

Excerpt: A Rake's Redemption

A pounding on Countess Benton's bedroom door brought Alexander Ashley swiftly to a sitting position. He grabbed his shirt as he leaped out of bed, pulling up his breeches at the same time. He never took off his breeches or his boots in these circumstances precisely for this reason.

"Let me in!" an angry male voice bellowed.

Alex made for the window, which he'd left open, lithely springing over the sill to drop to the cupola one story below.

The countess followed him to the window, not bothering with a robe. "When will I see you again?"

"Let me in!" her husband shouted again.

"You had better do as he asks before he breaks the door down," Alex answered.

She turned toward the noise. "Just a minute."

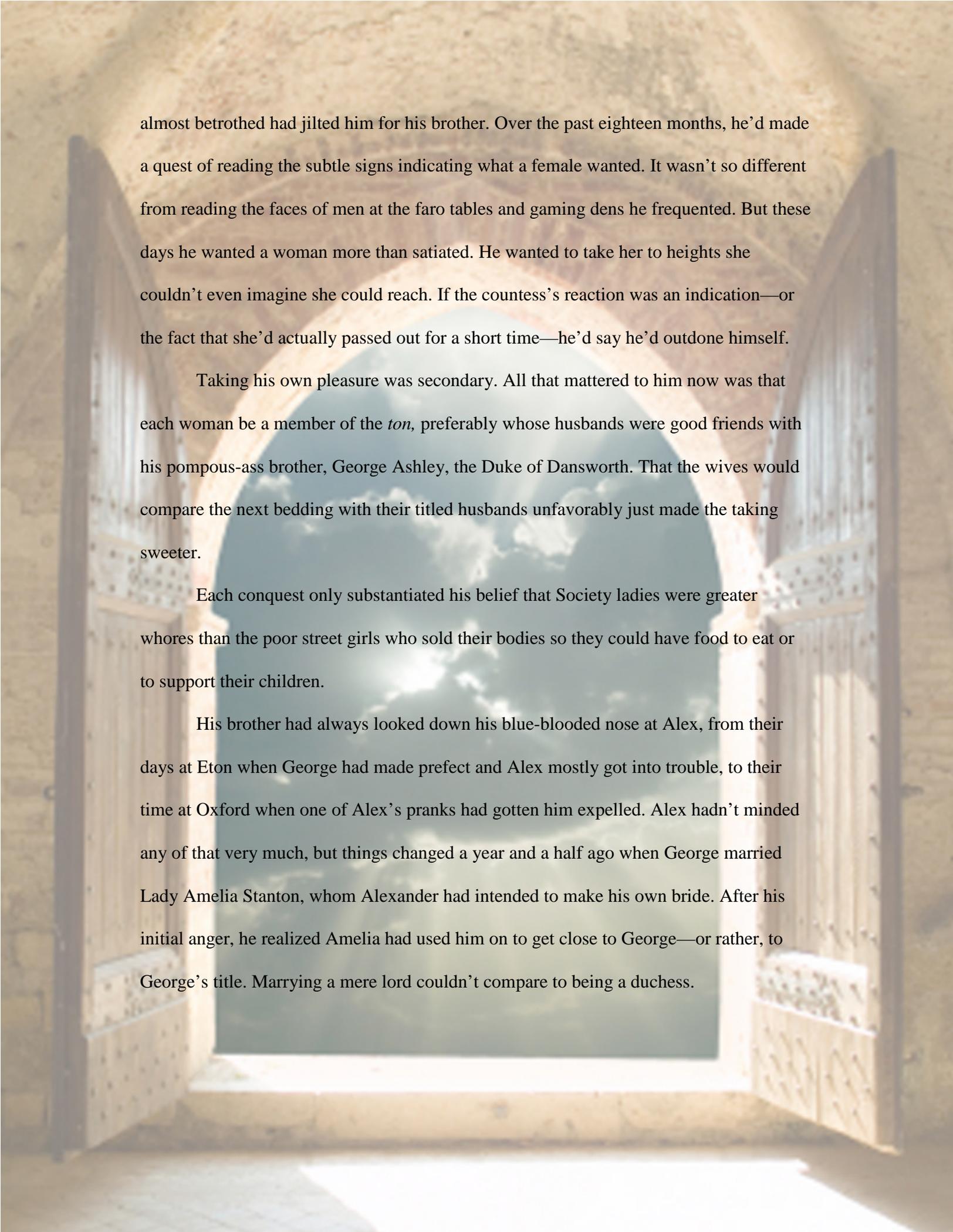
By the time she poked her head back out the window, Alex had already reached the ground. He grinned and gave her a mock salute.

"But when..."

Alex widened his grin and shook his head. He never encouraged women by returning. Then he moved into the shadows as he heard the door splinter.

As he made his way down the darkened street, he allowed himself a moment of self-congratulations. Another woman had been quite thoroughly pleased. Not just any woman, either, but Miranda Locke, wife of his damn brother's best friend.

Alex took pride in making sure any woman he took to bed was completely satisfied when he was through. That determination had taken on new meaning since his

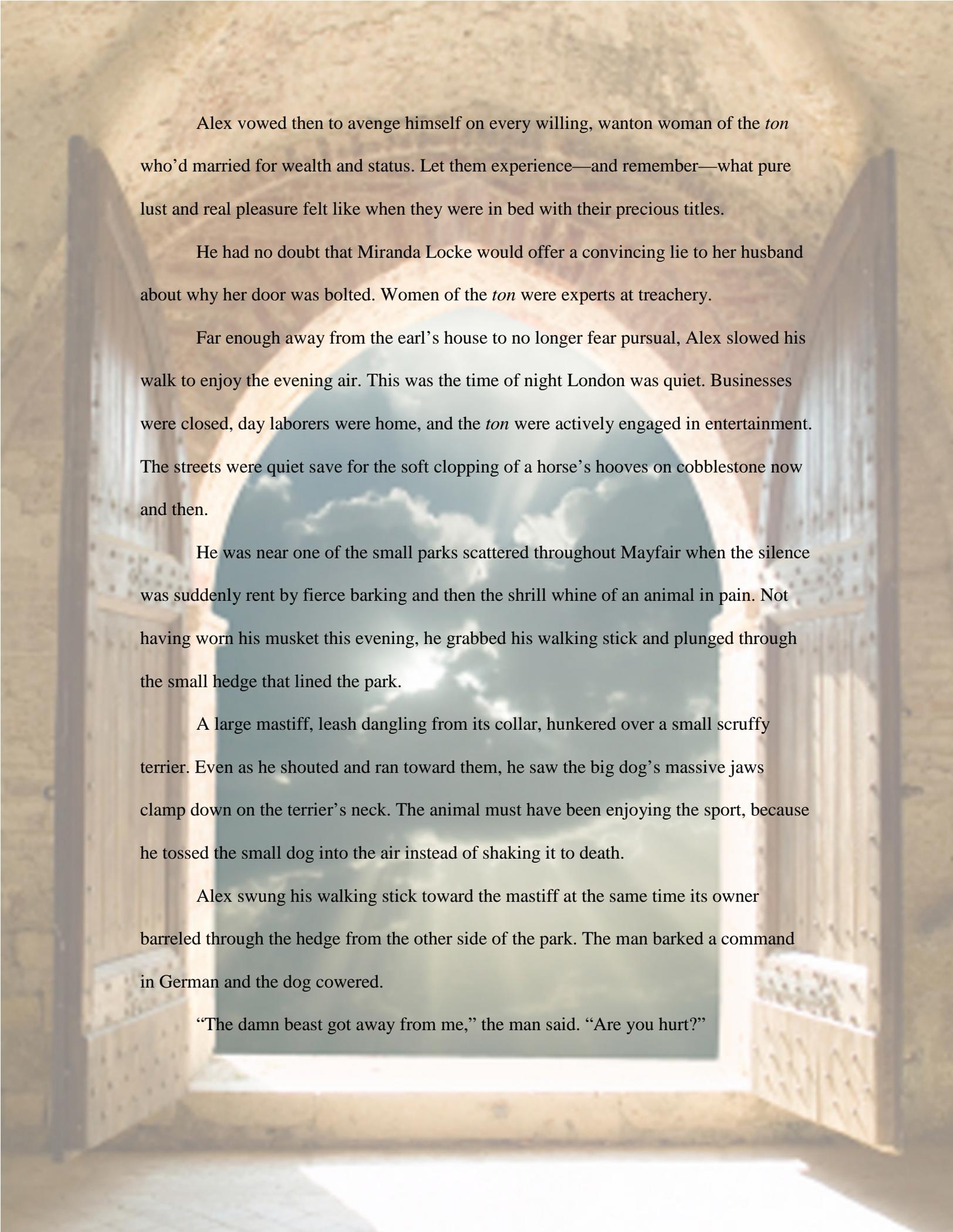
The background of the text is a photograph of an ornate, arched doorway. The doorway is made of light-colored stone or wood with intricate carvings. Through the arch, a bright, blue sky with scattered white clouds is visible. The lighting is warm and natural, suggesting a sunny day. The doorway is slightly ajar, and the floor in the foreground is a light, neutral color.

almost betrothed had jilted him for his brother. Over the past eighteen months, he'd made a quest of reading the subtle signs indicating what a female wanted. It wasn't so different from reading the faces of men at the faro tables and gaming dens he frequented. But these days he wanted a woman more than satiated. He wanted to take her to heights she couldn't even imagine she could reach. If the countess's reaction was an indication—or the fact that she'd actually passed out for a short time—he'd say he'd outdone himself.

Taking his own pleasure was secondary. All that mattered to him now was that each woman be a member of the *ton*, preferably whose husbands were good friends with his pompous-ass brother, George Ashley, the Duke of Dansworth. That the wives would compare the next bedding with their titled husbands unfavorably just made the taking sweeter.

Each conquest only substantiated his belief that Society ladies were greater whores than the poor street girls who sold their bodies so they could have food to eat or to support their children.

His brother had always looked down his blue-blooded nose at Alex, from their days at Eton when George had made prefect and Alex mostly got into trouble, to their time at Oxford when one of Alex's pranks had gotten him expelled. Alex hadn't minded any of that very much, but things changed a year and a half ago when George married Lady Amelia Stanton, whom Alexander had intended to make his own bride. After his initial anger, he realized Amelia had used him on to get close to George—or rather, to George's title. Marrying a mere lord couldn't compare to being a duchess.



Alex vowed then to avenge himself on every willing, wanton woman of the *ton* who'd married for wealth and status. Let them experience—and remember—what pure lust and real pleasure felt like when they were in bed with their precious titles.

He had no doubt that Miranda Locke would offer a convincing lie to her husband about why her door was bolted. Women of the *ton* were experts at treachery.

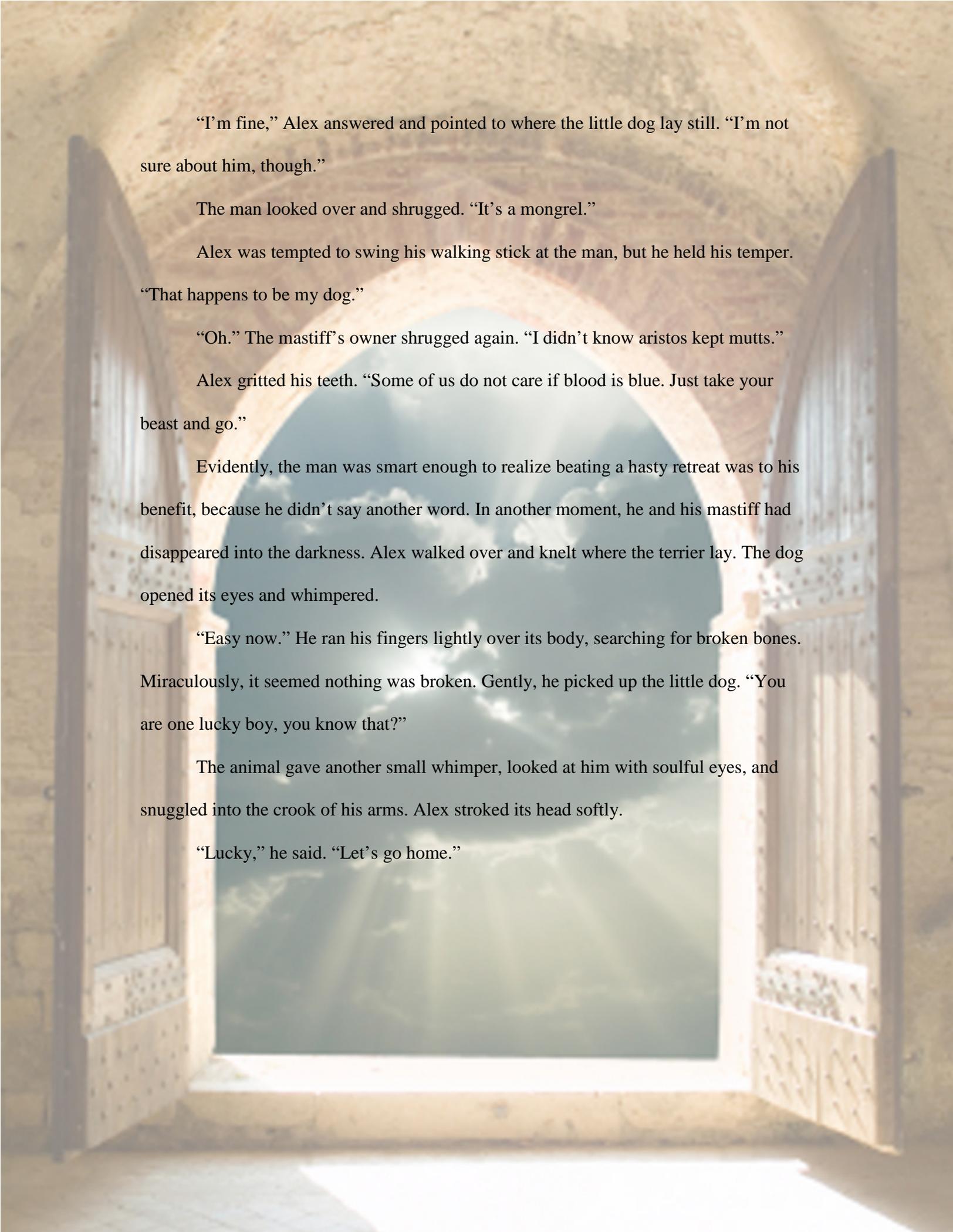
Far enough away from the earl's house to no longer fear pursual, Alex slowed his walk to enjoy the evening air. This was the time of night London was quiet. Businesses were closed, day laborers were home, and the *ton* were actively engaged in entertainment. The streets were quiet save for the soft clopping of a horse's hooves on cobblestone now and then.

He was near one of the small parks scattered throughout Mayfair when the silence was suddenly rent by fierce barking and then the shrill whine of an animal in pain. Not having worn his musket this evening, he grabbed his walking stick and plunged through the small hedge that lined the park.

A large mastiff, leash dangling from its collar, hunkered over a small scruffy terrier. Even as he shouted and ran toward them, he saw the big dog's massive jaws clamp down on the terrier's neck. The animal must have been enjoying the sport, because he tossed the small dog into the air instead of shaking it to death.

Alex swung his walking stick toward the mastiff at the same time its owner barreled through the hedge from the other side of the park. The man barked a command in German and the dog cowered.

"The damn beast got away from me," the man said. "Are you hurt?"



“I’m fine,” Alex answered and pointed to where the little dog lay still. “I’m not sure about him, though.”

The man looked over and shrugged. “It’s a mongrel.”

Alex was tempted to swing his walking stick at the man, but he held his temper. “That happens to be my dog.”

“Oh.” The mastiff’s owner shrugged again. “I didn’t know aristos kept mutts.”

Alex gritted his teeth. “Some of us do not care if blood is blue. Just take your beast and go.”

Evidently, the man was smart enough to realize beating a hasty retreat was to his benefit, because he didn’t say another word. In another moment, he and his mastiff had disappeared into the darkness. Alex walked over and knelt where the terrier lay. The dog opened its eyes and whimpered.

“Easy now.” He ran his fingers lightly over its body, searching for broken bones. Miraculously, it seemed nothing was broken. Gently, he picked up the little dog. “You are one lucky boy, you know that?”

The animal gave another small whimper, looked at him with soulful eyes, and snuggled into the crook of his arms. Alex stroked its head softly.

“Lucky,” he said. “Let’s go home.”