and shut the door.

He turned and was across the room trying to unlatch the window when an arm crossed his chest, another arm wrapped around his waist, and he was lifted from the window without any fuss or apparent strain.

It wasn't right that Holburn had an oak's strength as well. Agreeable surrendered without contest, and when his feet were placed on the floor and Holburn spun him around to face him, he looked up helplessly.

"There are guards outside the door," Agreeable whispered in dismay.

"They saw me. I'm sorry. I'll tell them I kept you here by force.

Do you think they'll believe that?" He considered Holburn's shoulders with concern and distracted lust. "Holburn," he worried aloud after that, pausing to bite his lip, "will you stay to watch me hang? Will you find my ma and tell her I'm sorry, if that's not too much trouble?"

"Shh." Holburn squeezed Agreeable's upper arms as if he thought Agreeable needed the help to stay on his feet. He leaned down to buss Agreeable's brow with a kiss and a tickle of a stray curl. "Good lad. Breathe for me. Stay there and catch your breath."

"They could come in at any moment," Agreeable warned, voice rising. "You're naked. The priests won't like that if they learn of it. The two of us. They frown on that, official-like."

"You're a freckled angel." Holburn shook his curls from his face. "Breathe, I said. You're going to be good for me and breathe."

Agreeable nodded, although he had been breathing. Too fast, but he had certainly been breathing.

“Now stay here. There’s no way out the window anyway, unless you want to break a limb, which would get you nowhere.

” Holburn cautiously took a step away, then exhaled wearily before glancing around.

He had his chemise over his head in the next moment and was already grabbing his breeches.

Thus dressed, if looking nearly as tired and tumbled as Agreeable did and holding his pants up with one hand, he pointed at Agreeable to remind him not to move, then walked barefoot to the door.

“Won’t even get another fuck before I die,” Agreeable mumbled, but couldn’t truly complain, for his last night on earth had been wonderful.

Holburn turned around to scowl at him, and then he was swiftly and furiously crossing the room just to stop in front of Agreeable and tug the cowl from his head.

Holburn took the scarf next, although that he merely pushed down to Agreeable’s neck so that he could put a hand to Agreeable’s cheek and stare at him.

“ Stay ,” Holburn ordered again, sounding as though Agreeable had annoyed him, yet his hold was gentle.

Agreeable reached up to take hold of Holburn’s wrist, then felt foolish and grabbed the ends of the scarf instead, soothed to have the soft cloth between his thumb and forefinger.

“Are you a lord?” Agreeable wondered breathlessly, not truly expecting an answer. “You act like one, I think. But not like the ones here. Yes, I’ll stay,” he answered at last. He would do whatever Holburn wanted, even if Holburn would never know that.

Holburn pushed out the same weary breath as before, muttered what sounded like a prayer, then marched to the door.

He opened it enough to put his head and shoulders through and spoke quietly to whoever it was on the other side. The guards, likely, but possibly Betram. Agreeable shifted from foot to foot but was where he’d been told to stay when Holburn closed the door.

Holburn rolled his shoulders before he turned.

“Now, answer me as honestly as you can. As honestly as you did last night in my bed.” Holburn paused, leaving Agreeable to clutch the scarf and nod. “Who do those clothes belong to? Or do you wear a skirt all the time?”

“Miller’s wife.” Agreeable glanced down to his shoes, which were his. “Was drying in the sun with the scarf. No apron. I should have had an apron.”

Holburn scraped a hand through his curls, tutting absently when his fingers caught in a tangle. “So we need to return the dress,” he decided aloud. “And get you something else that will fit you.”

He moved quickly, passing Agreeable to get to the small chest by the bureau, which he opened to root through. Agreeable was hit in the face with a chemise and a pair of short breeches made of cloth so fine that he squawked in protest.

“I can’t wear those! I’m not trying to be one of the Count’s pages!”

“A page.” Holburn stopped, hose or stockings dangling from one hand. He closed the chest. “I can’t give you a pair of my long breeches. I’m taller than you. Take the dress off, if you please.”

Agreeable yanked on the lacings he’d worked so hard to get right and tossed the false bosom of his forgotten clothes onto the bed.

Holburn was there to help him tug the dress over his head this time, as he had done in the night.

That Agreeable remembered, because his naked flesh had been explored thoroughly before his ass had been ploughed again.

Holburn had asked if Agreeable—if Remi, had wanted him to call it his cunny, and Remi had spilled from the very idea and then hoarsely told Holburn to call it whatever he wanted as long as he filled it.

Their eyes met once the dress was gone. Holburn’s lip twitched, but he didn’t smile or lean in for a kiss. He handed Agreeable the stockings, and Agreeable shook himself into action to remove his shoes and stumble into stockings that were lighter than air.

“Oh, you must be a lord,” he murmured as he stroked his calves to better feel the stockings against his skin. He nearly jumped into the air when Holburn dropped to his knees to do the same.

“Sorry,” Holburn offered, breathing against Agreeable’s knee while his hands wandered.

“I have a taste for pretty people wearing pretty things. Especially when the pretty things are mine. Aliette uses it against me often.” He ran his palms up and down

Agreeable's calves, then sighed and reached for garters Agreeable hadn't seen him grab.

He tied them himself, lingering at his work.

Shaking and flushed, Agreeable slipped the chemise over his head. It was too large, but floated into place because it was as fine as everything else.

"If I don't get dressed now, they will come to arrest me and find me under you," he informed Holburn with regret.

"Then we will both be in trouble, for this is not the capital." Though Holburn would likely have to endure a scolding at most, and maybe give money to the priests for some new building or other.

A sigh was his first answer, and then Holburn rising to his feet and leaving Agreeable to manage the breeches himself.

Agreeable finally tucked the chemise in and wished for a belt, although wasn't sure he'd be free long enough for it to matter.

When he reached for the scarf, Holburn stopped him with a hand on his.

"Keep that. I'll repay the miller's wife. But you should have that. It's what you liked the most about your disguise, and it comforts you."

One hand indeed already petting the ends of the scarf, Agreeable raised his head. "You see too much." He wasn't complaining.

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Holburn shrugged in a vaguely rueful sort of way. “And it irritates many. But not you.” He opened his mouth as if about to add something else, then paused. “You are just as pretty as a lad, you know.”

“Am I?” Agreeable was a fool but he was a happy one. “Spotted and skinny as I am? With my hair a nest for birds?”

Holburn took a deep breath. “Remi,” he said seriously, stopping again when Agreeable stared at him, thrown to hear his real name in the daylight, from someone other than his ma. “Agreeable,” he corrected himself, “will your friends come looking for you if the bailiff doesn’t find you?”

Agreeable ought to say yes with confidence. If he did that, Holburn might believe him. But Agreeable had agreed to be honest and moreover, he wanted to be. “Likely not. It wouldn’t be wise to.”

Unsurprised, Holburn nodded. “Good,” he declared, giving Agreeable a start.

“The staff at my home are nearing the age where they might prefer their pensions to running such a large estate, and their number is insufficient regardless. So I will need a page of my own. The house will eventually need more, of course, but I personally will also require one. And if you were to leave this place, you would need a position, would you not? You were thinking of it last night, even if you thought such a position out of your reach.”

“What?” Agreeable continued to stare at him.

“I was thinking of mucking or scrubbing. A page? In a house grand enough to have many pages? I wouldn’t know how.

I’m rough as they come. Oh.” He pulled tighter on the scarf.

“Do you mean in exchange for you using me some more?” It was tempting, to be sure.

“Is that what you want?” Holburn was nearly the stranger from the night before, watching Agreeable carefully and undoubtedly noting all that Agreeable did not say. But whether or not he noted it, he would expect Agreeable to say it aloud.

Agreeable put a hand to his hot cheek. “Well, I wouldn’t mind. You were quite good.” A dream Agreeable was going to carry with him for however long he had left. “But I know nothing of any of life in a big house. And servants will gossip like all people.”

“There is training and education required for any job.” Holburn waved one worry away.

“If you can go from farmer, to thief, to fisherman, from lad, to lass, and back again, you can learn how to fetch and carry, and mostly stand silent and listen. Many people ignore servants and often talk freely in front of them. I’d like to know what they are saying.

A page I can trust is worth a great deal to me. ”

“Ah.” Agreeable chewed his bottom lip and did not object even a little when Holburn gently tugged his bottom lip from between his teeth for him. He peered up. “You need that for business and such, do you? And the rest? The other servants will learn of it sooner or later if you’re making use of me.”

“They will learn of many things, but most of them won’t care.” Holburn’s lips twitched into a full smile. “But for others, and in public, discretion—distance—and a servant’s manners would be required, yes. In private, my lovers often use my name. I prefer that.”

“Do you have many?” Agreeable heard himself asking, like someone who had entirely forgotten the danger around him. That was probably Holburn’s fault. The only danger now was Holburn, and whatever wild ideas he had that Agreeable would go along with because they had all satisfied him so far.

“Is that judgment?” Holburn asked with faint surprise.

Agreeable shook his head. “Some covetous longing now that you’ve had me and I know the pleasure offered.

But it’s only right that others should know that pleasure too.

As long as... when I am trained and your page, if you tire of using me, you won’t toss me from the house, will you?

No.” Agreeable answered himself with a sigh.

“You might send me someplace else, but you wouldn’t leave me to starve in my nice page’s clothes. ”

Holburn studied him for what felt a long time, but was perhaps only a few heartbeats.

“Some call me a devil, but there you are, thinking me better than most because of a few hours in my company. Faith in others, in someone, should be rewarded, or so my grandfather always taught me. Now I must save you, though Ali will tease me for it. As I suspect you will too, in time. Allow me to dress and then perhaps I can find you



a cloak. Tomas might have a spare. You'll need something with a hood until we're out of the town. ”

“Are we leaving?” Agreeable asked, not alarmed, but thinking of his ma and having no chance to get to the Count's to tell her his fate. “To go to your home?”

“Eventually.” Holburn sighed heavily, weary again.

“First, I must visit your count. I stopped here to see the market while I waited on the arrival of my wife.” He narrowed his eyes there, and though Agreeable tried to seem unbothered, he must have failed, because Holburn's lips twitched—downward this time.

“I did mention Aliette, but perhaps I wasn't clear.

And” —he gestured with one hand, the simple ring there winking in the rising light—“farmers wouldn't wear rings for marriages, would they? Silly of me to forget. I apologize.”

The ring was for marriages. Agreeable made sure he would remember that. If he was to work in a rich man's household, then he would certainly encounter more married rich, and he would need to know those sorts of details.

His head swam at the idea of all he would need to learn.

“Are you sure?” he pressed. “You're going to have to make so many allowances for me. And what of your wife? Whatever happens at your capital parties, no wife is going to allow someone like me into her home.”

“Aliette is not overly concerned with the running of a household. She has Hilde for that.” Holburn moved away, apparently to get his belt from the day before and then to

find another one for Agreeable.

“I don’t understand a whit,” Agreeable admitted freely. “You seem devoted. So why isn’t she with you now?”

“She likes to travel in a carriage and I prefer to ride.” Holburn shrugged but Agreeable wasn’t sure he believed the gesture now.

Not from Holburn, who was anything but careless.

“And I wanted to see these lands for myself first. Something my grandfather used to do. Worrying his guards endlessly, I’m sure.

” Holburn combed his curls with his fingers, then gave Agreeable a study.

“But Aliette has a keen eye, and she sees what I don’t. Her opinion is better than gold.”

Agreeable bobbed his head and smiled. “It’s nice to see a man respecting his wife’s opinions and freedoms, even if you do take lovers.

Although you said she is a part of that, so.

.. so....” Agreeable lost his smile. “Are you really sure about me? I’m a hole at best, and you are very fine, and she is a jewel like you.

I could be a simple page if you wish, or stay away from you in the stables or a garden.

I could stay away from her as well, if I would bother her.

Or should I attend to her and pretend I have never called you Holburn?

I don't want to be trouble. I never have. "

Why that should bring Holburn back to him to pet his wild hair, Agreeable didn't know, but stood and trembled for it.

"If you mean as a page, attend her as is a page's duty.

" Holburn cupped Agreeable's chin and considered him with entirely too much warmth and satisfaction when there were guards outside the door.

"If you mean anything otherwise, attend to her as pleases you... and her." Holburn grew thoughtful. "Do you enjoy women in that way?"

Agreeable gazed warily up at him. "Yes, but that is... only as a thought. No good lass would have anything to do with me. If there was to be a babe, they wouldn't want to end up married to someone who has given all the lads a turn."

Holburn scoffed. "It's just as well. You are not meant for such a life."

"I'm not?" Agreeable was still in Holburn's hand. He didn't want to move from it.

"If I took you to the capital, many, even those I consider friends, would try to lure you away with sweetmeats and silks. Perhaps even diamonds. I could do that for you, if you'd like. Introduce you to them. Though I'd warn you to save the diamonds for the future."

"What do you do with diamonds?" Agreeable wondered, since he'd never seen one.

"Some wear them." Holburn's smile was the sort to give Agreeable flutters.

“And look beautiful, or foolish, depending on how. Aliette looks a queen in hers.” He smoothed a line between Agreeable’s eyes.

“She is not a queen. Don’t frown and don’t worry.

” Agreeable didn’t get a chance to ask why he might worry.

“But... I should tell you that my wife’s name is actually Luisa-Therese Aliette Elsibet du Albin, Duchess of Dharmin, Countess Lascarin, as well as a bunch of other titles you don’t need to learn yet. ”

“Isn’t a duchess the wife of a...?” Without finishing the question, Agreeable startled out of Holburn’s hold and fell down to sit on the edge of the bed.

He was faint. His legs were wobbly, but this time it had nothing to do with lust. He realized he was sitting in the presence of a duke and shot back to his feet, continuing to wobble.

“Am I allowed to sit around you?” he asked, voice rising all over again.

“I took some grapes from your table this morning!”

“Remi.” Holburn met his panicked stare and spoke firmly. “Eat all of the grapes. It’s fine.”

“I thought you were a merchant.” Agreeable gulped. And a king. He had thought that too. He hadn’t been far off. All of him was shaking now. “Oh, you are the Duke, aren’t you? Our duke?”

“I didn’t want people to know. Not until after I met the Count. It’s what I’ve been doing, as Ali and I make our way to my home to take official residence. Are you

well? Would you like some wine?"

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:16 am*

“The young Duke.” Agreeable put his head in his hands, then jolted and looked up. “I spoke ill of the Count!”

“I asked for your honesty.” Holburn moved forward, sliding his hand into Agreeable’s hair until Agreeable was somewhat calmed. Only a few touches were all it seemed to take with him. “I prefer honesty. But not in public, for obvious reasons. Only when we’re alone.”

“Right,” Agreeable agreed dizzily. “What about in front of your guards? Oh, damnation, those are your guards outside the door, aren’t they? I stayed here all night hiding from guards who didn’t care about a thief?”

Holburn cleared his throat. “I didn’t think a meal and a night by the fire would do you any harm. I was planning to help you in the morning before you ever climbed into my bed, if you recall.”

“You are as sneaky as a thief yourself.” Agreeable shivered for the gentle touch behind his ear. “And a good fuck. And a duke. The Duke. Don’t you have servants enough already? And lads or lasses aplenty to put in diamonds?”

“In my house in the capital, I have servants of my own. No kept lads or lasses.” Another brush of Agreeable’s ear followed that.

It was a compelling, unmanaging sort of touch.

Agreeable shivered and shivered. Holburn watched him and burned.

“My family home has servants, but as I said, most are older, and nearly all of whom watched me grow up. Including those guards out there. I would prefer someone who is mine.” Agreeable stopped breathing.

Holburn hesitated, then resumed petting him.

“Someone loyal to me and not the Duke or the estate. Someone in my employ only.”

“And in your bed?”

Agreeable’s honestly confused question brought the return of the twitched half smile.

“You approached me,” Holburn pointed out.

“I didn’t seduce you.” But he took his hand away and the pets with it.

He raised his chin and went as distant as a magistrate.

“You are probably used to exchanging services, but a page has a pay they receive for page duties. In addition, you would receive a little extra for spying, as long as you are loyal.” He said it as if some had not been loyal to him.

Agreeable couldn’t imagine how anyone wouldn’t want to be his.

“You wouldn’t receive payment for what is done in bed, if you chose to return to mine.

That’s not what I offer you now. Although I think.

.. no, I know that I will be tempted to give you gifts.

But I understand if that does not appeal, or if you don't want to leave your friends.

You're more used to their attentions?" Some of the distance left him as he peered down, studying Agreeable very closely.

"You are agreeable with all of them, you said."

"Yes, but..." Agreeable shut his mouth to think. Holburn must have guessed that, because he stepped back and returned to dressing. He also went to the door to speak to his guards again.

The guards had known Holburn was hiding a thief in his room. Or at least that he'd hidden a woman. Who was now in the clothes of a man. And soon would be a man in the clothes of a page. Although the guards would still know. Everyone would know.

But once out of this area, he would no longer be Agreeable. He would be only Remi.

Agreeable watched Holburn lace his boots. "You're going to take me into the home of the Count?"

Another shrug that Agreeable had thoughts about. "He's a thief too. Anyway, he won't question me."

Agreeable had been questioning him, he suddenly realized, only to fall silent when Holburn shot him an amused look. He saw too much but it spared Agreeable from another stumbling apology and a fit of worry.

"And your wife? You should be kind to her, sir... my lord?" Agreeable's worry was about to return.

"Your Grace," Holburn answered then slowly shook his head.



“Only in public. Holburn in private. Do you know how precious you are to fret over Ali’s feelings?”

You’re thoughtful of these things in a way that suggests you have been in a loving household.

You’re quick, and loyal, and you’re sweet-looking, whether lad or lass.

Trust me a little more and accept that you don’t need to worry over how Ali will feel about you. ”

Agreeable stared at him for far too long and then felt his jaw go slack. “You’re insinuating that she likes lasses, your wife? The Duchess, I mean. Her Grace. Lasses as well as lads?”

Holburn cracked a smile. “You might have been a good farmer but you were wasted as a thief, Remi.”

“You didn’t answer my question.” There Agreeable went again, questioning a duke. He bit his lip. Holburn crossed the distance to again spare Agreeable’s lower lip the pain.

“Aliette likes what she likes,” Holburn informed him gently. “But you are not obligated to visit any beds you don’t wish to.”

“That would be more of your extortion?” Agreeable didn’t see it this time, but already knew if Holburn explained it, he’d believe every word.

A tap on the door prevented Holburn from answering. He called out, “Come in,” as though Agreeable, as a boy, wasn’t on his bed in his clothes.

Two guards entered, one holding a steaming pitcher, the other with a bowl of pears and bread. Both of them glanced to Agreeable, then away. One of them winked at him.

They were both older, as Holburn had said. One probably a decade older than Holburn, and one with a head of snow-white hair. They were also so very handsome. Agreeable hadn't noticed that yesterday.

Holburn's gaze was lit with amusement when he saw Agreeable staring, although Agreeable quickly ducked his head.

Holburn was as clever as the most educated priest. Perhaps even cleverer, for he went around in the world and learned its ways.

Agreeable looked back up to watch him and hardly noticed the guards closing the door behind them.

Holburn, lips curved up, took a roll and brought it over to him.

"I will shave momentarily. Would you like to as well? We'll have time if Aliette found a distraction."

"Did she travel all night?" Agreeable asked around bites.

"Oh no. She stayed at a nearby home, a friend of hers. You should know that I lied to you, slightly."

"I lied to you last night." Agreeable sighed. "I can't be mad about your fibs."

"You didn't lie. Not really." Holburn seemed fascinated by the sight of Agreeable eating. "Aliette does take an interest in the running of our household, but not as

sternly or strictly as some. She will allow for your training. So don't worry about that, please."

Please , he said. Being a duke who said please only made Holburn more dangerous.

Yet Agreeable felt the need to reassure him. "If I don't work out and end up in the stables, I won't mind. Do your guards truly not object to knowing you lie with men? Or that your wife might know others?"

Holburn was briefly a sly cat. "You will find that not even the Church objects much to what lords get up to. But Tomas and Von are familiar with my ways."

Agreeable forgot to finish eating. "Have you... with them?"

Holburn tapped Agreeable's hand to remind him of his food, then said, "I don't make a habit of fucking servants. Well, not my own."

"Extortion again," Agreeable said wisely, chuffed to have used the word with more ease. "And I do not count?"

"You weren't my servant when you came to me." Holburn sighed in contentment once the roll was in Agreeable's belly. "But if you prefer, I can keep you, diamonds and sweetmeats and all. You would have no page duties."

His calm voice seemed almost false with his gaze still burning.

Agreeable licked his lips to rid them of crumbs. "You warned me to save the diamonds if another should keep me. Because you think I would eventually have no keeper."

"Most keepers eventually tire of those they keep. I suspect those people might."

Holburn said it insistently, as if he worried that Agreeable thought himself unwanted.

Agreeable supposed he had reason to think that way.

“Most do tire of me.” Agreeable couldn’t argue it, even if it made Holburn frown.

“Or at least pretend to,” he added, though it did not lighten Holburn’s displeasure.

Agreeable considered him and his not-beautiful face and felt a rare spark of anger for those who thought Holburn was a devil.

He was the angel in the room, to Agreeable’s way of thinking.

Fearsome, as well as a warning, even when he brought good news.

“Please don’t frown,” he went on gently.

“Your advice is wise. I think I would rather learn the ways of a fine house and have those skills if I should need them later, and let you use me as you please for fun. Besides, if you have no one there loyal to you, then I can be that. That’s worth more to you than any fuck, isn’t it?

And I want to help you if I can. I want to. ...”

He wanted to be Holburn’s, but kept that to himself just in time to keep from sounding a fool.

Holburn smiled widely and leaned down as if to kiss him. “A jewel for a jewel.”

Agreeable tipped his face up to meet him, but froze at the quick, low knock on the door. Not even a heartbeat later, the door swung open.

He got a glimpse of the guards in the background, eyebrows raised but looking carefully elsewhere as they closed the door after the woman who strolled in without hesitation.

She was the Duchess, almost certainly. No one else would be so sure of their welcome in Holburn's room, but she was also dressed as no one else in the surrounding villages dressed.

The wives of the lords or the Count's mother might wear their finest when amongst each other, but not when they travelled or passed through the villages.

And yet Agreeable was also sure these clothes, no matter how well-made, were not the finest this lady possessed.

## Page 12

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Her cloak was brown and reached the floor.

It looked to be warm indeed, though dirtied at the hem and with a sprig of greenery stuck in the cloth.

She had a length of shining blue fabric, almost the color a robin's egg, around her head instead of a hood, and beneath the cloak, she wore a dark blue bodice with a white chemise peeking through—which also had a sprig of greenery in it.

The twig only drew more attention to the plump bosom that spilled over the top of the bodice.

The lacing there was intricate, but what drew Agreeable's gaze down was when the Duchess moved and the wide, dark blue skirt split to reveal dark blue breeches.

As if she wore skirts and breeches together, or as if perhaps, she had wanted freedom to ride, though Holburn had said she preferred carriages.

Agreeable had seen one or two women in breeches in his life—that was, women who wore them when out in the public square or markets. To everywhere but church. But never anything that seemed designed to confuse a priest.

The Duchess had eyes only for Holburn and had nearly reached him before she stopped to stare at Agreeable.

She had light hair, not as pale as hay but more like honey, that spilled out from underneath the loose covering of blue, and big brown eyes, and... a streak of dirt

across one cheek.

Between that and the twigs and springs of green, she had the appearance of someone who had been scrumping. But she was a lady. A lady wouldn't need to steal apples or quince. A duchess certainly wouldn't bother.

A duchess. Agreeable remembered himself and jerked away so he would not look as if he had been waiting for a kiss from her husband and then jumped to his feet.

Uncertain, he considered bowing before he remembered his skirt and tried to hop into a curtsy like some of the milkmaids did for people like the bailiff.

Then he remembered he wasn't in his skirt and bobbed down in what he hoped was a proper bow.

"Did you have a good visit with Marie?" Holburn asked his wife, calm and unhurried, as though his good lady wife wasn't staring at the strange lad wearing her husband's clothes. "Where is Hilde?"

The Duchess swung her attention to her husband, pulling her lovely scarf back and brushing a few strands of hair from her eyes. Her hair had probably once been braided or twisted and pinned. It was windswept now, and... contained even more greenery.

"Hilde is downstairs getting a meal. I love Marie to bits, but her cook leaves something to be desired." She said that with her gaze straying back to Agreeable, but then her focus was all on Holburn.

"And you? I was going to ask if your journey was uneventful, but..." She gestured gracefully at the air in front of Agreeable, or perhaps at the rumpled bed behind him.

“I suspect my grandfather would be amused.” Holburn’s answer didn’t quite make sense to Agreeable, but the Duchess gave Holburn a wry look. She was not beautiful, not as Agreeable would have expected from how Holburn had described her. But that how it was with lovers, or so Agreeable understood.

Agreeable would have said that she wasn’t beautiful in the same way that Holburn wasn’t handsome.

She was lovely enough to have been a village flirt, but the sharp, careful way she had stopped to take note of Agreeable and then how she’d teased Holburn probably made her too smart for many.

She had a keen eye, Holburn had said. That would scare many away.

Agreeable straightened his shoulders to hopefully make a better impression.

“I wasn’t expecting you at dawn,” Holburn remarked, stepping over to her to kiss her brow, then her cheek, and then her mouth. She took each kiss with a smile—and her gaze on Agreeable.

“It’s hardly dawn,” she chided Holburn, although, in truth, it was not long past it. “There was a view I wanted to see as the sun rose. The coachman was very obliging for a hired man. We might need to keep him on. He seems kind.”

“I will ask him,” Holburn agreed immediately, then began, with wondrous gentleness, to pluck the sprigs of greenery from her hair. “Did you find this view of the sunrise up a tree, by any chance?”

“A small tree. I wanted a quick sketch so I can attempt to draw it properly later.” Finally, the Duchess looked up at Holburn. “You needn’t worry. I wasn’t about to fall out again.”



“Again?” Agreeable whispered to himself, remembering the pain from broken bones in childhood only too well. “How tall was the tree?”

He slapped a hand over his mouth too late to stop the question, and the Duchess slid him a look that said she could have clapped a hand over his mouth for him.

Holburn merely clucked his tongue and rubbed the dirt streak with his thumb. “Did Hilde not notice this?” He presented his thumb to the Duchess to show her some of the dirt.

“Damn and blast.” The Duchess reached into her dress for a handkerchief. “She told me and I forgot. And I saw the innkeeper looking like this. They’ll never believe I’m their duchess. Perhaps that’s for the best.”

“It’s the country.” Holburn said it as if people in the country walked around with dirt on their faces.

Agreeable glanced to the table and his wash bowl from the night before and said nothing.

“It’s a shame you couldn’t linger to draw the sunrise and pretty view properly. She’s a skilled artist,” Holburn added, to Agreeable perhaps, who tried to understand fully what that meant.

“Like what’s inside the church?” he wondered aloud. That was mostly images of saints and dragons and long-dead kings, the paint chipping from the walls, or faded from time, or covered in soot from the candles.

“I don’t paint anything. I only draw it.” The Duchess considered Agreeable with her keen eye and then, added, “I use a pencil or a piece of charcoal, and I try to create what I see on paper. But I don’t add color, and what I draw wouldn’t end up inside a

church.”

“Oh.” Agreeable again tried to understand, or to seem as if he did. Some of the church images had trees or the sun in them. “So no saints, then? Or miracles?”

“When I draw people,” the Duchess answered with her chin in the air, “they are not drawings fit for a church.”

Agreeable stared at her, wide-eyed, and thought of as many reasons as he could why a drawing of a person wouldn’t do for a church.

The most obvious one was that she didn’t draw priests and angels and the like.

The second was that the wife of someone like Holburn, with his capital parties and his ways, might not be interested in covering the bodies of saints with strips of cloth to hide their soft bits.

She swept a look over his face, and Agreeable imagined he must look an innocent, gaping at her and warm in the face over the idea of naked bodies drawn on a wall.

But her eyes narrowed. Grew sharper, he would have said, much like Holburn’s did.

She murmured, “But I’ve a mind to draw saints now.

Or an angel.” She peered at Agreeable as if she could see everything he’d been pleased to give Holburn in the bed behind them and everything he wanted to do if given the chance in the future.

“Holburn,” she said suddenly. She didn’t add anything else.

Agreeable finally tore his attention from her to glance to Holburn.

Holburn's lips twitched as he met Agreeable's worried stare. "Ali, this is... Remi, who might do for a page."

"A page who doesn't know whether to bow or curtsy?" the Duchess responded immediately, gaze unwavering on Agreeable.

Agreeable put his hands out. "I'm content to stay out of the way in the kitchen or even in the garden, my lady." He winced, then quickly added, "Your Grace."

The Duchess finally turned from him to look at Holburn with one delicate eyebrow raised.

Holburn's lip twitched again, although Agreeable didn't think of any part of the situation was funny. But as if he knew that, or worse, was apologizing once more to the likes of Agreeable in front of his duchess and wife, Holburn took the last piece of bread and offered it to him.

"Eat, Remi," he said, and Agreeable took the bread in both hands and eyed him suspiciously as he nibbled the crust. "He needs a position," Holburn added to his wife.

"Does he?" she returned, tart. But she wasn't flushed or screaming or making a move to flee the room.

"Two nights I was at Marie's. Three days you and Tomas and Von have had to travel as you believe your grandfather would have wanted, and I find you with a plum in your room.

"Her smile was brief and soft. "At least you found a way to pass the time."

"Remi found me." Holburn was all innocence. Remi coughed around a crumb. "It's

only been one night that I've known him, but he does need a place and he has been most helpful."

Plenty of wives would have had something to say about that, but the Duchess only turned to study Agreeable again.

"I answered the questions he asked me, uh, Your Grace." Agreeable stopped with the bread in front of him like a starving mouse. "He has been determined to find me a place. But if you mind, I'll...."

He went quiet when she waved that off.

"Do you not know whether to bow or curtsy?" she asked. Dirt remained on her cheek, only more smudged now. Agreeable was not calmed by that fact. Like Holburn, she was permitted to be unusual because she was powerful. That meant she might do anything and not even realize she was being strange.

"I... bow," Agreeable assured her, hoping she hadn't heard the hiccup between the words, although Holburn would have. "I bow. But I know I will not do for a page. I did try to tell him."

"Did you?" Her tone was mild as milk. Her glance to Holburn was knowing.

"I'm not anything." Agreeable wanted that to be clear so at least Holburn would not be in disfavor with his wife. "A failed farmer, really. I'm not even a paid bedwarmer. I'm just agreeable."

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The Duchess shook her head, bringing more honey locks into her eyes. “Do you think he brings every bit of sweet back to his home with him? Look at you, already trying to keep him out of trouble.”

“He seems the kind to get into trouble,” Agreeable answered without thinking.

“He takes the guidance of the Church more seriously than the Church itself does, and he has luxury enough to display his caring heart.” Holburn made a small sound.

His wife blinked rapidly several times. Agreeable sighed.

“I was expecting you to be the one to keep him from risking himself, but you seem the kind to fall out of trees to look at a pretty view, if you don’t mind me saying so.

And now he is caring for you as he has cared for.

..” Agreeable glanced to the bread in his hand and gave a start.

“You can’t treat your wife like your lover!

” he exclaimed to Holburn, only to stare in confusion at the Duchess.

“ Can he? Oh,” he belatedly remembered some sort of manners again, “Your Grace.”

The Duchess smiled wide enough to show a slight gap in her front teeth and a dimple in her cheek.

Agreeable had always liked dimples. They were so friendly, even when the person smiling wasn't. Although the Duchess didn't seem unfriendly, despite her sharp gaze.

"Eat, Remi," the Duchess ordered. "You're clearly hungry."

Agreeable had the rest of the bread in his mouth before the Duchess had turned to Holburn.

"He found me," Holburn said again. "Providence. And he needs me." Holburn moved toward the bed and put a hand on Agreeable's shoulder. "He wants to be mine. Isn't that right, Remi?"

Agreeable shivered under the pressure of that hand and the Duchess' bright, clever gaze. Holburn had heard all of what Agreeable hadn't said. But once again, Agreeable didn't mind. He swallowed, then nodded.

"Arrogant." The Duchess' lip twitched, leaving Agreeable to wonder if she had picked up the mannerism from Holburn or if he'd learned it from her.

"He will do that, sweet Remi, override your sense and then be infuriatingly right. Not always, but enough. Lure you in with sweet things and gifts, spin your senses around as though you've been at the wine.

And then he doesn't even have the decency to hurt you. Oh no. He only overwhelms you more."

"I haven't overwhelmed him," Holburn objected. "Have I?" He started to remove his hand and Agreeable, rash and foolish, reached up to draw it back to him before remembering that the Duchess would see it.

He dropped his hands. “I jumped into his bed. I wasn’t lured there. I didn’t even know he was a grace—a duke.” He trembled. “I thought he was a danger, but not that much danger. But I can leave. I can . They likely won’t hang me.” Maybe.

“ Hang you?” The Duchess looked from Agreeable to Holburn. “You have had fun.”

“No one is hanging you.” Holburn was firm, then exhaled and gentled his tone. “And we have a dress to return.”

“I had two days of garden strolls and bad cooking.” The Duchess crossed her arms. “All right,” she went on as though Holburn had said something or given her a doubtful look, “and perhaps an amusing bed romp. I still did nothing like this. I leave you alone for a few days, and you have a mysterious adventure and meet an angel?”

“No, no,” Agreeable jumped in, “I’m a thief. Accused thief,” he added to be safe. “Agreeable the accused thief. And I sto— borrowed a dress as a disguise.”

“Remi the future page,” Holburn corrected him. “And we’re returning the dress so you did indeed borrow it. No harm done.”

Agreeable met the Duchess’ curious stare without intending to. Her eyes widened and then narrowed in a foxlike manner.

“Poor lad,” she cooed. It felt a little mean.

Agreeable shivered for that too and found it was something else he didn’t mind.

Not at all. She was welcome to be a vixen to him as much as she liked.

She understood his situation, even if she teased him for it now; Holburn had ensnared her too.

“Entirely at his mercy, aren’t you? You aren’t bothered?”

” Her gaze said she already knew his answer.

But Holburn must not have. He removed his hand from Agreeable’s shoulder, for good this time.

Agreeable twisted to look up at him, his stomach quivering until Holburn curled a knuckle beneath Agreeable’s chin to tip his head back that much more.

Agreeable wet his bottom lip and stared into the red-brown warmth of Holburn’s eyes.

“I’m always at the mercy of the powerful.

Of everyone, really. But I like it. Being at his, I mean.

I like it so far.” He didn’t risk touching Holburn in return and grabbed the ends of his scarf for something to hold to.

“He thinks it’s his extortion, but it’s not.

I’m alright all the way through. And I want to help him.

He needs help, I think, or he wouldn’t have come to a thief with questions. ”

“The little, powerless Duke of Dharmin?” the Duchess asked, directing some of her mean cooing at her husband, or so Agreeable thought until she murmured, “He needs more people he can trust.”

“He’s like you,” Agreeable answered her, watching pleasure cross Holburn’s face



that meant something Agreeable had done had made him happy.

“Powerful enough, but avoiding the work to be done as long as you can, because it scares you. It’s a lot, isn’t it?”

Taking over when someone dies. Knowing all their work is yours now and not feeling ready.

” Agreeable hadn’t been ready, but even if he had been, the Count and the priests had thought otherwise, so it hardly mattered.

Holburn pulled in a breath. The Duchess made not a sound, so Agreeable looked over to find her.

“Parties in the capital must be fun, but now you have things to do, important work, proper justice and compassion as lords are meant to do... or so Holburn hinted. And except for some servants who knew him as a boy, there’s no one to help you.

This Hilde person, maybe. And me, if you want me.

I can serve you both like that, even if you don’t want.

...” He stopped, uncertain over what to say there.

“I can get a tumble in other places.” He settled on that.

“Even if I liked it with Holburn. And I can keep you out of trees, Your Grace. Or at least try to. Better than this Hilde did.”

“Picking a fight with Hilde already,” Holburn remarked lightly.

“Holburn,” the Duchess said again. “Not an angel. A saint.”

“And they haven’t the brains to want him here,” Holburn returned. Neither of them made a lick of sense.

“Maybe they appreciate the danger of associating with saints,” his wife sang back to him, but then tossed her head. “And don’t you dare remind me of the danger of falling out of trees in this moment, Remi. It hurt enough when I landed.”

“Are you bruised?” Agreeable wondered. “There’s herbs that can help with that.”

The Duchess drew her brows together as though she were cross, but her tone was warm. “All right,” she declared, and put her hands on her hips. “Let’s get a look at him. If he’s to be a page, he should be able to look the part.”

Agreeable turned to Holburn, who smiled down at him. “To your feet now, Remi. Stand straight.”

Agreeable stood, staring at Holburn until a flash of color made him turn.

The Duchess was directly before him, only a step or two away.

“You think I could be one?” Agreeable wondered with real surprise. “That is, you think I could be a page, Your Grace?”

“‘Your Grace’ in public.” She sighed it. “You must at least remember that if we are to get you, ‘Agreeable the accused thief,’ out of the village as our long-time page. I assume that is the plan?”

“He said you had a keen eye.” Agreeable ducked his head when she looked surprised. “Your Grace.”

“Villagers won’t know the difference.” She clucked her tongue. “But we’ll have to teach him better than that if we don’t want the Count’s household to know, either.”

“Only his mother, who works there for now.” Holburn slid an arm around Agreeable’s chest, urging Agreeable back and to the side until he was against Holburn’s chest. Agreeable sucked in a breath but went, his eyes wide on the Duchess.

“It’s not a terribly long journey to the Count’s from here, but in the carriage, we should have time. He’s smart. He’ll learn enough.”

“His clothes are not correct either.” The Duchess tipped her head to one side to consider Agreeable. “He’ll need a waistcoat, if not a coat. We can say his coat was destroyed on the journey. He used it to keep me from stepping in a puddle or something. Though I doubt anyone will ask.”

“Servants might,” Agreeable pointed out. “Though they’ll ask me, not you.”

“He should mostly keep to our rooms anyway.” Holburn wrapped his other arm around Agreeable over the first, setting Agreeable’s heart to racing.

“The servants will assume his true purpose and though they might snicker, they shouldn’t bother with wondering why he doesn’t fulfill the actual duties of a page. We can work on those once we get home.”

“I’m to be your centerpiece while I’m there?”

” Agreeable’s voice grew husky. The Duchess could see him trembling, almost certainly.

She had gone foxlike again and that only made him tremble harder.

Oh, she was so pretty and clever. Agreeable didn't know what to do about it except shiver.

“Everyone will know. I'll be Agreeable again.

Only... only....” He stopped as he realized. “Only I'll be your Agreeable.”

“You'll be Remi, who wants and does not merely agree.” Holburn was warm at his back. “And mine, yes.”

If Holburn hadn't been holding him, Agreeable's legs would have given way. He pressed his thighs together, for they might as well have been water, and panted, “I won't be able to listen for you that way. Not if I'm kept in your bed—in your room.”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:16 am*

There was something in his voice he had no name for, a match to the pressure in his chest that he'd called longing a while ago.

It felt stronger than mere longing now. Stronger than the itch, even.

It reminded him of the gnawing of hunger in his belly, except that he knew he would be fed if he only waited. If he was good.

"That can come later," Holburn assured him, holding him tight. "You've no other complaints about where you'll be, do you?"

Agreeable shook his head in a daze, then darted a look to the Duchess, alive with that feeling again to know she would tease him for it.

He wanted her to and yet he wanted to please her.

But maybe teasing was what pleased her and that's why he liked it.

He didn't know, so a whined slipped out.

Holburn gently settled him with a tender shush .

"I'll be with you?" Agreeable whispered, warm all over. "Does your lady grace share your bed too? What of her?"

"That is a lovely scarf, Remi." The Duchess had moved closer while Agreeable had been lost in thoughts of being the Duke's page who everyone knew was really the

Duke's willing hole, and then that the Duchess might also be in the bed while Agreeable was taken.

She might watch, or touch him. She might draw him into the snare with her because she liked it there.

And why wouldn't she, with a husband richer than most, who liked her wild, and traveling on her own, and climbing trees, and drawing whatever she found interesting?

And taking lovers too? They'd both said that.

"What will the servants think of you though, Your Grace?" he wondered with a tremor going through him. "Allowing such a thing in your bed? I wouldn't want you hurt."

The Duchess reached out to take hold of the scarf ends and let them trail through her fingers. "Softer than I would have expected."

"Quite soft," Holburn murmured into Agreeable's hair, "but strong."

Agreeable nodded. "Finest thing I've ever had." And it belonged to him now, because Holburn wanted him to keep it.

"Oh." The Duchess' mouth was pink and slightly chapped from her cold morning spent up a tree. Beneath the smudged streak of dirt, she was pink as well, but in the glowing color of certain apples, ripe for plucking.

"You see?" Holburn asked, although Agreeable didn't see anything but the Duchess' flush that spread all the way down to the tops of her breasts and looked so very tangible—touchable.

He quickly looked away so as not to offend.

Then remembered the lady fox in front of him would likely not be offended.

He brought his gaze back to her when she came half a step closer.

“If I may,” she murmured as she reached up to remove the long scarf the color of a robin’s egg from around her shoulders.

“Your scarf is lovely, but there are colors that would better suit you.” She rose up, perhaps onto her toes, to drape the shining length of fabric over Agreeable’s head.

She paused when Agreeable’s breathing stuttered, and met his eyes, and then continued to arrange the cloth around his face, tugging and tucking until finally releasing him.

“There, you see? You look like spring itself, Remi. It was, Remi, wasn’t it? Not Agreeable?”

“Remi is my real name.” Agreeable prayed the lady would not look down, but then wasn’t entirely certain what she would do if she saw what she had done to him. “It’s been forgotten by most.”

“A pretty name.” The Duchess smiled, not a hint of a vixen about her now although she still had Agreeable plumped and eager. “For a pretty lass? Unless you really do prefer to bow?”

Agreeable wriggled in Holburn’s arms, there was no other word for what he did. His mouth was open but he could not catch his breath.

“I don’t know,” he admitted faintly, burning when Holburn kissed the top of his head.

“I liked my skirt and my scarf. And I like this one. And I like it when I am a lass for him, but I like being a lad well enough too and always have. I’m a good lass, even if I was a lad no one wanted to keep.

I’m whatever you like as long as I’m yours, and you let me.

.. you let me stay, and you let me be good for you. Please.”

The scandalous confession out of his mouth, he bit his bottom lip hard to keep in anything else he might say.

Her eyebrows went up, then down, then up again when she looked beyond him to Holburn. “He’s truly that loyal?”

“He won’t even betray the friends who betrayed him,” Holburn answered.

“I think I see. Or I’m starting to.” She focused back on Agreeable. “Remi, the images in the churches, the painted ones, have you ever seen angels in them?”

More than a little lost, Agreeable nodded.

“But with freckles,” she said, as odd as her husband.

“As I have tried to say,” Holburn agreed. “And giving down to his very soul. He’s too dangerous a thing to be left alone in the world.”

“Yes, I can see that he will require care. I can see that only too well.”

“Me?” Agreeable tried to stand firm on one point at least. “I’m not worth that much trouble.



I'm a... slut, as they say about lasses who lie with many.

Which I have. It's what I like, and that isn't enough to make up for the fuss I've already caused.

But you can use me now if you like. I wouldn't mind.

Holburn knows I wouldn't—I mean Your Grace.

I mean, His Grace knows I wouldn't mind.

"He tried to grab the pretty scarf she'd draped over him but the cloth was so slick and soft it slipped through even his rough fingers. "This is too much for me."

"No, it isn't." The Duchess pushed out her lips in a pout. They were full lips, especially when she did that. Generous, he would have called them, until the pout. "I said so, and your job, once you are ours—our page, that is, is to say yes and agree with me."

"Ali," Holburn said, voice even despite Agreeable shaking apart in his arms.

"You already put him in your stockings and you're going to scold me for a scarf?"

"she asked loftily, although Agreeable wasn't actually sure that was what they were really discussing.

But she looked at Agreeable. "If you don't like it, you can refuse it of course.

I'm sorry. I've never considered bedding a servant before and I forgot myself.

Saint-angel, your friends lie if they claim they didn't want to keep you.

People often do that, don't they? Lie. Do you believe all priests are smarter than me simply because they are men?

"When Agreeable frowned in confusion, then forcefully shook his head, her smile went from warm to summer sunshine.

"They say what they want to be true and not what is true. If these people deny you, but still bed you, it's because they want you yet they're afraid of you. "

She clucked her tongue when Agreeable started to protest.

"This whole area watches him." Holburn spoke softly. "It's why he had to hide."

"The scarf is beautiful." Agreeable gave in with a quiet breath and warmth all through his chest. "But you will ruin me too if you also speak this way."

"I say the truth." She brushed the ends of the scarf as she spoke. "Not always. But here I do. Because I'm not afraid of you. We're not. Not enough to let you go. Unless you wish to leave?"

Holburn's hold was inescapable. Not that Agreeable would have tried to.

He moaned before he could stop himself. It did not get any better when the Duchess' smile turned smug, and she leaned in to place her hands on his shoulders.

She was so warm and her bosom was inches away, and Agreeable had often wondered what those might feel like.

Then he remembered imagining himself with breasts to fill Holburn's hands and nearly moaned again.

He suspected they'd both like the thought as much he had.

Holburn had said his wife liked what she liked.

Maybe she would touch Agreeable in return, and grind atop him like a woman desperate for a hand between her thighs.

Agreeable wanted to ask her to. He felt almost as if he could say whatever he wanted, be whatever he wanted, and they would eat it up.

He'd be that morsel if they asked it of him... or her. Whichever or both, if devoured joyfully.

"Never had anyone worry so much over whether or not they meant me well." It spilled from him as though he'd been at the wine all night.

"Not even my, well, my friends. There's my ma only.

" He wanted to clean the fine lady's cheek for her but was trapped between her and an oak.

He was dizzy and warm all through with that unnamed feeling.

"I couldn't resist a duke anyway, nor a duchess, if you don't mind me saying.

Any more than resist the Church. But neither do I exactly want to right now. "

"I'd like to think we would manage better with you than some randy priests.

" The Duchess smiled and then reddish sparks appeared in the air around her, winking out of sight almost as soon as they had appeared.

She was a mage. The Church didn't like mages who weren't priests, but didn't like lady priests either.

A mage and a duchess. Holburn had married what other men would have feared to. And he loved her as she was.

Even Holburn hadn't had a chance. What choice did Agreeable have but to give in too?

The Duchess looked him over, wild eyes narrowed and clever. Then she leaned in, her gaze flicking from Agreeable's eyes to his mouth.

"I suppose the Count can wait a little longer," she said in response to nothing that Agreeable had heard, but perhaps she and Holburn knew each other's thoughts.

But she did not lean in farther, and her tiny, vexed look reappeared, her lip out to sulk.

"Really, Holburn, how do you get us in these situations? You have stressed over your new role all these past weeks. Now people are waiting on us, and all I want to do is be selfish and have our pretty page. I want to let him try to keep me from trees. Would he be upset if I fell?"

"Oh," she went on when Agreeable nodded and Holburn muttered, "I would be upset too, as you know."

"Oh," the lady said again, "but you worry and scold, and he would gaze at me with those eyes and make me feel quite naughty." Agreeable jumped.

The Duchess scarcely seemed to notice. "What power he has." She focused on Agreeable.

“You’d have a much easier time attending to me.

I already have a companion so you wouldn’t need to do much. He is nothing but trouble.”

“I figured he must be.” Agreeable had to say it, because Holburn wanted honesty from him. “But perhaps you’d like me to help keep an eye on him for you, as part of me attending to you?”

To his dismay, she leaned back, but it was only to clap her hands together in approval. “That sense will do you good! Although I wonder if you can hold onto it for long.”

Between the two of them, Agreeable would have long days of worry and fuss.

.. and nights he couldn’t think about now without moaning again.

“Please,” he said first, like a fool, before trying to be as sensible as she thought he was.

“If it’s all that keeps you from tossing me out, then I will.

I will try at least. But I’m not known for my thinking. No one comes to me for that.”

Holburn tightened his arms around him.

The Duchess lost some of her smile. “These friends of yours, are they asses as well as liars?”

“Yes.” Holburn answered before Agreeable could, but pressed a kiss to the back of his head. “Alette? You agree?”

“He’s nearly always right, in the end,” the Duchess complained to Agreeable, but with the ripening-apple pink returning to her face.

That was why she’d made Agreeable think of scrumping; she was lively and ready to be harvested.

Agreeable often was too, but she was strong enough to demand instead of merely agreeing.

“He’s a jewel.” Agreeable sighed. “So are you, Your Grace. Though I still don’t know what to do with jewels.”

“Aliette.” She put her hands back on his shoulders, then slid them up to tug the scarf off his forehead and expose some of his hair.

Agreeable’s face was as hot as the rest of him.

“Like this?” Aliette wondered, before tugging the cloth forward again to cover his hair as though Agreeable were a modest, goodly woman.

“Or this way?” She pulled it all down around his neck and shoulders, then tossed one corner of it across his throat.

“Or like this? Against your skin but permitting us to see all of you?”

Agreeable could not breathe. “Whatever you like.”

“Good lass.” Holburn began to pull the loaned chemise up to spread his hands over Remi’s stomach. “Good lad. Good for us, aren’t you?”

Aliette’s hands joined her husband’s, then dipped lower into Remi’s breeches.

Remi nodded desperately. “A centerpiece, as you said.”

Aliette paused. Then her lips were against Remi’s, and her breasts as well as the sprig of greenery in her bodice were pressed to his chest. “Much more than that, I think. Our centerpiece at least. Oh, you like that so much.” She and her husband both had a hand on his prick and were enjoying his trembling. “I feel quite greedy about him.”

“Then be greedy,” Holburn murmured. “He likes to be had. Until he is sore. Until she is ours. Isn’t that right?”

Remi whimpered.

Aliette wriggled in delight in the sound. “You did say she was agreeable.”

“Remi,” Remi begged. He had never been so wanted and he would never be the same for it. He couldn’t seem to mind. “Remi, if I am yours.”

“Remi,” husband and wife agreed, and kissed him, and petted her, and kept her right there between them, where he was theirs.

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## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:16 am*

Remi woke just before dawn, used to rising early because he took his page duties seriously even if he wasn't a page in the sense that many other pages were.

The proof of that was the expensive silver clock in his room as well as the room itself.

The private room didn't see much use, save for where he dressed or studied, or sometimes, like the past few nights, slept because he didn't think it was right for him to sleep in Their Graces' bed when Their Graces were not at home.

Holburn thought this silly but didn't stop him, merely remarking in his way that the servants already knew where Remi spent his nights.

Which they did; there, Holburn did not lie.

But that was only more reason for Remi to work as hard as he did, and help around the household wherever he could, and to keep to his place when Holburn and Ali were away.

He wouldn't want other servants to think he was getting above himself or out to lord over them.

They hadn't shown any resentment, not that he'd seen.

Some quiet shock and some disapproval from a few, but those hadn't lasted long anyway.



Remi didn't think Holburn or Ali was responsible for that; they weren't involved enough with the staff to notice tiny sneers or frowns.

If Remi had to guess, he'd say Hilde had done it.

Hilde's word was law in this house and all of the Duke's residences.

Even the guards obeyed her. The Duke might bow only to the King, but, as Ali put it, Hilde was the one who saw that the Duke's meals were how he liked them and that everyone was treated well, and that was really all Holburn cared about as far as household matters.

Aliette was a bit more involved, as Remi would have expected a lady to be.

But that was for issues of decoration, or arranging for guests and parties, and, sometimes, taking the maids and kitchen workers aside to discuss matters of babies or no babies.

The workers loved her for it, even the ones who walked to the nearby village every Sunday to hear Mass like Agreeable's ma did.

There was no priest for the house at the moment.

Holburn's grandfather had never requested new ones after the last ones had died of old age, and Holburn had been in no hurry to replace them.

Two years since he had taken the title, and he had ordered the staff to dust the chapel regularly and to keep the doors open for anyone who wanted to pray, but that was all.

"Providence brought you to me," he had said when Remi had asked, "I'll find a suitable priest the same way."

Ali had quirked an eyebrow at her husband's ways and said only, "You can't expect another saint, surely," before smiling at Remi.

But either Holburn or the King must have grown tired of waiting for Providence, because Holburn had received a royal letter and then he and Aliette had packed up to visit a cousin of his in a monastery. They had wanted to bring Remi with them as they did for most trips, but Remi had refused.

In a place like that, with expectations and eyes on him, it wouldn't feel right to endanger Holburn's position, even if Holburn believed himself safe.

Anyway, Remi wouldn't have gotten to sleep with them in such a place.

A page would be with lower servants or postulants, likely sharing a room or an uncomfortable bed.

He'd rather stay home—stay here, and be useful, and sleep in his little room to the side of Holburn's, in his comfortable bed that faced his small writing desk.

Reading and writing took practice, and pages wrote and carried notes.

Spying also required knowledge of letters.

All of that was true. But it was also true that Ali enjoyed coaxing Remi through his lessons and rewarding him with pleasure, and that Holburn was aware of how proud Remi was to have gained such skills and of how Remi used them to assist around the house.

If Remi ever wanted to leave, or if Holburn and Ali grew tired of him, or if his presence in their bed endangered them, he would be able to find work elsewhere. That was important enough that even Holburn couldn't argue against it.

He wanted to, but he couldn't. When Remi said no, he meant it.

Remi smiled at the memory of Holburn's sulky response but then frowned through the pale morning light at the clock, which showed he was awake before he needed to be.

He listened for a moment, but there was no thunder or fierce wind outside, and certainly no sounds from Holburn's bedchamber or from Aliette's chamber beyond that.

They weren't due back for another day at least.

But then a faint, muffled thump from somewhere outside Remi's door made him pause.

No one should be lighting a fire or opening curtains in currently unoccupied rooms, and he doubted Holburn's household held a thief—aside from Remi.

In the capital, with newer servants or in the house of some noble friend of Ali or Holburn's, Remi might have expected such things, or a nosy servant serving as a spy, or Ali stumbling in tipsy from a party and falling over a footstool.

He got out of bed, Holburn's nightshirt falling to his knees as he tiptoed to the door to peek through the crack to the room beyond.

A trail of fine clothes strewn over a rug caught his attention immediately and drew his gaze toward the large bed that now held the shape of a man at rest.

Remi flew across the room to the bed. He didn't even pause to stare at Holburn's face or the shining mess of his curls because Holburn smiled and opened his eyes and said, "There you are," in a sleepy, rasping voice and tossed aside the blankets to beckon

Remi to him.

Remi went and was pulled down into Holburn's arms, which were bare, because at home Holburn slept naked except on the worst winter nights, and preferred to see his nightshirts elsewhere. On Remi, or if not on Remi, then on the floor.

Holburn rolled Remi over to pin him to the bed and repeated himself, perhaps a little grumpier this time.

"There you are." His breath was warm on Remi's nape as he brushed aside Remi's shoulder-length hair and he followed his complaint with soft kisses.

"Sleeping in that bed instead of our bed?" More kisses followed, as well as his hands slipping down Remi's ribs to his hips and then beneath him to find his cock.

Remi whined immediately, for it had been a long fortnight and with those in the house reluctant to touch him for fear of offending their lord and lady, that left only the village blacksmith, and for that, Remi had to go to him.

And that tumble, lovely though it was, wasn't this .

Remi liked a fuck but somehow, somewhere, Holburn had become the one in control of Remi's itch. He could command others to scratch it or do it himself, but he had to be involved or it wasn't enough. It wasn't right .

"I was worried you'd finally found some other bed worth staying in.

" Holburn tugged Remi's earlobe with his teeth and then bit lightly at his neck when Remi's cock twitched.

"But my good girl was waiting for me, and so frustrated." He clucked his tongue but

Remi didn't think he was sorry.

"Nearly shaking now. Wet as can be. Shh now, settle and I'll take care of you."

"Don't mind me tumbling in a footman's bed, but you mind me staying in a footman's bed?"

"Remi wondered breathlessly, squirming to get his legs apart so that Holburn might find it easier to take him.

Remi wouldn't even need to spend right away, only to be filled and have it be Holburn doing the filling.

That would satisfy him enough. "I'm always yours for the taking.

Was your journey an easy one?" he asked, growing fainter as Holburn's teeth nipped harder. "Where's Ali?"

"Easier if you had been there." Holburn pulled Remi's hips up and back. He was already hard.

Remi buried his warm face in the pillow below him.

"Ali couldn't give you a suck in the carriage?"

"Not if Hilde was with her, but Remi had known that before he asked.

He teased a duke these days, and that duke squeezed Remi's thighs in response as if he meant to be menacing, though Remi loved it and nearly everyone in the region knew it.

But then Holburn slowed, and stopped, and just before Remi could whine at him to take him rough and dry as he was, Holburn flipped him over and pinned him by his wrists.

Remi's legs were a tangle under him. His back was to the bedding and he was trapped beneath Holburn's weight.

He shivered for it, looking up to meet an unexpected frown.

"You are a lovely hole, Remi sweet," Holburn said in the voice that he used when discussing official acts and requests from the King. "But you are not only a hole to us. You do know that after all this time?"

Only two years. Not long at all in the life of dukes, who tended to live longer than farmers and definitely lived longer than thieves. And within a few months, Holburn and Ali were going to start on the matter of heirs. That would change things. Remi knew that even if they didn't.

Nobles had servants to care for their wee ones, but neither of the Graces who kept Remi in their bed were the kind to ignore their children. Remi would be more page than ever once that happened. There simply wouldn't be as much time for frivolities.

Remi was fond of that word, even if Holburn was displeased by how Remi used it.

"Oh, I see," Holburn murmured when Remi met his eyes but then glanced away. "My suspicions were right. That is why you really stayed behind. To get used to that terrible, lonely bed?"

"Holburn ." Remi pushed out a breath and reflected that he sounded like Ali when he said the name that way. Exasperated and yet happy , Hilde had described that tone once. "It's a fine bed. Better than all but this one."

“Do I seem tired of you?” Holburn settled more of his weight onto Remi before sitting up. He was still hard.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:16 am*

Remi kept his hands where Holburn had pinned them both because it pleased him to and because he knew Holburn thought Remi pretty in such a pose.

“No.” He had to answer truthfully and wanted to answer truthfully, even if the truth was strange.

Holburn shook his head to get his curls out of his eyes, then placed his hands on Remi’s chest, stroking Remi’s nipples and cupping his flat breasts while watching his face.

“Ali wanted—and needed—you with her while she evaded preaching priests and monks, and found ruins to sketch.” Aside from his flush and his stiff cock, Holburn could’ve been sitting at his desk discussing tenants and crops and plans to redirect streams. “You would have liked seeing their gardens, which were truly incredible.”

“Oh.” Remi bit his lip and Holburn paused in his attentions to his nipples to draw Remi’s bottom lip out of the way of his teeth.

“They had a library, and some wonderful wine—I brought some back with me, and you might like it. And I would have found you in that library, or in those gardens, or among those ruins, and taken care of you. As Ali would have, monks or no monks. Anyway,” Holburn moved one hand to the base of Remi’s throat but let it rest there, a whisper of a promise, “you should have heard what those monks got up to. Of a hundred men all sworn to chastity, I’d say only ten or fifteen actually managed it.”

His lips twitched with his amusement.



“Oh,” Remi said again, once more out of breath. “Do you think they would have taken me?”

“You could tempt a....” Holburn stopped, then pursed his lips. “Are the guards still afraid that I’ll be angry if they touch you? My poor Remi.” He stroked the side of Remi’s face. “No one to please you all this time?”

“They’re so handsome,” Remi complained. They could bugger him or have him as their girl. He wouldn’t mind either. “But it wouldn’t be right anyway.” He drew Holburn’s hand back down to his nipples, elated when Holburn smiled at him for asking and wanting instead of merely agreeing.

Holburn gave him a pinch. “Why wouldn’t it be right?”

Remi blinked up at him. “You have to be first and last. Just like in the capital. You have to be there. And they’d never do it with you around.”

Holburn opened his mouth, said the first several words of the Lord’s Prayer, then shut his mouth again. His hands stopped.

“And you believe that I would tire of you?” His voice was rough and he leaned in again to hold Remi to the bed. “What of Aliette? Do you believe she would?”

Ali, petting Remi’s face and cooing at him in encouragement while he was thrust forward and drawn back onto yet another cock, and then, while he was shaking and tired and so sated and pleased, and everyone else was gone, she would do the job herself with a well-polished beast on a belt around her hips before letting Holburn step in to finish him.

But there was also Ali, who had wanted to take Remi into some ruins with her while she drew. Remi knew that would have ended with her forgetting the hour, and him pulling food from a pack for them, and then falling asleep on her skirts and waking to

her sketching his face.

She had a lot of sketches of his face. Angel studies, she called them.

“Holburn.” Remi took a breath. “I didn’t mean it to hurt. Only that it would be sensible to prepare.”

Holburn’s quick smile left him uncertain.

“You don’t have to prove you’re sensible to me.

As you don’t need to prove anything to the servants in this house—although there you won’t believe me yet.

But look around, Remi, and recognize that your efforts to belong to this house have not gone unnoticed by the others.

People, honest people, can’t help but adore our saint. ”

A saint waiting for a tumble. Remi gave Holburn a suspicious look. “And your new priest?”

“Priest s .” Holburn announced it with pleasure. “Two of them. And considering what I caught them getting up to, I doubt they will have anything to say about you. Providence .” He nearly purred it. “You should have come with us.”

Remi could maybe see that now. He had studied, but he sometimes thought there were not words enough for the emptiness in him when his graces were away. The itch, the ache, were all a part of the same longing. Love, he knew it was now. But a centerpiece had no place to speak of it.

“I missed you.” A fraction, a mere whisper, but it brought Holburn down to kiss him.

First Remi's mouth and then down his neck as if Holburn was in no hurry. Remi squirmed. "Holburn, please. Am I not wet for you?"

A soft snort against his skin made him shiver, then Holburn backed off him altogether and Remi's shivers were more about the cold.

Holburn stilled him with a look. "We couldn't wait. We left early and travelled all through the night to get to you."

Remi's lips parted on a shocked breath. "I'm your hole, though you care for me."

It shouldn't have made Holburn twitch a smile, not with his gaze burning.

"You are, but you are not only that. Come here. There's a good lad.

" He sighed when Remi immediately shifted to kneel in front of him.

Holburn slid his hands into his hair. "Ali, a mage as she is, as inclined as she is, as uniquely lovely as she is, has never been widely welcomed. Not at first. Not even among the classes you call your betters. She keeps some of herself from them. But not from you." He pressed a kiss to Remi's cheek and then to the tip of his nose.

"Where is she?" Remi wondered softly, voice trembling.

"Distracted on her way to undress in her rooms, I am sure." Holburn was gentle. "I missed you,' you say, with your beautiful eyes telling me it was much more than that."

Remi closed them, a foolish move before Holburn's cleverness. But Holburn allowed it, petting him and granting him more kisses before leaning to one side to call out. "Ali?"

Remi opened his eyes and turned toward the door connecting the Duke's rooms to those of the Duchess in time to see Ali push through it, an open robe hanging from her shoulders and her hair half pinned and half loose. He reached out without thought.

Ali, more naked than dressed, fluttered over to the bed to kneel next to them and seize Remi for a kiss. When he was breathless, she inched back to peer at him. She looked pale to Remi's eye, with shadows on her face that spoke of their long night of travel.

"If you will not wake your maid, allow me to tend to your hair," he offered, but was ignored.

"Remi missed us," Holburn told his wife, pecking the tip of her nose as well.

"Did you?" Ali kept her attention on Remi, noting as much as Holburn undoubtedly had. She clucked her tongue when Remi glanced away. "Close to a fortnight away from you. We shan't do that again." She seemed very certain.

Remi darted a look to her breasts, to her stomach, curved but not with the weight of a child. Not yet. "You must leave me someday, even if you don't want to." He would allow that much; Holburn would insist. "If it risks you..."

"Holburn," Ali turned to her husband, "fuck some sense into her, please."

Holburn faced Remi with fires still in his eyes. "On your back, Remi."

Remi obeyed without grace, falling backward and hiking his nightshirt up to his neck to bare himself for their taking.

He looked between the two of them and lost his breath as Holburn spread his legs and bent his knees for him while Ali stepped from the bed to grab what was needed.

When she returned, she watched for several moments, gaze intent on Holburn's

fingers within Remi, before she leaned in to press kisses to Remi's open mouth.

"I meant..." Remi tried to tell her but he was shushed and kissed.

"I know what you meant," she whispered in response to his whining. "But do you not understand Holburn yet? Your husband has worried over you in return."

"Husband?" Remi blinked several times and moaned into Ali's mouth when she kissed him again.

Her smile as she drew back was clever and mean, and Remi whimpered for it.

When she looked at him like that, it meant she had a gift for him, something fair and soft for a good lass to wear, or that she was set to have him be used as he hadn't ever been used before.

Then Holburn was pushing inside him and Remi's back arched as he shook for it, and Ali kissed him again, harder now. She was enjoying the sight, and chiding him while Holburn made a home between his legs.

"Irritating though it can be, does your husband not always know what is right for you? Do I not care for you as your wife should?"

"I told you." Holburn grunted, deep inside Remi with his hands gripping Remi's hips tight, all while Remi panted.

"You are married." Remi couldn't manage more than the simple fact. Holburn yanked him down to keep him seated on his cock and then Ali's hands were in Remi's hair and she was turning his face for longer, deeper kisses.

"We are," Holburn rumbled at them both, "and will vow it in the chapel with you if you prefer."

“We’ve brought you a gift as well.” Ali drew one of Remi’s hands down to her cunny, where she was as wet as Remi felt. “Whenever you feel like wearing it. A ring. Though in pewter, since Holburn says you wouldn’t want the other servants to fuss. Our little saint.”

Holburn pulled back just to snap his hips forward.

Remi bit his lip in pleasure and had even that solace taken from him.

“But I am...”

“Ours,” his beloved graces finished for him, using him and loving him, and Remi had no protests left that they could not steal away if they wished.

“I have always been yours,” he admitted, shuddering and weak, “and you have always known that.”

“But now you know it too.” Ali was breathing harder. She’d be all over him the moment Holburn was through with him, kissing and rubbing wherever she pleased.

Remi looked up to Holburn, who watched them both and burned as he did, as he now said he always would. “Do you know that now?”

Holburn held still, waiting for an answer or to make Remi itch and ache and beg. But Remi would get what he begged for and then some.

Remi curled his fingers to please his lady and shifted up to encourage his lord.

His voice was soft. “I do.”

The End