

Ewan Mostyn, third son of the Earl of Pembroke, prowled the main room of Langley's gaming hell like a golden-maned lion stalked the savannah. Ewan moved through the ornate room with its red and black damask walls, gilded moldings, and glittering chandeliers as though he owned it. He owned a share in the club, so his proprietary air was not wholly without merit. The illusion that he belonged among such opulence and fragility was somewhat less warranted.

As his feet sank into the scarlet rugs, his gaze passed over the club's dealers—men who straightened at his mere glance—over the courtesans—bold women whose eyes dipped, nevertheless, when they met his—and over the patrons—wealthy, powerful men who studiously avoided garnering his attention.

Unless they were idiots, like the two men Ewan approached now.

Charles Langley had politely ordered the anemic son of the Duke of Suffolk out of the club. The pup's debts were mounting, and his frequent bouts of inebriation were becoming tiresome. But since the lad had not taken his leave, he had become Ewan's problem.

Ewan did not like problems.

"She's mine for the night," Suffolk's son said loudly, poking another man in the chest and hauling a painted tart to his side.

The other man was somewhat older than the duke's son and rather more sober. "And I told you, sir, that I have already paid for the lady's charms. Kindly unhand her and scamper home to your father."

Ewan planted his long, muscled legs beside the two gentlemen and crossed his arms over his chest. The older man widened his eyes until his eyebrows all but reached his graying sandy brown hair. "Sir," he said with a quick bow. "I-I-I'm terribly sorry for the disruption. Lord Pincoch and I were having a slight disagreement."

Ewan looked past the older gentleman and fixed his eyes on the duke's son. All around them, conversation ceased or dimmed to mere whispers.

"Get out," Ewan said. He was a man of few words, which meant those he spoke now carried even more weight.

Pincoch was too deep in his cups to realize the danger he faced. "I'll leave when I damn well please, and no half-wit with more brawn than brains will give me orders."

Ewan felt a muscle in his jaw tense. Not personal, he told himself. But it was too late. The old fury bubbled inside him, and he struggled to contain it. His face betrayed none of the struggle, which must have been why the pup swaggered forward, pulling the tart with him.

Ewan took quick stock of the situation. The lad's friends stood behind him, uncertain what to do. The older man had his allies as well. And the tart was gasping for breath beneath Pincoch's tight hold. Ewan's course of action was clear, though Langley would undoubtedly complain about the damage later. Hell would freeze over before Ewan allowed a man to call him a half-wit and walk away in one piece.

With a speed that belied his size, Ewan grasped Pincoch's free hand and wrenched it behind his back. Pincoch immediately released the whore, who sank to her knees and gulped in a breath. Pincoch screeched for help, and that was the signal for his friends, similarly inebriated, to jump into the fray. The four men charged Ewan, who rammed Pincoch up against a gilded mirror with one hand and tossed a man back by the throat with another.

The older man grabbed the woman and pulled her under a green baize table, where several other patrons had taken refuge. Those still out in the open regretted their decision when one of Pincoch's friends heaved a chair at Ewan. It crashed into his back, and he growled with annoyance. Still holding the lad in place, he turned to see another chair sailing toward him. Ewan reached up, caught the furnishing in midair and thrust it back. It crashed into a faro table, overturning table, chairs, and chips.

Bereft of chairs, Pincoch's friends manned a frontal assault. Ewan finally released Pincoch, and when the boy sank to the ground, Ewan shoved a booted foot against his chest to hold him in place. Both hands free now, he threw a punch with his right and slammed one of his attackers back with his left. Something crashed, but Ewan didn't have time to note what it was before the next man hurtled into him. He struck Ewan in the jaw, and the offense landed him a blow to the breadbasket and an elbow to the throat. When he was on the ground, wheezing for air, another man took advantage of the lull to dance before Ewan.

Ewan almost rolled his eyes. This one thought he was Gentleman Jackson or another renowned pugilist. If there was somewhere Ewan felt at home, it was in the boxing ring. This man danced more than he fought, and while he did his fancy footwork, Ewan slammed a left hook into his jaw.

Heaving for breath but not willing to show weakness, Ewan turned his head to take in the room. “Anyone else?”

No one moved.

With a nod, Ewan lifted Pincoch’s limp body by the arms and dragged him past the broken tables and chairs, past the shattered mirror, and past the cracked marble statue. Ewan winced. That statue was new, and he fully expected Langley to opine about it for hours. A footman opened the door of the club, and Ewan tossed Pincoch out onto the street.

He turned and saw several other patrons donning coats and wraps, preparing to depart as well.

That was just what Ewan needed—for Langley and the club to lose blunt because Ewan had scared the patrons away. Goddamn it. Ewan couldn’t do anything right. He tried to do his job as the muscle of the club, but it seemed he was always making some misstep or other. He’d already broken the statue. He couldn’t be responsible for a mass exodus as well. Ewan positioned himself in front of the door and pointed back to the gaming tables. “Inside.”

“But I...” A man who had just donned his beaver hat tried to move toward the exit.

Ewan pointed to him then at the main room, and the man put a hand to his throat. “Very well. If you insist, I could play a game or two.”

He turned back to the main room, followed by the rest of the crowd.

One man, however, stood his ground. He looked as though he had recently arrived and seemed in no hurry either to step inside or flee back out the door. Instead, he leaned on his walking stick and cocked his head. He was a tall man—not as tall as Ewan but taller than average—and he had a thin form and dark hair under a beaver hat. His great coat was fine quality as was the ebony walking stick with a silver handle and tip.

“You are one of the Earl of Pembroke’s, are you not?” the man asked.

Resigned, Ewan leaned against the doorjamb, where the footmen welcomed patrons and took their coats. Some of the patrons liked to talk. Ewan had found he was not required to answer.

“Not his heir or even the spare. I know those two well. You are the soldier. The third born—or is it the fourth? I know you have a sister.”

Ewan cut his eyes to the man, and then disguised his interest by focusing on one of the flickering candles in a chandelier over a table where a group played piquet.

“Well, no matter. I had heard you were strong. You fought with Lieutenant Colonel Draven in the war.”

Ewan kept his eyes on the candle. It was an ordinary candle, sputtering and fighting to stay lit. In this world, even a candle fought for light, resisted being snuffed out.

“Now that I see you, I’m not surprised you survived,” the man went on as though the two were having a conversation. “You are uncommonly strong. And you do not like to be called stupid.”

Ewan turned his head sharply toward the gentleman, who held up his hands. “For what it is worth, I do not think you stupid. No man with less than all his wits about him survived the war against Napoleon. In fact, I would like to hire you.”

Ewan narrowed his gaze, almost disappointed. It was not the first time he’d been propositioned. Men had tried to hire him to perform in entertainments or to box for them. Women wanted him for bedsport. Ewan liked his place at Langley’s just fine. He enjoyed the modest income his portion of the club afforded him and parted with very little of it to rent a room on the second floor. As his father would not deign to step foot in a gaming hell, Ewan need not trouble with unwanted visits from the earl or any other member of his family.

“I suppose this is not the place to discuss such matters,” the man said. “Would you come to my residence?” He removed a card from a silver case and passed it to Ewan.

Ewan barely glanced at it. The light in the vestibule was too dark to read anything anyway. He put the card in his pocket.

“Right. The day after tomorrow at ten in the morning then, if you are interested. It is honest work, and I will reward you handsomely. I will give you more details when you call.”

Ewan moved aside and the gentleman passed. A footman opened the door so the yellow lights and bright sounds of the gambling hell spilled into the dark street. When he was alone again, Ewan withdrew the card and moved into a rectangle of light.

“Rrr—lil—D,” he said slowly, staring at one of the words on the card. “Rid.” His head hurt as the letters moved and jumped. He stuffed the card back into his pocket and crossed his arms again.