

A Vital Chemistry (Ganymede Quartet Book 3.5)

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A Vital Chemistry (Ganymede Quartet Book 3.5)

by [darrah glass \(velvetglove\)](#)

Summary

First love, new love.

On Valentine's Day, Martin prepares to tell Henry he loves him. It's not appropriate for a slave to burden a master with his feelings, but Martin doesn't think Henry will mind. He won't let himself hope for Henry to return the sentiment, but the truth is that he feels loved. He knows how that feels because he was loved before—by his friend Richard at Ganymede.

Martin treasures his memories of Richard, but he's glad to be with Henry here and now. There's a vital chemistry that draws Martin to Henry, and it's unlike anything he's experienced before. There's more between them than Martin thought possible between master and slave, and he wants to believe it will endure, but he worries Henry will someday fall for a free man. Can Martin trust in Henry's love?

This story is told from Martin's point of view and runs parallel to events that take place in Chapter 12 of A Willful Romantic (Ganymede Quartet Book 3).

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

FEBRUARY 14, 1901

Thursday morning, Valentine's Day, in the break between Latin and English, Tom perched on the edge of Martin's desk and offered him an envelope.

“This is for you.”

Martin looked up at him, trying to gauge whether the card inside would be innocuous or troublesome, and took the envelope with some trepidation. He feared that Tom might make some unwelcome declaration, an inappropriate gesture, invigorating the tension between them instead of letting it die away.

Tom blushed, surely aware of Martin's misgivings. "Go on, open it," he said. "It's all right."

Martin opened the flap, drew out the card, and let out his breath, relieved. It was a pretty friendship card, nothing more. *Friends always, Tom.* A tiny heart drawn alongside.

Martin gave him a fond, genuine smile. "Thank you, Tommy."

"You're my best friend," Tom told him earnestly, a little desperately. "I don't ever want that to change."

"It won't," Martin promised him. He reached for Tom's hand and squeezed his fingers.

"All right boys, in your seats please!" Handsome, good-natured Mr. Vance swept into the room with his books and grading ledger and boys hurried to their places. Tom gave Martin a grateful look and returned to his chair.

They'd had some awkward moments since Mr. Ross' New Year's party. Tom was not particularly accustomed to rejection, and Martin had hated to hurt him, but whether or not they had sex hadn't been up to them anyway. It had been Henry's choice, and Henry wanted Martin for his own.

If Tom had been a Ganymede boy, if they'd grown up together, Martin would have welcomed him as a sex partner. All the other Algonquin boys had such complimentary things to say about beautiful, passionate Tom, and Martin was quite sure they'd enjoy each other given the opportunity. But he didn't feel he was missing out, and he wouldn't want to hurt Henry just to experience Tom. He loved Tom as a friend, but he wasn't in love with him, and couldn't imagine he ever would be.

He *was* in love with Henry. He'd bought a card for him last week and wavered on whether or not he would give it to him today. It was inappropriate for a slave to do such a thing, presumptuous. He shouldn't be putting his own feelings on par with Henry's. He shouldn't, but it seemed possible that Henry wouldn't mind. He didn't know if Henry actually *loved* him, but Henry was very ardent and fond, and he had a romantic temperament. Martin was nearly confident Henry would appreciate the gesture. He tried to tell himself he had nothing to lose by letting Henry know how much he cared for him. At the very least, Henry would be kind. He wouldn't scold Martin for not knowing his place as some of his friends' masters might.

Martin did know his place, even if he didn't exactly keep to it. No one brought up at Ganymede had any illusions about his place in the world. They were, every one of them, descended from careless, slatternly people who couldn't manage themselves, people who'd come begging to the House and had sold themselves or their unwanted children into servitude. They were low people who'd known their place, and that place was in bondage.

From this weak stock, the House bred carefully and intelligently, always cultivating service-minded individuals, boys who were eager to please and took pride in their work. From their earliest days, Ganymede boys understood that their proper, fated place in the world was in the service of a free man. A master would provide for their needs, and in return they would offer their labor, their obedience, their loyalty. Martin had taken the House's lessons to heart. He truly believed there was honor in submission, in adaptability. A person need never be ashamed of honest work.

There was no point in wishing for the rights and responsibilities of a free man; slaves' ancestors eliminated those possibilities for them when they went to the House desperate for salvation. Some boys had difficulty with this precept, but Martin readily accepted that he should always be subordinate, would always answer to a master. He'd always been an ambitious boy, but he'd only wished for things he could actually have, and he'd known that if he worked hard at Ganymede he could reach the top of the slave hierarchy. His goal had always been to become a companion, to be close to a master and perhaps become a trusted friend. A companion could have great power, great importance.

Ganymede was very particular about what sort of boys it would make companions. Not only did companions need to be smart, handsome, talented and obedient, they needed to enthusiastically enjoy or even prefer the company of other males. There had been several beautiful boys in Martin's cohort who were passed over for companion status because they'd shown no inclination for intimacy with other young men, and it had been a shock to come out into the world and realize other Houses weren't so exacting about their candidates. It made him feel that he truly came from a quality place, that he was a quality slave.

He had never asked Henry what he'd expected from his companion, but he felt confident Henry was satisfied with his service. They were very compatible. Henry was easy to serve, and he never voiced any complaints. As for himself, Martin did not think he could possibly be happier. His ideas about his future master had always been unrealistically romantic, and he had been at pains to keep these notions secret while at Ganymede, but even the most fanciful things he'd hoped for had come to pass. He was pampered and indulged and treated like a prince. He wouldn't jump to conclusions, but he felt loved.

He knew what love felt like, because he'd been loved before. At Ganymede, Richard had loved him with immense generosity and tenderness. He did not think there was any way to express to Henry how much Richard had meant to him without Henry feeling threatened. The conversation they'd had about Richard the day after the wedding party had been a nice start, but Martin wasn't sure how much more Henry could tolerate knowing. It was too bad, because Martin wanted to share his stories. He wanted Henry to know everything important about him, and that included his first experience of love.

AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 1896

In his last days as a twelve, Martin was anxious about receiving his training assignment. He and all the other boys in the cohort had been preoccupied with their futures since becoming twelves. Martin wanted only to become a companion, and knew he would be happy with nothing less. Teachers, minders and other boys gave him ample assurance that he was exceptional, but that was no guarantee he'd get the job he wanted. He did well in all the classes, practical and academic, but boys who became butlers did well in classes, too. He was widely acknowledged to be an attractive boy, and this was certainly a point in his favor. It was also advantageous, surely, that he preferred a male partner—or, at least, he preferred the *idea* of a boy, as he had no practical experience beyond kissing to go by. He did know that he felt no interest in women or girls, and he was desperately infatuated with handsome Richard, the boy everyone wanted for a friend.

He'd become specifically aware of Richard when they were tens, almost elevens, though they'd crossed paths in the music room many times before then. Richard had always been a good-looking boy, but time was burnishing his looks into something regal and romantic. He was tall, growing faster than most, but without gawkiness or any failure of grace. He had the sort of coloring Martin found particularly attractive, with golden skin and thick black hair flowing back from his forehead in waves, and there was something solemn in the set of his mouth that made him seem terribly noble. Richard was all the things Martin liked in one talented, self-assured package, and Martin

harbored a deep, swooning crush on this notable boy.

Martin was a popular boy in his own right. He was considered very pretty, and while he hoped he might grow more manly with age, he did appreciate how his face made those around him gallant. Boys were always vying for his attention, arguing over who would sit with him at mealtimes, who would work at his side in the dairy barn, who would hold the ladder while he climbed in the apple orchard.

Around the time Martin began to dream of Richard, a fad for kissing took hold throughout the cohort, and Martin was the frequent target of practice efforts, whether tentative or sloppy, announced in advance or sprung upon him, and he was mostly cooperative with these attempts, but his interest was for the experiment, for learning. His rudimentary romantic feelings were all for perfect Richard, but Richard never tried to kiss him, never even came close.

Martin wasn't shy with anyone else, and was even considered a bit of a flirt. He was an optimistic, happy boy, playful and outgoing and affectionate, and he was well-liked by the other twelves, but he shied away from Richard, avoiding play and conversation as best he could. In Richard's presence, he was tongue-tied, giddy and foolish. It seemed he couldn't be near Richard without embarrassing himself, stumbling over words or rendered speechless. Richard made attempts to talk to him from time to time, and Martin hated that he must seem rude, but his nervous reactions to Richard's friendly efforts were mortifying in the extreme. He was better off admiring Richard from a distance.

He didn't know exactly what his feelings about Richard meant, his embarrassing reticence and uncharacteristic reserve. He looked at Richard's handsome face and wanted to kiss it, but it wasn't like wanting to kiss other boys, which he did on a regular basis without giving it a second thought. This wanting was meaningful and important, but the exact meaning and import were hazy. Other boys were handsome, yet Martin was relaxed in their company, so it wasn't just looks that made Richard different. Somehow, and by some means opaque to Martin, Richard was just special.

Martin wasn't the only twelve who thought highly of Richard. Richard was notable for being admirable without seeming a goody-two-shoes, accomplished without lording it over lesser boys, and handsome without taking his beauty's effect for granted. He was a nice boy, a good boy, mature and humble and kind. He had a quiet sort of charisma, a steady flame, and everyone liked to be around him. He and Martin had many friends in common, and Martin would go preternaturally still, hairs standing up on his skin, whenever one of these boys would mention something Richard had done or said.

Richard was also a musician, principal cellist in the junior orchestra. Sitting in the first chair with his violin, Martin had a good view of Richard and his battered cello. Richard often played with eyes closed and so Martin was able to look at him as much as he liked. He was determined to be professional in the music room, focused on work, but he was always aware of Richard, where he was and what he was doing. After practice, as the boys milled about putting up their instruments and gossiping, Martin did his best to maintain a wary distance between Richard and himself. It was not always possible, however, since Richard was friendly with a great many boys and would frequently join in discussions with Martin's friends. On the few occasions when Richard spoke directly to him, Martin's responses were terse, his eyes anywhere but Richard's face, and he'd bolt as soon as his dignity would allow.

Martin's friend Georgie, a violist, took him aside and asked him if he disliked Richard.

Flushing red, Martin shook his head and insisted, "No, of course not."

"He worries that you do, you know. You're standoffish with him."

Richard was worried? “I-I...” Martin stammered. “It’s not that. He just makes me nervous.” Admitting this was humiliating, but also a relief.

Georgie scoffed at this. “He’s really nice,” he insisted. “Give him a chance.”

Martin had been hopeful after this conversation, determined that if Richard approached him again, he’d muscle through his embarrassment in hopes of forging some connection with the boy he admired. But nothing had happened for weeks and weeks. And finally Richard had smiled at him, but he’d hurriedly looked away, an automatic reaction, his face hot, and he was no better off than he’d been before talking to Georgie. Richard hadn’t approach him again after that, and it wasn’t as though Martin could blame him for not wanting to keep trying. He supposed Richard had given up on him until the Sunday evening before they were given their training assignments.

The junior orchestra played a concert after dinner, the last Martin and Richard and other juniors would play as twelves, and then all the boys were given ice cream. Martin was standing with his empty dish, licking the last of the peppermint off his spoon, when Richard appeared at his elbow, startling him.

Richard cleared his throat. “I think you play really beautifully,” he said in a low voice. “With so much feeling. I’ve always liked that about you.” The very timbre of Richard’s voice was exciting.

“Th-thank you,” Martin said, his voice a little unsteady. His heart pounded against his ribs. “You, too. You play really well.”

“I’ll bet you’ll be concertmaster one day,” Richard told him. “In the senior orchestra, I mean. You’re good enough, I think.”

Martin didn’t know what to say to this beyond, “Thank you.” He was almost nauseous with nervous excitement.

“You’ll make companion tomorrow,” Richard said. “I’m sure of it. I will, too. We should be thinking about who we want to share with.”

“Oh.” Martin hoped with all his might that he’d be a companion, and had done everything he could to achieve that goal, but he hadn’t let himself think as far as a possible sleeping partner. Charlie, maybe, if they both made it. Richard could have whoever he wanted, of course.

“I’ve wanted to be better friends with you,” Richard offered, red-faced and unexpectedly bashful in admitting this. “Would you want to know me better?”

Martin went still with shock. It didn’t seem possible this was happening. Martin’s mouth was dry, his heart thudding. He wanted to shout a fervent *YES!* but only managed, “I-I’d like that.”

Richard took Martin’s spoon from his hand, their fingertips brushing with an electric jolt. “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow,” he’d said. “When they tell us what we’re doing with the rest of our lives.”

“Okay.” Martin felt dazed, everything slightly unreal. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” Did Richard mean they should be together when they got their assignments?

“Find me, all right?” Richard urged. “Or I’ll find you.”

“Okay.” Martin was in a sort of pleasant daze. Were he and Richard friends now? He did want to be friends, but he wanted more than that, too, something even closer. And then it dawned on him: did Richard mean they should be partners?

Richard bent and gallantly kissed Martin's cheek. "Goodnight."

With a helpless whimper, Martin laid his hand over the spot Richard had kissed. He managed a feeble, "Goodnight," in return as Richard walked away with their dirty dishes.

Charlie, who had been hovering nearby, sidled up and put his arm around Martin's shoulders. "Does Richard like you, then? I always thought he did."

"I-I don't know," Martin admitted. The spot where Richard's lips had touched was burning.

"You like *him*, that's obvious," Charlie remarked, and Martin was embarrassed and shrugged out from beneath his arm. "There's nothing wrong with it," Charlie hurried to assure him. "I'm a little jealous, is all."

"Jealous?"

"I've always wanted you to like *me*, stupid," Charlie said. "If you didn't know that, maybe you're too stupid to be a companion after all."

"Ha." Martin shoved him, and he shoved Martin in return, and they kept it up back to the dormitory, where Martin got into bed with his friend Harry, with whom he'd shared a bed since the age of 6, and curled up and went to sleep.

~o0o~

Monday morning, Martin got up before sunrise to milk cows, showered, ate a sleepy breakfast, and sat through lessons until lunchtime. None of the twelves were able to concentrate on their studies, knowing their fates would be decided after lunch. No one could muster any interest in classwork; all of the boys were eager to speculate about their own futures and the futures of their friends.

In the dining hall at the lunch hour, all the twelves were barely contained, eager to be assigned and full of giddy energy. The tens and elevens took the meal with the twelves, and the younger boys shared their friends' excitement. Martin ate with Harry, who felt he was likely to be assigned a footman's role, having neither the intellect nor top looks required of a companion. They sat with David, Charlie and Stuart, who all hoped for companion status. Martin looked surreptitiously around and caught sight of Richard sitting several tables away with Noah, Artie and Terry; if Richard was aware of Martin at all, he didn't show it. Martin felt a pang of jealousy seeing how freely Noah—Richard's current sleeping partner—touched Richard and leaned against him. Surely handsome Noah—a haughty beauty with vivid red hair—would be made a companion and he and Richard would continue to share a bed.

Martin barely tasted his food, wolfing it down as if he could bring on the announcements by finishing early. Instead, he sat dyspeptic and impatient before his empty plate, waiting to be given permission to leave the table. Remembering what Richard had said, he determined that as soon as he was allowed, he would find Richard, for whatever purpose Richard wanted to be found.

At last they were released and allowed to stand up from the table, and the twelves were called to the head of the hall. In the rush and confusion, stampeding boys running in every direction, Martin looked for Richard, his heart in his throat.

"Come on!" Charlie said, gesturing impatiently. "Martin! Let's go!"

Martin whipped his head one way and then the other. He did not see Richard anywhere. He panicked, feeling as if he might cry. He thought that if he didn't find Richard he would miss an opportunity, one that he wouldn't have again.

“There you are.” A hand on his shoulder, his skin tingling at the contact. “I was looking for you.” Martin looked up at Richard’s smile and felt relief break open in his chest, fluid and flush. Richard nudged him and said, “Let’s go up front.”

Martin let Richard lead him through the press of twelves to a spot near the front where they could hear the head administrator, Mr. Taylor, speak. Martin didn’t want to guess why Richard wanted him near, but he thrilled at the closeness. He was so excited he felt he might be sick, his stomach in knots. They stood together, arms just touching. Martin dared to lean just a little closer to Richard, to feel the warmth of his skin through their shirtsleeves.

Mr. Taylor introduced Mr. Jacob and Mr. Elliott, the pair of adult slaves who would be the minders for the new companions-in-training, and then Mr. Jacob read out the names of those who’d been chosen in alphabetical order. Charlie made it. David did not, which was a disappointment. Georgie made it. Martin became more and more convinced that he would not be chosen, that he would be a butler, and he was prepared to be devastated. Mr. Jacob read Leo’s name and he whooped and his friends congratulated him. Mr. Jacob raised his voice to be heard over their noise and called Lloyd’s name. Richard’s hand tightened on Martin’s shoulder.

He leaned close. “You’re next,” he promised, and he was right.

“Martin,” said Mr. Jacob. “Mitchell. Noah. Otto. Paul. Philip. Randolph. Rex. Richard. Samuel.” Mr. Jacob kept reading, but Martin did not hear the rest of the list over the blood pounding in his ears, the overwhelming exhilaration that made him light-headed.

“Congratulations.” Richard spoke the words directly into the curve of Martin’s ear, his breath warm.

“You, too,” Martin offered shyly.

“Do you already have a partner?” Richard asked, eyes searching Martin’s face. “Do you want to share with me?”

Martin inhaled sharply; he had not allowed himself to think seriously of this possibility, and it seemed like something from a dream. The only thing he wanted more than Richard was to become a companion, and to have both things, the boy and the job, seemed unbelievable luck.

“If you already have someone,” Richard said, “tell me now. You’re my first choice, but if you don’t want me, I’ll have to hurry and ask Noah.”

“No!” Martin blurted. “I want you!” Noah would have to make do with someone else.

Richard grinned at him, blushing happily, and Martin smiled shyly back, a flutter in his belly.

Now Mr. Taylor was speaking again, introducing the minders for the new butlers-in-training.

Charlie pushed through the crowd, followed by Stuart. “There you are!” he said to Martin. “Hello, Richard.” Again directing his words to Martin, he asked, “Are you partners, then?”

“Yes.” Martin darted a glance at Richard, who gave him a smile full of reassurance.

“Huh. I always thought it’d be you and me,” Charlie remarked wistfully. “But maybe this will be best.” He shrugged and reached out to touch Martin’s arm a little awkwardly. “I just want you to be happy, Martin.”

Charlie’s confession flustered Martin, who had not realized the seriousness of Charlie’s

attachment. Was he making a mistake choosing Richard over someone who had been a constant and loving friend?

“I’ll go with Stuart, then,” Charlie said, slinging an arm around Stuart’s neck; Stuart did not seem terribly upset to be second choice. “I just had to ask you first.”

Richard nudged him and said, “Let’s move out of the way,” as the new butlers were named and began to press forward. They joined some of the other new companions at the side of the hall, Noah and Georgie, Leo and Sandy. Noah gave Martin a freezing glare.

To Richard, Noah said. “I see you got what you wanted.” He stood with his arms crossed over his chest, judgmental and aggrieved.

“I did,” Richard confirmed. “Don’t be a poor sport, Noah. We’ll still be close, you know that.”

Noah said nothing and sulked while Georgie whispered in his ear, a proprietary arm around his shoulders.

Richard leaned close. “Can I put my arm around you?”

Martin swallowed hard. “Yes,” he said firmly. “Yes, you can.”

Richard put his arm around Martin’s shoulders and drew him close. Martin tried to relax into Richard’s embrace, his breath coming short and his back stiff. They were close enough that Martin could smell Richard’s skin, his essential humanness. He wanted so badly to rub his face against Richard’s shirt, but he looked around and the others were behaving like they were civilized, more or less, and he didn’t want to embarrass either himself or Richard.

Richard leaned down again. “You put your arm around me, too.”

Martin tentatively put his arm around Richard’s waist. Richard was lean and strong and so warm, the heat of his body like a brand against the inside of Martin’s forearm and wrist, under the palm of his hand. He felt so awkward, like he’d never put an arm around a friend, like he’d never leaned against another boy’s body, like he’d never stood beside anyone before. He worried that Richard would notice his discomfort and change his mind, go with Noah instead.

They stood at the side of the room until all the twelves had been assigned their roles and applauded themselves for all their hard work.

Mr. Jacob and Mr. Elliott made their way through the press of boys to their group. Martin had seen them before, though usually at a distance. Mr. Jacob was a very handsome blond man with scarred, ravaged skin. Mr. Elliott was an ungainly dark-haired fellow with a face that appeared made up of mismatched parts.

Mr. Elliott put his hand in the air and called out, “Companions? Over here, please!” and waited, frowning, while the stragglers made their way through the crowd.

There were twenty-four new companions-in-training in total. Martin looked around at their attractive faces and felt proud to be one of their number. He didn’t know every one of the selected boys well, but of course they were all familiar to him, as were all of the twelves.

Mr. Jacob smiled at them and brought his hands together in a single clap. “Well! What a handsome lot you are!” he effused.

Mr. Elliott did not seem quite as impressed with their good looks.

“We’ll expect you at the companion dorm first thing tomorrow after breakfast,” Mr. Elliott told them. “If you don’t have a partner already, try to settle that tonight. If you do have a partner, decide which other pairs you want to share a room with. It will save us all time in the morning.”

“We’ll be making sure you’re settled in your new dorm bright and early, but then we’ll be taking the train into the city with our graduates, so we won’t tolerate dawdlers, all right, boys?” Mr. Jacob cocked his head and waited until all had murmured their agreement.

“The minders for the older boys will keep an eye on you until we return,” Mr. Elliott said.

“It’s unfortunate our first day together is cut short,” Mr. Jacob said, slightly wistful. “But it’s necessary to see our graduates through the auction process. We’ll do the same for you in four years, of course. We’re so proud of our boys this year, aren’t we, Elliott?”

Mr. Elliott made a noncommittal grunt.

“Let’s all introduce ourselves,” Mr. Jacob suggested with another enthusiastic clap. He turned to Paul and asked, “Now, which are you, dear?”

While they all waited their turns to officially meet their minders, Charlie and Stuart kept up a steady line of chatter.

“We should definitely be in the same room,” Charlie said, squeezing Martin’s arm. “Don’t you think?”

“Who else should we get?” Stuart asked, looking around the group. “Richard, who do you want?”

While their friends talked, Martin kept quiet, very aware of Richard’s body, his breathing, the tension of his muscles. His arm was pleasantly heavy across Martin’s shoulders, and he rubbed Martin’s shoulder with an air of absent-minded possessiveness. Martin tightened his arm around Richard’s waist and was thrilled breathless when Richard sighed and leaned into him. He dared to look up at Richard’s face and Richard was smiling down at him.

“Ask Leo,” Richard said. “Let’s get Leo and Sandy.”

When at last it was their turn, Richard took Martin’s hand and they approached their minders together.

“Oh, hello, Richard!” Mr. Jacob said happily, reaching to give him a pat. “We knew we’d be seeing you!” Mr. Jacob narrowed his eyes at Martin as if trying to place him. “And you’re...Martin, dear? Is that right?”

“Yes, Sir.” Martin was not surprised that Mr. Jacob already knew Richard; it did not seem possible to overstress Richard’s importance in the life of the farm and amongst his cohort. It did surprise him that Mr. Jacob knew who *he* was, but he supposed that both he and Mr. Elliott were familiar with the documentary photographs that had been taken of every boy each year of his life. His most recent set were just two months old, taken in his birthday month, and he suspected he looked very much the same now as he had then.

Mr. Jacob smiled at Martin and touched the back of his hand. “You’re quite special, too, aren’t you? I’ve just been reading your file.”

“Oh. Thank you, Sir?”

“Either of you might easily end up top boy,” Mr. Jacob noted.

Mr. Elliott also narrowed his eyes at them, though his manner was assessing, critical. “We have high expectations of the two of you,” he remarked. “See that you work hard and don’t let us down.”

“We won’t, Sir,” Richard promised, giving Martin’s fingers a squeeze.

“No, Sir, we won’t,” Martin parroted, feeling his face grow hot. He worried that his hand was sweating, but he didn’t want to pull it free of Richard’s grasp.

“You needn’t call either of us Sir,” Mr. Jacob told them. “Mr. J and Mr. E will suffice.”

“Thank you, Si—Mr. J,” Richard said.

“You’re both in the band, aren’t you?” Mr. Jacob asked. “You’ll need to get ready for the party, I suppose. We won’t keep you.”

“The party’s no excuse for being late tomorrow morning,” Mr. Elliott pointed out. “We expect boys like you two to set an example for the rest, understand, so be prompt.”

Boys like you two. Martin thrilled at the notion that he might qualify for a category that included the likes of admirable Richard; this day had been full of gratifying surprises. He had worked hard, though, and he had distinguished himself, so perhaps it was deserved that Mr. Jacob and Mr. Elliott thought him exemplary.

“We’ll be on time, Mr. E,” he promised.

“We will, Mr. E,” Richard echoed.

The twelves from the junior orchestra, Martin and Richard included, had been practicing with the senior musicians all week in preparation for playing the sixteens’ farewell party this evening. Including the twelves in the orchestra for the older boys’ celebration meant the sixteens who were musicians would be able to attend their own celebration.

They walked together to the music building, hand in hand. Martin had never before been so aware of the skin of his hand, the sensitivity of his fingertips and the sides of his fingers. Richard’s hand felt cool and dry, relaxed and easy. Martin had the peculiar sensation that his own hand was something newly attached to the end of his arm, and that he had not yet mastered its use. It seemed that he was gripping first too hard, then too slack, and his palm was unpleasantly moist.

Richard did not seem to mind.

“For the longest time, I thought you didn’t like me,” Richard offered shyly. “I’m glad that’s not the case.”

Martin blushed and shook his head. “No,” he agreed. “I’ve always liked you.”

“Oh!” Richard blushed, too. He repeated, “I’m glad.”

At the music building, Richard let go his hand and bent to say, “I’ll be watching you play. You’ll watch me, too, won’t you?”

When Martin looked at Richard’s face, his smile was crooked, worried and hopeful both.

“Y-yes,” he managed. “I’ll watch you, too.” He would have watched anyway, of course; he’d been watching all along.

In the rehearsal room, the twelves took the places of the absent sixteens. Their teacher and

conductor, Mr. Quilling, called for quiet. After everyone had taken their places, the older boys welcomed the twelves with a round of applause, congratulating them on their new assignments before settling in to work on the music. Martin sat next to the senior first chair, a nineteen, a butler-in-training named Lucas, and felt important turning the sheet music for him as they played.

Between pieces, Lucas smiled and said, “You’re actually quite impressive, aren’t you, kid?” He mussed Martin’s hair and gave his shoulder a little shove, brotherly and familiar. “You’re good musicians, all of you.”

Martin blushed at the praise and murmured, “Thank you.”

Lucas angled his bow across the orchestra’s semicircle to point at Richard sitting with his cello. “Is that black-haired fellow your sweetheart?”

Martin’s blush deepened. “Uh...”

“The way you two sneak looks at each other, it’s cute.”

The idea that he and Richard were engaged in a public flirtation was a bit shocking. He’d been certain his interest was circumspect, but apparently the whole orchestra had been aware. It was embarrassing, and his face grew hot, but at the same time he recognized that Lucas had said they were looking at each other—it wasn’t just Martin mooning over an indifferent Richard.

He darted a glance at Richard as he tucked his violin under his chin. Richard lifted his head and met Martin’s eyes and gave him a smile that flooded his body with syrupy heat. Flushed and breathless, Martin hurriedly turned his attention to the sheet music.

He couldn’t seem to stop being embarrassed, but he couldn’t stop looking, either. It was okay to look, though, wasn’t it? Richard liked him, after all. They liked each other. Maybe it didn’t mean what Martin hoped, but they were partners now, with all the obligations of partnership. At the very least, they’d share a bed. Thinking of the six years he’d shared with Harry, he thought he could expect some physical closeness with Richard, cuddling and comfort, and surely they’d whisper together and know each other’s secrets. Would Richard want to kiss him? The idea was so exciting that he couldn’t stay still, squirming on his wooden chair.

“Stop wiggling!” Lucas scolded him in a harsh whisper and kicked his ankle. “Pay attention!”

Martin sat up self-consciously straight, face burning, and hurried to turn the sheet music.

They practiced all afternoon and were given an early dinner, a picnic in the grass. Richard sat at Martin’s side and they ate chicken and potato salad from plates in their laps and had stilted conversations about which foods they liked and disliked. Martin felt nervous and shy, his self-consciousness a constant hum that occasionally rose to a roar in his ears, the tension making him flush and stammer. Watching Richard’s beautiful lips move as he talked and forked food into his mouth left Martin preoccupied with the question of whether or not Richard might ever want to kiss him.

“...not like beans?” Richard was pointing at Martin’s plate with his fork.

Martin jerked with a guilty start. “What? No, I do. I like them. I...was just thinking.” Quickly, he stabbed the beans with his fork and put them in his mouth.

“What about?”

Martin chewed and swallowed, blushing. “Just...just that I’m glad we’re going to be friends.” He

was thrilled with his own boldness. "Like I said, I always did like you."

Now it was Richard's turn to grow flustered. "Oh! I...I'm happy to hear it, really!" He turned to Martin, setting his empty plate aside, and leaned close. "I've always wanted you for a partner. I was quite jealous of Harry!"

Martin, who had never imagined that he stood out to Richard in any particular way, loved the idea that Richard might have been pining for him. "Harry's just my friend," he said, truthfully and perhaps a little dismissively. And then he mustered up all his courage and said, "I think you and I will be different."

Richard's expression was one Martin could not easily interpret. Avid and vulnerable at once, cheeks flushed and eyes bright. "We will," Richard assured him. He raised a hand to tuck Martin's hair behind his ear. "We'll definitely be different."

They sat very still, very aware of one another in every detail, breaths held, and then Mr. Quilling came into the midst of the picnickers and clapped his hands.

"Boys! Plates to the kitchen and get your instruments! Hurry, please!"

Staff and boys from some of the older cohorts had made preparations for the party. There was a huge, sprawling red oak in the yard off the dining hall and this and the surrounding trees had been hung with paper lanterns and crepe paper streamers to create a picturesque canopy. A hodgepodge of tables and chairs were arranged in the freshly-mown grass. Chairs for the musicians were set up in a neat semicircle near the edge of the flat, level ground beneath the oak where the partygoers might dance if they wished.

"I'll warn you, there won't be much dancing," Mr. Quilling told them. "You older boys will remember from prior years."

Looking around at the musicians, the older boys were indeed nodding agreement, some smirking at their memories.

"But music is always nice for a party," Mr. Quilling concluded with a shrug. "I'll expect you all to do your best regardless of whether anyone dances."

They took their places and awaited the party guests.

Only the companions would be leaving in the morning, of course, but the sixteens of every category attended the party. Only companions left the farm as a group; butlers and footmen and the rest would be offered at periodic auctions or private sales as they became ready, and their farewells would be subdued affairs. The companions' party was the first and last event held for the benefit of an entire cohort. It was a special occasion in every sense; it was understood that boys did and said things at the farewell party that they would neither do nor say at other times.

Mr. Quilling had been right. There wasn't much dancing, and what dancing there was turned to embracing in short order. The sixteens were tipsy on spiked punch and drunk on one another, veering and clinging and kissing like it was giving them life. They kissed up against the walls of the buildings, up against the trees, stretched out on the benches and straddling each other on chairs. Minders and staff scolded them when they groped each other too blatantly, when they went for their buttons, but no one stopped them when they left the party in twos and threes and little groups and slunk off to the barns. It was a shocking scene, titillating. It occurred to Martin that this would be him and Richard in four years, full of farewell passion, and it seemed romantic beyond bearing. So much could happen between them in four years!

There was a romantic drama unfolding before them, the outlines bold enough to be read clearly by even the twelves. Sid, a blond favorite with wide grey eyes, was in flattering pursuit of Aaron, a handsome colored coachman who had proven resistant to his charms to this point. Aaron had never been interested in taking his pleasure with other boys, but Sid was begging, hanging from his arm and whispering in his ear, and everyone was watching and waiting to see if Aaron would finally relent.

The musicians were allowed a break and given lemonade, and the older boys spent the time filling the twelves in on the details of the Sid drama. As they watched, Sid insinuated himself onto Aaron's lap, his heated yearning palpable from across the yard.

"Aaron should just do it," said one of the older cellists. "He'll regret it if he doesn't."

"All the sixteens say Sid's as hot as a mink," said another musician. "Not to be missed, if he's offering."

"He's as pretty as a girl anyway. Aaron should just imagine he's a girl and ignore his cock."

"It's not very sporting to ignore a man's cock, though."

Mr. Quilling clapped his hands. "Places, please, boys!"

Near the end of the evening, a frisson of excitement went through the crowd, and Martin glanced up from the sheet music to see Aaron leaving the lantern glow of the party with his arm around Sid's bony shoulders. He was flush with heat at the thought of pretty Sid getting what he'd wanted for so long and so very badly. He was at a similar juncture with Richard, perhaps—the end of wanting—except they were at the beginning of the story rather than the end, and they had years ahead of them.

There was a bonfire, of course, and the sixteens who were leaving on the morrow had brought with them the things they needed to burn, talismans and notes and trinkets. Slaves leaving Ganymede needed to break old ties and be ready for new relationships in the world beyond the farm. Martin couldn't actually see the fire from his seat in the orchestra, but he could see sparks and ash swirling in the air above the flames.

When Mr. Quilling announced the last tune, a few boys paired up to dance, but most sat or sprawled in cozy groups, piled on each other like dogs, affectionate and comfortable. Martin was easy and close with many of the twelves already, and he hoped he'd be that way with Richard soon, very soon. He could picture it so clearly, that someday it would be them lying on blankets beneath the trees with their friends, and they'd have hundreds of good memories to take with them into their lives in the world outside the farm.

After the last waltz, the musicians were allowed ice cream and cake. Again, Richard and Martin sat in the grass with their plates.

"Do you have special plans with Harry?"

The question surprised Martin. "What?"

Richard looked embarrassed. "Oh, nothing. Just, are you doing anything special since it's your last night?"

Martin blinked. He and Harry were friends, and they were very compatible sleepers, but there was nothing but filial affection between them. "No..." he said slowly. "But you and Noah...?"

Richard's blush deepened and he looked away. "Noah's hurt that I didn't pick him."

"He really likes you." This was obvious.

"I like him, too. I just...like you better."

Martin did worry a little that Richard didn't know him well enough to actually prefer him, but he supposed that went both ways, and he certainly felt he preferred Richard above any other based on equally scanty evidence.

"I-I'm glad I'm getting to know you," Martin offered in a shy, hoarse whisper. He cleared his throat self-consciously and spoke up. "I don't know why we weren't friends all along." He did know, though: his feelings toward Richard had been too big, too confusing to cope with. But now he wanted to try to come to terms with these adult-seeming feelings, these complicated emotions.

It was two hours past the usual farm bedtime. Mr. Quilling was impatient to get to his own bed, so he hurried the musicians through their dessert and harried them back to the music building to put away their instruments.

On the walk back from the music building to their dorm, Martin waited for Richard to take his hand, then realized he needn't wait and reached for Richard's hand instead. He fared better with the hand-holding this time around, slightly less-awkward. They didn't talk until they reached the door to the building; Richard's bed was on the upper floor, Martin's at ground.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning." Richard raised a hesitant hand to touch Martin's hair, smoothing it back from his temple.

"At breakfast," Martin agreed. He could feel Richard's warm breath on his face, and it seemed like he could just rise up a little on his toes and they'd be kissing. But he kept his feet on the ground.

"Goodnight. Sleep tight." Richard bent and kissed his cheek, a hurried peck, and stood straight with flushed cheeks.

"Goodnight," Martin echoed.

They crept into the building, mindful of dozens of sleeping boys, and went their separate ways.

After Martin brushed his teeth, he crawled into bed with Harry, who groaned a sleepy complaint and rolled to throw an arm over his chest.

"Nice party?"

"It was fun."

"Good. I'm glad. Goodnight, then."

Martin fell asleep quickly, his dreams full of Richard's warmth, Richard's smell, the press of his hand. Martin felt the mark of Richard's dream kiss first on his cheek and then diffused over all his skin. He woke sighing and rubbing against Harry, who did not appreciate his ardor and shook him roughly awake.

"Save it for your new partner," Harry told him, rolling his eyes.

They hurried through their milking, those who had played at the party yawning even more than usual after their late night. Martin looked for Richard in the showers but did not see him; perhaps

he'd finished his chores early and gone ahead.

On the walk to the dining hall, Charlie came bouncing between Martin and Harry and threw his arms around their shoulders.

“Are you excited? *I'm* excited! Thirteens! With *assignments!*”

“Ow, you're pulling my hair!” Harry complained, shrugging out from beneath Charlie's arm.

“Where's Stuart?” Martin asked.

“He'll catch up.” Charlie seemed unconcerned about Stuart's whereabouts. “I asked Leo, and he and Sandy will definitely room with us.” He turned to Harry. “You made footman, right? Who's your new partner?”

“Walt.” Harry didn't sound terribly excited about this. “I'm used to *you*,” he explained, directing his words to Martin. “It'll be strange with a different boy.”

It would be strange. It most certainly would.

“It's what's best, though,” Martin assured him. “We all need partners who are getting the same training so we can help each other out. You and I wouldn't be able to do that.”

Harry snorted. “Well, yeah. But you won't miss me anyway. You're going to be with someone you *like*.”

Had he really been so obvious? He ducked his head to hide his hot face.

Charlie nudged Harry with his elbow. “Martin doesn't care about me anymore, either, you know. All he cares about is Richard.” Charlie seemed to find the idea amusing, though, and he laughed as he tightened his arm across Martin's shoulders in a friendly hug.

There were running footsteps at their backs.

“Charlie! You didn't wait!” Stuart, out of breath, sounded annoyed.

“I didn't know you wanted me to.” Charlie was unfazed by Stuart's irritation.

The four of them entered the dining hall together and looked for their friends.

Harry peered out over the room. “I guess I should find Walt,” he remarked.

“Oh, there's Richard,” Stuart said, pointing.

“Where?” Martin looked past Stuart's finger to a table full of new thirteens and the back of a head of glossy black hair spilling over broad shoulders. Richard was sitting between Noah and an empty chair, his arm draped across the back with an air of casual ownership.

“He's saved a place for you,” Charlie remarked, “but what about me and Stu?”

“We'll see if we can get some guys to move,” Stuart suggested. “Come on. I'm hungry.”

They made their way through the room to Richard's table. Noah sensed their approach first and gave Martin a withering glare. Richard turned then, and his smile was full of welcome and warmth.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning. May I—?” Martin began hesitantly, putting his hand on the chair back.

“Of course. I saved it for you,” Richard told him, squeezing his fingers. “Sit.” He patted the chair seat, and Martin sat, his face pink with pleasure.

Charlie and Stuart negotiated with Mitch and Ben, who were already seated, arguing that they should sit with the people they’d room with, and ultimately claimed seats across from Martin and Richard.

Richard inclined his head, leaning close. “Did you sleep well?”

Martin blushed again thinking about his dreams. “I did. Did you?”

Richard leaned closer still, his breath warm against Martin’s ear. “I had a hard time falling asleep. I kept thinking about this morning, and—” here he lowered his voice “—and how I’d get to see you again.”

Martin made a little gasp of shocked pleasure as his body tingled with excited heat.

“I think I might like you more than you like me,” Richard remarked, hushed and confidential. “It’s all right, though, because I’m sure I can win you over.”

Martin shook his head, eyes averted, clenching his hands in his lap to hide their trembling. “No, that’s not true. I...I like you a lot.”

“You promise?” Richard gave him a very fond smile, a hint of teasing, an eyebrow cocked.

Martin’s heart was pounding when he said, “I promise.”

They lined up for their food and returned to the table with their plates. Martin relaxed a little as he ate and considered the other boys seated at the table. Charlie and Stuart had been his friends all their lives. Leo and Sandy, the other boys who’d be sharing their room, were not well-known to him, but he did know they’d always shared a bed and were especially close. Although Martin had thought the arrangements quite settled, Noah seemed to be negotiating with Richard to share the room, but Richard kept shaking his head firmly to the negative. Georgie, who’d be sharing with Noah wherever they ended up, was Martin’s friend from orchestra. He was, in Martin’s opinion, the second-handsomest boy in their cohort, and he was fond of kissing and very well-practiced.

At the end of the meal, minders made their way through the room to greet their new charges. Mr. Jacob and Mr. Elliott made stops at three other tables before getting to theirs.

“Good morning, thirteens!” Mr. Jacob said cheerfully. “And congratulations again on your achievement. We know how hard you’ve worked to get to this point.”

“I trust you’ve all chosen partners,” Mr. Elliott said. “And I hope you’ve settled on which pairs you’ll room with, as well. We don’t have time for a lot of to-and-fro this morning.”

“We’re settled, Mr. E,” Richard said, ignoring the glare Noah shot his way.

“We’ll all go to the dormitory, then, and get you boys situated,” Mr. Jacob said with a brisk clap of his hands. “Let’s be efficient about it, please.”

They gathered outside the dining hall and followed their minders to their new home. None of them had had cause to be inside the companion dormitory before. Like everything at Ganymede, it was unadorned and showed signs of hard wear, but it had been built sturdy to begin with and could

withstand the abuse. The common room was large enough to hold a hundred boys, although it would be a tight fit.

“We’ll be on the third floor,” Mr. Jacob said. “We get the best light and have the best views, so that’s lucky. The fourteens are up there with us, and they’re lovely boys. We’ll go upstairs in a few minutes, but first we’ll show you the washroom. There are toilets on every floor, but you’ll shower down here.”

“This way,” said Mr. Elliot, gesturing briskly at them to follow. “Just down this hall, boys. Come along.”

They were shown the washroom, where to get towels, and where to put them when they were wet, and then they were led up to the third floor.

It was different from the dormitories they’d grown up sleeping in. Those were vast rooms with dozens of beds in rows and very little privacy. Here, their beds were arranged three to a good-sized room and they had more privacy than any other boys would have.

“You’ll want that privacy when you’re older,” Mr. Jacob said blithely.

Their rooms were at the west end of the building. Mr. Jacob suggested they choose their rooms, but Mr. Elliott shook his head firmly, citing time, and quickly assigned the rooms instead. Martin, Richard and the others would be in the northwest corner.

“You’ll need to go back to your old dorm and collect your possessions,” Mr. Jacob told them. “But hurry, please. We still have to introduce you to the minders for the other cohorts before we leave.”

Back at their old dorm, the beds had been stripped to ready them for the incoming sixes. Martin crouched down and retrieved his box from beneath the bed. Harry’s was already gone. Every Ganymede boy had been given a similar sturdy wooden box upon becoming a six. When you became a six, it was the beginning of responsibility and obligation—to yourself, your cohort, and your House. As a six, you entered into the practice of Hetaeria in a thoughtful way, and in order to do that you needed a place to keep the talismans your friends would give you.

Martin’s box was crammed full of talismans and treasures—feathers, snail shells, painted rocks and whittled sticks. In addition to his box, he had a few items of clothing, but like everyone else, he wore whatever was handy that fit, and he wasn’t particular about whose it might be. Martin had few other possessions: the boots on his feet, a case for his glasses, a toothbrush.

Holding his few belongings in a precarious stack, he stood looking at the bed where he’d slept for six years and tried to muster up some feeling about it, but it was just a bed, after all, and he’d see Harry every day.

Martin’s new roommates were waiting for him outside. Richard’s smile made him feel hot and breathless.

“Dawdler,” Charlie said fondly, nudging him with an elbow. “Can we go, please?”

In their new room, Stuart asked, “Who wants which bed?” and was answered with shrugs.

“This one’s fine,” Leo said, collapsing bonelessly back on the bed nearest the door. “Is this okay with you, Sandy?”

“Wherever you are is good,” Sandy said, flopping down beside him.

Stuart wanted the bed in the corner that had windows to the north and west and neither Martin nor Richard had any objections. The third bed was against the interior wall, next to the dresser, with a window to the west.

“Which side do you sleep on?” Richard asked, and Martin was flush with heat again with the knowledge that he’d be sleeping in the same bed as Richard from now on. When Martin didn’t answer right away, Richard said, “You can have the window if you want. I’m used to sleeping on this side anyway.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Martin took his box around the foot of the bed and knelt to push it beneath the pillow end on what was now his side.

When he stood, Charlie and Stuart were on their backs, booted feet hanging off the edges of their bed, cheerfully complaining about the flatness of their pillows. Leo and Sandy were wrapped around each other in the center of their bed, speaking in tender whispers. Richard stood at the other side of the bed looking at him with a crooked, worried smile.

“Are you sure you’re all right with me?” he asked. “You don’t really know me—”

Martin shook his head firmly. “I’ll get to know you,” he insisted. Bravely, he said, “I-I think we’re going to have fun.”

Richard beamed at him. “Come around and sit,” he suggested, perching on the edge of the bed. When Martin did so, Richard took his hand. “I’ve only ever wanted to be a companion,” he said. “I think you’re the same.”

Martin nodded. He worried that his hand was sweaty, but he didn’t want to pull away.

“What Mr. Jacob said, about being top boy...let’s make sure that it’s one of us, all right? We’ll always do our best. If it’s you on top, I won’t mind so much being in second place.”

Martin was less confident of his own abilities than Richard seemed to be, but certainly Richard would do very well. Still, Martin would try. “We’ll do our best,” he agreed.

Mr. Elliott put in his head at the door. “Good, you’ve sorted out beds, I see. Come down to the common room, please, and be quick about it.”

Downstairs, they were introduced to the minders for the new fourteens, fifteens and sixteens. A few of the old sixteens, who were confusingly not referred to as seventeens despite the rest of their cohort aging up, sprawled on the common room couches and eyed the newcomers with friendly amusement. Pretty blond Sid was lying across the lap of a golden-skinned, tawny-haired friend and wore a dreamy, satisfied expression.

“Because of Aaron,” Richard murmured, and Martin was sure he was right.

Mr. Jacob and Mr. Elliott explained their new roles to them. Now that they were companions, they’d do little farm work. Their time would be taken up with schoolwork, the cultivation of various skills, and learning the running of grand houses. They’d learn how to choose slaves, horses, suiting fabrics and artwork. Every one of them knew already how to make a bed and set a table, but now they’d learn to supervise others’ work. They’d learn to be present in every aspect of a master’s life while allowing him to feel he had complete privacy.

“But first we’ll test your physical aptitudes,” Mr. Jacob said cheerfully. “You’ll all meet with the athletic coaches and they’ll put you through your paces and make suggestions. Think about what you might enjoy doing, though, and we’ll try to take that into account.”

They'd all be working on refining their performance on horseback. They'd continue to ride bicycles and swim. They might learn fencing or archery. There were newish pursuits on offer, tennis and golf, which were proving popular with the leisure class. They'd take turns leading and following in popular dances. They'd learn billiards, card games and parlor games. They'd likely be better-versed in leisure than their young masters in hopes that they might keep those young men adequately entertained.

Rex, one of the prettiest boys, with big blue eyes and soft brown curls, raised his hand. "Mr. J?"

"Yes, dear?"

"What about...what about *sex*?" Rex flushed a furious red as soon as the words left his mouth.

Mr. Jacob smiled. "Oh, don't worry about that! I know some of you are a little nervous," he said, his tone reassuring, "but you needn't be concerned with sex just yet. You're only boys now. There'll be no expectations until you're sixteens."

"It's not as though it's hard to learn, after all," Mr. Elliott said dismissively. "It doesn't take years of practice, not like riding or languages."

A great deal of tension seemed to have left the room, and the mood of the crowd was more relaxed. Richard squeezed Martin's hand and Martin dared to squeeze back, but wasn't sure what they were meant to be saying to each other with this contact. He did know he hoped for some kind of sex with Richard someday, just maybe not *this* day.

With the topic of sex introduced, they were reminded of the rule they'd known their whole lives, that forcing another boy was punishable, and any boy proven to have forced another would be whipped and banished to Atlas, their brother House that raised labor slaves, with the promise of a much harsher future than he would have enjoyed otherwise. Labor slaves weren't educated and their aptitudes weren't developed. Labor slaves would never live in grand houses or be close to high-status people. Everything in their lives—clothing, food, manners—was rough and crude. It was said labor Houses didn't have rules against forced sex, and a soft Ganymede boy would be fresh meat in the Atlas barracks. No boy wanted to be exiled to Atlas. Consequently, the rules against rape were rarely broken.

With the delivery of this sobering reminder, Mr. Jacob and Mr. Elliott said their goodbyes, and the new thirteens were sent as a group to the gymnasium to meet with the athletic coaches.

Martin and the others spent the morning running, jumping, climbing, throwing and lunging. Coaches questioned him about his eyesight, the necessity for glasses, and the accuracy of his throwing and catching. There was a prolonged discussion of his left-handedness and whether it was a positive trait, a negative, or neither. The questions and the displeased expressions left him feeling persecuted, but when they ranked all the boys on a chalkboard at lunchtime, he was fifth out of twenty-four. Richard was second.

They were all ravenous at lunch, wolfing down their food without much talk. They all looked disheveled, slightly sticky. Martin very much wanted to wash, but he and the other musicians were expected at the music building after lunch so that they might find places in the senior orchestra.

Mr. Quilling frowned. "You're all quite grubby today," he said in mild complaint. He put Martin in with the first violins, but at the back of the section. Lucas, the first chair, gave him a smile as he passed. Martin could no longer see Richard from his seat. In addition to playing, he would be turning sheet music for Caleb, an eighteen and a footman, who was not thrilled to have Martin in the chair beside him.

However, by the end of practice, Caleb had warmed to him somewhat. “You’re a good player,” he noted. “And you’re prompt with the pages. Keep it up and we’ll get along all right.” He called, “Wait up!” to his friends and strode off, leaving Martin to let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. He didn’t need Caleb to be his friend, he supposed, but he did want the older boy to like him a little.

Richard was waiting for him at the door, along with Georgie, Lloyd and Jerome. “It’s strange not being able to see you while I play,” Richard remarked. “We’ll both have to work our way back up front, I guess.”

They had some time to themselves before the senior dinner hour and made their leisurely way back to the companion dorm. The common room was full of boys, many of them curious to meet the new residents. Richard knew quite a few of the older boys and introduced Martin around. Some of the new thirteens wanted to play poker, but Martin wanted a shower.

“I’ll go, too,” Richard suggested, but Martin shook his head vehemently.

“No, please, that’s all right. I’ll go by myself.”

“Oh.” Richard seemed a little hurt. “I’ll have my turn when you’re done, then.”

There were six other boys in the shower room already, but Martin was not bothered by their presence. It wasn’t so much that he wanted to be *alone*. In the past, he’d showered often with Harry, and they’d washed each other’s backs, but the idea of bathing with Richard filled him with panic. He’d seen beautiful Richard naked in passing in the mornings, of course, but that was different than Richard up close, Richard touching his skin. He shivered under the spray at the thought.

When he returned to the common room, still flushed from the heat of the water, Richard made room for him on the couch, seeming very happy to see him.

“You’re all pink,” he said, his own cheeks pinking as he spoke. He ducked his head, mouth close to Martin’s ear, and said, “You’re very handsome. Well, very pretty, actually, if it’s all right to say so.”

“It’s all right,” Martin managed, not daring to look at Richard’s face.

“I should take my turn, I guess. Save my seat.” He gave Martin’s shoulder a squeeze and headed for the washroom.

While Richard was gone, Martin was dealt into the poker game. There was an awkward moment when sweet, dimwitted Rex asked Noah why he and Richard weren’t still partners.

After a long, uncomfortable silence, Noah sneered and turned his nose up at the idea of Richard. “I *much* prefer Georgie,” he said, in a tone that brooked no argument, and no boy dared challenge his assertion.

By the time Richard returned with dewy skin, smelling of soap, everyone was involved in speculation about group rankings, who’d be Superior, Choice or Standard in four years when they went up for sale.

“Richard will be top boy,” Sandy remarked as Richard took his place beside Martin, and this statement went unchallenged: they all thought Richard was best.

“It could be Martin,” Richard said. “It could be a lot of people.” He sat so that his hip and thigh

pressed against Martin's.

Some of the boys scoffed at this, dismissive of Richard's modesty.

"Well, it won't be *me*," Rex said, and everyone laughed. Rex was beautiful, with a face to inspire poetry, and he was charming and likeable, but he did poorly in school and was easily confused. He stood out—the others were all book-smart and talented. It had been a little surprising to hear Rex's name called at the assembly, but there were apparently masters who wanted a boy like Rex, a pet to spoil rather than a companion to depend upon. Really, though, if it were possible, Martin thought he'd like a master who'd do both.

They went in a straggling group to the dining hall for their assigned dinner hour with the senior boys. They'd been the oldest boys at junior dinner, and it was peculiar to be the babies again. The older boys gave them a round of applause to welcome them and then promptly ignored them.

During dinner, Martin began to allow himself to get used to being at Richard's side, began to relax in his presence, but then he thought about bedtime and grew tense again. If Richard noticed his distress, he gave no indication.

After the meal, they returned to the dormitory to play cards and fool around, arm wrestling and testing their strength. Minders for the older boys came and looked in on them, making sure things weren't getting out of hand. A few of the fourteens joined in the roughhousing but the fifteens and sixteens kept their distance, making it clear they considered these new thirteens mere babies and beneath notice.

At last the minders shooed them upstairs and they took turns at the sinks brushing their teeth. Despite his nervous stomach, Martin could contrive no reason to linger in the bathroom. The walk down the hall seemed very long.

Because it was hot, all the windows were open in hopes of catching a breeze. When the weather was warm, boys usually slept naked and thought nothing of it. Charlie and Stuart were naked, sprawling across their bed, shoving each other and laughing at some private joke. Leo and Sandy, also naked, were being embarrassingly lovey-dovey, and Martin quickly averted his eyes. Richard, dressed, was sitting on the edge of their bed, looking down at his hands in his lap. He lifted his gaze and smiled.

"Hi."

"Hi." Martin opened his dresser drawer and pulled out a pair of pajama pants. He crossed to his own side of the bed and busied himself removing his hair tie and folding his glasses to set them on the nightstand. As he hurried out of his clothes, he was aware of Richard opening a drawer; without so much as a glance in Richard's direction, he jerked on his pajama pants and ducked beneath the sheet. He lay flat on his back, full of tension, staring at the ceiling with his hands in fists. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Richard undress methodically, calmly, and pull on his own pajamas before slipping into the bed at his side. It was far too hot for pajamas. The mattress moved under Martin's back as Richard shifted position. Martin was afraid to look at him. Richard reached for his hand and squeezed his wrist, then interlaced their fingers as Martin slowly let his hand relax open.

In a low voice, Richard asked, "Do you want to sleep together or apart?"

When Martin didn't answer right away, Richard asked, "With Harry, what did you do? Did you curl up together, or did you keep your distance?"

“Together,” Martin admitted hoarsely.

“Do you want to come closer to me? Or I could move closer to you.”

Martin swallowed hard. “Come closer.” He rolled onto his side to meet Richard, their knees bumping. Richard put a hand on his shoulder and Martin started at the contact, embarrassed by his nerves.

Richard said, “I’d really like to kiss you.” He touched Martin’s cheek, stroked the side of his face. “I’ve wanted to kiss you for a long time.”

Martin’s voice was mostly breath. “Okay.” He began to shiver.

Richard moved closer still, his hand on Martin’s cheek. His breath was warm against Martin’s lips; their noses bumped and Richard gave a low laugh.

With the press of Richard’s lips against his own, Martin turned to liquid, honeyed and helpless. He gasped and clutched at Richard’s arm, and Richard took that as invitation to embrace him and draw him close. They fit themselves to each other, finding places for all their limbs as they kissed again and again. Martin had kissed friends before, many times, but it was as if these were the first kisses he’d ever really felt, and they took his breath away.

For that first night and a long time thereafter, they did nothing more than touch and kiss, and it was enough, and it was bliss.

FEBRUARY-MARCH 1899

The year they were fifteens, Martin made Richard a valentine, a red paper heart. He’d been a little secretive about it because Mr. Jacob and Mr. Elliott had threatened to forbid any exchange of tokens for the holiday. When the boys complained that *other* fifteens were allowed valentines, they were reminded that companions were different, with different claims against their persons. A decent master wouldn’t have the expectation that his butler be sexually accommodating, but he certainly would expect his companion to be available to him whenever and however he pleased. How much better it would be for the companion to go to his master willing and eager rather than pining for some friend of his youth. Mr. Jacob suggested they be lighthearted and playful now, not take each other seriously, and save their devotion for the master they’d be meeting next fall.

None of them listened, of course.

Martin decorated his paper heart with blue flowers, forget-me-nots, which were easier to paint than the red rose he would have liked to offer. He could do tidy work, but he was not artistically talented by any estimation. He viewed his creation with a critical eye, and hoped Richard would take the gift in the spirit intended.

They found a moment of privacy in the hour between lessons and dinner, just the two of them in their shared room. Richard was delighted with the valentine, seeming quite unaware of its aesthetic shortcomings, and Richard had something for Martin, too, a love letter.

In this wonderful letter, Richard laid himself at Martin’s feet. His words were offered with ferocity and zeal, touched with poetry. He wrote,

Dear Martin,

On selection day, when you agreed to be my partner, you made me the happiest I’d ever been. I was like a blushing bridegroom and could scarcely believe my good fortune. I feared at any

moment you would change your mind and go running to Charlie, but then you kissed me and I knew you were as much mine as I was yours. How I treasure the memory of that kiss!

I have so many good memories shared with you, so many firsts and important moments. No one has ever been so special to me. I love my friends, but what I feel for you goes far beyond what I've ever felt for any other boy. No matter where fate takes us, a part of me will always belong with you. When we're grown and sold, another man will command my body and claim my hours, but you'll forever be the master of my heart and soul. I will never forget you, Martin, and I beg you never to forget me.

What I will remember: Your gentleness, your playful intelligence, your kindness. Your mouth that is so clever in every way. Your passionate violin. Your smell of vetiver (when everyone else smells of lavender). Your serious expressions in private moments, when I feel sure you are memorizing me, and I feel so in love I could die.

Sometimes my feelings are so strong it hurts to be with you, but I want the pain if it means being by your side.

You know I wish I could be with you always, but we'll make the most of this next year, and we'll take away memories enough to last our lifetimes. Most days I'm sure that no one will ever love you as much as I do, but that's what I want for you: a master who'll love you more than he should, a master who'll see your worth and treasure you.

I know you'll find another slave (some dark, handsome fellow, I'm sure) who'll love you wholeheartedly in my place. I never want you to be lonely—I want you always to be loved—but selfishly I want you to miss me, too, and some late night when you're in his arms, I want you to remember what we had, and that it was incredibly, miraculously special.

My apologies if this seems premature, my mood a touch too melancholy for a loving holiday. I suspect I'll write you another version of this letter next year when we're sixteens, and the auction feels still more imminent, and we're at the official end of our youth. But I love you now, and I want you to understand how much so that you will rely on that love and depend upon me, and move through your days in confidence, knowing that you're valued and treasured, admired and utterly beloved.

With all my love, madly and truly,

Richard

Richard had terrible penmanship—his singular flaw—and it took Martin a good while to decipher his words, a stretch of time Richard spent nervously pacing the corridor outside their room awaiting his reaction.

By the time Martin finished reading, he was near tears, though he wasn't sure whether they were from happiness or dismay. It was intolerable that he'd ever be parted from Richard, tragically unfair when they loved each other so much, so purely, and with such strength. He got up from his perch on the edge of the bed, wiping at his eyes with the backs of his hands, and resolved that if he was going to cry, he'd let it be from happiness.

“Richard? Richard, I've read it!”

Richard met him at the doorway, and Martin went eagerly into his arms and they kissed and clung.

“Was it all right?” Richard asked. “Is it all right I said those things to you?” They'd said they loved

one another before, but it seemed so much more serious seeing it written down.

“It’s wonderful,” Martin assured him. He hugged Richard tight, mouth close to his ear, and said, “You know I love you, too.”

“Promise me,” Richard said, slightly breathless from kissing. “Promise you’ll burn it when we go to auction, please? Say you won’t pass it along.”

Martin had love notes older boys had passed down to him, notes they couldn’t bear to destroy, and so did all the other fifteens...but eventually they’d all be burned anyway. And really, it was better that Richard’s special words go up in smoke than go from hand to hand, getting grubbier with each new owner, the creases in the paper worn fuzzy and the ink fading.

“I promise.”

“Please don’t let Charlie read it,” Richard said, a hint of begging. “I know he’ll want to, but...”

“No, I won’t. You meant it just for me,” Martin reassured him, reaching to tuck his hair behind his ear. He laughed. “Besides, he’d never be able to read your handwriting.”

They kissed for a bit, but then Richard broke away to ask, “Will you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Remember me?” He seemed quite concerned about Martin’s answer.

Martin scoffed at this, but fondly. “Of course I will. How could I not? But let’s not think about that yet, all right? We have more than a year before we go to auction—lots of time to make memories.”

Now, as fifteens, however, there was a sense of time growing short; time in which they must begin to impress people. Beginning last year when they were fourteens, Martin had begun to seriously challenge Richard for the position of top boy. His already-good grades improved and he excelled in practical lessons. He became fencing champion for the thirteens and fourteens. His skills as a musician were second to none. He had good manners, was diplomatic and thoughtful, and was well-liked by many boys, not just the boys of his own cohort, but boys of all ages. He had an excellent work ethic and a positive attitude. Additionally, though it was never specifically mentioned by the adults, Martin’s decided preference for a submissive role in intimate matters put him at an advantage over many of the others, as this would be attractive to all prospective masters.

Richard was very smart, very skilled, and he was greatly admired, but he was no longer considered the only choice for top boy by the rest of the cohort and their minders. Richard was no less kind and confident than he’d always been, and he was still an exemplary candidate, but there was real competition now, and his superiority over all was no longer a given.

There were aesthetics to consider, as well. Richard’s looks were exactly what Martin liked, but there were a preponderance of dark-haired boys in their group, and it was felt this might make Richard seem ordinary, run-of-the-mill. Martin’s coloring was quite unique, not just amongst the companions, but all the fifteens, and even the Ganymede stock as a whole. While Martin was not technically a redhead, his hair was definitely *reddish*, and handsome ginger boys always garnered attention at auction. It was felt he would likely be a stand-out amongst the offerings from all Houses on auction day.

Of course, there were other boys who were contenders. Stuart often beat out Martin and Richard both at academics, and he was blond besides. Leo was the best sportsman, being the top-ranked tennis player, archer and horseman of their group. Charlie had a particular knack for household

management. Georgie was good at most things and a charming flirt.

Martin loved to compete. He did want to be top boy, but if he lost to anyone, he hoped it would be to Richard and not Stuart or one of the others. They were ranked on most disciplines every week, and he cared a great deal about his standing. When he fell short, he worked harder, and even jaded Mr. Elliott was impressed with his effort.

Over the weeks following Valentine's Day, the rivalries were especially fierce, albeit good-humored. Martin loved his friends, and it wasn't that he wanted them to fail, but rather that he wanted to excel. There was a week when Martin was top overall in every category, an unprecedented event, and he basked in the admiration of his cohort, flush with triumph. It didn't last, of course, but no one else had ever had a perfect week, and he was very proud of himself.

Knowing he had Richard's regard had always been an enormous boost to his confidence, and his confidence was increased even further after the offering of the letter. They were busy with school and lessons, but they showed each other love at every opportunity and life seemed especially romantic. They had a very satisfying month overall following the holiday, but then on March 10th Richard took ill. Martin didn't suppose it was serious—no one did—and left him abed with blithe reassurances he'd feel well in no time. But by the time Martin returned from his fencing lesson, Richard had been taken away to the infirmary.

March 19th was a Sunday, and Martin sat slumped on a bench with the others at the mandatory Christian service, though giving the sermon little attention. He was distracted by thoughts of the violin piece he'd been working on, as well as his worries about Richard, who had been in the infirmary for a very long time without any word as to his condition. Martin and some of the others had petitioned for the opportunity to see him in order to boost his morale, but Mr. Elliott had scolded them, pointing out that they all knew better. The House had to do everything possible to keep them well and protect its investment, and sending healthy boys to lounge about in a sickroom would not achieve that goal.

A great many boys had fallen sick since Richard succumbed, some of them seriously ill, and there had been some debate about whether or not Sunday services should be held for fear of spreading disease, but it had ultimately been deemed worth the risk. Martin's belief was nominal, but some of the boys took church seriously and were glad to attend and pray for their ailing comrades.

After the service, they made their way back to the dormitory. Charlie whispered in Martin's ear about certain things he'd like to do before lunch, and Martin was amenable, although the thought of intimacy with any of the others just made him miss Richard all the more. The things that were fun done with anyone were more meaningful done with Richard.

Mr. Elliott and Mr. Jacob had not been at the service, but adults often skipped to attend to farm business, so no one had paid their absence any mind. However, the minders were waiting in the common room when the boys walked in, both looking very somber.

"Boys," Mr. Jacob said. "Boys, sit down, please. We have some bad news for you all."

They arranged themselves on the couches, murmuring amongst themselves. Charlie sat at Martin's left hand, Georgie on his right.

"You all know our Richard had been ill," Mr. Jacob said.

"Very ill," put in Mr. Elliott.

Despite his concern for his sick friend, it hadn't occurred to Martin that the bad news could have

anything to do with Richard at all, so it was startling to hear his name.

“He wasn’t getting better, so the House brought a doctor up from the city to look after him,” Mr. Jacob continued. “No expense was spared.”

Was Richard being taken to the city to be tended to by specialists? That had happened with sick boys in the past. The House took good care of its stock. Martin hoped fervently he would get a chance to see him before he left.

“But this morning—” Mr. Jacob stopped himself mid-sentence. He looked down at his hands. “This morning.” His hands were shaking. He turned to Mr. Elliott. “I-I’m sorry,” he said. “Elliott, will you...?”

Mr. Elliott cleared his throat and patted Mr. Jacob’s arm, then squeezed his hand until their knuckles were white. “I’m so sorry, boys. Our Richard died this morning.”

No. Impossible.

The air was suddenly full of voices protesting, refusing. After a horrible moment of silent disbelief, Martin let out a desolate howl and broke into tears. He hunched in on himself, torn open, with a raw and tattered heart. It couldn’t be true. He knew, he’d always known, that he’d have to be parted from Richard one day, but they still had another year! A whole year! They were *owed* it! They *deserved* it! All around him boys were reaching for him, patting and stroking and offering comfort. Charlie and Georgie each threw a protective arm around him and tended him solicitously in his grief. Others were crying, too; Richard had been beloved.

Mr. Jacob came and crouched down before Martin, laying a hand against his wet cheek. “You poor thing,” Mr. Jacob said. “You were so fond of one another.”

Martin opened his mouth to speak, but it took effort to form the words, his voice wavering and poorly-modulated. “I-I don’t believe it,” he said, not convincing even himself. “It’s not true, Mr. J.”

“I’m sorry, Martin. I’m so sorry.”

Martin shook his head, denying. “But I didn’t say goodbye. I didn’t get to say goodbye.” It seemed impossible that Richard could be dead without some last words for Martin, a last kiss. His death would have to be revoked somehow, if only long enough that they might say their farewells. “I...I have to see him, Mr. J. *Please* may I see him?”

Mr. Jacob waved Charlie aside and took his place at Martin’s hip. He put his arm around Martin’s back and gave him a squeeze. “You poor, dear boy. You know we can’t risk you catching ill, too.”

“*Please*.” Martin clutched at Mr. Jacob’s sleeve. “Please let me say goodbye, Mr. J, I’m *begging* you!”

Mr. Jacob hugged Martin closer and kissed the side of his head. “Shh. It’s not up to me, darling. Besides, he’s already gone, he’s been taken away.”

“No...please, *please*...”

“Shh. It’s for the best, Martin. We’ll have a ceremony for him, all right? You can say all the things you loved most about him. You can remember him that way.”

Noah staggered over, blind with tears, and went down on his knees before Mr. Jacob, who drew

him close and petted his hair. Noah had shared a bed with Richard all those years when they were little, and Noah had always hated that Richard had chosen Martin for a partner instead of him, but if anyone understood what Martin was going through, it was Noah.

Noah, kneeling between Mr. Jacob's feet, leaned in to wrap his arms tightly around Mr. Jacob's waist and pressed his face against his waistcoat. He made terrible pained noises while he cried, and Martin ached to hear his anguish.

"Noah." He slid off the couch to the floor. "Noah." He shook Noah's shoulder.

Noah looked at him, full of uncomprehending misery, his handsome face red and raw.

"Noah, *please*." He held his arms open, begging.

Noah looked at him through narrowed eyes, considering their history of mutual mistrust and dislike, but then he nudged past Mr. Jacob's knee and came into Martin's embrace.

Martin wasn't sure how they ended up upstairs, fully-dressed, on top of the bed he'd shared with Richard, with Charlie at his back and Georgie curled around Noah. Most of the companions of their cohort and a few of the older boys were crammed into the room, piled on the beds. There were tearful faces all around, sniffles and sighs, boys offering one another comfort. Richard had been one of the best of them, and no one had expected him to die.

"He loved you," Noah said. "I know he loved you best." He put his hand against Martin's cheek, gazed seriously into his eyes. "But he loved me, too."

Martin sniffed wetly. "He did," he agreed. What was the harm in admitting it now? There was nothing to fight over anymore.

"When we're being nice to each other, like we are now, I can pretend I know what he felt when he was close to you."

This idea startled Martin, but he wouldn't begrudge Noah whatever gave him comfort, and it was a relief to have Noah treating him tenderly. He reached for Noah, willing to try anything to relieve this gnawing ache of loss. He put aside how nasty Noah had been to him, how petty. Richard had found so much to love about Noah. Richard had held Noah like this. Richard had touched his skin and hair and had loved to do it. Tightening his hold around Noah's shoulders, he imagined that this, Noah's sleek body fitted to his own, was just what Richard had felt, and he closed his eyes and made the effort to appreciate it.

The rest of the day was a blur, every experience smeared with confusion and pain. Food tasted like nothing, like wax, but everyone insisted that he eat it. People told him how sorry they were, and he tried to feel that it mattered. He let people hug and pet him, and it seemed to make them feel better to do it, but the pain of losing Richard had hollowed him out and he wasn't sure he felt anything at all.

Martin wondered if Richard had been frightened, if he'd been lonely. Martin had never been taken to the infirmary himself, but boys who'd been hadn't liked it at all. You felt terrible already, and then you were in a bed by yourself, all alone, with no one to talk to and no idea what was happening. Martin hoped Richard had been too sick to know he was alone. Richard liked to talk in bed, heads close on the pillow in the velvet dark. He'd liked to touch, claiming and soothing, his fingers smoothing Martin's hair against the curve of his skull and around his ear, his fingertips tracing the shape of Martin's lips. Whispering in the dark, Richard's breath on his cheek, there were times when everything they said seemed like a magical secret, even the ordinary things, the

things that weren't secrets at all.

That night, Martin clung to Richard's pillow, but it didn't smell of him. He could have been wetting anyone's pillow with his tears. The sheets had been changed twice since Richard had been taken to the infirmary and there was no hint of him remaining. Charlie and Stuart invited Martin to share their bed, but he declined the offer, thinking it preferable, more fitting, to sink into solitary misery. He wasn't left alone, though; Georgie and Noah came from their room next door and got into bed with him without asking whether or not he wanted them to do it, and he found he welcomed the company after all.

Georgie was Martin's favorite after Richard, and surely he knew it, and so did Noah. Now that Richard was gone Martin feared that Noah would do his best to keep Georgie to himself.

Georgie lay in the middle, an arm around each of them. He inclined his head to kiss Martin's forehead and said, "I'll stay with you as long as you want."

Martin liked this idea, but doubted he could have Georgie so easily. "What about Noah?"

"Can't he stay, too?" Georgie asked. "You don't need to keep fighting over Richard, do you?"

"Now we'll be fighting over you," Martin complained, aggrieved.

Noah sat up and leaned across Georgie's body. "Don't talk about me like I'm not here."

"Neither one of you talk," Georgie said, annoyed. "Richard hated it when you fought, and I don't like it any better." He pulled on Noah's arm. "Lie down and be good."

"Don't tell me what to do," Noah muttered, but he did as he'd been told.

Martin's grief crested and ebbed and crested again. He cried mostly quietly, soaking the front of Georgie's pajama shirt. At one point, Noah clutched his hand and they cried in solidarity while Georgie stroked their hair. The feeling of loss gnawed at him, wore him down, and he fell into an exhausted sleep still crying.

When he woke, he felt sore, beaten. The skin over his cheekbones had been burned raw by the salt in his tears and his eyes were swollen. Georgie and Noah were gone. There were other boys in the room, blurry forms. Mr. Jacob was sitting on the edge of the bed at his hip, offering him a sad smile. His eyes were red, the lines of his face tense. He held Martin's hand and squeezed his fingers.

Martin looked at him impassively. If Mr. Jacob had something to say, he'd say it. Martin felt so bad, so miserable; he thought he might easily die.

"We're all so sorry, Martin. The entire cohort, all the companions, everyone. Richard was an exceptional young man, and we know he cared deeply for you."

Martin knew this, too, and didn't need to be reminded; angry tears welled in his burning eyes.

Mr. Jacob squeezed his hand again. "It's absolutely right for you to grieve. It's understandable that you feel so sad. But I have to tell you, Martin, there will need to be an end to it, and soon. We can't allow you to fall behind. All along, it's been between you and Richard as to who'd be top boy, and we both know that Richard would have wanted you to fill that spot if he couldn't."

This was true. It was absolutely true. Richard had said as much practically every day.

“You need to keep working hard, Martin. You need to be the best companion you can be. You can do it to honor him, if that helps.” He leaned forward and put his hand against Martin’s cheek; Martin wrested his face away, scowling.

Mr. Jacob sighed. “Martin, we all have jobs to do. Mine is to encourage you.” He went back to squeezing Martin’s hand, coaxing pressure. “We’ll all go easy on you for a bit, but you have to do your part. Come on, now. Get up. Charlie will help you wash unless you’d rather have someone else.”

Tears rolled down Martin’s cheeks unchecked. He was furious with Mr. Jacob, but just as quickly as the anger had come over him, it dissipated. None of this was Mr. Jacob’s fault. They did all have jobs to do. Richard would be flattered that Martin wanted to lie abed and wallow in grief, but he wouldn’t want Martin to actually *do* that. He had always pushed and challenged Martin, their friendly rivalry exhilarating and so much *fun*. He wouldn’t want Martin to back down from that. He would want Martin to work hard and be top boy.

Martin sniffed and wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. “Charlie’s fine, Mr. J.”

Mr. Jacob patted Martin’s arm and stood so he could swing his legs off the side of the bed. “Good boy, Martin. Richard would be proud of you for being so strong.”

Martin wanted to snap at him, to insist that *he* didn’t know how Richard would feel, but it wasn’t true, and he gritted his teeth against a surly rejoinder. Mr. Jacob knew them all very well, including Richard.

Martin stood and smoothed his wrinkled pajama shirt against his torso with shaking hands. He felt wrung out and somehow old, so old.

Mr. Jacob leaned past, picked up his glasses from the nightstand, unfolded the temple pieces, and handed them to him. “Here you go, brave boy. We’re all proud of you.” Again, he put his hand on Martin’s cheek, and this time Martin submitted to the caress without protest.

Charlie stepped around Mr. Jacob and took Martin’s arm. “Come on. Let me help you.” He slipped his arm around Martin’s waist and steered him toward the door. He turned and called back over his shoulder, “Stu, get his clothes, will you?”

A worried gaggle of boys followed them down to the showers, nosy and solicitous, and they lounged in the vestibule while Charlie unbuttoned Martin’s pajamas and then stood with him under the spray and washed his back.

“I love you,” Charlie said, sluicing soap off his shoulders. “*We* love you.”

“I know.” Martin put his arms around Charlie’s neck and lowered his head to rest against Charlie’s shoulder.

“Take everything you taught each other,” Charlie said. “Take it and keep going forward. Will you do that?”

“I will,” Martin said, because it was the only right answer.

“I’m so sorry,” Charlie said, kissing his cheek. “I’ve only ever wanted good things for you.”

“I know you have. You’re good to me,” Martin agreed. Charlie was a generous and loving friend, and if Martin was a better person, he’d love Charlie more, but even with Richard dead, Charlie still came second to Georgie. But there was nothing to be done about it, after all: you couldn’t dictate

desire.

Would he ever want anyone as much as he had wanted Richard? He hoped so.

After awhile, Charlie turned off the taps and gave him a towel for his hair. He let Charlie play valet with the clothes Stuart had brought. While he dressed, boys crowded around the doorway, concerned about him and eager to be of use. They'd all lost Richard, too, but they were willing to put their sadness secondary to his. They were kind, so very kind, and he would make himself accept what they offered when all he wanted to do was curl up in a ball and hide away.

Mr. Jacob was right, absolutely right, about what Richard would want. He and Richard had enjoyed vying for the top spot. They had loved the competition, thrived on it. If he gave up, he'd be letting Richard down.

Very aware of the boys watching and worrying, he forced a smile. He told himself that a top boy would take strength from these expressions of caring. A top boy would excel in memory of a worthy competitor. A top boy might reel in the face of a devastating set-back, but he wouldn't fall. Charlie finished tying Martin's boots and Martin gave him a hand up.

"Are you all right?" Charlie asked, squeezing his shoulders.

Martin nodded. "I'm all right."

He was reeling, but he wouldn't fall.

FEBRUARY 14, 1901

Martin came back to awareness with a start, the classroom in flux around him. The others were shifting in their seats and talking in low voices. Mr. Vance collected his books and edged out of the room past Mr. Pitkin, who was coming in to teach practicals with a big box full of silver and napkins. They were apparently doing table settings again. Martin felt it was safe to return to reverie; he had been able to set a formal table for any menu since he was just a thirteen with a fresh tattoo, and felt confident of his performance should Mr. Pitkin call upon him.

At Ganymede last year, Martin had accepted valentines with good grace but had made none for his friends. This year, he'd considered giving a card to Tom, but he'd been wary of having his intentions misconstrued. Tom's benign, appropriate card gave him some relief in that regard; it seemed that Tom had adopted a reasonable perspective on their relationship, and that they could continue to be close friends.

Tom and the other Orpheus slaves all had cards for one another, of course. Martin was a little envious of how close the Orpheus boys were. He loved Stuart and had so many fond memories of growing up and training with him at Ganymede, but by tacit agreement they weren't demonstrative with one another, and they didn't seek each other out. In part, Martin kept his distance because he was quite certain Henry would not like it if he was too effusive with any other slave, especially one he'd previously been intimate with. Stuart had been a friend he'd enjoyed sex with, nothing more, whereas Henry was his beloved, his lover, but possessive Henry was perhaps constitutionally incapable of recognizing the difference. Mindful of Henry's feelings, Martin kept some small distance from the rest of the slaves, even Tom, though Tom was very persistent. While Martin considered his relationship with Tom entirely chaste, he suspected Henry would not see it that way if he knew the extent of Tom's interest, and it was clear that even Tom's most innocent affectionate gestures were often too much for Henry. Rekindling his youthful closeness with Stuart would upset Henry, and Martin didn't want to do things that would make Henry unhappy.

Valentine's Day had been recognized at all the Houses, of course, and even boys who preferred a female partner often had very romantic friendships before they were sold. Here at school, a holiday devoted to finer feelings made all of them moody and sentimental and prone to drama. Tom had had a boy he wouldn't quite admit to loving, a brash fellow with coloring similar to Martin's, and he obviously missed this Michael more than he cared to let on. Peter and Will, who had evidently spent an enjoyable hour together last Valentine's Day at Endymion, were passing notes, trading significant glances and snickering; they were likely to be reprimanded if they kept it up. Everyone missed poor Sam, but especially his best friend Ray, and Ray also missed a particular friend from Hermes, though he scoffed at the idea that this boy had been anything like a lover. Mr. Blankenship had apparently seen fit to reprimand Ray for his inattentiveness and homesick moping, so Ray was attempting to indulge his melancholy mood as much as possible during school hours.

Martin missed Richard, of course. He would always miss Richard, without question. Richard had been his important first love. If Richard had lived, it would have been so bittersweet to part from him, but Martin's skin still tingled when he thought of the moment he saw Henry in the Ganymede showroom, and there was no question in his mind where he was meant to be, who he was meant to be with. He was always meant for Henry, and he was confident he'd be happiest with Henry even if Richard had lived. He believed Richard would have approved of Henry, and specifically of Henry for Martin. As he'd told Henry, he rather liked the idea that Richard was looking out for him, a sort of guardian angel or friendly ghost who might well have brought them together. He liked to imagine that some ethereal version of Richard knew how his life was turning out and was happy for him.

While he was sure Richard would have approved of Henry, he wasn't so sure the reverse was true. Henry had done an admirable job of keeping his jealousy in check while Martin told him about Richard, but Martin questioned whether Henry could sustain such control for terribly long. Henry's jealousy made them both unhappy, though it bothered Martin most to see how Henry's insecurities filled him with doubt. Henry saw threats where none could possibly exist, and Martin disliked being doubted when he'd never shown Henry anything but devotion. Perhaps with time, as they got older, Henry would trust him more. Maybe the gesture of the valentine would help convince Henry of Martin's loving intent.

Henry hadn't asked for details about Richard, and Martin was grateful for this, as he was a little afraid Henry's insecurities would get the best of him if more was revealed. Martin supposed he could lie about Richard's good qualities, but he didn't want to get into the habit of lying to Henry, not ever; however, Richard had been, at least outwardly, a more impressive boy than Henry, and Martin knew Henry would fret over the comparisons.

Richard had been book-smart and confident, so he and Henry were not like in those ways. But Richard had been a kind person, tender and loving, and he'd made Martin feel special, just as Henry did, and those things were more important to Martin than Henry getting good grades or being a leader amongst his classmates. With the face of a sensitive prince, Richard had looked rather more like Henry than Martin would ever want to admit; he did not think there was any need for Henry to know that his own beauty represented a refinement of Richard's.

Memories of Richard were precious because there were so few of them, really, and because they represented so many tender firsts and fumbings. But everything was better with Henry, the sex they had together powerful and obliterating, making the experiences that had come before seem quaint and rudimentary. No one had ever made Martin come like Henry did, no one in a very long list. Even that first time, Henry not knowing anything, and with only spit to ease the way, it had been apocalyptic. Now that Henry knew what he was doing, it was so good that Martin was sure he'd die without it. If Henry ever put him aside, he'd die longing for Henry's cock.

The thing that had existed between Henry and himself from the moment they'd met, the thing that defied explanation, had made it inevitable that Martin would love him. Fated love, destined, irresistible. The smell and taste of him, the texture of his skin and silky hair, and the shy, helpless sounds he made while they fucked, all made Martin crazy, and it was this vital chemistry that trumped everything else. Standing behind Henry's chair at lunch at school, he'd get a whiff of his soap and have to bite his lip against a moan, have to shove his hands in his trouser pockets or button his jacket to hide his stiff cock, and he'd be counting the minutes until the end of the school day, before the interminable ride on the omnibus, until he would be alone with Henry in his rooms and could put his hands and his mouth on him.

Martin did enjoy clever people, intellectual people, but he had his friends to talk with about art and music and didn't need Henry to share those interests. He didn't need Henry to be a different person, a "better" person. The way Martin felt when he was with Henry was what was important. The way they responded to one another was all that mattered. When he was with Henry, he was convinced he'd been made to fit Henry's cock, their bodies perfectly matched. With Henry moving over and through him, he became a formidable sexual creature, a glamorous erotic monster, his best and truest self, needful and enviable and owned.

Even though Henry was often too shy to *say* what he wanted, he wasn't too shy to *take* it, and Martin loved nothing better than for Henry to put a hand between his shoulder blades and bend him over. There was no way to prove it, of course, but he felt sure that he and Henry had better sex than anyone else, anyone in the world. He was thankful that Henry was kind and loving, but Henry could turn around tomorrow and be cruel and harsh and Martin would still beg for his cock, still try his hardest to make him happy. It was in his training and in his nature, and in any case it was impossible to separate what Ganymede had done to make him a good slave from his essential character.

Mr. Pitkin had finished making Ralph and Miles set places for hypothetical meals and was now asking boys to identify serving utensils. Propped on an elbow, his face arranged to seem mildly attentive, Martin idly noted a mustard spoon, a lobster pick and a bird fork amongst the shining implements on display, but he did not raise his hand to volunteer the information. Mr. Pitkin could call on Martin if he thought it necessary for him to participate.

Martin didn't think he was an inherently bad person by any means, but he was definitely of the opinion that Ganymede had made him what he was, had made him the best he could be. Ganymede had made him into a boy Henry would appreciate and value. Unfortunately, Henry was starting to question Martin's position, Martin's bondage, and Martin wished he would not waste time thinking about it. Martin did not mind being a slave, not at all. He was not interested in freedom for himself. Freedom to do what? To go where?

If he'd been born free, who knew how he might have ended up? He doubted the sort of people he was descended from would have been able to provide him with the opportunities his House had given him. He wouldn't have been educated to such a high standard. He certainly would have never played a violin. He wouldn't live in such a grand house or wear such beautiful clothes. He would have been some uneducated little half-starved ruffian of the kind he saw every time he went out into the city with Henry. He'd have had the freedom to live in squalor, the freedom to go hungry, the freedom to fight and scrap for everything he needed to survive, and it was not an attractive proposition.

Most importantly, if he'd been born free, he'd never have met Henry. Admittedly, if he'd been born free, he might have fared better than the average poor boy because he wasn't an average boy at all. He was a beauty, and it wasn't impossible that some rich fairy might have taken a fancy to him if their paths had crossed. But that would have been some old man, some partner to be borne rather

than desired, and nothing like his passionate, eminently desirable boy, his Henry.

Henry was perfect for him, they were perfect together. Not that Henry was *perfect*, but Martin didn't mind his flaws at all. Henry wasn't a braggart, or cruel, or arrogant. He wasn't mean-spirited or violent. He was shy and sweet and handsome and gentle. He was humble and kind and generous and affectionate. When Martin had been at Ganymede dreaming of his future master, he hadn't been yearning for a scholar or savant. He had wanted someone just like Henry, with all of Henry's good qualities. Plainly, Henry was Martin's fated lover, and Martin couldn't possibly want to be free of him.

Was it so wrong to believe slavery had given him a good life? If he hadn't been born a slave, he'd never have known Richard. He'd never have known the generous boys of his cohort, or kind Mr. Jacob, or cranky Mr. Elliott. He'd have never met Frankie, who'd been like a dear, funny brother to him. He would have had some sort of family—a mother, at least; perhaps siblings—and maybe they'd have been as good or better than the House, but Martin doubted it. His people *weren't* good people—the fact that he was a Ganymede boy proved it. Good people didn't sell their children to Houses.

Again, Martin jerked alert. Glowering, Mr. Pitkin held up a pâté server in one hand, a fish server in the other, and berated Dick for his incorrect identifications. Mr. Pitkin was a quiet, timid man, but he could get quite passionate about cutlery.

“All right then, Dick. Which of these is used to serve relish?” Mr. Pitkin held up two utensils and looked at Dick expectantly.

It was a trick question. Martin held his lip between his teeth, willing Dick to see the trick of it, too.

Cautiously, Dick offered, “I think it must be both, Sir? I believe you've a relish fork in your left hand and a relish scoop in your right?”

Mr. Pitkin's pallid face lit up with pleasure. “Oh, yes. Good job indeed! That does go some way toward making up for your previous error.” He fussed with his silver, smiling down at the gleaming array. “I know some of you think learning your way around a formal table is beneath you, but you're mistaken. One day you'll all work with a butler, of course, and the cutlery will be his responsibility, but he'll be under your authority.”

Martin considered the Blackwell household, whether Randolph felt himself much under the authority of Mr. Tim, and supposed he might. Of course, Mr. Tim was not the sort of person who needed a lot of noise and bluster to assert his rule, and Martin hoped he might so easily command the respect of his future subordinates when he and Henry were adults with their own household. Mr. Tim was very kind to him, firm but patient and fair, and he seemed to take a paternal sort of pride in Martin's accomplishments. For his part, Martin was very eager for Mr. Tim's approval, for Mr. Tim to think him a suitable companion for a young Blackwell master. Mr. Tim was a very admirable person, and his good opinion was worth having.

Not all of his friends had such amicable relations with the senior companions in their households. In the Caldwell house, Mr. Enoch had never warmed up to Tom and considered him sly and flighty. The senior companion in the Lovejoy house thought Julian arrogant and ungrateful, and of course Martin wouldn't say so, but he did suspect that was at least a little bit true. But even though there weren't always warm feelings, in most cases senior companions would help their juniors with whatever problems might arise. The glaring exception had been the senior companion in the Pettibone household, who had known of poor Sam's plight but refused to get in between father and son. A few words to the senior Mr. Pettibone would surely have made a difference for Sam, and it was shameful that the slave who should have been looking out for him had refused to help.

At one point, before he was sold, Martin had believed that slaves got the treatment they deserved. He'd always been taught as much, and the way boys were treated at Ganymede bore it out. If you did well at things, you were ranked higher. If you were nice and fun to be with, you had more friends. Cause and effect. At Martin's level, everyone had been very good at their work, and they'd been praised and ranked accordingly. Everything was fair and appropriate, and he'd expected life in the world to follow suit.

Now he wasn't so naïve. Sam certainly hadn't deserved any of what Mr. Pettibone had done to him. Good slaves didn't always have good masters.

Martin did think he was the happiest amongst his friends, with Simon next in satisfaction, but none of the others railed against his master or bemoaned his situation too dramatically. None of these Algonquin boys was particularly desirous of freedom, not even disgruntled Julian. Working-class people had hard lives. Martin had a great number of responsibilities, but they were all things he did well, and he enjoyed his work. He didn't think he'd enjoy working—*slaving*—for a pittance as a clerk, or as some sort of human cog in a factory.

Mr. Pitkin began to put away his silver and dismissed them from class, clearing the desk for Mr. Abernathy, who would teach them mathematics after the lunch hours.

Tom came to join Martin as he got up from his desk. "I'm supposed to eat with the rest of the Orpheus fellows today. Do you mind?"

"I'll eat with you, then," Martin said agreeably. Tom offered his arm and Martin slipped his hand through the crook of his elbow.

In the refectory, Martin sat next to Tom, across from Simon and Miles. Allen sat on Tom's other side. Will, who had become quite attached to Allen of late, sat across from Allen and flirted with him quite shamelessly.

"Does Mr. Blackwell have a sweetheart? A valentine?" Tom asked between bites of his meat.

Martin liked to think this was his role, though of course he would not say so. "Hmm? Oh, no. Mr. Blackwell isn't interested in any girls as of yet."

"It's odd," Tom said. "He looks so grown-up, but he's...well, he's lagging behind the rest, don't you think?"

In a haughty tone intended to shut Tom up, Martin said, "What a strange thing for you to say about my master."

"Oh, don't take it like that," Tom said, giving him a little placating nudge. "He's very handsome, and it's obvious young ladies are interested, but he pays them no mind. All those girls at the arcade gaping and goggling at him, and he pretends not to notice."

"Mr. Blackwell Senior is quite strict with him about not getting involved with girls," Martin offered, hoping this information might be disseminated throughout the group. "What about Mr. Caldwell? You've never mentioned a girl."

"Well, he's got this cousin..." Tom began, and Martin was relieved to be off the subject of Henry and girls.

At the masters' lunch, Martin stood behind Henry's chair, eyes on the door, waiting for the boys to file in. As they entered, Henry was facing away, talking with Mr. Briggs, but then he turned, and his eyes met Martin's, and he gave Martin a shy smile, color rising in his cheeks. Martin felt the

same thrill he'd felt in the Ganymede showroom upon first seeing Henry, his entire being surging alive in response to Henry's presence. Flustered, he pulled out Henry's chair, and buttoned his jacket to hide his twitching prick as Henry sat.

He wanted to run his fingers through Henry's hair. He wanted to wrap his legs around Henry's waist and press his face against Henry's neck. He wanted to get under the table and suck Henry's cock. The school day was too long, intolerably long, and required too many clothes. Even if Henry didn't actually love him, he loved having sex with him, and Martin was sure Henry would want to fuck him every bit as much as he wanted to be fucked. He wished with all his might that they would go home straight away after school, that Henry wouldn't arrange with his friends to go to the arcade or the park or any other place that wasn't his bedroom.

When they got home, he'd give Henry the valentine, he definitely would. He wanted Henry to know how he felt, even if it was wrong for him to make it any of Henry's business. If they knew he was even considering such a thing, his Ganymede minders would be furious with him, and he felt a twinge of guilt that he would brazenly defy all their patient training, but he and Henry weren't like other slaves and masters. Henry wouldn't consider Martin's confession an imposition.

The masters were given a new seating chart every two weeks to encourage civility and social intercourse; Henry's current assigned seat was between Adam Pettibone's friend, Maurice Gaines, who Henry was ignoring as much as possible, and Freddie Caldwell, which meant that that Martin stood attendance between Ollie and Tom. Ollie was a good sort; he couldn't help who his master happened to be. Tom was very happy to be at Martin's side; he took every opportunity to lean close and whisper with Martin, even when he had nothing to say.

"Mr. Blackwell looks to be in a good mood today," Tom murmured, bumping Martin with his shoulder.

This was true, but Martin was surprised Tom had noticed. "Why do you say?" he whispered back.

"The look he gave you when he came in," Tom replied. "Of course, he always looks happy to see you. I think you must get along especially well."

Martin felt his face growing hot at the knowledge of just how well they got along. "I suppose so," he said in a disinterested tone, as if it wasn't something he felt in his very marrow and with every beat of his heart. "We don't fight, at any rate. This isn't news, though, Tom."

"No, but I'm envious," Tom said. "You know I'm just an afterthought for Mr. Caldwell."

"He likes you fine, I'm sure," Martin insisted. And it was true: Mr. Caldwell liked Tom just fine, though that wasn't nearly enough for Tom, who wanted someone to love him.

"You don't have to say anything," Tom noted. "It's obvious you're happy with him."

No doubt it was obvious, not just to Tom but to everyone. Of course, it was very acceptable for Martin to be devoted to Henry, but the opposite was not true. Martin knew Tom would figure it out one day, if he hadn't already. He'd see the expression on Henry's face as he looked at Martin, and he'd recognize it for what it was, and he'd know the extent of it. He'd know that Henry cared more for Martin than he was meant to. Martin thought he could depend on Tom to keep it to himself, but he wasn't as sure he could count on any of the others, and they might be just as observant as Tom if they cared to be.

He could ask Henry to look at him with impassive eyes, with a stern expression, in a spirit of criticism and finding fault, but he didn't want to, not just yet. Henry didn't make eye contact with

him often in public, certainly because he was cautious of showing his feelings to those around him, and Martin treasured those moments of fleeting intimacy.

Mr. Caldwell turned to Henry and said, "Wendell and I are going downtown after school to meet with his Betsy, and she might bring a friend or two. Do you want to come along?"

Henry's silver scraped against his plate, a ragged screech that set Martin's teeth on edge. "Uh, no, I can't today. Thanks for asking, though."

"Do you have other plans, then?"

From behind, Henry's ears were very red. "My father wants me home today, is all," he said.

"It's just as well," Mr. Caldwell said cheerfully. "You're too handsome to introduce to girls anyway. They get an eyeful of you and lose interest in regular guys. Charles is the same."

"Ha. Not true." Henry forked a bit of filet into his mouth and chewed, his ears still blazing red.

It was true, though. Girls were very interested in Henry. Unlike Henry, Martin enjoyed the effect Henry's good looks had on young ladies. He liked seeing them vying for Henry's attention and flaunting themselves, because then he could take mean-spirited pleasure in the evidence of Henry's indifference, Henry's discomfort with the attention. It was in stark contrast to how Henry responded to him, and him alone. Henry didn't even notice other young men, not even the beauties. Amongst Martin's handsome friends, most everyone but for Julian thought Henry very appealing, and they all wondered why he wouldn't swap. Boys who were made companions were usually predisposed toward finding young masters attractive anyway, but there was a certain amount of wistfulness involved in the way the others talked about Henry that Martin found very flattering on Henry's behalf.

The meal over, Martin held Henry's chair as he stood, and Henry took the opportunity to put his hand over Martin's just briefly, a fleeting touch that warmed Martin down to the very core of his being, like embers in his heart. Henry didn't look at Martin at all until much later, everyone out in the yard, huddled in their coats. Martin was laughing with his friends when he felt eyes on him, hairs standing up on the back of his neck, and he turned, and of course it was Henry's gaze. Their eyes met for just a moment, a transmission of pure desire, and then flicked away. Martin didn't think anyone had seen. They had to be careful, both of them. Henry's face was so easily readable, but he was nearly as bad, flushed and flustered. If they weren't careful, they'd get caught.

After school in the cloakroom, Henry noted the envelope in Martin's coat pocket.

"What's that?"

"Oh, that, Sir. It's from Tom." Henry frowned at this, so Martin quickly said, "He gave cards to others, as well, Sir."

Henry didn't look happy about this, but all he said was, "Oh, Tom," as if he wasn't bothered at all, and let Martin help him on with his coat.

There were abolitionists at the omnibus stop making noise and harassing those waiting for a ride. The young masters all pointedly ignored them, and their slaves did the same, turning their backs and closing ranks. Martin disliked and mistrusted the abolitionists, and most of his friends felt the same. It was widely believed that what abolitionists *really* wanted was for slaves to be freed so that poor people would have a chance at taking their positions. Some slave jobs might be done perfectly well by free people, Martin supposed, but surely no rich man would tolerate an untrained

companion.

There were often abolitionists downtown handing out pamphlets. They'd lie in wait wherever people might gather, outside the theaters or arcades, and would accost slaves as they entered with their masters. Abolitionists always wanted to talk about human rights and dignity, but they certainly didn't respect the rights of slaves to be left alone. They certainly didn't care about their own dignity, shouting in the streets. They'd call out, *Don't you care about your labor brothers? Are you really so selfish as that?* What did they expect Martin and his friends to do? Incite riot? It would be a waste of energy and completely misguided besides to rail against slave owners like the Blackwells; the Blackwell slaves were all cared for like valued property—pampered, practically. The Briggs slaves didn't have it quite as good, perhaps, but they still lived a life far more luxurious than that of the average free worker. The Caldwells took very good care of Tom. Even Julian, who was a terrible companion, was treated reasonably well by Mr. Lovejoy—he was fed, clothed and sheltered to a high standard, at any rate. If abolitionists wanted to help slaves, they should do something about people like Mr. Pettibone and leave people like Mr. Blackwell and Henry alone.

There was *some* truth to what the abolitionists said, the things about labor slaves. Everyone knew it was much better to be a household slave than an industrial slave. The threat of being sent down to Atlas as punishment kept boys in line at Ganymede because there were big differences between the lives of service slaves and labor slaves. Atlas boys lived under guard in barracks near factories and mills and mines and were made to do hard physical labor from an early age. They were educated only as necessary to do their jobs. They certainly didn't learn to play instruments. Sometimes they worked in chains. Sometimes they were whipped. They weren't picking apples and learning to ride bicycles and curling up together in comfortable beds. However, they did have one particular advantage, in that they were sold in groups, sometimes a full cohort at a time, and surely it was a comfort to always be with the men you'd grown up with.

Although Martin wasn't quite ready to admit that labor slaves' lives were miserable, he was very glad he was a service slave, a Ganymede slave, and not the product of a labor house. However, Martin was quite confident that whatever Atlas men Mr. Blackwell owned were treated better than labor slaves belonging to other masters. Mr. Blackwell afforded his household slaves dignity and autonomy, and surely his industrial slaves were given some equivalent accommodation.

Even if that wasn't true, Martin didn't have the concern to expend on a bunch of unknown people just because they happened to be slaves, too. His energies went to Henry first and foremost, the rest of the Blackwells second, his friends and household third, and really there was nothing left for anyone else. He also felt quite powerless. Even if he did want to talk about labor slaves' working conditions with Henry, and even if he could interest Henry sufficient to rouse his passion, he knew full well that Mr. Blackwell would not listen seriously to Henry's opinions on political topics. Agitating against the entire institution of slavery seemed silly, practically pointless. After all, when he'd tried his hardest to help just one slave, poor Sam, his best efforts had been for naught. Getting help for Sam had been a group project, and every one of Sam's friends had failed at achieving the goal; there was no reason to think they would fare better at altering the very fabric of society.

Besides, Martin did not wish to be freed. Selfishly, he really did not want it at all, labor slaves be damned. He wanted things to remain as they were, just like this, forever.

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Thirty minutes later, locked in Henry's bedroom, Martin moved sinuously over Henry's lap, Henry feeling so solid and hot inside his body. He had given Henry his valentine, and Henry had had a card for him, too. Henry loved him, really loved him, and had said the words and had wanted to hear them in return. It was like the best dream, the best luck, and everything they were doing

reinforced the truth of it. They had undressed enough to fuck, hurried and fumbling and gasping, Martin down to his shirt and one sock, Henry's pants around his knees, and it all felt so amazingly intense, so urgent. Henry kept saying, *I love you, I love you*, sounding abandoned and almost lost, and his voice made Martin's nipples tighten, made the hairs stand up on his skin. This was Henry loving him, this was what it felt like. He knelt astride Henry's hips, Henry slumped against the headboard, not even entirely on the bed. Henry's fingers dug into Martin's ass cheeks, spreading them wide, and he felt stretched thin around Henry's cock, reduced to just the rasp of his breath and the thick throb of his pulse. He felt the shape of Henry's cock moving through him, fat and flexing, and he wanted more than anything to feel Henry come. He wanted his own orgasms, he always did, but he wanted Henry's just as much. He was greedy for Henry's pleasure, delighted in knowing he'd given it to him; he wasn't a generous person at all, because he only made Henry feel good for the satisfaction of seeing him succumb to sensation, the thrill of seeing him come unstrung.

Henry's hands tightened on his hips and he held Martin in place while he thrust up into him, a look of complex concentration furrowing his brow. Martin shifted on his knees, bore down on Henry's pumping cock, and whimpered because the angle was just right, just perfect, and he was going to come if only Henry would keep doing what he was doing just a little longer.

His hands tightened into fists, crumpling Henry's shirtfront, and he let out a quavering moan. "*Henry,*" he begged. "Oh, *please*, Henry!"

"Come on, then," Henry countered, his voice low and rough in Martin's ear. He had one foot up on the bed, knee bent, so he could brace himself to thrust harder. "Go ahead, make a mess."

"*Oh...*" He would, he'd make a mess, and Henry wouldn't even care if he cleaned it up because Henry didn't think it was dirty, and Henry *loved* him. He let his head drop so that his forehead rested on Henry's shoulder and worked his ass back against Henry's thrusts, and didn't even try to stifle the pained, weak sounds he was making because it felt so good.

In the same low, rough voice, Henry said, "I love you. *Only* you." He put his hand on Martin's cock, thumb sliding over the head.

Oh god. It was too much. Martin hunched over, muscles tight, and came on Henry's fist, on Henry's shirttail, and Henry went still beneath him and groaned, his cock jerking in Martin's ass, and Martin felt the heat of his semen deep within. Martin went limp against Henry's chest, rubbing his face on Henry's neck, not really kissing him but putting his mouth on skin. Henry held him close and rubbed his back in soothing circles while their buzzing bodies calmed.

"Say it again," Henry murmured. "Tell me."

Martin knew what he wanted. "I love you. No one but you."

"What else?"

"You're *mine*."

Henry gave a little moan and gathered him closer still.

And Henry was his, for now.

Nothing Henry ever did or said made him think so, but nonetheless it seemed inevitable that someday Henry would meet another free man, someone of his class, and turn away from Martin. He should try to put it out of mind and enjoy this moment, but it was true. No matter how much

Henry might love him, he was only a slave. Henry might not be interested in any of the young men he knew now, but that could change when he got to university, and Martin would have no right to stand in the way of any romance that might develop between his master and a free man. Martin didn't care about Henry marrying—Henry would have to do that, it meant nothing—but he hated knowing that he might have to stand by while Henry made love to someone else and *meant* it. There was no point in discussing it now—Henry would just insist that it would never happen and have hurt feelings—but Martin did know his place, even if he didn't keep to it, and all his training told him that he could never be anything more than Henry's convenient first love. A man in Henry's position—so rich and handsome and kind—might certainly have many loves over the course of an eventful life. Martin only hoped they would be admirable people, men worthy of Henry's generous heart.

But why was Martin wasting time thinking about these future gentlemen when he had Henry all to himself here and now? Henry certainly wasn't thinking of anyone else yet. He held Martin close and kissed the top of his head and made sweet cozy noises as he petted him. Why was Martin stupidly lamenting the loss of Henry when he still had him, when Henry didn't know any better than to love him?

He had gone and made himself upset, on the verge of unbecoming tears, and it would be terrible if Henry realized how emotional he was he might easily think Martin was unhappy about their mutual declarations, might think Martin didn't actually love him. If he stayed here, clinging and listening to Henry's heartbeat, he'd be pushed over the brink into a sappy display. He swallowed hard past the lump in his throat and shifted out of Henry's embrace. Henry made a whine of dismay and reached after him. Martin ducked his grasp and got up on his knees, sitting back on his heels, and pulled his shirt off overhead.

"Yours, too," he said. "I got it dirty."

Henry rolled his eyes at this, but did as Martin wanted.

Martin took the shirts and slipped from the bed. "I'll be right back." He ignored Henry's protests and padded from the room.

He put their shirts in the laundry basket and went into the bathroom for his basin. He splashed water on his face, gave himself a frank look in the mirror, and encouraged himself to buck up. He washed himself quickly and efficiently, wiping all sticky traces from his hole. Feeling somewhat more composed, he carried basin and cloth into the bedroom.

While he did his work, washing and helping Henry off with the rest of his clothes, Henry touched him with a tenderness bordering on reverence.

"Do you promise?" Henry asked.

"Promise what?"

"That you love me. You're not just saying so?"

Oh, how could Henry doubt it?

"I would never just say so!" Martin insisted. He put his basin on the nightstand and lay close to Henry, as close as he could get.

"You might think it was your duty," Henry pointed out, pulling him closer still. "As my slave." He smoothed Martin's hair back from his forehead and looked into his eyes, very serious and solemn.

It was true that Martin might well have done this with another master, one he didn't love, out of a desire to provide the best possible service, but that definitely wasn't what was happening with Henry. "That isn't the case with us. My feelings are very genuine. Can't you tell?"

"Hmm." Henry did not seem to entirely believe him, but neither did he seem upset. He shifted and curled against Martin's side, his head on Martin's chest, an arm thrown over Martin's waist. "I do believe you about the sex."

Martin gave a startled laugh. "The sex?"

"I believe you have better sex with me than anyone else."

"That's certainly true." Martin ran his fingers through Henry's hair and felt Henry smile against his ribs. Martin told him what he believed, really and truly: "Obviously, no one has better sex than us. That's just a fact."

"Well, I suppose you know from experience," Henry noted, thankfully not seeming upset about it, "and I'm willing to defer to your judgment."

"But if you ever want to, with someone else—" Martin began hesitantly. He immediately thought better of bringing it up; it was neither the time nor the place.

"I *won't*," Henry said firmly, irritably, lifting his head to frown at Martin. "You know I don't ever want to hear that anyway, but definitely not today. Not *now*."

He shouldn't have said anything. "I'm sorry."

"I just told you I love you, Martin. I told you so many times, but still you're jumping to conclusions about strangers I haven't even met, and won't care about anyway—"

"I'm sorry," Martin said, hurrying to soothe Henry with tender caresses. "You're right, you're absolutely right."

"There's not going to be any future person," Henry said firmly. "The one I love is you. I don't need anyone else. I certainly won't be *looking*."

"I don't need anyone else, either," Martin admitted in a little voice. He slid down the bed to lie nose-to-nose with Henry and drew him close.

"I don't want to fight," Henry murmured, kissing Martin's neck.

"Me, neither. I'm sorry."

"Please stop worrying about what'll happen in the future," Henry told him. "You really don't have to, and it hurts my feelings besides."

Martin certainly didn't want to wound Henry with his unattractive insecurities. "I'm sorry," he said again. "I just...I'm trying to be realistic."

"You have to trust me," Henry said. "Forget whatever they told you at Ganymede about how masters act. That's not me. I love you. So much, Martin." He kissed Martin's mouth and gave him a little shake.

"I'll do better," Martin promised him. "I love you, too. More than I thought possible."

"Yeah?" Henry seemed pleased by this.

“Yes, definitely. I didn’t think I’d have a master like you.”

Henry shook his head. “This isn’t to do with me being your master,” he said. “It’s just love.”

Martin considered this and realized Henry could not understand what it meant to him to genuinely love his master, how perfect it was. The fact that they were master and slave instead of two free men made Henry uncomfortable; he felt his ownership diminished their bond. But Martin had grown up hoping that out of all the free men in the world, he’d be paired with the one who would best appreciate him, his devotion and service, and Henry was certainly that person. For Martin, wanting with all his heart to belong to the man who owned him was the best possible outcome, destiny fulfilled.

At Ganymede, he’d been told not to expect to love his young master. Spoiled rich boys weren’t often loveable when taken on their own merits. But love made the job easier in some ways, and love could be a volitional act. You could decide to love someone, make it a project. You could make a fetish of your master. And when he’d gone to auction he’d been prepared to do just that, to manufacture love, but it hadn’t been necessary. What had happened between Henry and himself was like a fairytale, one specific to slaves.

But Henry wouldn’t see it that way. Martin smiled at him and touched his face, the sleek arc of his eyebrow. “It’s definitely love,” he agreed.

They kissed a few minutes, languorous and searching, just as he liked. Henry’s upper lip and chin were just slightly rough with stubble, and Martin knew they should be careful about friction against his pale skin, but Henry’s mouth felt so good he couldn’t bring himself to put a stop to the tender onslaught. Henry’s cock was already hard again, and feeling that Henry was aroused increased his own excitement exponentially.

Henry broke off kissing and opened his mouth to speak, but then reconsidered and bit his lip, blushing.

“What is it?”

“It’s silly.” His bashfulness was really so charming!

Martin laughed. “Tell me anyway.”

“I’m guessing you had valentines at Ganymede, with Richard and all, but...I never gave anyone a card before. I’m glad you’re the first one.”

Martin was touched. “Really? You never gave one to a friend?”

Henry shook his head. “No, I never did. I...I like that I’m doing everything first with you,” he offered shyly.

Martin definitely liked this, too, and with a pang realized he wished he could offer Henry a first, something just for him, something that Martin would experience for the first time in his arms, though he racked his brain to think of what that could be. His own firsts were well in the past. There *were* a few games Martin wouldn’t mind trying, but Henry might consider them too extreme to be enjoyable.

There was, of course, the possibility of Martin playing with Henry’s ass, or even Martin being on top, but Martin knew Henry was reluctant to explore such options, and he might not consider those proper mutual firsts anyway, since he knew full well Martin had done them plenty of times with other boys.

He would think on it. He would come up with something that would be a first for them both, together.

But all he said was, "I'm honored to be your first."

Regardless of what Henry said, what Henry wanted, it wasn't easy to believe that Martin wouldn't just be the first of many, but he would put his worries aside for Henry's sake. Just as he'd gone to auction prepared to try to love whichever master took him home, he could make a project of trusting in Henry's enduring affection.

Henry looked into Martin's eyes, his fingertips splayed along Martin's cheek, and kissed him with tender abandon, his mouth lush as ripe fruit, sweet and bruised. Martin returned his hungry kisses, his body humming alive with the exhilarating sense that he was coming untethered from the world, utterly abandoned, with Henry as his sole precious anchor. His stiff prick jerked in Henry's hand as Henry sucked a careful kiss against his collarbone, and he moaned, arching his back and surging up against Henry's weight.

Henry broke off kissing and leaned his forehead against Martin's, their breath mingling.

"Let's do it in front of the mirror. I want to see us together." He bent his head and nuzzled Martin's neck.

Martin would do whatever Henry wanted, and gladly.

Henry rolled off of Martin and got down from the bed, holding out his hand for Martin to take. "Come on. Come look."

Henry got the oil out of the drawer and put the bottle at their feet. They stood together before the mirrored wardrobe door, arms about each other's waists, and admired themselves. They were both very handsome, and together they made an especially attractive picture. They were nearly of a height, Henry taller, but by less than an inch. Henry was fractionally bigger overall, a slight difference; it wasn't visible in the mirror, but was something Martin knew from experience, Henry's body pressed to his own, holding him down.

He knew he was attractive, artfully made, and he knew Henry valued this about him, and so was glad of it, but he wasn't interested in men with his own looks, his own coloring. Sleek, dark Henry, even bashful and blushing, was like some rampant young god, and he was everything Martin wanted in a man.

Henry was right, Martin did have a pretty cock, but it wasn't in the same league as Henry's, which was big and straight and perfect, an ideal of a cock. It was heavy when it was hard, thick and dense, and even at its stiffest it never stood as close to vertical as Martin's own. Now it was dark with blood, glossy at the head, bobbing with Henry's pulse.

Henry met his gaze in the mirror, his fevered eyes full of love and promise, then turned to kiss his neck, his ear, his parted lips. Henry's mouth was wet and sweet as syrup. Martin put his arms around Henry's neck and drew him into a close embrace. Henry's skin felt so good under his hands, hot satin dusted with crisp hair, and Martin broke off kissing just to rub against him, cheek to cheek, belly to belly. The feeling of Henry's cock sliding alongside his own, slick and velvety and so heavy and hard, made him weak at the knees.

Henry put his hands on Martin's shoulders and gently pushed him away. "Turn around." He put a hand between Martin's shoulder blades and pushed him toward the mirror. Martin stumbled a step forward and caught himself with his hands against the glass. His eyes met Henry's, which were full

of want, full of intent. Henry stood close behind him, his cock slotted in the cleft of Martin's ass, and sank his teeth into the flesh of the slope of his neck, where a shirt would cover. He kissed and licked and bit Martin's neck and shoulders, every nibble and nip sending a shower of sparks over Martin's skin, every swipe of tongue making his nipples tight, and all the while Henry was moving against him, holding his hips and grinding slowly against his ass. As he lavished attention on Martin, Henry's handsome face was obscured by Martin's hair, his shoulder, his well-shaped head, but Martin was able to catch glimpses of Henry's devotion in the mirror, his reverence, the effort he put into loving Martin, and he adored him for it.

Henry gave a thoughtful bite to the nape of Martin's neck and licked the marks he'd left, then pressed himself against Martin's back, an arm around his waist, and rubbed his cheek against Martin's hair with a satisfied growl. His hard cock left slick smears on Martin's ass. Martin's own cock stood close to his belly, and he reached for it with his left hand as he arched his neck for Henry's mouth.

Henry stayed his hand, a firm grip on his wrist. "No. Not until I say."

"*Please...*" He liked it, though, Henry telling him what he could do.

Henry held tight to Martin's hip and ground his cock against Martin's ass. "Not yet." He leaned hard against Martin, tasting his skin, rubbing against him like a determined and affectionate cat, and Martin pushed back, craving the contact.

Henry reached for Martin's prick, touching it lightly, and it lurched against his palm. Muscles contracted in a wet surge, and Henry fondled the sticky head and rutted against Martin's ass as Martin gasped. He would come so quickly if Henry kept touching him, and he didn't want to come yet, but neither did he want Henry to stop.

Henry knelt down and scooped up the oil bottle, and Martin waited, breath held, while Henry wet his fingers. Henry pressed himself to Martin's back, an arm around his waist. He slipped his oiled fingers between Martin's ass cheeks and ran them up and down the cleft, just glancing over his sensitive hole. Martin whimpered and his hole clenched, wanting something to squeeze against, cock or fingers or tongue.

Martin twisted in Henry's embrace, seeking his mouth for a kiss. Henry massaged his tense hole with a slippery finger as their tongues twined together. Martin sighed and arched his back, willing Henry to push his fingers inside.

Pressure and a slick slide, a gratifying fullness that only made him more eager for Henry's cock. He moaned and adjusted his stance, legs parting to give Henry more access.

Henry slid his free hand down Martin's torso to rest just above his cock, fingers spread. He pressed and rubbed deep inside, fingers crooked, and watched in the mirror as Martin trembled and suffered. It felt too good, intolerable, and he squirmed on Henry's fingers with an impatient whine. His hard cock jerked, dribbling milky fluid to spatter on the carpet, and the feeling that he was about to come stretched on and on, making him feel slightly desperate, slightly crazy. Henry laughed in his ear, taking pleasure in Martin's particular distress.

"I love you like this."

"Make me come," Martin begged. "I want you to make me come."

"Like this?" He pushed his fingers deep and Martin's toes curled.

“No,” he managed, breathless. “I want your cock.”

Henry’s eyes met his in the mirror and he withdrew his fingers from Martin’s ass. Martin shuddered, unable to suppress a little moan of dismay.

“Spread your legs.” Henry put his hand between Martin’s shoulder blades again and gave him a little shove, and Martin let himself be pushed, elbows bending, collapsing to lean with his forearms against the glass. Martin’s own breath seemed so loud and ragged but Henry was calm as he lifted Martin’s hair off his neck and kissed the sensitive spot behind his ear. Henry seemed especially imposing, looming, his body very hot and strong.

“More. Wider.” Henry nudged Martin’s thighs apart with his knee, and the weight of his body pressed Martin’s chest to the cool mirror.

This close, they could see nothing but their faces. Martin’s breath fogged the glass. He arched his back, pushing his ass insistently against Henry’s groin and hard cock.

Henry kissed the back of Martin’s neck and gave a light slap to his ass, followed immediately with a caress to take away the sting. He spread Martin’s cheeks wide with both hands, exposing his hole and circling the pucker with his thumb. He held tight to Martin’s hip with his left hand and used the right to position his cock, rubbing the fat head against Martin’s hole. “I’ll give it to you,” he murmured, pressing another kiss to Martin’s neck. “What you want.” He gave a little grunt as he tilted his hips and thrust.

Martin sucked in a hard breath and let out a quavering moan. It felt so good, not too slippery. A decisive thrust splitting him in half, a sweet burn drawn out over the length of Henry’s cock, perfect fullness. Henry groaned and held tightly to Martin’s hips and was still a moment, his cock flexing in Martin’s ass and his forehead against the back of Martin’s shoulder, and then slowly withdrew so that Martin could feel every throbbing vein, every muscular twitch. Martin’s greedy hole spasmed around Henry’s flesh, wanting him deeper inside, not willing to give him up. Henry paused with just the head of his cock inside Martin’s body and ran his hands up and down Martin’s sides.

“Is it good?” Henry’s voice was low, his touch soothing. “Do we need more oil?”

Martin shook his head and met Henry’s eyes in the mirror. “No, I like it like this.”

Henry smiled. Another kiss, Henry’s mouth on Martin’s neck, and then Henry rammed his hips forward, jarring Martin against the glass. Martin’s teeth snapped together and he whimpered and braced himself for the next thrust. He leaned with his chest, hands and flushed cheek flat against the mirror, his ass tilted to take the pounding. With each pump of his hips, Henry’s cock ran roughshod over the place that made all the hairs stand up on Martin’s skin, that made him frantic with the need to come. Henry’s fingers dug into the skin over Martin’s hipbones, and Martin liked that he’d have bruises later, love marks. Martin’s cock was hot and throbbing and he yearned to touch it, but Henry had said no, and Martin was going to do whatever Henry wanted.

As Henry fucked him, Martin was jolted breathless, full to capacity, his body molded vacuum-tight to the perfect shape of Henry’s cock. The drag between their skins felt dangerous, like Henry could pull him inside-out. Their bodies moved in rhythm, the pace urgent and demanding, and Martin imagined the two of them as exotic thoroughbreds giving a peak performance. Exquisite tension and dirty grind, taking each thrust with a sense of exaltation and the conviction that sex like this could only happen between the two of them, him and Henry alone.

Once again, Henry put his hand on Martin’s back, between his shoulders, and held him decisively

against the mirror, and Martin moaned, loving this taste of being bossed, owned, mastered. Henry was fucking him very hard, their bodies coming together in meaty smacks. Henry made truncated grunts that matched with Martin's excited whimpers. With each thrust, Martin's hands squeaked against the surface of the mirror; his sweat-slick chest slid against the glass. Martin could feel the lack of oil now, the friction hot and rough, and he willed Henry to pay it no mind.

"Please," he gasped. "*Please, Henry!*"

"We need more oil," Henry decided, his hips slowing.

"No! *Please, Henry!* Keep going! Just like this! I want to feel you come, *please!*"

Henry hesitated a moment, and Martin arched his back and shamelessly clenched around Henry's cock, milking him, drawing him in and urging him on.

Henry groaned and gripped his hips and slammed into him, balls slapping his ass. "Touch yourself," he commanded, his voice rough. "You come, too."

Flooded with relief, Martin gladly took himself in hand. His legs were shaky and his hole was tender and raw, but he felt good, so very good. The head of his cock was slippery, the shaft swollen and hot. He stroked himself with efficient flicks of his wrist, pleasurable pressure building up and up at the root of his cock while Henry drove into him, nearly lifting him off his feet.

There came an exquisite moment when the sensations coalesced, crested, and he went still and quiet, and then his cock was jerking in his hand and he was crying out.

"*Henry!* Oh god, Henry!"

That was Henry's signal. He moaned and wrapped his arms around Martin's ribs, shuddered to a halt, and came. He lowered his head to Martin's shoulder and leaned heavily against him as his cock pulsed, filling Martin with a wash of heat.

They stayed slumped in that embrace, catching their breath, until Henry's cock softened enough to slide out of Martin's ass. Henry's spunk followed suit, dripping down Martin's thighs in warm, sticky rivulets. Martin's own fluids were all over the mirror and the carpet. It was extremely unhygienic!

But just for now, he wouldn't care.

~o0o~

Following their extremely satisfying sex, Martin was able to feel more lighthearted throughout the rest of the afternoon and evening, not worrying about Henry's future lovers or his own stark vulnerability, and when he had time to think during the Blackwells' dinner, he felt more philosophical about the possibility of Henry having romances with free men. If Henry ever did make love to someone else, Martin would just have to bear with it, because surely Henry would realize right away that Martin was his ideal partner. He had a vague image of Henry in a rumpled bed, drawing back aghast from some handsome ginger gentleman, his erection wilting, having come to the conclusion that what he had with Martin could not be reproduced with just any good-looking fairy who might be game.

After the family hour, they retired to Henry's rooms and shared a few kisses and loving words before Martin did his chores. He undressed Henry and took their laundry downstairs, and when he returned, Henry was sprawled across the bed, handsome and half-hard, an enticing picture.

Martin stripped off his pajamas and joined Henry on the bed.

Henry nuzzled his neck, and in a wistful tone asked, “Don’t you ever wish you were free?”

Martin recoiled, just fractionally. He did not wish this, not at all. “No. Why would I?”

“So you could choose me.”

“I *do* choose you.”

“Yes, but...” Henry didn’t finish his sentence.

Martin disliked the implication that he wasn’t really choosing, that his status nullified his choice. He felt the choice in his heart, where Henry wanted him to feel it. Freedom wouldn’t make him feel it any more fervently; freedom would only remove him from Henry’s sphere. Every day, when he combed his hair and brushed his teeth, he saw the vivid blue of his tattoo in the mirror and he was glad of his mark all over again because it connected him to Henry and put him in this house, at Henry’s side.

Free boys might be close friends, but it was nothing like the closeness a master could have with a companion. Free boys weren’t curling up and sharing a pillow. Free boys weren’t drying each other after baths. Free boys weren’t licking each other’s cocks. The extreme loving closeness he and Henry shared was only possible because they had the excuse of the master-slave relationship to obscure the detail and depth of what existed between them. This freedom to be together in some more meaningful way that Henry envisioned was pure, exasperating fantasy.

“I do choose you,” Martin repeated. “I will always choose you.”

“You love me,” Henry verified.

“I do. I love you. I belong to you. My feelings are the same as yours. They’re not different because I’m a slave, Henry.”

“I know that,” Henry hurried to assure him, but plainly he didn’t know.

Martin couldn’t begin to imagine a version of himself as a free man. This Martin, this self, was the product of selective breeding and years of grooming and training and preparation. This self, this handsome boy who was optimistic and enthusiastic and loved the violin, only existed because of Ganymede. There was no alternate story that resulted in the Martin Henry loved finding his way to Henry’s side. This was self-evident to Martin, and he found Henry’s pointless fantasies of freedom annoying, at best. At other times, with their disregard for the entirety of his experience, these fantasies bordered on insulting. Outside of physical expression, Henry’s romanticism was vexing and impractical.

“It’s just that I don’t like that anyone might think you’re inferior to me because you’re a slave,” Henry said. “I wish we were on equal footing. Because really, Martin, you’re far superior to me—”

Martin scoffed at this. “I’m certainly not, Henry!”

“You’re smart and handsome and talented,” Henry pointed out. “I’m just handsome.”

Martin objected to this whole train of thought. “Henry—”

“If you were free,” Henry suggested haltingly, “and you could choose anything in the world, but you still chose me, then maybe I’d feel I deserved you.”

Poor, sweet Henry. Martin's irritation evaporated in an instant.

"Come here." He held his arms open and Henry ducked in to lean against his chest. "You're my ridiculous boy," he said. "Talking nonsense." He ruffled Henry's hair and drew him closer. "Of course you deserve me. Don't we deserve each other? It doesn't have to do with masters or slaves. You said it before yourself, it's just love."

Henry's voice was muffled against Martin's skin. "Well, yes, but...I wish..." He sighed. "I just don't understand why anyone thinks this is wrong. This is what I'm like—what *we're* like—and we can't change it. It doesn't hurt anyone for me to love you, after all."

"Well, for free people, this kind of relationship is supposed to be about having families," Martin pointed out. "You can't have a family with me."

"I don't care about a family."

"I do," Martin admitted. "I like children. I want you to give me a little Henry to spoil."

Henry considered this. Martin knew Henry felt he could somehow avoid a wife, but Martin was quite sure he could not and was prepared to make the best of it. The whole point of a wife was children, and Martin did want Henry's children.

"We'll see," Henry said grudgingly. "You know I don't want to get married at all."

Martin kissed his head, breathed in the smell of his hair. "I know. You don't have to think about it now if you don't want."

"It won't be fair to a wife. I won't love her, and I don't like the idea of ruining some girl's life just to make my father happy."

Well, it certainly wasn't a nice idea. However, much as Martin could muster only so much concern for labor slaves who were unknown to him, he had limited sympathy for this future wife, who might well have her own reasons for entering into a loveless marriage. For some girls, having an enviably handsome husband and all the money in the world might be reason enough. For people of the Blackwells' class, marriages weren't about love anyway.

Martin had heard that some of the richest women in the city had manservants who answered only to them, whose public duties were vague, and who doted on their mistresses in private, and it was further rumored that these male pets had been purchased by the women's husbands. It didn't matter why to Martin—people had reasons for all sorts of things—but he did think it meant that Henry could purchase a sex partner for his future wife if she'd let him. A House would sell a boy for nearly any purpose, after all.

"You won't ruin her life," Martin said loyally. "You'll give her beautiful children."

"I'll give *you* beautiful children," Henry corrected.

"Me, too, then," Martin agreed. "I'm looking forward to meeting them one day."

Henry shifted closer, his arm a welcome weight across Martin's ribs and his lean body radiating heat.

"You know, I never thought I'd have anything like this," Henry said, his tone low and confessional. "I thought I'd always be lonely. I thought all I'd get out of life was a wife. I didn't think I'd ever have sex with someone I loved, someone I *wanted*."

Martin hated this idea of his dear Henry miserable and alone. “Even if it wasn’t me, you’d have had a companion, though.”

“I only wanted you.”

Martin always liked hearing this. “You know I wanted you right away, too.”

“I was almost too stupid to figure it out, though.” Henry sighed.

“You weren’t stupid,” Martin insisted. “You were just...unsure. And we’re like this now, so it worked out exactly right.”

“If I hadn’t figured it out, would you have ever said anything?”

Martin had to consider this a few moments. “I don’t know if I would have *said* anything—it wouldn’t have been my place—but I might have tried to *show* you.”

“How would you have done that?”

Martin laughed. “So many times, when I was undressing you, I’d be crouched down helping you with your pajamas and debating with myself whether I could kneel up and put my mouth on your cock, just ambush you like that. I was afraid I’d scare you, though. I was afraid you’d be angry.”

“Well, I would have been startled,” Henry admitted. “I like to think I would have gotten into the spirit of the thing, though.”

“Our first night,” Martin said, “when I made you come with my hand, I couldn’t believe my luck, you know.”

“Your luck?”

Martin rolled his eyes. Surely by now this was understood. “Because of your cock, Henry. Your beautiful cock.”

Henry laughed. “Oh, of course.”

“I wanted to put it in my mouth right then, but you seemed so nervous and I didn’t want to spook you.”

Henry laughed again, low and deeply amused, and rubbed his cheek against Martin’s chest. “I hate to admit it, but I probably would’ve screamed.”

Martin remembered that nervous, shaky Henry with great fondness. He’d been so exactly what Martin wanted, and so innocent, ready to be shown everything, and—eventually—Martin had had the honor of doing just that.

Martin laughed, too. “You were so sweet and scared. I think maybe I should have been gentler with you.”

During that first encounter, Martin had been hard while he’d handled Henry’s cock, so hard he ached, but he’d wanted to keep it hidden from Henry because he’d been afraid he’d disgusted Henry with his service. He hadn’t expected a master to be so reluctant, to seem so miserable in the wake of release, and he’d begun to worry he’d somehow insulted or offended this shy, bashful boy.

“No,” Henry said. “You were very gentle.”

When he'd gone to the bathroom to wash his hand and get a cloth to clean Henry, he'd furtively put out his tongue and tasted Henry's spunk where it dripped down his wrist. After he'd retreated to his own room, he'd tried to remember the flavor, the exact salty tang, as he'd jerked off into a handkerchief. Despite his concerns about Henry's troubling reticence, he'd been optimistic about their future and hopeful that he'd get a chance to taste Henry again, straight from the source.

He'd had a disappointing few weeks, as it turned out.

But it had been all right in the end. Henry had needed time to get used to him and trust him. After all, Henry hadn't grown up surrounded by other boys elbowing and crowding and sleeping together in sweaty heaps. Henry hadn't grown up sharing friendly touches, not even with Mr. Briggs, who clearly loved Henry very much but was more given to shoving and punching. Henry was a person who needed reassurance and gentle handling, but once he'd become confident that he could touch Martin however he liked, he'd reveled in affectionate contact. Growing up, Martin had known boys who didn't like to be fawned over, but he'd always liked to be petted and doted on and loved, and so did Henry, and they could do this for each other. It was marvelous that he and Henry were so compatible in every way.

"You've always been gentle," Henry continued, stroking Martin's side lightly, just short of tickling. "At least with my feelings." He nudged Martin and added, "You haven't always been gentle with my body, not that I've minded."

Martin flashed back to the afternoon, Henry slamming into him against the mirror, and felt a tingle of interest in his groin. Would Henry want more sex before they slept? His hole was a bit sore, but there were plenty of other things they could do.

"I've learned a lot," Henry said, bashful and proud. "I know what you like and I'm good at it now. I'd fit right in at Ganymede, wouldn't I?" He lifted his head and turned to look at Martin, smiling.

No, Henry would not. He was too possessive, too sensitive, too monogamous. Martin couldn't imagine Henry having sex for sport. He was handsome enough to be a companion, to be sure, but he hadn't the right temperament. Besides, Martin wanted Henry all to himself.

But he said, "Oh, yes. We'd have been sneaking off to the barns at every opportunity." He had a moment's fantasy of a group encounter centered on Henry, all his Ganymede roommates wanting their turns, but the fantasy lost its charm quickly when he recognized that the boy Henry would likely be most attracted to besides himself was Noah.

Henry was completely unsuited to being a slave, of course, but if he'd been born into servitude, he'd at least have been able to love another boy without anyone particularly minding.

Henry was quiet for a time, occasionally nuzzling or stroking Martin's chest. "I feel so lucky," he said, "that you love me, too. I thought you might, but I wasn't sure."

"I definitely do." Martin ran his fingers through Henry's hair and gave it a little tug. "Don't ever doubt it."

"It makes me so happy. I wish I could tell someone."

Martin tensed alert. "But you can't. You know you can't."

"Of course not," Henry agreed. "But I still want to."

Martin relaxed slowly. He had to trust Henry to be discreet. Henry wasn't stupid.

Martin sometimes chafed a little at the need for vigilance regarding public displays, but it was part of his job to encourage responsible decisions. Henry was a gentleman, and he must always *appear* a gentleman, which meant Martin had to make sure he was never shown in a sordid light. If it became known that he and Henry were romantically involved, it would be a colossal failing on his own part, even if Henry were the one who let the information out. As much as he might want to boast and brag and proclaim their amatory superiority to the world, Martin knew any such indiscretions would have severe repercussions. So instead of sharing the extent of his tender feelings with all and sundry, he had to advise caution and discourage Henry from reaching for his hand where anyone might see.

Even at Ganymede, where two men together held no stigma, there had still been rules about public displays, with chastisements for anything more intimate than holding hands or pecking cheeks. Here in the wider world, it was unreasonable for Henry to want even as much as that, and that's what Martin told himself when he sternly rebuffed Henry's surreptitious advances in carriages or behind cover of omnibus seats. He'd remind himself that it was better to be safe than to be acknowledged, and felt that he'd much rather have the relationship he had with Henry, with all the social restrictions in place, than be back on the farm holding hands with his friends.

Once again, Henry lifted his head and turned to look up at Martin. "Will you say it once more?" Henry asked. "I won't ask again, I promise."

"You can ask as often as you'd like," Martin told him. "I do love you. I love you very much."

Henry seemed very happy with this. "I love you, too."

He began to play with Martin's cock, idle fondling, sliding the foreskin over the curve of the head and off again. Martin was hard in an instant, drawing in a sharp breath while Henry's thumb slid across the wet slit.

"What are you doing?" he asked hoarsely, just wanting an idea of where this might be going. He shifted his hips so that he was just that much closer to Henry.

"Helping you go to sleep," Henry told him. "Close your eyes if you want."

Martin didn't want to close his eyes. He wanted to watch Henry do it.

Henry circled Martin's nipple with his tongue and moved so that he could kiss his way down Martin's ribs. All the hairs stood up on Martin's skin as Henry kissed his way across the flat of his smooth belly. Martin's cock bumped against the underside of Henry's jaw and he gave a little nudge with his hips, Henry's stubble prickling pleasantly sharp against tender skin.

Henry's tongue dipped into Martin's navel, and it tickled, and Martin's entire body jerked. He laughed and pushed at Henry's head. "Don't."

Henry snickered and kept moving, pressing open-mouthed kisses to Martin's skin. Martin concentrated on staying still and patient, on waiting for Henry to get to his cock, but it was impossible, and he squirmed, ticklish and aroused, and lifted his hips to meet Henry's mouth.

"So impatient!" Henry laughed and held him down, using his hipbones like handles. "Do you think I'm going to put it in my mouth? You've definitely got the wrong idea." However, he maneuvered himself between Martin's thighs, putting himself in cocksucking position.

"What else do you have to do down there?" Martin asked. "You might as well put it in your mouth so you don't get bored."

“I could read instead,” Henry suggested. “I could make an early night of it.”

Martin shook his head, a definitive judgment. “No. You should suck my cock.”

“Why?” Henry bent and licked the head.

“Oh! For, uh, health reasons.” Martin shifted to better line his cock up with Henry’s mouth.

Henry laughed. “Whose health?”

“Obviously yours,” Martin told him. He ran the fingers of both hands through Henry’s hair and steered him into position, pushed his prick in the direction of Henry’s mouth to make his wishes clear, and let Henry take over.

As Henry made him come for the third time, he was awash with the joy of being loved, of having his feelings returned. He would have given Henry the valentine no matter what, but he was glad, immeasurably glad, that Henry had had a card for him, too. He felt a little guilty about accepting Henry’s confession—it was perfectly acceptable for him to love his master, but it wasn’t really appropriate for him to be encouraging Henry to love him in return. Honestly, though, what should he do to discourage him? Henry needed badly to love someone, but it wasn’t as if there were any more appropriate person for him to turn to. Martin was lucky; he’d been in the right place at the right time. If he could dare say it, they’d both been lucky.

As Martin moaned Henry’s name and arched up off the bed, shoving his cock down Henry’s throat, he felt so full up with tenderness he was near tears. He held his breath for a moment of soundless, starless, velvet black and came with wrenching pleasure and relief. He fell back onto the bed gasping for air. Henry wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and smiled, and then he came up for a kiss.

Was Martin being selfish? It was wrong to put his feelings on par with Henry’s, and he knew it, but *Henry* liked it, and he wanted to make Henry happy always. With this giving and taking of love, Martin was providing a valuable service for his master, addressing his loneliness and providing an important physical outlet. His purpose was with Henry, and he’d do anything for him. He’d never deny that he enjoyed Henry’s company, but of course that pleasure was merely incidental to the fulfillment of Henry’s needs, and no one could fault Martin’s devotion to duty. Martin loved his work. He did not think Henry had any complaints, and his master’s opinion was the only one that mattered.

“How about you?” Henry murmured, licking Martin’s ear. “How’s your health?”

“Mmm. My health?”

“You seem sickly,” Henry suggested, rocking his hips against Martin’s.

“Oh! Oh, yes, I’m feeling quite poorly.” Martin laughed and gave Henry’s cock a slow squeeze.

Henry tilted his hips against Martin’s hand and kissed his neck. “Do we need to call a doctor?”

Martin shook his head. “Oh, no. There’s a home remedy.”

As he kissed and stroked his way down Henry’s sleek body, taking pleasure in Henry’s whimpers, Henry’s hands tangling in his hair, he marveled at the intensity of their connection, and the stark miracle of it. Why the two of them? Why Henry above all others? Why Richard over Georgie, Georgie over Charlie, and why had Charlie loved him best? There was science that could explain it, perhaps, but it might be best to leave it a mystery. All that mattered was that he loved Henry

above all and would always look out for him.

He had a moment of clarity, envisioning the future. He and Henry would grow into adulthood together, become men. Henry would marry, as he must, and Martin would help raise Henry's children. He would love Henry through it all, and if he was lucky, as he'd been so far, Henry would continue to love him.

Henry might fret about it, but Martin didn't think a wife mattered at all. A wife certainly wouldn't matter to *him*.

It seemed a lifetime ago that he'd lost Richard, that he'd been sent reeling. Was it wrong that Henry made up for that loss? Was it terrible that he missed Richard so much less with Henry in his life? He'd certainly wavered in the wake of Richard's death, but he hadn't fallen, hadn't even come close, and now he had his affection and responsibility for Henry to help him maintain his forward trajectory.

The taste of Henry filled his mouth, dominating his senses. Salty-rich and deliciously bitter, slick on his tongue. Henry whispered, *I love you*, hushed and shy, and made fists in Martin's hair.

So long as he had Henry, Henry's regard, he thought he would be able to absorb any blow and take whatever life put in his path. Experience had taught him that love made a person stronger, both giving one's heart and having the sentiment returned, and by that token he'd made Henry stronger, too. He could try relying on Henry, just a bit. He resolved to make a project of trusting in Henry's feelings, and to stop worrying about future lovers, at least for now.

Henry made a noise deep in his throat, a little growl of pleasure and abandon, and squirmed under Martin's hands, lifting his hips to meet Martin's mouth.

Martin had survived catastrophic loss in the past and was stronger for it. Richard had been irrevocably lost, but if he lost Henry to another man, there was always the chance he could win him back. A good chance. He was resilient, resourceful and determined. He felt confident he was devoted beyond any other man Henry might meet.

Whatever happened, he would survive it. He would prevail. After all, a top boy might reel in the face of a devastating set-back, but he wouldn't fall.

Martin wouldn't fall.

End Notes

This story probably makes the most sense if you are reading the series. It takes place during the events of Chapter 12 of the book *A Willful Romantic (Ganymede Quartet Book 3)*. You can find out more about *A Willful Romantic* and other books in the *Ganymede Quartet* at darrahglass.com

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