



Duke of Seduction

Author: *Violet Hamers*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "I can fulfill all your desires... even the ones you try to hide..."

A breath away from being married off, Helena is desperate to fulfill her scandalous list. And the first thing she wants: a passionate kiss... Duke Morgan never expected to find his friend's sister in the most dangerous place in London. Nor that she would tempt him with an irresistible proposal...

Submit to him for seven nights in exchange for the pleasure she craves. Only Morgan's patience is being tested. For when she falls apart so beautifully in his arms... how can he resist ravishing her completely?

*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then Duke of Seduction is the novel for you.

Total Pages (Source): 90

CHAPTER ONE

“Helena, please,” Teresa hissed, tugging at her hand. “This was fun in the beginning, but have we not sufficiently proven our bravery? Come, let us get back to your house before your brother discovers that we have snuck out.”

Behind her black lace mask Helena Curtis, the Duke of Larsen’s younger sister, rolled her blue eyes. She and Teresa Bond, a new but dear friend, had been industrious in securing an invitation to the infamous Devil’s Masquerade, but now that it was time to actually go, Teresa was pestering her endlessly with annoying “what-ifs.”

“You truly think I went to all this trouble just to secure an invitation?” Helena asked, her tone low so the others in attendance would not hear them, “I want more than that, and so do you! You cannot deny that you are as curious as I am about these wicked soirees.”

Teresa blew out a frustrated huff from behind her peacock feather mask at being called out.

“What if it is not what we imagined?” Teresa countered, smoothing her hands stressfully down her shimmering forest green gown.

“What if it is such, and so much more?” Helena countered.

She pulled her friend closer while walking towards one of the many full-length mirrors that adorned the foyer to the private party, studied her reflection and smiled

wickedly. Helena had traded her normal array of pinks and reds for jet black. Even her lips, which she usually coated with a rose-colored tint, had been carefully painted black. She looked wicked, dangerous and, in her opinion, menacingly beautiful.

“You know how insistent Ambrose has been lately,” Helena whispered. “He wants to see me married off to a man of his choosing.”

“Your brother loves you, Helena. You know he would not choose an ill fit for you,” Teresa replied. “Look at him and Barbara! He only wants the same for you.”

It was true. While Ambrose was the lord of their household and ruled with an iron fist, he also wanted Helena to be happy and settled in a good marriage. She had no doubt her brother would find her a calm, strong nobleman of decent age who would respect her. However, Helena remained unconvinced that a safe union was all she needed. She wanted passion, lust and all the passionate moments that had been so tantalizingly detailed in her beloved books, and she wanted to experience it all before being forced to wed someone “safe” and “secure.”

Helena knew that it was unladylike to have such desires, but for once, just once, she wanted to experience life the way she wanted, not the way others had planned on her behalf. Even her dearest friends Alice, Lydia, and Barbara often babied and sheltered her. She wanted to find someone who would not view her as someone that needed to be protected, but as a woman who deserved to be devoured.

“You may leave if you like,” Helena said kindly, so her friend would know that she harbored no resentment towards her hesitation. “But I will stay, Teresa, if only to know that I truly tried to experience that which I desire. Tonight, I desire a kiss. It is the first item on my list. A kiss like the ones that are described in our books.”

Their books differed from the seductive novels in which Alice and Barbara buried themselves. Though, if truth be told, the collection did come from Alice’s wickedly

carnal library. She had found the abandoned library in Duncan's estate in Baxter when she had first moved in and had immediately claimed it as her own. It was no ordinary reading room: its sole purpose was to house erotic novels. And there, among the many shelves of sinful texts, Helena had found the Seduction of the Gods collection and had shared them with Teresa.

The books were erotically rewritten tales about Greek gods who fell in love with one another or with their human paramours. Unlike other library books, the collection eroticized the concept of being owned, almost enslaved, by their desire for their lovers. They spoke of yearning and need in a way Helena had never experienced. She began dreaming of sinking to her knees before a handsome, dominant god who did not just lust for her body, but also for her mind and soul.

Helena yearned to be wanted so desperately that she would be seduced into obedience, into shedding her headstrong mantle and letting her body experience everything it was truly meant to feel. Pleasure. Lust. Willingness. She could not picture herself being with any of the men Ambrose had already paraded before her.

As a result, a plan to capture the experience for herself had slowly developed in her mind. Before she became chained — wedded, to a man who would never understand her intense desires — she intended to find, explore and become one with hedonistic pleasures.

Teresa closed her eyes tightly and let out a sigh. "That is also what I want," she confessed in a whisper. "Perhaps you are right."

"She is," a deep voice stated.

Helena glanced at the reflection in the mirror as Teresa whirled towards the voice. They were greeted by a tall, masked man who wore a traditional, well-tailored tuxedo, beneath which a glaringly white shirt could be seen. His mask, a smooth,

bone white ensemble that only covered his eyes, highlighted a strong, clean-shaven jaw and sharp cheekbones. His black, curly hair was combed back straight, only letting the edges curl at the nape of his neck.

“Allow me to welcome you to the Devil’s Masquerade,” the man said, bowing as he offered his hand to Teresa.

Helena’s eyes shot to her friend, whose face was as red as the nearby roses. She looked to Helena hesitantly, and after receiving a subtle nod from her friend, she slipped her fingers into the white-gloved hand of the stranger.

“Thank you, um, my lord,” Teresa said breathily, “My name is?—”

“We do not use our real names here, little peacock,” the man countered before Teresa could finish. He swept low and caressed his lips across Teresa’s knuckles, making her gasp and shiver.

“This is a safe space for all who attend. We do not use names. We do not remove our masks. And we do not take what is not offered.”

“Oh, my,” Teresa breathed, a slow smile spreading across her face.

Helena felt her lips twitch into a smile as she watched her friend become more flustered than before. Teresa now appeared much less interested in leaving the soiree.

“Perhaps you could help my friend to relax a little, my lord?” Helena asked, eyeing the two of them.

“And you, little Nyx?” the man asked, his posture straightening as he looked Helena up and down. “Do you need assistance in...relaxing yourself? I have a friend or two that would be honored to be your guide.”

Although flattered by the offer, Helena politely declined.

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“Be merry, this evening, my friend,” she whispered to Teresa as she gave her a farewell hug. “Be wicked, but be safe.”

“You also,” Teresa whispered back. “Meet me in front of this mirror when the clock strikes one.”

For a moment Helena kept her eyes on her friend’s back, watching as she was led away by the handsome yet polite stranger. Then, free at last to do as she wished, she stepped away from the mirror and allowed herself a moment to take her first real look around. Every scone was encased in red glass, and even the high walls of the room were swathed with matching red silk, disguising the room. Black flooring shone so vigorously that it reflected her appearance.

As she walked around she could see that every person in attendance was equally disguised. There was no pastel or light to be found among the dark. Like her and Teresa, everyone was dressed in black or a similarly muted color. The faces of the women were also painted differently. There were no tones to highlight their natural beauty. Instead, cosmetics were used to dramatize the eyes, lips and cheekbones which peeked out from beneath their masks..

As she took them all in, women and men alike, her eyes paused on a man leaning in the doorway between the foyer and the salon. Like her, he had opted for an all-black ensemble, and his head of deep brown hair was encircled by a crown of black thorns. His lips twitched into a seductive smile as she settled her gaze on him, and his defined jaw line dipped into a nodding bow as he raised his glass to her.

“Some wine, fair lady?” a man asked, holding a tray out to her.

Helena blinked, startled that she had so easily forgotten that there were others in the room. She glanced towards the masked man in the doorway once more and he gave her another nod, as if giving her permission to accept it.

“Thank you,” she murmured, turning to the waiter for the glass.

The waiter bowed to her as she brought the glass to her lips. The dark ruby wine was thicker and sweeter than any she had ever tasted, and she let out a soft gasp as she let it roll and play on her tongue.

“Drink it slow, my lady,” the waiter murmured in warning, a wicked grin on his masked face as he rose to his full height. “It is stronger than most.”

Helena gave him a nod, believing what he said to be true, and then turned back to the doorframe. Disappointment churned in her belly when she saw that her masked man was no longer there, and her black-painted lips drew down into a pout at her missed opportunity.

“Pray, do you know who that was?” she asked the waiter.

He chuckled as he shook his head.

“Even if I did, my lady, I am not at liberty to reveal that to you,” he replied. “My master takes the anonymity of his guests very seriously.”

He leaned closer and tilted the carafe of wine to top off her glass.

“But I will say this. If there is someone, or something special you are looking for, this is the place to find what you want.”

Taking a breath to steady herself, Helena willed her most adventurous spirit to the

forefront. She had read of naked bodies and had seen them depicted in art. She had prepared herself to be shocked at what she might see and had opened her mind to accept it. Tonight was about not about judgment, but curiosity.

Was she truly the sensual woman she believed herself to be, or was she merely a silly girl who read too many books? Tonight, she would find out. Helena headed through the same doorway from which the handsome masked man had disappeared. Upon stepping inside the room she was instantly greeted with a myriad of perspectives.

Though most people in the room were dressed, standing and conversing, her eyes were immediately drawn to the people that were not. In the far opposite corner from where she stood, Helena saw a woman with nothing on but a mask, her legs splayed apart over the arms of a settee as a fully dressed man feasted between her thighs. The woman's dark red lips were formed in a perfect O as her body writhed, lost in pure ecstasy. Helena noticed that some nearby guests were watching the couple, but there were many others that were conversing as though they were at any ordinary party.

Helena waited for the shock to set in, to feel a sense of shame creeping through her that would compel her to run out, but it never came. Instead, warmth flooded her body and teased her nerve endings, and she found herself smiling with giddiness.

CHAPTER TWO

He wanted her. There was something so familiar about the woman in the shimmering black, deep V-necked gown, and yet something equally delightful, strange, and unknown. Morgan had attended the Devil's Masquerade many times, and he knew the usual women that found their way there by special invitation. However, this woman was new. Even in the black ensemble that highlighted her slim, nimble figure so well, he could tell she was untouched by the debauchery that surrounded them.

When their eyes met, Morgan had felt a bolt of lust strike his groin like it never had

before. It only amplified when she obeyed his silent order to accept the wine; the pleasure of it so intense that he had to walk away and take a moment to recork the lust that had erupted after she had sought his permission.

“Hades,” a woman purred, pulling Morgan from his thoughts.

“Hecate,” Morgan replied, raising his glass respectfully to the woman approaching him. They all played on names here; most of them drawn to the Greek Pantheon for inspiration. “You are looking as delightfully lethal as always.” Several other women flocked by her side, their eyes as hungry as hers as they approached.

“I was hoping you would say sensual,” the woman purred, the black feathers of her mask fluttering around her red-painted lips. “But I will admit that I can be...poisonous.”

Morgan chuckled and waited for the invitation he knew was about to be offered.

“My friends and I have missed you since the last party,” she went on, “It normally takes several men to accomplish what you were able to achieve all by yourself.”

“For all of us,” one of her friends added. This caused the rest of the women to let out sensual laughs, and Morgan smiled devilishly in return.

Behind the group of women he once again caught sight of the woman he had seen in the foyer. He could tell from the way she was looking around that she was fascinated by what she saw. She was also slightly intimidated, but she was hiding it well. From the way in which she carried herself, no one would guess that it was her first time at the event. She walked with gliding footsteps that appeared to make her float, a graceful neck that carried her chin high, and shoulders that were proudly set back.

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And those lips. Every other woman had painted theirs blood red, but the black paint she wore on hers was remarkable against her milky white skin and soft pink cheeks. She looked like a woman who belonged to the darkness. A woman who belonged to him.

He was watching her observe the couple on the settee when she slowly turned her eyes away from them and spotted him once more. Her slow-moving gaze stopped when she saw him, and Morgan felt his arousal stir against his black breeches. He inclined his head towards her, just slightly so the other women would not notice. Lifting up his left hand, he pointed his forefinger and middle finger at her and tilted them up ever so slightly. As if she knew exactly what he had meant, she kept her eyes on him as she brought her wine glass to her lips and took another sip.

Such a good little demon, Morgan mused silently as his arousal heightened.

“What say you, Hades?” Hecate asked, drawing his attention back to her and her friends. “Join us in the Spartan room later?”

“I shall see you there at some point, I have no doubt,” he murmured, not taking his eyes from his new little goddess of darkness.

“Soon?” one asked, the hope obvious in her voice.

“We do not rush the lord of the underworld,” Hecate chastised, playfully tapping her friend’s shoulder with her fan.

Morgan bowed his head in agreement, and without another word from him, Hecate

ushered her bevy of friends away. With no one now standing between him and his new goddess of the night, he inclined his head towards the nearby hallway, and without waiting to see if she would follow, walked down the darkened path.

Helena felt fire burst through her veins as she took her first step towards the man who had caught her eye. She had done well, she thought, disguising her search for him with her casual, confident walk and air, but the moment she had spotted him again, she felt the surge of nerves traveling through her chest, making it feel as though there was not enough and far too much air all at the same time.

Yes, she thought. This was it. This was exactly what she was looking for, and she had found it. One night. One night when she could be herself and could step into the seductive darkness of being unknown and unwatched by prying social eyes.

She followed him obediently, her heart pounding faster as she turned down the hallway he had just traversed. Her nipples and abdomen tightened as she saw him at its far end, leaning against a doorframe with one foot pressed to the floor and the other to the wall. He watched her silently as she approached, as if unbothered by her slow pace.

It was only as the distance between them began to close that she wondered whether her plan was a mistake. Helena's mind demanded that she turn around, but her body refused to listen. She was going to do this.

"Look at you," he praised, pushing himself away from the wall.

Like a predator, he walked a slow circle around her, his eyes roaming from the small black coronet of bronze twisted snakes in her hair to the shimmering black slippers she wore on her feet. Entranced, Helena said nothing as they circled one another, not even reacting when he was pressed her back into the wall he had occupied.

She let out a small gasp as her back brushed against the red hanging silk, and before she could speak a word his hand stroked her cheek and trailed down her jawline to her neck. Helena's fluttered her lashes as his surprisingly soft touch shot waves of pleasure through her, unaware that his arms and body had caged her against the wall.

"You are new here," he whispered into her ear, his breath teasing her lobe. "You must be. I would remember someone so tempting, gracing our little pocket of darkness."

Eyes still closed, Helena nodded. His sensual touch against her throat was making every fiber of her body spark with life. Her back relaxed into the silk as she let his fingers continue to trail again over her jawline, down her throat, and then gasped again as he gently gripped the back of her neck. He drew closer, the scent of sandalwood mingling with his body heat making her warm and dizzy.

She opened her mouth slightly as he dipped his head close to her, and inhaled softly as the tip of his nose trailed from her jaw to her collarbone. A low, rumbling sound of approval came from his chest as he took her in.

"Honeysuckle," he noted with praise, pulling back with a smile so sinful she felt her knees attempt to buckle.

"Do we have Persephone among us?" he teased, pulling away to look in her eyes. "Mmm, with those blue eyes sparkling with life, I believe that is who you are," he said, answering himself.

She knew the Greek tale of Persephone. How she was stolen by Hades, the lord of the underworld, to be his bride. However, instead of giving into her husband's darkness and drowning in sorrow, she had tricked him at his own game, and for half of each year she walked the earth during the time of sun and warmth. That was the version of the tale she loved the most. Despite knowing nothing about this man before her, Helena felt flattered by the comparison and nodded once more.

The man's wicked smile grew wider as he reached for the hand holding her wine glass, and with gentle fingers guided it to her lips. Desire poured through her and tingled into her empty fingertips as she willingly parted her lips for him. He let out a deep hum of pleasure as she accepted the small sip that he carefully poured into her mouth.

"You like not having to think, do you not?" he whispered, tracing his fingertips down her throat as she slowly swallowed.

Helena felt a jolt of terror at having her desire summarized into one short statement by this stranger. How had he known, when she had never found the proper words to describe what she was seeking?

"Do not be afraid of me," Hades said, his deep voice coaxing as he slowly drank in the fear emanating from her eyes. "Would you like another drink?"

Drawing in a shaky breath, Helena nodded numbly. This time, though, instead of bringing the glass to her lips, he brought it to his own and took a pull of the wine as his eyes remained on hers. The hand around her throat slowly traced upwards until his fingers were curled around her jaw. At the soft caress of his fingertips, Helena parted her lips, and her body felt warm and heavy as he slowly brought his mouth down to hers.

He stopped just a breath before his lips could brush against hers, and slowly trickled the wine from his mouth into her own. A soft whimper left Helena's lips as the wine touched her tongue, and she began to tremble as her throat greedily worked to devour the small trickle of liquid.

As she swallowed, dizziness exploded within her, and she swayed as a rush of carnal need ebbed out of the explosion. In a second, the glass of wine was gone from his hand, and he was letting out a deep, taunting chuckle as he helped her lean back

against the wall.

“I would love to take that as a yes, little Persephone,” he teased in a cruel yet comforting tone, “but I am going to have to hear you say the word.”

His hand then came up to her face again, cupping her chin in a way that allowed him to glide his thumb over her wine-damp bottom lip. She whimpered at the sensation; her nerves snapping with white-hot energy.

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“Yes,” she whispered, barely able to say the word.

“Verygood, little Persephone,” he praised in the same erotic but condescending tone, rewarding her with another massaging stroke of his hand, this time at the back of her neck. “Now tell me your limits. What do you want to happen tonight?”

Everything, Helena immediately thought as her body seemed to become boneless. Through the pleasure though, a voice of reason reminded her of her promise to herself and Teresa. Tonight was for a kiss and kiss only, although she was quite sure what she had just experienced was far more intimate than any kiss could ever hope to be.

“May we...I...I wish to be kissed tonight, but not an ordinary kiss, I...” she was trying to find the words, but her brain became incapable of formulating the sentence. Hades’s thumb paused in mid stroke along her lips as his eyes grew wide with recognition, and he uttered the single word that could make her fear for her life.

“Helena!?”

Helena’s body was immediately wrenched from its state of euphoria when she realized that she recognized Hades’s voice.

CHAPTER THREE

“What in God’s name were you thinking,” Morgan hissed, pulling his hand away from Helena’s mouth as though it had scorched him.

He grabbed her by the hand, ignoring the way his palm exploded with heat from her touch, and all but dragged her into a nearby room.

“I beg your pardon!” Helena hissed back as she fought against his grip. “Who are you to...oh good heavens, Morgan?!”

The anger in her voice transformed into genuine surprise as he pulled off his mask, and even through hers he could see the dread fill her expression.

“What are you doing here?”

From the nearest sconce Morgan pulled away the red votive, flooding the room with a soft yellow glow so that they could see one another better. It was a mistake, as the dim red lights that once hid some of her sensual features brought out the best of them. Her stunning blue eyes, the fullness of her black-painted lips, and the swell of her bosom as it threatened to escape from her dress.

A carnal and deep hunger unleashed in him as he scanned his eyes down the lithe body of his best friend’s little sister. He was immediately filled with hot shame, not because of what he had intended to do, but with whom he had intended to do it. With significant effort, he dragged his eyes away from her and shrugged out of his coat and held it out to her at arm’s length.

“Honeysuckle,” he murmured, shaking his head in disbelief, “I knew I recognized that perfume from somewhere.”

Helena paled even more as she pulled off her mask, using it to cover a small expanse of her tempting bosom.

“Here,” he insisted, shaking his jacket at her, “Put it on so that we may speak without further distraction.”

He glanced at her once more and watched as a gorgeous pout formed on her lips and her delicate brows creased into a frown.

“Why must I put that on?” she asked defiantly. “You had no trouble speaking to me a few moments ago.”

“Yes, well...that was different!” He stammered like a young, unseasoned buck. He had seen other women in much less, and yet...

“Put that damned thing on, Helena, and tell me why you are here,” he commanded. “Does your brother know you are here? Of course not. God, he is going to lose his mind if he finds out. I know you watched the couple on the settee. What else did you see?”

“Now, just you wait a moment!” Helena shot back.

She took the jacket with an aggressive tug, shooting her arms through the large sleeves with emphasis, and pulled it tightly around her.

“This is none of my brother’s business or yours, and you have no right telling him I was here.”

Morgan let out an annoyed laugh as he shook his head, finally turning his gaze back to her. His jacket swallowed her tiny figure, making her appear more adorable than he had ever seen her. He groaned internally at the sight and rubbed his face. Not her. Not mine. Wrong. So, so wrong.

“Oh, I am certainly not the one that will be confessing to Ambrose about this, Helena,” he laughed darkly. “You see, I value my life, and if I was to be the one to deliver this news, I would surely lose it at the end of his pistol barrel.”

A look of relief spread across her face, and she took a deep breath.

“Exactly. You did not see me and I did not see you, so we are both free to go on our merry ways without any discord.”

She attempted to remove his jacket, but in an instant he was towering over her, his hands clasped tightly around the lapels to prevent her from doing so.

“You still have not answered my question, Helena,” he said, meeting her annoyed gaze with his own. “Do you have any idea how dangerous parties like this are? You said you simply wanted a kiss, but the men who attend these things are devilishly convincing. Most here have trained to be masters in the art of seduction. You could have walked out of here experiencing much more than your first kiss.”

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To his surprise, Helena chortled and rolled her eyes.

“You would know all about that, would you not?” she taunted, her black lips forming into a wicked smile. “I do not know why I did not predict that I would find you here. Of course you would be. The illustrious Lord of Seduction. Many men take on lovers but not like you. You are a vile species all on your own.”

“I know exactly who I am, you need not remind me,” Morgan countered.

He was well acquainted with his reputation but did nothing to negate it. His appetites ran deep and there was no shortage of women that wanted him to feast on them. Although the virgin requirement was more hearsay, he could not deny the satisfaction he felt when women asked him to be their guide into the world of carnal pleasure. He knew who he was and held no shame about it; if only because he had never once needed to force himself upon a woman.

His mind suddenly flashed with the image of Helena pressed up against the hallway wall with his hand around her throat. Her breaths had been so soft, so full of anticipation. Had she not spoken he would have taken her.

“You must leave,” he insisted, releasing his hold on the jacket and taking a step back.

This was not right. Even if on some level he wished he had never recognized her voice, this could not happen. Not with him. Not with anyone else. Helena was not just a lady. She was a good woman who did not need to become mixed up in such debauchery.

“You will get in your carriage, you will go home, you will take off this- this—” his eyes swept down her form once more and he nearly groaned aloud, “this wicked dress and burn it. You will wipe that dark paint from your lips and cheeks, and you will lay your pretty head on your pillow and pretend this was all a dream. Then, when you wake up, you will swath yourself in your normal pretty pink gown and you will never come here again. Am I clear?”

To his surprise, Helena’s hands shot out and shoved at his chest as her beautiful face scrunched up with pure fury.

“How dare you give me orders!” she hissed defiantly. “If I was Ambrose’s little brother you would not command such things from me. You would be clapping me on my back and pointing me towards the nearest willing woman.”

While it was true that Morgan did not find the standards of their society fair, he was not about to agree with her on the fact.

“Do not be so brattish, Helena. You will leave here of your own volition or I will gag you, tie you, and take you out myself,” Morgan warned, his voice dangerously low.

He pressed his eyes shut at the thought, silently cursing himself for putting such an erotic image into his own head and took another step back.

“You are as bad as him!” Helena spat, tearing his jacket from her arms. She gathered it up into a messy ball, slammed it down onto the floor, and stomped on it angrily with one foot.

Morgan bit back his retort as she slid her mask back on, doing nothing to disguise her anger — and with muttered curses — she opened the door and stormed away.

“Christ in heaven,” Morgan muttered, bracing his hands upon his hips as he watched

her leave.

He was as hard as marble from their spat and he hated himself for it. This was Helena! In a way, she was a little sister to all four of them. The little beam of pink light in the darkness that had poured over their lives. And yet, here she was at the Devil's Masquerade as though the place existed just for her.

Morgan's thoughts were interrupted as the door opened and he whirled around, ready to carry out his earlier threat to Helena for daring to return. Disappointment welled in him as he saw Hecate step into the room alone.

She cocked her head to the side, a seductive smile forming on her lips as she pointed towards the one light without its red votive.

"No mask and actual light?" she mused, strutting towards him. "I thought we had planned on meeting in the Spartan room?"

Morgan quickly gathered himself, reapplied his usual carefree smile and pulled his mask back on before replacing the red votive over the small yellow flame.

"We are," he agreed, pushing thoughts of Helena from his mind. "You caught me in a private moment of adjustment. My mask faltered."

To him it was a clear lie, but Hecate simply shrugged at his excuse and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Perhaps you should keep your mask off, Your Grace," she purred, pressing her body tightly against his. "No disguise is as handsome as your face, unlike some of the others here."

Morgan ignored the sudden urge to pull her away from her. There were rules to

the Devil's Masquerade. Masks and anonymity were a must. Even if individuals were able to recognize the face and title behind the costume.

"Flattery will get you everywhere, my lady" he said, barely able to put feeling into the words. "But the mask stays on. Now come, we have an appointment with your friends, do we not? We must not disappoint them."

Cheeks burning with embarrassment, eyes pricking with tears from an emotion she could not understand, Helena made her way back to the main room of the party and found Teresa. Jealousy and self-pity filled her as she spotted her friend in the white-masked man's lap, their lips firmly locked together.

Teresa had been the one to object, yet she had been the only one to receive the desired kiss. Helena tamped down her disappointment as she walked over and tapped Teresa on the shoulder. It took her friend a long moment to pull herself away from the man's lips, and even then, it seemed to take a moment longer for Teresa to recognize her.

"Hel— oh, I mean, Nyx," she panted, touching a fingertip to her bruised lips. "There you are. Did you find who you were looking for?"

"I did not," she stated, her tone harsher than intended as she tugged at Teresa to get out of the man's lap. "Come, we must leave. There is no one here I wish to kiss."

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Helena was vaguely aware that she had just lied, but she ignored it.

Teresa pouted but remained seated in the man's lap.

“Whatever is the matter?”

“If it is a kiss you are looking for my little Nyx, I would be happy to help,” the man in the white mask offered, smiling at her seductively.

In his lap Teresa blushed and giggled before she said, “he is quite good at it, Nyx.”

Nyx. The Goddess of Night in Greek Mythology. Helena knew the legend well, but she had the sudden urge to correct them. If her moniker was to be anything, it was the one Morgan had given her. Persephone. She shook her head, pushing the thought away and said, “thank you for your um, kind offer, but no. We really must be leaving now.”

“It was a pleasure,” the man said to Teresa, sealing one more kiss of Teresa's lips before she was pulled out of his lap.

“And more,” Teresa sighed dreamily, wiggling her fingers at him as Helena began to pull her towards the foyer.

“What has gotten into you?” Teresa asked once they were back in Helena's carriage.

“Nothing,” Helena lied, taking off her mask and chucking it to the carriage floor. “I just...realized how silly and useless this all was.”

Teresa studied her a moment and asked her again what had happened, but Helena would not speak. She could not, for if she did, the tears that filled her eyes and had swollen her throat shut would surely spill.

Morgan. How, of all the men in all the private parties, had she been drawn to Morgan? She had known him her entire life, and to her he had always been the trickster; the sarcastic member of the bunch. Throughout her teen years, he had always been the one who would first make her angry, then make her laugh despite her anger. Morgan was the thoughtless but charming Peter Pan of the group.

How had he made her feel such things? Helena's body clenched in longing as her mind flashed back to the way she had drunk wine from his lips, and she felt a tear slip through her barrier of stubbornness and down her cheek. The worst part was that she found herself longing for him to make her feel that way again.

CHAPTER FOUR

Be calm. He knows nothing about last night. Of where you were or where she was.

"Good morrow, brother," Morgan sang out, flinging open the door to Ambrose's study.

He strode into the den as confidently as ever with his usual cheeky smile cemented to his face. Ambrose looked up from his papers, his blonde brows raised in annoyance; the look he sported whenever someone interrupted his work.

"How are you always so cheerful, even in the mornings?" Ambrose asked. He let out a sigh as he leaned back in his chair and swept a hand towards the empty seat across from him.

"God does have His favorites, old boy, and I am blessed to be one of them," Morgan

quipped back, taking the offered seat. “What has you so grumpy on such a beautiful autumn day?”

“This thing with George,” Ambrose replied, sparing no small talk. He picked up one of the papers on his desk, shook his head at it, and then tossed it down.

“It does not sit well with me.”

Morgan’s smile threatened to shrink, but he kept it in place and shrugged. Ambrose was not the only one who would not let go of the investigation into their fathers’ deaths. It would have been odd to suddenly stop after nearly twenty years of searching. Although the villain had been caught, and was currently paying for his sins in one of the most wretched prisons London had to offer, their search for the truth continued.

“Take heart, brother. You are just restless,” Morgan replied, keeping his feelings to himself. “You need to pursue a new fascination.”

“I have plenty of those,” Ambrose remarked, a smirk spreading across his face. “Barbara is...an ingenious woman when it comes to sating my particular fascinations.”

It surprised them all — Duncan’s wife, Alice, and Ezra’s wife, Lydia — when Helena’s dear friend, Barbara, had fallen in love with and married Ambrose. But there was no doubt that their feelings for one another were real, and they had baby Beau to show for it.

“I am sure she is,” Morgan mused, wagging his brows salaciously.

Ambrose chuckled as he stood up.

“Still, perhaps you are right. In any event, what brings you here so early? Hiding from last night’s vixen?”

Morgan barely disguised the sudden jerk of his body as the memory of last night filled him, but hid it behind a coughing laugh.

“You know me too well, brother,” he simply quipped back, rising from his own seat. “I came to remind you of Alice’s little party for Ezra and Lydia. It is tomorrow.”

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Ambrose shook his head in disbelief.

“Ezra as a father. Can you believe it?” he asked.

“It is hard to accept,” Morgan agreed, “but I am happy for him and Lydia both. Lydia will be a brilliant mother, and Ezra — well, you see the way he dotes on her. He will be excellent at whatever she tells him to do.”

Ambrose chuckled.

“I am well aware of the party, Morgan,” Ambrose replied. “Barbara and Helena have both peppered me with their frequent reminders. Now, tell me truthfully why you are here. You do not expect me to believe that is the sole reason for your visit?”

It was not, but Morgan could not tell him that. He had come to determine whether or not Ambrose was aware of Helena’s midnight escape into the dark underbelly of London’s debauchery. However, judging from his laidback demeanor, it was clear that he was not.

Part of him wanted to tell Ambrose what he had seen, to warn him of Helena’s desire to find passion before Ambrose married her off, but as he thought of the way his mind and body had responded to her, he found himself unwilling and unable to speak the words.

“You caught me,” Morgan said, holding his hands up in mock surrender. “I simply came because I was out on a stroll and my legs grew weary from the brisk air. I came to warm myself by your hearth, maybe even plead a drink from an old friend.”

“My hearth and liquor are yours,” Ambrose replied.

He waved a hand towards the fireplace, then walked to his drink cart to pour them both a glass.

“Let us drink port, though,” he insisted, handing Morgan a glass. “Whiskey in the morning is only for the bad days, and as you suggested earlier, the day is not bad.”

The sweetness of the alcohol burned Morgan’s tongue as he swallowed it whole. His groin stirred as he thought of the way Helena had obeyed him the previous evening when she drank the sweet red wine from his lips. He needed something bitter; something harsh, to chase the memory away. Port would not do.

“Stay a while,” Ambrose offered as Morgan handed the empty glass back to him. “Perhaps we can have a row in the ring? It has been a while since either of us have practiced.”

“Another time,” Morgan promised, suddenly needing to put space between them. “I do not wish to tarry long. I have a meeting at noon with a new investor. I only wished to offer you a good morning and steal some heat. Now that I have accomplished both, I must be on my way.”

To Morgan’s relief, Ambrose nodded his head and did not press the matter further. If there was one thing they could all agree on, it was that a business could not run itself.

“I shall see myself out,” he noted, clapping Ambrose on the shoulder as he passed him.

“Come by the gaming hell this evening,” Ambrose offered. “Our blackjack table misses you.”

Morgan chuckled, told him he would be there, and left the study. He did not make it more than a few steps before he felt someone grab him by the neck of his jacket and haul him backward into another room.

“For one so tiny you are rather strong,” he quipped, turning around to see Helena as she shut the door to the library behind them.

Disappointment and relief battled one another as he took her in. She was once again attired in one of her pink dresses; a deep, reddish-purple design lined with a white fur collar and cuffs. Helena had always been drawn to such colors and they suited her well, but he suddenly imagined her in the black dress from the night before, and his smile dropped as he rubbed his face in an effort to dispel the memory.

“What did you tell him?” Helena demanded, her voice coming out in a harsh whisper.

“That you are a wicked, wicked girl, who needs to be put over a knee,” he retorted sarcastically, raising a mocking brow.

She huffed and swatted at his shoulder again with much more force than her form suggested, and damn him if he did not like it.

“You are not humorous!”

“Neither are you,” he replied, his tone now serious. “That little prank you concocted last night was irresponsible and downright idiotic.”

Helena’s blue eyes glittered with defiance as she straightened her shoulders and tilted her chin up to look at him.

“It was not a prank,” she said stoically, “And I will be returning. This time, you will not stop me.”

“The hell you will,” he seethed, rare temper making a show as he stepped towards her.

“I told you last night that those parties are not for you. You have no idea what sort of trouble you could end up in, and I will not allow my best friend’s little sister to find herself in such a state!”

Helena cocked a brow as she crossed her arms and delivered a smirk that indicated danger.

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“You are right,” she agreed.

“Damn right I am.”

“I really do not want to end up in trouble.”

“I amso glad we finally agree.”

“So you will escort me.”

“I—what?” Morgan hissed.

“You will escort me,” Helena replied with a shrug of her left shoulder. “To make sure that I do not end up in danger. No one will try anything dastardly if you are by my side. I am sure of it.”

Morgan laughed wickedly as he ran a hand through his shoulder length brown hair.

“You are out of your mind if you think I would agree to that plan.”

“Why not?” she asked innocently, batting her blonde lashes. “Do you not wish to keep me out of harm’s way?”

The way she taunted him only heightened his arousal, and it both annoyed and pleased him to see her so fearless.

“I was wrong,” Morgan retorted, taking a step towards her. “You are not as innocent

as you like to pretend.”

“Oh, come now, Morgan! How many times have I helped you pull off your tricks?” Helena asked.

Morgan raised a brow as he worked his jaw and pointed a finger at her.

“That is not fair,” he insisted. “Those were pranks, but this is something entirely different. Moreover, I have not asked for your help all that often.”

“The Dutton-Wilshire winter ball eight years ago?” she asked.

“That was one minor example,” Morgan countered.

“The Brimsley Garden Party in the country six years ago?”

“All you did was let the chickens out,” Morgan argued.

“What about at Lady Rowley’s coming out party five years ago?” Helena went on. “You had me flirt with the wait staff so you could spike the lemonade.”

“Oh, come on, that party was boring,” Morgan sighed, rolling his eyes. “We all needed a little fun to liven things up, and besides, you cannot tell me you did not love pretending to flirt with the help.”

“Well, it was the way I discovered how to get the best treats at parties,” Helena admitted with a careless shrug, and Morgan laughed as he shook his head.

Morgan begrudgingly admitted to himself that Helena had spoken the truth. On many occasions she had assisted him in pulling off several rather humorous bits at certain boring affairs, and she had always kept his secrets for him. Still...

“Well, while I have appreciated you secretly helping me out with a few pranks over the last few years, you must be able to see that the type of help you are now asking of me is quite another matter,” Ambrose said quietly, his humor fading.

Helena’s cocky, haughty smile also began to fade as she contemplated her words, making him feel all the more guilty about his contribution to the situation in which they now found themselves.

“Helena, look, I am very sorry that your brother is being so insistent...”

“Every man alive is allowed to kiss a woman with passion, even if they are not married,” Helena said boldly, cutting him off.

Morgan’s argument died on his lips and he gave her a compassionate look. She blushed, her haughtiness seeming to waver for a moment, but she swallowed and continued.

“I only wish to experience the same thing. One night. One kiss. Not with a man to whom I am already married. Not with just mere hope that he might make me feel like the women do in my books. I want it to be real. Even if it is only once.”

There was passion in her voice, but it was overshadowed by a tone of fear, which made Morgan pause. It was a fear that he understood well. Marriage, whether for a man or woman of noble birth, was a necessity. One of the reasons he had avoided such a union for so long was exactly that; the thought of being legally bound to someone with whom he shared no passion was a nightmare that he was constantly trying to outrun.

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As if she knew she was gaining ground, Helena closed the space between them and put her hands on his shoulders. As she looked at him there was no anger or defiance in her eyes, just fundamental pleading for him to understand her.

Keeping his green eyes on her, he reached for her hands with his own and gently walked her forward until her back was pressed against the wall. She gasped softly as her backside made a small thump against the barrier, and he felt her body relax as he pressed himself fully upon her.

The scent of honeysuckle filled his nostrils and he immediately felt his mouth begin to water; dark fantasies filling his head as he pictured her in the gown from the night before.

“Is that what you want, little princess?” he whispered, his voice coming out raspy as he studied the way her breath had slowed. “Because I do not believe that is all you want. The way you sipped your wine from my hand? From me?”

Helena’s pink tongue darted out before she captured her bottom lip with her teeth, worrying it slightly until it was a deeper shade of pink than the top.

“I will explain more later if you promise to agree now,” she whispered hurriedly, then, in a more desperate tone, “Please, Morgan?”

The plea was too much. Of everything. Too soft. Too genuine. Too damned seductive. She had won.

“Very well,” he whispered, slowly untangling her fingers from his.

He had to force himself to take a step back, to drag in air that was not scented with honeysuckle.

“Truly?” she asked readily, following him as he turned to make his way to the door.

“Seven nights,” he said over his shoulder, his hand paused on the doorknob, “And we go about these meetings my way.”

“Seven?” she questioned.

He nodded and turned to look at her.

“Take it from a man of experience, little Persephone. You will need more than one night to soothe these cravings you have. I shall give you seven nights as your guide to depravity, then our deal is off, and you will never speak to your brother about this, no matter the outcome. Are we clear?”

Helena’s eyes were wide and shining as she nodded.

“Say it,” he commanded.

“We are clear,” she rasped.

“We follow my rules. My protocols. I shall send you word when I am ready for you. You will not respond, and you will follow the instructions,” he commanded, the timbre of his voice thickening as the tension between them crackled. “Say, I understand.”

“I understand,” she answered. Her tone was sweet and willing, and damn him if her obedience did not make him want to push her back against the wall and kiss her until she begged him to stop. He gave a terse nod, unable to force a goodbye, and walked out of the library before he could get himself into any more trouble.

CHAPTER FIVE

“It was such a lovely party,” Lydia gushed, her face glowing radiantly with happiness. “You all did not need to go to such trouble!”

“We wanted to,” Alice replied with a beaming smile, patting her sister’s baby bump lovingly.

“It was not fair, though, we did not have such parties for you or Barbara,” Lydia countered, placing her hand over her sister’s.

“Yes, well, we were not as anxious about having children as you and Ezra are.” Barbara replied in her usual frank nature. “Besides, we all wanted an excuse to celebrate. Christmas is still two months away, and it can get so dull in London during the winter months.”

Helena sat at the tea table centered in the sunroom of her home. The large windowpanes framed the stark coldness of the outdoors, but with the two large hearths roaring with fires it was as warm inside as any summer day.

Her eyes were focused on the nearby trees. Most of the leaves had fallen and scattered into the roadway, creating the illusion of orange, yellow and red confetti dispersing throughout the streets of Mayfair. Some stubborn leaves still clung to the tips of their branches, shriveled and colorless, and refused to let go. She felt a pang in her heart as she watched two leaves flutter in the wind, and silently hoped that they would find the strength to hang on.

“Helena, what is wrong?” Teresa whispered at her side, low enough so the others could not hear.

She said nothing as she turned away from the trees and picked up her spoon to stir her

tea.

“Not a thing,” she murmured, busying herself with refreshing the teacup with more hot water.

“Are you still disappointed?” Teresa asked, her brows drawing together in sad concern.

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“Disappointed in what, darling?” Barbara asked, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Helena fought the urge to give Teresa a scathing glare for asking such a thing in front of the others and forced a close-lipped smile onto her face as she picked up her cup of tea.

“Not a thing,” she lied.

Barbara gave Teresa a stern look, the kind she frequently used to pull the truth out of an unwilling informant.

“I...well, we were umm, discussing our hesitancy the other day,” Teresa managed.

“Hesitancy to what?” Barbara demanded quickly.

Lydia and Alice looked away from one another, their focus shifting to the two young, unmarried women seated at the table. Helena knew that if she did not immediately stop Teresa from talking she would tell them everything. Taking a deep breath, she turned and boldly asked, “Barbara, what makes being married to my brother so special?”

Barbara stilled, a look of confusion overtaking her beautiful face as she stared at Helena.

“I love your brother madly, Helena, you know this,” Barbara replied, then threw a questioning look at Lydia and Alice.

“Yes, but why?” she asked, then followed Helena’s gaze to her other friends. “I know you all love your husbands deeply, but why?”

“Where is this coming from, my darling?” Lydia asked, her tone gentle and nurturing. It was ironic that, out of all of them, Lydia was the one most afraid of becoming a mother.

“Are your husbands passionate with you?” Helena asked, then quickly added, “not by our society’s standards. I know they are that well enough. But are they like the men in the books we all love to read? You have all alluded to such similarities from time to time, but do you truly mean what you say?”

One by one, each of their faces turned varying shades of red. Lydia immediately lowered her head and placed both hands upon her pregnant belly, where she traced invisible patterns to avoid the question. Alice shoved an entire slice of lemon cake into her mouth, coughing on the crumbs, and Barbara, normally so forthcoming, dropped her teacup and watched as the dark brown brew slowly seeped into the white linen tablecloth.

A servant immediately appeared to clean up the mess, but Barbara quickly waved her off.

“Why are you asking us about such things?” Barbara asked, once she was sure the servants were out of hearing distance.

Deciding there was no time to be bashful, Helena looked Barbara directly in the eye and answered, “because I know my brother plans to marry me off soon. He has you now, and baby Beau, and that is now his focus.”

“Helena, wait a minute,” Barbara countered, but Helena put her hand up to silence her.

“I am not upset by it, Barbara,” she replied earnestly, “I love you and I love my nephew, and I am happy that that he chose you to be his bride. But you all must now be allowed to focus on your new families. To do that, I know my brother must find me a husband.”

“He is not so cruel as to take all choice away from you,” Barbara countered, her brows drawing down, “Do you think I would allow such a thing?”

“I know you would not, dear sister,” Helena answered quickly, “but I just...”

“Pardon me, my ladies,” Helena’s handmaid, Agatha, spoke quietly as she approached the table. “My deepest apologies for the interruption.”

“No apologies needed, Agatha, what is it?” Helena replied, relieved that she could finally end their awkward conversation. She had no clue what she was trying to say or what she was trying to learn from the others, but the conversation had gone horribly.

Agatha held out a small, blood red envelope as she said, “I was given strict orders to deliver this to you straightaway, my lady.”

Teresa’s eyes grew wide as she saw the envelope, thinking, no doubt, that it was another coveted invitation to the Devil’s Masquerade.

“Who is that from?” Barbara asked as Helena took it from Agatha and slipped it into her pocket.

“The stationery store,” Helena replied, the lie coming a little too easily, “I know my signature color is pink, but as age encroaches upon me, I was thinking it might be time to choose a darker color.”

“But I love your pink envelopes,” Alice stated, pouting a little as Helena rose.

“Perhaps I shall keep a few, just for you,” Helena replied sweetly with a smile.

She leaned down to kiss Alice on the cheek, then did the same to each of her other friends.

“I must read this and make my decision,” she said. “Then, I believe I shall go and lie down. Please, continue without me.”

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Helena's friends wished her well as she took her leave. Once she had made it safely into the hallway, Helena all but broke into a run up the stairs. She had known all along that the letter had not come from the stationery store.

In the privacy of her bed chambers, Helena opened the letter, and, as she suspected, saw Morgan's handwriting.

Persephone,

It is time to begin your lessons in sin.

In two nights' time one should know,

To follow the path through the wood and stone,

Then come to a gate where the garden stands alone.

Knock twice at midnight to gain entrance to your hell,

And there you will find your paradise as well.

X

Hades

"Clever," Helena murmured as a smile grew on her face.

It would be vague to anyone who did not know about the small path that led between the Colborne and Grandhill Estates. To get there without taking the main road, all one had to do was exit through the back garden, walk straight into the woods and over a small, stone bridge. If one kept walking, one would find themselves at the back garden gate of Morgan's London house.

She read over it again, feeling a tingle of excitement as she mouthed Persephone. She decided then that she preferred that nickname far more than 'little princess'. And 'Hades'... well, although she would not have initially chosen that moniker for him, the more she learned about Morgan, the more she agreed that it suited him perfectly.

"Very well, Hades," she murmured, tossing the envelope and letter into the fire roaring in her quarters. "I shall see you in two days."

CHAPTER SIX

"Morgan get up here," Ambrose called, waving a gloved hand to join him in the ring.

"I cannot," Morgan slurred, holding up both hands in surrender; a cup in one of them.

"And why not?" Ambrose sighed.

Before Morgan could answer, Ezra rose and swatted the back of his head.

"Because the fool is foxed," Ezra muttered, moving to take Morgan's place.

"Guilty," Morgan admitted, picking up the whiskey bottle to refill his glass.

Duncan swiped it from him before a single drop could flow, and the two exchanged heated glares as Ambrose and Ezra started their row.

“You are nowhere near drunk,” Duncan whispered, setting the bottle down in front of him as he took a seat across from Morgan.

“No,” Morgan admitted, swiping the bottle with a speed that surprised his friend, “but I plan to be very soon.”

“Why do you not just show them how good you are?” Duncan sighed, shaking his head at him.

“What would be the fun in that?” Morgan quipped with a lopsided grin.

Through his mask, Duncan gave him a look that pleaded for him to be serious, but Morgan only smirked and raised his glass to his lips. From the ring there came a suddenoomphfollowed by a heavy thud. Morgan and Duncan looked up to see Ezra grinning devilishly down at Ambrose, who lay askew on his back.

“Wanker,” Ambrose wheezed, holding his ribs.

“Dandy,” Ezra scoffed before reaching a helping hand to his fallen brother.

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“Enough of this,” Ambrose said, wincing as Ezra pulled him to his feet. “If we are not going to box then let us all drink.”

“Finally, some logic has been spoken,” Ambrose boasted, holding up the bottle to Morgan and Duncan as he passed by.

Ezra snatched it away from Ambrose, as Morgan chortled at the frown on Ambrose’s face.

“Hey!” he exclaimed as Ambrose swept a hand down to steal Morgan’s glass.

“Got to catch up to you, do we not?” Ambrose asked with a smirk before downing what was left in the glass.

Morgan rolled his eyes but grinned at his friend. Another glass was placed in front of him, and Ezra leaned over with the bottle to fill it.

“In truth I should not be boxing today,” Ambrose admitted with an exhausted sigh, “My mind is not on it.”

“Is that because your mind is too busy with thoughts of Barbara?” Morgan teased. The quip earned him a kick to his shin, but Ambrose smirked.

“She is nevernoton my mind,” Ambrose retorted wickedly, then grew serious as he rested his elbows on the table. “No, in truth, I have been going over suitable candidates for Helena.”

Morgan stilled as he felt his heart beginning to beat faster. Tomorrow evening would be their first of seven nights, and he could not deny that he was more excited than fearful of being caught helping his best friend's little sister. Her plea to him was too genuine, too similar to his own needs to ignore, despite how dangerous it was.

"Just be kind with your selection," Duncan said, though his eyes were on Morgan.

Morgan noted his stare and quickly shook himself out of his frozen state to lean back lazily in his chair.

"Agreed," Ezra chimed in. "She is a beautiful woman in both body and spirit. Do not saddle her with some old, fat aristocrat who has no time to nurture either."

"Do you truly think I would be so cruel to my own flesh and blood?" Ambrose replied, raising a brow. "I want my sister happy. Now, I confess I do not gauge beauty in men as well as I do in women, but the list I have created thus far does not have a man over thirty-five. They all have a full head of hair and appear to take care of themselves."

"Let us hear them then," Morgan encouraged.

"Lord Crawley, Lord Brandon, Lord Raventhorn..."

"What?" Ezra spat out, clearly disgusted by the list. "An earl, a baron, and a Scot scanty worthy of whatever title his home country gave him?"

"Ezra's right," Duncan chimed in, his half-revealed face showing his disappointment. "Helena deserves to be a duchess in her own right, at the very least."

"Of course she does," Ambrose remarked defensively, "You think I am not aware? But the eligible dukes that fall within the previously mentioned parameters reduce the

numbers to nearly none. I have sent word to Gantley, Duke of Urshire, and have yet to hear back, but his land is a four-day ride away from our home. I want to keep her close, just in case..."

Ambrose did not need to finish his sentence, because his brothers already knew how it would end. In case something awful happened to her. In case their investigation was not truly closed. In case whoever it was that had murdered their fathers was still a free man and would attempt to do the same thing to her.

"You could always marry her off to Thomas," Morgan quipped.

As usual his jester-like spirit broke the tension of an otherwise heavy conversation. Ezra cackled like a demon as he leaned back in his chair, while Duncan chortled so forcefully that he tilted his mask. Ambrose, however, gave Morgan a look of death. As usual, it sent a little shot of devilish glee throughout his person.

"Do not dare to even joke about such a thing," Ambrose said in warning, shaking his head gravely.

"You are right," Morgan mused, slapping his hand on his jaw in mock horror as he wagged his eyebrows in challenge, "She would have the poor boy whipped in no time."

Ambrose growled as he rose from his seat, but Morgan remained relaxed and perfectly calm as Ezra and Duncan lunged from their seats to hold him back, laughing harder all the while.

"Come on now, old boy," Ezra laughed, wrestling him back into a chair. "It was just a bit of fun. You have to admit the imagery is laughable."

Ambrose glowered at him as he finally seated himself in his chair. Thomas and his

younger sister Camilla were beloved by the four of them. Like them, the duke and little duchess had been orphaned at an early age and had no idea how to handle life as noble adults.

Ambrose, Ezra, Duncan, and Morgan all contributed as much as they could to give them access to trustworthy acquaintances and staff members, excellent tutors, and most importantly, a sense of being part of a family. Ezra and Lydia taught them how to be strong. Duncan and Alice taught them to control their emotions. Ambrose and Barbara taught them how to be cunning. And Morgan... Morgan taught them that it was safe to laugh again.

The two were cherished by them all. Despite Morgan's jest, he never meant it. Thomas deserved to grow into manhood, and Helena deserved more than a boy. There was no denying these truths.

"Must you blunder so blindly with your words?" Ambrose scorned, scuffing his thumb across his nose as Ezra and Duncan returned to their seats.

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Morgan held his hands up in surrender, grinning maniacally. “Apologies,” he acquiesced, bowing his head. “You were saying about your list of true suitors for Helena, my brother?”

Ambrose glowered at him a moment longer, then huffed out a breath through his nostrils, picked up the whiskey bottle, and smirked as he refilled all four glasses.

“Drink, you arses,” Ambrose commanded, raising his glass towards the center of the table. His brothers followed suit, clinking their whiskeys together and downing them as one, before slamming their glasses onto the table in unison. Ambrose leaned forward and readily continued with his list of potential suitors as though nothing had happened.

Morgan’s grin slowly faded as Ambrose continued to list off the names. The men were all of strong title and decent appearance, and their mannerisms were not necessarily appalling, but they were all so safe and bland. They were men that would chuckle at her books and desires, not take them seriously in the way she so craved.

He thought of Helena’s desperation in the library; the pleading look in her eyes to be understood, and he found himself standing up from the table.

“Rude,” Ambrose scoffed, looking up at him. “I was talking.”

“Apologies,” Morgan muttered, unable to reach for his usual wit. “I just remembered that I had a meeting.”

“At nine in the evening?” Ezra mused, watching him with a wary eye.

“I did not say it was respectable one,” Morgan countered, finally able to muster up some sarcasm. He added a rueful grin and the others rolled their eyes.

“Harlot,” Ambrose mocked.

“Old man,” Morgan shot back, and Ambrose grumbled something about being young enough to whoop his arse in the ring.

Duncan’s eyes stayed on Morgan, his smile fake, but Morgan pretended not to notice and made his way out.

“Your Grace,” a sweet, feminine voice greeted Morgan half an hour later. “What a lovely surprise, we have missed you.”

“And I have missed all of you,” he answered devilishly, closing the door to the paramours’ waiting room that was nestled inside Ezra’s and Ambrose’s gaming hell.

“Which one of us do you desire this evening?” the matron asked, waving a fan towards the three ladies available.

“All,” Morgan answered.

He needed to get Helena’s image out of his mind; get the phantom scent of honeysuckle out of his nostrils. He drew in a deep breath and welcomed the oversaturated scent of roses and nutmeg. It stung slightly as he breathed, but he took another deep inhalation as he looked down at the three women approaching him with lustful smiles.

“On your knees,” he commanded gruffly, his gaze and features suddenly cold and hard.

They all tensed for a moment as their eyes widened in fear, then dilated with pleasure as they all silently moved to obey. He moved forward, placing his hand on the head of the blonde to his right, and stroked up a handful of her hair, giving a firm yank. She let out a sharp gasp as heat flooded her cheeks.

“Are you going to be good for me this evening or am I going to have to punish you, Luna?”

The pleading look in the woman’s eyes quickly sharpened into a wicked glee as she smiled up at him seductively. “Punish me, my lord,” she purred, reaching for his crotch.

He caught her hand roughly and shoved her back onto her knees.

“Not yet,” he taunted, shaking his head as walked to the next woman, repeating the process. Cherie answered that she wanted to be good, and Elaine, like Luna, pleaded to be punished.

A plan began to form in his head as he motioned for all of them to stand and turned with a wicked smile towards the matron.

“You too, madam,” Morgan commanded, his tone and look both stern as he eyed her up. Her cheeks glowed with desire but she shook her head.

“But, Your Grace, the other clients...” the matron began.

“... are not going to offer you what I can” he cut her off, his tone like steel. “Now tell me, do you want to be praised or punished?”

The matron shut her mouth, her cheeks growing red at such a blunt question.

“Both, Your Grace,” she whispered as she waved to a nearby door.

Wicked pleasure bloomed in him as his thoughts raced to plan the next steps of their tryst.

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“Lead us to The Dungeon then, madam,” he commanded. “We have no time or pleasure to waste.”

Two of the women beside him smiled as the third woman and the matron paled. “The Dungeon” was a bedding quarter whose walls were lined with certain tools; a creative variety of chains, cuffs and other diabolic bits that were meant to cause equal measures of pain and pleasure. If he wanted to help Helena with what she had asked, he had to experiment with everything beforehand.

He pushed away the thought and focused on the task before him as he led the four women to their ecstasy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Helena knocked twice on the back gate of Morgan’s garden as he had instructed. Getting away from her home at such a late hour had been more stressful than she had initially thought. She had no idea that her brother worked so late and would still be awake when she was ready to leave. She felt foolish for presuming that he would already be asleep with Barbara by his side.

Her original plan to exit through the library’s patio doors next to Ambrose’s office had been thwarted, for she feared he would spot her through his window. Instead, she had chosen to leave through the back door of the kitchens, which were situated below the estate.

To her relief, she saw that only one servant was still present; a young girl, perhaps a scullery maid, who was dozing on a stool, her head resting comically on one of the

large pots she had likely finished drying before she fell asleep.

The garden gate swung open, making her jump, and Helena felt a spark of excitement as Morgan's frame filled the empty space.

"Ah, there is my little sister," Morgan teased, a grin spreading across his face.

Helena felt her cheeks grow warm as she pushed past him into the garden.

"Do not call me that," she hissed. "You are my brother's friend. Do not make this taboo."

"I believe me being one of your brother's best friends already makes this taboo," he retorted, closing the gate.

"Not right now," she said icily, enunciating each word. "In this setting, you are my...guide. Nothing more. You are not my brother's best friend, and I am not your sister." She sneered the word as if it was offensive; in such circumstances she gathered that it was.

The smirk on his face slowly transformed into a look of intense intrigue. A quiet, powerful energy emitted from him as his green eyes raked down her cloaked figure, making her feel exposed and vulnerable. Helena felt excitement and danger infuse her veins with energy as the joker transformed into a hungry beast.

He was looking so closely at her. Helena thought briefly of asking him to stop looking at her so intensely, but then a small voice in her mind whispered this is what you wanted...is it not?

Once he had finished looking her over and had lifted his green eyes up to meet her blue ones, he wordlessly held a hand out to her and waited. Swallowing her nerves,

Helena slipped her hand into his and allowed him to pull her into the gardens.

“You are sure about this?” he asked as he shut the gate behind them.

His deep voice, devoid of cheer or warmth, complemented the night, and she shivered as though it was as cold as the evening’s air.

“Why would I not be?” she managed to muster as they began to walk.

Although Morgan’s head remained pointed in the direction of the house, in the dim light she saw his eyes turn to her.

“You are about to see a side of me that our families do not know exists. It will forever alter how you see me.”

Helena’s brows lowered into a frown as she released his hand and took a step away.

“You think me so weak that I cannot understand what this is?” she asked defiantly. “It is a fantasy. I know that. And when we are done, you will still be the family jester, and I shall be the newly married lady I am destined to be.”

“I feel you still do not comprehend just how much you are asking of me,” he stated. “I would not have blamed you if you had not come.”

Drawing in a breath for courage, Helena stepped in front of Morgan and placed a hand on his chest to stop him.

“I know what I want, Morgan,” she stated. “And I want passion. Even if it is just a fleeting taste. I...” she paused, gathering the courage for her next statement, “I deserve it. My body deserves it. To know, if only once, what it feels like to be consumed.”

Morgan studied her for a moment before a devilish smirk bloomed on his lips. He let out a low, dark chuckle, as if impressed by her boldness, and placed his hand over hers. The heat from his touch was a shock to her numb fingers but she did not pull away. He then pulled her hand to his lips and she felt her entire body tingle as he breathed warm air into her palm before placing a sensual kiss in its middle.

“Very well, little Persephone,” he teased, slipping momentarily into the Morgan she had known all of her life. He then tugged at her hand, leading her once more. “Now come along, we do not want dinner to get cold.”

Helena’s brows drew up in surprise. Dinner? What did a meal have to do with her request? Morgan ignored her quizzical expression as he led her into his estate through the library. Inside, she felt her taut muscles relax as the heat from the fire chased away the chill of the night air.

She immediately noticed that the usual lamps were unlit, and the only light in the room came from the flames that jumped in the large, dark wood hearth. In front of the fireplace was a small, cloth-covered table with two covered dishes, two wine glasses and a dark green bottle. Two chairs sat opposite one another, but the table was so small that anyone sitting there would brush their knees against the opposite person.

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From behind her, Morgan reached around to the front of her cloak and unfastened it. He pulled it slowly from her shoulders, revealing the simple, long-sleeved white dress she had chosen, and she felt a bead of sweat form on her forehead as his hand slowly traced down the curve of her spine. She shivered with pleasure and surprise, unaware that such a small touch could make her feel so much.

“An interesting choice of color for such a task,” he mused.

“Not pink enough?” She managed to tease.

Morgan came around her, his brow cocked in amusement.

“Not black enough,” he corrected, and Helena smiled as she thought of the gown she had worn the night they had discovered each other’s secret.

“Sit,” he commanded, then pulled out a chair for her with one hand as he led her with the other.

As she obeyed him she felt her nerves beginning to unravel, her trembling now evident. Morgan took immediate notice and lifted the bottle of wine to pour her a glass. With one hand he captured the back of her neck, guiding her to tilt her head back, and with the other he held her glass, pressing it softly to her lips.

Their eyes met as the wine trickled onto her tongue, and she obediently sipped until he pulled the glass away. When he finished, she felt her nerves beginning to calm and released a soft sigh.

“Better?” he asked.

“Yes,” she breathed, her own hand fluttering to her throat as he took the seat opposite hers. “Thank you.”

He gave her a solemn nod, then removed the covers from the dishes. She could not help offering a small smile when she saw her favorite foods set out before her.

On her plate was a small pot of heavy, sweet cream drizzled with caramel and adorned with a small, silver spoon. Beside it lay a piece of aromatic, tender beef and a small portion of roasted beets. The beef and beets had already been cut into small bites, ready to be enjoyed using the silver fork that lay beside it. Upon closer inspection, Helena noted that Morgan’s plate was different from hers, and that a glinting knife rested beside his fork.

Although she was not hungry, Helena felt her stomach grumble greedily at the sight of the small meal, and she picked up her fork to begin. A peaceful silence settled over the table as they both began to eat, and for the briefest of moments, Helena forgot why she was there. This moment, this meal, felt intimate. Natural. Even though they had never once shared a meal alone.

“Tell me of your desires,” Morgan said, breaking the silence.

Helena paused, forcefully swallowing her last bite of food as she was reminded of her purpose.

“I told you,” she whispered, setting her fork down to reach for her wine. “I want a kiss.”

Morgan shook his head as he continued to eat.

“Well, yes, there are other things I also want,” she ventured, her mind going to the tamest of items. “I want to learn how to gamble. Not in a lady’s salon or party, but in an actual pub of some sorts. I want to drink and play cards and gamble coin.”

Morgan remained silent, his one brow raising as if amused.

“And I want to swim,” she pushed on, feeling emboldened. “Naked.”

“In front of others?” he asked.

“That is not a necessity,” she clarified, “but there are other moments during which I would prefer to have an audience.”

Helena’s cheeks were suffused with heat as she thought about what she had seen at the Devil’s Masquerade. She was not sure if she had gone there to watch other people or to be watched, but she wanted to find out.

“You promised me you would explain, Helena,” Morgan sighed, leaning forward with an almost bored look. “A kiss, yes, that is obvious, gambling and nude swimming, sure. I agree that those pursuits are all a bit taboo and exciting, but there is more. I know there is. You would not have pushed me so vehemently if that was all you wanted. Tell me exactly what you want.”

For a moment, Helena grew angry and self-conscious at being called out so boldly.

Damn him and his ability to see through me!

Helena drew heavily upon her courage. She had come this far and would not back out now. Not when Ambrose could inform her of her new husband at any time. Yes, there was more.

“I want to feel fire in my veins as I submit to someone who is worthy of submission,” she whispered softly, letting the words fly free.” I want to be so sensitive to someone’s presence that I shiver in excitement before he even touches me; to be so wrapped up in him that I want to obey his every word. I want to lose my breath and my ability to speak as I watch him walk towards me.

I want to desire their commands and their dominance. I want to need them to lay their hands, their mouth, and all manner of things upon me. I want to fantasize about them all day because I know what will happen to me at night, and it is a sensation we both long for so readily that when the time comes to be together, we nearly burn one another with our passion.”

Helena was surprised at the evenness of her own tone and the clarity with which she spoke of her desires. It had all tumbled from her so easily, so readily, that she did not even have time to consider how it made her sound. She lifted her eyes from her plate to find Morgan studying her with an expression she could not read.

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It was neither anger nor disgust that glistered in his eyes. Instead, a golden light had begun to shine through his forest green irises as he gently stroked the goblet of his wine glass and remained silent and contemplative. She had expected him to laugh at her or tease her for wanting such things, but there was no hint of humor on his face. Seeing him so pensive and serious unnerved her in a strange way, and she squirmed uncomfortably in her seat from the intensity of his stare.

“What makes you believe that you cannot feel such things once you are married?” he asked finally. “You are a beautiful woman, Helena, and I know nary a man that would refuse to fulfill your wishes if you spoke of them.”

“It is not simply about what I want him to makemefeel,” Helena countered, surprising herself at the rapidity of her response. “It is about how I want to makehimfeel. I want him to worship me for wanting to worship him. I do not believe that I can find that in a marriage.”

“You are wrong.” Morgan stated calmly.

“How would you know?” Helena shot back, offended by his immediate denial. “You are not even married.”

“Seduction does not require a marriage, nor does it require a lack thereof,” he went on, unbothered by her tone. “I may not be married but there is a reason that I am able to bed whomever I want, however I want, whenever I want.”

Helena’s breath hitched as she stared at Morgan in wonder. Where had the jester gone with whom she had grown up? Who was this master of seduction now sitting before

her?

Morgan smirked, as if reading her thoughts.

“What is the matter? Too serious for you? Shall I tell some jokes to put you at ease?”

“I do not understand,” she confessed, “how you can be positively one way in front of us, in front of the ton, but then be someone completely different when you are... ‘participating’ in other activities.”

“I am a complicated soul,” Morgan replied with a careless shrug. “I do not try to understand, I simply accept and coordinate properly.”

Helena was not sure what to say to that, but his words left her deeply intrigued. She had known Morgan almost her entire life, and suddenly realized that she did not know him at all.

But I want to. I want to know what other secrets he is hiding.

“I believe I can help you experience what you want,” he went on, going back to their original subject, “if that is still what you wish.”

“Why would it not be?” she asked, and was rewarded with another intense stare.

“You have known me all of your life, Helena, and I have played a very specific role during that time. Both the jester and Lothario exist within me, though one never overlaps the other.”

“I suppose I can understand,” she replied after a moment of contemplation, meeting his hard gaze. “It exists within me as well, I believe. If you can accept that about me, then I will accept that about you.”

As Morgan looked at her, she could see no trace of his charming smile. Instead, the look of a starving, wary wolf met her gaze, and it was watching her very closely.

“You must be willing to follow my rules,” he said finally, his voice strained.

“Rules?” she rasped.

“You and I will meet at night. Here, in the privacy of my home unless I decide otherwise. And you will tell no one,” he began.

At this, she braved a small smile.

“You truly do not want the others to know this side of you exists, do you?” she teased.

“That,” he agreed, smiling wickedly, “and I think you will find that the things I intend to make you experience will be very hard to describe to a person that will not make them worry or believe you have gone mad.”

Helena’s smile vanished as her mind filled with visions of what Morgan’s lessons would entail. She blinked several times to push them away and nodded solemnly.

“Very well,” she whispered in agreement. “What else?”

“Stand,” he commanded, his voice firm but husky.

Helena rose up from her chair to obey him before any thought could enter her mind, feeling slightly dazed and confused once she had gotten to her feet.

Morgan also rose from his chair and stepped before her, coming so close that her nose would have touched the center of his broad chest if she had moved half a step closer

to him. She felt the his fingertips caress up the line of her throat, coaxing her to look up at him. It was barely a touch; a movement of air, and yet she felt it throughout her entire body.

“Breathe,” he rasped, trailing his fingers just below her chin.

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Helena obediently drew a breath into her lungs, unaware that she had stopped a natural process just by being so close to him.

“There are things I will ask you to do,” he continued, his eyes taking a slow inventory of her face. “Things that will make you want to stop and feel shame. Your instinct will be to tell me no, and that is natural. If you can, though, I want you trust me, and push past that instinct.”

He walked back to his chair and lowered himself into his seat.

“With each request, I want you to ask yourself why you want to say no,” he went on, keeping his eyes on her. “If, in the event, you ever feel that it is absolutely right to refuse me, you must tell me.

“Seduction only needs a modicum of willingness to begin, but if there is absolute refusal, there is no pleasure to be found. You will tell me if something I do or request makes you feel such refusal, and I will stop. I must know when you want to stop, Helena. Always. Do you understand?”

Helena nodded, his words and voice mesmerizing her into complete stillness.

“Say it,” he commanded.

“I understand,” she breathed, her response immediate.

“I understand, sir,” he corrected her, his tone gruff.

A rush of arousal poured through her as she felt the exchange of power flow through them. She was doing it.

I am actually going to give myself over to his dominance.

“I understand,” she replied, then licked her lips as she added, “sir.”

Her heart fluttered in her chest as a smile of satisfaction slowly spread across his chiseled lips. How could obeying such a simple command cause such an intense rush of happiness?

“Very good, little Persephone,” he praised, and Helena felt a gush of moisture spread across her thighs as her lower belly tightened.

“Did you like that?” he rasped, his gaze locked on hers. Helena nodded slowly as she felt a tremble pass through her.

“Yes...sir,” she replied.

He relaxed further in his chair, smiling in approval at her response, then spread his legs in a wide stance as he raised two fingers to beckon her.

“Now come. Sit on my lap.”

Helena felt a rush of excitement so intense that her legs felt numb as she moved towards him. As if sensing this, Morgan reached for her waist, his large hands easily engulfing her, and he guided her until she was sitting on his right knee, her legs dangling in the space between his legs and her left shoulder tucked into his chest.

She almost laughed at how small she felt, never realizing how massive of a man Morgan was, but the sound never made it from her lips as she watched him reach for

the small pot of dessert that had yet to be eaten. With care, he slid the bottom of the small spoon against the lip of the pot, cleaning its underside, and then raised it to her mouth.

Helena almost said no, unable to imagine eating with her nerves so frazzled, but then she remembered his rules, searched within herself for what she actually wanted to do, and found herself opening her mouth. With care, Morgan slid the small spoon between her lips and over her tongue. He gave her a subtle nod and she closed her mouth around the utensil, letting him move the spoon in such a way that she did not need do anything.

The sweetness of the dessert exploded on her tongue as he pulled the spoon from her lips, and she let out a small whimper as she let it melt there.

“Now swallow,” he mused, the lightest smile touching his lips.

With effort, she did, and — without needing his command — she then opened her mouth once more for another bite.

“I have decided that this is not a gift,” he explained as he took his time feeding her. “I want something from you in return.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Morgan’s arousal had risen steadily with each obeyed command. He had always relished the moment when he could lose control, but there was something even more pleasurable about practicing self-constraint with Helena. She had been so earnest with her description, and it was so clear that she genuinely wanted such experiences, that he felt his wavering willingness to help her growing into a yearning frenzy.

This would take time and patience. These lessons were not going to be bright

explosions of pleasure. What Helena required was a slow, steady ember that had the ability to grow into an eternal flame that would never expire. She was not like the other women who came to him, impatient with need and confused desire. No, she knew precisely what she wanted, and she cared about how she achieved it and from who she obtained it. He greatly admired that about her.

“I do not know what I could offer you,” Helena replied, swallowing her last bite of dessert. “My books, perhaps? I know you do not normally enjoy reading, but perhaps the subject matter might...”

Helena trailed off as he chuckled and drew another spoonful of the potted cream to her lips.

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“I have no doubt read every book you possess and many more,” he replied.”

Helena smirked, thinking his statement could in no way be true.

“The Seduction of the Gods is my favorite collection,” he told her, and her smirk instantly faded.

“As is mine,” she said in awe. “It was what inspired my list.”

Morgan nodded in understanding, knowing all too well the portrayal of wonderfully enticing certain scenes of painful pleasure and submissions within.

“I cannot believe you know of it!” she laughed, looking genuinely pleased.

He realized that he had begun to enjoy her reception of this particular side of him, and pushed forward.

“Another secret you must keep for me,” he teased. “The others would never cease to torment me if they knew of my literary predilections.”

At this, Helena smiled softly and relaxed further into his lap.

“I want a portrait of you,” he continued, returning to the subject of their trade.

Helena’s brows drew up in surprise.

“That is all?” she asked.

Unable to help himself, he allowed his fingers to wrap around her outer thigh and begin caressing the soft flesh beneath her gown as he nodded.

“You will pose for me,” he further explained. “Naked.”

Helena’s relaxed posture suddenly went rigid in his lap.

“No,” she replied adamantly. “I am sorry, but I will not let an artist see me as such.”

“The artist would be me,” he explained calmly, lifting another spoonful of the dessert to her lips.

Helena brows flew up so quickly that he chuckled again.

“My request surprises you?” he asked, mocking offense. “Eat.”

“I had no idea that you were so drawn to the arts,” she confessed, then obediently took the offered bite.

“Yes, well, I like my secrets,” he replied. “What we care about the most must be kept close and guarded carefully, lest others try to steal them away.”

Morgan once again felt her body relax, and he remained silent as she contemplated his offer.

“No one else would see it?” she asked after a moment, a touch of concern in her eyes.

He shook his head gravely, his smile vanishing.

“What did I just say about the things we care about?” he asked.

“You care for me?” Helena whispered.

“For your wellbeing and happiness? I always have. All four of us have. Trust me when I tell you that I would gladly shoot any man who dared to lay eyes on such a portrait of you. It would be for me and me alone.”

She stared back at him intently, looking beyond his eyes and into his soul. In truth, no person, neither man nor woman, had ever looked so deeply into him, and it was his turn to shift uncomfortably. Still, he refused to look away, to give her any reason to doubt him.

“Very well then,” she agreed, her cheeks turning pink as she agreed. “But do not dare turn back to your jester-like ways upon seeing me bare.”

Morgan placed the spoon down on the table and wrapped his arms around her until she was fully ensconced within his embrace.

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“I assure you, Helena,” he whispered, touching the tip of his nose to hers, “there is nothing about your body that is laughable.”

A soft sigh escaped her lips as she sank into him. He could see everything in her eyes. The relief, the yearning, the intrepid anticipation that came with crossing the bridge from reality to fantasy.

“Hold your breath,” he rasped, caressing the back of her neck as he tilted her head upward, and he felt her cease moving immediately. He softly kissed one corner of her lips, then the other. He felt her tremble as his mouth traced teasingly over hers, her need flowing from her in waves as she held her breath.

“Now breathe,” he commanded, pulling away just enough so that the edges of their lips still met, “and kiss me.”

A whimper of desire wafted from her lips as she followed his command and pressed her lips hungrily onto his. Arousal burst like fire through his veins as he teased his chiseled lips against her heavenly soft ones, pressing and parting them so gently at first that she soon began to lean into him.

He allowed her to feel her own desire grow before pressing his own upon her. Without his guidance, she brought her arms around his neck and pulled him closer to her.

“Very good, little Persephone,” he moaned between their deepening kisses, “very good.”

CHAPTER NINE

“You did so well during your first lesson,” he praised as he gently pulled his lips away from hers.

Helena relived the memory of the way his hands had tenderly untangled her arms from around his neck; the way he had helped her, while dazed and mystified, to rise to her feet.

Helena swayed and stumbled as she swept into a low curtsy before Lord Crawley.

To her relief he had completely missed her blunder, so consumed was he with sweeping into his own low bow while rambling off his introduction. Helena had no idea what he had said, her mind too engrossed in her thoughts, and prayed he had said no more than what Ambrose had already told her.

“It is a great pleasure to see you again, Lord Crawley,” she replied as they both rose to a standing position.

Lord Crawley’s pale blonde brows flew up in surprise.

“Apologies, my lady. Did you say again?” he asked, appearing genuinely confused.

Helena felt a twinge of disappointment, followed by a rustle of annoyance as she stood a little straighter.

“Yes,” she replied, forcing a smile. “We spoke at Lord and Lady Beaufort’s garden party, although it was admittedly brief.”

Lord Crawley’s mouth formed into a forced smile as his brows creased with the effort of recollection and forced his slightly handsome face into a distorted and unattractive

caricature.

“You will have to forgive me, my lady,” he stammered awkwardly, bowing again. “I am unable to recall. Though, to be fair, my thirst at such parties has been known to steal my memory.”

He chuckled loudly and Helena’s disappointment grew.

“I beg your pardon, Crawley, but you will be more careful in how you share your truths with my sister,” Ambrose stated, stepping up beside Helena.

She groaned inwardly. How had she forgotten that both he and Barbara were present to chaperone her many appointments today? Morgan. That was how. After two days of being consumed with how he made her body feel, she was acting as witlessly as a simpleton. Her concentration was poor, and her manners scant at best.

Since the night she had kissed Morgan, a constant deep, warm and heavy ache had taken up residence in her lower abdomen and coursed throughout her body.

She had kissed Morgan. He had initiated it, but had let her keep a tight hold upon the reins of her own desire and had allowed her to explore the pleasure it had created within her at her leisure. Time had come to a stop, and without even realizing it, her undulating body had melted into Morgan’s, her breaths coming out in whimpers, until he had stopped her by pulling his lips away from hers.

He had carefully unwound her body from his and had sent her home in one of his unmarked carriages, as though he was completely blind to the fact that he had set her entire body on fire.

“Apologies, Your Grace,” Crawley stammered as Helena blinked herself back to the present.

Before he could continue, Gerald, one of the footmen, appeared in the doorway.

“Forgive me, Your Graces, but Lord Raventhorn has arrived,” he stated politely.

“Perfect timing,” Ambrose snapped, sweeping an arm towards the door. “Off you go, Crawley. You and I will discuss this later.”

Crawley scurried off without so much as a bow or another apology.

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“Give us one minute, Gerald,” Ambrose said, and the footman nodded obediently before disappearing.

“Helena, I am truly sorry,” he apologized, speaking tenderly as he went to her and put her hands upon her shoulders.

Helena frowned up at him, pushed his hands away and took a step back.

“This was a sign, brother. I told you I did not want to do this today. Send the others home.”

Ambrose’s apologetic expression dissolved into a frown. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

“Helena, please, not this again,” he pleaded curtly. “It is time. I am sorry, but it is time to find you a husband.”

“She is not denying that,” Barbara stated, stepping up to them. “She is simply saying today is not a good day, and I think perhaps she is right. If Lord Crawley is any indication of what today will bring, why risk it? It was awful from start to finish.”

“It will always be the wrong day for her,” Ambrose insisted, looking at Helena. “Will it not, little sister? There is no good day for this because you do not wish to be married.”

“I never said that!” Helena burst out, her rage breaking through the daze of heated memories. “I never stated that I was against marriage, brother, but I want time to make

my own choices!”

“You have had three years of time to make your choices,” he boomed back. “You are aging out of the proper...”

“If you finish that sentence you will not be sleeping in our bed tonight, Ambrose,” Barbara warned, her tone as cold as ice.

Tension rose in Helena’s spine as she watched Barbara and Ambrose glower at one another. Barbara had been a spinster once, and happily so, until some unfortunate debts had affected her father. Now, she and Ambrose were united in marriage and madly in love, even if they sometimes argued like fire clashing with ice.

Normally Helena loved watching a good row occur between them, but not today. Not because of her.

“Enough of this,” she sighed, stepping between them. “I will do this. Come, bring Raventhorn in.”

“Absolutely right you will,” Ambrose stated, breaking his glare from Barbara only to turn it on Helena. “And one more thing,” he warned. “You will take this day seriously. If you do not, Helena, my next step will be to make your selection for you.”

Anger swept through Helena as she once again felt her brother’s will being foisted upon her, and she twisted her fingers behind her back in an effort to stay her tongue. If he was going to push her so mightily, it meant she was running out of time.

Many hours later, Helena sank wearily into her bathtub, her mind and body a mess of scattered nerves and constantly pinging thoughts. Ambrose’s threat had rattled her to her bones, and it was all she had heard in her mind for the rest of the day as she desperately did her best to find something intriguing or desirable in her suitors.

Ambrose had been right. Crawley's visit had been a fluke. The other four had all been filled with the proper politeness and niceties required during such a call. Yet, despite that, none of them appealed to her. Not that some were not handsome. One had been particularly attractive, but she could not recall his name.

A knock at the door paused Helena's thoughts, and her body tensed at the fear of another impending argument with Ambrose.

"Who is it?" she called.

"I beg your pardon, my lady, it is Agatha," her handmaid answered softly from the other side.

Helena's shoulders released their tension as she invited Agatha to enter.

"A rider just delivered this to the rear kitchen door, my lady," Agatha explained, scurrying over. In her hands lay another small, red envelope.

A tremble passed over Helena and her heart skipped a beat. She sat up once more, quickly dried her hands and held them out for the letter.

"Thank you," Agatha," she said quickly. "That will be all."

Agatha curtsied quickly and left without another word as Helena opened Morgan's second letter. As before, a riddle was scrawled in artistic penmanship, the bold black letters igniting the deep red of the paper.

Persephone,

You first had two days,

But now you have none.

Knock twice on the gate,

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When the eleven singers have sung.

Last time you were snow,

But tonight you are ash.

Though either will melt at the touch of my brush.

X

Hades

Helena read it over again, both her smile and excitement growing as her mind worked to solve the riddle. The first time she had received his letter she had been forced to wait two nights to see Morgan. Now she had none, which meant she was to arrive at his back gate later that evening. Eleven singers, eleven tolls of the bell. She had to be there by eleven.

She reread the last three lines. Snow. Ash. Snow. Ash. She had been snow? Suddenly it clicked. Her gown. It was white. Like snow. He wanted her to wear black tonight. And the last lines were obvious. She would be posing for him. Nude. Just as she had promised.

Forgetting completely about her awful day, Helena slowly towed the letter and its envelope beneath the surface of her steaming bathwater. The brilliant crimson dye leached slowly from the paper and moved outward in little ripples until it turned the entire bath a brilliant red. Helena watched, transfixed, as the dye reached her flesh

and seeped into it.

Remarkably similar to how I seeped into Morgan's lap the other night.

Helena stood up and watched the scarlet water run in little drops down her breasts, tickling her nipples that had hardened from the cool brush of air. She tilted her head curiously as she watched the droplets continue their path, sultrily making their way over her navel and her taut abdomen.

Helena pulled her eyes away and stepped out of the tub just as the multiple droplets converged and flowed down into her pulsing sex. She reached over and retrieved the sodden letter from the tub and tossed it onto the fire. It hit the logs with a resounding hiss that made her tremble.

Glancing at the clock, she was alarmed to see that she had only an hour left to get ready. After toweling off she unpinned her dark blonde curls from the top of her head and let them cascade downwards until they came to a rest beside the two dimples on her lower back.

She had no other black gown, but she did have a black gauzy shift she could not deny herself last summer at the modiste's. It had an empire fit, but the neckline dipped down into a lowV that nearly reached her navel. It had come with a wide, shimmering, watermelon pink ribbon to tie around the waist, but she ignored it and pulled on her most conservative, pale pink dressing gown.

In a sudden burst of creativity, Helena returned to her bath with a clean linen cloth and dipped it into the crimson water until the white fabric was saturated with color. Taking it back to her dressing table, she then reached for a small brush and added some salve to the cloth, swirling it with the brush until it also adopted the crimson shade. She carefully applied it to her cheeks and lips until she had created a warm, soft pink glow on her clear, creamy face.

Her heart began to hammer as she studied her reflection. Her blue eyes were shining and dilated, her lips dewy and full as they drew in an excited breath. She could not deny that she was somewhat terrified, but every fiber of her being willed her to overcome her reservations about being seen naked by a man. By Morgan.

In the aftermath of such an awful day, she had needed this more than she had realized. She wanted him to do everything in his power to mesmerize her the way he had the other night, and chase away her reality. Helena dripped a few drops of honeysuckle oil behind her ears, and retrieved her cloak. She had ten minutes to get to the gate but she would only need three.

CHAPTER TEN

“I am going to hell for this,” Morgan whispered, closing his eyes as the first strike of eleven rang out from the nearest church.

He was by the gate, his body tense and agitated from two days of pure torture. Helena had opened herself up to him with her first kiss exactly as he had hoped, but what he had not foreseen was the painful, slamming need that pained his testicles the moment she stepped into his carriage and drove away. He had already booked a night at one of his favorite bedding dens to relieve himself of his unanswered need.

He went through one woman, then two, then four. Dawn slowly bled into noon and was absorbed by the evening. Even after a dozen women and an additional night at the brothel, he had not been sated. There was no act he did not venture into with those willing woman, but no matter how debauched or intense his encounters were, it was never enough to rid himself of the longing that plagued him.

No matter how uniquely beautiful or different the women were, Morgan only had eyes for Helena. He heard Helena’s voice. He drew in the phantom scent of her. He only felt how she had writhed in his lap, so grateful and responsive to finally be

immersed in her most sought after experience. How delicious her lips and tongue had tasted; a taste which still sat on his tongue like thick honey, and damn him if he did not want more.

Still, despite such intense sensations clashing within him, Morgan fought to maintain control. Helena wanted to learn from him, and he was not going to ruin that.

He had wanted to paw at her body the other night, cup and pinch her breasts, slap his palms against her thighs, but he had restrained himself, only using his fingertips to draw out her delightful shivers. She deserved to be taught with patience and willpower, and he was going to give her that.

Helena's knock came at the eleventh toll of the bell, exactly as instructed, and he felt his heart stop in his chest as he opened the gate and saw her piercing blue eyes looking up at him from beneath the hood of her cloak. It seemed to take several seconds for his heart to find another beat, but when it did, it slammed into him like a fist, and he finally remembered to breathe.

"I do adore how clever you are," he managed to tease, pulling her inside.

Helena smirked and kept her hand in his as they walked towards the house.

"Your riddles are fun," she replied. "I like them."

For some reason that touched him, and he could not help the flattered smile he gave her.

"However," she went on, her tone full of mischief, "giving me less than an hour this evening to prepare myself was not as enjoyable."

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Morgan's smile transformed into a devilish smirk. What she did not know was that he had originally planned to write a riddle to have her arrive the following evening, but as he prepared to pen his missive, he found himself unable to wait that long. It was a risk he had taken, but now that she was here, he was happy to have taken it.

He stopped, turning her towards her, and wrapped his left hand around her throat. Desire coursed through him as she swayed forward, pressing herself into his palm. She wanted this night. Perhaps not as badly as he did, but she wanted to be here with him.

"That is the thing about desire," he rasped, stroking his fingers reverently over her larynx. "One has to be open to chasing it from time to time at the very last second. And look at you now. Arriving perfectly on time, despite your concerns."

Helena's pink lips parted as she gasped slightly during an inhale, and Morgan's arousal grew as he felt every little reflex in her throat. Unable to deny himself, he squeezed slightly harder, just for the briefest of moments, until he could feel her heartbeat in the tips of his fingers.

"You are cold. Come, let us get you inside," he commanded, pulling his hand away as Helena's eyes began to glisten.

Helena made no protest as he put his hand on her lower back and guided her once more into his library.

"There is something I wish to mention," she told him, the yearning gone from her voice, replaced by insistence.

“Yes?” he asked.

“My list,” she replied her brow furrowing. “I want to participate in gambling and swimming last. I have decided that they are the least important aspects of my curiosity, and with my time running out, I want to focus on the other goals.”

Morgan initially felt a flutter of delight at the news, but as he watched Helena’s expression grow more determined, he mentally swept away the sarcastic response he had intended and instead asked, “what happened today, Helena?”

Rage touched her eyes as she shot a glare towards the ground and her jaw tightened.

“Ambrose is unhappy with my lack of interest in his selections. He is going to take the decision away from me, I am certain of it.”

Morgan’s first thought was to go to Ambrose, slap him upside the head and ask him why he was behaving like such a dolt. But he knew all too well how poorly that would go. Not just for him, but also for Helena. If Ambrose ever found out...

“That is an easy fix,” was all he said. “We will save those for last then.”

A look of relief passed over Helena’s face and she gave him a quiet nod of appreciation.

Once inside, Morgan shut the garden doors and pulled the maroon velvet curtains across them. His garden gates were tall, but he had made a promise to Helena, and he was not about to let anyone else catch a glimpse of what he was about to see.

“So, if you solved my riddle then you must know that tonight I will...” Morgan’s words died in his throat as he turned back to Helena.

She had removed her cloak and robe, both of them tossed onto a nearby settee, and was standing in a black night shift. The flames of the fireplace stood behind her, shining through the gauzy fabric and making the silhouette of her petite, slender figure vividly apparent. Morgan felt his mouth begin to water as another shot of painful arousal struck him in the groin.

“What is wrong?” Helena asked, her voice laced with concern.

Morgan suddenly realized that he had no idea what sort of facial expression he had been sporting; his face had become numb as all the blood had rushed elsewhere.

“Not a damned thing,” he croaked, the curse slipping out of his mouth before he could stop it.

Enough, Morgan. Get yourself together.

Morgan let out a growl as he forced his eyes away from the tempting beauty that was his student and now muse, and he stalked towards his easel.

“Is this not what you requested?” Helena asked, watching him curiously as he readied his canvas.

“You worry too much,” he taunted, forcing himself to grin at her mockingly as he finally looked at her again.

Doing so delivered a swift tug of desire to his lower belly, but at least this time he was not as taken aback by her beauty as he had been the first time.

“Besides, it is not the gown I am to be sketching,” he went on, “it is what lies beneath.”

Helena's pink cheeks deepened to red as she self-consciously brought a hand up to the center of her chest, as if trying to hide the bare expanse of flesh.

"We are...what am I supposed to do?" she asked.

Morgan could hear the intimidation in her voice, and for some reason, it allowed him to finally take control of the lust he had been feeling.

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“You understood my riddle, yes?” he asked patiently, taking a moment to sharpen the tip of his charcoal. “Tonight shall be easy for you. You simply have to pose for me.”

“Naked,” Helena said softly.

It was the first time Morgan had heard the word spoken from her lips and damn him if his ears did not hear it as an invitation.

“Yes,” he said, his own voice once more becoming raspy. “As you had agreed.”

Morgan could not miss the evident worry in her eyes, which compelled him to walk away from his easel and go to her.

“You do not wish to pose for me?” he asked, stopping a few steps away from her. His hands itched to touch her, but he would not chance swaying her truth. He needed to know how she truly felt, for he had never been the type of man to force himself upon a woman. Especially not Helena.

“It is not that,” Helena whispered, her eyes cast downward. Then, in a rush she suddenly added, “though, admittedly this is a bit frightening. To show oneself so plainly.”

Unable to resist any longer, Morgan reached out for her chin, tilting it up until her eyes met his.

“What is it?” he asked.

Helena's cheeks blushed harder, but she did not look away.

"Is this...is this the only task we are performing tonight?"

Excitement exploded through Morgan as his lips rose into a wicked grin.

"You want your second lesson tonight as well?" he asked.

"Yes." The word tumbled in a whispered rush from her lips.

Her willingness to learn more of what he could teach her pleased him immensely. Morgan lowered his head towards hers. Just as she pouted her lips for him, he dipped his head to her neck and nipped it softly. She let out gasp of slight pain as his bite transformed into a suckling kiss, then leaned into him as he drew his kisses up the column of her neck before finally meeting her mouth.

Helena sighed as she kissed him in return, opening herself up to him, inviting him to take what he liked. Stars exploded behind his eyes as their lips met and parted sweetly, and when he finally pulled back, he felt a rush of dizziness sweeping through him.

"Pose for me like a good girl," he whispered, stroking her cheek, "and I will give you what you wish."

Pulling himself away, Morgan returned to his easel with considerable effort and waited for Helena to remove her gown.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Though Helena had initially trembled as she removed her gown, the look of pure approval in Morgan's eyes had chased away her insecurities. He had stood silently at

his easel for several moments, letting his eyes roam across her body, wanting to take in every inch of her.

He then began his commands, ordering Helena to pose one way, then another, while his artistic eye attempted to find the perfect position. He finally settled upon seating her on the fur rug by the fireplace, her back to the flames, one of her legs laid straight while the other remained bent at the knee with her foot on the soft fur. He had then gently coaxed her to move in increments until he had her positioned exactly as he wanted.

Each one of Morgan's commanding touches felt like a bead of water sizzling on her skin, and when he had first pulled away she nearly fell out of her pose in her desire to follow his hands. Morgan had smirked and taunted her about patience, then posed her again.

After a brief review of her pose, Morgan had brazenly laid his hand upon her ribcage, his fingertips just barely brushing the delicate underside of her left breast as he worked. He kept his hand in place until he had felt her trembling subside. When he pulled away she felt as if he had pulled her flesh along with him; the lack of his heat felt harsh and unfair but she stayed put.

Silence gathered like a thunderstorm between them as Morgan began to sketch the outline of her body. The sound of charcoal stroking the paper and the flames crackling in the hearth were the only noises that graced the room. As Morgan drew her, Helena studied him.

A bit of his usual humor had appeared when she had first arrived, but the joker in him was soon tucked away. Upon entering the library, the lord of seduction had risen up to take the joker's place. His handsome face, which was usually creased with mirth, had become drawn in deep concentration as he immersed himself fully in his sketching.

As she posed for him she considered his duality and marveled at it. She had known Morgan nearly all of her life yet had never once thought that he was more than the joker he made himself out to be. Now she wondered what other secrets he kept. Were they all wickedly delicious, or did something painful and twisted fester inside of him?

All three of the other dukes had shown their darker sides in a more obvious fashion, but Morgan had never let anyone bear witness to his pain. Was it because he truly felt none, or because he was so good at hiding it?

“That is enough sketching for tonight,” Morgan announced. His deep tone slid like silk over her ears, and Helena felt a rush of excitement and surprise as she moved onto her knees and he walked towards her.

“Was that long enough?” she asked, rising slightly as he stopped before her.

Her eyes were level with the waist of his trousers, and she could not stop them from widening as she saw the clear outline of his manhood straining against the fabric. Though she was not sure why, she felt her mouth begin to water as she took in the sight and a deep curiosity rose within her.

What would he taste like?

Helena gasped softly as she felt the sudden caress of his fingertips at her jaw, and she felt herself jolted out of her reverie as Morgan forced her to look up. Fire danced behind his dark green eyes, making him look almost inhuman in his masculine beauty.

“Long enough for tonight,” he replied, his voice strained as he caressed his thumb across her lower lip.

He remained silent a moment as he slowly cocked his head; a predatory energy emitting from him as his stare grew more intense.

“Though we may have to completely start over. I did not imagine this pose before, but now...now this is what I was looking for. A portrait of you on your knees, looking up at me with those cursedly beautiful eyes. Jesus, Helena. You have no idea how bloody perfect you look like this.”

Arousal and self-love coursed through Helena’s veins as she heard the unfettered desire in his words. This was no jest. This was his truth, and she felt it permeating her as the dye from his letter had saturated her bathwater.

Morgan suddenly gasped sharply and pulled his fingers away from her lips. He balled his hand into a tight fist and shook with exertion before he released his hold. He rubbed his fingertips together several times before extending his hand to her.

“Arise, little Persephone, before I give in to my most vile thoughts and rush you too

far, too quickly,” he ordered, his jaw tight.

His pupils suddenly dilated until all of the lush forest green had been eaten away, and he flexed his fingers with urgency. Helena felt a jolt of electricity traveling through her as her body numbly and obediently reached for his offered hand, and she kept her eyes transfixed on his as he helped raise her to her feet.

“It is time for your next lesson, as promised.” Morgan said gruffly, walking away from her in a stiff gait.

From the table, he retrieved what appeared to be a cloth painter’s satchel used to keep brushes still and safe in tiny pockets while traveling, which could be rolled out and quickly readied for use. He brought it over to her, untied it, and Helena stepped back in shock when she realized what was inside.

“What are those?” She asked, staring worriedly at the glinting, sharp-looking golden tools that lined the satchel.

“Every artist needs his tools. If I am going to teach you the art of pleasure we must have the proper utensils to assure your absolute comprehension,” Morgan replied passively, as if the explanation was obvious and rather mundane.

He palmed the satchel with one hand, and with the other he drew out a long, thin golden rod and what appeared to be a spur attached to a thin, gold stick. He then snapped the satchel closed and tossed it onto the nearest side table.

“Come,” he commanded.

When Helena wavered, his brow drew up slightly.

“You truly think I would do something to harm you?”

The question was asked calmly and honestly, and she knew she was expected to answer similarly in return.

“No,” she whispered, and knew it was the truth. She did not fear Morgan.

Helena caught the hint of relief in his eyes at her answer and he beckoned her once more to come to him. This time she obeyed, and when she reached him he grasped her shoulder and turned her around. She shivered with pleasure as he traced his fingertips along the hairline behind her ear and let out a sigh when his lips fluttered there.

“Did you enjoy your first kiss the other night, Helena?” he whispered against her ear, his hands slowly twisting into her hair.

“Yes,” she breathed, her lashes flickering shut as he tugged her hair gently.

Morgan then placed a warm kiss below her ear, as if rewarding her for her answer, and replied, “good.”

“Somany sensations can flood through the lips,” he said, tracing his fingertips down her arm. “But there is so much more pleasure to be had in other parts of the body, some of which you would never consider.”

He again tugged the fistful of her hair, slightly harder this time, and Helena whimpered as she felt the back of her head brought down to his pectoral. Morgan’s head lowered, his lips skimming the flesh along her throat before sinking his teeth gently into the softness of her earlobe.

“Would you like me show you?” he rasped as Helena let out another small cry.

“Yes,” she breathed, feeling her blood begin to heat and thrum in her ears.

“Say yes, please,sir.” Morgan growled, nipping her ear once more.

Helena whimpered as she felt the length of his manhood pressing further into her backside and a yearning for him surged through her.

“Yes, please, sir, show me.”

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As Morgan whispered words of praise into her ear, Helena thought the voice that left her lips was not her own. The voice belonged to a woman who had done this many times; a woman who already knew what was about to happen to her body and she hungered for it.

“That is my good girl,” Morgan whispered, turning her head so that he could kiss her lips roughly.

He then took a small step back, commanding Helena to once move forward. With one hand still wrapped in her hair, Morgan produced the long, thin, pencil-sized golden rod and held it before her eyes.

“You may tremble. You may writhe. But you may not move your feet from where they are planted. You may not jerk or pull away suddenly. I am the keeper of your flesh and your pleasure for this evening, and I instruct you to obey me. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Helena whimpered, her eyes on the needle.

Beneath her excitement, she felt a tremor of worry pass through her. Even so, she closed her eyes and gave herself over to Morgan. She gasped, surprised at how soft yet biting the thin rod felt as he traced the tip of it down the back of her neck.

“Good,” Morgan murmured, his one fist still wound tightly in her hair as he watched her tremble.

He then shifted the wand into his hand like he would a pen and ran the sharpened

point down the perfect line of her spine. Helena gasped at the strange pleasure; confused and aroused by the sensation roiling through her body. She sank further into Morgan's hold as he pressed the tip of the rod first into the left dimple on her lower back, then into the right, and her knees nearly collapsed when he dragged the tip down her left buttock and thigh.

"Stay on your feet, little one," Morgan scolded gently, chuckling in her ear. "Just a little longer, I promise."

Helena was only able to whimper as she fisted her hands and pressed her feet more firmly into the floor, determined to stay upright. For the next several moments she trembled ceaselessly as Morgan dragged the rod teasingly along her hips, waist and breasts. She released his name from her lips with a strangled cry and flinched as the cold, golden tip was brushed across her nipple. It did not hurt, but the sensation set off a series of explosions along her skin, leaving a trail of flames in its wake.

She whimpered, then gasped as Morgan turned around and latched onto her injured nipple with his mouth. Helena's eyes rolled upwards with ecstasy as his hot tongue lapped sensually over the small wound and she felt the pain recede instantly.

When he released her she turned herself towards him, hoping he would tend to her other breast, but he instead twisted her back around, once more controlling her with his grip in her hair, and brought the tip of the rod up the arch of her back. With a few twists of his fingers, he gathered her dark golden strands into a bun, and deftly stabbed the rod through the knot.

It was only a hair pin, not a torture device.

Morgan had simply teased her with it before putting it to its proper use. When he released her and brought her around to face him once more, it stayed in place, pinned so that the long waves were off the back of her neck.

“How badly did it hurt?” he asked, going to his knees.

He came eye level with her breasts and inspected her nipple closely.

“Not at all,” she breathed, struggling to focus as his fingers teasingly inspected her flesh.

“But the anticipation?” he asked, while circling his thumb around the hard bud.

Helena smiled in rapt amazement and shook her head.

“The anticipation was powerful,” she confessed, and Morgan laughed softly.

Helena shook her head quickly. She wanted more.

“Continue with our lesson,” she pleaded, then after catching his stern brow, quickly added, “please, sir.”

Arousal flared in Morgan’s green eyes, and he gave her a nod of approval as he rose from his knees. He then pulled the spur from his pocket and ordered her to stand facing away from him once more.

“We shall have one more lesson in this practice before we move onto a more...impactful one,” Morgan muttered against her ear.

Like the needle, he ran the sharpened five-point spur down the back of her neck, and a smile grew on Helena’s lips. It was very sharp and generated just a pinch of pain, but it also tickled. Or, perhaps, nipped? She was not sure, but she knew she liked it. This time Helena’s body moved with the utensil, lightly pressing herself into it wherever it roamed, and she let out a small, light laugh that turned into a moan as he rolled the spur down the path between her hip and pelvis.

“Your hips are incredibly sensitive,” Morgan murmured into her ear, retracing the path he had just taken with the spur.

A wave of bliss grew in her groin and sped through her nerve endings as Morgan retraced the spur’s path. Helena’s knees threatened to give out when he paused at the fold of her buttocks and pressed slightly harder.

A deep groan of pleasure left Morgan’s chest as he slipped the spur into his pocket, picked Helena up, and carried her to a nearby settee.

“Lay back against me, between my legs,” Morgan commanded hoarsely, already repositioning her to do so. “That is a good girl. Now, spread your legs. Hook each ankle onto the outside of my calves. Yes, just like that.”

“Morgan,” Helena breathed, feeling a flush flood from her cheeks to her chest.

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Although she had been naked nearly the entire time, with her legs now splayed apart she felt more exposed than ever. Helena glanced up at him and saw that he was looking down at her with pure hunger; his breaths deep and rapid. Helena began to move her legs together as her insecurity grew. In an instant Morgan's hands gripped her inner thighs to stop her.

"Do not dare," he warned, nipping her ear.

His hands then loosened their grip on her thighs, kneading them slightly before they slipped up to her sex. His fingers skimmed across her petals, making her gasp and arch. Morgan let out another primal growl from deep within his chest.

"You do not hide yourself from me, remember?" he whispered, brushing his fingertips over her swollen pearl.

"Yes, sir," Helena whimpered, arching into his touch.

"Now, spread your legs wider."

Helena's body obeyed immediately, her mind not registering the command as it became overwhelmed with pleasure. From his pocket, Morgan pulled out the spur once more, and with one hand around her throat he began the lesson again.

He started with her breasts, letting the little sharp edges of the star prick and pull the sensitive flesh of each areola and nipple, and then the delicate underside of each breast.

When he reached her hip again, Morgan dug the tool slightly deeper, and a low, heady moan escaped Helena's lips as she writhed uncontrollably in his lap. She loved the biting sting of the little tool.

"Now, for this next part, you Must.Stay. Still," Morgan warned, his tone deadly in her ear.

Helena willed her body to stop trembling as Morgan guided the spur to the apex of her legs. She moaned his name as the small spokes traveled around the delicate flesh surrounding her moist opening, then pressed her head tightly against Morgan's chest as he turned the utensil so that the base of her bud slipped perfectly between the two sharpened prongs.

He removed the pressure of the device just as it became too much, and as Helena released a breath, she felt his fingers quickly replace it.

"My, my, you are simply soaking, Helena," Morgan taunted, his fingers expertly teasing her dripping petals.

She gasped as his left pointer finger slid between her slick, tight walls, and she felt a ripple of pleasure ebb through her as he began to gently thrust and rock and his hand. Her lashes fluttered shut at the pleasure, and she whimpered in protest when he pulled his hand away far too soon for her liking.

Helena felt her body melt into his as he began to tease her nipple and her steamy entrance simultaneously.

"Do not close your eyes," he commanded hoarsely. "Look at how wet you are for me."

Helena felt her eyes fly open and her cheeks burst with heat as she saw the evidence

of her pleasure dripping down his pointer finger and sparkling on his other fingertips.

“I want you to watch what happens to your body as it comes undone,” Morgan whispered into her ear as he brought his hand back down to her mons. Softly, he brushed his dripping fingertips to her clitoris, and her back arched immediately into the touch.”

Helena’s breaths grew heavy as Morgan continued to work her tiny bundle of nerves, and she forced her eyes open. She watched in wonder as her breath moved through her body; how certain parts of her trembled and refused to give in to her demand to be still.

“Have you ever touched yourself here, little Persephone?” Morgan asked, sliding his finger back inside of her as he worked her bud faster.

“Ah! Mmm!” Helena whimpered, shaking her head as she felt the wave growing within her reach its apex.

Morgan chuckled as he masterfully worked the tool.

“You have forgotten your words,” he taunted. “Have you never tried?”

Helena flushed at the deeply invasive question, but she knew she had to answer.

“I-I have tried,” she confessed, her nails digging into the fabric of his trousers that was bunched at his hip. “B-but I c-cann-not seem to find the right t-touch.”

Morgan flicked his wrist, causing a sharp but dizzying pleasure to shoot through her groin, and Helena cried out as she strained to keep herself still.

“Follow my touch,” Morgan ordered, moving his hand rhythmically back and forth,

up and down. “Next time you try, you will think of this; you will think of me, and when you release, you will call my name. Understand?”

Pleasure burst through Helena’s body as her building orgasm suddenly broke through its invisible dam. A loud, pleading cry left her lips as she felt tears fill her eyes and a flood of juices erupt between her legs. Morgan tossed the spur away, his fingers immediately going to the small bud he had just tortured and rubbing it hard and fast.

Helena felt her body lift up and then buck wildly against Morgan’s hand as the new pressure restarted her orgasm, and she felt another rush of pleasure engulf her.

“You will say my name next time,” Morgan commanded, covering her mouth as he nipped at her ear. Yes?”

“Yes,” she cried, the word muffled under his hand.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Morgan drew in a fresh breath of air, but it did nothing to calm the firestorm of lust that burned within him. It was torturous enough to have Helena laid out before him like this, but what she had not known was that he had felt her backside grind into his heavily engorged manhood with every touch he had given her.

His shaft was aching hard and the front of his trousers were damp with his need for release. He wanted nothing more than to free himself of his bindings and thrust deeply into the hot wetness that lay spread out in front of him like a feast, but he could not allow himself that pleasure.

“Such a good girl,” he breathed, pressing kisses into her hair and ear as Helena’s body continued to tremble on top of him. He held her for a few more moments, relishing the feel of her dewy skin beneath his palms, and then slowly slid out from under her.

Her eyes shone with worry as he stood over her, and he bit back the groan in his throat.

“Perhaps that should be enough for tonight,” he stated, his tone drawn and tight.

He would surely burst if they continued any longer, and he refused to release himself in his pants in Helena’s presence like some unskilled schoolboy. This was not going at all as he had planned. He had imagined his agreement with Helena would be fun

and pleasurable, but not on this level. Not in a way that provoked this much want in him.

“Morgan, please,” Helena whispered, sitting up on the settee.

He nearly choked on a groan when her hands rose and her delicate, thin fingers laced into his pockets, holding him still before her.

“Finish the lesson. You said before that was just the first part,” she went on, her eyes pleading.

“The next part will be more painful,” he warned, his tone gravelly as he fisted his hands to keep them from touching her. “And I am dangerously close to losing my control. I believe it is best if we stop.”

He unclenched his fists to wrap his hands around Helena’s, determined to release her grip on him, but Helena’s hands remained firmly in place as she continued to stare up at him imploringly.

“I trust you, Morgan,” she whispered, her tone full of reverence as she met his eyes. She licked her lips and drew in a breath as if gathering her courage, and added, “please, sir. Show me what is next.”

Morgan’s rigid member twitched at her plea. So perfect. So soft. Any thought of telling her no had suddenly been wiped from his mind. How could he when she was being such a good student?

“Go to the fireplace,” he commanded, pulling her grip from his pockets. “Then turn to face me.”

Helena accepted his hand and he watched her with hunger as she swayed in her first

few steps towards the fireplace. He waited until she was turned towards him, then slowly sat down on the settee, his legs splayed wide as he rested his hands on his knees.

He immediately noted that Helena's gaze had dropped to his straining manhood, and was filled with roguish satisfaction.

"Now, get on your hands and knees and crawl to me."

Helena's eyes grew wide as he uttered his directive. For a moment he thought that she had reached her limit for the evening. Then, after her tongue darted teasingly between her lips and she seductively pulled in her lower lip, she lowered herself to her hands and knees.

Morgan could not help his groan of approval as she began to crawl towards him. She was learning so quickly how to please him; he did not even have to remind her to look at him. When she reached the space between his legs she rose up on her knees, placing her hands over his own, and sat patiently.

"Up," he commanded, flicking his eyes to his legs. "Your backside facing me. Head facing towards one end, and your toes facing the other."

Helena swallowed slowly as she moved to obey. As she slid into place, he felt her hip press against his manhood and his rigid abdomen, and he let out a soft growl as she slowly stretched herself out until her buttocks rested in his lap. She undulated her hips again, teasing him, and he let out a sharp cry as a small burst of his seed shot into his trousers.

Self-loathing, lust and primal need thrashed around inside of him as he felt the pitiful discharge, and he brought his hand down in a harsh slap against Helena's left buttock. It was much harder than he had originally intended, but he had no time to apologize

or ask how Helena felt before a deep moan left her lips and she raised her hips.

Morgan was shocked, pleased and proud of how well Helena took the unintended first slap. He had planned to warm her up to the stricter slaps just as he had with the rod and spur, but she seemed to have no need for it.

He placed his hand over her reddening cheek, desire consuming him as he kneaded the stinging flesh, then drew his hand away and delivered another equally harsh slap to the opposite cheek. Helena moaned once more, squirming in his lap as she reached for the nearest pillow and bit into it.

For a moment he contemplated commanding her to be still, but he could not. He was enjoying it far too much.

“That’s it, little one, bite the pillow for me,” he urged, running his hand along her spine.

Helena whimpered and trembled as she arched into his touch.

“You know I normally do not allow women to tease me this much,” he mused, tracing his fingers over her reddened cheeks. “At some point the pleasure becomes too painful, especially when there is no avenue for release. Now I am left with all this pain. What am I to do?”

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He slapped her backside with emphasis and was rewarded with another heady moan from Helena, followed by a mumbling of words.

“What was that?” he demanded, slapping her right cheek. “Do not mumble, little one.”

“I said I am sorry,sir,” Helena panted after the next slap.

“For what?” he mused, then slapped the opposite harder.

“F-for causing you pain,” she breathed out, her body now fully rippling upon the settee.

He slid his hand between her legs and felt her dewy heat dripping onto his trousers, then followed the small trails until he found her soaking petals. She pushed her hips into his hand and slid herself onto his fingers.

“Not fair,” he rasped, watching her work herself on his fingers.

In a flurry of movement he straddled her on his lap and freed his erection from his trousers. Their lips came together in hurried, desperate kisses as they began to grind into one another. Helena was beginning to trust him to lead, so even through her fervor, she allowed him to take her hip and guide her.

Morgan growled with approval as her wetness coated him and coaxed him to move at a scant pace and tunnel himself inside of her. As much as he now longed for it, he kept her exactly where she was, their hips moving rhythmically together as the

friction brought them both closer to ecstasy.

“Remember what I said?” Morgan moaned, ripping away from their kiss as he felt them both near their end.

“About my name?”

Eyes closed, her face painted with pleasure, Helena nodded. She was so tense, so close to reaching the zenith of her rapture.

“Open your eyes, little one,” Morgan commanded, sensing her ready to explode as he thrust his shaft harder against her delicious mound. “Open your eyes and say it.”

Helena’s lashes fluttered with effort before she finally succeeded in opening her eyes. Her lips parted ecstatically as “Morgan” came pouring out in the sweetest, neediest tone. Her tongue clung to his name as he felt her release flood over him, the final syllable drawing out into a moan as she relinquished all control.

Morgan growled fiercely as his own explosion followed. This time it was far more intense than the last, and he could not help but sink his teeth into her shoulder as his seed rained from him and sprayed her breasts and abdomen.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Stop that,” Teresa whispered into Helena’s ear.

However, she could no longer hold it in. Using her fan as a cover, Helena let her pent-up yawn escape and blinked away the moisture in her eyes as they endured the numbing monotony of Mimi Courtley’s newest attempt at writing poetry. It was, on every level, the dullest event they had been invited to that winter.

“Helena,” Teresa chided as Mimi continued to read to the audience.

“Apologies,” Helena half-whispered, half-hissed as she wiggled in her seat, “But you cannot tell me that this is a stimulating read.”

Teresa frowned at her.

“Well, no,” she agreed begrudgingly, “But it is impolite to appear bored. You have been so...out of touch these last few days. Have you been sleeping well?”

Her question was a dangerous one, and Helena knew she had to be careful how she answered it. Although Teresa knew about her visit to the Devil’s Masquerade, she remained unaware of who Helena had met up with, and how that random interaction had led her to experience many of her deepest desires.

She thought back to her scintillating evening with Morgan two nights earlier. Images of the two of them entwined on his couch flooded her mind and filled her body with yearning. She again wiggled restlessly in her chair, her body suddenly oversensitive and annoyed at the enforced stillness.

“I am fine,” Helena insisted, forcing her body to stop moving. “Just a little fatigued by Ambrose’s parade of suitors.”

To her relief, Mimi finished the final line of her latest debacle. As the room filled with polite applause, Helena made a show of joining them as Teresa stared at her dubiously.

“That was part four of nine from my new sonnet, The Butterflies Are Our Friends,” Mimi announced with a smile. “We will now take a small break before I read the remainder. If you have enjoyed this piece, my father is having copies of it printed into booklets.”

“Part four?” Helena whispered as the small crowd began to murmur and stretch. “We are only on part four?!”

“It seems we shall never escape.” A familiar voice quipped from a seat behind them.

Helena felt her entire body begin to hum as she heard Morgan’s amused, dry tone and turned with a relieved smile to look at him. He was dressed in his usual finery; a smart, dark blue suit with a matching vest and white shirt, and he appeared both at ease as well as in command. Until that moment she had never noticed how easily Morgan could fill a room with his presence.

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“Lord Grandhill, how wonderful to see you,” Teresa said excitedly, and offered him a quick curtsy as she blushed.

“Lady Teresa,” Morgan greeted her with a bow of his head, then turned back to Helena. He winked as he bowed his head towards her, and Helena felt her fingers twitch in excitement as he gave her a knowing smirk. “Lady Helena.”

“I was not aware that you are a fan of the oral arts.” Helena commented and gave him a cheeky smile in return.

Morgan’s smile momentarily turned wolfish, but he composed himself, twisted his mouth into a serious expression and nodded.

“Unfortunately, tonight I am,” Morgan admitted, motioning his head to Ambrose, who was conversing with Mimi’s older brother, Christopher.

“Your brother insisted I attend,” he went on, “as a favor to Chris. Admittedly, I am bored out of my mind.”

“You do not enjoy poetry, Your Grace?” Teresa asked politely.

“Quite the contrary,” Morgan stated, his gaze warming Helena’s bloodstream. “I believe well-written prose can be quite...invigorating.”

Helena blushed as she thought of the words they had exchanged the other night. Although they had not been poetic, she appreciated their innate art and beauty.

“Lady Teresa, would you mind if I stole Lady Helena away for a moment? Family business,” Morgan asked politely.

“Of course,” Teresa agreed. “I shall go and fetch us some drinks, Helena.”

Helena and Morgan remained silent as they watched Teresa walk to the nearby refreshments table. Morgan took a slow look around the room, as though ensuring his words would be safe from neighboring ears.

“I owe you an apology for the other night,” he murmured to Helena, taking a small step closer to her. “I fear I went too far with your lessons.”

Helena felt a sweep of indignation move through her as she heard the worry in his voice.

“I assure you, sir, you did no such thing,” she replied, her tone low and icy as she smiled at him sweetly. “I am quite aware of what I can and cannot manage, and I have no regrets. I apologize, however, if you do.”

Although she knew that Morgan was only looking out for her, she was offended by his statement. Morgan instantly noticed the change in her demeanor.

“I never said such a thing,” he replied coyly.

Unable to help herself, Helena asked the question that had been burning in her mind since the first night they had come together.

“So you are enjoying this then?” she asked. “Not too much of a chore for you?”

Morgan chortled as he swayed closer to her and ran the tip of his index finger up the back of her hand.

“You are no chore, Helena, and I have greatly enjoyed my time with you,” he whispered back, his tone infused with desire. “But it is imperative that I know you remain comfortable with what we do and that you are not feeling coerced.”

Anger doused Helena’s blooming arousal and she frowned at him.

“The only force I am feeling is from my brother and his idiotic insistence that I marry this year,” she answered testily. “If you do not wish to continue my lessons, that is fine, but if I?—”

“Easy, my little Persephone,” Morgan whispered soothingly. “I never said that. In fact I have found immense joy in conducting your lessons. Likely far too much for my own good.”

Despite her initial burst of irritation, Helena felt herself becoming calmer upon hearing not only her pet name, but also his admission.

“Apologies,” she whispered back, eyes darting around the room. “I have found myself ill-tempered of late. It is hard to relax when every man you see around your brother is your potential future husband; a husband you have no connection to, whatsoever.”

Compassion overshadowed Morgan’s smirking face.

“He only wants what is best for you, Helena,” he offered. “With everything that happened with George, the original suspect in their fathers’ murders, and how close Lydia and Ezra came to dying, he wants to be sure he has someone by your side to protect you.”

Helena sighed wearily.

“I know,” she whispered. “But his protection is starting to feel like a death sentence.”

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“You should speak with him again,” Morgan insisted.

“And what, pray tell, do you think he would say?” She asked.

Morgan opened his mouth to speak, but then he raised his brows, sighed, and closed his mouth.

“Fair point,” he agreed.

“My fate is sealed,” Helena replied, her tone full of dismay.

Morgan briefly offered her a rare look of pure compassion before he restored his mouth into its usual smirk.

“Not yet,” he whispered in her ear just enough to make her tremble. “And until it is, you and I will simply continue checking off items on your list of debauchery.”

Helena cast a seductive smile his way as everyone began to return to their seats.

“You are still amenable?” she asked.

Golden sparks illuminated within Morgan’s vivid green eyes.

“Veryamenable,” he agreed, then bowed his head towards her and the approaching Teresa.

“Have a pleasant evening, ladies,” he said in farewell before returning to Ambrose.

“May our poetess take an exciting turn in her works.”

Helena and Teresa both laughed lightly at his sarcasm and settled back into their seats.

“He is so handsome, is he not?” Teresa whispered to her as she handed Helena her drink.

“I suppose so,” Helena smirked as Mimi returned to her reading chair.

“And so funny, too. You share similar wit, you know. If only he was a part of the marriage mart,” Teresa sighed, shaking her head in disappointment. “You two would work well together, I think.”

“Except that my brother would kill him,” Helena laughed softly.

Teresa giggled with her as they turned their attention back to Mimi’s performance.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Morgan, enough,” Duncan snarled, stepping in front of him.

Panting, sweating and seeing red, Morgan let out a defiant growl as he tried to step past Duncan. The fight had not been that bad. He had caused greater injuries in the past and had received much worse in return.

“I can go another match,” Morgan insisted. “You hear that crowd out there? They are clamoring for me to go back out.”

He should have known better than to agree to Duncan coming with him that evening. Since the first night he had discovered Morgan’s underground fighting habits,

Duncan had tagged along a dozen or so times to see the fights.

Save for tonight, his friend had always been quiet and had never become personally involved, no matter how bloody the match became. Tonight, however, was different for both of them.

Morgan had poured himself into his fighting, letting it become a conduit to release his mounting pressure. He had been savage with his fists, but so had his opponents, and he had earned every bruise that now covered his body. The only difference was that he had won, whereas the rest of the fighters were receiving wound care in the back room. He had gone through three fighters that evening, and Morgan felt as if he could go through a hundred more.

“I do not know what has gotten into you tonight, brother, but this is not the way to handle it,” Duncan whispered, his tone tense. “If you continue along this path you are either going to kill someone or get killed yourself.”

Morgan knew Duncan was right, but he had no choice. After his lessons with Helena he had tried being with other women, but it had never been satisfying. They could never give him what he needed to drive away the yearning in his bones. Fighting allowed his mind to focus on something other than his growing need to spend time with Helena.

Morgan recalled how sensitive her body had been to everything he had done to her. Naked and vulnerable, she had swallowed her fear, trusted him, and allowed herself to be at the mercy of his teachings.

Morgan’s mind flashed to the way she had gasped as he poked the tip of the hair pin into her nipple; how she had undulated while he rolled the sharp, five-pointed star down her hip; when he had applied it to her sex and caused her to orgasm. He had been certain his thundering heart would stop.

His mind then raced to the sight of her crawling to him; her sky-blue eyes wide with yearning and a touch of shame. Not enough to make her stop, but enough to appease the monster in him that roared when a woman exhibited a modicum of shame for her willingness.

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His hands itched inside his gloves, yearning to slap the beautifully curved cheeks of her backside once again. She had loved the sting of a heavier hand and her reaction had driven his body into chaos. He had broken his promise to himself not to explode in his trousers, and had an urge to make up for his transgression.

Helena's body and curious spirit was, by definition, a revelation, but it was also her emotional pain that called him. Just as he had not wanted to be a duke, she did not want to proceed with her impending marriage. She was being thrust into the position without a choice, just as he had been.

Morgan yanked on the sweaty black bandit mask that covered his face from his hairline to his nose, wanting nothing more than to rip it off. Duncan had insisted he do more to hide his true identity, and since he held Morgan's secret in the palm of his hands, he had acceded to his request.

"Step away with me, brother," Duncan urged over the roar of the crowd behind the curtain. "Any more bruises and our brothers will surely catch on that you have been up to something."

Morgan's brow furrowed. He had already promised another fight to the organizer. To go back on the deal would create an uncomfortable rift; one he might not be able to mend. But he could not have the others asking him questions. Duncan knowing was more than enough.

Duncan was altogether too insightful for his own good. He had seen the minuscule crack in Morgan's persona and had used every excuse possible to join him in work matters, have tea or whiskey during one of his unexpected visits, and attend his secret

boxing matches.

Duncan would never ask him what was wrong, and Morgan appreciated him for that. However, Duncan would continue to give him knowing looks; he would continue invading his space until that minuscule crack widened into a crevice, at which point Morgan would confess.

Being around Ambrose had become a burden. He knew he had no one to blame but himself for feeding the fire that would no doubt destroy their friendship, but he had become addicted to and obsessed with Helena. Her willingness. Her obedience. She wanted to be his. He had seen it in her eyes, and her yearning equaled his own.

His second orgasm had been explosive. He had released it from within himself as Helena undulated in his lap, her beautiful, reddened cheeks bouncing on his lap as she worked her wet petals against the side of his throbbing rod. It was better and more transcendent than any other release he had ever experienced.

However, the brief euphoria had ended shortly after he had sent her home in his carriage. As he watched her leave, he felt his earlier bliss transform into an active addiction. Now he needed her. Again. And again. And again.

And she needed him.

“Clawhammer, what say you?” The announcer asked, swinging through the curtain with an enraged expression. “You beatin’ another arse or not?”

Duncan leveled Morgan with an intense stare, and his silence carried a deadly warning.

“Not,” Morgan spat out, meeting Duncan’s stare with equal intensity. “Take back my winnings as compensation. I am out.”

Neither Duncan nor Morgan saw the surprised expression on the man's face, nor did they hear his pleasant goodbyes, obviously pleased that he could simply pocket the money for himself.

"Good lad," Duncan acknowledged.

Morgan broke his gaze the moment they were alone and went to see Boris to retrieve his clothes.

"You are a right bastard, sometimes, you know that?" Morgan huffed, shrugging on his shirt.

"I have been called far worse by people far more important," Duncan quipped back with a shrug.

"Nowthatwas a witty retort," a deep voice called out.

Morgan's equally witty retort died on his tongue as he heard the aristocratic accent filter down from the staircase. There were times when Morgan or Duncan would spot a familiar face in the fighting pit, but it was an unwritten rule that they never spoke to one another and never acknowledged each other's presence.

A handsome blue-eyed man in his mid-twenties wearing a black suit, top hat, and opera cape came into view. Morgan noticed tufts of blonde hair poking out from under the man's hat and saw the steely shimmer of his eyes, but the man was only vaguely familiar to him.

"Apologies, I know this is not the way things usually go, Lord Grandhill, but I just wanted to offer you my congratulations on your success. It was quite a good night for my pocketbook," the man stated, holding out a friendly hand.

Morgan and Duncan remained silent and neither of them accepted the stranger's hand.

"That is...appreciated," Morgan eventually said as the man drew his hand away.

"You know my name but I am afraid I do not know yours, Lord...?"

"Luke Ayles, Viscount of Ashfield," said the man, introducing himself with a slight bow of his head.

"Ah, yes," Duncan spoke up. "That is why we do not recognize you. You inherited your title from a relative a few years ago, am I correct?"

There was trace of resentment behind the man's pleasant smile as he looked from Morgan to Duncan.

"You are correct, Lord Baxter," he conceded with a tilt of his head. "I have spent much of my time acclimating to my new title, but now that I am better settled, I am on a mission to find some likeminded gentlemen with whom I can spend my time."

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He motioned towards the door that Boris was guarding.

“Gentlemen who enjoy outings such as these.”

As Morgan studied Luke, something in the back of his mind growled protectively. There was something about his face that made him want to punch it. Morgan liked fighting quite a bit, but it had never become personal.

“Perhaps we will run into one another,” Morgan replied and decided it was time to leave. With a nod of his head he stepped around the gentleman and Duncan quickly following.

Luke simply raised his hat to them.

“Perhaps we shall,” he called back.

As they left the man behind, Morgan heard him murmur the name Curtis and stopped walking.

“Come on, let us get out of here before he follows us home like a lost pup,” Duncan urged.

Though he wanted to turn around and ask Luke who he was talking about, Morgan heeded his friend and let his curiosity die in the night air.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Thank you for the dance, Lord Raventhorn, it was lovely,” Helena said politely, curtsying before the gentleman.

She was unsure whether she had danced well or not. Her mind was constantly preoccupied by Morgan and the things Morgan did to her or taught her to do to herself. Several days had gone by since their last lesson, and not a night had passed where she did not lock her quarter doors, climb naked beneath her covers, and fondle herself in the same way that Morgan had.

As promised, she had whispered his name each time she found release, and let the two syllables flow from her lips like a prayer, or a plea.

“It was a great pleasure, my lady,” Lord Raventhorn replied heartily, “You dance so beautifully. Did you practice ballet as a girl?”

“She did, actually,” Barbara chimed in, approaching them from the side with a smile. “Is she not the most graceful of us all?”

“Oh, most certainly,” Lord Raventhorn agreed, giving Helena a moon-eyed look of approval.

She smiled politely at him but felt nothing for the man, and replied awkwardly with a simple, “thank you.”

“Um, would you excuse me, Lord Raventhorn?” Helena asked, twisting her dusky pink satin-gloved hands. “I am positively parched.”

“Allow me to get it for you,” he urged, already taking a step towards the refreshments table.

“No, please,” Helena urged, forcing a light laugh to disguise her urgency. “I prefer to

choose my own glass when I am this thirsty.”

Both he and Barbara looked at her with confusion, but Raventhorn bowed his head towards her.

“As you wish, my lady,” he replied, “I shall keep your companion company in the meantime.”

She gave him another quick curtsy and headed for the refreshments table. Helena drank a full glass of lemonade, needing its tartness to snap her out of her thoughts.

“Helena, love, are you feeling well?” Alice asked, joining Helena and Teresa.

“Perfectly so,” Helena replied after finishing the last gulp of her second glass of lemonade.

“Is there...anything wrong?” Teresa asked innocently.

Helena sensed her friends’ worries. Their concern flowed from them the same way it had from Barbara. They were trying not to push but were all obviously noticing that she was changing. She had lost her fight these last few days, given up completely on denying her future, and had been more closed off than ever.

Her resigned attitude did not include self-pity. It consisted solely of Morgan and his lessons. Irrespective of the man that Ambrose chose to be her husband, she would still have her memories of genuine desire, pleasure and lust.

Two lessons have already passed. Only five remain.

That realization was the only thing that made her sad.

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“No, my friends,” she answered softly, grabbing their hands. “Have I not performed well this evening? Were my dance steps not acceptable?”

“Oh, no, you looked lovely, darling,” Alice assured her quickly.

“But...” Teresa added softly, “you looked...like you were dreaming.”

Unable to help herself, Helena’s eyes wandered to the bar and were once again rewarded with Morgan’s smile. Whether he had been talking with her brother, flirting with another woman, or making someone laugh, Morgan’s eyes always seemed to know when hers were upon him, and he always met her gaze.

Heat pooled in her lower belly as she caught the soft flare of his nostrils, the way his dark brow angled slightly while he continued talking with his friends. He was pleased she was looking, she realized, and she felt her lips lift into a smile as she looked back at Alice and Teresa.

“I am working on acceptance,” Helena said to her friends with a slight bow of her head. “Of my present and my future. Is that not what everyone wants?”

“Well...I suppose so,” Alice murmured, eyeing Helena carefully.

Two masculine hands wrapped around Alice’s waist and Duncan’s smile appeared by her shoulder as he planted a kiss on her neck. Helena watched joyfully as her friend’s face lit up with happiness and she turned in his arms to kiss his lips.

“Hello,” she said warmly. “What are you doing over here?”

“We have to come to nick some provisions from the refreshments table,” Morgan answered, stepping out from behind Duncan.

Helena’s blood sizzled in her veins as Morgan’s green eyes locked upon hers, and he reached for her hand.

“Could you help me with my selections, Miss Helena?” he asked, his tone innocent as he brought her knuckles to his lips.

Even the smallest brush of his bottom lip was enough to make her tremble.

“Still helpless, Lord Grandhill?” she toyed.

He smiled at her wickedly as he let go of her hand.

“As a child,” he remarked with a sarcastic grin. “Help me choose?”

As Duncan began to converse with Alice and Teresa, Helena and Morgan strolled towards a table covered with tiny finger sandwiches and other bite-sized treats.

“You look lovely this evening, Helena.” Morgan murmured as he studied the food.

Helena’s heart fluttered at the compliment. It was nothing unusual. Nothing he would not have said before when they were in front of the others. But this time, the small praise touched her deeply.

“You look quite handsome, yourself, Morgan,” she replied, letting her tone drop into a seductive, smoky tone as she said his name.

Morgan’s eyes closed briefly as he drew in a tense breath. A smile itched on her lips while he struggled with himself.

“You are kind,” he replied, snapping his eyes open before giving her a predatory look. “Are you having a pleasant evening?”

“Pleasant enough,” Helena murmured back. “A bit boring, though.”

A smile tugged at her lips as she dared a glance at Morgan, who was already smirking.

“Shall we make it a bit more exciting, then?” He asked, his tone deeper, so only she could hear.

“Yes,” she whispered, keeping her eyes on the table, pretending to look over the choices.

“Yes, what?” Morgan rasped, a touch of harshness in his low tone.

Helena felt her cheeks heat with embarrassment as her abdomen filled with arousal.

“Yes please,sir,” she whispered.

Morgan inhaled sharply through his nostrils as his jaw clenched and a short, low growl only she could hear escaped his throat. Keeping his eyes on the food, he reached for a sandwich beside Helena’s hand and traced the tip of his finger against it. The small touch sent a blaze of delicious fire up Helena’s arm, and she fought the urge to whimper.

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“Very good, little Persephone,” he praised, drawing closer as he reached for another sandwich and whispered into her ear. “Meet me in the library in twenty minutes.”

“Duncan,” Morgan then said loudly for all to hear. “Come on, let us return to our seats before they are taken by lads younger and stronger than us.”

“Right,” Duncan laughed, placing a kiss on his wife’s neck in farewell. “Dance with me when we have finished eating, my love?”

“Of course,” Alice sighed, pressing her forehead to his cheek before releasing him. “Go, enjoy your treat.”

Twenty minutes later, Helena slid her body through a small opening in the library doors and shut them quietly behind her.

“Lock them,” Morgan’s command came from within the darkness, sending a jolt of excitement down Helena’s spine as every inch of her skin pebbled.

She slid her hand up the door, found the turnkey and slid it into place. The sound of the bolt thrummed in time with the beating drum in her groin, and she felt herself constrict with anticipation.

“Step forward five paces,” came Morgan’s next command.

Helena’s heart hammered in her chest as she silently counted off the steps and then stopped. From the darkness before her the outline of Morgan’s face appeared, and she caught the hungry scowl on his lips before they pressed into her own. She whimpered

immediately, her body melting into his as he wrapped one hand around the back of her neck and the other around her waist, pressing her fully into him.

“Kiss me harder,” Morgan rasped, lifting her into his arms, “Come on, little one, show me what you want.”

His command sounded brash, but Helena pushed aside any trembling reservations and sank her teeth into Morgan’s lower lip. He growled in appreciation as his grip on her tightened, and in retaliation he forced his tongue into her mouth, compelling her to suckle or be choked.

Helena slid her tongue challengingly around his mouth. He growled in response, then ripped savagely away from their kiss, only to press his lips to her jawline, her neck, and the soft, sensitive flesh of her bosom, pressed high by her corset and gown.

With his lips and tongue he worked her left nipple free from its constraints. Helena compressed her lips to stifle the moan that clawed in her throat. His lips were hot against her skin, branding her nipple as he taunted it with the tip of his tongue and teeth until her knees buckled. Morgan’s arms caught her before she struck the floor, and he placed her gently on the ground.

“Your breasts are so sensitive,” Morgan rasped, working at the fabric that covered her other nipple. “I wonder if I could cause you to release just by teasing them.”

Helena stifled another gasp as Morgan’s mouth worked its wicked magic, and she dug her nails into the arms of his jacket as she writhed beneath him. Her sex pulsed as she felt his weight and warmth on top of her, and she ached to feel his length pressed up against her as it had the other night.

Morgan bit her nipple, causing a sudden, sharp pain that struck her forcefully. Helena was unable to stifle the sharp gasp that burst from her lips. Morgan’s lips were on

hers in a second, swallowing the sound as he pushed her skirts up to her waist.

“Now, now,” he chastised against her lips, tracing his fingers along the bare flesh of her inner thigh, “We cannot have that. Am I going to have to gag you, little one?”

Shame, desire, and excitement filled her as his question burned in the air, but before she could answer, his fingers had found her wet, parted petals and he slid a single, thick finger into her tight sheath. A deep, heady moan left Helena’s lips as she felt her pelvis tilt up and her legs open themselves wider.

“Oh, you poor, sweet thing,” Morgan teased, ripping the kerchief from his breast pocket with his free hand. “You need it do you not? Unless...”

Morgan stopped the gentle plunging movements between her legs, making her inner walls clench around his finger.

“Unless you want to be caught?” he whispered, sliding his lips over her ear. “Is that what you want, little Persephone? To be caught with me? To show everyone how much you belong to me?”

Helena’s cheeks burned at the question. Yes. The answer was yes, and she knew it. And yet...

“No,” she whimpered, squirming beneath him. “Gag me, please, sir.”

A look of indignation passed briefly through Morgan’s eyes, but it was quickly replaced with a devilish smirk, and he quickly tied the kerchief around her mouth. Helena sank her teeth into the white fabric and felt a thrilling, primal pleasure that her ability to speak was inhibited.

Morgan flicked his tongue over her bottom lip before he lowered his head to the apex

of her legs. As his tongue swept across the sensitive, taut bud of nerves nestled between her folds, Helena was suddenlyincrediblygrateful for the gag.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

No?Ohh, he was going to make her regret saying the word. Morgan had been watching her all night just as she had been watching him, and he saw how well she performed, but noticed that she was slightly distracted. He perceived that she had wanted his approval and looked for it often, and he had rewarded her with it at every turn. Shewantedto be his, just as much as he now wanted her to be his. And hewouldmake her confess to it.

Morgan captured Helena's wrists and forced them above her head, commanding her to hold them there before he once more burrowed beneath her skirts. Like a man dying of thirst, Morgan pressed his mouth against Helena's steamy opening and groaned as his tongue licked up her juices. Below him Helena whimpered against her gag and thrashed her hips, already humming with need.

Morgan drank from her greedily, lapping and suckling her bud until her entire body shook. Only then did he release it and run his tongue between her petals, causing her peaking pleasure to tumble, only to be forced to rise all over again. Unlike the incessant teasing he performed on her bud, he lapped at her petals softly, licking them clean of every drop in a slow, sensual pace until Helena's high-pitched sounds became low and breathy.

As he feasted on her, a brushing knock fluttered against the door, followed by the jiggle of the handle, and they both froze. Morgan's eyes went to Helena as her terrified eyes shot to the door. A soft sound of giggles was heard from the other side before they heard the receding footsteps and they were once again alone.

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“Such a good girl staying quiet for me,” Morgan cooed, rising from his knees.

He gently pulled the gag from Helena’s mouth and kissed her sweetly, his fingers returning to the spot his mouth had just left. Helena moaned against his lips as he eased two of his fingers into her tight passage, her walls instantly closing around them.

“You like being a good girl for me, don’t you, little Persephone?” Morgan rasped, keeping his gaze locked on Helena.

“Yes... sir,” she breathed, her pupils becoming dilated as he continued stroking her.

Morgan groaned as she included the proper address, and he rewarded her with another kiss as he began to swirl the pad of his thumb over her rigid pearl.

“You want to be mine, do you not? Ah, do not look away.” He instructed, his tone taunting as he moved his thumb faster.

Helena’s breaths grew thin and quick and she started to pant in time with his thrusts. Morgan felt a depraved sense of pleasure at how increasingly difficult it had become for her to focus. She was letting go, he could feel it, he only needed to push a little more...

“Yes, sir,” she whimpered, forcing her eyes back to him.

A wicked triumph came over Morgan as he saw her raw need to please him shining in her eyes. She wanted him to let her release, wanted him to give her this pleasure.

“Then say it,” he commanded, moving his hand faster as the sounds of her suckling juices began to fill the air. “Say that you are only pretending to be prim and proper in front of those men. Say you want to bemine.”

Helena’s mind was a ball of mush, and she watched as Morgan played with it like a toy. His fingers worked their magic between her legs and she felt her release growing, but she did not want it to end so quickly. She bit her lip, pressed her eyes shut and shook her head.

“No,” she whimpered again, more feebly than before.

Morgan’s hand pulled away from her, making her gasp as cool air rushed to meet her heated place. Before she could move Morgan had crouched between her legs again, his mouth so close to her entrance that she could feel the heat of his breath. He kissed her wet opening softly, then swirled his tongue slowly around the bud, making her lashes flutter as she arched her back against the floor.

He blew softly against the small bundle of nerves, sending a deep shiver throughout her body.

“You are so tense,” Morgan murmured, caressing his fingers across the top of her bud. He then grazed the tips of his fingernails over her petals, making her jump once more.

“Please, Morgan,” she whimpered, now desperate for her release.

Ignoring her pleas, he lazily drew out his tongue and traced the edges of her opening, making her quiver.

“You know what you need to give me first, little one,” he answered, his condescending tone only arousing her further.

He let out a low, deep growl as he fixed his mouth fully over her pubis and began to suckle and lap at her in a slow, leisurely fashion. Helena's head rocked back and forth against the floor as she felt Morgan lick away more of her resistance. His tongue was cruel to her, licking too fast or too slow. Each time she approached her release he would take it from her. Helena was aching, desperate, and ready to sob and beg him to help her.

"Yes," she gasped finally, giving in to the truth she was trying to deny the both of them.

"Yes, I am pretending with them all," she confessed in a rush, thrashing against the floor. "Yes, I want to be caught, so they can finally see I do not want them!"

"And who do you want?" Morgan asked through his ministrations.

"You, sir, I want you—I—oh, God," Helena's desperate confession faded in a low moan as Morgan finally applied the pressure she needed.

Helena's release was so intense that the dark room began to spin and her thighs trembled uncontrollably. Her breath came in ragged, airless gasps as wave after wave of pleasure detonated inside of her, causing a flood to cascade from her bruised petals.

"That is my good girl," Morgan groaned, nuzzling his forehead into her abdomen as he peppered soft kisses across her spasming sex.

Morgan's words resonated in Helena's mind like the deep toll of a forgotten church bell. That is my good girl. God, yes she was, she realized as her breathing finally began to slow. Morgan continued to murmur words of praise as he kissed his way up her body, enveloping each breast slowly and sensually one last time before he pulled her corset and gown back into place.

He then made his way up her neck, under her ear, to her jaw, and finally to her lips. She whimpered into his mouth the moment she savored his addictive essence.

He kissed her deeply, claiming full possession of her mouth until she saw white stars burst behind her eyelids, then pulled away roughly. His caressing hold on her jaw tightened, forcing her lips apart.

“Hold out your tongue,” he commanded.

Without thought Helena obeyed, letting her small, pink tongue drape over her lower lip as Morgan angled her head further back. Mesmerized, she watched Morgan stare back at her as his tongue pushed forward a large bead of his saliva. Her eyes widened with realization as she watched it fall slowly from his tongue.

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When it dropped into her mouth, Helena felt unfathomable pleasure as it slid inside of her and made its way to her core. She sensed the exact moment the small bead inside of her finally stopped and filled her with warmth, and she knew. Morgan had just made himself a part of her.

Morgan smirked wickedly, as though he was able to read her thoughts, before giving her one last world-spinning kiss.

“Time to get back to the party, little one,” he said, getting to his feet. He seemed almost apologetic as he took her hands in his and pulled her to her feet.

Still dazed, Helena swayed as she stood, but Morgan steadied her, albeit with a condescending chuckle.

“Now, when you get back out there,” Morgan instructed, busying himself with tidying her up, “You are going to flirt better than ever with your suitors, and you know why?”

Helena shook her head, still unable to find her voice.

Morgan finished fixing her hair and began to adjust her necklace.

“Because you now know to whom you truly belong,” Morgan said with an edge of possessiveness as his hands tightened fleetingly around her neck.

Helena’s eyelids fluttered at the pleasure of his grip.

“Because you will be holding a secret. A secret that you have experienced pleasure far beyond anything they could give you, and no matter how hard they try, they will never achieve what you just had and will have with me.

“You will flirt fiercely because you will know you belong to me, and that immediately makes me better than any of them. They are not your admirers or your equals. They are your toys. And you will play with their egos like the temptress you are. Am I understood?”

“Yes.”

This time Helena did not breathe the word. She tried to speak, but her throat was thick in the wake of his seduction. A self-reverence filled Helena’s soul as she realized the truth of Morgan’s words, and she felt herself smirk as Morgan’s grip tightened on her throat, forcing her gaze up at him.

“Yes, what, little one?” he demanded, his grip becoming tighter.

She smiled seductively back at him, brushing her nails softly against the back of the hand that held her throat.

“Yes, sir.”

“Helena’s mood seems to have improved,” Barbara mused.

Morgan’s eyes darted to her, then to Ambrose at her side. They, along with Duncan, Alice and Teresa, were all looking at Helena, marveling at the positive shift in her mood.

“She said her head ached and she had needed a rest,” Teresa stated, her tone offering reason. “Perhaps that was all she needed. She certainly seems happier now.”

“Far more attentive to her suitors than before,” Alice noted.

Morgan’s eyes flicked to her, but Duncan caught his gaze. His brother was looking at him with a steady, calm intensity, and it irked him to his core. Duncan did not know. There was no way he could.

“Maybe she just needed you all to stop putting so much pressure on her,” Morgan stated, his voice devoid of its usual sarcastic tone.

Everyone immediately turned and stared at him with naked indignation. He rolled his eyes at them, showing his lack of concern for their judgment.

“We are not pressuring her,” Barbara sighed, but rolled her own eyes and shook her head as she added, “I do despise when Morgan is right, but he is. We have put so much strain on her. And look at what good a little rest did for her! Perhaps we should listen to our jester and give our girl a few days’ reprieve from her suitors, hmm?”

Ambrose continued looking at his little sister, studying her newfound willingness and polite manners. Morgan, however, tried to hide his smile, knowing exactly what had caused Helena to change her attitude. He looked her over once more and felt a sense of pride at her new ease and self-confidence.

“I suppose so,” Ambrose reluctantly agreed, turning back to Morgan. “What do you know, Morgan?” Ambrose quipped, smirking at his friend, “You might actually be right about something.”

More than you will ever realize.

He watched Helena, incredibly pleased as she executed his instructions perfectly. Too perfectly. Her ability to act engaged and enthralled by her suitors was a worthy enough performance to be put to the stage. He suddenly grinned and shivered

as he thought of the little “warm-up” he had given her before she had returned to her performance.

“Still cold?” Duncan asked.

“What?” Morgan said curtly.

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Duncan nodded towards Morgan's hands, still ensconced in his fitted black leather gloves. He had told the others that he had grown too warm and needed a walk in the brisk air. But the real reason he still wore them was because his fingers were still covered in Helena's juices, and he was not ready to wash her away. His gloved fingers tightened around his glass before he brought it back to his lips.

"I have decided to call it an early night," Morgan stated after draining his drink. "I just came in for one last drink and farewells."

"Alone?" Barbara chuckled, glancing over at him. "And so early?"

"I do not take a lady home from every function I attend," Morgan drawled.

Ambrose turned to him with a raised brow; the others at the table following suit. He attempted to produce the jester spirit his friends all knew but what he found instead was a craving for more of Helena. He fought the grimace on his face, forced a sarcastic smirk, and clapped Ambrose on the back.

"Good night, all," he said as cheerily as he could.

As he crossed the room to leave, Morgan could not help but glance once more at Helena. She once again felt the pull of his gaze and turned to him. He nearly stopped in his tracks, pride and desire filling him as he absorbed the determination in her eyes that she had instilled in her.

A sensual smile grew on his lips as he bowed his head, and he felt his body tingle with satisfaction as she imperceptibly raised her glass towards him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Get ready quick.

We shan't be late.

Arrive by the tenth, knock at the usual gate.

XX,

H

Helena disliked the third red letter that was now a pile of embers and ashes below the fire. It was short. Vague. No instructions on how to dress or prepare herself other than to be there by ten. She waited for the tenth toll of the bell to knock upon the gate and begin her third lesson.

“Always so punctual,” Morgan praised, swinging open the old gate. He smirked down at her, his dark eyes glittering with excitement.

“Is that not what you wanted?” Helena snapped. She had been short-tempered ever since she had received his brief summons. She had spent the last two days in peace prior to receiving the missive. Following the last ball, Ambrose had given her a reprieve from her husband search. Her mind had welcomed the freedom to repeatedly replay her night at the ball with Morgan.

“Such a fierce little kitten this evening,” Morgan chuckled.

Helena was about to retort with a sharp comment when she suddenly felt his hand snake around the back of her neck and turn her into his arms.

“I had something else planned for tonight,” he mused, switching his hold to the front of her throat, “but if I need to make this evening more about the study of punishment, I will happily change our itinerary.”

Curiosity and humiliation flooded Helena’s features as she listened to the way Morgan had darkly and suggestively enunciated the word punishment. What could he possibly mean by punishment? Morgan’s eyes raced across her face, reading her every tell, and he smirked at her as his fingers stroked the column of her throat.

“Ohh,” he purred, stepping closer. “You are curious, are you not, my little one?”

Helena began to tremble as Morgan gently pulled her towards him and began depositing light kisses on her temple.

“What could that word mean to you? How does it feel to you?” he whispered seductively, his lips traveling to hers.

Helena closed her eyes as his tongue licked delicately at her earlobe and his teeth nibbled at the flesh. She sank into the hold Morgan had on her, and let her head tilt back as his kisses continued down her neck. Suddenly he pulled back, releasing her, and Helena stumbled as she felt the cool night air occupy the space where he had just been. She glared at him as he chuckled.

“You gave me no indication what you had planned tonight,” she bit out, “That is why I am out of sorts. I had no idea how to dress or how to prepare myself.”

“You do yearn for the instruction, do you not, little one?” Morgan interrupted, his tone thoughtful.

Helena felt her cheeks heat at his question and the sound of her pet name. She liked it when he called her Persephone, but something warm and delicious bloomed in her

lower belly when he called her little one.

“When you do so in your own particular way, yes,” she confessed, taking a step away from him.

Before she could get any farther Morgan’s arms were around her, his hand once more laced around her throat.

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“Do not be ashamed of that. It is good for me to know,” he coaxed, staring intently into her eyes. “That means I am leading you properly.”

He then leaned down and kissed her softly on her lips, immediately dispelling all of her agitation.

“Come,” he commanded, tracing his hand from her throat to her fingers. “Let us get you inside. We must be quick, but I will explain while you change.”

Change? Helena thought, as excitement shooed away the last of her querulous disposition. Once inside Morgan’s library, he quickly led her over to the fireplace, then moved over to a large box that rested on the table.

Helena gasped as she watched him lift an exquisite, black-beaded, floor-length gown from it and bring it to her. It reminded her of her black nightgown, but the embroidery had been created with much finer silk, and there were no sleeves. Instead, straps hung from the top of the gown, which dipped into a low V at the front and back. The beads, glittering little jewels that caught the light and refracted it, were sewn into a reflected hourglass design.

“Tonight we are not carrying out our lesson here,” Morgan explained calmly as he stopped just a few paces away from Helena.

“Now, take off that lovely pink gown for me.”

Helena blushed, feeling the familiar scurry of shame and excitement, but obeyed his command and removed her cloak.

“Where are we going then?” She asked as she undressed.

Morgan waited until she stood naked before him to answer. Even then, he took in a long, possessive look before he did so.

“I am taking you to a Devil’s Masquerade. Arms up.”

Helena’s eyes grew wide with surprise as she raised her arms. In truth, she had completely forgotten about her night with Teresa and had lost all interest in going back. What she had found with Morgan was far more satisfying.

Morgan lifted the dress up high and slowly lowered it down Helena’s body, smoothing the thin, beaded fabric over every dip and curve.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, tugging the dress this way and that until it fitted perfectly over her form.

For a moment, Helena became lost in the freedom of being cared for. She did not move as Morgan took control of her needs. She stayed still for him, fascinated, as he took her hair out of its clasp and loosely braided her curls into a long tail.

“How do you know how to do this?” she asked, fascinated by how expertly he weaved the strands.

“I do not do this for every woman,” he stated matter-of-factly. “The trysts most women and I find ourselves in are usually brief. But there have been instances where I have trained for a longer dynamic — and, in such cases, a Dominus must be able to take care of every detail for his Submissus.”

“Why is that?” Helena asked curiously, familiar with the two Latin words from her books.

Morgan stepped away a pace and smiled seductively. “Because a true Dominus can turn his Submissus’s mind into a melted concoction of primal need until they cannot make even the most basic decision for themselves.”

Helena blushed at his taunting tone and alluring words as he walked back to the box and retrieved a black, glittering fox mask and a thin, wide leather-bound box. Was he going to make her feel that way at the party? In front of others? Suddenly, she was no longer interested in going to the Devil’s Masquerade.

“What if I do not wish to go?” she asked as he carefully placed the mask over her eyes.

“Tell me why you do not want to go and we will discuss it,” Morgan answered calmly, tying the mask into place.

Because I do not want to be with another man. Not yet.

They had discussed the specifics of her list during her first lesson, and Morgan had not blinked an eye when she brought up the possibility of being kissed by two men at once. But right now she did not relish the idea. Even if Morgan was one of them.

“Well, what will we be doing there?” she inquired

Morgan smirked as he opened the leather-bound box and pulled out a thick, black, velvet choker with a large teardrop diamond dangling from its hem. Helena gasped at the beauty of it.

“Are you mine?” he asked, his gaze holding hers.

Helena struggled to swallow. She knew he only meant for the night, but still her mind ventured a tad further. Keeping that part to herself, she nodded.

“Just yours,” she managed to breathe.

Morgan gave her a look of pure approval as he walked toward her with the collar.

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“Tonight you will be my pet,” he continued in his calm, even tone as he secured the choker around her throat.

Helena whimpered as he pulled it tight and felt a lick of desire between her inner thighs.

“You will only address me as sir. You will obey my commands, stay by my side, and you will not speak to anyone but me,” Morgan continued, listing his rules as he pulled out two matching black velvet bracelets.

“We will primarily be viewers tonight, but Helena, you will be seen, and you will be noticed. The way you appear at my side like this — it will be inevitable that others will notice.”

Helena nodded once more, blushing at the truth of it. Even if they were to be viewers and not performers in the erotic aspect, people would see them together as they moved through the rooms. A chill of excitement raced over her shoulders as she thought of the curious eyes that would descend upon them.

I need you to hear me when I say this.”

Morgan stroked his thumb soothingly over her the bare part of her wrist and turned her chin to meet his gaze.

“No one else will touch you,” he urged calmly. “I swear it. And we will only show them what you want to show them.”

Helena's blush grew brighter as she swallowed hard.

"I do not want to show them anything," she rasped, feeling herself beginning to tremble. I want to watch the others. But if you and I...interactwith one another,I want it to be in the privacy of our own room."

Morgan gave her an approving smile as he cupped her cheeks and drew her mouth to his in a sweet kiss, erasing any misgivings Helena had harbored about giving him her answer.

"Very good, little one," he praised against her lips. "I thought that was the answer, but I needed you to say it and support it for yourself. Ialwayswant the truth. Peoplewillsee you. But I will not allow anyone to touch. I promise you."

Helena swayed on her feet as Morgan pulled away to fasten the other bracelet to her wrist.

"What if I make I mistake?" she asked weakly. "What if I embarrass myself? Or you? I have not learned much yet. What if I...what if I disappoint you?"

Morgan looked at her reassuringly.

"That will not happen," he promised, shaking his head. "You are incredible, Helena. You couldneverdisappoint me. But, if you do not want to go and you want to take this off your list, tell me, and we will do something else. No offense taken."

Again, Morgan had calmly left the choice in her hands. There was no hope or fear in his expression, just a steady, silent urge for her to tell him the truth.

"I want to go," she said, and as she spoke she knew it was true. Despite her fears and inhibitions, she wanted to see what Morgan had in store for her.

Morgan smiled at her with satisfaction, and silence filled the room as he knelt to the floor with the box in hand and pulled out two matching anklets. As he fastened the final one, Morgan trailed his fingertips from her ankle, up the back of her calf, and up the back of her thigh until his hand cupped the milky skin of her firm buttocks.

Helena gasped with pleasure as he massaged his hand against her backside and pulled her waist towards his mouth.

“Are you ready?” Morgan rasped, flicking his tongue between the small openings of black beaded embroidery nestled over her warm mound.

“Yes,” Helena moaned, her knees already threatening to buckle.

“Yes, what?” Morgan rasped, running his tongue against her sex a second time, wetting the sheer fabric.

“Yes, sir. I am ready,” Helena breathed as she felt her body relax into Morgan’s hold.

With effort, Morgan pulled himself away from Helena, and then cloaked her in his warmest black fur cape. The dress was merely an ensemble of artful beading and silk string; it could not even be defined as a fabric and would provide no warmth during the carriage ride.

Once he had her nestled inside the carriage, he handed her a mirror and a small bag of cosmetics and asked her to paint her lips and eyelids black as she had done before. When she had finished, he took the dark rouge and rubbed it onto her cheeks until it was exactly the shade he desired.

Pleasure simmered in his loins as Helena relinquished her control to him. It was becoming much too addicting and he needed to snap himself out of it. That was what tonight was for. He needed to remind himself, as much as he needed to remind

Helena, that she would someday soon be seen and wanted by another.

The dark specter of jealousy from earlier began to inhabit Morgan as the carriage pulled up to the newest location of the Devil's Masquerade. He swallowed hard and did his best to push it away. They had built a fantasy world where Helena was his, but that was all it was. A fantasy. She would soon be another's.

"Is everything all right?" Helena asked.

Morgan felt her soft fingers against his arm, and he forced himself to smile as he pulled on his black matte fox mask.

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“Perfectly,” he replied, reaching into his jacket pocket. As he pulled out the silver chain and leather wristlet, Morgan’s thoughts blissfully shifted to something far more pleasurable, and his smile became genuine as he revealed the leash. A wicked pleasure consumed him as a greedy look of desire lit up Helena’s blue eyes.

“Now, come, little one, it is time for lesson three.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“You love it, do you not?” Morgan mused with a sinful smile, his dark eyes nearly black with lust.

Helena nipped teasingly at the thumb that was stroking her lip and grinned back. From the moment they had walked in, Morgan leading her by the silver leash, she had been consumed by a wicked pleasure as every person seemed to ogle the two of them.

She had delighted in the jealous stares she had received from the women and looks of longing and lust she had received from the men. Most of all, she had loved the way she felt being by Morgan’s side as his pet.

As before, the sight of people intertwined in any given spot in the house was a shock to her senses, but this time, along with that shock, she felt a sense of purpose. She was no longer an innocent little lamb wandering into a den of bears on her own. She had a wolf by her side.

When they had first been approached by a group of men, Morgan had pushed a guiding hand to her shoulder until she knelt by his side; a symbol of her trust in him.

In the carriage, he had told her how to hold her head and hands when kneeling. Excited to carry out his wishes and hers, she had done so immediately, and right after that, Morgan began to receive praises regarding her good behavior and seductive appearance, followed quickly by questions about her origin.

“She is mine and that is all you need to know,” Morgan had answered, stroking his hand over the top of her head. He had then hunkered down and held her gently by her jaw.

“Are you not, my little one?” he asked in front of their growing audience.

A sense of freedom had burst through her when she had answered “yes, sir,” and was rewarded with his proud smile.

“Such a good girl,” one man had cooed. “Will she be of free use tonight like your others?”

Helena had simultaneously felt two jolts of displeasure. While she adored when Morgan called her a good girl, she suddenly realized that she did not feel the same when another man did so. She was also briefly displeased by the reminder that Morgan had probably done this with many, many women, all much more free and willing than her to explore their fantasies.

“She will not be touched by anyone but me tonight,” Morgan had stated, gently tugging at the leash to bring her to her feet. He then slid his hand around her throat and kissed her in front of them until she was breathless.

“Anyone who thinks otherwise will take a bullet to the belly.”

At his side, Helena tilted her head higher and straightened her shoulders, an intense sense of protection consuming her in response to his possessiveness. As if pleased

with her subtle response, Morgan stroked his hand down her hair and gave her braid an enticing little yank.

After that, Morgan had led her to an elaborate bedroom suite where a group of naked men and women had gathered on a massive bed and were undulating and moaning together. It had shocked her at first, seeing such an intimate scene for the first time, let alone with so many sets of couples, but she immediately became transfixed by the primal conflagration that was unfolding before her.

“In here, little one,” Morgan urged, taking her to a smaller room just off the larger one.

Like the other room it was furnished with a bed — though much smaller and clearly for only one couple — and one chair instead of eight. It was lit only by two red lanterns hanging from the ceiling on chains.

“This is a watching room,” he explained, moving her to the small splash of light that came through a square in a wall. “Come.”

Helena let Morgan’s hands lead her to the square, and she felt a wicked tingle as she looked through it. At first glance she felt as though she were viewing a painting backward, but as her eyes adjusted she realized that she could see beyond the paint and into the room where the others had gathered.

“They cannot see us!” she whispered excitedly.

“No,” Morgan agreed, reaching for her neck to caress his thumb down its column, “but we can see them. Shall we enjoy the show?”

Helena nodded and felt warmth pulse through her body as Morgan teased into her ear, “such a wicked little Persephone.”

Unable to help herself, Helena smiled widely. She rather liked that Morgan thought of her as wicked. She then felt the familiar tug of the leash and turned with Morgan to follow him to the chair that faced the faux painting, where he then pulled her onto his lap after taking a seat.

His fingers at her waist created tiny licks of flames over her skin as he began to turn her until she faced forward and her back was parallel to his chest. He then spread his legs slightly and traced the high slit of the dress until he reached her inner thigh, and moved each of her legs to dangle over his own.

Helena felt a rush of excitement as she pictured lustful eyes turned upon her and Morgan. Although no one could see, she was thankful that the dress draped down between her parted legs and covered her sex.

Morgan's lips pressed into the back of her neck, making her feel dizzy as his hand disappeared between their bodies. She let a moan slip from her lips when she discovered he was freeing his already engorged manhood and letting it rest against her lower back between her dimples.

"Did you hear that?" a muffled voice said from outside.

"I saw Hades take his new pet in there. He said we could not touch but said nothing about us watching them. Come, let us give them some company," another man's voice said.

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Nerves like cold taut lines snapped tightly throughout her languid body and caused her to tense in Morgan's lap.

"Relax, little one," Morgan soothed, moving his fingers up to her waist. He pressed a quelling kiss to her lips as she looked at him with questioning eyes, then added, "the door is locked. You are safe with me."

His words were so simple, but they were precisely what Helena needed to hear to let herself sink back into the otherwise sensual moment.

"I want you to ignore the jiggling of the doorknob and the voices outside. I will not allow anyone to barge in. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Helena whispered, fighting to control her anxiety.

"That is my good girl," Morgan praised, pressing a kiss to her cheek as he returned her gaze to the portrait. "Now, keep your eyes on the bed, and tell me what you are feeling," Morgan whispered, returning his hand to her neck, the other moving to her left breast.

Helena whimpered with need as Morgan's velvety voice created a deep vibration between her legs, and she felt moisture begin to gather there as his hips began to undulate slowly beneath her. Morgan suddenly and harshly pinched her nipple, sending a white lightning bolt through the sensitive flesh that made her mewl loudly.

"I am waiting, little one," he warned, already massaging the bruised, deep pink bud.

It was such an intimate demand, Helena realized as she confronted her truth. Her cheeks flooded with embarrassment as she realized just how much of a hedonist she was.

“I feel excitement” she whispered, much more confidently than she had predicted. “I feel like I want to watch them. Like I want to witness their pleasure.”

A loud moan of gratification suddenly rose from the bed as a participant was spanked with a black leather paddle. Helena smiled wickedly, watching the blush bloom in the woman’s face before her eyes rolled back in ecstasy.

“And their pain,” she added, smiling seductively as she let herself sink further against Morgan’s body. She was growing more comfortable, more confident by the moment, and Morgan’s command to ignore the growing voices behind the door was creating an entirely new thrill. They were longing for a look at her, and her refusal to let them was only heightening her arousal.

“Such a wicked little pet,” Morgan chuckled deeply, pulling the dress away from her breasts.

Her nerves began to frazzle. Those wanting to get in were still trying, and what if they were successful? Before she could worry further, she was quickly distracted by the way Morgan’s hands cupped and covered her breasts and she became lost in his touch. He massaged them firmly but gently, expertly rolling her nipples between his fingers, tugging them occasionally until Helena’s face was buried into his neck and she was emitting continuous low, sweet moans.

“You are being as loud as they are, little one,” Morgan teased, his one hand gently tugging the dress over one breast before sliding it down her abdomen. “Look how many are searching for you.”

Helena turned her eyes back to the show and saw that Morgan was not jesting with her. Though the ones on the bed were still very much absorbed in their activities, others in the room who had just been watching were starting to look around.

“So many men wish they were me right now,” he whispered filthily, his voice spiraling her desire out of control as his fingers began to circle lazily over her dress-covered sex. “They wish they had you on their laps, their fingers coated in your juices. They wish they were the reason for your pathetic little whimpers.”

Morgan’s hand suddenly left her breast and laced around her throat, forcing her to turn her head towards their audience.

“Listen to them, little one,” he commanded, nipping his teeth along her neck as he held her by the hair with one hand; his fingers still working her swollen bud with the other. “Listen to how desperately they want to open that door and get just a tiny peek of you.”

Helena obeyed Morgan’s desire-filled voice and she felt her sheath pulse with heat. She tuned into the sound of whispering, masculine voices from beyond the locked door, their soft, insistent knocks, and the occasional twist of the steadfast knob.

“They cannot have you, though, can they?” Morgan chuckled, increasing the pressure on her clitoris.

A wicked glee filled Helena as Morgan said the words. No, they cannot. Only Morgan. And Morgan will make sure of that.

“No, sir,” she whispered, smiling wickedly as she turned her head to kiss him.

Her orgasm erupted quickly, but before she could catch her breath, he slid his glistening fingers into her mouth, massaging her tongue before entering her throat.

Helena felt fire lick through her veins as she tasted herself on Morgan's fingers, and she found herself sucking greedily on them, enjoying her taste.

"Such a good girl, baby," Morgan groaned as he stroked her tongue, "I did not even have to tell you what to do. You just opened right up for me."

Helena moaned around his fingers and then suckled them harder, wanting him to know just how much she was enjoying this. When he finally slipped his fingers from her mouth it was only to replace them with his tongue. His deep, possessive kiss reminded her suddenly of a favorite scene in one of her romance novels. She had felt his tongue, his fingers, his saliva; she shivered in pleasure at the memory, and now, she wanted to feel something else.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jesus Christ, I am going to hell for this.

Morgan watched Helena slide to her knees. She had metamorphosized from an eager student to a seductive goddess capable of enslaving all man, sinner and saint alike. Every man in the room, even some of the women wanted her. Damn him if he did not love knowing that he was the only one that could have her.

For now.

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Morgan groaned as Helena pressed her hands to his thighs so that she could kneel between them. His thoughts flew from his mind as he captured a fistful of her hair and yanked her up by a few inches.

“What do you think you are you doing, little one?” he demanded, resting his forehead against hers. Unable to help himself, he drew in and kissed her lips roughly before letting her answer.

“I want to taste you,” Helena answered mischievously. Morgan reveled in her total loss of shame; her confident and sinfully, deliciously seductive voice.

Desire pulsed through him as he saw the clear yearning in her eyes. God, he wanted that too.

“I did not hear you ask,” he scolded tauntingly, clenching his fist more tightly around her hair.

He reveled in the way Helena gasped and shivered at his touch, the way her long lashes fluttered and her brows dipped slightly at the sensation of pain. Unable to stop himself, he reached out with his free hand and cupped her breast, thumbing her hardened nipple through the small beads and webbed strings. He grew mesmerized by the way her entire body came alive with just a small stroke.

“Please, sir,” Helena whimpered, her voice full of unabashed need as she stared up into his eyes, “Let me taste you.”

Pleasure roared in Morgan’s gut. Helena had so politely, so sweetly, begged to have

his shaft in her mouth. She had implored him to let her give him exactly what he had been craving for weeks. Yes. God, yes.

“Oh, I do adore the way you beg me, little one,” Morgan groaned, a wicked smirk forming on his lips before he drew her to him. He delivered another fervent, brutal kiss to her lips, then released her hair.

A shiver of excitement trailed up Helena’s spine as she slowly drew the tip of her tongue up the length of Morgan’s rigid, veined shaft. Her mouth watered as she drew in her first taste of him and savored the gentle saltiness on her tongue. Behind her she could practically feel the yearnings of the others drilling into her, but her focus stayed firmly on Morgan’s eyes.

His dark green orbs were glittering through his mask with shocking golden embers of desire as his clenched jaw moved subtly back and forth. As her mouth wrapped around him, she could feel his breath coming in low, steady pulls, and stopping in a tremble in his lower stomach.

Becoming fascinated with his shudders, Helena began to move her tongue in time with them as she hollowed out her cheeks and was rewarded with a low groan and a thrust of his hips. On his next inhale, Helena took as much of him as she could down her throat, forcing her lips over her teeth so as not to hurt him as his girth craned her jaw to its furthest possible capacity.

Satisfaction filled her as she felt his silky, pulsing tip touch the back of her throat, and she felt herself gag as she pulled him even deeper.

“Christ, Persephone,” Morgan muttered, tossing his head back in the chair as his hands delved into his hair.

He tugged her closer, encouraging her to continue with her exploration, and Helena

felt emboldened. She drew him slowly out of her mouth, letting her saliva flow freely until the tip of her tongue danced along the small slit at the top of his rod. A low, almost aching sound poured from Morgan's throat as he shivered violently, and Helena felt her sex grow wet and needy as she heard it.

She sat back on her heels and caressed the tips of her fingers up the length of his engorged, throbbing, deep purple shaft. Her mouth watered as she watched him hiss and buck his hips.

"Who is the sensitive one now?" Helena teased.

The wicked taunt slipped from her lips before she thought better of it, and it was only when Morgan's neck snapped forward and his glowing eyes sparkled with both lust and rage, did she realize she had made a grave mistake.

In a whirl of movements Morgan yanked Helena from her knees. She was suddenly splayed across his lap on her stomach, and her dress was pulled up to her lower back. She moaned loudly as his fingers slid easily into her soaking entrance with fury, hammering into her so fast that she lost her breath.

"What was that, little one?" Morgan snarled.

Helena cried out as she felt his palm sting sharply against her left butt cheek as his fingers pumped harder and faster. The pain spread like an explosion of flames, but within seconds, the sting faded into a warm, rosy pleasure that caused a gush of her juices to drip down Morgan's wrist.

"Are you being cheeky with me?" he demanded, delivering another hard slap to her right cheek.

"Yes,sir!" she hissed back, a wickedly dark pleasure filling her as she dared to look

back and smile defiantly at him.

Pleasure and rage stormed together powerfully in Morgan's eyes as a monstrosly beguiling smile spread across his lips. Suddenly the fierce pumping of his fingers ceased, causing Helena to whimper, and her breath froze in her throat as Morgan shifted her hips back, and delivered a stinging slap to her sex that was so intense her vision went momentarily white.

Helena stayed frozen, unable to decipher what was happening to the nerve endings short circuiting throughout her body. Morgan's fingers suddenly drove inside her again, and life returned to her body, flooding her with pure pleasure as her eyes fluttered open and she let out a loud, whimpering moan.

Morgan fingered her mercilessly as he continued his spanking, delivering hard, solid blows in a rhythmic manner, pausing ever so often to massage each glowing red cheek to provide her with a measure of relief. As she lay pinned on his lap, Helena's body had felt like it had melted, and she mutely accepted his punishment for her show of blatant disrespect.

Helena's second orgasm of the night was quickly approaching when Morgan's speeding fingers suddenly stopped. Helena braced for another slap against her sex, but instead, both of his hands began to massage her buttocks. She sighed in bliss as he sensually massaged the stinging, bruised flesh, believing that her punishment was complete.

Tiredly, she snuggled into Morgan's lap, reveling in the feel of the massage as his hands kneaded and pulled her cheeks apart. She whimpered and shivered when his thumb caressed her tight ring of muscle.

"You need to apologize to me, little one," Morgan mused, slowly circling his thumb around the taut enclosure, pressing just a little into its puckered center.

Helena was so enraptured by the new pleasure blooming within her that she almost did not hear him.

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“I-I am sorry, sir,” she answered with a sigh, lifting her hips into his touch.

Helena gasped and her nipples hardened when a finger suddenly slid back into her, ramming all the way up to his knuckle.

“That did not sound very convincing,” Morgan scolded, driving his thumb a little deeper as his middle finger continued to thrust into her.

Helena bit her lip as she fought off the dizzying need building inside of her. It was suddenly getting so hard to focus...so hard to will her body to do anything but give in.

“I-I am so sorry for sassing you, sir,” she said, this time louder, more emphatically.

“Say it again, louder,” Morgan growled, increasing the speed of his finger as his thumb worked in slower circles, driving in further and further until Helena felt a new type of fullness; a new and powerful rush of euphoria she did not know how to process.

Her body was now vibrating uncontrollably, sweat slicking down her body as she clung to the cushions beneath her. She was entirely at his mercy as she tried to fight off the growing thunderstorm in her groin. It gathered with a primal force she could not control, as though she would burst apart at any moment.

Completely undone, Helena began to release words. “Please. Sir. Oh, God, please forgive me-ooohhhh.”

She did not know what words had escaped her lips as the intensity of her second orgasm erupted in a tidal wave and all reason disappeared. Intense ripples of pleasure echoed throughout her entire being as she felt herself release on Morgan's palm over and over again, her spurting juices flooding over his hand and leaking onto the hardwood floor beneath.

Helena was dizzy with euphoria and found herself on her knees again. Morgan towering over her as he fisted his pulsating, swollen shaft with one hand and her hair with the other. A primal need overtook her and she immediately opened her mouth widely and accepted all of him. Morgan growled savagely as her lips pulled tightly around his base. He suddenly shoved her loose with a gasping breath.

"Who do you belong to?" he growled, his eyes burning into hers.

"You," she moaned, the word flying from her lips like a prayer. You.

She truly was his. She had no time to dwell on the thought as Morgan roughly plunged himself down her throat again. His thrusts were sharp and powerful, bruising her tonsils as he roared out his release. Helena's sex spasmed and tightened and she felt Morgan's member expand in her mouth. It forced her lips away from her teeth and caused her to bite down on him, and she felt his warm seed as it pumped into her.

There was no choice but to swallow. Morgan was so deep in her throat that she had no chance to taste him, but she could feel the long, milky shots fire one after another into her gullet. She blushed as her stomach growled, as if she had been starving for it.

Slowly, Morgan's grip eased up on her hair, and his thrusts became more like caresses on her tongue until he gradually pulled his spent, semi-erect shaft from her lips, and eased himself back into his trousers.

"Come here, little Persephone," Morgan rasped, tenderness thickening his tone as he

pulled her up from the floor, cradling her to his chest.

Helena whimpered, tears pricking her eyes as he held her close and kissed her deeply, and she wrapped her arms tightly around his neck.

“Such a good girl,” Morgan rasped between kisses, lulling her into a hypnotic trance. “Such a good girl, little one.”

Helena whimpered once more, unable to form words while her body hummed with pleasure.

“Have you had enough fun this evening?” Morgan asked.

His hand came between them, and though he still cradled her, he tugged the fabric of her dress back over her breasts and thighs.

“Or would you like some more?”

For a moment Helena floundered. More? How could there be more after that?

“We could visit another room,” he offered, running his hands along her body, as if he could not stop touching her. “Perhaps we could watch from a less private area, if you are feeling up to it.”

Helena hazily contemplated the offer as best she could in her delirious state, then shook her head in refusal. She had seen plenty through their privacy screen. What she now wanted was time alone with Morgan.

“Take me home, Morgan,” she said softly.

She almost did not catch it; her first mistake of the evening. He was to be addressed

only as Hades or sir during the Devil's Masquerade, and not by his real name under any circumstances. She tensed in his lap, her eyes wide with fear as she pushed away and began to say, "I mean?—"

"It is alright," Morgan whispered, looking completely unbothered by her mistake as he stroked her hair out of her face. "Though I want you to try not to let it happen while we are still here, I believe that I will always prefer you to call me by my name."

It was not arousal or lust that consumed Helena within that next moment. It was a sensation far deeper and more serious than either. There was care and affection in his voice and it stroked tenderly against her heart.

"Come," he commanded her softly, raising them both to their feet. "Let us get out of here. There are a few things I must take care of where you are concerned before I allow you to go home."

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Though Helena was wildly curious as to what those things were, she simply nodded, and after Morgan inspected her once more to be sure she was properly reassembled, he stepped in front of her and unlocked the door.

“Hades.”

A man’s voice broke through their hypnotic reverie, deep and thick with aggression and lust. Morgan seemed annoyed by the person before them, and Helena looked at the stranger with equal irritation, and expressing no desire whatsoever to discern what he wanted from them.

“Apollo?” Morgan chuffed.

The man, shirtless and well-muscled as he stood in his black trousers and matte black, full face mask, nodded towards Helena.

“How much?”

Helena did not have time to worry before she saw Morgan’s muscles tense under the back of his jacket as a low, warning growl only she could hear poured from his chest.

“She is not for sale.” Morgan responded in a clipped and threatening tone.

“Name your price, Hades. I want her.” Apollo went on as though not hearing him.

He dared to crane his neck to look around Morgan’s shoulder, as though he needed to lay eyes on her. A shiver of revulsion coursed down her spine, and she gripped the

back of Morgan's jacket. Her heart thudded for a second when her hand touched something hard that lay against Morgan's back, then began to beat in a calmer rhythm once she realized what it was.

She outlined the pistol with one finger before she felt his hands slide back and grip the handle. Helena smiled when his fisted hand instantly opened and embraced it, keeping it behind his back while showing her his willingness to protect her. Helena lifted her head in challenge and held the man's shocked gaze as she peered around Morgan's torso and ran a possessive hand down his chest.

"I do not believe the lady is interested in your offer," Morgan drawled. He did not raise the pistol. He did not need to even show it. How she had molded to him had been enough of an explanation.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Tell me how you are feeling now," Morgan commanded softly, untying the braid in her hair.

Pleasure rippled through him as he gently ran his fingers across her scalp and down her free tendrils. In his lap, Helena's smile slowly spread as she kept her eyes closed, her body stretching languidly into his touch. He had gotten her back to his home and out of her gown, and he had just finished massaging ointment into the handprint shaped bruises that now branded her bottom.

He did not do this. Not typically. When he took a lover, he often left her feeling euphoric and sated just as Helena was, but he had never stayed around after they had finished. He had never checked the prints his hands had left behind and had certainly not massaged the sore muscles within their supple bodies. He would just pay them their coin and go, sometimes with a ravaging kiss that would send them spinning again, but nothing more than that.

Helena's submission to him had been a gift. He had never experienced anything so addictive, so perfect. It was as if she had been made just for him. He had known her all her life, and yet all this time, he had never realized that they were so alike.

Like him, Helena had two sides. One that she showed the world — haughty, intelligent, kind yet willful, and one that she kept to herself. One meant only for the darkness, like his own. He wanted to make women fall to their knees, but Helena? She desired a worthwhile reason to go to her knees. She now understood that not all men were worthy of her, and comprehended why she became so waspish around weak men.

Morgan mentally shooed the thoughts away as he focused once more on the woman before him, laid out on his lap like an offering he did not deserve. He could tell by the look in her misty eyes that she was still immersed in the lulling sensations that her submission to him had created. He suddenly wished that he did not have to send her home. He wanted to keep her with him, just as she was, dazed and aroused for days on end.

Perhaps forever.

"The same as I was in the carriage," Helena sighed, nuzzling her head into his massaging hand.

Morgan chuckled softly, loving how exhausted and sated she looked in that moment.

"Then say it again," he encouraged, moving his hand down to her neck. He squeezed gently, and Helena's eyes fluttered open as her smile grew.

"You take me to places," she explained again, her cheeks turning pink. "In my body. In my head. You make the room spin and disappear."

“And how do I do that?” he mused, his own smile growing.

He found it adorable that she had not blushed at all when he had shoved his phallus down her throat at the masquerade but was now turning as red as a strawberry while he asked her intimate questions.

“The way you touch me,” she whispered, her blue eyes slowly dilating again, “The way you speak to me. Command me. You are so rough... yet so tender. It makes my head spin and my body yearn for more.”

Morgan swallowed hard. More. God, there was so much more he wanted to show her. They had four lessons left, but there was a certain line he knew he could not cross. And right now he hated that damn line more than anything in his life.

“I now know why ladies are always pouring themselves over you,” Helena giggled, turning in his lap so she could look directly up at him.

Morgan’s brow arched as he reached down and gently removed the collar from her neck, massaging his hand gently around the dark pink line it had left; it would be gone by morning.

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“And why is that?” he asked, moving to her wrists.

“If you treat them like this, why would they not?” Helena laughed softly.

Morgan smirked at her as he lifted her ankle and brought it towards him.

“I told you,” he reminded her softly, “I do not treat the others the way I treat you. You are different.”

“Is that why you did not sell me to Apollo?” she asked.

“In a word, yes. At those parties, guests partake in a wide variety of fantasies. There are some women who like the idea of being sold to someone, and there are some men who like the idea of buying a sex slave. None of it is ever without consent. They enjoy being passed on to other men.”

“But Apollo seemed determined, offended even, when you told him no.” Helena pointed out.

“He is not used to me being so protective of my paramours,” Morgan confessed. “None of them has had the effect on me that you have.”

Helena’s smile slowly faded as her amusement turned into one of slight concern.

Morgan forced a chuckle. He was not inclined to allow the moment to become too personal and patted her foot before pulling her from his lap.

“Come on, little one, it is time we get you home,” he stated, pulling her pink gown back over her body. His mind screamed in protest as he shrouded her lovely curves in the fabric, hiding her body away from him once again.

“No other man will ever get to have this part of me,” Helena announced softly, her voice ringing with sincerity.

Morgan felt his hands tighten on her dress as he perceived the honesty in her eyes, and he found himself speechless.

“My brother is going to have a husband chosen for me any day now,” she went on. “We may not even get to finish our seven lessons before I am wed. But I... I do not care anymore.”

“Why?” he managed to croak. Unable to help himself, he reached for her and ran his thumb tenderly over her jawline. His entire body surged with a longing to protect her as he watched her relax into his touch.

“Because now I truly know what it feels like to experience what I have read in my books. I now intimately understand such phrases as ‘his tongue licked along my flesh like a flame’. I have personally experienced words like ‘dizzying’, ‘pulsing’ and ‘gushing’.”

Her cheeks turned a deeper red and a chuckle slipped from Morgan’s lips as she shrugged at her brashness.

“I know now, Morgan, and I will miss those sensations. I will yearn to be touched again like this, I am sure, but for now — and for a long time — I will simply be thankful for the experience.”

Helena’s tone was full of praise and gratitude, yet Morgan felt a slow, aching burn

beginning to radiate in his chest. He did not and could never regret entering into this deal with her, but he hated the reason she had to force him to agree to it.

“Your brother is a good man,” Morgan forced himself to say, ignoring the growing pain in his chest. “He will find you a husband of good standing; someone who will treat you like a proper lady. I know this does not seem fair, Helena, but Ambrose truly wants only what is best for you.”

Helena smiled sweetly as her eyes became glassy.

“Yes, he does,” she agreed softly. “But he has no idea who I truly am or what I want. He will make sure my husband is not a dandy, but the likelihood of him choosing a man that knows or wants to learn how to lead me? Well, you and I both know how improbable that is.”

He held her for a moment, a sense of mourning overtaking him as he realized the true sadness of the life Helena was soon to live. Suddenly he was proud of her. For all of it. For putting herself to the test. For loving herself enough to gain these experiences for herself and herself alone. He also felt proud of himself for helping her realize her dreams and desires. It was, he realized then, the most important accomplishment of his life.

“I will keep that part of you safe and alive, Helena,” Morgan promised, pulling her closer. “It will always exist within me.”

She beamed at him with gratitude as she reached between them and laid her hand upon his chest to feel his beating heart.

“And I shall keep such parts safe and alive for you as well,” she whispered. “Our little secret of who we both truly want to be.”

Morgan nodded, feeling an invisible bond snap into place between them as he pulled her in for a kiss. They would have their pact and memories to cherish for the rest of their lives. Still, a nagging sadness echoed through him as he realized that one day, very soon, that was all they were ever going to be. A secret memory.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Well, this has been positively impeccable, has it not?” Ambrose stated gaily, looking happily around the room.

Helena turned her well-practiced smile from her new fiancé to her brother. No one would know how numb she felt.

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“It truly has been, brother,” she agreed cordially, then turned back to the man Ambrose had chosen for her.

Luke Ayles, Viscount of Ashfield, smiled charmingly back at her. He was, to her brother’s credit, a classically handsome man with a flattering jaw line, short, sandy brown hair and bright blue eyes. His teeth were white and straight, and judging by the way his jacket fit, he took exceptionally diligent care of his health.

He had an air of aristocratic authority about him; strong but distant. Even from their brief meeting, it was clear that he was no pushover when it came to women, which was what Ambrose wanted for her.

He was also pretty and polite, and as she did not have any further say in the matter, that was all Helena cared about. Sign the dowry, buy the dress. What did it matter? Her wedding was not going to matter to her anyway.

“Thank you for letting me ramble on about my love of books,” Helena said cordially, “It is nice to know that my future husband will not have an issue with my reading habits.”

“Oh, certainly not,” Luke replied jovially. “I am much like your brother in thinking that women should be welcome to explore the world of literature. You never know what one might learn.”

From her seat, Barbara suddenly chortled, then coughed when Ambrose shot a glare at her.

“How sweet of you,” Barbara praised.

Luke gave her a smiling nod, as if pleased with himself, then turned back to Helena.

“Though I will be choosing your genres from now on,” he went on, his smiling twisting into a slightly condescending smirk. “I have heard there has been an increase in the sales of books of a more salacious nature. No wife of mine will be permitted to read such filth.”

Barbara’s smile dropped a little as Luke reached for Helena’s hand and gave her patronizing smile.

“Not that a woman like you would ever be drawn to such words, Lady Helena. I know you are far too ladylike for such nonsense.”

Helena felt a rebellious urge to smile sweetly and tell him that he had no idea what type of woman she actually was, but before she could even begin to form the words, Ambrose said, “of course she isn’t,” in a slightly defensive tone.

Helena then glanced at Barbara, who refused to meet her gaze. Anger suddenly flamed through her as she once again felt how trapped she was. There was no choice left for her.

“Very well, my lord,” she finally responded, forcing her voice to be sweet and teasing, “but if you are to choose my books, then I insist that I choose the colors of your walls.”

She forced a false glimmer into her eyes as she looked at him with a teasing smile, and was rewarded with a loud, haughty laugh that was common among men of the ton.

“Well, is that so?” he taunted back, looking pleased with the joke. “Very well then. In what color should our home be shrouded?”

“Pink, of course,” she replied.

This time Ambrose joined Luke in his laughter, both of their tones patronizing. They found her answer adorable. Harmless.

“Of course,” Luke replied earnestly, giving her another charming smile. “I should have known.”

Helena forced herself to go along with him. Ambrose and Barbara looked relieved that the conversation had taken a lighter turn. She was not comfortable with Luke’s presence, she realized then, but she accepted that Ambrose could have chosen worse.

The four of them chatted gaily for another half an hour before Ambrose drew the conversation to an end, and walked Luke out after a brief discussion about their next meeting which would involve planning the official announcement.

“Well that went well, did it not?” Barbara asked gaily. “In fact I found it all very lovely. Save for the reading bit.”

“Perfectly so,” Helena agreed, her smile distant. “It seems Ambrose was correct after all. I should never have fought him on taking over the decision.”

“What was that?” Ambrose asked, walking back into the room.

He gave Barbara a curious look before turning to Helena with an arched brow. Her distant smile stayed fixed to her face as she shrugged once more.

“I can admit when I am wrong, brother. To be honest, it is a relief that the search is

finally behind us.”

Ambrose’s triumphant smile slowly faded as he cocked his head to the side and studied his sister.

“Are you well, sister?” he asked cautiously.

“Perfectly so,” she assured him. “But if we are finished here, I must be on my way. I promised Teresa I would stroll with her if there was sun left once we were done. There appears to be an hour of daylight remaining, and I would like the air.”

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“We could join you,” Barbara offered quickly, walking to Ambrose’s side. He quickly nodded in agreement.

“That is kind, but I wish to have a private moment with my friend. Agnes will be with me, as will the footmen. We shall be perfectly safe and I will return before dinner is set.”

They both studied her curiously, but the numbness that had been creeping in on her all day had now fully taken hold, and she could only stare blankly ahead.

“Very well, then,” Ambrose said slowly.

Helena curtsied to them both and quickly left the room without another word. In the foyer, she met Agnes holding her cloak. Tucked inside its pocket was another red envelope. A kaleidoscope of emotions breached the walls of numbness that surrounded her and she felt her heart begin to sing.

Desire, arousal and need thrummed through her veins as she wrapped her fingers around the red envelope and slipped it back into her cloak pocket. Her wedding day would soon be here. How many lessons did she have left before they ran out of time?

“Helena, whatever is wrong?” Teresa asked worriedly, clinging to her side the moment she approached her in front of her gate. “You look as if you are about to faint! Should we take you inside?”

“No,” Helena breathed, suddenly feeling nauseous. “But I need to confess something, and I need you to promise me on your life that you will not breath a word of it to

anyone.”

Teresa’s eyes widened, but she quickly nodded and clung more tightly to Helena’s arm as they began to walk.

“Of course,” she whispered. “I will not tell a soul.”

With that, Helena began to confess, starting with what had happened the night the two of them had visited the Devil’s Masquerade and ending with her last visit with Morgan. She left out the more graphic details, the secrets she promised to keep for Morgan, and the bit about his sketching her in the nude, but Teresa still blushed a dozen shades of red from the rest.

Before Teresa could formulate a response, Helena shared the results of the day’s events, and that she was now the fiancée of the Viscount of Ashfield.

“Do you now find me awful? Helena asked breathlessly once she had finished.

Teresa looked her sympathetically and shook her head.

“Am I surprised at how far you have taken your little excursion? Yes, darling, I am afraid that I am, but I do not judge you for it. Perhaps I am even a tad envious of it. But, Helena, darling, now that you are engaged, you must stop. A line has been drawn, and it must not be crossed.”

Helena’s heart ached as she nodded in agreement. It was the wedding ceremony that truly mattered, but the act of engagement had a barrier all of its own. She drew in a shaky breath of chilly air and felt a fever spread under her skin as her world became very suffocating and colorless. As the reality of her engagement assaulted her senses, Helena ceased walking and froze in shock.

“Oh, dear God, I am engaged,” she rasped, pressing a hand to her roiling stomach. No, a voice inside her screamed. No! No! No!

“Yes, you are,” Teresa agreed sadly. There was no feeling of elation at the news.

She suddenly revolted against the idea of discontinuing her lessons with Morgan. No longer being able to see him, touch him, taste him or smell him was infinitely more frightening than the engagement. A wave of nausea struck her again and she let out a low moan as she felt the acid bubble in her throat.

“It is time to get you home,” Teresa commanded, taking the upper hand and steering them to turn around.

“You have had your fun and I am happy you have had it,” Teresa murmured quietly. “You now have the memories you wanted. Far more than I will ever have, to be sure, and you should be grateful for that. But you are engaged. And it is now time to give him up.”

Teresa’s words hit Helena hard in the chest, but she forced herself to nod and quickened her steps. The red envelope in her cloak was now burning a hole in her pocket, calling her to take comfort in it, and she wanted to be home alone to open it.

“Ah, there you two lovely ladies are!” Ambrose exclaimed loudly as he appeared at the front gate.

“Ambrose, were you waiting for me?” Helena asked, her cheeks suddenly burning.

Once again, she was thankful her brother could not read her thoughts.

“I was actually waiting for Teresa,” he corrected, throwing her friend a charming wink. “Barbara wanted to extend an invitation to dinner, but you walked away from

us before she could tell you.”

“I would love to,” Teresa answered quickly.

Though she did not know why, Helena felt betrayed by her friend’s acceptance, as though she, like her brother and Barbara, also felt a need to keep a close eye on her.

“Should you not first ask your mama?” Helena asked sweetly.

Teresa gave her a challenging look, as though she knew best, and replied, “Mama will be overjoyed to know that I will be late to return home because of such a gracious invitation.”

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“It is settled, then,” Ambrose said merrily, coaxing them both inside.

“You two go on,” Helena urged as she walked towards the stairs. “I just want to freshen up in my room for a moment. I shall be right down. Agatha assist me, would you please?”

She hurried up the stairs, ignoring her brother’s requests to wait and headed to her room.

“Lock the door, Agnes, and if anyone knocks tell them I will be out momentarily,” she commanded as Agnes shut the door behind them.

“Yes, my lady,” Agnes replied eagerly, already sliding the lock into place.

Helena scurried from her sitting room to her bedroom, shut the inner door and pulled out Morgan’s letter as she stood before the roaring fireplace. She opened it with trembling hands, and as she read the page, her mouth fell open and her stomach clenched with desire.

He had not sent a letter this time, but a sketch. Of them. Of Morgan from the throat down, elegantly dressed and seated on a couch, his shirt unbuttoned halfway and his jacket spread open, revealing the contours of his muscles. She lay in his lap, completely naked, her back arched, her eyes full of lust and need, and her lips parted and willing.

Morgan had sketched one hand around her throat, no doubt evoking the look of absolute pleasure drawn into her face, and she could practically feel his firm grip

around it as she studied the sketch. It was beautiful. Erotic. Possessive. It was the most emotional piece of art she had ever seen.

“Mistress,” Agnes whispered from behind her bedroom door, “Your friend is insisting that she be let in.”

“Tell her I am coming,” Helena replied hollowly, not taking her eyes away from the sketch as she stretched it out above the fire.

She had destroyed every other letter Morgan had sent her, but now, as she stood before the flames, she could not bear the thought of tossing the sketch into the fire. As much as she could not bear to stop her lessons.

Pulling the paper away from the flames, Helena walked it over to her bed and tucked it into her pillow. She would find a better hiding place for it later, but for now it would have to do. After she was sure it was tucked away safely, Helena wiped the silent tears that had started to trickle down her cheeks, drew in a steadying breath, and went to join her friend and family for dinner.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Engaged. It had finally come to pass. Ambrose had made his choice and now Helena was engaged. Though he knew it was coming, the news had hit him harder than he had anticipated. Anger and jealousy had whirled up in him so intensely that it had stolen his breath and he had stormed out of the house for some air.

Not yours. Not yours, no longer your concern.

It was true. Helena was not his, but why did he feel like part of him was being ripped away? He forced his mind to turn from the thought, and focused his attention on Helena’s husband-to-be. Luke Ayles, the freshly minted viscount. Ambrose did not

know him from Adam but he knew he despised the man.

His memory traveled back to the night he and Duncan had met Luke and recalled the strange reaction he had experienced in the man's presence. His air of nobility and his kind nature had almost appeared genuine, but something had felt off. Like a mask that did not quite fit, Morgan felt as if Luke was not exactly as he seemed.

"Let it go," he murmured to himself, cracking his gloved knuckles.

He needed to get into the ring and fight away his feelings.

"Morgan!" Ambrose called suddenly, shocking him out of his reverie.

Morgan looked up, immediately hoping to see Helena. As his eyes landed on her he felt a deep sense of peace. She looked cold, but the redness on her nose and cheeks made her appear innocent and adorable. And there, attached to her arm, was Luke.

A black rage eclipsed his usual sarcastic spirit. Morgan forewent his usual traits and stormed with purpose towards Helena.

Helena jolted out of the familiar numbness she felt around her fiancé as she heard her brother call out Morgan's name.

"Did something pinch you?" Luke asked worriedly, pressing a concerned hand into her bright pink fur muff. His hand felt warm, but her body recoiled from his touch.

"It is the wind," Helena forced herself to say as her eyes landed on Morgan, who was striding purposefully towards them.

Her heart hammered as she saw the grimness on his usually smiling and handsome face. There was a dark energy radiating from him as his eyes stayed trained on her.

Like a hunter stalks a fox.

“Ambrose,” Morgan greeted, cutting a glance and rueful smile toward her brother.

“Morgan, how goes your day?” Ambrose replied jovially, clearly not noticing his friend’s low countenance.

Helena felt a rush of emotion as Morgan turned his green eyes to her and stared openly into her soul. His gloved hand then twitched at his side, as if he were about to reach out to her, but then he drew it into a fist and rubbed his other hand over it.

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“It has been...most intriguing,” he answered finally.

He bowed before her, and Helena pulled her cold hand from her muff to slip it into his black-gloved one. The soft raw kid leather of the glove warmly enveloped her hand, and her entire body flooded with light as his lips blew a hot breath over her knuckles before brushing a kiss across them.

“It is far too cold for a lady to be out today,” Morgan stated, his tone condescending.

He tucked Helena’s hand back into her muff in a small act of protection and turned an annoyed look towards Luke, who was still fastened to her arm.

“I wonder what fool thought it was appropriate to make the poor lady suffer?”

Shock ebbed through Helena as she turned a studious gaze to Luke’s expression. In the background, she could faintly hear Ambrose’s angry voice, but she could not make out the words as she focused on Luke’s nearly vicious smile; so different from the soft, charming one he always gave her.

“That would be me, her new fiancé,” Luke answered boldly, then held out his hand to Morgan.

“Good to see you again, Grandhill.”

Helena watched as Morgan’s body tensed, and for a moment, she thought he was going to refuse Luke’s social nicety — then her breath came out in a rush as Morgan stiffly reached out and accepted Luke’s handshake.

“Lord Ashfield, only my friends may address me as such,” Morgan answered, his tone flat as his eyes sparkled with challenge. “I prefer ‘Your Grace’ from those I do not know.”

At her side Luke let out a huff of a condescending laugh, and nodded his head.

“Very well, Your Grace,” Luke conceded, “but if you had accepted my earlier offer you would know me well enough by now.”

“What offer?” Ambrose asked. “Have you met? When?”

Morgan cut Ambrose a look but it was Luke that answered. “Oh, just an offer I extended a couple of weeks ago. At a boxing match across town. I cannot remember who won that match, though. Do you?”

Helena’s discomfort rose as Morgan and Luke locked into one another’s stares. She was not sure what was going on, but she was certain that the entire story was not being told.

“Why do we not—” Ambrose began to say, but Morgan cut him off.

“Well, if you are going to be Helena’s new fiancé, Ashfield, then I suggest you start taking better care of her. It is far too chilling today for such a long stroll.”

“Morgan,” Ambrose growled out.

“I’m alright,” Helena faintly whispered. But when Morgan turned his eyes toward her again, she shivered at the cold numbness that had settled over her.

“Her fingers are frozen and she does not need to suffer simply because you want her seen on your arm,” Morgan said cuttingly.

“You would know all about making young ladies suffer, would you not, Lord Grandhill?” Luke asked calmly, his blonde brow cocking slightly.

“What was that, boy?” Morgan snarled, taking a step toward Luke.

“Morgan, what has gotten into you?” Ambrose’s words finally registered as he pulled Helena away from the two men and stepped between them.

“Him, Ambrose? You chose him?” Morgan asked, his voice raw and deep as he turned an accusing eye towards his friend.

“His title is not even his own! It is inherited! He has done nothing to prove himself worthy of her.”

“I beg to differ, Your Grace,” Luke replied smoothly, completely unbothered by Morgan’s aggression. “I have overcome a vast amount of challenges in my climb to nobility. Lady Helena and I share an understanding of these challenges and will prove to be very compatible with one another.”

“You could never...” Morgan began to snarl, but before she could think, Helena was beside him, laying a staying hand on a forearm that had been veiled by his coat.

“Lord Ashfield, this is one of my brother’s dearest friends,” she interjected calmly. “You see, my brother and his three friends are extremely close. They are like siblings, and have all become rather...protective of me. Do excuse him, please.”

Hurt pierced her heart when Morgan turned his seething glare upon her as if she had somehow betrayed him and pulled his arm out of her grasp.

“Indeed,” he grunted, folding his hands behind his back as he took another step away. “Brothers.”

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He then turned towards Ambrose, the grim line of his mouth once again firmly in place, and he shook his head in angry disappointment.

“She deserves better. You are a fool for this. A fool.”

Ambrose stepped back, speechless. Helena’s heart hurt for him as she saw the pain etch her brother’s face. Never had Morgan spoken so harshly to him. The need to do something to fix the situation overcame her, but as Morgan turned and walked away from them, she could do nothing but remain frozen in place, as shocked into silence as her brother.

“Lord Ashfield, I apologize,” Ambrose stated after finally finding his voice. “That is... that was, a most unusual interaction with him. He is normally the jester of our group. However, Helena is correct and that was an oversight of mine. My friends are a rather protective bunch, and I should have warned you.”

“No apology needed, Your Grace, and please call me Luke. We are to be brothers-in-law, after all,” Luke replied calmly, touching the lip of his top hat towards Ambrose. “However, if I may say so, perhaps the Duke of Grandhill is the one that Lady Helena should be protected from. His reputation is... nefarious, and it is clear he is becoming... unwell from such practices.”

Anger surged through Helena so suddenly and intensely that her face turned crimson.

“That is a slanderous rumor, Lord Ashfield, and I will not tolerate such wicked gossip in my presence. Now, to Lord Grandhill’s credit, he was correct about the weather, and since we have paused our walk the chill has become unbearable. I should like to

return home, please.”

“Agreed,” Ambrose said readily, taking a step in Luke’s direction. “We do not tolerate rumors. Morgan is my good friend and this behavior is most unlike him. I must go and speak to him and unearth the reason why he is so unlike himself today.”

“Go,” Luke urged quickly. “I shall see Helena and her handmaid home.”

“Our footmen shall see us home,” Helena replied quickly as Ambrose left. She turned to Luke with an icy stare. To her surprise, a look of guilt crept across Luke’s face and he bowed her head to her.

“Of course, my dear,” Luke replied immediately. “And please, do accept my apologies for my words. You were right when you said they should never have been uttered before a lady.”

He then bowed before her again and took her arm in a far too familiar way.

“I should still see you home,” he insisted. “Your brother would not approve of me breaking my word simply because of your hurt feelings. It is what is best, Helena.”

Helena bit her tongue to keep the vicious words in her mind from spilling out, knowing it would do her no good. This was why Ambrose had chosen Luke for her, after all, because he would do “what was best” for her. Even if it left her enraged.

Upon her return home, she bid him a curt goodbye and denied his request to come in for tea and a visit.

“I have the most dreadful headache, my lord,” she insisted. “I am afraid I must retire to my bed for the evening.”

“You did not invite him in?” Barbara asked as Helena urged the butler to close the door.

“I am weary from our walk,” Helena replied, her tone matching her words.

Barbara gave her a brief look of disappointment before she took another quick look around the foyer and asked, “where is Ambrose?”

Helena felt the blood rush to her cheeks. “We happened upon Morgan when we were in the park,” Helena explained as calmly as possible, ignoring the feelings it brought forth in her. “He was not himself and Ambrose went after him.”

“Morgan,” Ambrose called, his voice erupting loudly and firmly behind Morgan’s back.

Morgan looked over his shoulder after turning onto a less busy street, and pretended not to hear him.

“Morgan, stop!” Ambrose commanded, catching up with him.

He felt Ambrose put his hand on his shoulder, and without thought, Morgan whirled on him with a threatening look. Ambrose did not startle this time, but only glared right back at him. For a moment they just stood there, eyes locked and muscles tensed.

Brother. This is your brother.

It took a moment for him to tamp down the volatile rage erupting within him, but when he did, he let out a long breath through his nostrils and dropped his glare.

“What do you want?” he asked gruffly. Morgan grasped Ambrose’s hand and calmly

removed it from his shoulder.

“I want to know what in hell has gotten into you,” Ambrose retorted. “You have been absent as of late. You have failed to show up for our usual gatherings and have not even come to box. I would wager you are not wearing gloves because you are warm, but because your knuckles are damaged from fighting, am I right?”

Morgan turned his gaze away from Ambrose’s questioning one, refusing to answer. Yes, he had been fighting, and God help him he was about to go and fight some more.

“What was that back there with Ayles?” Ambrose asked, his words coming out in white clouds against the bitter cold. “I have seen you speak savagely before, but you do it with humor and wit. That was just pure fury.”

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“He is not good for her,” Morgan insisted sharply.

“Why?” Ambrose responded quickly. “You are my brother. Tell me why and I will take your words to heart.”

Morgan opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. It was not what he knew, he realized, but what he felt, and he could never tell Ambrose how he felt. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to regain his composure. He would indeed fight. But later, and not with Ambrose.

“I have not been myself as of late,” Morgan finally said curtly. At least that was the truth. I find myself... becoming withdrawn, and I cannot grasp why.”

“Then speak to me, brother,” Ambrose insisted, his brow deeply furrowed with concern. “It does not have to make sense at first, but we have always been better at working things out together than apart. All of us. Remember Duncan, and when he felt this way after marrying Alice?”

Morgan let out a dry laugh, recalling the way he, Ambrose and Ezra had traipsed into the wilderness of the countryside to look for Duncan, only to find him drunk and terrified of losing the woman he loved. Pain sliced through his chest as he now felt the familiarity of such a fear.

Do I...do I love Helena?

No. I cannot. I simply care for her wellbeing.

“I will be well, brother,” Morgan insisted, some of his rage retreating into its dark corner. “I am just out of sorts.”

Ambrose stepped up to him again, and this time as he laid his hand on Morgan’s shoulder, he did not brush it off.

“Out of sorts or not, you are still family and we care about you. Please, do not pull yourself away.”

Morgan nodded as he felt the brotherly love from Ambrose flow into him. Only this time, as it tried to make its way into his heart, it was met with a barrier, as though his heart had become fully occupied by someone else.

“Come to dinner next week,” Ambrose urged. “Any night, there is no need for an invitation. Just... come over and be present with us, Morgan.”

Us. As in not just Ambrose, but Helena as well. And how many more moments would he get to dine with her so casually?

“Very well,” Morgan agreed, forcing a smile upon his face. “Apologies for my outburst, Ambrose.”

“Do not mention it,” Ambrose replied quickly. “Just let us be a family again.”

Helena’s thoughts and feelings churned relentlessly as the day drew on. Ambrose had returned an hour later, and though Helena had pressed her ear against the door of his study while he talked with Barbara, she could not make out what was said. By the time the clock struck nine she could no longer tolerate the worry. Donning her cloak, Helena snuck from her home and went to Morgan’s, this time without an invitation.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Bloody hell,” Morgan muttered, pressing the ice cube filled rag against his left cheekbone. It was swollen and bruised in four distinct colors, and a laceration sliced through its center. He had another on the right side of his jaw, and he was not even going to attempt to count the ones that covered the rest of his body.

It was not often he risked a fight during the daytime, but after his run-in with Helena in the park and then Ambrose on the street, he had needed a fight like a fish needs water. This time there was no Duncan to pull him away, and he had finally been able to fully unleash himself. Six fights. More than he had ever accepted in one day, and he had won them all, though he had barely scraped by during the last one. His fury had decreased slightly, but his strength had dried up completely, and he’d had to resort to a head butt.

“Morgan.”

Helena’s soft voice resounded in the silence of his library, and Morgan felt his heartbeat stammer as he looked away from the small mirror. His body instantly tensed and warmed as he saw her standing before him, a look of terror marring her beautiful face.

“Helena, what are you doing here?” he rasped, shocked by her sudden presence.

A deep, pulsating sense of pleasure began to spread through his chest at the realization that she had come to him, even after how he had behaved today and how angrily he had glared at her. He had regretted it the moment he walked away, which was the reason he had gone to the fights.

Morgan’s heart wrenched as he saw tears well up in Helena’s eyes.

“I am all right,” he whispered as she rushed towards him.

“What happened to you? Who did this?”

Her soft voice was full of worry as she delicately touched and inspected the wounds on his face, her eyes still filled with terror as she no doubt thought the worst.

“Easy, little one,” Morgan soothed, capturing her hands in his own. “I am fine. They are just bruises, and they will fade.”

“Just bruises? Just bruises?” Helena hissed, picking up the rag of ice he had just placed on the table.

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“You know the four of us like to box,” he continued, letting her press the ice back to the bruise on his cheek.

“Ambrose did not do this to you, did he?” she asked, and the look of increasing rage on her face made him chuckle, then wince as pain bloomed in his ribcage.

“No, little one. I box with other men sometimes. In an arena where the rules are not so...strict.”

“The rules are strict to protect the fighters,” Helena replied, giving him a stern look. He fought the smile that was trying to spread across his face. She was adorable when she was angry with him.

“Sometimes a man needs to fight without rules,” he replied defensively as she began to dab salve onto his wounds.

Helena paused her ministrations to gently grip his chin with her clean hand. She looked at him with calm intensity. Morgan stared back into blue eyes that were riddled with alarm and need.

“Tell me what is going on,” Helena commanded. Her voice was soft and seductive, knowing somehow that she did not need to add bark to her delivery.

Morgan continued drilling his intense stare into her for another long moment to scare her into looking away, to force her to submit to him as she had done so many times before. But this time she did not yield.

Beneath her hold on him, Helena felt a shiver ripple over his skin, almost like the shiver she had felt when she had been exposed to him. Something in her heart, ethereal and full of emotion, picked up the faint vibration, and latched onto it as if it were meant to bond with hers.

She refused to break his stare or back down from his warning glare. Wild and untamed feelings coursed through his veins as she protectively gripped his chin. Her touch had delivered a hot rush of need into his groin, but an arrow of alarm had also found its way into his heart. The combination was making his heart race and his anger rise. How dare she? How dare anyone look so deeply into him?

“Morgan,” Helena beckoned. Her voice was like silk; a siren song that made his blood sing in response. In a desperate whisper, she softly and gently commanded him, “tell me.”

“I had an older brother, you know.”

His secret, the one he had kept even from his adopted brothers, spewed from the depths of his soul and poured out of his mouth as though he had no choice in the matter. With it came the pain he had worked so diligently to mask. Helena’s eyes widened as curiosity and concern shadowed her expression and her grip on his chin transformed into a calming caress. Without a word she returned to tending to his wounds, and in her silence he felt a gentle push for him to continue.

“His name was Liam, and he was everything, and I mean everything he was supposed to be,” he went on, feeling his pain transition from physical to emotional. “My father loved him much more than he loved me, and rightfully so. I was a fool when I was younger. But Liam cared about me just as I was. He was to be the duke — not I — so what did it matter what I did?”

He fell silent as memories of his brother flooded his mind. Liam laughing at his

pranks. Liam urging their father not to be so hard on him. There was never any need to worry because Liam was the heir. Liam was going to take care of everything.

“What happened to Liam?” Helena asked, her tone gentle as her fingers massaged the tense muscles at the back of his neck.

Her touch reduced the emotional ache that radiated from him, and he leaned into her touch. Helena sighed with relief as he rested her head against her breasts and draped his arms around her waist.

“It was the most senseless accident,” he sighed nuzzling into the comfort she offered him as he relived that tragic day. “The three of us and some other gentlemen were out in the country on a fox hunt with the dogs, the year before my father died.

“The horses had hunted with us dozens of times, and there was no reason for Liam’s mount to be skittish. He was an excellent horseman, but it all happened so quickly. One minute he was in the saddle, and the next he was flying from a rearing steed; then he was gone, flung down a ravine. There was no time. It was over in a second. Yet I remember it as if it had taken hours to occur.

“Father was instantly furious, and that fury took the place of shock, sadness, mourning and heartache. Everyone was to blame, especially me. He said it should have been me, that I was the one always being daft and errant, how had it not been me?”

Morgan startled himself as he heard his own voice break with a raspy quiver, and he cleared his throat to chase it away. He tried then, gently, to push Helena away, but her arms had banded tightly around his head.

“His dislike for me turned into hatred that day,” he continued, now feeling as if he needed to let all of it out. “He did not beat me. He did not need to. His words were his

weapon of choice, and they were full of poison and curses. Never again was he kind or even impartial. He swore upon the devil that he would outlive me now that he had no proper heir.”

He stopped there, the irony of what his father had said to him hanging heavily in his heart. He had said those words like a commandment and then died a year later, almost exactly to the day, leaving Morgan the only one left to take on the title and the weighty responsibility.

“Your father had no right to say that to you,” Helena whispered, stroking her fingernails soothingly through his hair.

Her gentle, nurturing touch forced another shivering breath from his chest, and although his muscles tensed at feeling so exposed, he did not try to let go again.

“Morgan, I am so sorry that you lost Liam. He sounds like he was a wonderful spirit. But your father was wrong. You have done so well with your land and your responsibility. You are still known as a jester, but Grandhill is also known for its constantly expanding trade. That is solely because of your dedication and hard work.”

Morgan startled at Helena’s praise, raising his head so he could look at her.

“Do you think I do not notice such things?” Helena asked, one of her brows rising slightly as a slow, kind smile spread across her face. “We all notice, Morgan. I think that is why Ambrose gets so annoyed at you sometimes, because you can be the jester and the duke so effortlessly.”

That raw, vulnerable sense of being seen overtook Morgan once again as Helena spoke, and with it came a hungry, sucking void of realization. He was going to lose her; one of the rare people who saw him for who he was and still cared for him. It was too much, and no matter how soothing her touch was, it did not erase the pain

and enormity of his loss.

Morgan pulled Helena down into his lap. His hand lifted to her throat as his lips claimed possession of hers, coming down on them, hot and demanding. Helena responded immediately, trying to curl herself around him as she opened her mouth for his kiss. He grabbed her wrists, unable to give her any more control, and it made his heart bleed even more when Helena did not stop him, respecting his need to regain dominance.

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He nearly groaned in agony when he broke the kiss. He wanted so much more. Not just in that moment, he realized, but in his life. He wanted Helena completely to himself, but he could not have her.

“You should go,” he rasped, his voice strained with emotion as he brought them both to their feet.

Helena looked back at him longingly, still dazed, her lips still swollen from his demanding kiss, and he had to force his hands to let go of her.

“But, you are hurt...” she all but whimpered.

In so many ways, little one.

“I will be fine,” he forced himself to say. “And so will you. I apologize again for today. It will not happen again.”

“Morgan...”

“Go,” he commanded, this time more gruffly. “I will send for you when I am ready.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Pardon, Your Grace, but you have a Mr. Varley at the door,” Morgan’s valet, Claude, announced.

Morgan’s words and train of thought ceased as he heard the name, but he smiled

charismatically at the gentlemen seated before him and said smoothly, “I believe my next appointment has arrived. Can I answer any further questions before we conclude?”

“Looks like another solid trade investment to me,” Lord Barryl replied cordially, standing up.

“I shall leave you to it, Lord Grandhill,” Lord Shanks stated. “All seems to be well in order as usual.”

Morgan shook their hands calmly, hiding the growing tension inside him as he thought of the man waiting to see him. After Helena’s last visit he was left feeling disjointed and uneasy. Though he had finally accepted that he was falling in love with her he knew he could not have her.

Still, that did not mean that he could let her marry Luke. Something was off with the man. Something familiar, cold and evil, but he could not put his finger on it, so he had once again called upon Mr. Varley, a private investigator who had assisted him during the investigation into his father’s death.

“Your Grace,” Mr. Varley greeted pleasantly, bowing to Morgan as he was shown into his office.

Morgan gave him a nod of acknowledgement as he poured out two glasses of whiskey.

“Mr. Varley,” Morgan greeted, handing him a glass, “I am surprised to see you again so quickly.”

“My investigation is not concluded,” Mr. Varley warned quickly, pulling a folded letter from the inside of his jacket. “I am afraid that your viscount’s past is still

wrapped in mystery, but when I found this I knew I had to come to you immediately.”

Whiskey forgotten, Morgan set down his glass and reached for the offered paper. He quickly read over its contents and his eyes snapped to a particular word on the page. Without bothering to finish reading the rest, Morgan looked up from the letter and pinned Mr. Varley with an intense stare.

“Where did you find this?” he demanded.

“As you know, Your Grace, a man’s office can hold quite many secrets,” Mr. Varley replied with a shrug, then took a drink of his whiskey.

Morgan did not know why he had even bothered to ask as he returned his attention to the word burning a hole in the page. Whittler. The man responsible for their fathers’ deaths. The man they had sent to prison just a few months’ earlier.

“The viscount’s office, however, was quite sparse when it came to personal information,” Varley continued. “It was strange, really, how little of himself could be found in the space. Even this letter contains no trace of him. Yet, for some reason, he has correspondence from this particular man.”

“It makes no sense,” Morgan mused, reading over the instructions in the letter. Like the others Ezra had found months ago, this one provided simple instructions as to when and where the dukes were to meet. “Why would he have this? Ayles is only five-and-twenty, he would have been a mere child when our fathers were killed.”

“I will keep searching for that very reason,” Mr. Varley assured him, “but my suspicion thus far is that he is somehow related or attached to Whittler. His paternal history is unknown. It is possible that Whittler could be his father.”

It was a leap, and a big one, but it was enough to take to Ambrose, Morgan decided.

Even if Whittler was not Luke's father, it was still suspicious that he held a letter written by their fathers' murderer.

"Do you have any more leads?" Morgan asked.

"I have discovered the name of his mother. Francis Trawley," Mr. Varley explained. "She was a lady's maid, but she died about six years ago. I have found traces of her work history, and will figure out where she was working when she became pregnant. Then I will begin tracking down her old coworkers, to see if they remember her ever mentioning someone of interest."

Morgan pulled out his billfold and handed Mr. Varley a stack of pounds.

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“Come to me the moment you find out more,” he commanded. “Day or night.”

“Your Grace,” Mr. Varley agreed, bowing as he took the money, understanding that their conversation was now over.

As soon as he was gone, Morgan tucked the letter into his jacket and called for Claude.

“Your Grace?” his valet asked, entering the office.

“Cancel my last appointment for the evening,” Morgan commanded as he walked past his valet and into the hall. “Tell them some urgent family business has arisen.”

Helena smiled wanly in Luke’s direction. She was not at all sure what joke he had made, but she had noted the smiles on Ambrose’s and Barbara’s faces, the merriment of their polite laughs, and she joined in. In truth, if asked, she could not recall a single thing Luke or anyone had said that evening. Every conversation with him seems to be the same. Polite. Filled with compliments. And utterly dull.

Although he was a perfect gentleman, Helena’s mind could not focus on him. Not in the same way it focused on Morgan. It had been three days since she had gone to see him. Three days since he had bared his soul and held her as if she was his lifeline. And three days since he sent her away, leaving her feeling lonelier than she ever had in her entire life.

“Oh, Ayles, your wit is unmatched,” Ambrose chuckled, shaking his head. “Helena, do you agree that your husband-to-be is quite the storyteller?”

“Oh, quite so,” she agreed quickly, masking her boredom with another smile.

“Tell me, which part of the story did you enjoy the most?” Luke asked her earnestly.

Mentally, Helena flailed as she scrambled to find an answer, not recalling a single word the man had spoken through the entire dinner. She was fumbling with her words and twittering laughter when the doors to the dining room opened, and a servant appeared to announce the arrival of Lord Grandhill.

Relief and surprise combatted one another as Helena’s eyes focused on Morgan’s approaching figure. His eyes filled with the briefest touch of warmth as they met her gaze, but hardened into a predatory glare as he looked at Luke sitting beside her. Alarm scurried through her as she saw the absolute vitriol in Morgan’s eyes.

“Morgan,” Ambrose stated, his tone full of surprise as he rose from his seat, “What a pleasant surprise.”

Morgan glared at Luke another moment before his mouth twisted into a wicked smile, and he turned his gaze towards Ambrose. They had not spoken since his outburst in the park, and Helena was not at all sure what was about to happen.

“What brings you to us?” Helena asked, unable to help herself. She could not deny it. She was happy to see him, even if he looked as deadly as a wolf among lambs.

“I came to offer my apologies,” Morgan’s words came icily, his eyes still fixed on Ambrose. “For my vulgar behavior before a friend and a lady.”

Helena watched with growing interest as Morgan then bowed before Ambrose.

“Well, brother,” Ambrose said slowly, rising from his chair with a raised brow, “that is kind of you. And, of course, you are forgiven.”

“We will speak more on the matter later,” Morgan stated with an air of authority as he straightened his posture.

“Indeed,” Ambrose agreed, then waved a hand towards the free seat opposite Helena. Join us. We have only just started.”

Helena’s heart leapt and began to hammer at the devilish twitch in Morgan’s smile as he examined the offered seat.

“Why, my dear friend,” Morgan stated dramatically, pulling forth his jester persona as he reached for the back of the chair with a flourish. “It would be an honor.”

Helena then watched in a transfixed state as Morgan transformed the boring dinner into one of boisterous laughter and interaction. The polite but tight smile Ambrose had worn for Luke grew into an open, wide-mouthed grin filled with laughter as Morgan injected life and warmth into the room.

Although he tried to disguise it, she also noted how Luke had stiffened in response to Morgan’s presence. On multiple occasions he had attempted to steer Morgan’s stories towards one his own, trying to reclaim the center of attention. On each occasion, Morgan would halt Luke’s words with a clever retort that was so polite it would cause everyone else to laugh and ignore the true sting of his subtle insults, save of course, Helena and Luke.

The delivery of his insults was more sophisticated than the manner in which he had hurled them that day in the park, but no matter how wittingly he coated his pointed words with politeness, Helena saw the toll they took each time they slashed at Luke’s pride. By the end of dessert, Luke was quick to excuse himself.

“Leaving so soon, old chap?” Morgan asked, his voice thick with sarcasm as Luke picked up Helena’s hand and kissed it.

“It seems my fiancée is being entertained enough this evening by her, what was it she called you in the park? Brother?”

For the first time since he had taken over the conversation, Morgan’s charming, confident smile faltered.

“Yes, brother,” Luke repeated, emphasizing the sibling relation with a hard tone as his lips drew into a smile that could have easily been mistaken as a snarl.

“Now would be the best time for this sibling-like reunion in any event,” Luke said, his tone dripping with false remorse as he rose from his chair. “After our wedding, Helena will be joining me in Ashfield and we shall be terribly busy there for quite some time. I am afraid you will not have dinners such as these with her much longer, Morgan.”

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Morgan's green eyes deadened, but he did not lose his smile.

"It is Your Grace to you, Ayles," Morgan corrected. And we will see about that. No one keeps us from our family."

Not breaking his challenging gaze from Luke, Morgan tilted his head towards Ambrose.

"Ambrose, is that not right, brother?" he asked.

"I am afraid it is," Ambrose agreed, giving Luke a regretful shrug oblivious to the growing tension in the room. "When we want to see Helena, we will see Helena. Not even your marriage will keep us apart."

"It is true," Barbara agreed, reaching across the table for Helena's hand. "We will always be there for our sister."

Helena felt a rush of overwhelming love as she accepted Barbara's hand and looked at the three sets of eyes that stared adoringly back at her. She beamed at Ambrose and Barbara, returning their genuine sibling love, and felt her heart skip a beat when she focused on Morgan. There was no kin-like love in those eyes. Not anymore. It was pure, burning desire. Hot, and possessive.

"Of course," Luke agreed, his gruff tone pulling Helena's focus from Morgan.

Helena felt the pain shoot through her fingers as Luke's grip hardened on her hand. She instinctively tried to pull away from his grasp, but Luke pulled her to her feet and

captured her attention with a vaguely threatening glare. Helena felt another, stronger urge to pull away from him.

“I shall see you tomorrow,” he stated. His tone made it clear that it was not a request for an invitation, but a command. “Will you kindly walk me out?”

Helena felt a scurry of alarm pass through her as a note of cruelty resounded in his voice.

“I shall do the honors,” Ambrose stated, rising from his chair at the perfect time.

He walked over to Luke and clapped him on the shoulder. As he did so, Luke finally released Helena’s fingers. “You are not married yet, my friend.”

Helena pulled her aching fingers into the palm of her other hand as she watched a pleasant, polite smile settle over Luke’s face as Ambrose led him out.

“You are right, I am too excited for our wedding day. I got ahead of myself,” he agreed amicably as they left the dining hall.

“Your Grace,” a maid called, coming to Barbara’s side, “I beg your pardon, but the cook said to kindly remind you of tomorrow’s luncheon menu.”

“Oh, yes,” Barbara sighed, standing up from the table. “I almost forgot that we needed to secure that. Very well.”

“Excuse me, you two, I will return shortly,” she said to Helena and Morgan before disappearing after the maid.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Why do you not like him?” Helena asked Morgan as soon as Barbara had left.

Morgan smirked but it looked more like a snarl as he rose from his seat.

“I was perfectly polite,” he replied defensively, going to the window.

“And as pointed as a knife,” Helena retorted, following him. “You might not have been as blatant as you were in the park but you were cutting him open all the same. Now tell me, what is it that you have against him?”

The letter Varley had given him burned in his breast pocket. He realized then that he wanted to tell Helena was going on. After all, her father had also been killed by Whittler. But he could not divulge his information to her until he’d had a chance to talk to Ambrose and perhaps not even thereafter. It was not as though telling her about Whittler would address his possessive feelings towards Helena. That stark realization only served to darken his mood.

“I will just say that I now perfectly understand why you sought out someone like me before you must marry,” Morgan replied, forcing a playful tone into his voice. It was harder than he would have liked, and he regretted it the moment he saw Helena’s brows furrow with hurt.

“The man is boring, Helena,” Morgan sighed wearily.

To his relief, Helena’s pout disappeared and she rolled her eyes.

“You may be right,” she agreed begrudgingly. “But he is trying in vain not to be, and you are quelling his efforts at every turn.”

Good, Morgan thought vindictively, but he kept the remark to himself and studied Helena as she stood before him. She wore a gown in a particularly deep shade of

pink, and looked as lovely as ever. Yet, as he took her in, flashes of her in the black-sequined gown consumed his mind.

Morgan looked towards the door to ensure that they were still alone, and then reached for the dangling diamond earring hanging from her left lobe. He caressed the sensitive flesh and reveled in the way Helena's breath immediately quickened.

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“He mentioned a week,” Morgan murmured. “Is that true?”

Helena’s cheeks flooded a deeper shade of pink than her gown, but she did not look away from him.

“Yes,” she breathed. “He...I...we...decided that there was no need for an elaborate ceremony.”

“I do not recall that being what you wanted,” Morgan mused.

“It is what is best,” she said with a dismissive shrug. “My other plan was to have a love match. This is not a part of my plan, although I believe that he will be an amicable husband.”

“Amicable,” Morgan echoed with a scoff. He stepped closer and grazed his fingers from her earlobe to encircle her throat. She nodded slowly, not stopping him as his fingers tightened with his need to possess her.

Helena nodded again, a look of lust glazing over her eyes as an electric charge began to build between them. Each time it began, they were powerless to stop its advance.

“We must finish your list,” he whispered, stroking his fingers over her neck, “Before your...amicablemarriage begins.”

Helena licked her bottom lip as if suddenly parched and shook her head while still in his grip.

“With the wedding so close...” she began to say.

Unable to help himself, Morgan pulled her close and steadied his lips just a breath above hers.

“Come to me tomorrow night,” he rasped, teasing her lips by barely brushing his own over hers, “At eight.”

“Eight,” she gasped, breaking out of her trance. “That is so early!”

“You will find a way,” he murmured, pulling away from her as they heard footsteps approaching.

Morgan was across the room in an instant, opening the dining hall doors just in time for Ambrose to step through.

“Are you leaving?” Ambrose asked, sounding disappointed. “I was hoping you would stay.”

Morgan had meant to stay. Meant to show Ambrose the letter in his jacket pocket with the Whittler’s name on it. But now, as he stood before his friend, he realized he could not. How would he explain how or why it had come into his possession? He was not even sure he could be honest to himself let alone Ambrose.

Besides, the letter had not been addressed to Luke, so there was no proof that it belonged to him, other than the fact that Morgan had hired an investigator to break into the viscount’s office. Which, of course, would only expose him to more grueling questions.

“Let us meet up in a few hours,” Morgan said, patting Ambrose on the back as he paused beside him. “At your place.”

Ambrose nodded, looking relieved that their friendship was no longer strained.

“See you there,” Ambrose nodded, clapping Morgan on the shoulder as he took his leave.

As Morgan made his way out into the hall, he heard Ambrose’s voice as he spoke to Helena.

“The viscount is most looking forward to your union, Helena,” he heard him say.

“That is well, brother,” Morgan heard Helena say as he suddenly stopped outside the doors. She sounded as dull and lifeless as Luke’s personality.

“He will be the perfect provider, I believe,” Ambrose went on. “Though, a little overzealous for time alone with you, perhaps.”

“Yes, brother,” Helena replied in that same lifeless tone.

Morgan was pleased by the lack of interest in Helena’s tone, and as he pushed away from the door, he knew he had finally confirmed his suspicions. Helena did not want to marry the man.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“We are out of time.”

Morgan said the words simply and numbly. Helena felt the weight of their brevity sinking deep into her heart like a stone, tearing it in two. She swallowed, rubbing the stinging tears from her eyes and nodded. She could not look at him.

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When he had met her at the gate, he did not guide her by the hand as he normally would. Once they were in the library and he had taken her cloak, he stood several paces away. She hated the space between them, but as the strange silence descended around him, she found herself unable to move.

“We are.” She agreed, her tone as numb as his.

Her body trembled, but this time it was due to sadness, not arousal. Sorrow poured so rapidly from the tear in her heart that she could not staunch its intensity. This was going to be their final night together and it all seemed so wrong. She wanted her crimson letter. She wanted his protective, dominant stance taking up her personal space. She wanted him.

She commanded herself to stop, growing frustrated with the onslaught of feeling. Their arrangement was always meant to be temporary. Morgan was there to help her experience the desires on her list, and that was all, except now that she had cracked open that door, she wanted more. She wanted to throw it open and walk into its swirling shadows, and she wanted to do it by Morgan’s side. She wanted to wear his collar again, to feel that exchange of power and trust as he clipped on the leash and led her, protected her.

In a small corner of her mind where her memories with Morgan existed, she laughed softly at her recollection of their very first interaction.

“Something amuses you?” Morgan asked.

There was no numbness in the way he spoke this time. His voice was heavy and

drawn out, as though it pained him to speak. She lifted her eyes to gaze into his green orbs and nearly clutched her chest when she saw the raw emotion in them.

“No,” she answered quickly. “I do not know why I did that.”

“Come now,” Morgan scoffed, his lips drawing into a soft smile as he slipped his hands into his pockets and took a step towards her. “If there is a joke to be laughed at in this moment, I very much want to hear it.”

Helena smiled tentatively and braved a step towards him as well.

“I was thinking of the first evening I met you as Hades,” she confessed, feeling her smile widen. “And how, like him, you have guided me through the underworld of my desires. It just... seems very fitting, is all.”

Sadness streaked across Morgan’s eyes but his smile drew wider, and he closed the space between them to stroke her cheek. Helena nearly sobbed at his touch as the familiar heat and tingle rose in her.

“I suppose it was, Persephone,” he murmured, stroking his fingers along her jaw, as if he could not help himself.

Helena’s eyes stung as she looked at him. Golden streaks of lust streamed through his forest green eyes, and she felt a strange combination of loss and bittersweet joy. She wanted, no, needed him to kiss her.

Please, Morgan...

“Thank you for coming so early,” Morgan rasped, his fingers ceasing their caress. Helena could not help but sway towards his fleeting touch as he slowly drew away and slipped his hand back into his pocket. Her heart skipped a beat as a cold breeze

crept over her heated skin. She swallowed hard and nodded silently, unable to trust her voice.

“Since it is our last night, we shall have to squeeze two of your adventures into one,” he went on, walking towards a box on the table. “As well as another sitting.”

Excitement filled Helena upon hearing his promising words.

“Sitting?” she asked.

“For your portrait,” Morgan replied, his eyes heating up once more. “We had agreed that this would be an exchange of favors, remember?”

She recalled their heated exchange, and her body tingled at the memory.

“We do not have to finish my list,” she said as Morgan brought the box to her. In truth, she could no longer remember its details. Her cravings had rapidly focused on Morgan and the pleasures he could offer her. “What if we just...”

“No,” Morgan said softly, not letting her finish as he pushed the box into her hands, “We made a deal, and we are going to keep it. Now here. Put this on. We must get underway.”

Helena had looked at him with confusion once she had unwrapped the plain, peasant-style dress. One of the less exciting desires on her list was to learn how to gamble. He was by no means going to take her to Ambrose’s gaming hell to learn and participate, so he had decided to take her to the Harvey Tavern.

It was a modest, safe tavern that ran responsible tables for the laymen of the land, and a place very rarely visited by nobles. At times it was reputed to draw an unsavory crowd, but tonight as they entered, dressed in their disguises, Morgan knew it would

be a fun, light night. As he predicted, the men at the table they chose were taken by Helena's beauty, even in her plain dress, and were all too happy to have the presence of her company for her first gambling lesson.

Morgan had not missed the yearning and sadness in her eyes back at his home. It had nearly swallowed him up, almost pushing him to give in to his own desires and make what little time they had left just about them. But last night, as he lay in bed and thought of all the ways he could make Helena whimper and plead for him, he realized something. It was unfair to make her burn for him when she would be forever trapped with someone who left her body cold and without feeling.

He had left other women yearning for him, begging him for more, and he had always done it with a charming smile and a weak promise of future trysts without so much as a care. But he could not do that to Helena.

By eleven, Helena had been swept up by the merriment of the gambling lesson and several cups of weakened ale, and she was smiling and giggling as he helped her back into the carriage. While he had allowed her to drink as she wished, he had kept his solitary cup of strongly brewed ale mostly untouched, wanting to be sure he could assist or protect her at any moment.

She had done fairly well with the games at first, with Morgan's coin initially coming out about even, but by the end of the night, the rules he had tried to teach her were swept away by the ale. He had lost money in the end, but it was worth it.

In her plain dress, with that smile and giddy expression, he found her more beautiful than ever. His heart swelled in his chest as he took in the happy flush of her cheeks, and the little bounce in her body as she sat opposite him in the carriage. His happiness was quickly replaced with anguish when he realized how happy it made him to make her happy in any capacity, and his responding smile slowly slipped as they made their way to their next location. Helena's little bursts of giggles gradually

faded into nothing, and silence filled the carriage.

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“Where are we going now?” she asked after a few moments.

“We are going swimming,” he replied, forcing a small smile onto his face as he turned to look at her. “I recall you mentioning the desire to swim nude beneath the stars?”

He almost immediately had to look away, unable to handle the explosive feelings that rocketed in his chest just from looking at her.

“Swimming?” Helena echoed, sounding alarmed. “We cannot go swimming now! It is nearly winter. We will freeze to death!”

Unable to help himself, Morgan chuckled as he looked out the window.

“Come now, do you truly think I would allow that to happen to you?” he asked.

A heartbeat of silence passed between them before Helena replied softly, “No. I do not believe you would allow anything bad to happen to me.”

Morgan felt his stomach tighten and his throat close as he forced his eyes to meet hers, his small attempt at humor withering as his longing consumed his thoughts. Though he knew it would only torture him further, he found himself sliding into the open seat next to hers and pulling her into his arms.

“Never,” he whispered, finally allowing himself to wrap his body around hers.

His soul sang with pleasure as Helena slid into his lap and burrowed her face into the

crook of his neck. When she sighed in contentment, he felt his manhood pulse beneath her buttocks, and his grip on her tightened. He nearly lost his mind when her soft lips began tracing delicate, teasing kisses along his throat, persuading him to allow her to continue. He was only saved from his desires by the knock on the carriage ceiling, signaling that they had arrived.

“Come,” he coaxed, gently pulling her away.

“Morgan,” she breathed, her eyes filled with yearning as she clung to his neck.

Kiss me. He could see the plea in her eyes as plainly as he felt his own need for it.

“Time is of the essence,” he forced himself to say.

His body roared in protest as he opened the carriage door and put more space between them, but he ignored it and waited for Helena to follow him out of the carriage. The chilly air was a blessing to his overheated body, and he pulled in several deep breaths through his nostrils as Helena reluctantly climbed out of the carriage.

“Where are we?” she asked, looking around at the unfamiliar street.

She looked up and down the empty roadway, then turned to the lone, expansive cottage with a water wheel that sat to the right of the roadway. From the windows, as he had requested, he could see the many candles and fireplace lit inside.

“Just outside of London,” he explained, guiding her along the path to the cottage. “This is one of my properties.”

“Yours?” Helena asked, surprised. “But why would you have this place? Your estate in the countryside is far more impressive and secluded.”

“True,” he agreed, smirking as he drew close to revealing his secret, “But this particular piece of land holds a very interesting geological gift.”

He unlocked the cottage door with his key as Helena observed him with burning curiosity, but when she turned away from him to look into the house, she gasped and smiled widely.

“I...what? How is this possible?!” She laughed in surprise.

Seemingly forgetting their interrupted kiss, Helena stepped forward into the open-concept floor plan of the cottage and absorbed her surroundings. The walls and ceiling were standard, as was the large rock fireplace that stood against the far-right wall. The couches and other furniture were also standard, but what was not was the slow, steaming river that moved through the house. The floor was strategically positioned right above it so that someone could simply step into the water. It was approximately as wide as Morgan’s arm span, and deep enough to come up to his waist.

“Hot springs are not commonly found so close to London,” he explained matter-of-factly, guiding her carefully away from the edge of the stream and towards a couch. “This one was discovered only a decade ago. Erosion had forced it to break to the surface. I have always been drawn to the miracles of nature, so I moved to purchase the property. Further down the way, the spring is used to power a lumber mill I own. But here, the water is pure, warm, and perfectly safe to swim in.”

With awestruck eyes, Helena turned back to the stream and knelt down beside it. She tentatively lowered her hand into the slow-moving water and laughed.

“It is so warm!” She laughed, her face lighting up.

Morgan could not help but smile adoringly at her delight, pleased that she was so

happy with it.

“I told you,” he chuckled.

Helena smiled warmly as she turned her eyes up to him. In an instant she had risen to her feet and stood beside him, her arms wrapped around his waist in gratitude. Morgan’s body sang at the contact, but he only allowed himself to place a hand on her lower back as she whispered, “thank you.”

“A deal is a deal,” he forced out, now hating the emotion that thickened his voice.

“Come, get undressed,” he urged gently, moving his hands to her cape, “We have only a few more hours before we must return home.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Helena lowered her naked body into the warm water, her skin tingling with excitement as it rose up to her breasts. The night had been enjoyable, but tense. Every so often she and Morgan would fall into one of their sweet embraces and she would feel herself relax, but he would always pull away.

The warm, dizzying effects of the ale she had enjoyed earlier were starting to fade as the water swirled around her, and she looked over at Morgan with longing. By now, she was used to the thrilling if not exposed sensation of him being clothed while she was naked, but tonight she could not tolerate it.

“Come in with me,” she urged, holding onto the edge as she kicked her legs up to float.

Morgan smiled from his seat on the couch but it did not reach his eyes. Though the water was warm enough to form sweat on her brow, Helena felt a lonely chill crawl up her back.

“This is your discovery, not mine,” he replied. “Please, enjoy yourself. I promise I will not let you drown.”

Tired of the tension between them, Helena pulled herself out of the stream and wrapped herself in a blanket before padding over to him.

“Enough of this, Morgan, please,” she insisted, kneeling before him. “If this is our last night let us make it an amazing one.”

“Are you not having a good time?” he asked, looking down at her with eyes far too cold for her liking.

“It has been nice, but...”

“Are you experiencing your adventures the way you had originally hoped?” he pressed.

Helena furrowed her brow.

“What I originally wanted is not what I want now,” she replied, her tone laced with defiance.

“And that is my fault,” Morgan acknowledged, leaning forward on his elbows. “I have tainted your previous experiences and that was wrong of me. I was supposed to be your teacher, not your guide.”

“Guide, teacher, what does it matter?” she asked.

“It matters because these experiences were supposed to be about you, not how you felt completing them with me,” Morgan replied, his tone growing flat and hard. “I went too far, Helena. I am trying to remedy that. Why will you not let me?”

“Because I do not want you to remedy it!” Helena seethed, her nails digging into her knees. “I want these experiences, Morgan, and I want them with you.”

“I forgot how spoiled and demanding you are,” Morgan scoffed.

Morgan and her other brothers had teased her with those exact words hundreds of times in the past, and each time they did she would respond with something haughty and clever to prove their point. This time, though, Morgan's words hurt her.

Yes, she had been very demanding, there was no denying that. But under Morgan's seductive influence, she had lost the need to be that way and had found freedom and safety in following his orders. Letting him think for her, act for her, and protect her had brought her more joy than any spoiled demand she had satisfied in the past.

She rose from her knees, glaring down at him as he remained seated, and pulled the blanket from her body. She watched with wicked pleasure as Morgan's eyes grew dark with lust and his hands clenched into fists before bearing down on his kneecaps with obvious force.

"You are right," she said haughtily, squaring her shoulders as she proudly stood naked before him, just as he had taught her.

"I am very demanding," she agreed. "And I will see to it that you fulfill my wishes as I wish them to be carried out."

The pain in Morgan's eyes vanished as he rose to his feet, a glittering challenge taking its place as he stretched to his full height until it was he that towered over her. A carnal glee shot through her as she caught the dominating, predatory look consuming his eyes; the look she had longed to see all night, and she smiled wickedly.

His eyes remained fixed upon hers as he untied his cravat, then worked furiously to remove his jacket and shirt. He did not look away from her, did not even blink as he shrugged the rest of his clothing and took a predatory step towards her as he emitted a low growl.

Helena gasped softly, the intensity of his dominance scrambling her senses, and took a step back. In an instant, Morgan's hands were upon her waist, lifting her off her feet to straddle his hips. She whimpered as he roughly pulled his warm, muscled chest against her breasts.

Morgan held her to him with one hand while the other snaked up to her jaw and forced her lips to his. A moan poured from her lips the moment he kissed her, and her nails dug into his shoulders as she clung tightly to him. Morgan growled at the sting of her touch, but he only pulled her tighter, pressing her bare sex against his own.

"Do not stop," she whispered pleadingly into his lips. This was what she wanted. Not the nude swimming, but to have Morgan inside of her. Her maidenhood was hers and hers alone to give away, and she decided in that moment that no matter how polite Luke was, she did not want him to have it.

She ground her hips against his, pulling another needy moan from both their lips as they each spasmed in pleasure, and Morgan's grip returned fully to her backside. Not breaking their kiss, his firm grip guided her hips upwards, her leg muscles useless against the corded ones lining his arms, and he repositioned her at his navel, pressing her sex tightly so she could not lower herself onto his throbbing, engorged manhood.

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She whimpered in protest, but Morgan lightly bit her lip and took another step forward. Without breaking their kiss, he walked them to the edge of the stream, and his well-toned legs easily took the large step down into the water, which bathed them in its warmth. Pleasure pulsed in Helena's veins as Morgan lowered them until the water reached their shoulders. He gently pressed her back into the stream's bank as his eyes searched her face.

Morgan's kiss was as needy and demanding as her own, and for the next several minutes, they battled one another for control. If she bucked her hips, he bit her lip. If she clawed her nails down his back, he gripped her backside and forced her pulsing, engorged petals to rhythmically ride the ridges of his lower abdominal muscles. It was working her nerves into a frenzy of pleasure and frustration, and the warmth of the stream was only heightening her senses.

Growing desperate in her need and realizing that her demanding nature was getting her nowhere, Helena decided to change tactics. With a sigh, Helena stopped fighting and let her body sink sweetly into Morgan's, melting onto him like a second skin. He tensed, and she felt his hands begin to push her away almost immediately. She did not resist, but instead softened her kiss and coaxed Morgan's tongue into her mouth.

A feral sound ripped from his throat, but his grip on her thighs began to ease and turn into kneading caresses. Sliding her fingernails from his shoulders, up to the back of his neck and through his hair, she felt his shoulders also begin to relax as his breath decelerated.

Yes, Hades, my god of darkness. Feel me. Remember me. Give in to me...

A heady, aching groan rose from Morgan's chest, as though his soul had heard hers whispering to him, and Helena felt the rest of his body unwind. He broke their kiss slowly, pushing and parting his lips against hers with a lazy greed as they both took deeper breaths.

"Helena."

Morgan's deep voice was both breathless and full of pain as he pressed his forehead against hers and traced his fingertips up her back. The rawness of his tone sent a thick spear of need shooting down her abdomen, where it exploded in her moist center and made her insides tighten with desire.

He pushed her away just far enough to look into her eyes, and she saw the same ache there that she had heard in his voice. A mixture of need and heartache welled up in her like a sudden storm.

"Please, Morgan," she pleaded, stroking her nails softly through his hair again, "Please."

"Say it again," Morgan commanded, his tone suddenly gruff as he gripped her tightly.

His gaze was locked on her blue orbs, wide and dilated with so much arousal that they were almost black, and he watched as her response poured from her soul. His desire was so great that he could feel himself about to spiral out of control. He needed to stop himself and regain his command over his emotions.

"Please, Morgan," Helena pled obediently once more, and Morgan lost himself.

He kissed her lips possessively once more, unable to get enough of her taste, and then tore them away to drop kisses down her neck, over her collarbone and her breasts. The buoyancy of the water made Helena's body ridiculously light, so it took him

almost no effort to bring her legs high enough on his chest so that his mouth could reach her breasts.

Like a feline stretching from a long afternoon nap, Helena arched her back so that her breast pushed further into his mouth. Opening one eye to be sure she did not hit her head, Morgan watched as Helena seductively pushed her pelvis at a different angle against him so that she could lower the back of her head to the stream's wooden bank. He then watched in satisfaction as a look of pleasure overtook her features; he paid close attention to every furrow of her brow, every pout of her lips and nudge of her chin as he slowly worshipped her.

He could not give her what she asked for, and he knew she would be furious for denying her that, but he could not hold back on denying her the ecstasy she so deserved. If this was his last chance to taste her, he was going to devour every part of her.

Helena melted under his mouth and caresses. Her moans came out in soft, repetitive breaths as his tongue lay claim to every expanse of flesh he could find. When he reached the apex of her legs, he positioned them on either side of his shoulders and swirled his tongue lazily around her taut bud. Helena moaned his name again.

He pulled back, inhaling her feminine scent as he bared his teeth like a vampire ready to consume the blood of its victim.

“Do you remember the first order I gave you?” He asked, slowly swirling the tip of his middle finger over her swollen, pink petals.

Helena gasped and bucked her hips against his teasing fingers, desperate to have them inside of her.

“Morgan,” she whimpered, trying to gyrate towards his touch.

“Yes,” he growled. “I love it when you say that, but answer my question.”

Helena’s face and chest were flushed with warmth and arousal as she opened her eyes and looked at him. He smiled as he saw the answer as clear as day in her eyes. She remembered.

“I must say your name whenever I release,” she whispered, then swallowed slowly before also saying, “even if by my own hand.”

“Good girl,” he groaned and rewarded her by sliding his two fingers between her tight folds.

Helena moaned in ecstasy as her upper body dissolved on the cottage’s floor at his touch. Her inner walls sucked greedily on his fingers as he continued to flick his wrist in the way that offered her the most pleasure; a motion he had learned by obsessing over every move she made when she was with him. He felt the strength of her mounting orgasm force her walls to clamp down more tightly.

“Say it again,” he rasped, his eyes transfixed on the pleasure written all over her face.

“Morrrgannn,” she moaned. His aching, pulsing and dark red phallus twitched painfully at the sound of his name.

“Again,” he commanded, lowering his mouth to her hard bud.

“Morrr...gannn,” she breathed headily, her gasps becoming lower and deeper.

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“Again,” he whispered softly, swirling his tongue over the sweet sensitive bundle of nerves.

He moaned as she obeyed and began to feast upon her.

He did not have to say “again” for Helena to scream his name as her orgasm erupted into his mouth, and he moaned in gratitude as he licked greedily at her juices.

“Yes, Helena,” he praised between licks, his voice soft and raspy as he consumed her hungrily.

“Morgan, please,” she panted, her hands finding their way through his hair as she recovered, “Please, give me what I want.”

He wanted to more than anything, but instead of giving in to her request, he slowly started pulling away, letting kisses trace from her sex, down her inner thigh, calf, and then to her foot. Helena rose up on her elbows, her eyes glazed with confusion and pleasure.

“Morgan,” she whispered.

He placed a final kiss on her ankle and shook his head as he repositioned his hold on her and placed her onto the floor, out of the water. Morgan said nothing and lifted himself from the stream, careful of his aching hard erection, and walked away from her towards a stack of towels. He wrapped one around his waist and grabbed another one for Helena.

“You want this,” she insisted, pushing the towel away from her as if it were a trap.

“It does not matter if I want to or not, Helena,” he said gruffly, stepping towards her.

“I simply cannot.”

She tried to avoid his grasp but he was too fast and too alert to let her subvert him, and he captured her with the towel. Betrayal filled her eyes as he wrapped her in the cloth and gathered her up in his arms.

He glanced away, unable to look into her eyes, and walked towards her clothes.

“Get dressed,” he ordered, turning his back to her to do the same. “It is late. I need to get you home.”

“We are not done yet,” Helena insisted from behind him as he dressed. “You and I need to talk about this, and you said you wanted to finish your portrait of me.”

Unable to turn back to her, Morgan merely shook his head as he finished dressing.

“I changed my mind,” he said, his tone gruffer than he had intended as he worked his trousers up over his aching manhood.

“Why?” she asked him. “Are you so done with me that you no longer desire to draw me?”

Morgan closed his eyes to the hurt that permeated her voice. It was not that he did not wish to draw her. She was, he was certain, the only thing he would be able to draw for the foreseeable, distant future. His time with her had evolved from a deal to a pleasure, and, finally, to an obsession. He needed to pull away from her now, even if it pained him.

“It no longer matters. I will be waiting for you in the carriage,” he told her, pulling his jacket back on.

“Morgan,” Helena called, her tone filled with worry. He cringed at the sound but pressed forward.

“Be quick, Helena,” he said over his shoulder before closing the door behind him. “We have run out of time.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Would you please pay attention, my dear,” Luke insisted with an edge of irritation in his otherwise polite tone.

Helena tensed as she pulled herself from her thoughts and looked at Luke. He was smiling at her in his usual charming way, but his lips were tight and his left eye twitched. Little pieces of his politeness and charm had begun to melt away after their engagement the previous week; dripping from him so gradually that most people would not take notice. But Helena had.

“Apologies, Lord—I mean Luke,” Helena murmured, reaching numbly for her spoon. “What is it you were saying?”

This time her husband-to-be made no effort to hide his displeasure. His smile turned into a thin line, and a look of pure annoyance entered his eyes. He reached for the teapot closest to her and poured her another cup of tea. She crinkled her nose at it, but when Luke gave her a warning look, she accepted the full cup.

She then looked over at Teresa — and her older brother James — her chaperones for the Ashfield visit, and was rewarded with eyes that quickly darted away from her. Another pot of tea, one for the siblings and for Luke, sat closer to the three of them,

out of her reach.

Helena did not want the tea from her pot. She was not sure what herb it was, but it had been the only tea he had allowed her to drink since moving to Ashford. Something about it tasted bitter and wrong. She also did not like the way it made her stomach feel or how it made her mind go blank, but Luke always insisted that “his future wife” deserved a pot of tea all of her own. ‘Special tea for my special lady,’ he had said.

Sometimes, though, she welcomed the numb emptiness in her mind and how it deadened the sensations she felt when her mind wandered back to Morgan.

It had been two weeks since their last night together, and their final moment in his makeshift bathhouse had torn not just her heart, but her body completely in two. Every moment, aside from when she drank the tea, had been plagued by the memory of his touch, his scent and his taste. Every time she realized it would always be just a memory, she felt her entire being ache.

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Never again would she feel his touch, be comforted by his dominance, and nurtured by his gentleness. The reality swallowed her, and she felt her pain bloom anew as she struggled to remain present with Luke.

“Your mind no longer seems to reside in your body, my dear,” Luke said, speaking to her as if she was a disobedient child. “Tell me, what are these thoughts that so completely take hold of you?”

Though she did not like it, Helena reached for the tea and took a long swallow, welcoming the odd detachment it provided.

“I believe I am simply homesick,” she managed to say after downing nearly the entire cup. “This has been a most lovely visit, and I have learned much about my future duties, but I believe we should all go back to London this coming weekend.”

“You do not like your new soon-to-be home?” Luke asked almost immediately, a look of disappointment crossing his face.

No, I do not.

“I thought you and your friends could stay here until the wedding. That way there is no chance of failure at your tasks when you come back as my viscountess,” Luke explained.”

Helena did her best to smile and replied, “it is lovely, truly. But I am accustomed to being with my family, and in truth, I do not relish staying behind while you return to London for your business.”

“You have plenty to keep you busy while I am away,” Luke insisted, “Have you not enjoyed learning about your new house and its required responsibilities? Do you not want to be the best wife for me?”

“I am not your wife yet,” Helena said, her tone low as she gave Luke a level look. He looked back at her with annoyance, and the two of them stared challengingly at one another until a servant entered the room.

“Pardon, my lord, but a missive has arrived for you,” the man said, bowing as he presented the letter to Luke.

Unable to help herself, Helena leaned towards the writing on the envelope, wanting to see who it was from. Perhaps it was from her brother demanding her presence, or even Barbara. She was able to read the letters R.K. penned in eloquent script, but that was all she could see before Luke tore it open.

“Perhaps Lady Helena is right, Lord Ashfield,” James stated as Luke read through the missive. “We have been most gracious of your hosting, but I believe we all would like to return to London.”

“What?” Luke grunted, his attention still on his letter.

An awkward silence settled over the table. Luke’s mood obviously darkened as he read the missive. When he had finished, he muttered something regarding ingratitude as he tucked the letter into his breast pocket.

“You are right,” Luke said to James politely. “We should all return to London. We will leave in the morn.”

“An excellent choice, sir,” James replied as Helena felt relief flooding through her.

“Perhaps you and your sister should go and get started on your packing,” Luke replied. “I need to speak to my future wife for a moment, if you do not mind.”

“Just a moment,” he repeated when neither James nor Teresa moved.

They both looked over at Helena, and only moved from their seats when she gave them a nod. When they left, Luke’s small smile dropped and he leaned toward her with an inspecting glare.

“You are a very confusing woman, you know that?” he told her, cocking his head.

Helena’s cheeks burned not with shame, but with anger.

“How so, my lord?” she asked sweetly

“When I offered this visit to you, you seemed so willing to get out of London,” Luke replied, his lips twitching to show his back teeth. “I actually thought it was because you wanted to be with me. But that is not true, is it? You have been as quiet and lifeless as a ghost since you got here. Is this what I have to look forward to in our marriage?”

Helena’s nostrils flared as she thought of all of the visceral responses she truly wanted to deliver. She was disliking Luke more and more every day and she wanted nothing more than to tell him how she truly felt.

“Perhaps it is,” she replied icily.

“Perhaps,” Luke murmured. “Or perhaps I shall have to fix some things about you to have you become more pleasant.”

A chill of disgust skittered through Helena’s spine and she narrowed her eyes. There

was something wrong about his tone, about the way he spoke about her, and looked at her as if she were an object to be handled.

“Go to your friends,” he grunted in dismissal as he looked away from her. “We do not want them to worry about your honor.”

He then chortled as if he knew something, and under his breath muttered, “not that there is any to worry about.”

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Helena heard him, but instead of firing back a retort, she quickly rose, relishing the excuse to leave the table. As she got to her feet, though, the world began to spin, and she pressed one hand to her upset stomach as her other hand reached for the table's edge.

Suddenly, she felt Luke's body pressed completely to her back as his arms came around her waist to haul her back up. Disgust poured through her as she brought weak hands up to stop him, and she heard him chuckle.

"Are you well, my lady?" he asked, his tone almost taunting as he continued to press her tightly to him. "Perhaps you should lie down instead. Come, I will assist you."

"No," Helena burst out, struggling more against his hold. "Let go of me!"

He had been doing that a lot lately — insisting she let him take her to lie down when she stumbled, which had also been happening quite frequently.

What is happening to me? Why am I feeling so weak of late?

"Helena?" Teresa's voice called from the dining room door, saving her.

Luke released her just as the doors opened and James and Teresa strode back in.

"She is not feeling well," Luke stated, looking completely unflustered as he took his seat again. "Perhaps you should take her to bed. She needs her rest."

Helena glared at him as Teresa and James each took one of her arms and walked with

her out of the room.

“Helena, are you alright?” Teresa whispered as they headed toward the stairs.

“Yes,” she lied, feeling her heart hurt even more. “Just help me upstairs, please. The sooner we are packed, the better I will feel.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“You nearly killed him!” Duncan growled, latching onto Morgan’s sweaty biceps.

Morgan pushed Duncan off him, a warning growl erupting from his chest.

“I have heeded all of your suggestions regarding my fighting, brother, but tonight I refuse,” he snarled back.

“Tonight? Just tonight? Morgan, Morgan listen to me, you have left a trail of bloody, beaten bodies behind you since last week. If you do not get a hold of yourself you will murder someone, and I know you do not want that!”

“Do not be so sure, brother,” Morgan huffed, his mood growing even darker as he imagined Luke’s face.

He knew it was not Luke that he was picturing when he fought with his opponents in the ring; he was fighting with himself. Anger and disappointment had stopped him from attending Helena’s small party before she left to take a holiday with Teresa and her brother to Luke’s estate in Ashfield, but it was his monumental self-loathing that had fueled his need to bloody faces.

It had begun the morning after her party. As he woke up alone in his bed, staring at the ceiling with dead eyes, he realized that, in trying to avoid the pain of seeing her,

he had lost out on other, more precious moments.

He had missed the chance to promise her that he would always be there for her whenever she needed him, even if it was in only a brotherly capacity. The chance to wish her a happy marriage, even though they both knew otherwise. He had missed the opportunity to touch his lips to her skin and taste her one more time.

He knew Helena would be back to London for her wedding next month, but he already decided that he could not attend. This had been his last chance. At everything. And he had missed it.

Morgan's ability to reach for humor had completely abandoned him thereafter. His foul temper had scared the servants, caused meetings to be cancelled, and infused his brothers with worry. Morgan had successfully avoided contact with Ambrose. Their relationship had become rocky after he had decided to show Ambrose the letter from Whittler the day after Helena left for Ashfield.

Ambrose had undergone an apoplectic fit when Morgan revealed his suspicions that Luke was a nefarious character. He had yelled at Morgan in Luke's defense, insisting that the letter could have belonged to the house's previous owner, and that their fathers' murder case had been closed. His response was like a slap to Morgan's face, and after drinking the numbness away, he had started to fight on a nightly basis. After that incident, Ambrose had stopped contacting him.

Ezra, however, was like a demonic weasel thereafter, appearing out of nowhere in his usual all-black attire, and greeting him with a disappointing frown. When Morgan walked up to him, ready to curse him out of the door, Ezra raised his brow, and in his usual lifeless tone, simply asked, "you can gamble in my hell, but I cannot gamble in yours?"

Morgan had frozen and given Ezra a distrustful stare.

“You seriously think I care what you do in your free time?” Ezra sighed. “I heard about a good fighter. Came to place my bets. Finding out that I am betting on you does not concern me provided that you keep winning.”

Morgan held out his forearm to Ezra and his brother pressed his own against it. Without another word, Morgan had returned to the fight, and they had not spoken since.

Thereafter, Ezra attended the fights on a nightly basis, bringing along other men from their side of town, and always a few more than the night before. Ezra was taking their bets on Morgan’s fights and was making many of them rich men. Tonight though, the crowd was equally half peasant, half gentry but all of them were betting on him. At the rate Morgan was going, he was going to make them all rich men.

“You ready, mate?” the announcer shouted into the back room.

“Morgan,” Duncan warned.

“Ready, mate,” Morgan yelled back, shaking his head slightly as he began walking backward towards the ring.

“Either back me up or get out, Duncan,” Morgan commanded before he got to the curtain, “but tonight I am not done until I say I am done.”

A clanging noise filled Morgan’s ears as he stepped into the ring. It shrieked alongside the roar of the crowd so viciously that he was unable to hear the name of his opponent. Not that it mattered. He zeroed in on the man that shared Luke’s features and let himself fill with rage. As the bell rang for the fight to begin, the clanging in Morgan’s ears ceased. In fact, all sound stopped and time slowed down as he rained blow after blow on his opponent.

He did not have to duck. He did not have to dive. His first attack was lethal and far too fast for his opponent. Metal cuffs were snapped onto his wrists and he was pulled off the broken man. Morgan roared as he slid in the large pool of blood he had created, and violently kicked the lifeless body.

“Back off, boy, you’re done!” growled the mountainous man that held Morgan’s left cuff.

“Get these off me,” he snarled, fighting the two mammoths that were carrying him away from the ring.

“Aye, we will, as soon as ye get yer arse together. Now calm yer sack or we’ll be

forced to knock ye out in these chains.”

“Ye’re not under arrest lad, ye just need tae calm down,” added the large man to his right.

Morgan forced himself to take a steadying breath and willed his muscles to relax as he was seated in a chair. He shook his head and raised his hands in surrender. Inside him anger still raged so much so that his hands shook, but he forced an easy, innocent smile to distract them.

“I am calm, see?” he asked.

The two large men looked at one another, seemingly having a silent conversation. Now that Morgan could get a better look at them, he realized they were probably brothers.

“Take ‘em off, Norm,” the larger one sighed.

“Right, Norb,” Norm replied obediently, and removed the metal cuffs from Morgan’s wrists.

“Thanks so much,” Morgan said chipperly, rubbing his wrists. “Now, let us get back to the fights, yes? Who is next?”

“You don’t understand, boss,” the man called Norb said, shaking his head.

“Ye’re done fer the whole night. Maybe even the week.” Norm added, coiling up the chains.

The thin veil of feigned cheer that Morgan had wrapped over his anger suddenly loosened and he felt his body tense again.

“The hell I am,” he answered gruffly. “I want back out there!”

“And I want to be a lord, Clawhammer, but I ain’t to be one,” Norb replied, his protruding brow furrowing. He stepped in front of Morgan, blocking his path.

“You ain’t goin’ back out there, boss, and that’s that. What the owner says goes. You want to stay and watch, that’s yer business, but ye ain’t gettin’ back in that ring.”

“I shall buy you a beer, old chap,” Ezra offered, his usual nonchalant tone breaking the tension in the air. “Come along. You have won us enough money. Time to celebrate.”

For a moment Morgan did not move, his gaze locked with Norb’s. He briefly thought about fighting the man, but a small sliver of sanity and self-preservation formed in his mind, and he finally took a step back.

“Let us drink, then,” Morgan said gruffly, going to Ezra’s side. Duncan had also appeared, but he and Morgan refused to look at one another.

Begrudgingly accepting that his fights were done for the time being, Morgan dressed and joined Ezra at his table. Their pints were filled and he drank the brew down completely in just a few, deep chugs.

“Another,” he rasped, slamming down the empty tin mug.

“Indeed,” Ezra muttered, refilling both their cups.

He clipped his mug against Morgan’s without the effort of a verbal toast, and they both tilted their mugs back once more. Ezra was filling their cups for a third time when Morgan finally managed to look up at his surroundings. He froze, his stomach turning into a giant block of ice as he saw Luke Ayles seated at a nearby table

chatting animatedly with two other gentlemen.

“What ishedoing here?” Morgan snarled, forgetting all about the beer.

Ezra and Duncan both followed Morgan’s line of sight and a look of confusion crossed their faces.

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“Is he not supposed to be in Ashfield with Helena?” Ezra asked.

Upon hearing Helena’s name, Morgan felt every muscle twitch back to life.

“Do you think she is back in town?” Duncan asked. “I am sure Alice would love to see her.”

“Let us go say hello to the chap,” Morgan said, his glare still focused on Luke. “See what we can find out.”

The three of them stood up, ready to make their way to Luke’s table when a crowd of men inconveniently passed between them.

“I cannot bear remaining with this woman for much longer,” a familiar voice, drunk and full of complaint, said from the other side of the passing men. “She is so clumsy now, but spiteful as ever. And still she denies me!”

“That is what you get for going after one of the spoiled, pretty ones,” another man answered.

“Just keep giving her the tea. It will not hurt her, just make her weak enough to allow you to take her.”

“What is the point? I do not even want her anymore. My father is making me do this and now I do not have the slightest clue what to do with this cold, uppity woman. Maybe I should just go ahead and give it to her all at once. That would show her.”

An explosion of rage went off in Morgan's head. He suddenly cut through the slow-moving crowd and lunged for Helena's betrothed. He hated the man's voice and would recognize it anywhere.

"You son-of-a bitch," Morgan growled as his fists gripped onto Luke's lapels.

With the force of his lunge he had Luke off his stool and his back to the ground in a second.

"I would not do that if I were you," Ezra warned, smiling wickedly as he stepped in front of a friend of Luke's who was coming to his aid.

"Definitely not," Duncan said in agreement, standing before the another.

"What are you doing here?" Luke asked, his words slurring as he looked up at Morgan, wide-eyed. "Are you not supposed to be in the ring?"

"They put me out," Morgan seethed, hauling Luke to his feet, "for being too violent."

He pulled Luke's terrified face to his and grinned wickedly.

"Would you like me to show you why?"

"No," Luke slurred, pushing at Morgan's grip. "Let me go, you giant."

Morgan shook Luke until his hands fell from Morgan's grip and he turned a sickly green.

"Not until you tell me what you were talking about just now," Morgan demanded. "That had better not have been about Helena."

Through his terror and green complexion Luke managed a smirking grin.

“Why?” he slurred. “What are you going to do about it?”

Morgan pulled his fist back to cold cock the bastard, but Duncan’s hand wrapped around it, held it fast, and quickly offered him an alternative. “Let us take him outside. There is an alley out back.”

As Luke tried to argue, Duncan’s hand shot out and shoved a cloth into the man’s mouth. His angry words became muffled sounds around the gag, and like the sack of garbage he was, Morgan dragged Luke towards the door and up the steps to the street. The moment they were in the alley, Morgan shoved the man against the wall, and Duncan and Ezra flanked Luke on either side.

Luke’s eyes darted to each of them wildly as Duncan ripped the gag from his mouth, his chest heaving as his weak-minded fear overtook him.

“I knew you were a damn coward the moment I saw you,” Morgan seethed. “Now you can either die as one right here, or you can tell me what the bloody hell is going on, and where the hell Helena is.”

A wave of rage flooded Luke’s blue eyes and mixed with the terror inside of him. He bared his teeth at Morgan like a feral animal.

“You cannot kill me,” he hissed back at Morgan. “Not if you want that little brat of yours to stay alive.”

Morgan, Ezra and Duncan growled as one, and their fists collided with Luke’s face like a practiced symphony of drums. Morgan might have been the only one in love with Helena, but all of them had grown up and watched over her like a little sister, and their willingness to keep her safe knew no limits.

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“God, I think you broke my nose,” Luke groaned.

“Not yet,” Ezra said pointedly, “but we will break every bone in your body very slowly and painfully until you tell us what you know.”

“Veryslowly,” Duncan agreed. Realizing that he needed to demonstrate to Luke what he meant, he reached for Luke’s right hand and seized his pointer finger. He gave it a violent twist until the bone snapped and Luke screamed from the pain.

“Then we will kill you.” Morgan promised, his blood singing at the thought.

“Fine! Fine! Fine! Oh, God, fine, just let me go!” Luke squealed.

Duncan glanced down at the man’s hand in his palm and caressed it almost lovingly. Then, with the quick twist, he also broke Luke’s middle finger at the knuckle and let go. Luke screamed again in pain, but Morgan clamped his hand over his mouth to muffle the sound.

“Just a warning of what will happen if you try to lie or hide anything from us,” Duncan said with a shrug, taking a step back.

“Talk.” Morgan commanded through gritted teeth. “Now.” He scraped his hand roughly across Luke’s mouth.

“I did not want her. I never wanted her. I mean I wanted her in the way every man in the ton does,” Luke started to blurt out, his words slurred, rushed and unfiltered, “but I do not want to marry her.”

“Then why did you ask for her hand?” Morgan roared, his voice echoing through the empty street.

He did not know where it came from, but the ferocity poured from him with a vengeance. Luke flinched but answered.

“M-my f-father!” He blurted out, turning as far away from Morgan’s murderous gaze as possible. “H-he set all this up!”

Morgan’s mind suddenly flashed back to the letter Mr. Varley had brought him, and something clicked in his mind. The letter had not belonged to Luke after all.

“This is not the time to be vague, boy,” Ezra hissed, his fingers snaking out to seize Luke’s ear in a painful grip.

“I cannot tell you that,” Luke huffed, his chest beginning to heave in panic once more. “I have begged him to acknowledge me for years. He said this was the only way he would do it. Please, you have no idea what it is like to be ignored by your father, to be cast out of title and home for being a bastard.

“Look, I will stop giving her the tonic, I swear to you. And she can come to London as much as she wants. But I cannot stop this ruse. I need her.”

Morgan’s hand grabbed Luke’s fractured index finger and gave it a quick snap at the top knuckle. A silent scream welled in the man’s chest, his mouth fell agape and his eyes fluttered as though he was about to faint. Morgan slapped him with an open palm, reviving him before he could pass out.

“You are going to tell us who your father is and then you are going to tell us what you have been giving to Helena and why,” he commanded as Luke let out a low, agonizing groan.

“Reuben Knight,” he finally croaked. “He said we needed the girl for insurance. I do not know more than that, I swear!”

The rage eating Morgan alive suddenly ceased as all the clues came together. Reuben had hated them all long before his niece Barbara had married Ambrose. When they married he had openly despised the union, so why would he instruct his son to marry Ambrose’s sister?

“The Whittler is your father.” Morgan said.

The pain in Luke’s eyes was replaced by pure surprise.

“How do you know that?” he asked.

“What the bloody hell?” Duncan roared.

“George was telling the truth,” Morgan muttered, recalling the man’s plea as he was taken away. He had warned them. George Nicholson was arrested one year ago but he was not The Whittler.

“We have got to get to Ambrose and Helena, and someone needs to find Reuben,” Ezra stated, a promise of death evident in his somber voice.

“They are together now,” Luke stated, his eyes wide with panic. It was clear that he no longer wanted anything but to be set free. “At Ambrose’s estate. Having dinner. I was not allowed to attend.”

“Then your father does know how foolish you are,” Duncan growled. “Come on, let us go.”

“Not yet,” Morgan said, turning back to Luke with an eerie calm. “This tonic. What is

it?”

A look of guilt passed over Luke’s face as he tried to escape Morgan’s commanding gaze.

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“It is a sedative,” Luke confessed, his tone pitiful. “I do not know what it is called. My father instructed me to give it to her. He said it would not hurt her, but it would make her more... susceptible and easier to manage. It does not work though, not on her. It makes her weak, yes, but she still denies me.”

“You drug your soon-to-be-wife in the hope of bedding her?” Morgan rasped incredulously, his rage expanding. “You are not a man at all.”

“I just wanted my father to accept me,” Luke choked out, shaking his head as tears began to pour down his bruised, pathetic face. “Let me go now, please.”

“Not a chance,” Morgan and Ezra growled in unison, both yanking Luke up from the wall.

“You are coming with us,” Morgan seethed, pushing the stumbling man towards his carriage.

The moment he got Luke inside, Morgan wiped his hands across his trousers, unable to wait one second longer to remove the man’s vile tincture.

CHAPTER THIRTY

“Helena, darling, are you sure are all right?” Barbara asked.

Helena stumbled but offered her a genuine smile as she was helped into her chair.

“I am getting better by the moment,” she replied, and truly felt like she meant it.

Though she was still having bouts of dizziness and fatigue, Helena had noticed a vast improvement in her physical ailments since returning to her brother's house.

"I am sure by the end of our visit I shall be back to full health," she said assuredly, but felt her face blanch as the world around her spun again.

"I hope you are as motherly to your own children as you are to that girl," Reuben Knight harrumphed, cutting into his meat with a look of annoyance.

"I assure you, Reuben, she will be a wonderful mother to our children," Ambrose replied, his tone harsh.

The look of annoyance on Ambrose's face quickly vanished as he turned towards Helena.

"Helena, are you sure?" he implored, looking as worried as Barbara.

"Perhaps it would be better if she ate in her room," Reuben grunted. "Her piqued complexion does little for my appetite."

"Lord Knight, I do apologize for interrupting your visit with Barbara," Helena apologized as Barbara and Ambrose both shot him a glare. "It is my fault that I did not forewarn them of my intention to visit. But please, my time in London is growing brief, and I would very much like to spend it in their presence while I have the opportunity."

Reuben grumbled something about manners and politeness, then turned his full attention to Barbara to discuss his great nephew. As the two talked, Ambrose looked anxiously at Helena. He and Barbara had both been worried from the moment they had laid eyes upon her, claiming she was too pale and too thin.

Helena had lost count of how often they had asked if she was all right, and she felt guilty for worrying them.

In truth, she had been so dazed over the last two weeks that she had not noticed that her dresses had become heavy and loose, but now — under Ambrose's watchful eye — she felt every gaunt inch of her. She picked up her fork, and although she was not hungry, forced down a bite of pheasant.

"Has your soon-to-be-husband been taking care of you, Helena?" Ambrose asked, his tone low. "Has he been cruel? You can tell me."

"No," Helena replied. It was true. Cruel was not necessarily the right word.

Not wanting to stay long on the subject and unable to stave off her own curiosity any longer, Helena cut up another piece of meat and as casually as possible asked, "so, how are the others? Barbara has enlightened me on Alice and Lydia, but how is Ezra? Duncan?" She swallowed hard as her heart skipped a beat. "Morgan?"

She tried to say his name as carelessly as possible, but even so, she and Ambrose both went rigid upon hearing it. She had been informed of some little argument between the two after he had not shown up to her party, but even Barbara was unsure what their disagreement was about.

"Fine," Ambrose said, his tone tense.

Only a second of silence ticked by before the doors to the dining room flew open, and through them spilled a bloodied Luke, followed by Ezra, Duncan, and Morgan. Helena felt her heart stop, then beat in double time as she took in Morgan's face. Yearning filled her as their eyes met, and though he wore a murderous look, his eyes flashed with pure relief upon seeing her.

“What in the bloody hell is this?” Ambrose growled, jumping from his chair.

“I tried to tell you,” Morgan snarled, throwing the letter at Ambrose’s feet. “I tried to tell you he was no good for her!”

“Christ in Heaven, Curtis, do your dogs even possess a modicum of couth?” Reuben snarled as he stepped away from the table.

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“Morgan,” Helena whispered. Relief surged through her as she urged herself to her feet; her mind was too fuzzy to embrace what was happening, and she felt herself sway.

“Helena,” Morgan choked out, his hate-filled eyes going wide with concern as he flew to her side in an instant to catch her. “It is all right. It is going to be all right. We are going to get the tonic out of you.”

“What?” she breathed. Too many emotions and too many questions were raining down on her simultaneously. The comfort of Morgan’s long-missed embrace was only adding to her confusion.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Ambrose demanded of Morgan.

“Father, I am sorry,” Luke groaned as he reached towards Reuben’s feet.

Silence, thick and tense, filled the room as Luke’s secret came tumbling from his lips. Morgan’s attention remained solely on Helena as he cupped her chin and studied her eyes. She tried to focus on him, elation pouring through her at being with him again, but her vision was extremely blurred.

“I need you to sit, sweetheart, it is not safe,” Morgan whispered to Helena as he gently lowered her into a chair. Everyone else slowly turned towards Reuben.

“Luke has been drugging you, but it will wear off,” he told her, his soothing tone in complete contrast with his deadly expression. “We are taking care of all of this right now.”

“Drugged?” Helena rasped, tears forming in her eyes as a tremor of fear ran through her.

“Nothing more is going to happen to you, I swear it,” Morgan told her, holding her hands easily with one of his as he pressed a glass of water gently to her lips.

“Drink, little one,” he commanded softly. As though his words had broken a spell, Helena felt her body break free from its sickly, tense hold as she succumbed to Morgan’s dominant, protective demand.

I have missed you.

Helena cried silently as she opened her mouth to swallow the refreshing liquid.

“That is my good girl,” he coaxed, tilting the glass a little more.

“Morgan.” Ambrose’s voice was a twisted mixture of indignation and surprise as he heard his best friend talk to his little sister in such an intimate way.

Helena flushed, realizing Morgan had just revealed their bond, and yet she could not break away from his intense gaze.

“I will take care of this,” he rasped as he set down the glass, rose from his knees, brushed his lips along her forehead, and turned towards Reuben with clenched fists. Helena sank into her chair as Morgan stood protectively in front of her and glared at the men before him.

“You have one chance to tell the truth,” Morgan stated, taking a threatening step towards Reuben. “I demand to know who you are and who he is,” Morgan hoisted his leg and gave Luke’s side a swift kick, “or my brothers and I will unleash an unholy hell upon you, I swear to God.”

“Brother,” Josiah said, looking up at Reuben from his chair. “What is he talking about?”

“Shut up, Josiah,” Reuben snarled, “Have another drink.”

Barbara stepped protectively in front of her father.

“Itoldyou to stay far away from him!” Reuben’s voice boomed through the hall, his face purple with fury as he swept a finger towards the orphaned brothers. “I told you to stay away fromallof them.”

“Is that man your son?” Ambrose demanded, pointing a finger towards the still crumpled up Luke.

“Barely,” Reuben seethed the word.

“Father, please, I did what you asked,” Luke pleaded, rising carefully to his knees.

“And you spoiled it all!” Reuben snarled, making his son flinch back into a fetal position.

“YouareWhittler,”Morgan stated, drawing the attention back to him. “That was what George had been trying to tell us.Hewrote the messages to our fathers, but it wasyouwho ordered him to do so, was it not? It wasyouwho offered the bigger payoff to George, not our fathers.”

Shock exploded in Reuben’s eyes before a devilish smile overtook his face, and he tilted his thick chin downward, making him appear more demon than man.

“My, my. You like to pretend you are the stupid one, but you are smarter than you appear, are you not, Lord Grandhill?”

Morgan tilted his chin upward as he smirked, his fingers flexing in anticipation.

“I have my moments,” he agreed.

“It was you?” Duncan seethed, slowly removing his mask from his scarred face, his eyes wide with fury.

“You did this?”

“It was payback for what they did to me,” Reuben answered venomously, sneering derisively as he looked at Duncan’s scars.

“If your brothers had genuinely loved you, they would have let you die from your wounds rather than live out the rest of your life in such a state of ugliness. It is not my fault they were weak.”

Time seemed to slow as Helena bore witness to the flurry of horror that unfolded before her. Though he was a large man, Reuben propelled himself at Helena with great speed, avoiding her brothers’ rage-filled lunges. Helena’s weakened body was painfully crushed against Reuben’s foul-smelling chest as his meaty fingers wrapped painfully around her throat.

Helena choked from the lack of oxygen and true fear overcame her.

She gnashed her teeth and pursed her lips when she felt a small bottle being pushed into her mouth. Reuben’s meaty hand moved from her throat, forced her jaw open and jammed the bottle into her mouth.

“Take one more step and I will kill her,” Reuben growled.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“Nightshade,” Reuben ground out, glaring from one brother to the next, his hate-filled eyes stopping on Morgan.

Blood pounded in Morgan’s temples as he froze in place.

“A little at a time just makes you more... susceptible. All of it though... I am told it is quite a painful, horrible way to die,” Morgan’s body flinched as Reuben held fast to Helena. “Much more than this spoiled brat deserves.”

“The authorities are already on their way,” Ezra said, his deep voice a slick promise of death. “We instructed our driver to fetch them as soon as we got here. There is no walking away from this.”

“Let her go,” Ambrose pleaded, his hands outstretched towards his sister. “She has nothing to do with this.”

“Your fathers owed me a fortune. Luke was to use her to get into your business deals and corrupt them from within so that we could make him look like your savior. He was supposed to take your money and come to me. Then it would have been done,” Reuben stated.

Morgan stayed silent, watching Reuben warily as he waited for his opportunity.

“That’s between you and us, not Helena,” Ambrose insisted. “She is innocent, let her go!”

Reuben chuckled wickedly as he shook his head.

“Innocent? Hardly. She has been sneaking out at night, meeting this fool. He has taken

her to the Devil's Masquerade, you know. I heard they put on quite a show."

For the first time since the evening had begun, Morgan lost focus. He felt Ambrose's look of pure betrayal bore into him, felt his own shame slash through him as though he were a flimsy sheet of paper. He had promised Helena that her secrets were safe with him but, all the while, someone had been watching them. His eyes once again focused on Helena and Helena alone, silently begging her for forgiveness.

"I thought it was perfect," Reuben went on. "Thought that at least Luke would finally have a little fun. She is so prim and proper during the day, but my, after how she...opened up for your friend here, I thought Luke could also have his way with her. But do you know what he told me? He said she was as cold as ice and as fearful of the bed as any other maiden. As a father I felt badly for my son, so I gave him this to use, but she was too strong-willed to fall under its full influence."

Reuben then pulled the bottle of nightshade from Helena's lips and forced her to look up at him.

"If my son was unable to break you, I was ready to embrace the challenge," he whispered wickedly, bringing her face close to his.

Morgan felt his rage flare into white-hot flames before it pinpointed its intended target. He flew forward as he unsheathed his dagger. Like a dancer, he dipped under Reuben's arm, slashing the wrist of the hand that held the nightshade. A roar of pain blasted from Reuben, directly into Helena's ear as his hand unclenched the bottle of poison.

Predicting that Reuben would reflexively pull Helena closer to him, Morgan switched his dagger to his other hand and delivered a deep, severing slash to the tendons of his right thigh. As the nerves freed from their restraints, Reuben immediately released his hold on Helena, and Morgan caught her.

From behind him, Ezra, Duncan and Ambrose rushed forward, fists flying into Reuben as he struggled to stay on his knees, his hand pressed against his bleeding thigh.

“Look at me,” Morgan commanded, letting his dagger tumble out of his hand as he took Helena away from the beating. He knelt down a few feet away, both arms wrapped around her as his hands searched her body for injuries.

“Are you hurt?”

Helena obeyed his command and looked at him. Morgan choked on a sob as he saw the relief and adoration in her eyes.

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“No, I-I think I am all right,” she replied, her voice gentle, as though she was trying to comfort him.

“Did you swallow anything from the bottle?” Morgan asked, his heart twinging with pain as his fingers passed gently over her bruised neck and jaw.

Helena shook her head. “No, I do not think so.”

Morgan felt relief explode in his chest, and he pulled her to him as he burrowed his face into her neck.

“Thank God,” he whispered, his lips pressing against the thrumming pulse in her throat.

“I thought, I thought...”

“Youkilledhim,” Luke groaned from behind them, his voice full of raw pain.

Morgan turned at once, noting the pale, bruised, unmoving body of Reuben on the floor.

Not yet.

Morgan watched the subtle rise and fall of the man’s chest. Reuben would die if a doctor did not come soon to patch up his wounds.

“Stay where you are,” Morgan heard Ezra warn as his ears also picked up the sound

of metal gliding against the bare floor.

Morgan rose from his knees just as Luke lunged towards him with his own dagger, but he caught Luke's clasped hands just as they were about to sink the blade into his chest. Morgan pushed him forward, overtaking Luke easily due to his broken fingers, and pried the dagger from his hands. Before it could fall to the ground, Luke freed his good hand and caught it, plunging it into Morgan's side.

Pain bloomed from the wound like an explosion as Morgan heard a fearful, piercing scream fill his ears. His vision brightened, throbbed and blurred as he took a struggling step back, glaring at Luke with surprise.

Luke looked as surprised as Morgan, seemingly unable to believe he had actually done it, when Helena suddenly stepped between the two men.

Morgan reached for her as he staggered backward, only able to brush her hair with his fingertips before he saw her small body fly into Luke's. As Morgan went down, so did Luke, who stumbled backwards into the edge of a chair. He continued to fall backwards and struck the back of his head on the edge of the table with a resounding crack.

"Helena," Morgan called, the room swirling with darkness as he searched for her. Where was she? Where was the dagger?

"Helena," he roared, fear overtaking him.

"I am here," Helena gasped, her voice trembling as she suddenly appeared above him, her hands pressing tightly into his wound. "I am here."

Relief began to seep through the fear and pain that soared through Morgan's body. The room was suddenly filled with the noise and chaos of the arriving officers. Pain

stabbed, hotter and brighter into his side again, and he winced as another wave of exhaustion swept through him. He could vaguely hear her whispers of assurance as he began to go under, and his heart stumbled in his chest. He was supposed to protect her, yet she had protected him.

“I am sorry I failed you,” Morgan murmured, summoning the rest of his strength to reach for her cheek.

“You did not, Morgan,” Helena sobbed, pressing his hand tightly between her cheek and shoulder.

But, as he lost consciousness, he knew he had not saved her from anything.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“He is going to be fine, you know,” Ambrose stated, handing Helena a glass of water.

After hours of chaos, the house was finally quiet again. Reuben was being stitched up at the local jail. Luke’s body was carried away. Josiah was taken home, and Morgan was upstairs, still asleep from the small surgery he had needed. The doctor had assured them that he and Helena would be fine.

Upon hearing that she had been being drugged with nightshade, the physician had immediately performed a physical, then prescribed her a tonic that would quickly flush the sedative from her system. Ambrose had mixed the powder into the water as the doctor instructed and was now looking at her to drink it.

Helena drained the glass without a word and sat it down on the table as she stared at the floor. Now that it was all over and her secret was out, she could not look at him. Reuben had seen. Perhaps not everything, but enough to ruin her if word got out.

“How long has this been going on with Morgan?” Ambrose asked, his tone patient.

“Just over a month,” Helena replied. She did not want to lie anymore. Not after seeing everyone else’s lies and deceptions unfolding before her. The pain and suffering they had all been put through. All because of so many deceitful lies.

“Do you love him?” Ambrose asked.

Yes.

“I do not know,” Helena replied. “I-I love when we are together. He is a different person. Not the comic he so obviously plays in front of you. He takes me seriously.”

“I take you seriously,” Ambrose quickly replied, and when she glared at him, he glanced away with a pained look.

“Not seriously enough, I suppose,” he muttered. “You tried to tell me you wanted to wait for love, but I paid no attention. You had just grown so... unhappy, it seemed, as we all coupled up. I thought that if you were wed you would find the happiness we have.”

“Would Barbara have been happy if she had given in to being married to the other lord vying for her hand?” Helena asked. “Would you have been happy?”

“No,” Ambrose murmured, a pained look skittering across his face. After working up the courage to look at her again, he asked, “tell me what happened.”

Helena gave him the details that mattered, including her yearning for experience, the list she had created, and her push for Morgan to be her teacher. She told him how Morgan had first refused, and how she had convinced him to do it. She was grateful that Ambrose did not ask for the specific items on her list.

“I knew something was going on,” Ambrose sighed when she finished. “Morgan had been acting so strangely. I thought his over-protectiveness was like mine, but clearly I was wrong.”

He sounded hurt, and for the first time, Helena lifted her eyes to him.

“He is still your best friend, Ambrose,” she insisted quietly. “That will never change.”

He slowly nodded and looked at her.

“And you? What is he to you?” He asked. “A brother? Or something more?”

Her silence seemed to be enough of an answer, and Ambrose only nodded.

“I am sorry,” he went on after a while. “For pushing Luke onto you. For not looking into him further.”

“You wanted what was best for me,” Helena replied with a soft smile, “Like you always have.”

“Always,” Ambrose replied meaningfully, the smallest smile touching his lips.

“This time you were simply wrong.”

Ambrose let out a weak laugh at her jest.

“I was awful. I almost forced you to be his wife. And when Luke lunged for you, I was not there,” he replied.

Helena winced as she thought back to the moment she had pushed Luke and heard his head crack against the floor. For a moment, she had been sure she had killed him. She did not even believe she had the strength to make him stumble. And yet, when she had pushed him with all of her remaining might, he had sailed backwards like a kite.

He would live, but only in the barest form of the definition. Now that a few hours had passed and a physician was able to take a better look at Luke, they had stated that his quality of life — and length of life — were now severely limited and he'd need full nursing care. A luxury neither Helena nor Ambrose were sure that the Crown's arm of justice would be willing to supply. He could no longer walk. No longer talk. He could only lie there, and stare back silently. It was worse than death, Helena thought.

"You acted in self-defense; you will not even have to suffer a day in court for this, Helena, I swear to you."

"I nearly killed him," she rasped.

"He was trying to kill you," Ambrose retorted coldly. "He was poisoning you. He deserved worse."

Helena winced and looked down at the floor.

"Please," he continued, when she did not respond. "How can I make this up to you?"

"Let me marry in my own good time," Helena stated, her answer both clear and immediate. "If I choose to marry."

"Done," Ambrose stated quickly. "I will buy whatever property you want. I will support you in whatever manner you wish, even if it is the life of a spinster."

"And," Helena pressed forward, "you need to forgive Morgan. For hiding my secret from you, and everything else."

Silence filled the room again as Ambrose struggled to accept her final request.

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“You are my baby sister,” he rasped, looking at her with a pained expression. “He was, is, my best friend. The two of you should never have...”

“It was upon my insistence,” Helena repeated, cutting him off. Ambrose flinched at the words as if they were a blow to his face.

“I understand that you may not wish to know that about me, brother, but I am more than just your sister. I am a woman. And while they are limited, there are some decisions I have the right to make. Also, please remember, Ambrose, that if Reuben had not been spying on us, no one would have been the wiser. Morgan kept his promise. He kept my identity safe. He kept me safe.”

“I do not want to hear any more about what Morgan did or did not do for you,” Ambrose retorted hurriedly.

Helena closed her mouth and nodded. She did not have a particular desire for that either.

“Morgan tried to talk me out of it,” she said at last, knowing they had to finish the conversation somehow. “I was simply too stubborn to take his advice.”

Ambrose huffed.

“Now that I believe,” he said with a smirk.

The two of them shared an affectionate look, and Ambrose shook his head.

“I do not how I ever came to the conclusion that Luke was the right man for you. You need a man who is stronger than you. Despite his malicious subterfuge, Luke would never have been able to control you.”

“I do not think many men can,” Helena replied honestly. “I was raised by you and your band of brothers, Ambrose, there was strength and stubbornness everywhere I looked. Of course I was going to take after you.”

A look of pride shone in Ambrose’s eyes as a touch of a smile graced his lips.

“So Morgan...” he went on hesitantly, “Morgan makes you feel as if...?”

“As if I do not have to be so strong,” Helena breathed, her breath trembling as her truth finally came out. She had been searching for the words within herself for weeks, but it was now that she could finally say them. Morgan removed her mantle of burdens and let her rest. Let her be cared for, completely.

A knock on the door interrupted their moment, and a maid popped her head in through the double doors.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace, my lady, but the nurse has sent me. Lord Grandhill is beginning to stir. He should be waking soon.”

Helena’s heart throbbed in her chest as she rose to her feet too rapidly. The world spun again, but only for a moment this time, and she looked at Ambrose.

“I need to be there when he wakes up,” she stated. It was not a request.

Ambrose nodded and motioned with his hand for her to go. She took a step towards the door, wishing she was already upstairs, but she stopped and turned back to her brother.

“Come with me,” she urged gently.

“I do not know if I can.”

“He is your brother,” Helena stated. “In every way but blood, and has been so nearly all of your life. Whatever happens next between Morgan and me, I do not want that bond between you to fade. Ever. Come brother, please. He will want to see you.”

Ambrose’s brow furrowed as his jaw tensed, struggling for a moment with his raw emotions.

“You are wise beyond your years, Helena,” he rasped, standing up to join her.

“Thank you,” she replied, looping her arm around his. “I get it from my brother.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The first thing Morgan felt coming out of the black, numb darkness was something cool and soft being pressed gently against his forehead. His warm head pounded with relief as small droplets of cool water trickled over his temples, down his jaw, and to the back of his neck.

The second thing he felt was the pain, dull and constant, pounding in his right side. It thrummed along with his heartbeat, pulsing throughout his entire body. It was worse than any punch he had ever received. It was deeper; beyond physical. It reached from his lower right side and up into his heart.

Helena. Where is Helena? Is she safe?

He groaned at the pain, and a sudden shiver ran through him as his worry overrode his sleep, and his eyes finally snapped open. The pain in his chest lessened when he

saw Helena's placid blue eyes staring down at him; a small, relieved smile gracing her angelic face. It was she holding the cloth to his head, waking him from his tortured dreams.

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“I am here,” she whispered, tracing a delicate fingertip over his brow, “I am here.”

“Are you all right?” he croaked, willing his heavy limbs to reach for her. But before he could attempt to hold her, Helena’s hands were at his forearms, pushing him gently back into the bed.

“I am,” she promised, laying a soft kiss on the bruised knuckles of his right hand. “Try not to move, you will rip your stitches.” Her touch, words and tone were like a soothing rain over his hot skin, and he closed his eyes and let out a long breath. His heart finally beat in a steady rhythm, and the pain in his side lessened significantly.

“The doctor saw to me after he finished with you,” she went on, as if knowing he needed more detailed answers. “He gave me an antidote of sorts and I will be back to myself in no time.”

“Luke,” he muttered, his body jolting at the memory. Morgan opened his eyes and immediately saw the morbid answer in Helena’s regretful expression. Despite his fading consciousness, he had still heard the sickening thud of Luke’s head hitting something hard and known that his chances of getting back up were slim.

“She is not being charged with anything,” a familiar, masculine voice stated from the corner of the room. “He is alive, for now. Though by nature or by justice, it will not be for long. And no one but us and the authorities will ever know what actually happened. I have made certain of that.”

Morgan turned his head towards Ambrose with a wary look and gave him a nod of thanks. Though he was relieved to know his brother was by his side, he still had no

idea where they stood.

“That is good to hear. And Reuben?”

“Very much like Luke, he may live,” Ambrose answered, his expression still grave, “Then again he may not. He lost a lot of blood before help arrived. Either way, he has been charged with murder and attempted murder. I have no doubt that, even if he survives his wounds, he will not survive the hangman.”

“I should have stabbed him in the heart,” Morgan said viciously, then winced as a fresh bolt of pain shot through him.

“You did well enough,” Ambrose said.

Morgan heard Ambrose’s familiar, “I-am-older-so-do-not-argue” tone, but unlike before, he felt a surge of anger well up in him. Yes, Ambrose was the oldest, and he had done very well keeping his sister and three adopted brothers in line. But this time he had failed. In the most awful way possible.

He turned back to Helena, reaching for her hand without remorse. Her eyes widened a little at the bold move, but when he looked up at her imploringly, her gaze softened and she slipped her fingers into his gracefully. Morgan pressed her warm palm into his and brought her hand to his mouth, placing a soft kiss upon it.

“Helena, I pray that you do not go far, but would you please give me a moment with Ambrose? There are some things we need to discuss.”

For a moment Helena looked unsure, but she nodded and squeezed his hand.

“We have things to discuss too, you know,” she told him, slipping her hand from his.

“Truly,” he agreed, “and we will address them with haste.”

Morgan’s pain eased a little when his answer drew a small smile from Helena’s lips. He watched her leave the room as a sense of duty washed over him. He had been a coward through all of this. In many ways. But that was now going to stop.

“We are all grateful that you are going to survive, brother...”

“This is your fault,” Morgan stated harshly, cutting Ambrose off with his sharp words and glare. “I told you something was wrong with Luke. I brought you the letter, and yet you did nothing.”

Ambrose’s tensed stature melted as he slumped forward in his chair and hung his head.

“I know.”

For a moment Morgan’s anger was stymied by surprise, but only for a moment.

“Luke had not only married Helena as a ruse, but he had been drugging her, Ambrose,” Morgan growled. “She is your sister! You are supposed to protect her...”

“I know!!!” Ambrose boomed, rising to his feet, his face twisted with fury. “Damn it! Do you not know that I will carry this mistake with me for the rest of my life?! I took her choice away because I thought I knew what was best for her, and what did I do? I nearly got her killed! I nearly got us all killed! Reuben’s plan had been to steal our money and murder us, or did you forget that?”

Morgan remained silent. He was no longer sure who he was more enraged with. Ambrose, or himself?

“I have not forgotten,” Morgan replied through gritted teeth. “But I care about her more than us.”

Ambrose squeezed his eyes shut as he grimaced and shook his head.

“Do not speak so emotionally about my sister,” he said, his tone steely.

For a moment, a sliver of guilt snaked through his heart. It was true that Ambrose had committed a sin out of ignorance. But Morgan had broken a cardinal rule of brotherhood by not only going behind Ambrose’s back, but falling in love with his little sister.

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“You are—were a rake and a comic, and I knew that you would charm your way into any woman’s bed you saw fit. You have made inappropriate references to Helena in the past, but I never believed that you would actually try to charm your way into hers.”

“I did not charm Helena into anything. You do not understand what happened between us,” Morgan spat out.

“Nor do I want to,” Ambrose replied quickly, putting a hand up to stop Morgan from elaborating. “What I want is to rewind time and find a way to bypass all of this, but I cannot. What I can have, though, is my friend back. My true, sarcastic, overly confident friend who reminds us to laugh when life gets too serious.”

“I cannot be that for you anymore,” Morgan urged. “Not without Helena. I did not mean to fall in love with her, Ambrose, and I am certain that she did not mean to fall in love with me, but there is something in the two of us as individuals that completes us as a whole, and I will not let her go.”

“I used to joke because I thought I was happy,” he went on, shaking his head, “the women, the power, it all made me drunk on life for a time. Then, shortly after we locked up George, I woke up one morning with the worst hangover and no longer saw life as funny. For a while thereafter, I pretended that all was well and fine. Until Helena. Once she caused me to realize what I was missing, I could no longer pretend to be happy. Not without her.”

The silence stretched out between them as they each absorbed what the other had said. Morgan lay prone and helpless on the bed, while Ambrose stood a few paces

away from him, his hands resting on his hips as he stared down at the embroidered carpet.

“So you are saying I cannot have my best friend and brother back to his cheerful self unless he marries my sister.” Ambrose finally said decidedly.

“Yes.”

And there it was. His truth. His confession. His plea. His bargain. All wrapped up into one word.

Ambrose finally looked up from the floor, his annoyance still evident.

“I believe she feels the same way about you,” he grunted, as though displeased.

Morgan did not realize he was holding his breath until he heard the heavy sigh escape his own lips. An invisible weight seemed to lift off of him as Ambrose’s words resonated in his own head. Could she? After he had failed her?

“I will not be forcing Helena into another marriage,” Ambrose went on, “The choice is completely hers. If she says no...”

“If she says no, neither of you will have to worry about me anymore,” Morgan stated, his tone now calm. You and I will find our way back to friendship in some sort of fashion, I suppose, though you will not see me as often as before. And Helena will never have to worry about interacting with me again.”

Ambrose did not look pleased with Morgan’s response, but he gave a nod and stepped closer to Morgan’s bed. The two men looked at one another warily, knowing that their friendship, for multiple reasons, had been forever altered.

“I shall go fetch Helena,” he said, reaching out to lay a familiar, brotherly pat on Morgan’s shoulder.

“Thank you, brother,” Morgan replied, giving him a respectful nod. Ambrose’s lips twitched at the word, but instead of responding, he walked to the door and opened it to leave.

He had not taken a full step before Morgan heard him chuckle softly and stop. Though his pain was still sharp, Morgan was on his feet and shuffling to the door, somehow knowing what he would find.

“What are you doing?” Ambrose hissed quietly, swiveling his head towards Morgan as he heard him get up.

“I am fine,” Morgan grunted. “I want to see.”

“God, you must be in love with her,” Ambrose muttered under his breath as he rolled his eyes.

For a brief instant, their usual bond snapped into place and Morgan grinned at Ambrose. His brother then smirked back and helped him complete his remaining steps to the door. Upon reaching it, Morgan leaned into the frame as he peeked out, and felt his heart swell at the sight of Helena curled up on the love seat, deeply asleep.

“She has had a terribly exhausting day,” Ambrose whispered as they both looked down at her. “And I believe the medicine the doctor gave her has only added to her fatigue.”

Morgan nodded, feeling his entire body respond to the sight before him. He wanted to lean down before her, pick her up, and carry her home to his bed where they would

both rest for days. Helena did indeed look exhausted, but it did nothing to take away from the radiant beauty that shone from her. Nothing, not even poison, could take that from her.

“She and I will talk later,” he decided, his tone barely above a whisper. “Take her to bed. Make sure she gets her rest.”

“Let me help you back to yours first,” Ambrose insisted, but Morgan put up his hand.

“I will be fine,” Morgan replied, giving Ambrose a small push towards Helena. “Go. See to your sister. She deserves to rest in her own bed.”

At this Ambrose nodded and moved towards Helena to scoop her up. Morgan watched closely, making sure her head was in no fear of being bumped as Ambrose pulled her into his arms.

“Goodness,” he chuckled softly, looking down at the sleeping woman in his arms. “I have not done this since she was about eight.”

Morgan watched as emotions of all sorts travelled over his friend’s face. Relief. Worry. Fear. Guilt. Love. They all passed from Ambrose’s heart to his eyes.

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“She is safe now,” Morgan said quietly. Unable to help himself, he stepped away from the door frame and gently stroked the back of his knuckles across her warm cheek, smoothing a lock of hair back behind her ear. As he did so, Ambrose looked up at him and a quiet, thoughtful expression filled his face.

“We will keep her safe,” Ambrose promised.

Morgan nodded and watched in silence as Ambrose carried her away. He turned to walk back to his bed and go back to sleep when a memory of their last night together slammed into him. The exquisite ecstasy they had created had turned into a frenzy of panic and tears after the way in which he had chosen to end things between them.

Helena had begged him, begged him to stay and speak with her, but he had not. He had crushed her then, just as much as Ambrose had when he took away her choice of husband. Would she want him? She seemed willing to speak with him, and she had been happy to see him at the dinner party, but did that mean anything? Her life had been put at risk, so she would have been grateful to see anyone step in to save her.

A twisted fear ran through his veins until it reached his heart, and the pain he had briefly ignored suddenly came back with a vengeance. Forgoing the bed, Morgan walked to the chair where his shirt and jacket had been draped and got dressed. With painful effort, he made his way down the stairs and left.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“We should wake her. I am worried for her,” a soft voice whispered.

Through the layers of deep sleep, Helena stirred slightly at the sound. For a moment she felt drawn to it, but the warmth of her bed dragged her back down.

“The doctor said she would be fine, and that such deep sleep was normal,” another voice said just as Helena was about to drop off again.

“How will we keep her hydrated if she is asleep?”

“It has only been a day. Let her rest!”

Now drawn completely from her slumber, Helena fluttered her eyes open and was greeted by the sight of Ambrose and Barbara at the side of her bed, glaring at one another as they each stood with their fists on their hips. They both looked angry and worried, and memories of the previous night’s events came flooding back to her.

The last thing she remembered was waiting to speak with Morgan. How had she gotten into her bed? Worried over how much she had missed, Helena attempted to clear her dry throat and sat up among her pillows. Ambrose and Barbara immediately turned to her with smiles of relief.

“What time is it?” she croaked, rubbing her eyes.

“Just past ten in the morning,” Barbara answered quickly.

“Are you thirsty?” Ambrose asked, going to pour her a glass of water. “It has been quite a while since you have had something to drink.”

Helena’s brows furrowed as she accepted the glass.

“What are you talking about?” she asked, “It has barely been seven hours.”

She tilted the glass to her lips and began to drink.

“Actually, dearest, it has been seven hours and a day,” Barbara said gently.

Helena choked on her water as she looked at her brother and sister-in-law in surprise.

“What?” she croaked.

“She is concerned,” Ambrose noted, sounding worried. “See, I told you it was too long. We should have woken her yesterday evening.”

“The doctor said not to, and that all would be well,” Barbara sighed in agitation. “And look! Now she is awake and will certainly be well.”

“I am well,” Helena insisted, her thoughts not of herself. “And what of Morgan? Is he well?”

A tense glance between the two was the only response she received, and she immediately moved to get out of bed. She was stopped by Barbara’s gentle but insistent hands while Ambrose fetched a tray from the nearby table. Helena looked at them both dubiously as fear began to rise through her body. “One of you answer me! Is he well?”

“That we know of,” Ambrose answered, his tone soothing as he braced the tray over her lap, keeping her still.

“What do you mean that you know of,” she hissed, still fighting him, “Let me up this instant!”

“Helena, please,” Barbara urged. “He is well. I promise that he is well. Drink. Eat your breakfast, and we will talk.”

Helena had half a notion to start throwing the items on the tray at them until they started speaking more plainly, but knowing it would get her nowhere, she settled for picking up the silver spoon on the tray and dipping it into the bowl of porridge and sweet cream.

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Her stomach growled hungrily as she swallowed the first bite, and she quickly took another. Between mouthfuls she pointed her spoon at the duo and said, “start talking. Now.”

“Well, the fact that she is still bossy is a clear indicator that she will be fine,” Ambrose sighed, throwing her a bemused look.

“Morgan’s wound was not deep,” Barbara explained as Helena glared at her brother. “He has chosen to heal in his own home.”

“When did he leave?” Helena asked.

“Not long after I found you asleep on the love seat outside his room,” Ambrose replied.

Before she could ask if he was sure that Morgan was still all right, Ambrose added, “I have been by twice to visit him. The last time was only two hours ago. I assure you, Helena, he is well.”

Though this information brought Helena some minor comfort, she still despised the fact that he had left. Why had he done that after promising to talk? Her mind flashed back to their last night together, the pain of him ignoring her rising anew. Had he lied to her to get her to leave?

“Enough about Morgan,” Ambrose insisted when she said nothing else, “Please, tell us how you are truly feeling? Are you still dizzy? Does your stomach still pain you?”

The memory of the mysterious ailments that had befallen her for the last two weeks returned to her, and Helena took a moment to take a silent inner inventory of herself. She flicked her eyes around the room, flexed her fingers, felt along her stomach. Nothing. She felt no lingering effects from her earlier symptoms, and though she was worried for Morgan, she smiled in relief.

“I feel completely myself again,” she answered with certainty.

Ambrose and Barbara both gave her a look of great relief, and Barbara reached out and slapped Ambrose on the shoulder.

“See? The doctor was right. The rest helped. We did well in not waking her.”

“But I am awake now and ready to get out of this bed,” Helena insisted, pushing at the now-empty tray on her lap.

“Are you sure you want to get up?” Barbara asked. “After everything that has happened to you?”

Though she had appeared completely composed until then, Barbara’s eyes suddenly turned wide and misty and her face contorted into a heartbreaking sob as she sank onto the side of Helena’s bed and began to cry. Helena looked at her, startled, and pressed a comforting hand to her friend’s back.

Barbara was not the crying kind. She was tough and willful. Even during her pregnancy, when most women were prone to crying, she rarely did. And even after the feat was accomplished, Barbara would become frustrated with herself.

Worried by this rare show of emotion from her friend, Helena looked to Ambrose for an explanation. He only grimaced and gave her a pleading look. What was not being said?

“Barbara? Barbara, darling what is wrong?” Helena asked.

“My fault,” Barbara sobbed, wrapping her arms around Helena’s waist, “It is all my fault, this entire thing!”

Helena had no idea what Barbara meant and she did not find the moment humorous, but a laugh bubbled up from her lips. Ambrose looked at her with alarm as Helena shook her head and pulled Barbara fully into her arms.

“Listen to me, Barbara,” Helena said calmly, drying Barbara’s tears with her blanket, “this was absolutely not of your doing.”

“He is my uncle,” Barbara spat out, her watery gaze going up to Helena’s eyes. “And Luke is my cousin. It was my family that did this. All of it. It was my family that killed your father.”

“You are not them, Barbara,” Ambrose stated in a level, patient voice as he reached out to touch his wife’s back. “You did not conspire with them. This is not your burden to carry, my love.”

“Ambrose is right,” Helena agreed soothingly. “We would never blame you for any of this, ever. You are my friend; my sister. You are not, have never been, and will never be my enemy.”

As she said the words, Helena felt the truth of them resound within her soul. Barbara had been her friend and a pillar of support long before she and Ambrose had fallen in love. Barbara had taken her in like she was her older sister. She had of course supported Helena’s more rebellious acts against Ambrose’s overprotective rein, but Barbara had also been there to stop her right when she was about to take things too far.

Barbara loved her deeply, and Helena knew that she would never intentionally cause her harm.

“God, I detest crying,” Barbara croaked, pulling away from Helena with a sniff. Then to herself she said angrily, “come on, pull yourself together, you loon.”

A light laugh broke from Helena and Ambrose as he pulled out his kerchief and handed it to his wife.

“Stop that,” Ambrose urged gently, pulling her to him. “I shall not have anyone talk to my wife that way. Including herself.”

Barbara let out a soft chuckle as she dabbed at her eyes. Then her chin began to wobble and she shook her head, as if fighting off another bout of tears.

“They were going to hurt you. Hurt all of us.”

“We stopped them,” Helena said gently.

She wanted to point out that Barbara was right. All of them. Which included herself. Barbara had been in just as much danger as they all had. Instead, she grasped Barbara’s hands and urged her to look at her.

“Please do not do this to yourself, sister,” she insisted quietly. “As I said, this blame is not yours to take, and to try and do so will surely lead to madness.”

After a few more minutes, Barbara calmed down, and she excused herself to go check on Beau. Once alone, Ambrose turned to Helena and said, “this has been tearing her apart. Thank you for telling her she is not to blame.”

“It is the truth,” Helena replied quickly. “But keep watch over her, Ambrose. I fear it will take her some time to truly accept that.”

“You know I will,” Ambrose said firmly, standing up from the bed.

He then leaned down and kissed her affectionately on the forehead, and as he straightened, he sighed and slipped his hands into his pockets.

“I am assuming that you have not changed your mind about staying in bed?” he asked, giving her a look that said he already knew the answer.

With a hint of a smile on her lips, Helena shook her head.

“Right,” he sighed, taking a few steps towards the door.

“Let a carriage take you to him, at least,” Ambrose continued as he reached the door.

“I am assuming that is your plan?”

“It is at that,” Helena agreed, her brow rising up in challenge as her brother turned back to look at her.

The truth was out now. There was no pushing it back into the dark. They all needed to move forward, no matter the discomfort.

Ambrose sighed wearily, then nodded.

“Bring him back to us, would you? We all belong together.”

Helena’s heart stuttered at Ambrose’s words and his acceptance as he slipped quietly out of her room, no doubt on his way to be with his wife and son. Alone, Helena once more shoved the covers away from her, and took a tentative step out of bed.

Excitement rushed through her as she felt no trace of dizziness or pain. The poison was completely gone, vanished along with its strange effect, and she was fully herself again. Feeling empowered, Helena smirked as she twirled, easily finding her sure footing, and then marched to her closet to find a dress.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“Your Grace, if you will not travel to your rooms, you should at least allow us to bring a bed in here,” Martha, his housekeeper and grand leader of his staff, said sternly.

Morgan raised an amused brow at the older woman. He adored Martha. She was a natural leader who kept his household running with efficiency, and as far as sarcasm went, she could easily keep pace with him. When she was angry though, the woman became a mother hen whether he liked it or not.

“I have everything I require here in the library, Martha,” he sighed, feigning exhaustion as he rolled his eyes.

“I understand why you wanted to stay on the first floor,” Martha tittered, going around the room pick up abandoned teacups and plates. “With your wound, I am certain stairs are a difficulty. But you need a proper bed to rest in. You need to rest, period!”

Morgan gave her a cheeky, boyish grin as he watched the older woman drive herself into a tizzy. Although he had sealed himself in the library, the room that held such precious memories of Helena, he had indeed done everything but rest. He had used that expansive space to exercise almost endlessly, forcing his body to sweat and transform through the pain that throbbed in his side.

He was fine. The twice-daily physician visits had assured him of that. His physician always made sure the wound was clean and remained well-sewed. There were no blown stitches or infection. The good doctor, however, agreed with Martha that his restlessness was doing him no favors.

“Is that not what I am doing now?” Morgan asked, waving a lazy hand over his prone body.

Martha gave him a warning look, as if he was pushing her too far.

“You only finally settled onto the couch when I came in,” she replied pointedly. Do not try to fool me, my boy. Your charm does not work on me.”

“Which is why I will always love you,” he replied adoringly, then chuckled as the older woman picked up a dirty napkin from her tray and threw it at him, hitting him square in the chest.

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“What did I just say?” she snarled, and Morgan’s chuckle erupted into a booming laugh.

“You are hopeless,” she sighed, heading towards the door. “I do not know why I bother.”

“Because you love me too,” Morgan chuckled.

“Devil with you,” Martha cursed, flinging the door open.

Morgan watched with amusement as the woman tried to step through the portal with her anger, but then folded like a piece of thin paper as she let out a sigh, tilted her face towards the ceiling, and shook her head.

“I will be back at four with your evening tea,” she said reluctantly, an annoyed expression on her face.

“Thank you, Mummy,” Morgan said cheekily, grinning at her with boyish innocence.

Martha grunted and walked out, muttering her complaints under her breath.

For a moment, Morgan chuckled. But the moment the door was closed, the laugh faded and his smile slid into a lifeless line. His brief bout of mirth slipped away as quickly as it had arisen, and he turned his eyes towards the fire.

Images of Helena posing before the great hearth filled his mind, causing a cacophony of sensations within him. Arousal, yearning, heartache, and a desperate need to see

and touch her again. Still, he welcomed the memories and let them flood freely through his mind and take him away.

Leaving Ambrose's house had felt like a ridiculously large mistake from the moment he had returned to his home. He was sure it was the reason he could not stay still or rest for too long, but he could not go back. Too many mistakes had been made on his part, and he had played the fool worse than he had ever done before. As predicted by his brothers, his spirited personality had finally gone too far.

Morgan flicked his eyes away from the fire, the memory becoming too vivid for him to endure. He startled when he looked through the floor-to-ceiling windows facing the back garden and saw Helena's black-cloaked figure stepping through the glass door.

"Helena," he burst out, getting to his feet in an instant.

"Yes, Helena," she snapped, pulling back her hood to reveal her anger-filled blue eyes.

Dear God, is she beautiful.

"You said we would talk," she snapped, tugging viciously at the ties of her cloak. "You promised. And then you snuck off while I was asleep?"

She balled up her cloak, revealing a dark blue and black dress that looked rather becoming on her, and threw it at him.

"I am getting a lot of things thrown at me today," Morgan muttered, catching the cloak.

Helena laughed bitterly as she crossed her arms and cocked her head.

“Oh, now you want to joke again, hmm?”

“No,” he answered quickly, tossing the cloak aside and looking at her. His body immediately stirring with arousal.

No longer afflicted by the poison, her skin had lost its bluish tint, and she had regained her warm peaches-and-cream complexion. Her blue eyes, previously dull and misted over with confusion, were now sharp and full of expression as she pinned him with her stare.

“You look so much better,” he told her quietly.

For a moment Helena’s anger lessened, a touch of appreciation coming over her pained face, but then she set her glare upon him again.

“You refused to give in to my request at the bath house. Then you never showed up to my wedding. Then you showed up at dinner, saved me, saved our entire family, got stabbed, and then left. That is quite a series of events to follow, and I what to know exactly how you arrived at every single one of those decisions.”

Helena took a quick look around the room, spotted a chair, and then walked with purpose towards it before she sat herself down, crossed her legs, folded her hands over her knee, and looked at him expectantly.

“I am not leaving until you tell me,” she announced while he stared at her in shocked silence. “So either start talking or send for a servant to bring me something to eat. I am hungry.”

Despite the emotions running through him, Morgan let out a chuff of laughter. He had always found her stalwart disposition admirable, and he remembered suddenly why she had come to him with her request. Because she did not bow to just any man, and

she would not go down on her knees unless that man was worthy of her. She was now demanding that he prove himself to be worthy.

“Very well,” he agreed, knowing that she would not change her mind, “But I am going to get you something to eat all the same. I will not have you passing out from hunger while I am pouring out my heart to you.”

This earned him a smirk from Helena, which shot an arrow of joy through him, and he went to the door to give the command.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“Morgan,” Helena breathed, looking upon the sketches before her. “These are...these are magnificent.”

“You are magnificent,” he told her, standing by her side.

As promised, Morgan had explained everything. From the moment he began to have romantic feelings for her, right up until he left her home. When he was finished, he had pulled out the sketches — over a dozen — that he had done of her while she had been in Ashfield with Luke.

They had astonished her, the realness of his lines, the glow that he had captured. But, while the women in the drawings held some of her likeness, they were not her. They could not be. The woman he had drawn was so much more.

“These are not me,” Helena protested, tracing her finger along a curved line on one of the drawings, “I am... I am not this beautiful.”

“They are how I see you,” Morgan said softly, laying a hand on her shoulder.

Her cheeks flushed as she instinctively leaned into Morgan’s touch.

“You are Persephone, are you not?” he asked, his tone slightly teasing as his hand slipped to the back of her neck.

She let out a dry laugh and turned her gaze towards him.

“Only at the Devil’s Masquerade,” she retorted.

“Mmm.” Morgan grunted, shaking his head slightly. “You see, I must disagree with you there. “When you are happy, Helena — genuinely happy — you glow. Your inner light blasts into the surrounding darkness and floods it with life. Just as Persephone’s did in the underworld.”

Helena felt a lump form in her throat as she listened to Morgan’s emphatic words. There was no flattery, no seduction. It was just raw truth.

“Only you have made me glow like this,” she rasped, turning away from the sketches.

“It was an honor,” Morgan replied, stroking the back of her neck.

Helena turned to him sharply, her emotional reverie brought up short by one particular word.

“Was?” she asked.

Morgan’s lips twitched as he let out a rueful laugh, his eyes filling with sadness.

“In light of every possible way that I failed you, I would assume so,” he replied, though there was a ring of hope in his voice.

“You failed at nothing,” she countered. “In fact your success in everything you have done has been phenomenal.”

Morgan gave her a puzzled look.

“How so?” he ventured slowly.

“Well, not only were you successful in completing my list of goals, saving my life, and getting my brother to give my freedom back to me, you have also succeeded in making me unbelievably angry.”

Morgan laughed, and she could not help but smile in return.

“The only thing you failed at was giving in to my request to take my maidenhood.” She continued. “Though I was — and still am — very disappointed by that, I am grateful.”

“You have no idea how hard that was,” Morgan replied, his smile fading. “I wanted you. God, I wanted you from the moment I saw you at the first masquerade, but Helena, things were becoming so twisted, and you were so...”

“I know,” she replied, not wanting to relive the moment all over again.

“You have spoken your truths. Now it is time for me to speak mine, so here they are. When I asked you to help me with my list, I thought that I would be able to have these experiences without the need for love and enjoy them. I had intended to keep them as precious memories of the time when I was bold enough to strike out and realize my desires.

What I have come to realize is that thereasonI enjoyed all of these things with you was because you made me feel safe, and I now believe that such desires cannot be felt the way I felt them without that sense of safety. That safety did not come out of nowhere. It had always been there, ever since you came into our lives as a boisterous boy. I did not realize how heavily I leaned on it until you were no longer there.”

“My love for you has existed since I became a part of your family,” Morgan replied. “I just had no idea that it could ever become romantic until we struck our bargain.”

Helena nodded in acceptance.

“I feel that way, too,” she confessed.

“But Ambrose,” he countered. “How is he going to accept this? I know he said he is fine with it, but is he truly?”

“I believe Ambrose has... learned a lot from this particular experience,” Helena replied. “And as I told you before, he only wants his brother back.”

“And you?” Morgan asked quickly, slipping his hand away from her neck and taking a step back. “What do you want, Helena?”

Helena drew in a breath as she squared her shoulders and tilted her chin up to him.

“Firstly, I want to finish sitting for my portrait,” she began. “You achieved your end of our deal — hastily and rather poorly, but you did.”

She paused as Morgan let out a laugh.

“Now I want to reach the end of mine. Even if what you draw from memory is stunning.”

“You will have to sit nude again,” he reminded her, his brow quirked.

“I imagine so,” she replied with wit. “But I will not be called a shirker.”

“Very well,” he agreed, his stature growing more relaxed. “What else?”

“Tell me how you feel about me.”

Morgan’s smile dropped a little, but not into a frown. His face held a look of deep reflection as his green eyes shone into her blue ones.

“I love you,” he stated simply.

Happiness poured through her, but Helena fought the emotional tears and pushed forward.

“And I love you. So, what shall we do about that?”

A look of yearning filled Morgan’s eyes as he swept his gaze down her body, and Helena felt her blood warm. When they met hers again, she felt her knees grow weak as she saw his pure desire for her blaze from his green depths. She remained still as he closed the space between them, but could not stop her body from trembling and shivering as his hand closed around her throat.

“Tell me what you want, Helena,” he commanded, his humor gone. “Tell me, and whatever it is, I shall give it to you.”

Helena felt her heart flutter in anticipation as she reached for his hand and squeezed his hold more tightly around her throat. She smiled seductively as her aching canal spasmed with need and caused a feral grunt to erupt from Morgan’s chest.

“I want this,” she rasped, stroking her fingers teasingly along his own, “I want this... exchange of power between us. Every night. As your wife.”

“Oh, thank God,” Morgan groaned, then pulled her in by the throat to kiss her.

Helena met his lips hungrily, happy that at long last they were together again. As their lips joined and devoured, Morgan's other arm wrapped around her waist, pressing her fully into him. She reveled in the feeling of being so close, and she greedily wrapped her arms around his muscled torso in return.

"You will be my wife," Morgan rasped between kisses.

His hands smoothly shifted their hold on her, going to her backside, and Helena gasped as she suddenly felt her body leave the floor as Morgan lifted her. She immediately shifted her own hold, wrapping her arms around his neck as her legs locked around his waist.

"Mine," he whispered, carrying her to the couch, "All mine."

Helena whimpered, her heart flooding with joy as arousal pulsed through the rest of her body. Yes, she would be his. And he would behave.

"Morgan," she whispered, their kiss breaking as he began to kiss down her neck.

"Yes, my little Persephone?" Morgan rasped, continuing his kisses as he worked at her buttons.

Helena gasped, then moaned as he freed her left nipple and licked it slowly before enveloping her breast with his mouth.

“Remember my request from our last night together?”

For a moment she felt Morgan tense, but before she could ask, his body relaxed into hers, and he worked to free her other nipple.

“You want to give me your maidenhood?” he asked, beginning his worship of her right breast.

“Helena’s cheeks stained red at his blunt question, but her body was experiencing too much pleasure from Morgan’s wandering mouth to care.

“Yes,” she breathed.

With a sudden harsh tug on her skirts that made her back arch and her breath shudder with excitement, Morgan let out a sound of agreement and buried his head between her legs.

“Very well, little one,” he murmured in a muffled voice.

Helena moaned and shuddered as his tongue licked slowly across her heated, moist petals. He chuckled darkly as his hands clasped tightly around her thighs, and just before he unleashed his pent-up need upon her, he added, “as you wish.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“That wasnotwhat I meant,” Helena muttered under her breath as she led Morgan towards Ambrose’s study.

Morgan gave her a devilish smile. "I am keeping my word. Your treasure shall be mine."

Helena's face twisted into an adorable snarl that nearly made Morgan explode with happiness. Technically, he was still keeping his word. He was going to be her first. But they were also going to wait until they were married. They had taken deep, extraordinary steps together in their unorthodox discovery into her desires, but this step could wait just until they joined as man and wife.

"You seemed to have no problem with what I did to you instead," Morgan teased.

"Yes, well, I thought that was to be my warm-up, not my finale," she muttered unhappily.

This time Morgan could not hold back his laugh, and the sound boomed from his chest as he stopped in the hallway and pulled her into his arms. Helena smirked at him in defiance before she gave in and sealed her lips with his in a long kiss. With difficulty, Morgan reined in his desire to pull Helena into the nearest empty room, and they withdrew from one another.

"It was still a trick," Helena sighed, going right back to the argument.

"It was clever word play," Morgan retorted, continuing their walk again. "It is not my fault you did not notice."

"You were distracting me," Helena said with a soft laugh, pushing at his shoulder.

"And I will gladly distract you as many times as you wish until our wedding night," he replied wickedly, winking.

"I hate you."

“You love me.”

“Damn you, but I do,” Helena laughed again as they stopped before Ambrose’s door.

“Very well, you silver-tongued devil,” she went on with a sigh. “We shall wait. Now go, talk to Ambrose.”

“We shall call for you when we are done speaking,” Morgan promised her, leaning in to kiss her forehead.

Though all three of them knew exactly why Morgan was there and what he would be asking Ambrose, he wanted a moment alone with his friend. Though he did not realize it until he fell in love with Helena, Morgan believed there were some traditions he wanted to maintain.

Morgan waited until Helena had gone from the hallway before he took a steadying breath and opened the door to Ambrose’s office. As usual, he found his brother behind his desk. Only this time, Ambrose was not buried face first in paperwork or records, but instead was leaning back in his chair with his hands behind his head, his feet propped on top of his desk.

“Oh, come now,” Morgan huffed, waving a hand at him. “This look does not become you.”

Ambrose’s brows furrowed for a moment, but then rolled his eyes and shifted out of his relaxed pose and into his usual one.

“No, it does not,” Ambrose muttered. “I was trying to be more...casual.”

Morgan raised an amused brow.

“How is that working for you?”

Ambrose grunted and got up to retrieve his decanter of whiskey.

“Nothing about this is casual,” Ambrose sighed. “I have spent the last two days wrapping my mind around you marrying my sister, and it still does not seem plausible.”

He poured out two glasses and then walked one over to Morgan.

“That is why you are here, is it not?” Ambrose asked warily, raising the glass to his lips.

Morgan tilted his glass towards Ambrose in a toast of agreement, and then took a sip of the liquor.

Ambrose shook his head as he looked at the ceiling and drained his glass.

“We did not mean to, but Helena and I have fallen in love, Ambrose. I want to marry her. Be her husband. Make sure she never has to worry about anyone coming after her again,” Morgan replied.

“You run through women like you run through boxing partners,” Ambrose retorted. “You have “been in love” dozens of times. How do you know this is real?”

“Fair point,” Morgan acknowledged wittily, taking another sip of his whiskey. He was expecting more than a few barbs and harsh questions to be thrown at him today,

and he had prepared himself for it.

“Reuben’s spy might have discovered our little tryst, but what he did not discover was how much she and I talked,” Morgan explained. “By our second meeting, I was sharing things with her I have not shared with anyone. Including you, brother.”

Ambrose frowned at him, but did not interrupt.

“In our talks, I discovered many things. Helena is an incredibly kind soul beneath her haughty exterior.”

“I already knew that,” Ambrose snapped.

“But I did not.” Morgan countered. “I learned, though. I learned all about her, and the more I learned, the more I wanted her. We had a deal that was supposed to have a starting and stopping point, but Ambrose, I knew far too quickly that I was going to go through torture when we stopped. And I did, and you saw it.”

Ambrose let out a long breath through his nostrils.

“Indeed I did,” he agreed begrudgingly.

“I do not want to be apart from her anymore,” Morgan went on. “What I feel for her, what we feel for each other is real, Ambrose.”

Ambrose sneered as he looked down into his empty glass and went to refill it.

“Very well, let us say you are truly in love. I can accept that. I never thought I would love a woman as I love Barbara, but here we are. But what about Helena’s last engagement? Do you have any idea what rumors we are already dealing with? An engagement announcement is only going to make them more vicious.”

“Helena deserves a long engagement if she wishes,” Morgan replied. “And Helena has never cared about the opinion of the ton, nor have I. But do not ask me. Ask her. I am simply here to ask for your approval to ask for her hand.”

“Rumors will also spread about you,” Ambrose pointed out. “No doubt some are already circulating. You are used to playing the clown and the rake, Morgan, but will you still be comfortable when people treat you differently because of it?”

“Whatever happens, we will deal with it together,” Morgan stated calmly, steeping his fingers. “As a family.”

Ambrose perked his brow and leaned back against his desk.

“As a family?” he asked. “Does that mean you are coming back into our fold?”

“Did I ever truly leave?” Morgan asked, smirking. But when Ambrose did not say anything, he grew serious.

“I never wanted to leave, I just thought it was best for everyone if I did. But I am not going anywhere. You, Ezra, and Duncan are my brothers. Barbara, Alice, and Lydia my sisters. And Helena will be my wife.”

Ambrose looked at Morgan for a long time, the silence filling room like suffocating quicksand as he studied him.

“Very well, then,” Ambrose sighed, a wry smile spreading over his face. “Let us call her in here. It looks like you have a question to ask her.”

“Morgan?” Lydia asked, her eyes wide with shock. “Morgan?”

“Morgan?” Alice echoed.

“How many times are you going to say his name?” Helena laughed, looking at her friends across the table.

“I was as shocked as you two were,” Barbara said alongside Lydia and Alice. “You could have knocked me over with a feather when I found out.”

“How?!” Lydia exclaimed, obviously still having trouble processing the information.

“Oh, that is not really important,” Helena said hastily, which earned her a smirk from Barbara and Teresa. She would one day tell that story to her other two friends, but for now, they seemed to be having enough trouble accepting the identity of her new husband-to-be.

“I cannot believe Ambrose has allowed this,” Alice said in awe.

“He has been over for dinner quite a few times since he asked for Helena’s hand,” Barbara explained on Helena’s behalf — throwing her a lifeline. “It is very clear that he has true feelings for her.”

“And do you love him?” Lydia asked, her brow raised curiously.

“I do,” Helena agreed, laughing.

“Morgan?” Alice said again, and Helena shook her head as her smile began to hurt her face. She knew that her friends would have trouble accepting the news, but their

surprise was becoming downright comical.

“I am so happy for you, darling,” Teresa said warmly, reaching for Helena’s hand.
“This is such terrific news.”

Helena beamed at her friend and squeezed her hand in return.

“Thank you, Teresa.”

“Darling,” Alice said carefully, a light blush tinging her cheeks, “I do not mean bring up such unsavory topics, but after everything that happened with Luke, are you sure you want to do this?”

Helena fell silent for a moment as the memories of last week flooded into her mind. It was not an uncommon experience for her. It had happened to her many times, at any given moment. She could be having breakfast with Ambrose and Barbara or posing for Morgan, and the memories of Luke’s accident would overwhelm her. At night it was worse.

Even if she managed to escape them while she was drifting off to sleep, they were always waiting for her in her dreams. Except, of course, when she snuck away to sleep in Morgan’s arms.

While he remained steadfast to his idea of marital tradition, they had indeed bent some of the rules. She would still sneak out most nights to be with him. Their dynamic seemed to grow more intense every time, even when he was simply holding her and stroking her hair while she sobbed at the memories.

When she did sleep alone, she would awake many times with a racing heart, gasping for breath, and covered in sweat despite the chilly air. She would then get up, and though she knew it was silly, would check her chambers to be sure they were empty.

Sometimes, when she woke up, she would feel that familiar sense of dizziness she had experienced in Ashfield and she would panic, thinking Luke had somehow poisoned her again. It was going to take a long, long time to heal from what had happened.

Especially since she wanted to do nothing more than talk about the drama of it all. Which was why, as a family, they had chosen to take a cold journey to the countryside, where they would not only live out the rest of the winter in peace, but where Lydia and Ezra would have their baby.

“I want to be with Morgan,” Helena replied finally with a simple shrug. “I am going to struggle with these memories, whether it is by his side or by myself. I would rather fight those memories while I am in his arms as his wife than I would on my own.”

“Oh, dear,” Alice sighed, turning a serene expression towards her older sister. “She really is in love.”

“It seems so,” Lydia agreed, smiling warmly at Helena as she traced her fingertips over her very large, very pregnant belly. “You know, this idea of you two together is growing on me. I did not want you to leave us. None of us did.”

“That I can agree with,” Alice supplied.

“As can I,” Barbara agreed right after, clapping her hands as if to symbolize the change of subject. “Now, let us move on to the fun part. The planning of the wedding. Have you and Morgan spoken about it?”

Helena beamed, happy that their conversation had finally concluded.

“White and pink,” Helena sighed. “I want everything white and pink. With just a touch of black here and there. The church we visit when we summer here is

absolutely gorgeous; white stone and peaked rooftops that look stunning and mysterious when the snow falls. And you must recall the inside. The stained glass windows and the artwork on the ceiling are absolutely precious. We will have the ceremony there, and then have the reception at Morgan's country house."

"And on what date will this gorgeous affair take place?" Lydia asked, then let out a small gasp as she jerked in her chair.

"The end of January," Helena answered, her brows furrowing with worry as she watched Lydia suddenly grow pale.

The others noticed as well, and all four of them rose from their chairs to go to Lydia.

"Darling, what is it?" Alice asked, putting a hand on her sister's shoulder.

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“I think—ohh!” Lydia gasped as she jerked in her chair again, this time so harshly that she rose to her feet. Alice immediately grabbed hold of one of her arms as Helena grabbed the other.

“Is it the baby?” Helena asked, her excitement growing as she looked down at Lydia’s belly.

Lydia nodded, her pale face turning red as a contraction seemed to ripple through her body.

“Oh, my goodness, it is time,” Alice sang, a smile beaming across her face.

“Teresa, find a footman to send a message down to the men. Ezra needs to know,” Barbara insisted.

“Helena, come, we must get her upstairs.”

“I shall go fetch the boys myself,” Helena decided, moving so that Barbara could assist Lydia.

Helena flew towards the doors of the salon and threw them open wide so the others could bring Lydia through. She was smiling widely as she ran to the butler who was stationed by the front door.

“Is all well, Lady Helena?” the servant asked as Helena hurried towards him, her face flushed pink with excitement.

“Everything is perfect,” Helena said in a rush. “Send someone immediately to fetch the midwife. She is currently at the Stanton’s country residence checking in on their new little boy. Bring her here posthaste.”

Joy eclipsed the old man’s worried expression, and he bowed quickly in acknowledgement.

“I will at once, madam,” he replied readily. “Oh, what joyous news! Finally a new baby Fernside child!”

Helena hurried off in the direction of Ezra’s study on the far side of the house. Upon opening the door, she was greeted by a familiar sight that only made her laugh harder. While Ezra and Duncan were leaning against the fireplace — drinks in hand as they smiled — Morgan and Ambrose were wrestling on the floor, with Ambrose holding Morgan in a defensive move.

“Oh, for heaven’s sakes, still?” Helena asked, throwing her hands up in the air. “You are all either in your thirties or nearing it, and you are still playing at this?”

“He must admit that I am the strongest and the oldest,” Ambrose insisted, shrugging nonchalantly from his position.

“Never,” Morgan grunted beneath him.

Shaking her head, Helena smiled as she crossed her arms and rolled her eyes.

“Well, I am happy to see that you are all...bonding again,” she giggled. “But I come with important news.”

At once Ambrose got off Morgan and helped him up as Duncan and Ezra dropped their drinks on a nearby table and stood up. Ezra walked to her, his ice blue eyes

pinning her with his usual deep stare. Helena had looked into those eyes nearly all her life, and while most had felt fear upon looking at him, she had only felt a rush of sibling love. She drew closer and put her hands on his upper arms.

“Is it time?” Ezra asked steadily.

Helena could feel the soft tremble running through the otherwise stoic beast of a man. He was the toughest of the four of them, or at least he had been until he had fallen in love with Lydia. Now, just like Ambrose and Duncan, he turned into an excited pup every time his wife was mentioned.

“The midwife has been called, and Alice, Barbara and Teresa are helping her up the stairs,” Helena replied, reaching up to give his arms another squeeze.

Excitement filled Ezra’s eyes as his face drained of all color. He suddenly whirled on his feet to face Ambrose and Duncan.

“What do I do?” he asked them quickly, his voice brimming with panic.

“Easy, old boy,” Ambrose laughed, grabbing him by the shoulder as the man stared at him, utterly petrified.

“All will be well,” Duncan assured him next.

Ezra did not wait to hear any more words of encouragement before he bolted from the room, calling Lydia’s name as he made his way to the stairs.

“We had better go with him,” Duncan suggested, looking at Ambrose as he nodded his head towards the door. “That man does not deal with fright very well.”

“Do any of us?” Ambrose chuckled, but he and Duncan were both already heading

out the door to catch up with their friend, leaving Helena and Morgan behind.

“So, it is time for a new bundle of joy to join the family, is it?” Morgan asked, walking up to Helena.

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She smiled as she lifted her arms, loving the way Morgan's body swallowed hers in a tight hug.

"It appears so," Helena replied, then burrowed her nose into Morgan's chest, inhaling deeply. "Though I fear it was the news of our engagement that shocked her into labor."

Morgan chuckled as he shook his head. "You know Ezra was worried about that," he teased. "How did they take it?"

"They were surprised," Helena admitted, "but as always, they are supportive of my happiness."

Morgan gave her a genuinely loving look and leaned down to place a warm kiss on her lips.

"Is she frightened?" he asked next, smoothing his hand down her back.

Helena hesitated. Of course Lydia was frightened. After what had happened to her mother, she had feared having children of her own for a time. Ezra had also feared the idea of children after his own upbringing, but — as their relationship deepened — their idea of parenthood had slowly started to shift.

"She will be well," Helena said definitely. "She and the babe will be well, and we will have another beautiful child in the family."

"Lydia will make an excellent mother," Morgan stated, rubbing his chin on top of her

head.

“And Ezra will make an exceptional father,” Helena said, then grinned. “Albeit a little overprotective, I would imagine.”

“Yes,” Morgan chuckled, pulling away just enough so that he could look down into her eyes. “I think all of us are going to be over-protective.”

Helena’s brow perked as she looked up at her husband-to-be.

“All of us?” she asked, a slow grin forming.

They had yet to discuss children. At one time, Helena had despised the idea of having children of her own. But now, when she imagined her future with Morgan, she not only saw the two of them, but a family. Is that what he also imagined?

“All of us,” he agreed, moving his hands up to cup her cheeks. “If, of course, that is something you want?”

Helena’s smile grew wider, and she raised up on her toes to kiss his lips. Just as they were about to touch, a piercing wail from above filled the air.

“We had better get upstairs,” Morgan stated, laying a quick kiss on her lips as she stared up at the ceiling.

“Yes, we should,” Helena agreed, the two of them holding hands as they left the office. “Our friends need us.”

Fourteen Hours, Three dozen screams, and one bruised Ezra hand Later.

“Look how gorgeous she is,” Helena gushed, her heart overflowing with love as she

held the newborn baby in her arms.

Surrounding her were Barbara, Ambrose, Morgan and Teresa, all of them looking down at the newborn. Lydia, exhausted but smiling from ear to ear, was now reclining in the freshly cleaned bed. Ezra was to her right, nursing the injured hand Lydia had held onto during the birth. He looked happy, relieved and nauseated. Alice and Duncan were to her left, looking Lydia over with both concern and love.

“You did amazingly, sister,” Alice whispered to Lydia, leaning down to kiss her temple.

“Thank God she looks like her mother,” Morgan joked over Helena’s shoulder as he peered down at the child.

“Watch it,” Ezra warned, glaring at Morgan.

“Oh, come now, old boy, you must admit, your wife is far more attractive than you,” Morgan teased back.

Ezra stopped massaging his injured hand, and smirked before he looked down at Lydia with absolute love.

“Well, I cannot argue with that,” he retorted. “She truly is the most beautiful woman in the world, is she not?”

“Stop it,” Lydia whispered in an exhausted voice, but she smiled lovingly at her husband as Ezra took her hand and leaned in to kiss her forehead for the thousandth time.

“She is so tiny,” Teresa breathed, looking over Helena’s shoulder at the baby.

“Fear not, she will grow to be big and strong, I promise you,” Barbara whispered, reaching down to stroke her knuckle gently across the sleeping child’s face.

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“She certainly will,” Ezra agreed.

“Bring her here,” Lydia implored, holding her arms out for her daughter.

Helena immediately brought the child over to her mother and placed her gently in her arms.

“Here you go, Miss Francesca Marie Fernside,” Helena sang softly, “Back to your mama where you belong.”

Frannie breathed contentedly through her tiny nostrils and snuggled into Lydia’s bosom as she felt her mother’s touch, all without rousing from her sleep.

“Come, everyone,” Alice urged, rising from the side of Lydia’s bed with a smile. “Let us give them some privacy.”

One by one each family member came to kiss Lydia’s cheek and hug or shake Ezra’s hand, and left the couple to marvel over their new babe.

“What a darling blessing,” Morgan murmured when they were all in the hallway.

He found Helena, seemingly unable to keep his hands off her for too long, and massaged her shoulders as they walked slowly towards the stairs.

“She is perfection,” Alice sighed, leaning into Duncan’s side. “Pure perfection. Come, husband, let us go check on our own bundles of joy.”

“Of course, my love,” Duncan replied, throwing a goodbye nod to Ambrose and Morgan.

“We should also check in on our little one,” Barbara gently urged Ambrose, who had wrapped his arm tightly around her shoulders.

“Indeed,” Ambrose murmured, leaning down to kiss the top of her head, “And then perhaps it is time we start working on another.”

“Ambrose!” Helena scoffed, then laughed.

“And you look down on our behavior?” Morgan teased, throwing up his hands in mock astonishment at Ambrose’s rather tawdry words.

“It does not feel good to hear such things about your siblings, does it?” Ambrose shot back, throwing a devilish smile over his shoulder at Morgan.

“Do not be so brash, brother,” Helena teased, shoving Ambrose’s arm.

But she laughed, happy that their family was finally as it should be. It had taken a little time, but Morgan and Ambrose’s relationship was stronger than ever, and though he sometimes muttered complaints, his initial begrudging approval of their impending marriage had become a genuine one.

“You are staying here tonight, are you not?” Ambrose asked Morgan, moving on.

“Of course,” Morgan replied. “I cannot leave now. Ezra is bound to panic at least a dozen times before breakfast.”

Ambrose smirked and nodded.

“No doubt,” he agreed. “I trust you will behave while you share a roof with my sister?”

“Ambrose!” Helena gasped, and even Barbara echoed her surprise.

“Go check on your children, brother,” Morgan chuckled. “Your sister is well in hand.”

“Very well in hand,” Helena agreed mischievously, to which Ambrose groaned and rubbed his eyes.

“Your jokes separately are hard enough to put up with, but now that you have joined forces I fear you have grown much, much worse. I must remember that.”

They all laughed as Barbara patted her husband’s chest and told him to breathe as they veered off down the hallway to Beau’s room.

“Your brother has a point. We truly do work well together, do we not?” Morgan whispered in Helena’s ear.

“Unequivocally,” she replied, stepping before him to stop their walk to their rooms.

“Can you imagine our children?” Morgan chuckled, wrapping his arms around her waist. “Sarcasm will be their first language, not English.”

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“They will keep their cousins on their toes, to be sure,” Helena laughed softly.

“But first,” Morgan whispered, bringing her fingers to his smiling lips, “We shall be married.”

Helena gave him a bemused look before giving him a rueful grin. He loved teasing her about her maidenhood now, taunting her for being a true bride.

“Thank you so much for the kind reminder,” she replied sweetly, then boldly reached out to cup his bulge.

Morgan let out a surprised wheeze as he backed her into the hallway wall.

“It is always a pleasure to remind you, my little Persephone,” he whispered wickedly, and gave her a passionate kiss.

EPILOGUE

“Is that a tear, old boy?” Morgan teased, throwing his arm around Ambrose’s neck.

“No,” Ambrose snarled, pushing Morgan’s arm off him, only to smile devilishly and pull him in for a fierce hug.

“Sure looked like a tear,” Ezra noted, smirking.

“He cried,” Duncan sighed, swirling his whiskey in his glass.

“Like a little girl,” Morgan crooned, and the three of them laughed and pushed affectionately at Ambrose as he began to curse and shove them back.

“Alright, you caught me!” Ambrose sighed. “But what do you expect? I was walking my baby sister down the aisle, after all. Did you see her smile, her exquisite dress, and the excitement radiating from within her? How could I not experience a moment of sentiment?”

“I think we were all affected,” Duncan admitted. “It was what was always meant to be. Congratulations, Morgan.”

Though the words were full of praise, all four of them noted the subtle meaning beneath them. This was the marriage Helena deserved to have. A wedding where she actually wanted to join in marriage with her husband out of love, not propriety.

“I am still very confused about how this all came to be,” Thomas stated, looking up at his adopted uncles with a suspicious eye.

“We all are, lad,” Duncan offered, clapping a hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Best not to ask questions.”

“I will not have to marry my sister, will I?” Thomas asked, raising a worried brow as he looked across the room at Camilla, who was with Helena and the other women. Ezra and Duncan began to roar with laughter as Ambrose scowled and Morgan gave him a cheeky grin.

“Might I remind you for the hundredth time, dear boy, that Helena was not and never will be my sister,” Morgan pointed out.

“Still does not seem right,” Thomas muttered shaking his head.

“Tell me about it,” Ambrose muttered. “You think I wanted to see my sister married to this buffoon?”

“Speaking of the beautiful bride,” Morgan said loudly, alerting the others to Helena and their incoming wives.

“Hello, wife,” Morgan said chipperly, greeting Helena with a warm but quick kiss as she came to his side.

“Hello, husband,” Helena replied through her smile.

“Oh, darling, that dress is absolutely perfect on you,” Morgan groaned, unabashedly roaming his gaze over her. “Have I told you that yet today?”

“Only a thousand times,” Helena laughed.

It was true though, and Morgan could not get enough of seeing her in her wedding gown. He had loved her in black, but he wanted to worship her in white. In fact, he planned to do exactly that the moment their guests left. Which, he realized, was right now.

Their vows had been exchanged, the speeches had been made, the feast had been heartily consumed, and Helena had returned from saying her goodbyes to Teresa and her family, as well as a few other guests. They were down to their original eight, and as they all gathered together, Morgan motioned over a servant to refill their champagne.

Together, their group said their goodbyes to Thomas and Camilla, all promising visits in the near future, and waited until the younger ones had departed.

“Well, my friends,” Morgan announced, looking at the faces of his loved ones,

Helena wrapped tightly under his arm, “it appears the festivities have concluded. Thank you all for your support, your love, and most of all, your friendship. May we live merrily and peacefully from now on.”

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“What, no joke?” Ezra retorted, causing a wave of laughter to ripple through the group.

Morgan chuckled along with them as he looked down into Helena’s eyes. Her blue orbs were bright with a mixture of love and excitement, and his grin widened as he saw his future there.

“Not this time,” he replied, raising his glass at the center of them. “To us.”

“To us,” everyone toasted, clinking their glasses against Morgan’s before having their final drink.

“Morgan,” Helena whispered, staring at the painting before her.

“Do you like it, my love?” Morgan asked, standing behind her as they both looked up at his work. “I thought I would try my hand at painting you with clothes on this time. Not my favorite way to portray you, but I must say, I am rather fond of it.”

Helena gazed in awe at the painting of herself. Morgan had been able to capture her beauty and essence from his very first coal stroke, but there was something more intense about this particular painting. Instead of being posed, naked and welcoming, she stood, wearing the black dress and mask Morgan had bought for their second lesson at the Devil’s Masquerade.

Her stature was tall and fierce; intimidating but still incredibly feminine and beautiful. Her blue eyes glimmered behind the mask with both fire and life, creating a sultry warming glow that seemed to emanate from the painting itself. In this

one, she was so clearly the one who gave commands. It was how she presented herself to everyone else but him. For him, she went down on her knees.

“It is a wonderful present, thank you,” she said sincerely, turning in his arms.

Morgan smiled as he bowed his head to her lips, the words, “my pleasure,” breathing out as he sealed the kiss. Helena felt her body melt into his as they deepened their kiss; excitement skittering through her as she realized that her wait was finally coming to an end. She reached for the buttons at the back of her neck, trying to work the frustrating things free.

She was rewarded with Morgan’s soft chuckle before his hands reached for hers and captured her wrists.

“Let me take it off,” Helena pouted, fighting Morgan’s hold on her wrists.

She had given into his request to remain chaste until their wedding, had kept her excitement at bay all throughout the ceremony and reception, but now that their guests were gone and they were alone in Morgan’s bedroom —their bedroom — Helena did not want to wait any longer.

Morgan chuckled as he kissed her pouting lips but did not release his hold on her wrists.

“I will take it off when I am ready for you to take it off,” Morgan replied, his tone chastising. “Patience, little Persephone.”

“I have been patient for long enough,” Helena insisted as Morgan lowered his lips to her neck. “I have — ohh!”

Her words of complaint were cut off with a gasp as her husband’s teeth sank

seductively into her flesh and his hands gripped the back of her dress, which was held together by a long row of small, pearl buttons, and gave it a sudden yank.

A shiver traveled up Helena's spine as she felt the cool air and Morgan's hot fingertips touch her bare skin. Her brain immediately cleared itself of all thoughts.

"Turn for me, little one," Morgan commanded, his deep voice full of seductive authority.

Her body was warm and hummed with electric desire. Helena turned away from him with effort and gasped again as she heard the deft sound of a knife's blade cut through the strings of her corset in one straight line. The ruined undergarment was roughly pulled away from her, dragging along her nipples in a teasing fashion that made her quiver.

Before she could recover, Helena felt Morgan's lips begin to move slowly down her back, starting from the base of her neck and only stopping when his lips brushed the end of her tailbone. When he finished, he rose back up and slowly dragged down the front of her gown until it was a puddle of white clouds on the floor.

"There you are," he murmured in appreciation as he walked a patient circle around her. "I have missed you, Persephone."

His voice was filled with awe as he took his time taking her in, and though Helena was flattered, her need and impatience were brewing into a dangerous combination.

"And I have missed you," she breathed, following him closely with her eyes.

"Where were we in our last lesson?" Morgan asked, taking off his jacket.

Helena's cheeks flushed red as she thought of their last exercise. Though they had

slept apart the last week and Morgan had yet to take her innocence, they had still continued down their path of sexual exploration, especially when it came to Helena's submission.

"Crawling," she replied, licking her lips as he took a seat on the edge of their bed. "And using my teeth to undress you."

"Shall we start where we left off then?" He suggested with a gleam in his eyes, and Helena nodded excitedly.

"Very well, then, little one. On your knees. Come to me," Morgan commanded, untying his cravat.

Helena felt her body tremble in anticipation as she slowly went to her knees and crawled to him. By the time she reached his knees, he had removed his shirt and sat bare-chested with his legs spread wide apart. Morgan groaned, causing her mouth to water as she rose up slowly, placed her hands on his knees, and laid a warm kiss on his abdomen.

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She whimpered at the salty, clean taste of Morgan's muscled torso, and placed another slow, seductive kiss on the next muscle down, this time letting her tongue flick across his flesh. With another groan, Morgan reached out, thrusting his hands through her pinned hair, and drew her lips to his in a deep kiss.

"Maybe we will continue our lesson later," Morgan rasped against her lips.

Helena nodded willingly as she felt him lift her up into his lap, then to the bed where he pressed her back against the silky sheets and began to devour her. He kissed and licked his tongue over her lips, her neck and then her breasts, where his tongue and teeth played until she felt an overwhelming ache form in her lower belly and swell there until it exploded in a gush of pleasure.

From there Morgan's mouth traveled down her abdomen and towards her sex, his kisses growing hungrier and rougher until he reached the valley of her inner thighs.

"Morgan!" She moaned, her hands thrusting into his hair as he fused his mouth to her dewy, fragrant petals.

"Very good, little one. Say my name," Morgan groaned, increasing her pleasure by inserting two fingers into her heated, wet canal.

Without thinking Helena obeyed, chanting his name over and over again until another release tore through her body and blinded her mind with a brilliant white light. With needy hands she gripped his shoulders and dragged him up her body.

"Please, Morgan," she whimpered, her feet and legs working at lowering his trousers.

When Morgan pulled away to remove his trousers, Helena caught a glimmer of something she had never seen in him before; a lack of control.

Suddenly, she realized that he had probably imagined their first time unfolding differently, but because he too was so built up with desire, he had abandoned all of his plans and relinquished his need to maintain the upper hand. For the first time, they were on the same level of frenzy, and Morgan had just as little control over his need as she did.

“Come here, my love,” Morgan whispered, lying on top of her as his mouth joined with hers.

Helena’s legs wrapped securely around his waist, inviting him to settle his hips into hers.

“Take a deep breath,” his sultry voice commanded, thrusting between her soaking petals.

Helena obeyed the command as if she could not help it, then the sight of Morgan’s handsome face looking down at her blurred as she felt a deep, aching pain begin to pulse in her womb. Her breath blew out in a rush as her back arched into the tight fit of Morgan’s manhood, and through the pain she felt a familiar spark of ecstasy.

“Morgan,” she whispered, looking up at him pleadingly as she dug her nails into his forearms.

Her vision drew into focus again as she felt the gentle rock of his hips, and she whimpered when she saw the adoring, fascinated look in his forest-green eyes.

“I’m right here, Persephone,” he promised, lowering himself to his elbows so he could hold her closer. “Move your hips with me, that’s it. There, is that not better?”

The shift into the more intimate position caused the fullness she felt to expand, and for a moment, she whimpered in pain as she took in even more of her aroused husband. Through it though, she heard his gentle command, and began to move her hips in the same rhythm as his.

Helena's whimper of pain slipped into a relaxing sigh of pleasure as the discomfort melted away, and her body relaxed completely beneath him. Deep, resounding waves of pleasure were emanating through her entire body as they moved together, and after only a moment, she forgot that there was any pain to begin with.

"Yes, little one, look at me," Morgan moaned. "Let me see those beautiful eyes. Do you need me to stop?"

"No!" Helena gasped, her lashes fluttering open as her hands instantly clutched to his biceps.

For a moment she had gotten so lost in the hypnotic pleasure of their lovemaking that her head had lulled back into the pillows and her entire being filled with fiery sparks of pleasure. Morgan chuckled wickedly, drawing his chiseled lips into a devilish smile before capturing her mouth in a deep kiss and driving his hips faster.

His name ripped from her lips once more as Morgan began to release his own need, and her fingernails dug deeper, scratching little red rivers over his bulging biceps and shoulders. The little sparks of pleasure were quickly growing into fires, erupting their ecstasy through every pore and tooth.

She hadn't even realized she'd leaned up and bit his neck until his roar of mixed pleasure and pain erupted in her ears. Suddenly his hand was at the back of her head, locking her teeth in place upon his flesh as his hips drew into an impossibly fast pace. Locked into him, unable to do anything but hold on, Helena moaned her ecstasy into the deepening bite mark on Morgan's chest as the pleasure emanating from her

womanhood became too much to bear.

When her release flooded through her, a rainbow of color flooded behind Helena's eyes like never before. For a moment, the intensity of the pleasure was so much she could not breathe, could not unroll her eyes — and then Morgan's release came. Her name poured from his lips like a thunderous prayer as he suddenly thrust into her with all his remaining might, and she whimpered wickedly when she felt his seed rushing to meet her own orgasm.

“Oh, my god,” Helena breathed when Morgan's grip finally released her biting hold on his neck.

Her heart still beating rapidly, her body still trembling from their intensity, she drew in deep mouthfuls of breath as Morgan slipped to her right; placing kisses along her neck as he took his own deep breaths.

“Oh, my Helena,” Morgan groaned, giving her a sly smile before moving up to kiss her.

Amid her thrumming post-coital ecstasy, Helena giggled into Morgan's lips. Their arms drew warmly around one another, melding them close.

“How bad is the pain?” he whispered, stroking his hand lovingly over cheek and jaw.

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Sleepily, Helena shook her head as a soft smile touched her lips.

“What pain?” she teased.

Morgan smiled back, a low chuckle in his throat, and slid her to her back. She moaned softly when his hand moved to her lower belly and began a gentle massage.

“See, are you not glad we waited?” Morgan teased.

Helena’s eyes fluttered open again and she glared at him as she smirked.

“No,” she remarked truthfully, which earned her another chuckle from Morgan.

“But I am glad you are my only,” she said, still smiling.

Morgan let out one more soft chuckle before his cheeky smile grew into one of pure adoration.

“As am I. And you. You are now my only. From now until forever.”

Helena’s heart bloomed with emotion and relief at his words, and she leaned up to brush a kiss to the tip of his nose.

“Is that a deal?” she asked playfully.

“No,” Morgan smirked, his hand sliding to her throat so she would hold still.

They both look at one another with pure love and happiness as they smiled softly.

“But it is a promise.”

His lips then sealed against hers once more, and delirious with joy, Helena slid against him, and kissed him passionately back.

The End?