



'Twas the Night

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Christmas evening should be a time spent with loved ones, gathered around the Yule log or playing merry games. Percival Owens evening, however, will be marked by something entirely different

Percy yearns for the nights when he can kneel before his lover, even though no self-respecting gentleman willingly submits to another. Michael Barlow wants his first Christmas with Percy to be perfect, but is frustrated by Percys inability to ask for what he wants. The gift Michael offers Percy—and that Percy offers in return—is the best Percy could ever hope to receive: his will to submit.

Note: This is a previously published work that was available in an anthology and is now available as a short story. This second edition has been edited with minor changes.

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December 25, 1820

London, England

Percival Owens stepped out of his mother's town house, a sigh of relief deflating his chest at finally being free of the drawing room. As he lingered on the last stone step, waiting impatiently for the footman to shut the door behind him, he shoved his hands in the pockets of his greatcoat. His fingers curled around crisp, folded paper.

I will expect you at eight in the evening on Christmas Day.

A short note. One line was all that was needed. And that one line had been foremost in his thoughts since he'd received the note yesterday morning.

With a smart snap, the footman shut the door. Instead of going east toward his apartments, Percy turned left onto the walkway, toward the direction of Michael Barlow's tidy town house on the outskirts of Mayfair.

The rain that had made the family carriage necessary to attend church services that morning had abated, yet the chill, damp air held the promise of more rain soon to come. Thick clouds obscured the full strength of the moon, but the golden light spilling from the windows of the houses he passed kept the night from near pitch darkness.

The streets were relatively quiet, with only an occasional carriage passing him. Most people would be tucked safely in their homes, gathered around the Yule log or playing merry games, celebrating the Christmas holiday with loved ones.

Whereas his holiday would be marked by something entirely different.

Shame washed over him, familiar and unavoidable. He knew exactly what would transpire when he arrived at Michael's home. Well, perhaps not exactly . Michael made the decisions. Percy merely did as bid.

But he wanted to do as bid. Needed Michael to take control. Wanted that large hand to palm the back of his skull. Wanted to be told to suck Michael's cock. To be bound and restrained. To be buggered and spanked. To let Michael do all sorts of wicked things to him no self-respecting gentleman should allow.

Yet he did allow them. When he was with Michael, all those wicked things didn't feel quite so . . . wrong. He didn't feel so wrong.

Percy quickened his pace. The sooner he reached Michael's, the sooner that sense of calm would wash over him. The worry and the shame gone. Wiped away for a few precious hours.

If only it could be longer. If only Michael could come to care—

He gave his head a firm shake, throwing off the thought before it could fully form. A handsome, successful man like Michael would never want him for more than a very obedient bed partner, and it would do no good for Percy to even begin to hope for more.

The yearning tamped firmly down, he headed north at the next corner to cross Oxford Street. It seemed like no time at all before he was standing before the third door on Henrietta Street. A check of his pocket watch proved he had not arrived late.

Michael was expecting him. There would be no need to knock. The servants dismissed for the evening, Michael in the study, perusing the Times or a report from

his estate manager.

Percy stepped up to the door, reached for the brass knob with a hand that shook only slightly, and turned it.

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The faint click of the front door shutting made its way to Michael Barlow's ears. A smile spread across his mouth. Percy had arrived.

Setting the Times on the couch cushion next to his hip, he looked to the clock nestled in the evergreen boughs draping the fireplace mantel. Percy had followed his instructions.

No surprise there, though. Percy always did as commanded. No questions, no hesitation, no needs of his own to interfere. In fact, he couldn't recall a single instance when Percy had asked anything of him. Not for so much as a touch or a kiss. Not even when he was gasping and groaning in pleasure, fingers clutching the coverlet, had Percy allowed a single plea for more to fall past his lips.

A furrow touched Michael's brow. While he preferred his lovers not to be of the overly demanding sort, he couldn't help but find such blind acceptance of his whims a bit disconcerting.

The sound of footsteps approached the study, and then Percy walked into the room. He glanced to drapes closed tightly over the windows, then shrugged his greatcoat from his shoulders, revealing a plain brown coat and trousers. "Good evening, Michael," he said, finally looking at Michael. Coat folded over one arm, he shifted his weight, discomfort mixed with acute need radiating from him.

Michael did his best to keep the frown hidden from view. They'd been meeting for

months. The uncertainty of a new relationship should have been behind them by now, yet the proof that it wasn't stood just inside his study.

Patience, he reminded himself. Percy was young. Just three-and-twenty compared to Michael's own thirty years. And while Percy had never explicitly stated it, Michael had the sense his prior relationships had been confined to a handful of hasty encounters.

"Good evening, Percy." He tipped his head toward a wingback chair, the one that held the navy coat he'd discarded a good hour ago. "Did you have a pleasant dinner with your family?"

A grimace flickered across Percy's genial features as he folded his greatcoat over the back of the chair. "I wouldn't go so far as to classify it as pleasant. My mother still wants me to distinguish myself by becoming a barrister."

"Did you inform her that you'd rather not?"

He shrugged. "It would not do any good to argue with her."

"I beg to differ. If you prefer your position as a clerk, you should tell her so."

"I reminded her I've been in Mr. Miller's employ for a year, but to her, that's a year too long." He shook his head, his shoulders slumping. "Rather than listen to her go on about it, I left early and walked here instead of taking a hackney."

It took considerable effort for Michael to hold back his opinion of Percy's social-climbing family. Anger on his behalf, or even compassion for being tied to a family that refused to appreciate him, wasn't what Percy needed. "A reminder as to the length of your employment is not akin to a statement of your preferences," he said, careful to keep his tone firm yet even. "Honestly, there's no hope at all she'll ever

stop pushing you to become a barrister if you don't make your wishes known." For that, he received another noncommittal shrug. Holding back the sigh, he flicked his fingers toward the other wingback chair across from the couch. "Sit."

Percy rounded the chair then stopped short, his gaze on the brown leather bag on the chair's cushion. Simple yet sturdy, a bag fit for a barrister's clerk.

"Happy Christmas."

Shocked hazel eyes met Michael's. "For me?"

"Yes."

"Truly?"

"Yes," Michael repeated, uncertain if he should be amused or concerned at Percy's disbelief.

"Thank you." Percy reached down, feathered ink-stained fingertips over the engraved initials on the small silver oval on the bag's flap. "But . . . P J O. How did you know the J?"

Trust Percy to notice the smallest detail first. "I ran into your elder brother at my club the other day. Pulled the name from him." Percival Joseph Owens, the Joseph coming from his grandfather.

A wrinkle marred Percy's brow, his eyes clouding with acute anxiety. "Oh, does he suspect . . . Did he ask . . .?"

"Not to worry. He hasn't the slightest suspicion of the degree of our acquaintance." Michael waved a hand to the present. "Do you like it?"

“Yes. Most assuredly. It’s perfect. Thank you.” The words rushed out of Percy’s mouth, eager and pleased, the briefest of smiles lighting up his face. He ran a reverent hand over the smooth leather. “But . . .” There was that wrinkle again. “But I have nothing for you. It didn’t occur to me. In my family, the presents are given to the children, never among the adults. But I should have thought to—”

“Not to worry.” He knew Percy’s position didn’t pay him much, and that even though his mother possessed an ample fortune, she rarely pressed a few extra pounds into her younger son’s hand. The man needn’t spend a shilling on him, nor did he want him to. “Truly. Don’t fret over it.”

Teeth digging into his bottom lip, Percy nodded once, ever obedient. “If there is anything I can do for you, you need only to ask.”

“Perhaps I shall.” He lowered his voice. “Later.” He swore he could detect the frisson of anticipation grip Percy’s body. “For now, have a seat.” Once Percy sat, Michael asked, “Would you care for a drink? I had the kitchen make some wassail before they departed this morning.”

At Percy’s nod, he got to his feet and crossed to the console table.

Hands clasped over the leather bag on his lap, Percy glanced about the study, to the evergreen on the mantle, the holly sprigs on the corner of his desk, the punch bowl on the console table. “You’re one for the holiday?”

He needn’t sound so surprised. “Yes,” Michael said, handing Percy a half-full glass.

“Did you spend the day with family?”

Instead of taking up his spot on the couch, he leaned a hip against the edge of his desk. “No. They’re up in Cumbria. Wasn’t of a mind to travel this year. I took dinner

at the club since the kitchen had the day free.” And then he had spent the rest of the evening alone, waiting for Percy.

Percy nodded once, then took another sip of the spiced punch. A little nervous wiggle in the chair. A fleeting glance to Michael. A glance full of stark, desperate need.

Michael couldn't keep the command from his lips a moment longer.

“Stand up, Percival.”

Glass clinked as Percy set the tumbler on the side table. He carefully put his gift on the floor, then stood. Hands at his sides, eyes downcast.

“Remove your clothes.”

The only sounds that broke the silence were the swoosh of fabric and Percy's quick breaths. There wasn't one fumble, not one rushed tug at a stubborn button. His ink-stained fingertips made efficient work of removing his coat, waistcoat, and cravat. He whisked his shirt over his head, ran a hand over his short light brown hair to smooth it, then pushed his trousers down his legs.

After folding the garments and placing them on the chair, he turned to Michael, eyes once again downcast and arms at his sides.

The light from the candles flickered across his pale skin, his erection jutting eagerly from between his legs. Michael resisted the urge to reach out and wrap a hand around that beautiful prick, to coax a whimper from Percy's throat, and instead simply took pleasure from the sight before him.

At a good five inches below Michael's own six feet, Percy's body was compact and softened to the perfect degree, with just a bit of extra flesh on his frame. Not so much

as to cause a protruding belly, but just enough so he wasn't all hard muscle.

The fire crackled in the hearth. Michael waited. Waited until the rhythm of Percy's chest slowed, until his breaths turned even, the ragged quickness gone. Until the line of his shoulders finally relaxed.

"Upstairs," Michael said, calm and without a hint of command.

Percy turned on his heel. Michael pushed from the desk and grabbed the folded clothes.

He could have had Percy undress in the bedchamber, but then he'd have been denied the pleasure of following a naked Percy up the stairs, that generous round arse bouncing with each step he took.

Once they reached the bedchamber, Michael saw to lighting the candles and the fire in the hearth while Percy waited at the foot of the four-poster bed. Pulling a small key from his pocket, Michael dropped to his haunches and then unlocked the trunk next to the writing desk. He made to reach inside the trunk but stopped, hand hovering over a pair of leather cuffs.

It hadn't escaped his notice that Percy's reluctance to voice his preferences extended into the bedchamber. The man embodied the very definition of a compliant lover. That wasn't to imply Michel didn't enjoy his evenings with Percy—he most assuredly did, and Percy's reactions screamed he enjoyed them as well. But it was Christmas. And Percy had made him an open offer. Perhaps there was something Percy could give him that wouldn't cost the man even a halfpenny. A gift that could benefit them both.

He wiped the smile from his expression, then stood. Percy's gaze went to the writing desk, the surface clear of leather goods, dildos, and plugs, then to Michael's empty

hands. Confusion filled his eyes.

Stopping before him, Michael let the smile touch his lips in an effort to reassure Percy. “Earlier you said that if there were anything you could do for me, I need simply ask. I’ve decided what I want. Call it a gift, if you will. I want your voice tonight.”

A furrow crossed Percy’s brow. “I don’t understand.”

“I want your voice. I won’t do anything to you unless you ask for it.” That furrow became heavier. “It’s not difficult, I assure you. Shall I show you how it works?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Kiss me, Percy.”

Without hesitation, Percy raised an arm, cupped Michael’s jaw, and lifted onto his toes. Soft lips brushed across Michael’s. He held back the impulse to deepen the kiss, to take control of it, and simply savored his first kiss from Percy. The first kiss Michael had not had to take. The chaste press of his lips, the light puff of his breath across Michael’s cheek.

A flick of Percy’s tongue, a short fleeting taste of the man’s delicious mouth, then those lips were gone.

Michael cleared his throat, gathered his senses. “That’s what I want from you tonight. The gift of your voice. I will do whatever you want. Bind you in any fashion you desire. To the bed, to a chair, tie you down on the floor. I’ll redden your arse until you’re sobbing for more, tears streaming down your cheeks, bugger you until you can barely sit tomorrow. Prepare you for my cock and then make you wait an hour for it. Anything. You just need to ask. So do you agree?”

The discomfort, the uncertainty was back, tightening Percy’s shoulders, compressing those soft, sweet lips, convincing Michael that his instinct in this had been spot-on.

And so he held onto his patience and waited for Percy's answer.

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“B ut . . . I-I . . .” Looking about the bedchamber, anywhere but into Michael’s piercing blue-gray eyes, Percy rolled one shoulder, the pop and crack of his joints echoing in the quiet room.

He couldn’t possibly ask for what he wanted. He needed to follow Michael’s commands—Michael’s voice, Michael’s hands, Michael’s body’s desires. Then he wouldn’t have to think about what he was doing. He could let go, give in to that wicked part of him, and simply follow and feel.

“It’s only the two of us, Percy. No one else will hear you but me.”

He nodded, a quick jerk of his head. Of course he knew that. Michael always dismissed his servants for the night before he arrived. The footman and maid gone, the drapes drawn to hide their illicit activities from innocent eyes.

A large hand touched his upper arm. Nerves strung so tight he couldn’t stop the flinch from seizing his muscles.

“It’s all right.” Low and gentle, Michael’s voice barely registered above the pounding in his ears. “Will you look at me, please?”

With effort, he pulled his attention from the large four-poster bed. He wanted to be there, with Michael. Wanted Michael’s weight covering him. Needed the press of his skin against his own. He did not want to be here, Michael a good foot away and gazing at him with what could only be true concern.

At least it wasn't disappointment. He should count himself fortunate in that.

"Why? Why do I have to ask tonight?" The question popped out of his mouth before he could give it any consideration.

"Because I like hearing your voice. Because it's good to ask for what you want. Because I want to discover what you prefer above all else. And you don't have to ask. I would never force you to do anything you don't wish to do. You do know that, Percy, don't you?"

"Yes." Michael might stuff him full with the fattest dildo in his trunk, bind him with fifty knots, keep him on the razor-sharp cusp of a climax for what seemed like hours, yet he always felt safe in his hands. Hell, he felt safer with Michael than he'd ever felt with another.

"Will you tell me why you're reluctant?" Michael rubbed his hand along Percy's arm. "Why the notion of asking unsettles you so?"

He concentrated on the soothing drag of Michael's palm, the way the warmth of Michael's hand penetrated his muscles. The frantic beats of his heart began to lessen. His eyes drifted shut. "Because I shouldn't want those things." His lips barely moved. The words barely made their way out of his mouth. Yet the brief pause of those lulling drags indicated Michael had heard him well enough.

"What things?"

"Everything. All that you do to me while we are in this room."

"Who told you that?"

"No one needed to tell me. It's bad enough that I allow you to do those things to me.

That I want them.” Oh God , how he wanted them. “I can’t . . .” A wince squeezed his eyes closed tighter. “I can’t . . . ask.”

“Yes, you can.” Fingertips lifted his chin. “Yes, you can, Percy.”

Reluctantly, he opened his eyes. Slowly, as if fearing what he would find. But he knew exactly what he’d find. The low, comforting baritone of Michael’s voice had painted the picture in his mind before Percy’s lashes had even begun to sweep up. Michael, so calm and strong, the patience that always seemed to lurk in the depths of his eyes now filling his gaze.

“When we are together, nothing is wrong. Nothing is forbidden, as long as we both want it.”

“But it’s—”

“Yes, what we do is against the law, but we aren’t inflicting harm on anyone. The torment you impose on yourself, it’s not necessary. Believe me, it’s unnecessary,” Michael stressed, his eyes boring into Percy’s, demanding he believe him. “If you can trust me in anything, trust me in this. A bit of discretion—all right, more than a bit—is all that’s needed.”

“I do trust you. But it’s not just that we are both men. I know sodomy is against the law, I know we need to be discreet. It’s unnatural to want another man, but if that was all I wanted, then . . .” He gave his head a shake, dislodging Michael’s grip on his chin, and dropped his gaze to his feet. A year ago, he’d come to terms with his preference for men. He wouldn’t go so far as to label it acceptance , but he had at least stopped fighting that particular desire. “But that’s not all I want. Surely there is something wrong with me if I want so desperately to do as bid. If I want so desperately for you to use everything in that trunk on me.”

Silence filled the room, pressed against his ears. Unable to remain still, Percy shifted his weight, suddenly acutely aware he was naked as the day he was born, his now soft cock dangling between his legs. Whereas Michael, save for his coat, was fully clothed, complete with a neatly tied cravat and a fob chain attached to his iron-gray waistcoat.

“You have been with other men before, correct?”

“Yes. A few,” he added, not wanting Michael to think he bent over for just anyone who would have him. Not that there were many who had wanted him.

His attention fixed on his bare feet, he sensed rather than saw Michael’s nod.

“Have you ever been with someone like me? Someone with more eccentric tastes in the bedchamber, who enjoys dominating another man?”

“No.” Until he’d met Michael, the wickedest thing he’d done was allow another to bugger him. But Michael had an uncanny ability to pluck his deepest, darkest desires from the bottom of his depraved soul and present them to him wrapped in a neat leather bow, so to speak. Hell, after being with Michael, now just the scent of leather could get him aroused.

Michael let out a sigh.

Percy fought back the cringe. That sigh had sounded so . . . disappointed. His muscles drew even tighter, bracing for the next words from Michael’s mouth. Bracing for the request to leave Michael’s house and never return again.

“You have my apologies.”

Apologies?

Why in God's name was Michael apologizing to him?

Michael let out another one of those disappointed sighs. "I suspected, and I should have taken a moment to have a discussion with you before now. Percy, there is nothing wrong with you. Some men prefer to submit to another. Having such an inclination is not wrong, and in case you believe thus, it does not make you weak, either. It takes great strength to give up control."

Great strength? An absolutely ridiculous notion. Now Michael was pandering to him. Brilliant.

"Will you tell me what's going through that head of yours, what's causing that frown?"

He pulled his attention from his feet, met Michael's gaze. "Men are supposed to be strong, to take what they want, to crave power and status and distinguish themselves in the world."

"They are supposed to want to be barristers, for example?"

"Yes. They're supposed to be like you. Well, you're not a barrister, but that point matters not. You say it takes strength to give up control, but it doesn't. It's easy." He knew that for a fact. Nothing Michael could say could change it.

"For you, perhaps. But not for everyone. I can't give up control the way you do. Just the thought of allowing another to restrain me?" Michael shook his head, his dark eyebrows drawing together, as if the mere suggestion made him want to lurch back in protest. "And it's not because I think others would look on me as weak or believe me wrong for wanting such a thing. Rather it's outside my abilities. When you give yourself over to me, I can't help but feel more than a bit of awe because it is something I could never do." Michael took a half-step closer, cupped Percy's

shoulder with one large hand. “Strength takes many forms. The strongest of us are those who own our desires, both inside the bedchamber and outside of it. What we do in this room is not wrong. Having a need to submit to another is not wrong. Giving voice to your needs is most assuredly not wrong.”

He couldn't deny that Michael's argument held some logical sense, though it sounded more like Michael was talking about having confidence in oneself. He wasn't convinced submitting made one strong. He definitely would need time to thoroughly think that one through.

“Percy, there is nothing more natural in all the world than to indulge your desires with someone, whatever those desires may be. All that matters is that we both enjoy our time together. And I do so enjoy our time together.”

At a loss for what to say, Percy nodded.

“Have I eased your mind at all?” Michael asked with a fair hint of uncertainty, as though he truly, honestly cared about Percy's answer. As if he cared about him .

He swept his gaze over Michael's face, over his strong, handsome features. The worry creating a crease between his brows, the tension in his jaw, the slightly fuller bottom lip compressed by the lines bracketing his mouth. And it occurred to him. He, Percy, had the power to ease Michael's mind. His answer alone would do the trick because Michael cared for him. Cared enough to want him to be free of the burden of shame and guilt whenever he stepped out of this room.

Michael did not need to care. The last three months were proof alone a clear conscience was not a requirement for Percy to suck Michael's cock or bend over on command. Yet . . .

If he said no, he knew in his bones Michael would put a stop to their evening. Would

not allow them to proceed again until Percy could answer in the affirmative.

Michael well and truly cared for him. Why exactly, Percy hadn't a notion. But he could refute it no longer.

He gave himself a moment to allow that astounding fact to sink in.

And since that was indeed the truth, Michael would not lie to him. Would not say whatever Percy needed to hear. Michael actually believed there was nothing at all wrong with him. Hell, he'd encouraged Percy to own his desires. Had all but commanded him to not be ashamed of them.

"It still feels . . . wicked." The sound of his own voice echoed in his ears, startling him.

Had he said that out loud?

Bowing his head, Michael leaned closer, breaching the half foot of distance between them. Warm breath fanned Percy's neck. "Yes. But that's part of what makes our nights so enjoyable," he whispered into Percy's ear, as if it were a scandalous secret only the two of them shared.

. . . Our nights . . . They were their nights—his and Michael's. No one else's. Therefore whatever they chose to do together could not be wrong.

A sense of calm settled over him, and at the same time, he felt somehow lighter.

"Yes, you've eased my mind."

He felt Michael smile against his ear. "Thank you." Then Michael straightened, though his hand remained on Percy's shoulder. Steady and comforting. "Now back to

the original question. Do you want to try asking, or shall we attempt that some other time? The choice is yours completely.”

Michael had asked for Percy’s voice as a kind of gift, and not just any gift, but a Christmas gift. He should at least try. If he was going to own his desires, there was no better way to start, after all.

He took a deep breath, gathered his courage. “All right. I’ll give it a go. But if . . . I . . .”

“You can stop at any time,” Michael said, filling in the void. “And if you do, the evening does not have to stop if you do not wish it. We can continue on as we have in the past.”

Reassured, Percy nodded.

But what to ask for?

Given he and Michael had spent a good number of nights together, Percy was rather intimately acquainted with the options available to him. And there were a lot. Too many.

Clearing his throat, Percy briefly glanced to the floorboards beneath his feet, as if they held the answer.

Not a bit of help at all.

Well, he could follow Michael’s example. He was good at following.

“Will you kiss me?” Oh hell. Was that his voice? He sounded like a meek, uncertain miss.

A warm smile curved Michael's mouth. One of those rare ones that made Percy want to snuggle up to the man's side. "It would be my pleasure."

Michael's hand slid down his arm, curved around to rest at the small of his back. Michael had kissed him countless times and on countless places on his body, yet this . . . this was so very different. Anticipation rushed through his veins, backed by a heavy measure of . . . nervousness? Need? He wasn't quite certain. Michael's dark lashes swept down as he leaned in to press a kiss to Percy's lips. A soft, slow kiss. Light and gentle. A mirror image of the one Percy had given him.

Needing more, he wrapped his arms around Michael's neck, pressed up against the solid bulk of his muscles, rubbed his bare skin against Michael's clothed body. Yet Michael kept the kiss frustratingly slow.

"Harder, please," he whispered against Michael's lips.

A low growl rumbled around him. Slanting his lips over Percy's, Michael deepened the kiss, claimed his mouth. Tongue delving deep, possessing him. Doing exactly as Percy had asked.

The concept of merely asking and receiving was . . . well, bloody damned brilliant.

Percy clung to Michael's neck, surrendered to the strength and the power of Michael's kiss. Of Michael himself.

The hand on his back splayed, coasted down to grab his arse, hauling him even closer. The hard arch of Michael's cock nudged his lower belly, the soft wool of his trousers tickling Percy's skin. His head swam with lust, with need, with a craving for more, so potent and thick.

Then Michael's lips left his, the heat of his body gone.

Percy blinked his eyes open to find Michael gazing down at him. The man arched one dark brow.

Oh, yes. He was in charge of orchestrating the night's events.

He licked his lips, savored the taste of Michael that lingered there. What to ask for next?

His brain felt clunky and slow, his senses still awash with the force of Michael's kiss. Yet some part of his mind knew exactly what he wanted, for his attention went directly to the placket of Michael's trousers and the blatant erection the soft black wool could not conceal.

* * *

The raw hunger in Percy's gaze was like a physical force. Michael's cock hardened even further, straining against the confines of his trousers. Percy's tongue darted out again to swipe across his bottom lip.

Having to stand idle, even though it was a situation of his own construction, was turning out to be more difficult than he could have foreseen. He kept a firm hold on his patience, kept his mouth shut and his arms at his sides. It wouldn't do to rush Percy, and he would not learn exactly what Percy preferred above all else if he nudged him in certain directions. For example, a direction that would get that amazing, talented, and above all eager mouth onto his body.

Another swipe of that pink tongue across Percy's lip.

Patience.

Hungry hazel eyes met his. "Tell me to suck your cock." A blush rushed up Percy's

neck, staining his cheeks and the tips of his ears, yet Percy kept his gaze locked with Michael's.

Pride swelled within his chest. It was all Michael could do to keep the grin from his lips. He schooled his features into a hard mask of command, dropped his voice to a low rumble. "Get on your knees and suck my cock, Percival."

The light brown fan of Percy's lashes fluttered briefly, and a little smile of absolute contentment curved his mouth. It was as if he melted down to his knees, the motion seamless perfection. And it didn't escape Michael's notice that Percy hadn't asked him to do something to him. Rather the opposite.

I want so desperately to do as bid. Percy's earlier words sounded in his head.

Perhaps it wasn't just the act of submitting, but the act of serving, of fulfilling Michael's desires, whatever they may be, that called to Percy's soul. It made sense. Percy preferred to serve in his position of employment, after all.

Percy's light brown forelock fell over his brow as his nimble fingers made quick work of the buttons on the placket of Michael's trousers. A warm hand reached inside, wrapped around Michael's length, and pulled it free.

Intent on the task given to him, Percy did not glance up once. He leaned forward, his lips parting, his tongue darting out to swipe the bead of fluid from the head of Michael's cock. A content smile flittered across his lips again, and then he opened his mouth wide. Soft lips slid over the crown, down his length, until they touched Percy's fingers still wrapped around the base.

Michael reached out a hand, threaded his fingers into Percy's hair, palmed the back of his skull. Percy's light brown lashes drifted down to rest on his flushed cheekbones, then he began serving Michael in earnest.

Satisfying suction and wet, slick heat. The firm grip of his fist pumping in counterpoint to the strokes of his mouth. Percy truly had an amazing mouth. And tongue. Each pull back was accompanied with a flick across the crown that sent a jolt straight to Michael's ballocks.

The delightfully crude sound of Percy sucking his cock filled the bedchamber. Percy's deep breaths fanned his groin. Hot, thick pleasure coiled slowly down Michael's spine. He was torn between the need to tip his head back, close his eyes, give himself up to the decadent sensations, and the need to keep his gaze pinned on the beautiful sight before him.

A sight that had captivated him since their first night together. It was meant to have been a simple affair. A shared drink in his study, a bit of conversation, a nudge or two to confirm his suspicion Percy preferred men. But Percy had been so nervous, yet at the same time so obviously attracted to him, that Michael had thrown his intentions into the hearth and followed his instincts. "Get on your knees and suck my cock." He had sworn then that Percy had sighed in gratitude as he'd promptly done as commanded.

The suction intensified around his length, jolting his thoughts to the present. Percy didn't quicken his pace, but Michael felt the change acutely. The increase in determination. The heightened resolve behind each stroke. Percy's free hand, resting on Michael's thigh, flexed and tightened, as if resisting the urge to reach down and stroke his own leaking prick. The orgasm that had been hovering quite pleasantly at the edges of Michael's senses began to barrel down upon him.

He cupped Percy's jaw, tapped the pad of his thumb against his hollowed cheek. The light touch was a stark contrast to his tone. "Mind, Percival. I told you to suck my cock, not bring me to climax."

The intense suction instantly lessened. A few long luscious strokes more, and Percy

eased back, Michael's cock slipping free of his mouth, his fingers releasing Michael's length.

Percy rocked back to rest his arse on his calves, his prick so hard it arched up to brush his lower belly. Head bowed and arms at his sides, he seemed satisfied to wait for Michael's next command. As if he wanted the next command to come from Michael.

While Michael wanted to learn what else Percy truly preferred above all in the bedchamber, perhaps the time had come for him to take back full control of the evening. Percy had asked for a kiss, voiced his desire for Michael to deepen said kiss, and told Michael to tell him to suck his cock. Three requests, when not a quarter of an hour ago, Michael had feared he would not be able to pull even one from Percy.

He opened his mouth, the command for Percy to get onto the bed on the tip of his tongue.

Percy glanced up through the fan of his lashes, caught Michael's eye. "Tell me to lick your arse."

Naughty, brave man. Hell, how Michael adored him.

"Percival Joseph Owens, I want you to lick my arse."

A visible shudder went through Percy, his breath catching. "Yes, Michael." He reached for the waistband of Michael's trousers hanging on his hips, tugged the garment down to his calves. One foot at a time, he removed Michael's shoes, pulled the trousers free of his feet. Then he stood.

Michael waited for him to fold the trousers, place them on the chest of drawers, and tuck the shoes beneath. The man was so tidy. A trait Michael could appreciate, though right now, the trousers could remain strewn across the floorboards for all he

cared. Too impatient to wait a moment longer, he made to tug on the knot of his cravat.

“Leave it on,” Percy said, with a glance over his shoulder. “For now, please.”

He wanted him partially clothed? Oh, he definitely possessed a wicked streak that rivaled Michael’s own.

As Percy turned from the chest of drawers, Michael caught him by the upper arm. Pulled Percy to him. Slanted his mouth over those plumped, reddened, wet lips, needing to taste them again.

He coasted his hands down Percy’s back, the skin as smooth as crushed velvet. Percy sagged against him, his innate need to submit rendering him almost boneless. Michael couldn’t help but marvel at the man in his arms as he swept his tongue inside Percy’s delectable mouth. Percy might believe otherwise, but he possessed a strength, a purity of soul, that called to Michael’s own on a level he’d never felt with another.

Through sheer force of will, Michael broke the kiss and released Percy. “Now get to work.” He turned toward the foot of the bed and bent at the waist, resting his elbows on the edge of the mattress. “And I expect nothing less than your best effort.”

Cool air brushed his arse as Percy tucked the tail of his shirt beneath his waistcoat. A creak of the floorboards, then hands palmed his arse cheeks, spread them fully apart. Anticipation soared through Michael. Oh hell , was Percy good at this act. Almost too good. He’d never climaxed from it alone, but Percy had brought him damned close on more than one occasion. Warm breaths brushed against him, then Percy placed a soft, reverent kiss on his hole. Starting with slow licks, he wet the sensitive skin, leaving no spot untouched. Then those slow licks turned to teasing swirls and light flicks.

A groan shook Michael’s chest. Damnation .

Yes, indeed, almost too good.

Widening his stance, Michael arched his back, pushing into Percy's grip, wanting more of that talented tongue. Fingers clutching Michael's cheeks, Percy gave it to him and then some. The hot pants of his breaths scorched Michael's crease as he licked and stabbed, taunting Michael with the tiniest hint of penetration.

The notion nudged hard against his senses. His hole flexed, craving more. Craving the satisfying burn that came from being stretched, opened, stuffed full.

"Stop, Percy." He looked over his shoulder, caught Percy's gaze over the curve of his hip. "Fetch the hollow steel plug from the trunk." With enough width, and lighter than solid steel or marble, that particular plug would stay firmly in place regardless of what activities came next.

Hazel eyes flared. A swipe of his forearm across his wet mouth, then Percy nodded, quick and eager. The next moment, he was bent over before the trunk, putting his arse on display. Michael let out a grunt. Soft yet firm and oh so plentiful, the man had an arse designed to be buggered and spanked.

The plug in one hand, Percy returned to stand at his place behind Michael. His flushed chest worked under the force of his quick breaths. Not from nervousness or trepidation. The excited spark in his eyes said all too clearly he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

Michael flicked his chin toward the plug. "Suck on it."

Opening his mouth, Percy slipped the length of the plug inside. Hell and damnation, that was a pretty image, Percy's reddened lips stretched around the steel. Three strokes, and he pulled it free, the surface glistening with moisture.

Michael waited. Let the anticipation ratchet, draw taut, in Percy, in himself. All the while, Percy's eager gaze remained locked with his. When Michael couldn't wait another moment, he spoke, his voice barely above a growl.

“Percival, push that plug in my arse.”

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Michael's crude command went directly to Percy's groin. His ballocks lurched up, tightening against his body. He coasted a hand over the soft silk of the back of Michael's waistcoat, then down to palm the man's arse and pull a cheek back. Short dark hair dusted his crease and swept down his strong thighs, the area around his entrance slicked with moisture from Percy's mouth. The rectangular end of the plug clutched tightly in his other hand, he made to lift his arm, then paused.

Michael hadn't told him to fetch the oil, yet . . .

Leaning down, he spit on Michael's entrance. With a hand that shook slightly, he used the narrow end of the plug to spread the moisture there. Then he pushed just the tip inside. Careful and slow.

A part of his mind marveled that Michael was allowing him to do this, yet another part oddly wasn't surprised. The man radiated confidence—the same confidence that drew Percy to him. Michael pursued what he wanted without regret, without shame, without hesitation. He sparked the craving within Percy to be like him, to be that confident, that sure of himself.

Dropping his head, Michael pushed back. "More, Percival. Shove it in my arse."

A thin whimper slid past Percy's lips. Increasing the pressure, he did as Michael demanded. He couldn't tear his gaze from Michael's arse as the flared length of the plug disappeared into his body, his entrance stretching, yielding to the increase in width. Then his hole closed snugly around the narrow base and the rectangular end

settled against his skin.

With a gravelly, distinctly satisfied grunt, Michael straightened. He turned to face Percy. His eyes were heavy-lidded, the crests of his cheeks flushed the tiniest bit, his thick cock standing stiff and hard between his bare legs. Yet his cravat was still neatly tied, his waistcoat fully buttoned. A debauched, proper gentleman. “Well done.”

“Thank you,” he whispered. Just knowing he’d pleased Michael . . . there was nothing quite like that feeling in all the world.

“Would you have liked the plug to be your cock?”

The question took him aback. “You’d let me?”

“Indeed, if you wish to try it. Have you ever buggered a man?”

“No.” He’d never been with another who’d wanted that from him.

“Then I can be your first.” Judging by the possessive glint in his eyes, the notion seemed to please Michael. “Not tonight, though perhaps soon?”

Percy nodded. “Perhaps soon.” A rather intimidating prospect, to be responsible for Michael’s pleasure in such a fashion. But the idea of Michael ordering him to bugger him . . . of it being his cock , and not steel, sliding into Michael’s arse . . .

A heavy bolt of lust shot through him.

“Back to tonight. Is there anything else you wish to ask for?”

Michael had said earlier they could stop at any time, and Percy found he was ready to

shed the responsibility for the night. It had been exhilarating—oh, most assuredly—and even enlightening. But he yearned simply to do as bid again.

He shook his head. “Do with me what you will.”

That possessive glint made its way to Michael’s mouth, curving his lips. “First, though, I find myself rather overdressed for what I have in mind for the remainder of our evening. Since my valet is not available to see to the task, you will serve in his place.”

“Yes, Michael.” Taking a half-step closer, he reached up. The backs of his fingers brushed Michael’s jaw as he tugged on the white muslin, unraveling the neat knot. He’d removed Michael’s trousers many times, yet to have the pleasure of undressing him fully? To have that particular task entrusted to him?

His breath stuttered. He gently pulled the length of fabric from Michael’s neck. Michael kept his attention fixed straight ahead, his chin slightly lifted, bearing Percy no mind. Just as one would pay a valet no mind as the servant went about his duties. After folding the cravat over his elbow, he set to work on the buttons of Michael’s waistcoat. One by one, he slipped each small fabric-covered button free, all the while resisting the urge to lay his hands on Michael’s broad chest. To feel the heat of his body seeping through the fine silk.

He stepped behind Michael, took hold of the shoulder seams of the waistcoat. Michael shrugged, and Percy pulled the garment free.

Percy pursed his lips. How did a valet remove a gentleman’s shirt? As he’d never had a valet of his own, he hadn’t a notion of how to accomplish the task.

But before the worry could fully grip hold, Michael whisked the shirt over his head, solving the problem for him.

Determined to do his very best, he did not allow himself to soak up the sight of Michael's glorious bare back. Instead, he quickly took the shirt from Michael's outstretched hand. Once he'd folded the garments and placed them on the chest of drawers, he returned to stand before Michael.

"Well done. Now get on the bed, Percival."

He scrambled onto the bed. There were so many possibilities that he hadn't a notion of what Michael might want from him. The unknown somehow made everything that much more wicked, and at the same time, that much more . . . comforting.

Pushing the pillows aside, he positioned himself in the middle of the large mattress on his back. And waited.

A satisfied nod, and Michael turned from the bed. With each step he took, Percy caught a glimpse of steel between his cheeks. Knowing the plug was in Michael's arse right at that moment . . .

He caught the groan just in time to keep it from rattling his throat. He knew exactly how that particular plug felt. The lightness of it, the way it'd moved with him, yet at the same time lit up every nerve in his arse with each step he'd take.

After reaching into the trunk, Michael strode back to the bed, a long leather carriage line held in one hand and a glass bottle of oil in the other.

With a satisfying thump, Michael dropped the coiled line onto the mattress. "Arse up," he murmured, grabbing two of the pillows.

Planting his feet, Percy arched his back to lift his hips off the bed.

Once the pillows were positioned under his hips to Michael's satisfaction, Michael

grabbed the leather line.

The ropes beneath the mattress creaked softly as Michael knelt on the bed beside him. Every movement was deliberate yet efficient as Michael restrained him, his expression intent, his dark brows scrunched together the tiniest bit. One end looped and knotted above Percy's knee to draw his leg back, the line passed between two of the wooden spindles spanning the length of the headboard, then wrapped and knotted around first one wrist then the other. Michael didn't need to ask Percy to draw his other leg up for the line to be looped above that knee, the end secured with a simple slipknot.

Arms above his head, legs back, arse exposed, Percy was almost completely immobilized. A light tug of his arms pulled his legs back further, past the point of comfort. Yet there was just a bit of give in the line, enough to allow a little wiggle and to keep the leather from biting into his skin. Designed to control a strong team of six, the line was also broader than the usual variety, making it the ideal width for the use Michael had put it to. In his time with Michael, Percy had quickly found he had a fondness for both knots and leather. The security of a knot binding him, the thick, woodsy scent of leather. Ropes were quite nice as well, but they couldn't rival the feel of smooth leather against his skin.

Michael ran a fingertip beneath the leather wrapped above one knee, clearly testing to ensure it wasn't too tight. "All right?" he asked.

In his prone position, Percy nodded as best he could. Oh hell. More than merely all right. Each beat of his heart reverberated in his prick, the hard length resting on his lower abdomen. Fluid dripped from the small slit, wetting his skin. And his arse . . . His muscles tightened. His arse was completely Michael's to do with as he pleased.

A fact Michael demonstrated by dragging a fingertip down from his ballocks to his entrance. Such a light touch, yet there was no denying the authority, the command

behind it.

“This gorgeous arse is much too pale. But first . . .” The scent of almond oil filled the air as Michael poured a generous amount into his palm. “I want you prepared for my cock. I want you ready for me.”

Yes . At the first brush of an oil-slicked finger, Percy closed his eyes. A swirl of a fingertip over his skin and then that digit pushed inside. The teasing touch long gone, he took each firm stroke, bottom lip held between his teeth. With no warning, one digit became two. Then three. There was no other word for it: Michael prepared him. Methodically. Resolutely. And the absolute lack of softer sentiment cranked the lust even higher.

His prick ached for a touch. Needed it. Michael wouldn't have to do anything but wrap a hand around Percy's cock to trigger the climax building swiftly within. A fact he was certain Michael well knew. Hell, even his climax was Michael's to do with as he pleased.

Those fingers left him. Left him aching and empty and wanting.

He heard the loud crack of skin against skin an instant before the delicious sting radiated through him. Blow after blow, the rhythm as consistent and solid as the man himself, Michael smacked the exposed bottom curve of his arse, alternating from one cheek to the other.

Percy reveled in each sensation. The brief feel of Michael's bare palm on his skin. The sharp fiery impact. The way the sting flared and then seeped into his muscles, ratcheting the ache to be filled. To be taken by Michael. The plea screamed to the surface, yet ingrained habit had him tamping it down, keeping it locked inside.

The sensations began to blur together. Every last trace of tension left his body. He

gasped for breath, felt the tickle of warm moisture slide down his temples. Intense pleasure saturated his senses, left him lax in the lines and almost at the point of sobbing in earnest.

And then there was silence. So immersed in Michael's rhythm, Percy's breath stumbled when the next blow didn't come.

"Gorgeous." Michael smoothed a hot palm over his smarting skin. "How many was that, Percival?"

"Nineteen." He could barely form his mouth around the word, hadn't a clue how he even knew the answer. Yet he always did.

"Very good." The mattress shifted beneath Percy. There was a faint clink of glass against glass. A fresh hint of almond oil beneath the scent of male sweat. "Open your eyes. Look at me."

Percy forced his eyes to focus on Michael kneeling between his spread legs. Met Michael's intent gaze.

"Don't look away." With a hand on Percy's hip to hold him steady, Michael pushed his cock inside him.

A groan rattled his throat as he was stretched wide. So damned wide. Without a single pause, Michael pushed deeper and deeper. Until his groin pressed against the just-spanked skin of Percy's arse. Until he filled him completely.

His eyelids threatened to close. The pleasure . . . so intense, so perfect. The empty ache finally, blissfully satisfied. Yet he kept his gaze fixed on Michael's as ordered, and earned the ultimate reward.

He watched as lust took hold of Michael's features. Darkening his eyes to almost a midnight blue, pulling his upper lip, tightening his jaw. Michael took hold of Percy's hips with both hands and pulled back, teasing the rim of his entrance with the head of his cock, then plunged back inside.

"Tell me, Percy. Do you like it when I fuck you?"

Percy bit his lip, almost hard enough to break the skin. Tension threatened to seep into his muscles, to mask the all-encompassing pleasure. Yet it wasn't the demand, but the plea in Michael's eyes that finally pulled the truth from him.

He nodded once.

A deep growl rumbled from Michael's chest. "Tell me. I want to hear it." Michael pulled back and slammed into him.

"Yes, yes." The words tumbled past Percy's lips before he could yank them back. And once the words were free, he couldn't stop them. Did not want to stop them. It was as if every word he'd ever tamped down demanded to be heard. "Please, Michael. More."

Buried hilt deep, Michael paused. "Very well done," he whispered, his features momentarily softening, telling Percy louder than words just how much his voice meant to him. And then he proceeded to give Percy exactly what he'd asked for.

The hard thrusts shook the bed. With each slam of Michael's hips, Percy's cock slapped against his belly. But the contact wasn't enough. His senses teetered on the cusp of a climax, and Michael held him there. Poised, ready, desperate. He gave him more and more and more. Driving more pleasure into his senses. Faster, harder, deeper.

Michael finally reached for Percy's cock. Strong fingers wrapped around his length. And the orgasm blazed through him.

“Yes, yes, yes!”

As the sound of his own shouts echoed in his ears, Michael rammed into him to the hilt, filling Percy with hot seed.

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Michael removed the wet cloth from Percy's arse and replaced it with another one. A chill swept over his skin. The cold cloth was supposed to help soothe his reddened arse, or at least that's what Michael had once told him. And he had to admit that even though he felt a bit ridiculous lying on his stomach on Michael's bed, a cloth draped over his bare arse, the remedy wasn't for naught. It did work.

The leather line was gone, put back in its place in the trunk. Michael had also seen to the steel plug himself, wiped the seed from Percy's stomach before it could dry, and stoked the fire in the hearth. A few more minutes, and Michael would deem his arse sufficiently tended to and remove the cloth. That would be Percy's cue to drag himself out of Michael's bed, pull on his clothes, and leave. Until then, though, he'd savor whatever was left of their night.

He watched as Michael crossed to the low cabinet by the door. A little clink of porcelain, and he returned to the bed bearing a teacup.

"Drink this."

Pushing up onto one elbow, Percy took the proffered cup. "Thank you." Cold tea, likely because the maid had heated it before she'd been dismissed for the night, but it did wonders for his parched throat.

Setting the empty cup on the bedside table, Michael sat on the edge of the bed. "How do you feel?"

"All right." He could don his trousers without discomfort.

“No. How do you feel?” Michael asked again, his brow creased with concern.

Oh . Michael wasn't referring to his arse, but to him. “All right.” Michael's hard stare demanded a more thorough answer. “A bit tired, but all and all, right as can be. And no regrets,” he added before Michael could press him again.

And he did not have any regrets. He actually felt rather damned good. The worry and shame that usually began to form over his head about now were wonderfully absent. Gone. The only thing that kept the smile from his lips was the knowledge that he would need to leave soon, return to his lonely apartments. But there was no use bemoaning it.

Michael studied him for a moment. “Would you care to stay for the night?”

“Honestly, Michael, I'm fine.” The man needn't put him up in a guest bedchamber, keep watch over him like some sort of invalid. He was well able to see himself to his apartments.

“I don't doubt that. Still, I'd like you to stay with me tonight.”

With him? “But . . .” He now knew Michael cared for him—their evening had been proof of that astonishing fact. Yet . . . Michael wanted him to stay with him, in his bed? “Truly?”

“Yes, truly.”

Before the smile could show itself, rational thought descended, dampening that light, wonderful feeling sweeping through his body. “But your maid. Your valet. I can't be here”—he nudged his chin to indicate the bed—“come dawn.”

“Yes, you can. I gave my staff the night free, including the morning. They won't arrive until noon. An early present of sorts for Boxing Day.”

“You enjoy giving presents, don’t you?” And Michael, bless his generous soul, had given Percy the most amazing one of all—the gift of his own voice. Of accepting his desires, of owning them. He wasn’t certain if he could ever repay him.

Michael tipped his head. “Will you stay with me tonight?”

“Yes,” he replied, unable to contain the smile a moment longer.

A crisp nod from Michael, and he got to his feet, taking the damp cloth with him. As he extinguished the candles, Percy slipped beneath the coverlet and wiggled to the right, being sure to leave enough space for Michael to sleep comfortably.

With the room lit only by the faint glow of the fire in the hearth, Michael got into bed. The mattress shifted, the ropes beneath creaking. Then an arm wrapped around Percy’s back, pulling him close to a strong, bare body.

“I want you with me, not on the other side of the bed.”

Percy didn’t need to be told twice. Resting his head on the man’s broad shoulder, he eagerly snuggled up to Michael’s side. Sleep tugged heavily at his eyes, but he didn’t want to surrender to it just yet. He wanted to savor every detail. The way the heat from Michael’s body warmed his own. The steady rhythm of his breaths. The feel of Michael’s arm holding him tight.

Michael tucked him closer to his side. “I would have you know that I’d welcome a call from you, whatever the time of day or night. You needn’t feel compelled to wait for a note to knock on my door. It’s always open to you.”

Percy lifted his head. He couldn’t make out Michael’s features, yet the dark shadows surrounding them could not mask the sincerity in the man’s tone.

“In fact, I would like for it to be only us. No others. If you agree, that is.”

The rise and fall of Michael's chest picked up a notch, the steady rhythm gone. As if Michael wasn't fully certain he would agree. As if the man hadn't a notion that he'd just presented Percy with his fondest wish, the one he'd been too afraid even to hope for. "There haven't been any others, not since our first evening together." He wanted no doubt in Michael's mind on that point. "I've only wanted to be with you. I only want to be with you."

The tension eased from the strong body beneath him. "As I with you. Hence my question. So do you agree?"

Shifting up, he pressed his lips to Michael's, put his answer into the kiss. Then, pulling back, he gave Michael the words. "Yes. I would like that above all else."

They would need to be discreet, to appear only as friends outside of this room. Yet the knowledge that he was Michael's, just as Michael was now his, would be more than enough to compensate for the need for discretion.

Feeling happier and more secure than he could ever remember, he snuggled back up to Michael's side. "Will you tell me your full name?"

"Michael Albert Barlow."

"Thank you."

"It was my pleasure, Percival Joseph Owens. Being with you is always my pleasure." Lips brushed the top of Percy's head. "Happy Christmas."

Percy smiled against Michael's chest. "Happy Christmas to you, too."

Tonight had truly been a Christmas he would never forget, a Christmas he knew would be the first of many more to come with Michael.