



J.K. Pendragon

The Gentleman
and the *Rogue*

In the midst of the opulent Edwardian Era, the young, head-strong son of the Police Commissioner longs for adventure and a chance to prove himself. When an evening party is disrupted by a band of mysterious masked men, he sees his chance and gives chase, pursuing a rogue thief through the dark streets. But all is not as it seems and adventure quickly turns into something sinister and terrifying, where his only chance at saving London is joining forces with the mysterious Rogue.

The Gentleman and the Rogue

By J.K. Pendragon

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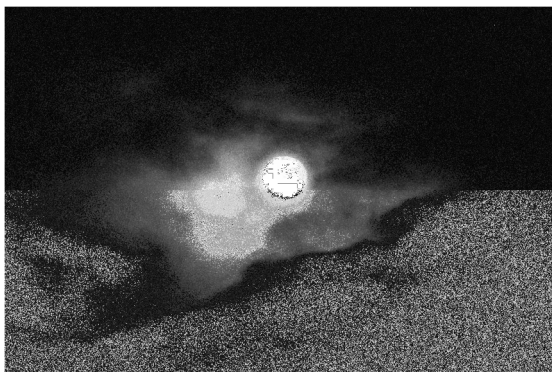
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It was midnight in the Winter Garden.

The dark ivy that crawled up the walls and stonework was flecked with crystals of ice, and a sparkling white coat of frozen snow covered everything, glistening in the moonlight. The night sky had undergone a fierce battle in its quest for dominance, or so it looked to the Gentleman, for it was peppered with sparkling punctures and the moon was a fierce slash, perhaps from a sickle-blade, glowing brightly above the heads of the party-goers.

He had only escaped the company of the others for a few short moments to gaze at the sky before he was hailed back by his mother and forced to endure another round of petty discussions. Michael Pennington, it seemed, was determined to engage in a proper struggle with him over the hand of Miss Betsy Clarke. Although he had little to no interest in the woman, his mother had been holding up his side of the fight for him for the last several weeks, and now Michael was bound and determined to get the better of

him, whether or not the Gentlemen cared to be gotten at all.

He disliked Michael Pennington, and did not often campaign to make a secret of the fact. Michael was a year or two younger than him and already high on his status as the heir to his father's lucrative manufacturing business. The Gentleman was slated to take over for his father as head of the police force, but he felt no need to parade around lobbying the information to any and all passers-by. The cocky look in Michael's dark eyes and the monotonous drawl of his voice only served to aggravate the Gentleman further, and so he was more than happy to be presented with a distraction in the form of his father.

Despite having grown up under his father's tutelage, the Gentleman was not very like him at all. While the Gentleman was tall, well-built and reserved, his father was short, stocky and ridiculously extroverted. His favourite activity at socials such as this was waddling around to make jovial small talk with the attendees. Unfortunately, this was also his favourite activity at work. The Gentleman was bound and determined (upon his appointment as police commissioner of course) to set the police force straight and restore the officers of London to their former glory. Until then, however, he settled for quietly shadowing his father at work, and practicing his sword and gunplay religiously after hours.

"I thought I ought to draw you away from Miss Clarke and your mother there," said his father conspiratorially. "They looked rather ready to swallow you whole."

"Oh yes, thank you father," said the Gentleman with a small laugh. "I do appreciate it."

"Of course, my boy." The Commissioner patted his son on the back. "Listen, why don't you take your chance and run on home? The party's bound to keep on for another

few hours, and I know you want to get back to your training."

The Gentleman was rather taken aback by this unexpected leeway from his father, but accepted it gratefully and ducked into a covered walkway, making his way to the exit. A nice cup of tea was in order, and then perhaps a few hours of endurance training before bed.

He had almost made it to the door when he heard his name called from down the walkway. He sighed, recognising the voice as Michael's.

"And where do you think *you're* going?" demanded Michael, striding up to the Gentleman and glaring up at him. "I was just beginning to inform your mother what I thought of her plans to host a luncheon next Saturday after the ball."

"Yes and that has nothing to do with me," sighed the Gentleman, "so I really don't see why it's necessary for me to—"

"It's *rude*," snapped Michael. "In fact, you have been nothing but rude to me or Miss Betsy for the past fortnight. I really haven't the slightest clue what she sees in you at all."

The Gentleman was about to reassure Michael that he hadn't the faintest idea either when they were interrupted.

A loud bang sounded from the garden, and then, after a very long moment of hushed, tinkling silence, the screaming began.

The Gentleman's instinct kicked in, and he rushed back to the garden, Michael hot on his heels.

It was difficult, for a moment, to process what had happened. The garden which had until recently been peaceful and still was suddenly awash with chaos. The colourful dresses of the women swirled frantically, like a saturated nightmare as they ran to escape. And blood ...

yes, there was blood on the snow, and a man was yelling furiously, his voice suddenly cut off with a snap. The scent of gunpowder filled the air as another blast went off, blindingly bright and disorienting. The Gentleman shaded his eyes, and then turned to face the attackers.

They wore masks; grisly, grotesque masks, the faces of demons. Their bodies were like gold skeletons, glinting in the light of the fires and the Gentleman realized that they wore a strange sort of armour. It did not protect their bodies in any way, but rather ran down their arms and legs and formed artificial joints. The Gentleman watched, horrified, as an attacker took hold of one of the brave men who had stayed behind to fight. He could see the man's eyes widen as the attacker circled a golden clawed hand around his neck and began to squeeze. Then, suddenly, with inhuman disregard and quickness, the monster snapped the man's neck, and casually tossed him aside. The Gentleman stared, frozen for a moment, before a woman jostled him in her rush to escape and then he sprang into action.

A wooden table had been upturned next to him, and he hurriedly seized one of the legs and broke it off with his foot. Then he glanced around in time to see one of the attackers accosting Miss Betsy. He rushed to her side and with a fell swing, knocked the attacker off of his feet—or rather, tried to. It seemed that whatever the gold armour was made of, it was enough to stop the heavy wooden leg from doing any harm, and in fact broke it clean in half. The Gentleman flinched, taken aback for only a moment, and then he swung the broken leg around in his fist and aimed it clean at the attacker's chest.

The makeshift stake slid in between the golden ribs of the attacker and punctured deep, causing the man to cry out and then fall to the ground, dead. The Gentleman

stared at the motionless figure on the ground for a moment. He'd killed him. He had trained his whole life, but he'd never killed anyone before. He closed his eyes for a moment, reminding himself that the man was a murderer himself, and he had acted in the interest of protection. Then he lifted his eyes to Miss Betsy, who was staring, her breaths quick and shallow, but apparently unharmed. He glanced around to assess the situation, and saw that most of the women had managed to flee. Several men had bravely stayed to fight off the attackers and looked to be gaining the upper hand. Michael, he noticed, was nowhere in sight.

A sudden cry from Miss Betsy caused him to turn back to her, just in time to see another skeletal attacker take hold of her and begin to drag her away. The Gentleman shouted and attempted to leap after them, but he stopped short when the man pulled out a sleek, gold gun and aimed it at Miss Betsy's head. The Gentleman froze at the sight of it, and attempted to clear his thoughts, his head pounding. He would do no good to Miss Betsy dead or shot, and he was quite sure that the man would not be hesitant to shoot either of them.

Slowly, Miss Betsy still struggling in his arms, the attacker began to back away, heading for a gate in one of the far walls. The Gentleman stood stock still, formulating a plan, waiting for the moment when the man would be too far away for the Gentleman to be a likely shot. His head was rapidly clearing now, and he knew without a doubt that he would not allow Miss Betsy to be captured. He shuddered to think of what intentions these vigilantes must have for her.

It all happened quite suddenly. There was a high-pitched whistling sound, like something falling, and then

another blast, but this one dark, and then the entire courtyard was filled with thick, black smoke.

The Gentleman recoiled automatically and shielded his eyes. When he managed to look up again, Miss Betsy was on the ground, visible by the bright pink of her skirts spread around her; the gold-plated attacker was in close combat with someone new—a small, dark figure. Another armoured attacker rushed to the aid of the first, but the darkly-clad figure turned and dropped him with a swift kick to the throat. Then he returned to the first, bringing him to the ground also within a few more seconds. He fought like a dance—fluid and lightning-swift. The Gentleman had never seen the like.

"Don't move," said a husky voice, and the Gentleman felt cold metal pressed to his temple. He obeyed the voice for a second, flicking his eyes over to see another gold-masked attacker with a gun to his head. Adrenalin still coursing through his veins, he rashly disobeyed the order, swinging his fist up to knock the gun away. Hardly daring to believe his luck, he threw the man over his shoulder and onto the ground, delivering a quick, incapacitating foot to his throat. The scuffle took no more than a few seconds, but when he looked up again, the situation had changed drastically. The small, dark figure was on top of Miss Betsy! His hand was at her throat and she was struggling, and then the Gentleman saw him draw his hand away triumphantly, something shiny clasped tightly in his gloved fist.

The Gentleman shouted and the figure looked up for a moment, enough for the gentleman to see that he wore a plain black mask over the top of his face and a wide-brimmed hat. Then he turned and ran into the smoke. Furious, the Gentleman ran after him, hardly bothering to

apologize to Miss Betsy as he tripped over her skirts, and chased the masked man out into the street.

It was mad of him, he knew. The proper thing would be to stay and make certain that the attackers were taken care of, and then interrogate them. But there were other men to do that. The attackers and this mysterious rogue had definitely both been after Miss Betsy, had fought over her. The armoured attacker had attempted to drag her away, instead of killing her instantly like the other victims! If this masked thief was involved, he must be brought into custody.

By the time he emerged from the garden onto the street and his eyes had cleared from the smoke, the masked man was already an alarming distance away, and turning into a side street, out of view. The Gentleman immediately raced after him, for once despising the tightly tailored suits that he always made certain to wear. He turned the corner, and thought for a moment that the man had disappeared completely, for it was a dead end. Then he looked up and realized, aghast, that the man had climbed the pipes on the wall, and was disappearing onto the roof.

Growling, the Gentleman ripped his coat off and threw it to the ground, before tackling the pipes as well, hoping that they would support his weight. He had seen enough of his target to know that he was only about half the Gentleman's size—and much more agile. Nevertheless, he managed to drag himself to the top of the wall with only mild difficulty, never more grateful for all the agility training he had forced himself into.

The masked man, obviously unsuspecting of his continued pursuit, turned at the sound of the Gentleman's ascent and gasped a little before turning to run again. But

his cockiness had got the better of him, and the Gentleman was catching up.

Together they raced over the rooftops of London, the smoke of the chimneys slowing their breath and the walls and smokestacks providing a tight, dangerous obstacle course. The moon shone serenely overhead and all was quiet save the sharp gunshots of their footsteps on the rooftops and their laborious breaths. The Gentleman found himself laughing a little to himself. This masked man was an excellent pursuit, for certain, but he was secure in his belief that he would eventually catch up, for there was no one in London in better physical shape than himself, and he could hear the long, ragged breaths of his pursued as they ran.

Finally they reached an impasse: the end of a string of rooftops, the opposite wall too far to jump to, and the immediate wall flat and devoid of footholds or stairs. He had trapped the man. And now he intended to discover his purpose.

The Gentleman stopped a safe distance away from the masked man and regarded him intently. He was indeed, smaller than the Gentleman, by at least a head, and slender. He was dressed all in black—a stylish, but completely functional ensemble. The Gentleman could see nothing of the man's features, the wide-brimmed hat and dark mask obscuring them, but the lower half of his face was pale and pointed, and although the man panted for breath, the Gentleman could see a sharp, curved smile on his lips.

"Well done, sir," said the masked man. "You have given quite the chase. I feel akin to the innocent but pursued fox of the hunt."

"Save for your innocence," snapped the Gentleman. "Who are you, rogue? How dare you attack that innocent

woman. What did you steal? As the future Commissioner of the Police Force, I demand that you return it!"

"Who am I?" The man smirked. "A Rogue, as you have said. One with no sway to any man, never mind one so inconsequential as the *future* Police Commissioner." He laughed, a clear, high laugh, like bells, with a touch of madness to it. Then he stopped, and smiled at the Gentleman again. "But for you, and only for you, I may give some hint. Although, I think you know already, perhaps, what it is I have taken."

"I do not," said the Gentleman. "Show me immediately."

"So rude," admonished the Rogue, but he reached a gloved hand under his collar and pulled out a necklace, the gold of it glinting in the moonlight. It was a locket, a plain but elegant oval. "Inconsequential, doesn't it seem?"

"It does," said the Gentleman. "So tell me your purpose with it."

"I will not," said the Rogue, and the Gentleman took a step forward.

"You may tell me now, or later, in the hands of the police," he warned the Rogue. "Why not tell me now?"

"Because," said the Rogue, "I do not wish to." Then he turned, and brought himself to the very edge of the high wall, pulling from his belt at the last minute a small black tool. He lifted an arm and, as the Gentleman watched, frozen, aimed and shot, and a thin cable spanned the divide and attached somehow to the wall opposite.

"As much as I admire you, sir," said the Rogue, with a glance back at the Gentleman, "I cannot trust you. We shall meet again."

He jumped, and the Gentleman cried out with rage and ran to the wall in time to see the Rogue swing heavily down but somehow land lightly on the wall opposite. He

watched, awed, as the Rogue clipped the cable to his belt and, with almost superhuman agility, scaled the wall to disappear over the top. The Gentleman thought he saw the Rogue give him one last lingering look before he disappeared into the smoke.

By the time he returned to the battle-ravaged garden, the partygoers had long dispersed and only the police remained, industriously combing the area for hints on who the attackers had been. It only took a few short questions for the Gentleman to deduce that all of the wounded and dead of the mysterious attackers had been spirited away by their cohorts, and no trace of them remained, save the destruction, which was extensive. One wall of the garden had been completely destroyed by the blast, and the peaceful ice-covered rosebushes were shattered and splayed about like bloody torn rags. And there were victims. Bodies, some recognizable, some horribly maimed, lay strewn across the party-grounds. The Gentleman was instantly hit by a sickening wave of guilt. How many of these people would have survived if he had stayed and fought? What did he have to show for his abandonment?

It was, at least, some comfort to see that for once, his father was taking his job seriously and acting the proper, stern commissioner. Unfortunately, his newfound severity also extended to his son.

"Have you any idea how irresponsible it was to go running off after a rogue thief in the middle of a disaster? There were people here who needed your help!"

The Gentleman felt another pang of guilt in his chest at his father's words, but defended himself automatically. "Father, I believe the man I followed may have some clue as to who the attackers were!"

"Nonsense! He was obviously only a passing thief, who took advantage of the chaos to make a few pennies. Now I would appreciate it if you would put such trivialities out of your mind and act as my proper apprentice by helping these men search." His father made perfect sense, of course, and the Gentleman obeyed, helping to search the area for clues.

The night wore on, but nothing was found to give any hint, and by the early hours of the morning, they were forced to give up the search, and rope the area off for further inspection later.

The Gentleman thought of informing his father all that had occurred during his pursuit of the Rogue, but his father's harsh words were like a sting, and the guilt at his desertion a sickness in his stomach, so he remained quiet. That night as he lay in his bed, sleepless, he vowed to himself that he would stop at nothing to discover the mystery of the attackers. But whether he desired to do so in order to avenge the fallen, or to relieve his guilt, or simply to prove himself his father, he did not know.

The next morning, there was a service for the dead. The Gentleman awoke from a fitful sleep, his heart pounding and his head full of blood and death, and dressed numbly. It was cold out, London still in the midst of a furious winter snap, and snow fell lightly over the

ministrations taking place in the graveyard. His father had spent the night helping bury the victims, and it showed on his face—his wrinkles seemed more pronounced, and the dark shadows heavy under his eyes. The Gentleman's mother was unusually sombre and had proclaimed several times that morning to the Gentleman how happy she was that his sisters were away in boarding school, and thus not privy to such horrific events.

The priest mumbled his prayers, and the Gentleman found his thoughts drifting. He thought he would never remove the image of the man whose neck had been snapped in front of him from his mind, but something else plagued him also. Over and over, he tried to tell himself that his suspicions about the Rogue were only a figment of his imagination, drawn up to relieve himself of his guilt over leaving the attack, but he couldn't quite believe it.

I will give you some hint. Although I think you know already, perhaps, what I have taken. What did the Rogue mean? Why had he targeted Miss Betsy, and stolen an apparently worthless locket, when she had been wearing pearls about her neck as well. And he remembered clearly the masked attacker, gun to Miss Betsy's head, backing away with her ... taking her somewhere. It didn't make sense.

Consequently, that afternoon found him taking tea with Miss Betsy in her parlour, whilst earnestly discussing her part in the attack.

"Oh, it was ever so terrifying!" exclaimed Miss Betsy. "I've never been manhandled so much in my entire life. I was in shock! And, I know it's such a trivial thing compared to the tragedy of what happened, but, well ... my locket stolen as well. Oh, I do wish you had managed to catch the thief, sir."

"Yes, Miss Betsy," the Gentleman began tentatively, "it's the locket I was wondering about. Tell me ... was it terribly expensive?"

"Oh no, not at all," sighed Miss Betsy. "Just a family heirloom, you know. My grandfather gave it to my mother, and she to me. It's not even real gold, I don't think. Only brass. I can't see why any thief would want to steal it."

"Yes, and I suppose it's ridiculous of me to attempt to spot a pattern, too." The Gentleman leaned back and sighed, swirling his undrunk tea. Perhaps his father was right. And even if not, who was he to launch an investigation all on his own? "No one would report worthless heirloom jewelry as missing, surely."

"Not to the police, I would assume," agreed Miss Betsy. "But ... let me think. Do you know Miss Emily Stanford? Of course you do, well I was visiting with her just last night, and she told me about how she had misplaced a locket of hers as well. She was a bit distraught, you see, because her mother had told her that she had simply let her imagination run away with her—she does tend to do that, you know—but she swore that the night before it had disappeared, she had watched a dark figure come in through her window and go to her vanity. And of course, we all thought, that's impossible, because she lives in a townhouse, you know, on the top floor, and no one could possibly get in through her window but ... now that I think about it, it does seem like a very odd coincidence, doesn't it?"

The Gentleman left in rather a hurry after that, thanking Miss Betsy profusely for her time, and rushed to the Police Station. It was a grand old building, built of sturdy thick stones in the medieval style—it had once been a prison, and it still sat atop a network of underground cells, rarely used now, except to hold prisoners temporarily.

It had been refurbished since, of course, but the cold, stone hallways still reminded him slightly of a penitentiary at times.

His father's office opened into the library and records room, which was of course where the Gentleman was headed.

"And what are you doing here?"

"I think I have a lead, father," said the Gentleman distractedly, pawing through a file of records.

"You think you have a lead," said his father. His arms were crossed, and a cigar hung motionless from his lips, contrasting the frantic movement of the Gentleman as he dug. "I don't suppose you're going to tell me what this lead is? Does it have to do with the attacks?"

"Yes," said the Gentleman. "Well, no, not directly, it has to do with stolen locket. But I think they might be connected!"

His father stared at him for a few moments and then, apparently resigned, threw his hands up and left the room. "Make sure you put everything back in order," he called, "and let me know when you don't find anything, and want to help me with something useful."

The Gentleman was not to be dissuaded. The archives were well organized, but it was hours of searching, and the winter sun had begun to set over the rooftops of London, casting a brilliant orange hue through the glass windows of the station library and illuminating the dusty bookshelves and wooden filing cabinets—before he at last stumbled on a connection, and one so obvious that he kicked himself for not having discovered it sooner.

"Miss Betsy and Miss Emily's grandfathers worked together!" he exclaimed triumphantly to his father. "And furthermore, Father, listen to this: both men died in a

questionable explosion at the laboratory they were working in."

"Yes, that's fascinating, son, but absolutely insignificant," said his father irritably. "The explosion you're speaking of happened over thirty years ago, and the attack which you are *supposed* to be helping me investigate happened last night!"

"And we don't have any leads, father!"

His father huffed at him, obviously displeased at his son's announcement of the obvious. So far not one piece of evidence had emerged as to the identity of the attackers, or where such a large, well-equipped army could have suddenly appeared from. "Well, perhaps if you'd get your brilliant head out of those books and help me, I would!"

But the Gentleman couldn't bring himself to follow his father's orders. He had something, and it wasn't just his imagination. If it really could help to figure out the mystery of the attack (and it could—somehow, he knew it could), then he had to follow it.

There had been one other man who had worked on the project (which as far as he could tell, had been some sort of mechanical endeavor), although he had not died, and the Gentleman was surprised when he read the name and recognised it. Ernest Wilde was an old, retired engineer, who lived in solitude on his large estate, with only his staff, and his grandson Derek, to keep him company. Derek Wilde had been one of the Gentleman's closest friends when they were children, although the Gentleman had to admit, the boy had all but slipped his mind over the past few years. He remembered vaguely that Derek's family had come down with some awful disease, that his parents had died, and Derek himself had gone away for several years to recover. He rarely came to social events now, and if the

Gentleman recalled correctly, his face had been quite severely scarred by the disease.

Ah well. What better excuse to investigate than to pay his old friend a visit? The Gentleman grimaced as he donned his overcoat, wondering if most people actually enjoyed making and taking social calls as much as they seemed to, or if they were just better at hiding it. He had never enjoyed the social obligations that his parents appeared to thrive on. Perhaps he was simply ungrateful. Or more suited to the life of a recluse like the Wildes.

He had almost made his way to the Wilde Estate when he happened upon the last person he had ever desired to see. Michael Pennington was making his way down the path, his greatcoat falling stylishly open, despite the bitter winter wind, and his top hat perched jauntily on his head.

"Fancy seeing you here!" he called. "What brings you to Ernest Wilde's manor?"

"I thought I might make a social call," said the Gentleman shortly.

"Little late for it, isn't it?" replied Michael casually. "In any case, was just stopping by to visit Mr. Wilde, but it seems he isn't there! Left quite suddenly, on one of his trips. Most unfortunate, as he was providing me with some inside knowledge about his machines, fascinating stuff you know. Very useful for when I succeed my father in his ..."

"Yes, goodnight, Michael," muttered the Gentleman, and he strode past Michael, quickly as he dared, in the direction of the manor.

"Well, as I said," called Michael after him, "It seems he's not there, so there'll be no one to talk to besides his grandson, not much company at all, I'm afraid—"

"Goodnight, Michael!"

Luckily the wind picked up just then, and Michael's protests were drowned out by its howl. The Gentleman pulled his overcoat closer around him and ducked his head against the flurry of snowflakes that quite suddenly appeared in the air around him.

When he at last managed to get hold of the doorman he was informed that Ernest Wilde had indeed left earlier that morning. He had left Derek to manage his estate however, and the Gentleman decided that an audience with him was better than nothing. He was escorted upstairs, to Derek's private rooms, and Derek greeted him there.

He was much smaller than the Gentleman remembered him being—perhaps the illness had stunted his growth? Or perhaps it was just the way he hunched under his too-large dressing-robe, regarding the Gentleman through overlong black hair. His skin was still scarred, the Gentleman saw, quite badly so, and it was motley and flaking in places. Derek stared at the Gentleman as if he didn't recognise him, but a look of understanding crossed his face when the Gentleman introduced himself.

"We were friends, weren't we?" Derek asked. "As lads?"

The Gentleman nodded. He expected some show of warmth from Derek then, but was disappointed, for his face simply became more sombre and impenetrable.

"What can I do for you, then? Is it a matter of police business?"

The Gentleman nodded again, a little taken aback. He had expected this to be an undercover investigation, but since Derek had immediately called him out on his purpose, he decided to switch tactics.

"Yes, actually. It's about the attack last night—in a way—did you hear about it?"

Derek nodded dismissively. "Yes, of course."

"Right well, do you ... happen to be in possession of an old golden locket?"

There was a moment of silence. Then Derek snorted. "I'm sorry, but I don't quite see the connection."

The Gentleman sighed, and attempted to explain. "The day of the attack, a thief used the diversion to steal a necklace that belonged to a woman there. A small golden locket—not real gold, mind you, worthless. Then I discovered that a similar locket had been stolen by what I believe was the same thief, a few days before."

"A rather dubious connection, you must admit."

"Yes, but it was something he said ... Never mind it now. Do you have such a locket? A family heirloom?"

"Well, actually, I do," said Derek. "But—it's worthless, I assure you. There would be no point in stealing it."

"May I see it?"

Derek paused for a moment, but then nodded, and gestured for the Gentleman to follow.

Derek's room was uninteresting—decorated in an old Victorian style, befitting the dated feel of the manor. Derek shuffled around for a while, and then went to a small carved box next to his bed. The locket he retrieved from it

was nearly identical to the one that the Gentleman recalled hanging from the Rogue's gloved fingers.

"That's it," he confirmed. "Now Derek, are you certain no one's attempted to steal it?"

"Of course not," said Derek. "No one knows I have it, besides my grandfather. And anyway, I lock my doors at night, and we're on the third floor, if you didn't notice."

"Hm, yes." The Gentleman wandered over to the veranda doors. "Do these lock?"

"Doubtful. As I said, we're on the third floor."

"Right, Derek, I'm going to ask you for a favour."

"Well, you can't have the locket, if that's what you mean. It's mine; it's quite dear to me."

"No, it's not that. I need you to let me stay in your room tonight."

Derek stared at him. "*Why?*"

"If the thief breaks in and attempts to steal it, I want to catch him in the act."

"You're insane."

Well, perhaps he was correct. But two lockets stolen, only a few nights apart, and each belonging to the grandchildren of men who died together ... and now here was the third locket, on the third night ... It would be foolish not to anticipate a theft. "Please, Derek. I'm asking you this, as a friend, to help me solve this."

Derek opened his mouth as if to argue, but then shut it again with nothing but an exasperated sigh. After a moment he said, "Fine then. I was just going to bed anyway. There's a chair over there, you can sit."

With that he shuffled from the room, presumably to dress for bed. The Gentleman situated himself in the far-too-comfortable chair, and wished he had some coffee to keep himself awake. A few minutes later, Derek returned

to the bedroom, blew out the candles and, with a sideways glance at the Gentleman, got into bed.

All was quiet. The Gentleman stared at the softly falling snow through the glass doors, watched it swirl in the gusts of winds and dance like women in white ball-gowns. They swirled and danced and soon he felt they were swirling in front of his heavy eyes, and he was amidst the snow, and alone. And then he felt cold on his hands and cheeks, and realized that the window had blown open. Blown open ... or had been opened.

He jerked awake, blinking to clear the sleep from his eyes. In the second it took to survey the bedroom, he saw the dark shape of Derek, still asleep in the bed, and another dark figure, staring at him from the balcony. He saw the white flash of the Rogue's teeth as he grinned at him and the gold glint of the locket around his neck, and then the brilliant black of his cape against the snow as he disappeared over the rail.

With a shout, the Gentleman stood and raced out to the balcony. The Rogue was scaling the ivy of the wall! Of course, he should have thought of it. With a curse, he threw himself over the balcony rail, ignoring the biting cold against his shirtsleeves. Slowly and cautiously, he manoeuvred himself to the ivy-ridden wall. A glance down revealed that the Rogue was already near the bottom.

"May as well give up!" called the Rogue in a taunting voice. "The ivy is too weak, and your hulking weight will surely snap it! Follow me next time!"

"There shan't be a next time!" called the Gentleman and he threw himself onto the ivy. He heard the Rogue gasp from below him, but was far too concentrated with not falling to his death to pay it much heed. One of the vines supporting the Gentleman's foot had indeed snapped, and he could feel the other dangerously close to

doing the same. He attempted to shift more of his weight to his right hand, but in doing so only tore the vine he held there.

"Right then," he heard from below, "I'll be off! Enjoy yourself sir, cheerio!"

He turned sharply to see the dark shape of the Rogue sprinting across the snow covered lawn, and in the next minute was turned upside down as his last remaining holds snapped, and he fell. He managed to grasp a few vines on the way down to slow his fall, but in the end found himself spread-eagle on the ground, gasping and mentally surveying his person for broken bones.

"Goodness, are you alright?"

When he at last managed to move his head, he saw that the Rogue had returned, and seemed somewhat concerned about his well-being.

"Please tell me you haven't broken your spine," said the Rogue, bending down to study him. "I'd feel awful."

The Gentleman let out a weak groan. In reality he felt just fine, although a little rattled, but if he played his cards right, he might just be able to ...

There! As the Rogue leaned over him, the locket slipped forward from his collar and dangled directly under his face. With a quick movement, the Gentleman sat up, shot a hand forward to grasp the locket and ... missed!

The Rogue darted away, clutching the locket to his chest. His mouth opened in shock, and the Gentleman could see the pale skin on the bottom half of his face turning a faint pink in the moonlight. "Right sir, you startled me," he said. "Good job. And goodbye."

He was a fast runner, and he had the advantage over the Gentleman, who somehow managed to pull himself to his feet despite the protests of what felt to be his entire body and give pursuit.

The fresh snow was wet, and his feet were soon soaked and freezing. Still, the dark shape of the Rogue was visible across the lawn, slipping behind a hedge. The Gentleman sprinted and rounded the bush, only to find the entrance to a labyrinth of hedges. For a moment he didn't know which way to turn, but then he heard the high, clear laugh of the Rogue, and darted left. Around the corner he saw the whisk of a black cloak, and then again around the next. The night was darker here, the gleam of the moonlight on the snow dimmed by the high, impenetrable hedges.

At last they emerged in a clearing, dotted with gleaming marble statues. The Gentleman fainted, and the Rogue hesitated, and then the Gentleman was backing him against a wall and hedge. He nearly missed the small brass doorway that the Rogue made for, a key suddenly in hand. Frantically, he grabbed the Rogue's hands as they reached for the handle, and pressed them up to the wall, using his weight to his advantage to trap the Rogue face-first against the doorway.

The Rogue writhed underneath him. His body felt lean and firm under the layers of dark clothing.

"You won't escape this time," growled the Gentleman.

"Oh yes? And what do you think you're going to do to me, sir?"

The Rogue writhed again, and the Gentleman realized there was something inherently sensual about his movements.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?" laughed the Rogue. "This?" and he strained against the Gentleman, so that his back was arched into him, and his head was back, inches from the Gentleman's face. "This may surprise you sir, but the other night wasn't the first time we met," he said in a low voice, laughter

threatening to escape it. "I have been watching you ... and I have wanted you."

"You don't know me," retorted the Gentleman. His voice was hoarser than he meant it to be, and he could feel himself hardening against his will, the Rogue's sensual writhing awakening something in him that had been long-buried. "I've never seen you before in my life."

"Oh, but I have seen you," laughed the Rogue again, turning his face to brush the Gentleman's. He could feel the warm breath on his cheek as he spoke, "I have watched you from ... afar ..."

"Who are you?" He was pressed dangerously close to the Rogue now. Surely the man could feel him pressing into him, could feel the strength leaving the rest his body, migrating to his hips. Slowly the Rogue tugged a hand from the Gentleman's—not the hand holding the key, no, that was still firmly in the Gentleman's grasp, but the other. The Gentleman let him take it, curious to see what he would do.

Slowly, the Rogue slid his hand to his neck, and unclasped his cape. Then down, lower, and the buckle of his belt was deftly undone. The Gentleman hissed in shock, but couldn't bring himself to stop him. His right hand was becoming numb from its iron grip on the Rogue's, and the little brass key was digging into the flesh between his thumb and finger.

Then the Rogue slid his thumb to his backside, and slowly lowered his trousers. His body was pale and smooth, and shapely, and the Gentleman stared despite himself. Then those deft fingers were making their way back, caressing the Gentleman's cock under his trousers. He moaned a little, under his breath, and its evidence shone like a silver cloud in the cold of the night. The Rogue laughed, and undid the Gentleman's fly.

"What are you doing?" demanded the Gentleman, pressing roughly into the Rogue, his body barely under his control.

"Something I have wanted to do for a very long time," hissed the Rogue, his hips moving seductively. "Surely you will grant me this one thing."

"No ..." gasped the Gentleman, but his body did not agree with him. He had never been out of his own control like this before, never wanted anything so ... "W-will I ... hurt you?" he whispered.

The Rogue deftly moved his hands down, and released the Gentleman's cock from the restraints of his trousers, then slid it up, between his legs, towards his opening. Then he laughed, and there were something manic in it. "I don't care," he whispered. "I'm nothing if I'm not a masochist, you'll learn that about me soon, sir."

His words slid slowly up to the Gentleman, but were nearly meaningless. The press of his body over the Gentleman's cock was much more real than anything else in the cold night. The Gentleman could feel the Rogue opening, his body begging entrance, and so he began to force his way into him. His hips moved, as if they knew the rhythm already, in and out, like the pulse of his heart, and each time he went deeper. Pain and pleasure surged through him, so that he could barely think, and the Rogue gave little whimpers and cries. What he was pleading for, mercy or more, the Gentleman did not know. He did not have time to know.

He thrust deeper, and with his free hand reached down and roughly handled the Rogue's cock. It felt firm and warm in the biting cold. He slid his hand up, over the smooth, heated navel, and then higher. Now he was fighting with himself, the rational side of his mind clawing at him for dominance, and for a moment—and a moment

was all that was needed—it won out. The Rogue froze, and cried out when he realized what the Gentleman was doing. But it was too late—the locket was already in the Gentleman's hand.

In his moment of gloating, however, the Gentleman let loose the Rogue's hand, and it, still bearing the key, slipped downwards. Then the door was open, and the Rogue was gone.

Shocked and in disbelief, the Gentleman stared after the Rogue for an eternity. Then the cold began to bite at his extremities, and he hurriedly re-buttoned his trousers, all the while staring at the golden locket in his hand. Was it truly worth what he had just done?

He left without waking Derek, simply leaving a message with the doorman, and then made his way home in a daze, the cold wind biting at his skin and the locket clenched firmly in his fist. He was surprised to find his father still awake when he arrived home.

"And where have you been?"

"I went to visit Derek Wilde, father and ... look!" The Gentleman thrust the locket at his father triumphantly. His father took it, and examined it for a few moments, then sighed and returned it to the Gentleman.

"So this is what you were after," he said, disapproval heavy in his voice. "Son, normally I would be more than happy to let you go chasing whims and mad theories all you want, but we're in the middle of a crisis!"

"What do you mean?"

His father sighed again, and regarded him seriously. "We've received a threat from the attackers. A telegram, with an unknown origin."

"What did it say?"

"Pennington Ball. Midnight."

"The ball this Friday?"

His father nodded, and the Gentleman blanched. Michael Pennington's family were very wealthy and they gave a grand ball every winter. Most of London's high society would be in attendance and the ball would last long into the night.

"You think they're going to attack again?"

"It's likely."

The Gentleman shook his head. "Why would they announce it like that?"

"It's how these men work, son." His father shook his head. "They think they're invincible, so they send out a hint, a sort of handicap. But they underestimate us."

"If only we knew more about them."

"And you think that piece of junk will give us all the answers, do you?"

"I haven't any other leads!"

"You haven't any leads at all; it's codswallop you're chasing, boy!"

The two stared heatedly at each other for several moments, and then the Gentleman turned on his heel and strode towards the stairway.

"You'll accompany me tomorrow!" his father yelled after him. "No more running off on foolish notions!"

The Gentleman made a point to examine the locket thoroughly as he stripped his clothes and got into bed. As far as he could tell, it was utterly normal—made of some brass compound with delicate filigree set into the front. Opening it revealed nothing but an empty, scratched

interior. The thin metal prongs originally set to hold a photograph within were bent and one was completely broken off. It was indeed, completely worthless. Perhaps his father was right, and he was chasing nothing but shadows. But then why ...? Why had the Rogue stolen it? What was his purpose with it? Was he simply using the lockets as a device to get to the Gentleman?

What did the Rogue want with him, really?

He sighed, placing the locket on his nightstand and settling under the covers. Distracted, he slid a hand down over his stomach, and began to stroke himself. And what had the Rogue done to him, to make him act in such a way? He had never felt such desire. Of course, desire had always been there, in one form or another, for men and women alike, but he had always suppressed it, deemed it inconsequential.

And yet he recalled hazily, a moment in his youth when a woman had visited from America. Amelia Applegate, the widowed wife of a cousin—although she was young, and did not act like a widow at all. She had been loud, and boisterous, and her voice had echoed down the halls of the normally quiet manor. And then one day he had been on his way to practice, as he had always done in the morning, and he had walked past her doorway, and it had been open. He remembered staring, unable to move, as Madame Applegate faced away from him, completely naked, and drew a wet sponge over her pale body.

Then she had turned and seen him, and he had run, faster than ever before, and spent the next several hours practicing his swordplay. At dinner that night, he had felt his face burn hotter than a stove-fire, so that his mother had insisted he had a fever and must be put to bed. But at one point his eyes had locked with Amelia Applegate's, and she had smiled at him.

Inconsequential. Then as it was now, he thought, irately dragging his hand away from his cock. He had far more important things to focus on and whatever strange, perverted ideas the Rogue had about the two of them were completely unfounded. He was still a suspect, and an enemy, and sex with him was the last thing on the Gentleman's mind.

When he woke up the next morning, the locket was gone.

He scrambled about his room for a few minutes, searching, before he realized with a gut-wrenching shock that he had left his window unlocked. He swore loudly, and then apologized to the maid who had entered to bring him breakfast. Unable to stomach the thought of food, he dressed and washed as quickly as possible, then stumbled downstairs to inform his father of what had happened.

"Good," said his father. "Maybe now you can focus on more important things, like the perimeter we're setting up around the Pennington Manor. The ball is only two nights away, and we need to be ready for an attack. You will come with me," he said in a voice that broached no argument, "and assist me in preparing."

And so the Gentleman went with his father, and supervised whilst the police force was instructed as to their duties in case of attack, and a security system was set up, in secret so as not to alarm the ball-goers.

"We will capture them this time," his father assured him, "and we will get to the bottom of this. They should

never have warned us—but these kinds of men always get cocky and make mistakes. You'll see."

The Gentleman supposed he ought to be happy that his father was so sure and capable, but he couldn't shake the feeling that it all seemed a little too scripted. Why *would* the attackers send a warning as to when they would attack? They couldn't really be that arrogant. He felt certain his father must be walking into a trap of some kind, but could think of no way to warn him that would penetrate his thick skull. Once his father had ideas, there was no dissuading him from them.

That night he awoke to the sound of someone rustling through his dresser drawers. He sat up immediately, and the Rogue, noticing his movement, turned and shrunk into the darkness behind his drapes.

"Evening, sir. I'm sorry to intrude, but I'm afraid I'll be needing that necklace back now."

The Gentleman sat up a little further, "I don't have it," he said. "You took it last night."

"I didn't—" The Rogue went silent suddenly. "You gave it to him, didn't you?" His voice had a sudden chill to it, like the frozen wind that whispered through the crack in the window.

"Gave what to whom?" The Gentleman was up now, out of bed and moving towards the Rogue, who had foolishly backed himself into the corner. "Last night, I stupidly left it on my night table, and in the morning it was gone. Obviously, you took it."

"I don't—I didn't—" The Rogue shook his head, and then said, almost to himself, "I don't understand, why would you lie?"

"I'm not lying!" Without thinking, the Gentleman took the Rogue's arms and threw them above the smaller man's head, pinning him to the wall. "Tell me what's going on! If you didn't take it, who did? And why?"

The Rogue swallowed. The Gentleman could see the pale pulse of his throat and the glow of his eyes as they flicked downwards over the Gentleman's body. They were green, and the Gentleman suddenly remembered that he had gone to bed without a nightgown that evening.

"You're cold," said the Rogue, and his voice wavered a bit.

The Gentleman growled, and threw the Rogue's hands down. "Explain!" he demanded.

"You really don't know, do you?" said the Rogue, and his voice was still quiet and weak. "You really are innocent." He took a long, shaky breath. "I—I couldn't be sure." He paused for a moment, and then nodded. "Right then, I'm going to show you something. Get dressed, and come with me."

"Why on earth would I go with you?" said the Gentleman, taken aback. "I don't trust you in the least."

"Come now, sir." The Rogue was regarding him intently. "It's I who should be suspicious of you. I'm offering the answers you've been so desperately seeking. You have nothing to fear from me. Have I ever given you any reason not to trust me?"

The Gentleman felt his heart rate increase, and his breath was strangely warm as he said, "What about that ... thing you did to me?"

"Thing I did to you?" The Rogue tilted his head. "Oh, you mean the sex."

"It wasn't sex."

"Oh no? What was it then?" The Rogue had adapted a casual stance, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. It seemed impossible for someone so entirely swathed in clothing to be so appealing, but he managed it somehow.

"Sodomy," muttered the Gentleman. "An abomination."

The Rogue laughed aloud, and the perfect white of his teeth flashed as he grinned at the Gentleman. "Is that what you're calling it? I just call it fun."

"And you said you'd been watching me," said the Gentleman, frantically grasping at the point. "How is that supposed to encourage me to trust you?"

"Yes, I've been watching you." The Rogue was grinning still, and he leaned forward so that the Gentleman could feel the shift of air and the warmth of his breath on his face. "And I've seen horrible things ... but I haven't told on you."

"I haven't done any horrible things."

"Oh no? What about when you're alone, in your room at night."

"You've been stalking me!" cried the Gentleman, aghast.

"Hm. 'Stalking' is a strong word."

"It's all about the wording with you, isn't it?"

"*You're* the one calling me names, sir."

They stared at each other for a long, burning moment. The Rogue's face far too close to the Gentleman's for comfort; that little cocky smile on his face far too tempting.

"No," said the Gentleman at last, "Absolutely not. I'm not going with you."

The Rogue shrunk away from him slightly, and sighed. "Well, that only proves your innocence."

"I don't understand why you're so insistent on considering me otherwise," snapped the Gentleman.

"And you will never understand, unless you come with me!"

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to find someone else to go with you on your mad, perverted adventures," the Gentleman said huffily, and stepped back, allowing the Rogue to slip past him to the window.

"Very well," said the Rogue. "I expected more from you, sir."

He was gone for a moment, and the silence was suffocating. There was a burning forcing its way up the Gentleman's throat and threatening to take him over. He stumbled towards the window.

"Stop!" he called. "Alright, I'll go with you!"

"Ah!" The Rogue was back in a heartbeat, grinning widely at him. "Your curiosity got the better of you. I knew it would; I could see it in your eyes."

"Must be nice," muttered the Gentleman, but he consented, and went to find some clothes.

He was stupid. He was absolutely stupid, and his absurd tendency to go running off on mad notions was going to get him into horrible trouble one of these days, just as his father always said. But he couldn't stop himself.

He dressed as quickly as possible, and opted for comfortable clothes, rather than the stiff, stylish ones he wore normally. After all, he didn't know where he would be going, or what he might need to run from or after. The Rogue would give him no answers, only stood silently and watched while the Gentleman changed. Then they went out the window, following a pathway along a drainpipe that the Gentleman had failed to notice previously, and then dropping from the roof of a gardener's shed to the ground.

The Rogue led him on strange passageways through the city, on routes he had never taken before, and soon he was all but lost, and was surprised when they emerged in a familiar area.

"This way," said the Rogue, and gestured for the Gentleman to follow him. "Have you been on the underground?"

"A few times," admitted the Gentleman. "I usually travel by carriage—"

"Of course."

"And what about you, do you generally travel on the underground?"

The Rogue laughed. "Trying to deduce my identity by asking questions, sir?"

"Not your identity," replied the Gentleman. "Just your character."

"Don't bother. You won't like what you find." The Rogue gestured for the Gentleman to follow him down the dark stairway, and the Gentleman followed warily. The underground was deserted so late at night, and the dim electric lights did little to illuminate the darkness.

"Here," said the Rogue, and the Gentleman followed him down a slim rusted ladder onto the metal of the track. He couldn't help but admire the graceful way the Rogue climbed, and his calm surefootedness amidst the rubble of the track.

"If you're taking me into a trap," the Gentleman warned the Rogue, "you'll be sorry about it. My father is—"

"I know who your father is," scoffed the Rogue. "You can trust me, sir. You'll see."

They began to walk, and the dim lights soon retreated behind them, until there was nothing up ahead but darkness. The Gentleman stumbled.

"You're sure there's no trains about then?" he asked, and the Rogue just laughed.

Silence again, and then they rounded a corner and were left in almost utter darkness. There was a rustle as the Rogue reached into his belt and retrieved a strange black device, then a click, and suddenly the track was bathed in a soft warm light.

"Is that an electric torch?" gasped the Gentleman. "Wherever did you get that?"

"Keep asking questions and I'll be tempted to leave you in the dark." replied the Rogue.

The Gentleman had no doubt that the Rogue would make good on the offer, so he fell silent and plodded quietly behind the Rogue for the next while. Finally they turned a corner, into a small, claustrophobic passageway, and the Rogue spoke.

"Do you know a man named Charles Lakin?"

The Gentleman thought for a moment. "Yes," he said finally. "He's ... an older gentleman, an acquaintance of my father ... I don't think he ever married."

"You know about the lab accident, yes? The one that killed two men, and almost killed Ernest Wilde?"

"Yes."

"There were four men working on the project. William Stanford, Marius Clarke, Ernest Wilde, and Charles Lakin. All four were there the day of the explosion."

"But the news reported only three," said the Gentleman. "And the only survivor listed was Ernest Wilde. If Lakin was there, and survived too, why wasn't he listed?"

The Rogue said nothing.

"Unless ... he didn't want people to know."

"Exactly."

"You think he caused the explosion?"

"I know he did. Wilde told me as much."

"You're working for Wilde?"

"Now why would you assume that?" asked the Rogue, as he wrenched open an old, rusted door. "Quiet now."

The small passageway was darker even than the railway and the ground beneath his feet was wet and slippery.

"Not much farther," whispered the Rogue. "Watch your step."

His command immediately became impossible to follow as he flicked the switch torch off, and they were once again flooded in darkness. The Gentleman kept his hands on the wet walls on either side of him and inched forward. He could feel the presence of the Rogue in front of him, a little comfort in this dark underworld. *A man could die down here*, he thought.

They walked at a cripplingly slow pace for what felt like hours. Eventually, the Gentleman could see the outline of the Rogue in front of him, slowly materializing as they drew closer to the dim source of light.

When they finally reached the source of light, it was revealed to be a glowing square in the floor, a trapdoor which the Rogue lifted silently. He glanced up at the Gentleman, and the flickering glow from below illuminated the green of his eyes, and under the mask they looked apprehensive but resigned.

"Look down," he said.

The Gentleman did. Immediately in front of him, he could see a grilled walkway, and then, several stories below, an expansive metal floor, in the centre of which burned a roaring bonfire. On either side of the fire and all around stood men milling about, some half-dressed in the heat and some wearing the vestiges of golden armour. Around them and stacked up along the walls were crates, and

boxes, and intermittently, strange machines, and welding instruments.

"What is that armour?" asked the Gentleman, when he had recovered from his surprise. Straining his eyes, he could just make out the spindly golden spires that followed the men's bodies as they walked, providing little to no protection. "What is the point of it?"

"It makes them stronger," explained the Rogue. "In time it will do other things also, unless we can stop them."

"What? How?"

The Rogue shook his head. "This way, and move silently."

They dropped down onto the metal grate below them, the Gentleman doing his best to make as little noise as possible. Silence seemed to be the Rogue's natural state of being. The Rogue had obviously been here before, for he traversed the walkway easily, and led the Gentleman along to another, where they crept into a crevice in the wall, and then emerged on another catwalk above a smaller, adjacent room.

The room was dimly lit by a fireplace and several candles. In the corner, taking up nearly half of the rectangular space, stood a strange golden machine. It was made of the same spindly golden spikes as the armour the other men wore, row upon row of them, and all of them arranged to point directly to the centre of the contraption, where a seat rested. It looked something like a cross between a throne and a torture chair, for several of the spires protruded into the space of the chair, so that they must nearly skewer anyone who sat there. The rest of the room was a mess of strange mechanical devices and scattered papers, the workplace of some mad mechanic or scientist.

"What is—" began the Gentleman, but he was shushed by the Rogue, who pointed slowly towards the large fireplace, where a figure stood in a black, hooded cloak.

They waited for several minutes, before the door creaked open and another cloaked figure entered. This one was tall and slender under his robes, and moved with the stale grace of an old man.

"Well?" said the first man, turning to survey the new arrival.

"I need the other two."

The shorter man scoffed, and turned back to the fire.

"Do not misunderstand me!" The new arrival had his hands clasped, rubbing them together nervously at intervals. "The fact that these locketts exist is brilliant, your discovery of them, years of lost work, is wonderful! I have made magnificent progress thanks to your recovery of the first locket but I *shall* need the other two, if the plan is to be realized."

"I understand, Lakin. Now hush," said the shorter man, and the old man drew back his hood to reveal the silver-haired head of Charles Lakin, a man whom the Gentleman had met several times in his youth, but never taken much notice of.

"Please do be silent about my identity," hissed Lakin with a furtive glance towards the closed door. "You say we can trust these men, but they are nothing more than criminals! Why should we trust them?"

"I have promised to make them lords," said the hooded man. "When my new order is in place, they will have power and riches beyond their dreams ..."

"I thought your 'new order' didn't have any lords or power or riches."

"Yes well, that's what I've promised them," said the hooded man. "In any case, you needn't worry about your

loquets. You'll have them before the week is up, and then, if what you promise is true ..." He dropped his voice, and stepped closer to Lakin, and the Gentleman could barely make out his whisper. "We'll have no need to worry about the loyalty of the men, correct?"

Lakin nodded, and stepped back, crossing his arms in front of him. "Well then, best make the preparations for your grand ball this Friday," he said, tilting his head towards the hooded man and making his way towards the door. The Gentleman watched as the Rogue's eyes followed his exit, and then snapped back to the hooded man, who was looking at something on the desk.

It was the locket. The Gentleman could see the shimmer of the dull gold catch in the firelight as the hooded man held it up by the chain. He stared at it for what felt like an eternity, then sighed, and placing it carefully back on the desk, left the room as well.

The Rogue waited for a few moments, and then sprang into action, pulling from his belt a shiny black hook, and attaching it with a soft clang to the metal grate underneath him. In a moment, he was off the catwalk, and slowly lowering himself down by a length of rope. But his feet had no sooner touched the ground when the door creaked open and several masked men stepped in. They didn't notice the Rogue at first, but then one's eyes fell on him, and he yelled.

Immediately the five men set upon the Rogue and the Gentleman thought that he was surely doomed. But he had forgotten the Rogue's fighting prowess. Two of the men were on the ground before they knew what hit them; another's feet went out from under him when the Rogue dropped low with a sweeping kick. The fourth's throat was crushed by the Rogue's gloved fingers, and the fifth

suffered a kick to the back of a neck which dropped him instantly.

Without even a moment to recover, the Rogue raced to the table and grasped the locket nimbly, just as the door slammed open. Lakin stood there, flanked by a multitude of masked men. A sleek golden gun was in his hand, and aimed at the Rogue. Slowly, the Rogue raised his hands above his head, the locket still dangling from them.

"Drop it," said Lakin.

"Drop what?" replied the Rogue with a slight smile.

Lakin stared at him for a moment then gasped. "You're the thief who stole the Clarke locket! What have you done with it? Where is it?"

"Safe, out of your reach."

"We'll see about that." Lakin stepped towards the Rogue. "You were foolish to come here, but I'll spare your life, if you give me the locket." He held out a hand, the other still holding the gun, this time trained directly at the Rogue's temple.

The Gentleman could see the Rogue's eyes dart around a few times, although to his credit, he did not look up at the Gentleman. Then he sighed, and slowly began to move his hand out, to drop the locket into Lakin's hand.

This had to be stopped. The Gentleman hastily tested the strength of the rope, and then leapt silently off the edge and began to make his way downward.

"Good," said Lakin, and he hastily pocketed the locket. "Now..." His hand reached back, around the Rogue's head, to where the black mask on his face was fastened.

The Gentleman dropped. In the minute before the masked men realized what he was doing, he grappled a knife from one of them, and a golden gun from the other. Then, holding the knife in front of him to stem off attackers, he pointed the gun at Lakin.

Lakin's eyes widened, but he gestured at the Rogue. "Shoot me, and I'll shoot him."

The Gentleman thought for a split second, but knew there was no alternative. With a twinge of regret, he trained the gun on the nearest masked man, shooting him point blank in the head. The man dropped to the ground, and the Gentleman once again pointed the gun at Lakin. There was no time for empty threats. Lakin had to know he was serious.

The Gentleman wondered if he was hell-bound yet.

Lakin sputtered. "What are you doing?" he cried to the other men. "Attack him!"

The Rogue took advantage of Lakin's distraction to knock the gun from his hand, and aim a boot for his stomach. He would have been on Lakin in a minute if he hadn't been immediately beset by two more of the masked men. The Gentleman couldn't quite see what happened then, because he was busy fending off several more of the attackers. Although both of them were good fighters (the Rogue maybe a little better than him) they were both hopelessly outnumbered. More and more of the men were reacting to the commotion and pouring through the door.

The Gentleman heard the Rogue cry out as a metal hand connected with his stomach, and then saw that he had reached the rope, and was gesturing to the Gentleman to come with him. But it was short-lived as one of the tallest men reached up and cut the rope with a knife. In the next second he lost both the knife and his jugular, but it was too late; the rope was hopelessly out of reach.

The Rogue swore, and shot towards the Gentleman, grasping him by the arm and dragging him to the door. He fought as if second nature, fending off the attackers with a knife in one hand, and dragging the Gentleman in the

other. The moment they exited the small room, hundreds of more men were on them, and the Gentleman thought their doom was certain, but the Rogue fought for a few more seconds, and then, when an opening was revealed in the swarm of golden men, pulled something from his belt, and threw it on the ground.

Dark smoke bloomed from under them, and in a moment, it was as if the Gentleman's eyes had ceased to work. The ashy grey of the smoke was completely impenetrable, and he could not even see his hands in front of him. He felt the Rogue's grip on his arm, however, and followed blindly, until they exited the smoke, which was contained within a few metres. This meant that the majority of the men could see them instantly, but they had a head start.

"Is there another way out of here?" gasped the Gentleman as they ran, and the Rogue made a wordless, affirmative noise.

There was indeed a door, guarded by two men who hardly had time to turn their heads as the two ran past them. They were in another underground station; this one looked abandoned, although he didn't have the time to look too closely. Now they were running down the tracks, and he could hear the hoard of masked men getting closer. He could see that the Rogue wanted to run faster, but was waiting up for him, because he couldn't run so well on the tracks and then—*damnit!*—he had tripped, and fallen to the ground and the Rogue was doubling back to pick him up, almost dragging him in his haste.

"Come on, sir, no time for dilly-dallying..."

And they were up, and running again, but it was too late, their pursuers had caught up. The Rogue pulled a knife from his belt, and the Gentleman remembered that he still had a gun, and cocked it, and then they were upon

them, and the Gentleman saw that three of them had jumped on the Rogue and were pinning his arms down, and another had a knife to his throat. The Gentleman cried out and he saw the Rogue's green eyes go wide at something behind him, and then there was nothing but darkness.

He awoke to something cool on his forehead, and the flickering of candlelight behind his swollen eyelids. When he managed to crack them open, he could see the figure of the Rogue above him, slowly tracing a cool cloth over his temples. But when he stirred, the Rogue turned away, and the Gentleman watched as he slid his mask from the table next to the bed and fastened it over his eyes before turning back to face him.

"What happened?" said the Gentleman, and the Rogue sat, and lifted the wet cloth, and continued to nurse him with it. The Gentleman reached up, and felt a thick gauze on the back of his head, and a sharp pain.

"Don't," said the Rogue, and gently brought the Gentleman's hand back to his side. "You were attacked from behind. You were unconscious. I fought them off, and gave you something to sleep because you were concussed ... and then I brought you here."

Slowly, the Gentleman lifted his head, and looked around. They were in a small, dimly lit room, and from the lack of windows and the harsh, rock-like quality of the walls, he deduced that they were underground. The cot the Gentleman lay on was small and simple, a few sparse furnishings strewn about, and a table sat across from them,

covered with all manner of dark objects, ropes and trinkets, and strange machines. He couldn't see quite their purpose, and anyway, his vision was a little blurry. He lay back again, and watched as the Rogue continued to nurse him, noting quite belatedly that the Rogue had stripped him to his shirtsleeves, and that his hands were now trailing down the Gentleman's cheeks to his bare neck.

"You saved me," he said, and the Rogue's hands froze. "Why?"

"I couldn't leave you there ..." said the Rogue, and his hands continued to brush their way down, deftly undoing the buttons on the Gentleman's shirt, and sliding down over his body. "I think you know quite well by now how I feel about you, after all."

The Gentleman was silent for a moment, scrutinizing the Rogue's face, and enjoying the feel of his hands on his bare body. "Who *are* you?" he asked, yet again.

"You don't know me," replied the Rogue with a sigh.

"But you know me."

"As I said, I have watched you from afar," said the Rogue. "In any case, don't trouble yourself about it. I do not ask that you return my love. Only that you ... enjoy it."

The Gentleman would have said something more, but the Rogue's hands were loosening the button on his trousers, and slipping down. The Gentleman lowered his head back tentatively as the Rogue freed his rapidly hardening cock, and slid his mouth along the length. Gloved hands caressed him, and the Rogue's small, hot tongue circled him, until he moaned, and his body moved. His cock slid up, and soon was enveloped by the Rogue's mouth, suckling and moving in rhythm. The Rogue made a small, desperate noise, and the Gentleman opened his eyes and watched. The Rogue was stroking the base of his cock as he sucked, and his free hand gripped the

Gentleman's leg tightly, the thin gloved fingers curling into the fabric, as if he meant to never let go.

Slowly, the Gentleman reached up, ran a hand over the Rogue's back, eliciting a shudder from the man, and then up, over the fine black hairs on the back of his neck, to grasp tightly as his head continued to move in rhythm. The feeling built like a quickly spreading wild-fire through his body, burning away the snow and cold. He slid his hand higher, and grasped the hastily-tied cloth of the mask there, to pull it over the Rogue's head ...

Quick as lightning, the mask was gone from his grasp, and the Rogue was turning and straightening, fixing it firmly to his face once again. The Gentleman groaned and lay back, ache and frustration ebbing too slowly.

"You are too curious, sir," said the Rogue with a laugh, his face still turned away. "Perhaps that is why I like you, though. Come, if you can stand, I will show you something."

The Gentleman found that he could stand; whatever drug the Rogue had given him was quickly wearing down, and his injury was nothing but a dull throb at the back of his head. The Rogue was standing at the table, next to a strange, spindly black device. A glance over the table revealed a broad spectrum of meticulously organised devices, the nature of which, for the most part, the Gentleman couldn't discern, but he recognised a few of the black grappling hooks that the Rogue used, and several small black globes which must be smoke bombs.

"Look here," said the Rogue, and the Gentleman saw that he held up two golden locket. "Betsy Clarke's, Emily Stanford's," the Rogue said, gesturing to each. "I'm afraid you took Derek Wilde's from me before I had a chance to secure it, and it's now in the hands of Charles Lakin."

"I'm sorry." said the Gentleman. "I didn't know—"

"It's quite alright, not really your fault."

"You would have given me a better reason to trust you, if you weren't hiding behind a mask."

"Well, I prefer to let my actions speak for themselves," said the Rogue. "Now look, they seem completely normal, do they not?" He gestured to the locket.

"Yes," agreed the Gentleman, "I couldn't discern anything unusual."

"Right," said the Rogue, and he lit a small gas light above the strange black contraption, and then bid the Gentleman look through the small viewfinder there, placing the locket under the scope as he did so.

"It's a microscope," said the Gentleman, realising at once what it was and looking through the lens at the picture there. Immediately he could see traces of writing and outlines. He moved the locket but a little (the magnification was very high) and was treated to another set of outlines, diagrams, and notes.

"Plans," he said, glancing up at the Rogue. "Plans for what, though?"

"An army." The Rogue stood with his arms crossed, gazing away from the Gentleman, "Originally, they were researching for the British Armed Forces, but Lakin started to talk about using the plans for themselves. When they disagreed, he caused an explosion and attempted to steal the plans."

"But he didn't, obviously, or he would have them now."

The Rogue nodded. "Wilde and the others suspected him, so they destroyed the plans. Those markings you're looking at ..." he nodded at the microscope, "are all that's left. They couldn't bring themselves to destroy them completely, I suppose, but they wanted to make sure that Lakin never got his hands on them."

"So how did he discover them?" asked the Gentleman. "Why now?"

"I don't know, but from the looks of it, Lakin has been working on his army for a long time now. His discovery of the existence of the locket was likely just the catalyst to begin the attacks. Anyway ..." the Rogue exhaled, and turned away slightly. "It doesn't matter so much that he has Wilde's locket—his plans only held the basis for the mechanics of the armour and machinery, but Stanford and Clarke were researching something much older."

The Gentleman lowered his head to the microscope once again. "What was it?"

"An ancient Roman technology. We might call it magic here." The Rogue sighed. "Don't look at me like that. It's all rooted in science. Clarke was looking into its role as a weapon, and Stanford ... Stanford discovered how to use it to manipulate people's minds."

"Manipulate ... how?"

The Rogue shook his head. "It's beyond me; I'm a fighter, not a scientist. Wilde showed me the basics, but only Stanford really understood it. Lakin thinks perhaps he can too, that's what that golden throne you saw was. He plans to sit in it, and control all the men wearing the armour, manipulate them completely."

The Gentleman shuddered, the cold underground suddenly seeming much colder. "So how do we stop them?"

"Keep these two away from them," said the Rogue, and he dropped both lockets into a small black box and pushed them back on the desk. "They think Emily still has her locket, so they likely plan to attack her at the ball on Friday. Once they have her, they'll probably attempt to keep the Pennington manor as a base of attack. Whether or not

they have the other two locket, they still have a powerful army."

"I'll be there," said the Gentleman. "My father knows about the attack, he's arranging a counter."

"Yes, I suspect he would," said the Rogue. "Listen, it's probably best if you don't go. You're injured, and you'll likely get in my way."

"I'm fine," said the Gentleman. "I won't get in your way. I saved you today, you know."

"Hm." The Rogue sighed and wandered away to another table. "I suppose you did. Thank you. But I do prefer to work alone."

"Nonsense, I can help, you know I'm a good fighter."

"You're a liability."

"Why, because you care about me?"

Suddenly the Rogue was standing close to him again, their faces inches apart, those brilliant green eyes staring up at him, the pale lips slightly parted. The Gentleman thought he was going to kiss him. But then he felt something stinging on the side of his neck, and turned to see that the Rogue had pressed something sharp to it, and then he fell into the Rogue's arms.

"I'm sorry," he heard the Rogue say, and his voice echoed in the Gentleman's head. "But I can't just let you walk out of here. I love you, sir, but I don't entirely trust you. Not yet."

He awoke back in his bed. The fire had gone out, and the room was chilled. White snowflakes whispered in through the open window, and for a moment

he thought he had dreamt it all, but the sharp pain on the back of his head, and the newly forming bruises all over his body told a different tale.

Groaning, the Gentleman pulled himself out of bed, and nearly stumbled over the pile of his clothing on the floor. Nice of the Rogue to hang it up for him. He dragged himself to the window, and shut it stiffly, before bending over the fire and attempting to start it again.

What was he to do? The ball was in two days, and all signs pointed to a major attack from Lakin and his army. He had seen the number of the army, and it far outweighed the police force. Perhaps the military should be brought in? He determined to inform his father tomorrow, straight away. And then, should he, as the Rogue had suggested, stay out of it? No, he couldn't, not when lives could possibly be saved. Lakin thought that Miss Emily still had her locket, so naturally she would be a target. It was his duty to protect her. He had to—

He nearly swooned when he stood up from the fire, and had to brace himself against the cold bricks. Well, first he had to get better, if he was going to be of any help at all. A concussion was no laughing matter. He resolved to inform the maids that he was sick for the next few days, and recuperate in time for the ball. Pushing himself to further injury would do nothing in the long run.

But when he finally returned to bed, he found that he could not return to sleep. To add insult to injury, it was not the thought of Lakin that kept him awake, nor his army of masked men, nor the near death he had just experienced. Instead it was the memory of the Rogue's mouth on him, the warm firmness of his tongue, and the soft velvet of his gloved hands ... and he hadn't finished either, although, he supposed, that *was* entirely his own fault ...

When he awoke the next morning, it was to a splitting headache. It seemed the concussion had finally caught up with him. Every glittering stream of morning light through the window was like a beam of agony; every soft tap of the maid's footsteps, the beating of a bass drum. How on earth could a simple blow to the head make every movement akin to the feeling of pressure on an open wound?

When the maid entered to bring him breakfast, he nearly shouted at her to leave and take her infernally loud breathing with her. Instead he managed to croak an inquiry as to the whereabouts of his father.

"I'm afraid he left early, sir." The maid curtseyed quickly. "Something about urgent police business. Said not to trouble about tea or dinner for him. Are you alright, sir?"

"Oh, fine ..." he murmured. "I, er ... injured myself last night. Late night training, you know."

The maid tsked. "Will you be requiring a doctor, sir?"

"No, no, just rest."

"Very well, sir," She curtseyed again. "I shall inform your mother."

"No, don't..." he croaked after her, but she had already left. He sighed and buried his face under the blankets. When he awoke next, it was night and there was a fire burning in the grate. He had slept the day away.

He finally managed to drag himself about the next day, first downstairs, where he was told that his father had already left for the day, and then to the police station, where he was told that his father was at the Pennington Manor. When he arrived at the Pennington Manor however, he was told that his father had not been present all day, and was likely back at the police station.

"Have I gone mad?" he asked his mother at lunch. "Can a concussion render one senseless?"

"I don't know my dear, perhaps if you'd take a break from your constant training and come with me to more socials, you wouldn't have so many opportunities to damage yourself," said his mother smartly. "Although I suppose with the recent trend, we might both be better off staying in. That's what your father says, anyways. Oh, don't look at me like that. Your father works hard to protect us, you know."

Wherever his father was working hard, it certainly wasn't in any convenient locations. The Gentleman only managed to come face to face with him on the morning of the ball. He pulled himself out of bed that morning, feeling much better, and made his way to the Pennington manor once more, where the preparations for the expected attack were still underway. His father dragged him around for a good fifteen minutes, happily demonstrating the multitude of hidden forces he had organized all over the manor in case of attack, before the Gentleman could get a word in edgewise.

"Father, I've found their stronghold, there are too many of them, we are outnumbered! You must listen to me!"

But his father didn't listen, not until he had pulled the Gentleman into a side room, and conveyed the true reason

for his apparent negligence to him. "I don't want you to come to the ball tonight, son."

"What? Why?"

"I'm terrified for you, of course! My only son, and you're so headstrong, I know you've been training for exactly this sort of thing your whole life, and you're so excited—"

"I'm not *excited* father, I—"

"But you're only a boy still, and this is *dangerous*."

"Father!"

"I won't have you coming to the ball tonight, son, I can't allow it. I need to be able to do my job, and I can't do that if I'm worried about you. No arguments. Go home."

And so the Gentleman did go home. He went home, and had tea with his mother, and then he changed into his best formal attire, and slid a knife into one of his breast-pockets, and a gun into the other. And then, since his mother was, of course, staying home from the ball as well and would notice if the carriage was missing, he took the underground, and slipped in just a few minutes before the ball was about to begin.

It was, as it had been in years past, a grand affair, women in beautiful haute couture ball gowns of every colour, and the men all in sharp black tailcoats and top hats. On a normal occasion, the Gentleman would have been content to meander about, making polite conversation with the ball-goers and then leaving as early as possible. As it was, he was on high alert, barely pausing to speak to anyone, only exchanging quick pleasantries, and then moving on.

The Pennington Manor was an old house, built in the Neo-classical style, and featured an airy white ballroom with pillars open to a beautiful courtyard, complete with a fountain and pond. As it was winter, the fountain did not

run, and a thin layer of ice covered the pond, although it was not, to the dismay of the ball-goers, thick enough for ice-skating. The Gentleman made his way about the fountain, checking to make certain that the police were in their stations. They had been ordered to stay out of sight to avoid causing distress amongst the ball-goers, but anyone with a keen eye could notice the dark figures stationed behind pillars, on balconies, and around corners. The Gentleman remembered that Constable Briar, an old friend of his father's, had been stationed out of the library, and resolved to speak to him. He had a level head, and probably wouldn't tattle on him to his father. Perhaps he could ask to be of some assistance.

But Constable Briar was not in the grand, sky-lit library, and the Gentleman didn't recognise any of the darkly clad men attending there. Furthermore, when he asked as to the location of the Constable, he was shushed, and all but forcibly shoved from the room. Confused, and more than a little put off, he snagged a flute of champagne and went to stand against a pillar, thinking. He should find Emily, he supposed, that would be the best course of action, to keep her safe.

Now with a designated plan, he turned, and almost bowled over Derek Wilde. Derek stumbled a little, and stared up at him with an accusatory look on his face.

"Oh, hello," he said, when he recognised the Gentleman, and made to swerve around him, but the Gentleman caught him by the arm.

"Derek, what are you doing here?"

Derek looked at him strangely. "It's a ball. I was invited. Weren't you?"

"Yes, but you never go to balls."

"Yes, I do," said Derek. "I always go to balls, and most other social events ... you've never seen me there, have

you. Well, don't worry about it, no one notices me, really." He made to leave, but the Gentleman grabbed his arm, suddenly remembering something.

Two of the locket were accounted for—Lakin and his men knew that the Rogue had stolen Betsy's locket, and they were in possession of one, stolen from his bedroom when he had stupidly left his window open. However, they couldn't know for certain whether the last locket belonged to Emily or to Derek. Why hadn't he thought of it before? Derek was in at least as much danger as Emily. He needed to keep them both close in case of attack.

"Derek, would you walk with me?"

"W-well, actually, I was just going to get some champagne."

"Oh take mine, I insist," said the Gentleman, and shoved his drink at a disgruntled Derek. He chanced a glance at the young man and couldn't help but notice that his choice of tailcoat had a rather dated fit to it, and was over-large to boot. And his top hat was ... molting ... a little like his face ...

Suppressing a shudder, the Gentleman looked away, scanning the partygoers for a sign of Emily.

"Have you seen Emily Stanford tonight?" he asked Derek, without looking at him. "Do you know what colour dress she's wearing?"

"Er, no," said Derek. "Why? Wait, yes, I think she was wearing black, come to think of it. Is that appropriate for a ball?"

It wasn't (although the Gentleman couldn't expect Derek to know that) so he was quickly able to pick out a black skirt among the sea of bright, colourful ones. Further inspection revealed that it did indeed belong to Emily Stanford, but just as he had resolved to go and talk to her,

and drag Derek along with him, he was accosted himself, by one Michael Pennington.

"May I speak with you?" demanded Michael in his usual pompous manner.

"Er, yes, go ahead," said the Gentleman.

Michael hemmed. "I mean, *alone*," he clarified, with a sideways glance at Derek.

Social obligation overrode his thoughts for a moment, and he found himself following Michael to a dark corner, where he would undoubtedly be once again interrogated about his intentions with Miss Betsy. Serendipity had it that it was that moment that the attack began.

It was horridly familiar, a re-enactment of the last attack, but on an even bigger scale. Three marble pillars were destroyed, and a fire blazed over the carpeted floors. There were more armoured men than before, if that was possible, and they attacked brutally, with no apparent design besides chaos. The Gentleman immediately scanned the room for Emily and Derek and saw that Derek had been beset by two men and Emily by one. He raced towards Derek, who screamed and ducked as the Gentleman swung his knife at one of the attackers. Metal clanged against metal, and the man's armoured hand thrust into his chest, sending the Gentleman flying backwards.

The breath knocked from him, he struggled to get up, watching as Derek was beset by three more men, struggling, until he fell backwards into the ice-cold pool. In the same moment, he saw Emily Stanford, her dark skirts rustling around her as she kicked and tried to escape her captors. Between the men who held her, he recognised a dark cloaked man. The one who had been conspiring with Lakin, who wanted to instill a "new order". He reached a

gloved hand up, wrapped it around Emily's slender neck, and then began to drag her, screaming from the courtyard.

In the flurried frenzy of his mind, he managed to deduce that Derek was his first priority—such freezing water was deadly. In a moment the Gentleman was up, and knocking the attacks of the two masked men away, slitting the throat of one, and then burying the knife in the chest of the other. Then, without a moment's hesitation, he dove into the water after Derek.

The cold hit him like nothing he had ever felt before. It was as if his entire body wanted nothing more than to shut down completely, and cease to exist. But he couldn't let it. He thrust himself towards Derek's struggling body, grasped him, and pulled him towards the ground. In a moment he was out, shivering immediately, pulling Derek out after him, and shaking him to ensure that he was alright. Apparently he was.

"I can swim, you idiot!" Derek said, in a very familiar voice. "Now go after Emily!"

Shocked as if by an electric current, the Gentleman did as he was told, leaving Derek on the stone ground, and rushing after the cloaked man and the still struggling Emily. They were heading into the library.

The water had made his gun useless, and he tossed it aside, opting instead for only his knife as a weapon. With a quick gait, he made his way up behind them, offing two of the men with swift stabs to the back before the third turned to fight. He had killed the two that held Emily, and she ran free. The cloaked man cursed, and pulled out a gun. It was against the Gentleman's head before he could escape, and, to his surprise, the man gestured him and his final soldier inside.

They ducked into the dark library, where a multitude of armoured men stood, flanking none other than Charles

Lakin. The Gentleman suddenly realised, too late, that the dark men who had stood watch around the manor hadn't been the policemen at all, but the masked men, disguised.

Then all his thoughts came to a shuddering halt as the cloaked man at his side pulled away his hood.

It was his father.

"Father?" gasped the Gentleman. His father flicked his wrist, and his men brought the Gentleman to kneel before him and Lakin. "Father, what is going on?"

"I told you not to come," said his father, and his voice was chilling. "I wanted you to stay out of this, until I could explain it to you properly, but you had to meddle, didn't you."

"Just kill him, James," said Lakin, and his father shook his head, his eyes still narrowed. Gradually, the Gentleman came to realise that the man in front of him was not the same man he had grown up under, and loved. Everything from his mannerisms, to the way he held his face was different. He wanted to ask what was going on, to plead with his father to explain, but his voice refused to work.

"Well, I suppose this has happened as it has, I might as well give you the choice I planned on giving you eventually," said his father. He stepped back, and lifted a gloved hand, to gesture to the men around him.

"Look," he said, "and listen. Do you see these men? Do you hear those screams outside? That is the sound of the end of an era."

"I don't ..." began the Gentleman, but his voice failed again.

"All this," said his father. "All this will be gone soon. And so it should be. This world you live in, boy, this fake world of lavish parties, and pretty things. You think you deserve it because you were born into it?"

"Hurry up and kill him, James," said Lakin. But his father was staring at the Gentleman still, the golden gun still cocked to his son's head.

"All this will fall," he said, "to make way for a new era. And with this army, I will be lord over it. First London, and soon the world. I will make it right. There will be no more classes, no more starvation. All will be equal under me. Don't you see, my son?"

"Why—" the Gentleman's voice cracked, but he managed to ask, "Why are you telling me all this?"

His father's face went strangely blank then, "I don't love your mother. I never have. But I have in my heart still some love for you. If you pledge your allegiance to me, my son, I will make you great. I will make you—"

"A lord?" said the Gentleman. "No thank you father, I think I'd rather die."

Any emotion that had been left in his father's face disappeared then, and he cocked his gun. "So be it then," he said, and he heard Lakin breathe a sigh of relief.

"Stop!"

The door burst open suddenly, and the blazing firelight illuminated the figure of Derek Wilde in the doorway. He had stripped to his shirtsleeves, and his hair was still damp from the water. The motley lumps on his face had all but dissolved, and he wiped the last of them away with little thought as he stood with a shining golden gun trained on the Gentleman's father.

"Let him go," he said, "or I will shoot you."

Suddenly Lakin spoke. "Oh, it's you!" he said to Derek. "The boy who was supposed to die along with his parents. Poison wasn't good enough, apparently, but I thought it had gotten the message to dear Ernest. Apparently not."

"Shut up."

"Was it painful, though?" said Lakin. "Their deaths? I imagine yours will be much less painful. You do realize that there are fifty men in here, all ready to shoot, on my command."

Derek stared at him for a moment, his green eyes narrowed. Then he cocked his head, and pulled from his neck a small, golden object.

"Fine then," he said and, dropping the locket to hang from its chain, turned the gun and trained it directly on the locket. "I don't imagine it'll survive this."

There was a tense silence.

The Gentleman's father growled and Lakin shook visibly.

"Don't do that," Lakin said.

"Don't shoot him," said Derek.

"Fine," said Lakin. "This boy for the locket. I can't imagine why he's so valuable to you."

Derek's face remained still. He held the locket aloft and stepped forward. First one step, and then another, until he was directly in front of the Gentleman. His gun once again trained on Lakin, he reached back and hurled the locket deep into the depths of the library. Lakin cursed, and ran after it. In the moment that his father looked away, Derek grasped the Gentleman's lapel and hurled him to his feet, all but dragging him to the doorway, the gun still trained backwards. Bullets ricocheted off the walls behind them as they stumbled from the room.

The Gentleman couldn't move. He didn't know if it was the cold, or the ice in his mind, but his feet refused to work.

"Come on, sir," said Derek, shooting a glance behind them. "We've got to leave now."

The Gentleman's feet dragged, and he nearly collapsed to the floor.

"James," said Derek to the Gentleman. "James please, come with me now."

Hearing his name reignited something within him, and the Gentleman found that he could run again. They made their way through a dark corridor, and were attacked by two armoured men. Derek put a bullet in the chest of one, and kicked the feet out from the other, before shooting him blank in the head. Then he grasped the James's arm and pulled him, still numb, from the house.

A carriage awaited them, parked around the back of the house, behind the shrubbery. Derek shoved James in, through the velvet curtains, and then jumped in himself, shouting for the driver to go. James found himself sitting across from Ernest Wilde.

He was older than James remembered him being, and frailer, but he seemed alert enough. Derek sat next to James, shivering, as Wilde stared at them wide-eyed.

"What happened?"

"I'm sorry, Grandfather," said Derek. "I failed, I lost the locket."

Wilde's eyes widened further. "How?"

"I ..." Derek faltered, and he lowered his eyes. Amidst the hollow numbness that clouded his eyes, James could see that his lips were blue from the cold, and shivering. "I traded it for James' life."

"Of course you did," said Wilde, and he looked at James curiously. "What's happened to him?"

"He didn't know ..." said Derek, "about his father."

"Ah," said Wilde, and the rest of the carriage ride passed in silence.

When they finally reached the Wilde estate, James had recovered enough to walk indoors, and then Derek suggested that they had better hide underground, where Wilde had been hiding since the first attack, for fear of his life. They entered the underground from behind a bookshelf, which slid back into place, completely un-

detectable afterwards. The underground caves were much more extensive than James had thought they were on his first visit, and the small room he had awoken in was merely Derek's personal bedroom. Derek sat James down on the bed, and then went to put his grandfather to bed. When he returned, James hadn't moved.

"I'm sorry," said Derek. "James?"

James stared at the wall in front of him. Finally he mustered up the willpower to speak. "You knew," he said. "You knew that my father was behind this, what he really was, and you didn't tell me. Why?"

"I didn't trust you at first," said Derek. "And then, once I knew you had no idea, I didn't want to hurt you."

"Hurt me," said James, standing now. He had finally recovered his voice, "Well you certainly did that, didn't you." He was angry. And he knew he was likely taking it out on the wrong person, but he couldn't stop. His mind was a jumble of rejection and denial and anger. What had happened to him? What had happened to his life? Who was he now?

"I'm *sorry*," said Derek. "Really, I am, I told you to keep out of it. I didn't want you to know, because I knew it would kill you."

"So you lied to me!"

"I never lied to you, James, I—"

"You told me I didn't know you!"

"You *don't* know me!" Derek's voice was hoarse now, and he was shouting.

"Exactly," said James, and he advanced on Derek, so that their faces were inches apart, and he wanted nothing more to smash the Derek into pieces, to destroy him. "So I can't trust you!"

"Oh, why don't you just fuck me, James. Would that make you feel better?" snapped Derek, and James wasn't

sure when the anger transformed itself, but in the next moment his lips were pressed to Derek's and their tongues in a furious dance together. His hands grasped at Derek's thin shirt, desperate to feel his body underneath of it, and Derek's hands reached for him, equally frantic.

They stumbled back towards the bed, hastily divesting each other of their clothes, and then Derek moved to straddle James, moving his mouth furiously against him, taking James's lip beneath his teeth and biting ... the taste of blood, and then he could feel nothing but the sensation of Derek's naked body moving against him. From somewhere Derek produced a bottle of oil, and poured it over them both, hastily and messily. And then he was climbing atop James, quickly, as if he must before he came to his senses, and sliding his still tight body onto him. James groaned, and grasped slippery hands at Derek's waist and backside, desperate for more. Their moans mingled as their bodies moved in sync, burning tightly against each other, and slipping away, then together again. Derek made a soft, desperate noise, and then his face was over James, his breath heated on his face, his green eyes like a riddle, burning up from the inside.

Derek was a truly savage lover, and before the night was spent, James was riddled with bites and bruises. As it turned out, Derek needn't have worried about his senses getting the better of him-- his desire was enough to fuel him for hours, and James was completely lost to the sensation and drive of his own deprived body. Derek's heated mouth whispered many things to him over the hours, and often the words *I love you* slipped from him fervently, and strangely present in James was the desire to whisper back, *I love you too*. But the part of him that still contained logic resisted, for truly he didn't know his lover at all.

At last they finished, and in the sleepy euphoria, the pang of the night's occurrences rang sharp and desperately horrid, but he could do nothing then but roll over and pull Derek's sleeping and pliant body to him, and wait for the morning.

When he awoke, the room was illuminated faintly by a ray of sunlight streaming down from the ceiling.

"It's a mirror system," said Derek after James had stared blankly up at it for a few moments. "Part of a tunnel that leads up to the grounds, to let in the sunlight. Otherwise it gets a bit dreary down here."

James turned to look at Derek, who was no longer in bed with him, but instead sitting, Indian-style, on the floor in front of the bed, and looking up at James with his head cocked slightly.

"What are you doing?" asked James.

"Meditating," replied Derek. "I learned it in China."

"China?"

"That's where we went after Lakin poisoned us." Derek's eyes were dark and downcast and his posture slumped as he spoke. "My grandfather, he ... he could never get us far enough away. And then, after my parents died, he put me in every sort of martial arts training imaginable. We travelled through China, then Taiwan, Japan, Singapore, and then back to China again. I had dozens of tutors and trainers ... he turned me into a weapon."

"Do you resent him for it, then?"

Derek shook his head. "No." He stood, and slid back into the bed next to James. He was cold, but James didn't mind the feeling of his naked body curling around him. "It wouldn't have worked, anyway, if I hadn't wanted to learn. I did. I needed to." He sighed, and slid himself closer to James. "You're more impressive than me, anyway," he said. "I had money, training, people helping me. You've practiced for years, all on your own, with no help or encouragement."

"Yes," sighed James. "My father never was much ... " He went silent suddenly at the thought of his father. It was still fresh, the wound. Still hard to reconcile the father he had known all his life with the man he had seen last night. Had the man he had known even existed at all?

"I'm sorry, James," said Derek.

"It's all right, it's not as if we were terribly close, we were fighting even, before ..." He laughed darkly. "I feel like he's died."

"That's understandable."

"I just ... I don't understand *why*."

Derek shifted a little, and lay back, pulling the sheets up to cover himself. "My grandfather told me that when your father was young, he was in love with a woman. She was ... a commoner, I suppose, a mill worker. They were engaged to be married, but when his parents found out about it, they forced him to call off the engagement, and forbid him from seeing her again. A while later, she died in the streets. My grandfather says he was never the same after that. It was as if a light in him had gone out."

"And now he wants to put out all the other lights too."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"And what about Lakin?"

Derek looked away, but James saw the darkness come into his eyes once again. "He wants power, and he doesn't

care what he has to do to get it. He killed Stanford, and Clarke. He tried to kill my grandfather, and when my grandfather tried to go to the police, he poisoned my whole family, to scare my grandfather into never trying to stop him again. He's the reason I'm doing this, the reason for my disguise, my training ... everything. I have to kill him."

"It must be hard," said James. "Pretending to be someone completely different, not being able to ..."

"To be myself?" Derek nodded. "A little." He looked back at James, and then turned, and wrapped himself around him again, "But I've never been one for mindless trivial socializing. You know," he said, sliding a finger down James' cheek, and whispering in his ear, "the thing that was the most difficult ... was keeping away from you."

With all too perfect timing, a loud and obtrusive bell sounded, and Derek immediately jumped off of James to go to the source of the ringing, a speaking tube near the door.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Er, yes, someone at the door for you sir," said the faint, tinny voice of the doorman. "A mister Michael Pennington."

James groaned, and Derek gave him a pitying grimace. "Let him in then," he said to the brass mouthpiece. "We'll take him in the drawing room."

"Very good, sir."

James watched, a little dazed, as Derek dressed quickly into a casual, stylish ensemble, before turning back to James and announcing, "I need to speak to my grandfather about something, get dressed and we'll meet him upstairs."

"Oh, must I talk to him, Derek?" moaned James, "I'm not at all in the mood."

"It was his house that was attacked, James, it's a wonder he survived, never mind managed to escape. He may have some useful information for us. Dressed, now." With that, Derek slipped out the door, leaving James alone.

The pang he felt at Derek's departure was worrisome. Part of him had been hoping that Derek would deem it too dangerous to leave the underground, and that they would have to spend the entire day alone in Derek's room together. Such desires were completely unlike him, and highly inappropriate given the situation, but he couldn't seem to be rid of them.

He sighed and rolled out of bed reluctantly, examining the state of his clothes. They were crumpled on the floor and not at all in the proper style for visiting—it would be obvious that he had spent the night. But then, he supposed with the chaos that must be going on around the city, it probably didn't matter that much.

When James and Derek entered the Drawing room, Michael was sitting nervously on the edge of a spindly couch and appeared to be chewing his nails. He looked as if he hadn't changed or slept all night—his clothes were singed with soot, and his eyes were wide and haunted. He jumped up when he saw the two of them and ran towards them, all but embracing James.

"Thank god, you're alive! This is the first place I thought to come; I thought perhaps they wouldn't look for me here."

"Why would they be looking for you, Michael?" asked James, instinctively backing away from him.

"Well ..." Michael's voice broke. "They attacked my home! And the last attack, I was there too! I thought for certain I must be a target, and I can't stay at home.

"You're not a target, Michael, you—" James began, but Derek shushed him.

"You can't stay here," Derek said. "You're not a target, but I am. We could be attacked at any second."

Michael's eyes went wide. "Wh-what?" he gasped. "Wait, Derek, you look different. You've—your scars ..."

"Never mind that," said Derek. He crossed his arms and sighed heavily, regarding them both for a moment. Then, seeming resigned, he grasped Michael's arm and pulled him towards the bookcase that led downstairs. "I suppose it's not safe to just send you out there either," he sighed as they returned downstairs. "You can stay here, for the time being."

He showed Michael into a spare room, and then returned to where he had left James, standing next to a meticulously organised set of spiked weapons and a heap of discarded straw dummies.

"Well," Derek said. "What do we do now?"

"We can't let my father and Lakin have access to the last locket," said James, and Derek nodded, pulling from around his neck a familiar, golden pendant.

"It stays here. I'm sorry James, but this time if you're captured, I can't pay your ransom. Not when so many lives are at stake."

"I understand," said James, and followed Derek into the bedroom, where he stowed the locket in the familiar box that James remembered from before.

"If the manor is attacked," said Derek, "my grandfather will escape, and cave in these rooms. It will be as if they never existed. The locket will be safe. So ..." he turned to James. "Now what?"

"We should go to the police station. Find out what happened to the officers that were supposed to be stationed at the Pennington Manor. If possible, we should try to arrange a force to counter Lakin's army, and alert the armed forces, if they haven't been already."

"There's a possibility that your father will be there, and some of Lakin's men."

"I know. But if you can manage to stay out of sight, so can I."

"Right," said Derek. "Just let me change then."

When Derek had finished changing, he was every inch the Rogue that James knew. "I suppose there's no point in wearing this," he said, staring at a length of black fabric in his hand, and James realized that it was his mask. "Whatever happens tonight, it'll be the end of my charade."

James took the mask from him, and then he took Derek's chin in his hand, and kissed him, long and hard. "This isn't the charade," he said, reaching up, and tying the mask firmly over Derek's eyes. "This is you, and ..." He swallowed. "I think I'm falling in love with you."

It was frightening, voicing his budding feelings, but also exhilarating. He had never said such things to anyone before. He had never *felt* such things for anyone. He kissed Derek again, revelling in the warmth that spread through him, the strange serenity and longing.

"James." He could hear Derek's voice break a little as they pulled apart. "I never asked you to."

"You never asked me for anything. It's just happened. I thought you would be pleased."

"Did you?" Derek gave a wry smile, "I suppose things are very simple in your mind aren't they? I should love to see the world the way you do."

"I don't understand. What do you want from me?"

"What do I want?" Derek laughed, "What I want is for you to stay here, safe and out of sight until this is all over. But I know you better than to expect that. Come, my love. Let's go."

They left quickly, without saying goodbye to Ernest Wilde, for fear that Michael would learn of his presence. Both were to stay hidden in the underground lair, and Derek made a point to send all his servants away on leave. In the likely event of an attack by Lakin and his men, the house must appear deserted.

James was surprised then, when instead of leaving the house as he had thought, they returned underground, and Derek led him deep into the network of caves. They soon left the domesticated area and trekked deep into an underground labyrinth, the only source of light coming from Derek's electric torch and the occasional beam of muted sun from small gaps in the ceiling. The sound of running water filled the dark hollows, and often the ground under their feet was wet.

"These caves are all made of limestone," explained Derek, gesturing with the beam of his torch. "Natural formations. My grandfather explored them all when he was younger. I come down here all the time. It leads almost to the heart of the city, and connects with the underground in a few places. You're going to like this," he said, and James could see the hint of a smile on his masked face as they climbed up, and emerged on a plateau.

James couldn't withhold his gasp. Beams of sunlight filtered down from the ceiling high above them, glittering in the mist and dust-motes. Below them, the cavern stretched far down, and around them, a vast, underground canyon. James could hardly believe that the magnificent rock formations were natural—spires of rock dripped from the ceiling and thrust upwards from the mist below. The

sound of dripping water echoed into oblivion and the air was thick and heady.

"It's beautiful," he whispered.

Derek nodded, grinning at him. Then his face fell slightly, and he sighed.

"I want you to know that I have a plan," he said quietly after a moment.

"Do you?" said James, still distracted and in awe of the beautiful sight before him. "Excellent, what is it?"

Derek was silent.

"You're not going to tell me," deduced James. "You still don't trust me."

"I don't trust anyone," said Derek. "Don't take it personally. It's probably got something to do with how ridiculously often I lie."

"You told me you never lied to me."

"Yes, well, that was a lie. I always lie, James. I'm ..." Derek sighed sharply, as if he couldn't find the words to say. "I just want you to know what you profess to be falling for."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm not a good person. Not at all. I mean look, the thing I want most out of everything is to kill Lakin. To kill a man. I'm not ..." Derek sighed again, and turned away. "Come on, we should keep moving."

"I don't think that's true," said James as he followed Derek down the narrow, slippery path. "I don't think it's true at all, if all you wanted was to kill Lakin, he'd be dead by now. You want to stop my father too, and put an end to their plans, I know you do."

"And what about you, James?" Derek was moving quickly ahead of him, so quickly that James had to struggle to keep up. "What are you going to do if it comes down to it? Would you kill Lakin? Would you kill your own father?"

"I've already killed men," said James hollowly. "I've killed a lot of those men. I may not be a police officer yet, but I've sworn to protect the people, and if that means taking lives in order to defend them, then that's what I have to do."

Derek stopped, and turned on his heel, and abruptly he was directly in front of James, his hands gripping his lapels and his face inches from his.

"That's just it, James," he said, and the warmth of his breath made it difficult to concentrate for a moment. "You're such a good man. You're noble, you have honour. We're not the same. And I—I've already broken my rules, about coming near you, talking to you ... "

"I followed you," James reminded him. "I've always followed you."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe because you're not that different from me. "

Derek's grip loosened, and he turned away from James. "No," he said. "I am. We should hurry."

It was only a short walk before they emerged onto a familiar underground line, and made their way up to the Police station. James was surprised to find it deserted, despite the fact that it was mid-day. Papers, parts of uniforms and weapons were left strewn about, as if they had been abandoned suddenly, but there was no one in sight.

"Do you suppose they've all been killed?" asked James, but Derek shook his head.

"Where are the prisoners kept, generally?" he asked.

"There are cells downstairs," replied James. "Quite a few. You don't suppose they're down there?"

Derek looked around, and James thought that he was acting particularly skittish. "We should have a look," he said distractedly, his eyes still scanning the empty rooms.

The door was locked, but James had been here in the past, and knew the locations of all the spare keys. They made their way down into the dark basement, the only light streaming wanly down from the open door above them. Derek pulled out his electric torch and flicked it on, illuminating the dark barred cells ahead. They both halted suddenly when they realized that the cells were full to the brim with people.

"What?" gasped James, and Derek raised the torch above his head, revealing what looked to be the entire police force, standing warily amongst the cages.

"James!" said one of them, and James recognised him as Officer Briar. "James, the Commissioner's son?"

Derek began to back away, looking around him warily.

"James," whispered Briar. "James, I'm so sorry, your father ..."

"I know," said James. "What's happened here?"

"They've been coming for us throughout the night, taking us somewhere. Listen to me James, you've got to get out of here."

"Absolutely not, we—"

"James, I think we'd better listen to the man," said Derek, and James turned in time to see the door slam from above them.

"Damnit!" Derek flew up the stairs, but the door was locked tight from the outside. He turned swiftly, and cried out James' name, just as James felt the cold barrel of a gun against his head.

"Just as expected," hissed a voice next to his ear, and his hands were grasped and yanked behind his back, secured with a pair of cold metal handcuffs.

"Come down slowly and surrender," said his captor to Derek, " or we'll shoot."

Derek sighed, "Oh, James, why is this always happening to you?" he moaned, but he made his way slowly down the stairs, and allowed himself to be handcuffed too. James wasn't sure if his easy surrender was in order to protect him, or simply because they were so badly outnumbered with no place to escape to.

And they were outnumbered. Masked men poured into the room through a tunnel in the wall that James knew hadn't been there before. Within minutes, another cell was emptied, its occupants handcuffed and tied together, while the small army of masked men marched them out of the cell and down the dark tunnel.

At some point during the lengthy march, James managed to manoeuvre himself next to Officer Briar. The man's face was steely, and although he was still handsome (James had a sudden recollection of a strong childhood crush on him, long forgotten or repressed) the sharp crags on his face were even more pronounced in the torchlight, and his eyes were haunted.

"What happened?" James asked, and Briar's eyes flicked over to him for a moment, before fixing firmly forward once again.

"Your father," he said. "He came by the night before the Ball, told us all to go downstairs, get into the cells, that he'd explain later." He hung his head. "God, we're daft. We just listened to him, did what he said. We had no idea!"

"No one did." James doubted his words were a comfort. They were merely a realization of the complete and utter duplicity of his father. He had had friends, people who trusted him with their lives, a wife and children who loved him. "He's mad, I think. A little."

"Have you got a plan to stop him?" asked Briar, and James glanced instinctively at Derek. He was walking alongside James, his feet light and steady and his eyes fixed downwards, but he felt their gazes and looked up for a moment. His eyes were narrowed, and he tilted his head, a noncommittal gesture.

James wasn't surprised when they reached their destination. It was the underground lair that he had visited with Derek, what seemed like so long ago. He was surprised, however, when the masked men sat the policemen down, still handcuffed, and began to outfit them in the same, golden armour.

"What are they doing?" he asked Derek, but Derek was staring at the approaching cloaked figure—James's father.

"My son," he said, smiling down at James. "And Derek Wilde, isn't it?" He nodded at Derek, and then turned back to James, "I knew you wouldn't be able to resist getting involved. It was only a matter of time until we had both of you."

"What are you doing to them?" said James. "Why are you armouring your enemies?"

His father laughed. "Oh, but they aren't my enemies, my boy. Or they won't be for long. Follow me."

"How do you intend to use the armour to control them?" asked Derek, his voice strangely blank, as they were forced into the private room and shoved into some waiting chairs. "You haven't got the locket with Stanford's research."

"Haven't we?" said a familiar voice and James looked up with dread to see the horrid, smirking face of Michael Pennington. "Shouldn't have been so obvious about where you were leaving it then, should you?"

Derek hissed in anger, but Michael laughed gleefully, "Isn't it brilliant? These fine gentleman allowing me to assist them. I'll be rich for this. A lord."

"You'll be dead, you mean," snapped Derek.

"Ah!" said a voice from the corner, and Charles Lakin stood, from where he had been hunched over his work, unnoticed in the corner, and strode over to stand in front of Derek. The familiar golden locket hung from his hands as he bent over to examine him.

"Your friend Michael procured this for us," he said, gesturing tenderly to the locket. "He's very clever, deduced long ago what you've been up to. Once we confirmed that Emily Stanford's locket had been stolen, well ... there was only one place left to look. My, my, you have been a nuisance, haven't you, boy?" He reached forward and grasped a handful of Derek's hair, pulling his head back with a snap. The locket dangled from his hand as he reached to untie the mask around Derek's face and let it slip to the floor.

Lakin paused to observe Derek for a moment, and then he drew back his hand and brought it forcefully across Derek's face. Derek's head flew back with the impact. He looked down at Lakin through narrowed eyes and smiled a little as a thin trickle of blood rolled from the corner of his mouth. "What was that for?" he asked.

"For not dying when you ought to have," replied Lakin. "I should have ensured your death. You've caused far too much trouble."

"Then why not just kill me?" hissed Derek.

Lakin drew back, and a cruel smile crossed his gaunt features, "Because," he said, "you've lost now. And I want you to be alive to watch the results of your failure. I've almost completed it." He nodded at the machine. "Now that I have the information I need, it'll be short work."

"Then get on with it," growled James's father.

Lakin returned to his work, and then there was nothing to do but wait. James' father paced around the room, and Michael fiddled with Lakin's devices behind his back, and shot smug glances at Derek and James. Once James tried to talk to Derek, but Derek shushed him. The trickle of blood had made its way down the side of his face to drip on the floor, and there was a purple bruise developing on his cheek. A few times James's father went out to the larger room to oversee the arrival of the masked men with the rest of the police force. All of them were being outfitted with the golden armour and grotesque masks, and none of them understood why. It was maddening, waiting, knowing what was going to happen, and being unable to stop it. The handcuffs behind his back were strong and sharp, cutting into his wrists, and there was no squeezing out of them.

Finally, after tense minutes, or hours, Lakin stood and shouted excitedly. "Of course ... " he exclaimed hoarsely, a touch of madness in his voice. "Of course, that's it! It's so simple!"

"What is?" said James's father, and Lakin stood up, grinning, "I've done it," he said, holding the shining gold locket aloft in one hand, and a strange metal device in the other. "It's perfect."

"Excellent." James's father nodded. "Use it then. Let's see this mind control."

Grinning manically, Lakin made his way to the gleaming golden throne in the corner, and inserted the metal device into the base of the chair.

"Derek," said James, and he tugged futilely on the cuffs around his wrist. The chair rocked and skidded as he attempted to stand. He had to stop Lakin—had to stop him now! "Derek!"

"Hush, James, it'll all be over soon."

Lakin sat, with his hands on the arms of the throne, and the golden spikes gleaming around his head, as if waiting to be crowned.

"Derek, we have to do something!"

James's father strode over him, and placed his hands on the back of the chair, holding it firmly in place. "Be silent, my son," he said. "You are about to witness history."

"Switch it on, boy," Lakin ordered Michael. "Now!"

With one last glance at James, Michael hurried over to the throne and obeyed, flicking the large switch at the base of the machine. Immediately, all the other lights in the room seemed to dim as the throne began to glow a blinding gold. Sparks like lighting danced on the metal, and wormed their way down to Lakin's head. He began to laugh.

"Yes! Yes, it's working!" he cried, and James scream of "No!" was drowned out by his maniacal cries. James stared in horror as the lightning consumed the man's body, and then, suddenly Lakin began to scream. An unearthly, petrifying howl, and the armoured men that stood behind James and Derek screamed too, and fell to the ground, writhing in pain. The lights grew brighter, pulsing, and then the base of the chair began to explode. Sparks and explosions worked their way up Lakin's arms, his body, burning him as his dying screams echoed. Then, suddenly, eerily, the lights went dark, and the screaming stopped.

James blinked, trying to rid his eyes of the bright spots in them. Derek was laughing.

"What's happened?" cried Michael, his voice breaking. "What happened to him?"

Outraged, James's father stormed over to Derek, and grasped his face in his hand, "What did you do, boy?"

Derek was still grinning, and out of the corner of his eye, James could see his gloved fingers working with a small metal pick at the clasp of his handcuffs. "You thought you could trick me," he laughed. "You thought that boy there was a better liar than me? Well, you thought wrong. I'm a professional, sir."

His handcuffs undone, Derek reached for his belt, and in a lightning quick move, inserted a dose of sedative into the Commissioner's neck. He lifted his feet and kicked the unconscious man off of him, and flipped backwards over the chair, landing upright between the two guards. They were still recovering from the pain of Lakin's malfunction, and he took them out easily with quick, calculated motions.

"What happened?" demanded James as Derek extracted the key from one of them and quickly removed James' handcuffs.

"The locket was a fake," explained Derek. "My grandfather designed it to malfunction the machine, and kill the first person who sat in the chair."

"You knew about Michael, then? The whole time?"

"Why else would he come to my house for shelter? He's been coming by before too, wanting to 'speak to my grandfather'. Plus, he's a horrible actor. I can tell, I'm a good one."

James stared at Derek for a moment as he stood, rubbing his wrists. "You're amazing."

"I know," said Derek. He stooped to pick up his mask and tied it securely around his eyes once again. "Now come on, we've got to help out your police force."

Ignoring Michael, who was now cowering on the floor, they quickly exited into the larger room, where a fierce battle was raging. Several of the policemen had escaped their bonds when Lakin's machine had malfunctioned. Now, suited with the strength-enhancing armour, they made

short work of the untrained horde that had captured them. James had never been more proud of the police force in his life.

He had just reunited with officer Briar, who was arranging for the remaining criminals to be rounded up and arrested (many had been recognised by the officers as inmates from the prison break that had occurred several months prior) when he realized that Derek had disappeared. He found him a few moments later, about to climb a rope in the now empty side room, to the scaffolding above.

"Where are you going?" he asked, and Derek turned to look at him, cocking his head a little and smiling that cheeky, slightly mad grin.

"Good job, sir," he said. "You've been very brave. Didn't doubt you for a minute."

"But you're leaving. Why?" It was as if there was a hollow in his chest, rapidly expanding. Derek was leaving. Derek was going. Suddenly nothing else seemed to matter nearly as much.

"It's not like me to stick around, is it?" Derek smiled a little, ruefully.

"But you're a hero!" James protested. "You saved everyone, you—why? Why can't you stay? I want you to stay." His voice broke a little, but he didn't care. It was imperative that Derek understood how he felt.

Derek stared at him for a few moments, then sighed. "I'm not a hero, James. I'm not a good man, I'm not—" He broke off, then smiled a little, as if laughing at himself. "Look at me. I think it's time I started following my rules again." He grasped at the rope, and began to lift himself.

"No. Don't—"

"Goodbye James."

"No, Derek—" but Derek was already up the rope, pulling it quickly after him, and gone before James could move.

Nearly three weeks later, James was lounging against an antique cabinet sipping a flute of champagne, and wishing that he could take his leave of this particular party. But he couldn't, because the party was in his house, and he was the one that had thrown it. It was in honour Officer Briar, who had been made Commissioner Briar after James' father's arrest without bail and multitude of charges. The position had been offered to James, of course, as he had been next in line for it, but he had declined. The patrilineal system was antiquated, and he was neither old enough, nor responsible enough to handle the position. He had, however been assigned the position of Constable, and he thought it suited him rather well.

Someone called his name, and James turned to see a young gentleman making his way towards him. He was wonderfully dressed, in a dapper black suit, a white bow tie and scarf, and a top hat at the perfect jaunty angle on his head. He had a clever face, and brilliant green eyes that held James quite captivated.

"You're here," James gasped, barely restraining himself from taking Derek around the middle and pulling him close. "Where have you been? I've been coming by, but your doorman always says you're out, and you haven't been at any socials ... "

"Yes, I'm sorry ... " Derek paused, then explained with a small smile. "Back in China I used to go out at night and cause trouble for petty criminals. I'm afraid I've rather gotten back into the habit."

"What? Derek, that's dangerous."

"Oh yes?" Derek grinned, and reached out to straighten James's lapel. "And what about you, Constable? Been up to anything dangerous lately?"

"You can't take the law into your own hands like that!"

"I can take whatever I want into my hands, are you going to stop me, sir?"

"I might have to."

Derek tsked and looked away. "Well, I'm sorry I'm late, but I'm here now and I thought we might have a dance." He gestured to the next room, where there was indeed dancing occurring.

"We can't dance, Derek."

"No ... " Derek sighed. "I suppose we can't."

"What are you asking for?" demanded James. "Derek what's the meaning of all this? Why did you disappear for three weeks and now suddenly here you are again?"

Derek sighed, and backed a little away from James, crossing his arms in front of him.

"I just ... " He sighed. "I wanted to see you again."

"Isn't that breaking your rules?"

"Yes." Derek stared past him. "Yes, I suppose it is."

"But ... here you are."

Derek's eyes snapped back to James's. "Here I am."

They stared at each other for another moment. A man with a champagne glass pushed between them.

"Would you like to go somewhere private?" James suggested, and Derek nodded.

They wandered through the halls of the house, silent, for a while, their shoes making clicking noises on the

marble floor. Following his feet without thinking, James found themselves in his bedroom.

"So," he said, closing the door behind them and turning to face Derek, "why did you come here then? Why the change of heart?"

"I don't know." Derek laughed. "Really, I don't know. I suppose it's just that I ... I want so badly to believe you. What you said about us."

"That we're not so different."

"Yes."

"Do you?"

"No." Derek shook his head. "I don't. But ... I realized I haven't been giving you enough credit. Perhaps I've been giving myself too much. Perhaps my being around you won't have as bad an effect on you as it will a good effect on me."

"Perhaps ... " James laughed a little, "How can we know for sure if we don't try?"

"Not as easy as it sounds. It's very easy to love someone from afar, you know. It's when they start to reciprocate that it becomes terrifying."

"So you're afraid. So am I."

"Really?" Derek smiled a little. "Seems to me you're not afraid of anything."

"I've fooled you then."

"Yes, well, maybe I don't know you so well after all."

"Derek," James took Derek's chin in his hand, and brought his face up, to look into his eyes. "I don't know you that well. I hardly know you at all. But I like what I do know. I like it a lot."

"You haven't seen the truth about me. You've barely scratched the surface."

"I want to," said James, and Derek looked up at him for an impossibly long moment.

"I suppose I want you to as well," he said.

"Good," said the Gentleman, and he bent his head down, and kissed his Rogue deeply.



