



Three Nights with the Beastly Duke

Author: *Violet Hamers*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "Three nights, Your Grace. That's all I need to show you that I'm your perfect match..."

Duke Arthur knows that his terrifying appearance makes any woman run for the hills, his betrothed included. And yet her sister seems to be an exception... Lavinia would do anything for her sisters. Even give herself to the beastly Duke. So she vows to convince him that he must marry her instead... When Arthur agrees to spend three nights with Lavinia, he knows he must never let her plan succeed. Yet the desire to see her come undone proves to be impossible to resist...

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

Total Pages (Source): 60

CHAPTER ONE

“It is time, my dear son,” Marianne had insisted, her words ringing in Arthur’s ears.

“You’ve shut yourself away long enough. You must do your duty and find a wife.”

As the words played over and over in Arthur’s mind, his eyes searched the scenery of London’s finest homes. He hated the city. At home in Whitekin, his people had grown used to his disfigurement and saw him as their Duke. But here, in the swell of people, he was just a scarred face with a fine suit. A well-dressed beast feared by all.

He’d avoided London successfully for several years. Then, shortly after his turning two and thirty, his mother began pushing him back into London Society in hopes of snagging him another bride. He’d objected at first, not willing to go through Grace’s rejection all over again. But he knew she was right. He’d stalled long enough, and before he knew it, Society would be demanding an heir from him.

His carriage slowed down in front of tall gates that encompassed an impressive manor of a house, and a moment later, when they came to a stop inside of the gates, the driver announced that they had reached the Donset Estate.

“Kenneth Dennis is a respectable man of the ton as are his three daughters,” his mother had told him. “His middle girl, Rebecca, is on the marriage market, and he has agreed to accept our proposal of marriage for her. She will be good for you.”

When he asked about the eldest sister, Lavinia, his mother quickly discouraged his curiosity, stating that she had already—and rather unfortunately—embraced the life

of spinsterhood.

“Ah, Your Grace!” Kenneth Dennis, the Viscount of Donset, greeted with a booming voice as Arthur stepped out of the carriage. “We are so honored by your visit.”

“The honor is mine, Lord Donset,” Arthur returned politely, offering the older man a respectful bow. “My family thanks you for your willingness to move forward with this marital arrangement. Tell me, will I be meeting Miss Rebecca today?”

Arthur caught Kenneth’s eyes lingering on his scar, and he ignored the disappointment sweeping through him. Of course, he would notice. Everyone noticed.

“In good time, Your Grace,” Kenneth replied cheerily, finally turning away from Arthur so he could lead him inside. “She is a bit nervous, my dear girl. But she is a very respectable young lady. She will make you very proud as a wife. I am sure of it.”

“I have no doubts,” Arthur replied, following the man into his study.

Unknown to him, however, his bride-to-be was indeed there, hidden between the wall and a large, decorative urn. And when she saw her intended, a knot formed in her stomach, her eyes welled with tears, and she mourned the loss of her freedom.

* * *

“Rebecca?” Lavinia called, going from one door to another to find her sister. “Rebecca, where are you?”

Lavinia had watched from her window as her younger sister’s future husband arrived. He had a large stature this man. Not of width, but of height and posture. Even from her perch, she had seen the Duke’s dominating presence ebb and flow all around him like invisible clouds. He was tall, even taller than her father—which was a feat in

itself—and a well-muscled figure that seemed uncomfortably confined in his fine clothes.

His hair, dark and wavy, fell over the left side of his face, covering one of his eyes. Though she couldn't be sure from her position, she was sure that they were either a dark brown like hers, or possibly even dark green. Knowing her sister was nervous, she had set off to find Rebecca and talk to her. But thus far, she had been unsuccessful.

“Rebecca,” Lavinia repeated, her voice dropping to a loud whisper as she came to the first floor of their home. “Darling, come out this second!”

From behind the closed door of their family's library, Lavinia heard the softest cry, and she stopped in her tracks. She pressed her ear to the door and listened. Sure enough, she could hear Rebecca's soft voice on the other side, murmuring something about beasts or monsters. Both curious and concerned, she opened the door and went to Rebecca's side.

“Becca, darling, what is wrong?” Lavinia asked, putting an arm around her sister's shoulders.

“Oh, Vinnie!” Rebecca wailed loudly, turning to throw her arms around her sister. “It's true! The rumors are true, and it's awful! He looks as beastly as they say!”

Although she was compassionate for her sister's situation—being married to a complete stranger—Lavinia rolled her eyes. The tone and the rumors it produced were never boring. But they were annoying. And often inaccurate. Unfortunately, she knew such things from personal experience.

“That is simply not true,” Lavinia replied calmly, running a calming hand over Rebecca's hair. “I saw him from my window, and I thought he looked rather

handsome. Gruff, yes, but also handsome.”

Rebecca quickly pulled away from Lavinia’s embrace and looked at her older sister with a gaze of betrayal. Though sisters, they looked so different from one another. While Lavinia had their mother’s dark features, a pale complexion, and a slim figure, Rebecca and Agnes had inherited their father’s. They both had copper hair, bright blue eyes, a smattering of adorable freckles across the bridge of their noses, and curvier figures. Lavinia had often envied their looks when they had been younger, but in recent years, she had learned to accept her own type of dark beauty.

“You didn’t get a close enough look,” Rebecca bit out, roughly wiping away her tears. “He has a horrible scar across his face. They say that his temperament is as foul as his looks. What is Papa thinking?!”

Lavinia wished that she knew. When her father had broken the news to them that he had bartered a marriage for Rebecca, she had been beyond furious with him. They had argued for days about her mama’s final wish, and how it went against everything she had wanted for her daughters. But no matter what point she made, her father had refused to hear it.

“Darling, I love you dearly,” her papa had said. “You know I do. And I am thankful for the help you’ve given with raising your sisters, but you made an error when you chose not to marry. It is one thing to have one spinster daughter, but I cannot have two. And thanks to your sister’s deplorably spoiled attitude, she has chased away every suitor that has come to our door. The Duke of Whitekin holds a respectable grip on his lands and is willing to overlook not just your sister’s flaws, but yours as well. I’m sorry, darling. But Rebecca will marry Arthur Kendall.”

“You must help me, Vinnie,” Rebecca begged presently, gathering Lavinia’s hands into her own. “I can’t marry him. I can’t.”

“You will learn to love him,” Lavinia assured her, trying her best to be optimistic.
“You just have to give him time.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Rebecca shook her head adamantly, her blue eyes wide with panic. “No, I won’t,” she whispered. “I can’t. Don’t you see, Vinnie? I’m already in love with someone else.”

Lavinia looked at her younger sister wildly. In love? With whom? And why hadn’t she mentioned it before now?

“You must tell me who it is,” Lavinia urged as she regained her composure. “I can help you to talk to Papa if it’s a proper match.”

Rebecca bit her lip as she lowered her eyes to the floor and once more shook her head. “I can’t tell you. Not yet, at least,” she replied fretfully. “But you must help me, Sister. Please, don’t pull me away from the man I love to marry a monster. I beg of you. Mama wouldn’t have wanted this for me, and you know it.”

It was the truth, and there was no way Lavinia could deny it. If her mother were with them, she would have already thrown the Duke out on his arse. She had wanted them to marry for love and for happiness and for no other reasons.

“Very well,” Lavinia soothed, taking Rebecca back into her arms. “Leave it to me. I shall sort this out.”

Something between a sob and a sigh of relief left Rebecca’s mouth, and she burrowed her head into Lavinia’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Vinnie,” she sobbed. “You’re the best sister I could ever have.”

I hope to be.

Lavinia wondered how on earth she was going to turn this whole situation around.

CHAPTERTWO

“Lavinia,” Kenneth called, seeing his eldest daughter descend the grand staircase in their home. Beside him stood the Duke, who, after arguing over the acceptance of Rebecca’s dowry, had come to an agreement about the marriage. He thought it odd that a man of his stature would refuse the dowry, but eventually, Kenneth had let it go.

“There you are. Have you seen Rebecca?”

Lavinia froze on the step. She was not a good liar and, in fact, was a little too honest for most people’s liking. But now the need to perfect such a practice was upon her, and she had to say something. Beside her father, the Duke—her potential brother-in-law—waited silently and patiently. Much closer now, she did indeed see the scar her sister had spoken of. But to her, it was more intriguing than horrifying.

“I am afraid Rebecca is indisposed today,” Lavinia explained, pulling on a polite smile as she finished making her way down the steps. “Womanly woes are a terrible thing, are they not?”

“For heaven’s sake, Lavinia,” her father murmured, his face turning a dozen shades of red as he began to tug at his collar. “I wish you would speak more delicately when it comes to such things.”

“Apologies, Papa,” Lavinia replied emphatically.

“Well, they are quite horrid, I’m told,” Arthur said, injecting himself into the conversation.

Shock and amusement traveled through Lavinia as the Duke said this, and she turned to face him with a raised brow. “You know of such things, Your Grace?” she asked, barely able to keep the laughter out of her voice.

“Yes, well, I am constantly in the company of my mother and sister, you see, and with no other men around to share my time with, I’m afraid I’ve become the compassionate ear they lean toward when such a time comes,” he replied, the smallest of grins touching his lips.

As their eyes met, Lavinia felt her own lips curling upward, unable to stop herself from returning the small expression.

“Apologies, Your Grace,” Kenneth interjected, giving his daughter an exhausted look. “For the poor topic of discussion and for the lack of introduction. Allow me to present my eldest daughter, Lavinia. Who, I trust, will go right back upstairs and inform her little sister that monthly woes or not, duty must be upheld.”

“Arthur Kendall, the Duke of Whitekin,” Arthur replied, taking Lavinia’s offered hand as he bowed. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Dennis.”

“And you, Your Grace,” Lavinia replied politely, curtsying to him in a perfect manner. “Again, I do apologize for my sister’s absence, but as I said, today just will not do.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Arthur assured her.

His eyes were definitely green, she realized upon closer inspection, but she could see how she’d confused them with brown. There was something deep about his eyes—endless tunnels that navigated toward something hidden inside. And as she studied his scar, which had first been hidden by his wavy dark hair, she didn’t find it unattractive at all. But instead, intriguing, if not strangely handsome.

Most Lords she knew were as pale-complected as she, with their work keeping them inside. But the Duke's complexion was as dark as a peasant's in the field, and the texture of his hands matched such labor. Because of his darker tones, the white of the scar stood out bright and lonely against its tanned skin. It was awful, yes, but also...alluring.

"His Grace has agreed to a three-month engagement with your sister, Lavinia," Kenneth stated, interrupting the silence that had fallen over the three of them. "So that the two of them may get more acquainted before the ceremony takes place." He looked between his eldest daughter and the Duke, wondering if he'd just secured the right match.

Lavinia's eyes finally left Arthur's, and she turned to her father with a smile. "Well, that is most kind, is it not?" she asked sweetly, taking a step back so that she could look at both men. "I am sure Rebecca will be happy to hear of it."

"Yes, unfortunately, propriety has pulled me from my home in Whitekin, and I must suffer the London if I am to conduct my necessary business," Arthur explained.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Though he said it in a matter-of-fact tone, Lavinia could almost hear the amusing dread.

“You do not like London’s social life, Your Grace?” Lavinia asked, intrigued.

Every gentleman she knew adored being part of the ton. It was a way to easily show off the life of excess they’ve achieved and be boastful about it.

“It is not my favorite place, no,” Arthur agreed. “But your father has told me that you and your sisters are indeed social creatures, and so I must indulge.”

Lavinia wanted to say that she despised the ton as much as he, but she kept it to herself. Why would she want him to know this anyway?

“We are, indeed,” she said instead. “In fact, we shall be attending the Porters’ ball the day after tomorrow.”

“I shall see you there, then,” Arthur told her, giving her another curt bow. “With hope, Miss Rebecca will be in better spirits, and we might find time to converse. But I should make my departure now. I’m afraid the day holds many other responsibilities to tend to.”

Arthur shook Kenneth’s hand, and the two men exchanged departing pleasantries. Before he put on his top hat, Arthur turned to Lavinia a final time, his green eyes directly meeting her brown ones, and he winked.

“It was a pleasure, Miss Dennis.”

“Indeed it was,” Lavinia agreed, curtsying to him.

A servant appeared out of seemingly nowhere to escort Arthur back to his carriage. Lavinia’s father waited until he was sure that his future son-in-law was out of earshot before he turned to his eldest daughter with a cold gaze.

“She is not ill, is she?” he asked, using his strictest fatherly tone.

“Papa, you know this is not what Mama wanted for us,” Lavinia replied, no longer holding any pretense. “Rebecca is frightened of him. Terrified! She cannot do this.”

“She can, and shewill,” Kenneth retorted, taking a step toward his eldest daughter. “She wanted you to marry as well, Lavinia, and you had plenty of chances. And yet, you chose spinsterhood. So, yes, I may have failed your mother. But so have you.”

Kenneth’s harsh words hit Lavinia’s ears like a stinging slap, and she flinched. It wasn’t like her father to talk to her like this.

Realizing the brunt of his words, Kenneth sighed as he bowed and shook his head. “Forgive me, my dear,” he apologized. “But you simply do not understand what it is like to have children. You must do what’s best for them. Even if they hate you for it.”

“Well then,” Lavinia whispered, going back to the stairs. “If that’s what being a parent means, then I am glad I shall never become one.”

Kenneth pleaded for her to wait, and Lavinia paused and turned on the stairs, glaring at him. “You act like spinsterhood is a disease you can catch. Like just because I chose it, Rebecca and Agnes will follow. But you forget, Papa, that the reason I chose this life was so that I could take care of them like our mother couldn’t. So, perhaps you could stop looking at me as if I am single due to not being wanted.”

Kenneth gave his daughter a sorrowful look, but before he could reply, Lavinia quickly made her way upstairs, her throat and eyes burning, and locked herself and Rebecca into their little sister's room.

* * *

Arthur sat in his carriage, contemplating the arrangement he'd just made. Rebecca Dennis, on paper, did indeed seem like a fine young woman. And it didn't actually bother him at all that they were not able to meet that day. He did, however, get to meet the older sister, and that was indeed intriguing.

When he'd first spotted her on the steps, he had felt a thrill of excitement, hoping that she was his Rebecca. She was, in his opinion, a breathtaking woman. Tall. Slender. Slightly intimidating in the way she looked one directly in the eye. And those eyes. So dark that they were almost black, framed by sharp eyebrows and cheekbones. Her hair, as dark as her eyes, looked thick and luscious as it tumbled over her shoulders. She reminded him of the wild Fresians he'd once seen on his tour—beautiful and untamed.

Unlike most of the ladies he'd seen thus far, she did not dress herself in bright colors and had been clad in a modest, dove-gray gown. She wasn't trying like the others to catch a husband. But that's why he had to marry Rebecca, was it not? Because Lavinia was now deemed too old to marry.

Personally, he did not care, but his mother had made it clear that he would bring no more scandal into their home. His scar, a permanent fixture and reminder of what he'd survived for their country, was bad enough.

When he arrived at the London Whitekin Estate, thoughts of the eldest Dennis daughter dissipated when he saw a stack of luggage outside of the front door.

“What is all of this?” he asked quizzically when he saw his sister running toward him.

Behind, walking much more slowly and gracefully, was their mother. Irritation was written all over her face, and he knew he missed something big. Susan flew into his arms, hugging him tightly, and immediately began talking at the speed of a rather annoyed squirrel.

“Slow down, slow down,” he soothed, pulling Susan away from him so he could hunker down and look into her eyes. “What’s happening?”

“Mama is sending me back home!” Susan wailed. “After all of the promises she made about finally allowing me to have a Season, she’s sending me back to Whitekin!”

Arthur looked up at his mother, alarmed. As far as he knew the trip was to find both him and his sister a match. And while he had balked at the idea, Susan had been all for it.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“What happened?” he asked.

“Your sister is more gullible than we believed,” his mother explained, clearly exhausted. “She let a group of these young London ladies convince her into a little game of cat and mouse with some of the more...unseemlygentlemen of theton.”

“Are you sure they’re not all like that?” he asked, muttering the words under his breath. Then, he looked back down at his sister with a gentle gaze, and slowly shook his head. “Susan, you know better,” he chastised lightly.

As if furious with him, Susan pushed him away with both hands and let out a sound of irritation.

“You’re both awful!” she exclaimed. “I’m never allowed to have any fun!”

“We will try again in the spring Season,” their mother stated, folding her hands calmly in front of her. “When you’ve had more lessons. In the meantime, you must return home while your brother and I tie up his arrangement. Your cousins Marcy and Walter will be waiting for you back home and have agreed to take over supervision until we return. Youwillbehave for them.”

Susan let out another angry sound and flew toward the stairs of their London home and out of sight.

“Please tell me your day went better than mine,” Marianne pleaded with her son once they were alone.

Arthur took a long look at his mother. She had aged greatly since his father's death, and every day appeared just lightly more withered and frail. It worried him greatly and was reminded that marrying the right woman would take a great burden off her plate. He made the mental decision right there that whatever thoughts he had about Lavinia, they didn't matter.

"Swimmingly," he reported, handing his hat and jacket to a servant. "Lord Donset was most agreeable to my terms, and we shall have a wedding between our families at the end of August."

"And the girl?" Marianne asked, looking hopeful.

"Our introduction was delayed today, so I have not met her yet," he replied truthfully. "But have no fear. Her father is most adamant about this union. It will happen one way or another."

A look of relief came over her mother's face, and she slowly sank down into a nearby chaise.

"Thank heavens," she sighed. "Now, if only I could get your sister to act as obediently as you."

"Give her time, Mama," he soothed, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "The burden of nobility isn't easy on anyone."

CHAPTER THREE

"I'm going to be sick," Rebecca stated, looking pitiful in her carriage seat. She looked beautiful in her pale pink and yellow gown, and the matching ribbons in her hair brought out the brightness of her eyes. But she still looked lonely and abused like a pup rejected by its mother.

“You will do no such thing,” Lavinia replied patiently, smoothing her hands over her forest-green silk gown.

“You said you were going to help me!” Rebecca snapped. “How is this helping?”

“What is Lavinia helping you with?” their father asked, looking up from his book.

“Her manners, Papa,” Lavinia replied quickly, flashing him a large smile. “She must be eloquent for the Duke this evening.”

“Indeed, she must,” he muttered as his eyes returned to the worded pages.

Lavinia waited until she was sure her father was once more enraptured in his book, then she leaned toward her sister and whispered quickly, “I am going to help you! But first, you must help yourself and stop acting like this! Get a hold of yourself.”

Lavinia had indeed promised that she would help her sister out of her engagement with the Duke. And she would keep that promise. But her sister’s behavior was becoming more than annoying. She was still trying to suppress those feelings of annoyance when they walked into the ball, and it only began to dissipate when she saw her old friend coming toward her through the crowd.

“Timothy,” Lavinia sighed in relief, taking his outstretched hands. She leaned toward him, and they gave each other chaste kisses on the cheek. “Thank heavens you are here. I am in need of distraction.”

“Well, have no fear, darling, for I am here to meet all of your distracting needs,” Timothy jested, giving her a fun twirl before letting go. “Dark colors again, Vinnie?” he teased. “When will you join us in the sunlight and colors that this world has to offer?”

Lavinia laughed, used to his teasing of her darker wardrobe. “While I appreciate the bold colors of the day, my dear friend, you and I both know that I am a daughter of the moon.”

“You certainly are,” Timothy replied, his blue eyes glittering brightly as he looked at her. “Is your father here? I should like to say hello.”

Lavinia looked away from Timothy and took a slow look around the ballroom. Finally, she spotted her father and little sister, both of them standing in front of the Duke of Whitekin. A sliver of guilt went through as she realized she’d let her sister down, but she pushed it away. Their meeting was inevitable, anyhow.

“Ah, he’s over there,” she replied, nodding toward them, “introducing Rebecca to her soon-to-be husband.” She then looked back at Timothy and smiled. “And where is your wife? I feel as if I haven’t seen Emily in over a year.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

The glimmer in Timothy's eyes suddenly deadened, and he turned away from her to look toward Kenneth and Rebecca. "She's come down with something or other," he replied dismissively. Then, changing the subject, he nodded toward Arthur. "That is who your father has chosen for Rebecca? The Beast of Whitekin himself?"

Though she didn't know much about Arthur, Timothy's blatant taunting of him offended her. Timothy was not a gossiping man. In fact, it was why their friendship had lasted so long. But yet, here he was, saying cruel things about someone he'd never met.

"What an awful thing to say, Lord Stonehames," Lavinia stated, taking a step back from him. "I've never heard such harsh things come from your lips. Has your time back home hardened you?"

Timothy's eyes snapped back to Lavinia's, his gaze full of remorse. "Apologies, Vinnie," he pleaded. "You know I hate it when you call me that. But yes, sadly, I believe you are right. Emily has been ill in some way or another during our stay at Stonehames Manor. I fear my worry for her has spoiled my mood. Do forgive my poor soul, though? I feel if I spend adequate time with you, I shall return to my happy self."

Although still upset with him for his pettiness toward the Duke, Lavinia agreed to forgive him. They were, after all, childhood friends, and she was sure that he had a brotherly urge to protect not just her, but her sisters as well.

"Very well," she agreed. "But you must promise me that you will not say such things again."

“You have my word,” Timothy promised, picking up her hand to lay a chaste kiss on it.

After promising Timothy a dance later on, Lavinia parted from him and went to go find Rebecca, who had quickly made herself scarce after being introduced to the Duke. She found her alone in the nearby library, crying.

“Oh, my darling.” Lavinia sighed, going to her sister’s side. “You must calm yourself.”

“He’s even worse in person, Vinnie!” Rebecca wailed. “That scar! It’s awful. I could barely pay attention to what he was saying because of it. I cannot marry him, Vinnie. I won’t!”

“What is this?” Kenneth asked, coming into the room. “Why are the two of you hiding out in here? Rebecca, your fiancé and I were not finished talking with you yet. It was quite rude of you to walk away as you did. I demand you go out there immediately and apologize!”

“I won’t!” Rebecca repeated, stomping her foot hard on the floor as she rose.

“Papa, please,” Lavinia pleaded, “this arrangement clearly will not work. Break the engagement.”

Kenneth’s face began to turn red as he looked at his daughters, then he let out an exhausted sigh, and let his body collapse into a nearby chair.

“I have avoided saying this plainly in order to spare your feelings,” he told them, “but clearly that has done more harm than good. So, here is the truth. I’m getting old, my darlings. And I will not be around forever. I cannot pass my money or title or properties to you, as you are women, and if something were to happen to me, you’d

be left penniless and homeless. That is why you must marry, Rebecca. The Duke may not be a handsome man or even a warm one, but he is rich and powerful. You will never be without a roof over your head or a dress on your back with him.”

“Oh, Papa,” Lavinia breathed, her heart aching for him.

He looked at her wearily. “It is too late for you.” He sighed. “And I have accepted that. But it is not for Rebecca and Agnes, and they must get married. You are strong, Lavinia. You will be all right, no matter what happens to you.” He paused, turning his gaze toward Rebecca. “But you, my darling, are as delicate as a flower petal. Poverty will not suit you. So, no, I will not break this engagement.”

Lavinia kept her lips pressed together, her eyes pleading with Rebecca to tell their father of this other mystery suitor that she was already in love with. But instead, Rebecca only crossed her arms in resistance and turned away from their father. At this, he let out a long sigh and shook his head.

“I love you both very much,” he stated as he got up and walked toward the door. “But you both need to grow up.”

“Can you believe he said that?” Rebecca asked once they were alone. “When did Papa become so callous?!”

Lavinia didn’t answer. Her mind was churning at a fast rate, studying everything her father had said, and what her sister hadn’t said. Rebecca would be fine if she married her mystery suitor, and Agnes, in all of her loveliness, would be easy to marry off when her time came. But her? She was, like her father had indicated, unsavable. Unless...

“Go tidy yourself up,” Lavinia urged, a plan formulating in her head. “I will take care of this.”

Rebecca's eyebrows furrowed. "How?" she asked.

"Never you mind," Lavinia replied, reaching for the paper and inkwell on a nearby writing desk. "Just do as I say."

As Rebecca grumbled but ultimately obeyed, Lavinia sat down at the desk and began writing her note.

* * *

Arthur looked around the ballroom, mentally counting the minutes until it was suitable for him to leave. His introduction to Rebecca had been less than desirable. Her eyes had been drawn to his scar right away, and she had done nothing to hide the disgust on her face. He didn't blame her. He couldn't. But it still didn't stop the sharp pain that traveled through his chest when a woman looked at him like that.

"Pardon me, Your Grace," a valet said, pulling Arthur from his thoughts.

"Yes?" Arthur asked, looking up at the man from his seat.

The valet held out a small piece of folded paper to him as he bowed. "I am to deliver this message to you, Your Grace." He bowed once more, then scurried away before Arthur could ask him what it was about.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Curious, Arthur unfolded the letter to read its contents.

Meet me in the library. We must discuss your engagement.

It was short and unsigned, but even so, Arthur deduced that it could have only been one person. Was Kenneth pulling out of the arrangement? Probably so. It had been impossible not to notice the look of horror on his daughter's face. Perhaps he'd deemed the marriage too cruel to go through with.

Oh well, might as well get this over with.

He left the ballroom, and after some confusing navigation of the house, found the library. He was pleasantly surprised when he opened the door to see that it was not Kenneth waiting for him at all. But his eldest daughter, Lavinia.

"You," he stated, looking her up and down in surprise.

"Me," she replied coolly, her shoulder lifting in a careless shrug. "You were expecting someone else?"

Not wanting to go into his most recent thoughts, he merely nodded and tucked the note into his pocket.

"Well, this is quite scandalous, isn't it?" he mused, taking a look around the empty room before he approached.

"Only if handled improperly, Your Grace," Lavinia replied matter-of-factly. "Come.

Sit. I have a proposal.”

Intrigued, Arthur took a seat in one of the large, cushioned, chairs, and then looked at her, waiting.

“Are you not going to have a seat as well?” he asked, slightly amused.

Lavinia looked around her as if she was not sure of what she wanted to do, then took a seat on the chaise across from him, her posture reeking of anxiety.

“My sister does not want to marry you,” she told him.

Arthur chuckled at her bluntness, unable to believe she’d just said such a thing. Her honesty, though, was refreshing.

“I gathered as much,” he said in way of agreement. “And yet, despite her revulsion toward me, I am still not open to an affair.”

Anger glowed from Lavinia’s eyes as she suddenly stood up. “I beg your pardon, Sir?” she asked.

“Well, that’s what this is about, isn’t it?” he asked, waving a hand around the empty room. “A secret note, a quiet room, the acknowledgment of my fiancée’s unhappiness. This...situation screams affair. And though it would be fun, I must politely decline. My mother insists I do not bring home a scandal.”

Lavinia’s dark eyes glittered with rage as she stood in front of him, shaking. The idea of having an affair with him obviously displeased her, and he wasn’t sure whether to feel relieved or offended. But then, he realized he did feel something—disappointment. He suddenly felt that his joke was poorly played, and he apologized.

“A poor jest on my part, clearly,” he murmured, waving at the chaise. “Please, sit back down and tell me what is on your mind. Clearly, it must be important if you are willing to risk a scandal in such a public place.”

“Yes, it is,” Lavinia agreed, her stance relaxing. Eventually, she did sit back down but crossed her arms protectively in front of her.

Unconsciously, Arthur began to trace each of her movements. She wasn’t trying, he knew, but every subtle shift seemed like some sort of dance.

“As I was saying, my sister does not want to marry you,” she continued, “but not for the reasons you may think. You see, she has already promised herself to another nobleman. One she is in love with.”

“I see,” Arthur retorted, crossing his legs as he leaned forward. “Well, this is disappointing. But not devastating. I shall, of course, withdraw my offer as soon as you tell me who the gentleman is. Tell me, does your father know of this?”

“No,” Lavinia replied quickly, “and you must not tell him. Rebecca will not tell anyone who it is yet. Not even me.”

“Well then, I withdraw my withdrawal,” Arthur replied calmly.

“What? Why?” Lavinia asked, flustered.

“How do I know this gentleman even exists and is not an excuse to avoid this marriage?” he asked with a shrug. “If there is no proof, there is no reason to cancel the engagement. I feel for your sister, I do. But it is my future that hangs in the balance as well. I must marry, according to both the rules of Society and my mother. And your sister fulfills all of the necessary requirements of a good wife. So, unless you can prove with hard facts that she is already someone else’s intended, I will

continue to move forward with the engagement.”

“Her love for this man is real,” Lavinia protested.

“Even if that were true, love is just an illusion. A fairytale for children. It will pass.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“Have you always been so cold?” Lavinia asked, her dark eyes boring right into his.

A stillness passed over Arthur. Up until that moment, he’d been having a rather enjoyable time with their banter. But her invasive question brought him up short very quickly.

“Since the day I discovered the truth about love,” he replied, his tone flat. “It’s a pretty thing to think about, I know,” he continued. “But it is not real. You’ll be a better person for it if you just accept that. Trust me.”

Lavinia’s gaze softened, and the look of pity she gave him became so overwhelming that Arthur couldn’t help but look away.

“Either way, your sister will be well taken care of,” he told her, getting up to leave. “She may not have love, but she will be given anything else that she asks for. I’m sorry, Miss Dennis, but this wedding will happen. Even if my bride is less than thrilled about it.”

“Do you not have a younger sister as well?” Lavinia asked, her tone quickening as she, too, rose from her seat.

A protective surge went through Arthur, and he felt his muscles clench as he turned back to Lavinia. “What of her?” he asked warily.

“Do you not love her?” Lavinia asked. “Do anything for her?”

Arthur let out a slow breath through his nostrils, beginning to grow weary of this

interaction. He was not used to being made to answer to anyone anymore. Especially by women.

“Yes, I do. Of course, I do,” Arthur admitted. “But that is familial love and entirely different than this imaginary romance your sister has concocted.”

“That’s not why I asked,” Lavinia replied quickly. “If she came to you, frightened of her new fiancé the way my Rebecca is frightened of you, could you still force her to marry the man?”

Something stirred inside of Arthur then. It was small and ill-used. Pity? Self-pity? He wasn’t sure, but he hated the sensation, nonetheless.

“She... she is frightened of me, then?” Arthur asked, turning to face Lavinia.

Lavinia pressed her full lips tightly together as if she weren’t sure if she should reply. “Yes, Your Grace,” she replied quietly as if trying to be as delicate as possible. “She is. So I ask you again. Please, call off the engagement.”

“So your family is saved, but mine is left rejected and left in the metaphorical mud that is London’s gossip,” Arthur countered. “I see your points, Miss Dennis, all of them. But it hardly seems fair to both of us.”

A look of relief came over Lavinia’s face, and she took a step closer to him. “Actually, Your Grace, I have an idea that would save both of our families from shame and still give you what you want,” she informed him. “Allow me to switch places with my sister.”

Despite the serious turn their conversation had taken, Arthur suddenly let out a laugh.

“You cannot be serious?” he asked, continuing to laugh.

“Why can I not be?” Lavinia asked, balling her fists and planting them on her hips.

“Because you are a spinster, Miss Dennis,” Arthur replied. “You may have made this choice, but in the ton’s opinion, it is because no one will have you.”

“And the ton also says that no one will have you,” Lavinia countered. “So, what if we created a contract that would prove them all around wrong? I may be a spinster, Your Grace, but aside from that, my reputation is glowing. My decorum and manners are praised by all, and there are many attributes I possess that could aid in multiple areas. You are not looking for a wife. I am not looking for a husband. Perhaps instead we could forge a powerful partnership.”

Arthur wanted to declare her idea a ridiculous notion, but the more Lavinia explained, the more it made sense. He knew Rebecca was frightened of him. He’d seen it on her face. But Lavinia, she didn’t avert her gaze from him, not once.

“Continue with your proposal,” Arthur urged, opening his mind a little more.

“Allow me three events,” Lavinia replied, her tone laced with excitement. “Three events to prove that I would be an easier match for you than my sister.”

“And after?” Arthur asked while moving closer to her. “You do realize that if the three events we attend go well, I will have to marry you. Do you, as a woman who has sworn off marriage, truly believe that you can commit to such an act?” He took another step closer to her, their noses nearly touching. “Do you really think you can handle being the wife to the Beast of Whitekin?”

Lavinia’s eyes lowered to the ground for a moment, as if the weight of the reality was pushing down on her harder than expected. Then, she brought her eyes back up to him, her gaze full of determination, and nodded her head.

“Yes. Yes, I do,” she replied.

“And you are sure you are not afraid of me?” Arthur asked, lifting his fingers to her chin. The pads of his fingertips brushed across her buttery soft skin, sending a shiver of desire through him that he didn’t expect.

“I am sure,” Lavinia whispered, keeping her eyes on him.

“Very well then,” Arthur murmured, his gaze dropping to her full lips. “Three events. You may have them. If you can seal our deal with a kiss. If you can do this, I will know that you are serious.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Lavinia looked startled, and for a moment, Arthur thought he had her. But then, a look of determination came over her, and she nodded.

“Very well, then,” she whispered, letting her body lean closer to him.

Arthur had intended the kiss to be quick, but as he felt her plump lips press to his, he felt something long asleep inside of him awaken. Lavinia’s breath quickened, and she brushed her lips against his again, as if she, too, wanted more.

Suddenly, his hands were on her waist, pulling her closer, and as he did so, Lavinia’s arms encircled his neck, and they drew into one another.

Her frame, tall and proud, suddenly softened against him, and a soft moan escaped her lips as he slowly traced his tongue across her bottom lip. He had meant for the kiss to be a punishment for her, to show her how awful he could be. But instead, he only discovered that he was now torturing himself.

Pulling away before he could fall even deeper into the pleasure of the kiss, Arthur felt shaky and strange as he walked silently toward the door. It was only when his hand was braced on the knob that he looked back at her, and nearly groaned. Her beautiful, pale cheeks were now bright pink, and her lips, swollen and glistening from his kiss, looked more tempting than ever.

“I accept your proposal, Miss Dennis,” Arthur announced, trying to get a grip on himself. “I will see you soon.”

Without another word, he opened the door and left before he gave in to any more of

his body's urges.

CHAPTERFOUR

"Where are you going?" Marianne asked, stopping her son in the hallway.

Arthur winced. He had been hoping to sneak out without his mother noticing. She'd been battering him with questions he couldn't answer regarding the ball three days ago, and he was in no mood to try and explain the actual events of the evening.

"I have dinner plans with some newly made acquaintances," he replied stiffly, pulling on the jacket his valet handed him.

"Ah! Would any of these 'new acquaintances' be your fiancée, by chance?" his mother asked, hope coursing through her tone. "I noticed you have not left the house to call on anyone."

"She will be there," Arthur admitted. But in truth, that was not why he was going to the dinner at all.

As promised, he would have three events with Lavinia, and this was to be the first. They had written one another discreetly and had agreed it was feasible. Rebecca was still averse to spending time with him anyway, and he was curious as to where this new deal would take him.

He hadn't expected his body to react as strongly as it had to his kiss with Lavinia. He had meant to intimidate her into admitting that she thought he was just as horrid as everyone else thought him to be. But instead, it had shaken him to his very core.

Arthur had stayed faithful to his former fiancée when he had been off at war, but before that, before he had met her, he had been a different kind of man. A man who

had had a voracious appetite for the sexual arts. He'd had cravings in his last ten years of celibacy. It was only natural for a human. But his pain from losing Grace had kept him from actually satisfying those hunger pangs.

Then, the other night, when he had felt Lavinia's lips graze his, he had remembered. He had remembered how much he enjoyed being touched. How much he enjoyed touching a woman. An other-worldly beautiful woman, at that. And an ache had started within him.

Rebecca's looks had startled him at first. He had expected her to have dark features similar to Lavinia's, but instead of having the presence of the moon, Rebecca had the presence of the sun. Copper-haired and pink and soft—a perfect representation of spring. Any man would have felt blessed to be engaged to such a pure creature, but instead, Arthur had felt a stir of disappointment. He belonged to the dark. To the night. Where it was harder to see his face.

“Wait a moment,” his mother insisted, interrupting his thoughts. “I am decently dressed. Allow me to fetch my gloves, and I shall join you.”

“Mother, please,” Arthur pleaded, growing annoyed as he turned to look at her. “I am well aware of what it is I must do, and I am doing it against my own wishes, just as you asked. But I implore you, do not join me in my outings. Let me be a man of my own when I can.”

Marianne's eyes glistened with hurt for a mere moment, then she righted herself and nodded, a small smile drawing across her face.

“You are right, of course. I have an invitation from Lady Berges for a Ladies' Evening, anyway,” she replied resignedly. Her eyebrows then furrowed as she gave him a pitying smile and reached for his hand.

“I know this is difficult for you, darling,” she said patiently. “But one day, you will feel better about this. When your children come, you will understand what all this was for. They have a way of changing your point of view, children do. It is more than just a duty to fulfill. I know you don’t see that now, but one day, you will.”

Arthur let out a steadying breath as he took in his mother’s words and nodded. “Apologies for my outburst, Mother. You are right, of course. Forgive me for my shortsightedness.”

“No apologies needed, darling,” his mother assured him quickly, leaning in to kiss his cheek. “Now, off you go. Have a wonderful time.”

* * *

Lavinia searched the parlor of Brighton Estate once more, wondering if Arthur was truly going to keep his end of the deal. She was thankful he had accepted her offer, but the demand for a kiss had thrown her off greatly. What had been more peculiar, though, was how much her body had craved it ever since.

She had never been drawn to kissing a man before. Not like that, anyway. Timothy had kissed her cheek once when they had been children, but that had only felt like a brush of air. But Arthur’s kiss had not felt that way at all. Even though it had been surprisingly tender, it had forced a fire to sweep through every vein in her body, making her tingle and leaving her deliciously dizzy.

She was not pleased with the way he had demanded it or that he had been so brash with such a request, but she could not deny that she had liked it. Very,verymuch.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“Sister, who is it you are looking for?” Rebecca asked, coming up to her side with two glasses of wine. She held one out to Lavinia, and she took it with thanks.

“Your fiancé,” Lavinia replied, then took a sip of wine. It immediately went to her head, giving her a fun, dizzying sensation. She took one more sip and then set the glass down on a nearby table. It was best that she was sharp for the evening.

“What?” Rebecca hissed, her eyes shining with betrayal. “Why would you do that? I thought you were helping me?!”

“Be calm, little sister,” Lavinia soothed. “I have it well in hand, I promise you. The Duke and I have come to an agreement, and I believe, if properly negotiated, you will be satisfied with the results.”

Rebecca’s gaze turned to one of resentment to excitement. “Tell me,” she implored.

Lavinia gave her an amused smile and shook her head. “No. The less you know the better. Have fun this evening. Act as you normally do. There is no need to go out of your way to converse with him tonight. I shall be his companion for the evening.”

“And if someone asks why?” Rebecca asked. “Father has already spread word of the engagement. People will find it odd that we are not speaking to one another.”

“If they do, just simply reply that your new fiancé understands that your social needs are very important,” Lavinia replied with a shrug of her left shoulder.

Her eyes then scanned the room once more, and a mixture of relief and excitement

spread through her when she spotted Arthur making his way toward her. She also noticed how people seemed to preemptively move out of his way, as if afraid to get too close. It bothered her to see this.

“There he is,” Lavinia whispered, giving her sister a gentle push in the opposite direction. “Go on, have fun.”

Not needing any further encouragement, Rebecca skipped off to a circle of nearby friends.

“Your Grace,” Lavinia greeted Arthur politely, giving him her best curtsy. “It is so charitable of you to join us again.”

As if he, too, knew they should put on a show, Arthur gave her a low bow and kissed the back of her hand. A tingle went up her arm as his lips touched her skin, and she had to steel herself against the shiver of pleasure her body suddenly wanted to release.

“The charity is all yours, Miss Dennis,” he replied amicably. “Your presence is always appreciated.”

“It is, indeed,” Timothy agreed, walking up to Lavinia’s side. “How do you do? I don’t believe we’ve met formally. Timothy Hill, the Earl of Stonehames.”

Lavinia felt a shock of alarm as her friend suddenly appeared out of nowhere. She hadn’t expected him to be at the dinner. In fact, she had shamefully not thought of him at all since her meeting with Arthur. Quickly, she gathered herself, and put on a dazzling smile.

“Lord Stonehames, might I have the honor of introducing you to Arthur Kendall, the Duke of Whitekin? He is an honored guest of our family this summer season.”

She looked at Arthur imploringly and was not disappointed when he accepted Timothy's handshake and exchanged pleasantries.

"Ah, yes, you are to be Rebecca's husband, are you not?" Timothy asked, a sudden bark in an otherwise casual tone.

"As of this moment, yes," Arthur replied, his eyes darting to Lavinia.

"Lord Stonehames, tell me," Lavinia said quickly, changing the subject. "Is your dear wife joining us this evening? I missed her at the ball the other evening and had hoped to say hello."

A look of indigent hurt appeared on Timothy's face for a brief moment at the mention of his wife. In fact, it was only then that Lavinia realized that he gave her that lookanytimeshe mentioned Emily. But why? She looked back at her friend curiously, wondering suddenly why that was.

"Indeed, she is," Timothy replied in a defeated tone. "And she is surely worried that I've been gone too long. I should get back to her. Come find us later if you wish to speak with her."

"I will surely do so," Lavinia said as Timothy already started to walk away. She looked at her friend's back, wondering what was going on with him.

"A turned down proposal, I assume?" Arthur asked, humor lacing his voice.

"I beg your pardon?" Lavinia asked, turning back to him with a confused look.

Arthur nodded toward Timothy's fleeing figure. "That gentleman. I'm assuming he proposed to you at some time, and you broke his heart when you chose spinsterhood over him?"

The sense of longing for Arthur's kiss suddenly shriveled up and burst into dust as indignation flooded through her.

"No, that is certainly not what happened," Lavinia replied, doing her best to keep her voice at a low, calm tone. "Timothy and I have been friends since childhood and have only ever been friends. In fact, he and Emily wedded quite young, as if they couldn't wait to be together."

"Apologies." Arthur chuckled, shaking his head as if amused by her controlled anger.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“It’s just by the way he looked at you, the poor boy has always been infatuated with you. And when you brought up his wife? Well, it was like watching a wretched dog get kicked. Quite sad, actually.”

Lavinia rolled her eyes, starting to question her loyalty to her plan. “You have absolutely no idea what you are talking about, Your Grace,” she replied matter-of-factly, her nose gravitating upward.

“As you say,” Arther agreed, putting his hands up as a sign of surrender.

Before they could continue, the bell for the dinner began to ring, and their host’s voice called for everyone to join him in the dining room.

“Shall we?” Arthur asked, holding his arm to her.

Lavinia said nothing as she accepted his arm, and together, they walked into the dining room. She had already spoken to the host’s wife, who had agreed with little fuss to seat her with the Duke at the same table. Personally, Lavinia thought the woman was relieved that anyone would accept the Duke’s presence.

As they took their seats, they were quickly joined by two other ladies she knew and their husbands—all of whom were known to be vicious gossips.

“Why, Miss Dennis,” Lady Lewis greeted, her voice light and airy as she took the seat her husband held out for her. “How lovely that we are dining together.”

Lady Tinsel, Lady Lewis’s friend, smirked. “Yes, and you’ve brought a friend with

you. How lovely.”

“You are the Duke of Whitekin, are you not, Your Grace?” Lord Lewis asked, stretching out his hand toward Arthur. “I must say the Whitekin stockholdings are legendary. There hasn’t been a business yet that has failed with your investments.”

“I am,” Arthur agreed cordially, shaking his hand. “And, indeed, my family does quite well.”

“Glad to hear it,” Lord Lewis continued. “After all, you deserve some sort of victory after what the war did to you. Bloody shame about all that.”

Lavinia watched as Arthur stiffened beside her, and she felt a protective surge go through her.

“Actually, His Grace was well awarded for his valiant efforts in the war,” Lavinia explained matter-of-factly. “He was not only given a sovereign medal for his service, but he also received a healthy land donation. The success of his business ventures, however, is due to his work, and his work alone.”

For a moment, the table grew awkwardly quiet, and Lavinia caught Arthur giving her a look of appreciation as he sipped his wine.

Then, Lord Tinsel cleared his throat and nodded. “Quite right,” he agreed, raising his glass to Arthur. “To the Duke of Whitekin.”

CHAPTERFIVE

“You surprised me this evening,” Arthur admitted, his voice low.

After the dinner, many of the guests took to walking in the gardens under the twilight

sky. They were not alone, but if they kept their voices down, they could have an honest conversation privately.

“I have no doubt,” Lavinia replied playfully. “I knew from the moment we struck our deal that you underestimated me.”

A smile tugged at Arthur’s lips. It seemed so difficult to keep a straight face around her, despite his damnedest. Normally, it wasn’t an issue at all, and his stony face kept people from approaching. It was a tribute he greatly appreciated. Under normal circumstances.

“Even if I did underestimate you,” Arthur retorted, “that does not mean I am sold on this exchange. It will take much more than that to change my mind.”

“I had no doubt that it would,” Lavinia replied haughtily. “But I am not one to give up so easily. Especially when my sister’s happiness is involved.”

A pang of guilt shot through Arthur at the mention of Rebecca. He had seen through the course of the evening, but Lavinia hadn’t mentioned her once, and he felt no inclination to go over to her. It was strange, he realized, that despite his stubbornness toward Lavinia’s idea, he was still drawn more to her than his intended.

“Tell me,” he implored, changing the subject, “how did you know all of those things about me? My awards for my service to Her Majesty are not commonly talked about.”

Lavinia stayed quiet a moment as they walked, and it gave him a moment to take her in. She had worn a white gown with black lace trim. Under the moonlight, it practically glowed, creating an aura around her. Arthur felt a warm sensation slide through his cold heart, and he quickly looked away.

Now, now, none of that.

“I know being a spinster is often viewed as a horrid thing,” Lavinia said at last. “But what most people don’t know is that when you’re not chasing a husband, you can indeed chase an education. I had my father find any newspapers he could about your service from the hall of records and read them thoroughly.”

“And why would he do that?” he asked.

Lavinia looked at him sideways with a small smile. “I told him that I wanted them for Rebecca.”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“Ah.” Arthur chuckled. “Very sneaky of you. Your services could have been useful as a spy during the war.”

“I have no doubt.” Lavinia laughed, a proud smile gracing her face. “You will learn, Your Grace, that I take my deals very seriously. As your wife, services like the ones I provided this evening would be regularly given. The people we sat with like to talk quite a bit. Soon, everyone here will know of your heroism.”

This startled Arthur a bit. No one had ever looked past his scar to want to learn where it came from or why he had it. They just took one look and assumed it was something deserved. A bad scar for a bad man.

“You did me a service tonight,” he agreed, steering her toward a darkened corner of the gardens. Lavinia allowed him to do so and put up no resistance when he pressed her back up to a trellis. She looked back at him with a studious gaze, as if trying to determine what it was he was trying to do.

Unable to help himself, he reached up toward a loose curl of dark hair by her ear and stroked the silken strands between his fingertips.

“But such a favor can quickly be turned if I refuse your proposal,” he stated. “How do I know you will not turn against me if I still choose your sister after all of this?”

Lavinia reached up, taking his hand into her own, and held it to her collarbone. His palm tingled as he touched her naked flesh, and his blood practically began to sing as he felt the gentle rhythm of her heartbeat. Was she thinking of their kiss as often as he was?

“You will learn, Your Grace,” she whispered, her tone alluring as she looked him in the eye. “That I am nowhere near as fickle as the other ladies of theton.”

“Yes,” Arthur murmured, resisting the urge to kiss her again. “I am starting to see that.”

They stared into one another’s eyes for a moment, the heat in Arthur’s groin growing once again as he took in her doe eyes, dark curls, and full lips. The urge to kiss her again swept through him suddenly, so intense that it startled him. And was it his imagination? Or did she look as if she wanted him to kiss her, too?

“We shouldn’t tarry much longer,” he said, his body moving in protest as he spoke the words.

Something like disappointment passed over Lavinia’s face, and she finally tore her eyes away from him.

After clearing her throat, she nodded and took a step back toward the walkway. “Yes, you are right, of course,” she agreed, her voice unsteady.

* * *

Lavinia was just tucking herself into bed when she heard her chamber door open. Curious, she leaned forward to look out into her sitting room and then relaxed when she saw it was only Rebecca. Her younger sister practically skipped across the rooms, her smile so big that it took up most of her face.

“Tell me everything,” Rebecca urged, bouncing onto the bed. “Has he agreed to drop the engagement? Will he return to Whitekin and leave me be? I saw you sitting with him at the dinner. Was it awful? How do you even eat when you have to look upon that dreadful scar of his?”

Indignation rose up in Lavinia, and she almost snapped at her sister to bite her tongue. There was still much more she needed to learn about the Duke, but one thing she was already tired of was everyone's opinion about his scar. Instead, though, she took a steadying breath and smiled at her little sister.

"He has not," Lavinia admitted, ignoring her sister's question about Arthur's scar. "In fact, he made it quite clear that he wasn't going to give up so easily. But I believe we are turning a corner. We have a little more time left, and I am certain I will change his mind."

Rebecca pouted at this, then looked at her sister with accusing eyes. "You're not saying anything bad about me, are you?"

Lavinia laughed at the absurdity. "What on earth would make you ask that?"

Rebecca shrugged. "You won't tell me any more details about your little plan," she complained. "How am I supposed to know how you are dissuading him?"

"I would never risk your reputation like that," Lavinia countered, feeling offended.

If her sister only knew what she'd offered in exchange... if she knew the personal risk involved... but it didn't matter. All that mattered was the end result.

"You must trust me, Sister," Lavinia urged gently. "I would never do anything to harm you."

Rebecca sighed as she crawled under the covers and lay down next to Lavinia. "I know that," she admitted, snuggling up to her sister. "I'm just worried, you know? I cannot be happy as that man's wife. I just cannot."

"I know," Lavinia assured her, snuggling down into the pillows. "Sleep now. I have it

all in hand.”

Rebecca nodded, then yawned as she snuggled into the blankets and pillows in Lavinia’s bed, and then closed her eyes. Random sleepovers were something that had happened often since the death of their mother, and Lavinia had come to accept them. More often than not, Agnes, her fifteen-year-old baby sister, would often join them as well.

As Rebecca drifted to sleep, Lavinia looked down at her and sent up a silent prayer.

Please, Lord. Please, let my plan work.

But as she prayed, she began to wonder if she wanted her plan to work for her sister’s benefit or her own.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

The next morning during breakfast, their father announced that the Duke had sent tickets for the Opera that would be performing in three days' time. While Rebecca and Lavinia shared a glance, Agnes excitedly asked if she would be allowed to attend as well.

"Indeed, you will," Kenneth replied jovially. "He's sent tickets for all of us and has included in a little note that his mother would be joining us well."

He looked up from the letter, smiling at Rebecca. "You will be able to meet your future mother-in-law," he stated happily. "Won't that be nice?"

"It certainly will not," Rebecca grumbled under her breath.

"What was that?" her father asked, his brow raised in an intimidating fashion.

"I certainly believe so," Rebecca said louder, forcing a smile. "Quite a lot."

"Ah," Kenneth replied, regaining his smile. "And how is your engagement going, thus far? Did you and your fiancé get a chance to converse with one another at the dinner party last night?"

Rebecca looked quickly at Lavinia, her eyes pleading for help.

"Actually, Papa, we spent last night introducing the Duke to our friends," Lavinia replied, setting down her cup of tea. "There's so many horrid rumors about him, you know, and Rebecca and I wanted to help dispel such vile speech."

“How honorable of you,” Kenneth praised. “But the Duke is a grown man. I am sure he can speak for himself.” He turned his attention back to Rebecca. “At the Opera on Friday, I want to see you speaking with your fiancé. Do you understand? One way or another, he will be your husband. And the union will benefit greatly if you make time to get to know one another.”

“Yes, Papa,” Rebecca sighed, turning back to her poached eggs with a look of defeat.

After they finished breakfast, Lavinia was on her way to attend to her embroidery when she was approached by a valet.

“Pardon me, Miss Dennis, but a missive has just arrived for you,” he stated, bowing low as he offered the letter on a silver tray.

Lavinia quickly thanked him and took the letter. She waited until he walked away before stowing herself into a nearby closet and opening it.

The first was compelling. But how will the second go? See you at the Opera.

There was no signature, but she knew who it was from. She was starting to enjoy these secret missives from the Duke. Even if they were irritatingly short and slightly annoying.

Unable to help the grin on her face, Lavinia tucked the note into her bosom, left the closet, and began to mentally prepare herself for what was coming next.

CHAPTER SIX

“Oh, my darling, this was such a wonderful idea,” Marianne stated enthusiastically, looking over the edge of their Opera box. “I am so happy you are taking your engagement seriously.” She turned back to her son with a slight pout and added,

“Though I do wish you’d tell me more about how the dinner went.”

“It went perfectly well, Mama,” Arthur assured her, taking her hand to guide her to her seat. He had sent word ahead to the Opera house to have two small tables set up in the box.

“Yes, you said that.” Marianne sighed. “But that is all you have said about it.”

“Well, that is because that is all there is to say about it,” Arthur replied as the curtains to the box were pulled back.

A moment later, the two of them were joined by Kenneth and his three daughters. Rebecca and the youngest sister looked lovely in their pastels, but it was Lavinia he was immediately drawn to. She wore a navy blue gown with black lace gloves, and her dark curls were pinned prettily, with a navy blue feather sticking out of them.

His body reacted immediately to the sight of her, but he ignored it and went to Rebecca first.

“Ah, my lovely bride-to-be,” he greeted cheerily, kissing her hand. “Thank you for your presence.”

Rebecca gave him a thin smile and nod, but nothing more, and her father quickly approached her side to speak.

“We are honored that you thought of us, Your Grace,” Kenneth stated pleasantly. “You know Rebecca and my eldest, Lavinia. But may I introduce my youngest daughter, Agnes.”

“A pleasure to meet you, young lady,” Arthur said, bowing to the smallest of the Dennis sisters.

“The pleasure is mine, Your Grace,” Agnes stated in a most elegant fashion. Then, in a more childish nature, she added, “Are you to be my big brother? I’ve always wanted one.”

At this, everyone in their box chuckled, and Marianne quickly seemed taken with the young girl.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“Are you not the most precious thing?” she gushed, taking Agnes’s hand. “Come, I insist you sit by me for the performance. Lord Donset, you, too. I should like to get to know my son’s future father-in-law better as well.”

“Oh, indeed,” Kenneth replied jovially, then beckoned to Lavinia. “Come, Lavinia, the four of us shall sit together so that these two may talk some more.”

“Actually, Lord Donset,” Arthur spoke up, “perhaps it would be better if Miss Dennis sat with Miss Rebecca and me. After all, a chaperone is necessary.”

“Quite right, quite right,” Kenneth agreed. “Well then, the three of you take that table over there. We shall take this one here.”

Arthur offered his arm to escort Rebecca to their table, but she only gave him another strained smile and took Lavinia’s arm instead. He pushed the feelings of indignation away and followed behind them so he could pull out their chairs. Rebecca looked disappointed when Arthur took the seat between her and her sister, and when he explained it was so that they could converse better, she only nodded and turned her full attention to the stage.

Within minutes, the lights of the Opera house began to dim, and the hum of talking hushed as the story began. Arthur enjoyed some forms of opera, but the one performed that evening was that of a love story, and he had no interest in watching it.

“Well, this is rather dull, is it not?” he whispered to Rebecca a few minutes into the opening scene.

“Shh, Your Grace,” Rebecca pleaded, her eyes glued to the stage.

He knew she wouldn’t look at him then. Even if he begged her to. She needed something, anything, to look at other than his face.

He turned away from her, giving up on conversation altogether, and looked at Lavinia. She was not focused on the stage at all but on him. A look stating, “I told you so,” was written clearly on her face.

“And you?” he whispered to her. “Do you find this scene as captivating as your sister?”

Lavinia let out a breathy laugh and shook her head, the dark blue sapphires in her earrings swaying lightly. “If I am to be honest, no,” she whispered back.

Arthur raised an eyebrow at her, surprised. “I thought you also had an affinity for love stories,” he teased.

“Oh, I do,” Lavinia agreed. “But only for real ones. The Opera is wonderful. I find the ability to sing such arias quite breathtaking. But the acting, I feel, is much too exuberant, too dramatic, to really portray real life. It makes love feel so...”

“Imaginary?” Arthur offered.

A smile touched Lavinia’s lips, and she nodded at him. “Precisely.”

A subtle but clear shushing sound came from Arthur’s mother then, and they both turned their attention back to the scene. All too quickly Arthur became bored with it, and his mind began to wander back to their kiss. The memory of it had been plaguing his mind every free moment he had, consuming him with the pleasure he’d felt from it.

He pictured them alone, tucked away in the privacy of their box. He would wait until he caught her looking at him, then bring himself closer to her. Slowly, at first, so as not to startle her, then he would kiss her. He could taste the sweetness of her lips, feel the soft flesh of her cheek beneath his palm. She would be bashful at first, which would only make him want her more. But then, as their kiss deepened, and he pulled her into his lap, she would melt into him, giving in to her curiosity and desires.

“Why can I not propose to the eldest daughter?” he recalled asking his mother when he had finally agreed to find a wife.

“Because she is five-and-twenty and off of the marriage market,” his mother had explained matter-of-factly. “You cannot marry a woman no one else wants. You must go after one every gentleman wants. Miss Dennis is just too old. Miss Rebecca will suit you better. She is younger, more popular, and will restore both your vitality and your reputation. I am sure of it.”

Although the topic had been held in the form of a conversation, Arthur knew it had been a command. Marry Rebecca because she is better for their reputation. But now, as he subtly looked from Rebecca to Lavinia, he wondered what gossip would come from marrying a woman who couldn’t even look at him. What happiness would she talk of to others? What secrets would she share because of her displeasure?

Arthur’s thoughts tumbled over and over as the Opera continued, but they all came back to the kiss he’d shared with Lavinia. Finally, though, a loud roar of applause went up throughout the Opera house, and the singers all gathered hand in hand on stage. The moment the lights came on, his mother was out of her seat, going quickly to Rebecca’s side.

“What did you think of it, my dear?” Marianne asked excitedly. “Did you enjoy it?”

“Oh, it was quite lovely,” Rebecca assured, already taking steps toward the curtains.

As one, the group left the box and gathered together out in the hallway.

“We have traveling tropes come through Whitekin all of the time,” Marianne continued. “We may not be as busy as London, but the entertainment we receive is just as lovely.”

A feeling of disappointment enveloped Arthur as he watched his mother trying to bond with Rebecca. He had thought that she was giving him the cold shoulder just because of his scar, but now that he was watching her converse with his mother, he saw that Rebecca’s coldness also extended to his mother. He spared a glance at Lavinia and noticed that even she looked annoyed at Rebecca’s lack of enthusiasm.

“Well, that does sound nice,” Rebecca replied with a fake smile. “If you’ll excuse me, though, I see some friends that I simply must catch up with.”

“Prudence! Eliza! Oh, how good to see you again!” she squealed, showing an exuberance she had yet to share with Arthur or his mother.

“We thought that was you up there!” Prudence giggled, taking Rebecca’s arm. She then leaned in close to Rebecca’s ear and whispered, “So, is it true? You are engaged to this beast?”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Arthur had been used to hearing such things, but it was clear by the look on his mother's face that she was not. She looked at him pityingly, and his heart ached for her. She'd never asked for such a grotesque son.

"Papa," Lavinia stated, speaking above the gossiping whispers of Rebecca's friends. "It is still early, and the night is beautiful. Why don't you take Her Grace and Agnes around the corner to the ice shoppe? The three of us shall join you shortly."

"Oh, yes, Your Grace," Agnes agreed enthusiastically, unaware of the tension surrounding them at the moment. "They have done something divine with blueberries and cream, you will absolutely love it, I promise."

As if comforted by Agnes's excitement, Marianne smiled graciously at her and nodded. "Well, that does sound lovely," she agreed. "Lord Donset, do you mind?"

"Not at all," Kenneth agreed, shooting a final disappointed look at the back of Rebecca's head. "Please, allow me."

"It's all right," Arthur assured Lavinia resignedly as they both watched their parents leave.

"It certainly is not," Lavinia hissed, practically trembling with rage as she walked over to her sister and her friends. "How dare you," she stated, glaring at the group of young women. "How dare you say such cruel things, especially in such an open space?"

"We meant no harm." Prudence laughed indifferently. "Did we, ladies?"

“It was an honest question,” Eliza said in agreement. “Did our mothers not raise us to be honest?”

“Oh, that’s right, poor darlings,” Prudence said in a pitying voice. “You didn’t grow up with a mother, did you? Of course, you wouldn’t know.”

Arthur felt himself flinch as the young ladies made the distasteful remark. He had been so consumed with issues regarding the rumors about him that he had forgotten Lavinia was dealing with some of her own. Feeling as if he should say something, he stepped toward them.

But before he could say anything, Lavinia stepped in front of him, towering over the younger ladies.

“One thing my mother did teach me was that a lady who speaks so lowly about others is not a lady at all,” she said, her tone low and biting. “In fact, gossipers are the lowliest of creatures, ranked even beneath the beggars and wretches that crowd our London streets. You may have your families’ money to keep you in fine clothes, but to me, you are nothing more than paupers begging for a penny.”

“Lavinia!” Rebecca gasped, and Arthur bit his bottom lip to keep from laughing.

“If you must speak, speak with purpose, ladies,” Lavinia advised coldly, pulling Rebecca away by the arm.

Rebecca let out a sound of frustration as she watched her friends all hurry away from the interaction. Silently, Arthur followed them out of the theater toward the ice shoppe.

Once more, he had been impressed with Lavinia’s strength and protectiveness, and he wondered, truly for the first time, if Rebecca really was worth marrying.

* * *

“Why did you embarrass me like that?” Rebecca wailed.

They had both bid goodnight to their father and younger sister, and this time, Rebecca didn’t even go to her own room first. Instead, she followed closely behind Lavinia, demanding an explanation for her outburst.

“The real question is, why are you so comfortable sharing in gossip?” Lavinia retorted, growing weary of being her sister’s protector. “You know how badly it has hurt our family. First when Mother died, and those awful rumors of Agnes being a cursed child. Then when I was nineteen, the rumors circulating about Father and me, and how I’d replaced Mother in ‘every’ sort of way for you and Agnes?”

“Those were different,” Rebecca shot back. “They were lies! What we say about the Duke is true. He does look like a monster, and by the way he looks constantly disappointed in me, I bet he acts like one too!”

“He’s disappointed because you see nothing but his scar!” Lavinia lamented, growing frustrated that she had to explain this to Rebecca. At twenty years old, Lavinia felt that she should be beyond such a need.

“Are you defending him?” Rebecca asked, giving Lavinia an appalled look. “You are supposed to be defending me, Sister, not him! You promised me that you would end this engagement, but after what happened tonight, it seems that you’ve only sealed it! Whose side are you on?”

Lavinia took a deep breath as she rubbed her temples. “Yours, Sister,” she stated softly. “Always yours. But do you need to be so cruel? You were raised to be much kinder than this.”

“I am cruel because he threatens my ability to stay here with you and Papa and Agnes. I am cruel because I have already found my love, and I do not want to betray him,” Rebecca stated. “And I will not stop. Now, I need to be sure once and for all. Are you truly going to help me get out of this marriage? Whatever it takes?”

Lavinia’s loyalty to her family overrode her other feelings, and she nodded in resignation.

“Yes, Sister,” she promised in a defeated tone. “Whatever it takes.”

CHAPTERSEVEN

“Mother,” Arthur called softly, his knuckles rapping on the parlor door. “Might you have a moment?”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Marianne looked up from her embroidery and smiled at her son. “Darling,” she greeted happily, patting the cushion beside her. “Of course, I do. I was just trying to finish these last few stitches before I retire to bed. Do you mind if I continue while you talk?”

“Not at all,” Arthur replied, taking a seat beside her. “Did you enjoy our time at the Opera with the Dennis family?”

Marianne smiled and nodded as her eyes and hands remained on her needlework. “It was a lovely production, and Lord Donset and his daughters seem most pleasant.”

“Indeed,” Arthur agreed, studying her.

He was trying to focus on the subject at hand, but his thoughts kept fleeing back to Lavinia. She had looked ravishing at the Opera. Not pretty or beautiful like the other ladies. She was more than that. She was powerful. More goddess than human.

“Miss Rebecca, though,” he went on, struggling to control his thoughts, “she still seems quite unnerved about our engagement. And the company she keeps gives me pause.”

Marianne looked up at him from her needlework, studying him over the rim of her small spectacles. Then, with a sigh, she tucked the needle into the fabric and set her piece aside.

“Miss Rebecca did seem a bit distant,” she agreed, after taking a moment to gather her thoughts. “But she is young. And obviously very popular in the London circles.

Of course, she will be resistant to change at first. But give her time. She will find new friends and new passions in Whitekin as your wife.”

“And what if she does not?” Arthur asked.

“She will.” Marianne sighed. “I was the same way when I found out about my engagement to your father. But we ended up in a very beautiful marriage. It just takes time. You will see, and so will Miss Rebecca.”

“I am not so sure, Mother,” Arthur replied, shaking his head. “However, Miss Dennis, she is quite amicable. And you should have heard the way she defended our family.”

“I am sure Miss Dennis is as lovely as she looks,” Marianne countered, “but do not forget that she, too, has been embroiled in scandal. Miss Rebecca, though, has not. And is obviously much adored. If you cannot accept this marriage as a love match, then consider it one of convenience. By marrying her, you are proving that there is nothing wrong with you or our family, and others will be forced to see it.”

“But, Mother—”

Marianne stopped her son, grabbing him tightly by the wrist and looking him square in the eye. “It is your duty to restore our family’s reputation, Arthur,” she stated, her tone grave. “Yours and yours alone. You will marry Miss Rebecca. And soon. Lord Donset and I have spoken, and we both agree three months is too long.”

“What do you mean?” Arthur asked.

The image of Lavinia suddenly appeared in his mind, and he felt a sense of longing pass through him.

“Exactly what I said,” his mother stated matter-of-factly. “Three months is too long. He and I have spoken with the bishop of the church. Your wedding ceremony will be at the end of the month.”

Arthur balked at this. Since meeting Lavinia at Donset Estate, he could not stop thinking about her. But perhaps that was why his mother was right. If he spent three more months close to Lavinia, he might not be able to think straight. Let alone keep his hands to himself. There was trouble here, and he knew it.

“Very well,” he sighed, feeling defeated in more ways than one. “We shall do things your way, Mother.”

* * *

“You’re going to unthread the whole thing if you don’t stop fiddling with it,” Rebecca scolded Lavinia as they rode along in their carriage. “What has you so nervous anyway? It is my head on the chopping block. Not yours.”

Lavinia stopped pulling at the loose thread on her black lace gloves and folded her hands in her lap. She and Rebecca had not said much to one another since the night at the Opera. Rebecca was convinced Lavinia wasn’t truly going to help her. And Lavinia was convinced that her sister was no longer the nice young woman she’d raised her to be. Either way, Lavinia realized, she was the failure in this situation, not Rebecca.

When their father announced that the Duke would be joining them at the annual Gardens & Conservatory ball, Lavinia had expected that another secret missive would come for her. But none had arrived, and she feared that her deal with the Duke had been compromised. If it had, there would be no saving her sister.

“I am in need of a new pair of gloves, Papa,” Lavinia stated, choosing not to retort to

Rebecca's scolding. "Perhaps we could go to the Modiste soon?"

"Yes, of course," Kenneth agreed, a twinkle in his eyes as he looked at both of his daughters. "But you will need to be fitted for more than just gloves."

Beside her, Rebecca immediately perked up. "Do we get new dresses, Papa?"

"Indeed, you do." He chuckled. "You all do, of course, but you in particular, my dear. It is time we have your wedding dress designed and fitted."

For the first time in days, Rebecca looked at Lavinia once more with a pleading look and clasped at her hand.

"We have months yet, do we not?" Rebecca asked. "I am not sure I am ready to think of such things just yet."

"Yes, well," Kenneth murmured, shifting uncomfortably in his carriage seat. "The Dowager Duchess and I have been communicating, and we agreed that three months is a bit too long. Especially after seeing how well these last few interactions have been going. You shall wed him at the end of the month."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“What?” Rebecca breathed, the color draining from her face as she looked at their father. “Papa, please—”

“Enough,” Kenneth snapped, growing stern. “The Duke of Whitekin has proved himself an honorable man, and his mother is a saint of a lady. This union will be good for both families and end these rumors of ill repute for us all.”

A tense silence fell over the carriage as they finished their journey. Lavinia’s mind was scrambling, looking for any possible way to get her sister out of the arrangement. She decided not to heed Arthur’s lack of contact as a bad omen and went forward with the idea that tonight was her third and final chance to change his mind.

Upon their arrival, Rebecca all but bolted from the carriage, disappearing with a group of friends who were making their way inside.

“You have spoiled her,” Kenneth grumbled as he walked with Lavinia.

“I have tried to protect her, Papa,” Lavinia replied, her tone soft, imploring. “Perhaps this just isn’t the right thing to do.”

“Poppycock,” Kenneth retorted with a snort. “Perhaps if you hadn’t snubbed your responsibility of marrying well, Rebecca wouldn’t have to do this. But we cannot change the past, so this is what must be done now.”

Lavinia pulled on a smile just before the Master of Ceremonies announced their names. She stood, perfectly prim and composed, with her father, until the ordeal was over, then abruptly left his side. Around her, she could hear the whispers of gossip.

Of her, of Rebecca... of their mother, and she began to walk faster. She needed a moment, just a quick one, to be alone and gather herself.

“Ah, so you are ignoring me, too, as well as your sister,” a familiar voice called out, making Lavinia stop in her tracks. Shivers of pleasure ran down her arms as she heard Arthur’s deep voice, and despite her annoyance, she felt a soothing wave lap over her anxiety.

Had his voice always had this effect on her?

“Your Grace, my apologies,” Lavinia offered, turning to face him. “I did not realize I had walked past you.”

“Nor does anyone else,” he replied, shrugging one of his muscled shoulders as he approached. His dark green eyes studied her, then tried to meet her gaze. She avoided it, keeping her eyes on the floor below them.

“What is the matter?” he asked, his tone surprisingly tender.

She knew she couldn’t tell him the truth. That the weight of his decision hung around her neck as much as it hung around Rebecca’s. That his inability to write to her had scrambled her brain.

She drew on her strength and forced a smile as she finally met his eyes. “Nothing at all, Your Grace,” she replied, her tone a careless sigh. “Though I am curious to know- is our deal still on? Is this to be my third chance?”

Something troubling passed over Arthur’s gaze, but his smile remained intact, and he nodded.

“Indeed, it is,” he replied. “And I have already attempted many times to get your

sister to dance. All to no avail. It seems she is set on avoiding me until the moment we are to be wed.”

“She is stubborn,” Lavinia acknowledged, slightly disheartened by her sister’s continual bad manners.

“Yes, she is,” Arthur agreed. “Though I have no issue with stubbornness. It can be quite charming.”

“That is surprising to hear,” Lavinia laughed softly, not able to help herself.

“Stubbornness kept me alive during the war,” Arthur replied amicably. “In fact, I am sure that is the only reason I left with my life. I was too stubborn to die.”

“A blessing, to be sure,” Lavinia replied, feeling more at ease.

“Only some believe so,” Arthur retorted, the sad truth ringing in his voice, before changing the subject. “So, your sister has made her choice. What is yours?” he asked, taking on a more sarcastic tone. “Shall we commence with our third event? Your last effort to change my mind?”

Arthur held his arm out to her, giving her a mischievous smile, and Lavinia couldn’t help the small laugh that left her as she took it. Arthur could indeed be charming when he wanted to. She wondered, for the briefest of moments, why he hadn’t tried such charm with her sister.

Arthur led her to the dance floor, which was already occupied by several couples. As they took their place, Lavinia noticed how many people fumbled their steps to get a look at them, and for a moment, she felt insecure.

“Don’t look at them,” Arthur instructed, his deep voice calm as he began the dance,

“just keep your eyes on me.”

Lavinia felt a delicious shiver as she felt Arthur’s hand on her waist and heard his deep voice whispering words of encouragement. There was something about the way he led her that made her feel both safe and excited.

“I have dealt with judgmental looks before, but it’s never felt this invasive,” Lavinia confessed, moving into the steps with him.

Arthur smirked as he moved her around with surprising grace. She had never expected such a hardened man to enjoy the art of dance.

“Yes, well, you’ve never danced with a beast before, have you?” he asked, his tone light.

“How do you do that?” she asked.

“Do what?”

“Have such little care about what others think of you,” Lavinia explained. “There’s been such horrid gossip about you since you’ve arrived, and yet, you seem unfazed by it all.”

Arthur chuckled and spun her around at the appropriate time. “I’ve had this scar for years now,” he replied. “I’ve gotten used to it, I suppose. People can say what they want. I have little personal care for what others choose to talk about.”

“So why push this marriage, then?” Lavinia asked as they continued to dance. “You don’t seem that enthused about it yourself.”

Arthur’s smile dropped a little, but he nodded. “I said personal care. But this marriage is neither just for me nor just for your sister. It is for our families. We must all do our part, whether we like it or not.”

“You sound like my father,” Lavinia retorted, annoyed by the fact.

“I take no offense to that,” Arthur replied, spinning her once more in time with the music. “Your father is a great man. In finances and in family. He raised you, did he not?”

“Yes, but I am a failure to Society,” Lavinia scoffed.

“Not in my eyes,” Arthur stated, his tone sincere. “You are a brave, beautiful woman who is extremely protective of her family. And you are not afraid to be yourself. Every woman here is wrapped in some sort of pastel atrocity that passes as fashion. But you? You allow yourself to take comfort in your preferences. And you wear them quite well.”

Lavinia noticed Arthur’s eyes travel slowly down her gown, then up again, and she felt warmth touch her cheeks as she saw the heat in his gaze.

“In fact, you are, without any doubt, the most beautiful woman here,” he continued, his voice dropping an octave. “It may be my scar that draws their attention to me... but have you considered that it is your beauty that draws their attention to you?”

Lavinia was speechless. She had been called beautiful by many suitors in her younger days, but no one had spoken of it with as much reverence as Arthur just had. Before she could form a response, the song ended, and Arthur was bowing in front of her. In a sort of daze, she curtsied to him as she heard the polite applause fill the air.

“Would you look at that,” a feminine voice whispered from behind her.

“The spinster witch and the beast.” Another giggled. “They do look rather perfect together, don’t they?”

Lavinia’s eyes went back to Arthur’s, and she knew by the look on his face that he had heard them, too.

“Let us talk,” he whispered, his tone serious as he led her away. “Meet me in the gardens in ten minutes.”

* * *

Get ahold of yourself.

Arthur made his way through the crowded conservatory, ignoring the stares from everyone he passed. Something had happened to him on the dance floor. Feelings long since dormant, or even thought dead, had reared up inside of him as he spoke about Lavinia.

Everything he had said about her was true. And he wanted her. He wanted Lavinia, specifically, not Rebecca. Not because she was afraid of him or even because her behavior was coarse. But because she wasn't Lavinia.

He had wanted this evening to be fun, to be a goodbye of sorts to the idea of having an option out of his marriage. And yet, as he had held Lavinia in his arms and looked into her eyes, he had realized he was only torturing himself.

He had to tell her the truth. Not tomorrow or after the ball. But right now.

CHAPTEREIGHT

"There you are," Timothy stated, grabbing Lavinia's arm as she tried to make her way outside. "I've been looking for you."

"Timothy!" Lavinia exclaimed, completely caught off guard. "Apologies, I did not see you."

Timothy's smile fell, and a look of hurt came over his face. Lavinia tried to gently pull away, but his grip on her only tightened.

"Did you not know that I was coming?" he asked.

"Of course, I did. I simply forgot," Lavinia placated.

Her heart was starting to beat faster as time ticked by. She was to be meeting Arthur at any moment, and she did not appreciate the delay her friend had just pushed upon her.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“Since when do you forget me?” Timothy asked, anger touching his hurt expression.

Growing impatient, Lavinia pulled her arm away with more force. This time, Timothy let her go.

“I have much to deal with regarding my family, Timothy,” Lavinia stated in a short tone. “Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

“No. Wait,” Timothy urged, stepping in front of her. “Something is wrong. Tell me.”

“Please,” Lavinia pleaded, stepping around him. “You and I shall talk later. But for now, let go of me, this instant.”

Timothy stepped away from her as if slapped, but Lavinia felt no guilt, as she was finally let free to go outside. The gardens at the conservatory were vast, but she didn’t have to walk far at all to find Arthur waiting for her. The moment their eyes met, he nodded to a shadowed place nearby.

After making sure no one was paying attention, she made her way quickly over to him and joined him in the darkness.

“You’ve made your decision,” she stated, sparing pleasantries. It wasn’t a question.

Even in the darkness, Lavinia could make out the outline of Arthur’s face. His scar, in particular, seemed to glow. But she was not looking at that and was instead focused on his grimly set expression.

“I have,” Arthur confirmed, and she knew by his tone that she had failed. “Your efforts have been valiant, Miss Dennis. You have done more to protect my reputation in the last two weeks than anyone has in my entire life. But sadly, that does not change things.”

Lavinia could hear the disappointment in his voice and knew his apology was real. He didn’t want this marriage to Rebecca any more than Rebecca wanted this marriage to him.

“You played me, Your Grace,” Lavinia whispered bitterly. “You knew from the start of tonight that you were not going to accept my offer.”

Arthur gave her a pained look, and for a moment, his hand gravitated toward her, as if to reach for her. But then, he suddenly let it drop to his side, then clasped both hands behind his back.

“I enjoy my time with you, Miss Dennis,” he confessed. “I wanted one more night to play with the idea of having you as a wife instead of a sister-in-law. But I believe we’ve played this game to its end. You know it, and so do I. Our parents have moved the wedding up to the end of the month. There is nothing more we can do about it.”

“But my sister,” Lavinia countered, struggling to whisper. “She despises you! And she is in love with someone else. You truly want to be married to a woman who will forever yearn for another?”

“I have no choice,” Arthur stated, his voice annoyingly calm. “And besides, I accepted long ago that a woman would never love me enough to see past my scar.”

Lavinia was growing frustrated. This damned scar. Why did it bother people so? If it hadn’t been for the scar, she wouldn’t be in this position. Neither would he and neither would Rebecca. For a moment, she thought of never meeting Arthur, and that

only made her more frustrated. Why were her feelings so damn confusing?

“You must understand, I will never mistreat your sister,” Arthur went on. “She will be perfectly provided for, and I will never bother her unless it is absolutely necessary...”

Arthur kept talking, but Lavinia was no longer paying attention to his words. Instead, she was focused on the soft sound of footsteps approaching. There were quite a few coming their way. A whole group that would soon catch them together. She could have told Arthur to stop talking or pushed him further back into the darkened space. But instead, she gripped his lapels, pulled him close, and kissed him soundly on the lips.

Arthur’s words stopped immediately, and his arms quickly wrapped around her waist.

A low moan left his lips as he pulled her away just enough so that he could take control of the kiss, and then brought her back to him again. Immediately, Lavinia’s thoughts became scattered as pleasure scrambled her brain and melted her body. She released her hands from his lapels only to wrap her arms around his neck and meld herself to him.

Using her body weight, she pulled herself backward so that Arthur moved with her, and they both stumbled out of their hiding place and into the path of the group walking nearby. Gasps could be heard all around them as they appeared in front of their audience, and Arthur struggled immediately to get out of her embrace.

Lavinia let him go, breathless from their kiss, and felt a well of remorse as Arthur stared at her with accusing eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she mouthed as the people around them started to talk.

“Look, it is the beast and spinster!” A man laughed.

“My word, the indecency!” an older woman’s voice called out.

“Lavinia,” Arthur whispered, looking at her as if she’d just stabbed him. “What have you done?”

“I sacrificed you for my sister,” she whispered as her father, Rebecca, and the Dowager Duchess of Whitekin all came toward them.

The look of betrayal on Arthur’s face was more than she could bear, but as she was surrounded by her father and Rebecca, she knew she had no choice but to focus on what was coming next.

Within a matter of seconds, they were pulled from one another by their families, and Lavinia was being walked to their carriage. Her father all but threw her into the small compartment, and when he closed the door after he and Rebecca climbed in, he slammed it so hard that it shattered the glass plating of the window.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“What in God’s name have you done?” her father bellowed. “Do you have any idea the ruin you’ve just caused? For yourself? For Rebecca? For all of us? I thought you loved us!”

“I do, Papa,” Lavinia spoke earnestly, her hands clasped together in prayer before her. “Please—”

“No,” Kenneth stated, his face scarlet red. “You will talk no more, understand? In fact, you will do nothing, from here on out. You will not leave our house. You will not write to anyone. You will not be allowed to do anything. Am I clear?”

Before Lavinia could reply, her father started on a tangent all over again and did not desist until they made it home. As soon as they were inside, he sent her to her rooms and demanded that her handmaid and another servant be posted outside of her door so that she couldn’t leave. Lavinia accepted all of this silently, no longer trying to explain herself.

She knew what she had done was awful, but at the moment, it was all she could think of to keep her sister from the marriage. But then, when Arthur had looked at her like that, with such betrayal and confusion, she had felt even worse.

She had hurt him. Just like everyone else had. And just like them, she had hurt him with rumors. Rumors that were no doubt spreading like wildfire throughout London. By morning, they would all be ruined.

“Vinnie,” Rebecca said, startling Lavinia as she walked into her room. She had been so busy bowing her head to her father’s harsh words that she hadn’t realized that

Rebecca had already gone upstairs and was now waiting for her.

“Goodness, you scared me,” Lavinia breathed, holding her chest as she took a step back. “How did you get up here so fast?”

“For the first time in quite a while, Father was not focused on me,” Rebecca stated softly. “It gave me time to get up here.” Then, before Lavinia could retort, she flew into her question. “Vinnie, why did you do this?” she demanded, her eyes full of concern.

Lavinia looked around her room, spotted a decanter of wine, and made a beeline for it. She filled her glass to the brim and then drained it. Her head began to feel dizzy, but she’d need to drink much more if she wanted to stop caring.

“You know why,” Lavinia replied, taking off her gloves. She began to grapple with the ties of her dress, growing frustrated with them. From behind her, she suddenly felt Rebecca’s fingertips over hers, and she let go as her sister helped her.

“Allow me,” Rebecca whispered softly.

For the first time since the kiss, Lavinia let out a breath. A real, deep breath that filled her entire lungs.

“It was for me, wasn’t it?” Rebecca asked as she worked loose first the dress’s stays, then the strings of Lavinia’s corset.

“A scandal with you would give me more than enough reason for the ton to praise me for leaving the marriage contract. I would get out untouched. Pitied, even.”

“We know the ton better than our father,” Lavinia stated. “You and I both know that this scandal will indeed touch me, but exonerate both you and him. I am the evil

spinster. The duke is the vicious beast. Two awful things canceling each other out. Father will be pitied as the single father who did his best, and you will look like a pure, white doe that was just saved from a sacrifice to evil. I have no doubt that you will have suitors calling on your doorstep within a month.”

“But, Vinnie,” Rebecca sighed, helping her sister out of her gown and then into her nightgown. “What this will do to you. If the Duke does not agree to marry you, then Papa will have no choice but to force you out of our home. You will have nowhere else to go.”

Lavinia wrenched the pins from her hair, then shook out her curls roughly, grabbing fistfuls of the strands only to give them an extra yank. She then turned around and placed her hands on Rebecca’s shoulders. She tried to muster a small smile, but the result was a pitiful imitation.

“Your happiness and future are protected, my darling,” she said tenderly, looking Rebecca in the eye. “Do not worry for me. Whatever shall befall me is my burden and mine alone. I knew what I was risking.” She paused, took another breath, and then continued, “I do not approve of your recent behavior, I want you to understand that. Your view of the world is so small, Rebecca. I want you to promise that you will learn to enlarge it. But regardless of this, I still love you. Very much. And I will always do what I must to keep you and Agnes happy.”

Rebecca let out a sob and then fell into Lavinia’s arms, squeezing her tight. Lavinia returned the embrace, blinking back tears as she held her little sister. It could very well be the last time she would be able to do so.

“I love you, Vinnie,” Rebecca sobbed into her sister’s chest. “I’m so sorry for being awful. Please, please forgive me.”

“Of course, I do,” Lavinia whispered, sniffing. “Just remember what I said. And

promise that you will strive to gather more compassion.”

“I promise,” Rebecca replied through broken breaths.

The sisters were so focused on their moment of both rejoicing and sorrow that they hadn’t heard the door open, and their youngest sister’s naked feet padding across the floor.

“Vinnie? Becs?” Agnes asked, her soft voice full of concern.

“Oh,” Lavinia sighed, gently letting go of Rebecca. She quickly swiped her thumb under both eyes and forced a smile as she looked down at Agnes.

Even though she was fifteen, Agnes was still quite shorter than her or Rebecca and had yet to hit her growth spurt.

“It’s all right, darling,” Lavinia promised her, walking to her with an outstretched hand. Agnes took it readily and went to wrap her arms around her oldest sister’s waist.

“Something bad happened at the ball, didn’t it?” Agnes asked, looking up at Lavinia with her cheek still pressed to her sternum.

“It was... not ideal,” Lavinia confessed, stroking her little sister’s copper hair. She should have been in bed hours ago, and probably was. Her father’s angry, booming voice had probably awoken her.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“I’m so sorry we woke you up, but all will be well,” she promised Agnes.

“Something is not right,” Agnes stated, shaking her head. “Father is furious, and the Dowager Duchess of Whitekin is here.”

Lavinia felt her heart freeze, and she and Rebecca both snapped their heads to one another. Shesobadly wanted to ask if Arthur was with her.

“Do you know why?” Rebecca asked, coming closer to her sisters.

Agnes shook her head. “No, only that Papa greeted her at the front door himself and then the two of them directly went to his study. I tried to listen at the door, but they were speaking too softly.”

“Well, no shouting.” Rebecca sighed. “That is a good sign.”

“We may certainly choose to take it as one,” Lavinia agreed, not wanting to worry her sisters any more than they already were. “Come, it is getting late,” she urged gently. “Let us get to bed. Rebecca and I shall walk you back to your room.”

“No,” Agnes protested, tightening her grip around Lavinia’s waist. “Can we please stay together tonight?”

“I think that is an excellent idea,” Rebecca agreed quickly, giving Lavinia a pleading look.

A wave of sisterly love enveloped Lavinia as she held both of her sisters tight.

“Truly, it is. Come, Rebecca, you can wear one of my nightgowns for the night.”

Agnes and Lavinia quickly helped Rebecca out of her gown and pins, and once she had her nightgown, the three of them crawled into Lavinia’s large bed and snuggled into one another under the covers.

“I love you, Vinnie,” Rebecca whispered.

“Love you, Vinnie,” Agnes echoed, already falling asleep.

Lavinia pressed her lips tightly together and squeezed her eyes shut to hold back the fresh tears. “I love you, too,” she breathed raggedly, holding them closer. “With all my heart.”

* * *

“She trapped my son,” Marianne Kendall, the Dowager Duchess of Whitekin, bit out, her teeth snapping together with each syllable.

Kenneth Dennis shook his head. Though he was outraged by his daughter’s actions, he couldn’t believe that.

“No,” he stated. “She is in ruin, obviously, but she would not do that. Rebecca was against this marriage from the beginning. Lavinia is so like her mother. Protective to a fault. I should have known she was up to something, but I could have never imagined this.”

He looked into Marianne’s eyes, his own pleading with her for understanding.

“I am so terribly sorry for what my daughter has done to our families,” he apologized emphatically. “I should have been keeping a better eye on them. Should have worked

less. Remarried, even. Leaving them motherless is a personal sin I'll never forgive myself for."

Marianne's stinging gaze softened, and she walked to the bar cart sitting between them. Normally, she would never dare touch whiskey. It was improper for a lady, and it burned her mouth and throat horribly. But she needed it.

"Single parenting is difficult," she agreed in a passive tone as she poured herself two fingers of whiskey.

She raised the bottle to Kenneth, who nodded to her, and she poured the same amount into another glass.

"There is no world in which I can deny that. Like you, I chose not to remarry after my dear husband died. It was too painful of an idea. But what was best for me wasn't necessarily good for my children. It is only with maturity and time that we can see those mistakes."

"Well put," Kenneth agreed, feeling his tension slide away, if only by an iota.

Marianne handed him his glass. They clinked them together, and he drained his in one gulp. Marianne drained half the glass, then let out a hiss. He almost chuckled, despite the brevity of the situation. The Dowager Duchess may have looked perfectly proper on the outside, but inside, she was not afraid to break a rule or two. Just like Lavinia.

"My daughter is not as reckless as you may think," Kenneth ventured, setting down his glass. "She is well-read and plays the violin. Strangely, she likes the art of cooking and does so quite well. In fact, there was a time when both of her sisters refused to eat any food unless Lavinia had made it. She is patient, wise, usually poised, and extremely protective of the ones she loves."

“There is no denying the greatness in her,” Marianne agreed. “Even I have seen it. But this carelessness of hers has cost us all.”

“Not unless your son and Lavinia wed,” Kenneth countered, holding up a finger. “We can twist this story. Make it look as if they were madly in love, trying to keep it a secret because they knew it was wrong. We could say Rebecca gave them her blessing, but before they could announce it, he and Lavinia were caught kissing.”

“They won’t believe that,” Marianne retorted with a dry laugh.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“You’ve been away from London too long, Your Grace,” Kenneth replied quickly. “Thetonwill believe anything they’re told if the story is repeated enough. You go to your friends. I go to mine. We spread from the source, and we are absolved.”

CHAPTERNINE

“Arthur, wake up.”

Arthur’s head jerked upwards, his neck screaming in pain at the sudden movement. When his mother had left with the carriage as soon as they’d gotten home, he’d sat on the chaise in the foray and waited for her to return. He must have fallen asleep.

He blinked against the harsh light coming in from the windows and saw his mother standing in front of him, wearing a different gown from last night.

As Arthur awakened, he remembered their tense conversation last night about his future with Rebecca. They hadn’t been arguing for long before his mother had suddenly left the room and then the house. He had been furious. With his mother. With Lavinia. With the entire situation.

“Where have you been?” he demanded to know, rubbing his sore neck. “Do you have any idea how worried I’ve been about you?”

“Clearly,” Marianne retorted dryly. “You were so asleep when I got home last night that you didn’t stir even when I tried to rouse you.”

“Where were you?” he repeated, ignoring her jab.

“At Donset Estate,” his mother replied, walking away from him and toward their dining room.

Arthur felt his heart squeeze tightly in his chest, and he quickly followed her. “Why? What happened?” he asked.

“You and Rebecca will not marry,” his mother stated matter-of-factly as she walked into the dining room.

“Yes, that is obvious, but what of Lavinia? As I stated last night, a marriage will be the only way we survive this without anyone getting burned.”

“Yes,” Marianne agreed, taking her seat. She beckoned to a servant, who came forth to pour her tea and take her breakfast order.

“Lord Donset and I discussed that at length last night,” she continued after she finished with the servant. “While I was against the idea at the beginning, he has brought me around to your way of thinking.”

Something comprised of both relief and anger filled Arthur as he took this in. While he was relieved that he could save his family from any further scandal, he was also enraged that he would now be married to the woman who had betrayed him. He had grown to like her, even trust her a small amount, and then she had destroyed it.

“I do believe that that is the most reasonable solution,” Arthur replied, his tone somewhat defeated. He took a seat at his mother’s side and was quickly brought his usual breakfast of thinly sliced fried pork and three eggs.

“So, here is what shall happen now,” his mother continued. “After breakfast, you will go upstairs, bathe, and change, and we shall make our way to Donset Estate. Once there, you will formally propose to Miss Dennis, and her father and I shall begin to

spread the news. You shall be married in two weeks' time, and the three of us shall return to Whitekin. In a few weeks, any and all rumors will dissipate, and we can all continue with our lives."

They did not speak much after that, and as Arthur ate his breakfast, he focused on his pain. It wasn't just his neck that hurt him, but his head ached badly. His scar, in particular, seemed to throb, and he had to stop himself several times from touching it.

Lavinia had been clear from the beginning that she was trying to protect her sister, but he had stupidly started to believe that she actually saw past his deformity by the way she had defended him. But now it was clear. The pretty words, the playfulness—the kiss. It had all just been to get him away from her sister.

He finished his breakfast, barely tasting it, and then went to his quarters to quickly bathe and dress. Within thirty minutes, he met his mother downstairs, and they traveled to Donset Estate. They were shown into the drawing room, where they found Kenneth, Rebecca, Agnes, and Lavinia.

Lavinia looked at him directly, but he avoided her gaze and only placed a quick, chaste kiss on her hand, as he had with Rebecca and Agnes, and then took his seat.

"Well, we know why we are here," Kenneth announced. "I have explained the situation to my daughters, and they are in agreement. We shall move forward with the new engagement."

"Thank you, My Lord," Arthur stated, raising his head to look at the man. "I appreciate your grace in this."

Kenneth gave him a stout nod. "I know it is customary to hold a reception after the ceremony, but after discussion, Her Grace and I have agreed to forgo that tradition and just hold the sealing of the vows."

“Yes,” Marianne agreed. “We will do what we can to steer the rumors from here on, but we won’t provide any fodder for new ones.”

“An excellent idea,” Arthur agreed coldly.

He finally looked over at Lavinia, and the look of hurt on her face almost made his anger fade. Almost. He waited for her to speak up and negate him as she usually had, but instead, she only stayed silent and lowered her eyes to the floor.

“That being said,” Marianne continued, pulling a dark blue velvet box out of her small reticule, “we can encourage the theme of romance in subtle ways. Rebecca, Arthur was meant to give this to you, but you successfully avoided the possibility of him doing so.”

Arthur watched his mother look pointedly at Rebecca, who paled considerably and looked down.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“But now that things have changed, Lavinia, this is for you,” Marianne finished, handing the box to Arthur. “Go on, Son,” she urged.

Arthur steeled himself from his emotions and got down on one knee as he opened the box in front of Lavinia. He couldn’t fight the sense of pleasure he got from seeing her eyes light up upon seeing the large ruby and black pearl ring inside. It was an heirloom from his father’s side. His mother used to wear it daily until his father had died, and then she had tucked it away for Arthur’s future bride.

Arthur hadn’t bothered to look at the ring since his mother had taken it off. But now, as he saw it glittering on Lavinia’s hand, he realized that the ring did Lavinia justice. It matched her somehow. Far better than it ever could have matched Rebecca.

“To seal our engagement,” he said, reaching for her left hand with his free one.

He could feel Lavinia trembling the moment he touched her, and he desperately wanted to know the cause of it. Was it happiness? Or dread?

“It’s beautiful,” Lavinia whispered as he slid it on her left ring finger. “Thank you.”

“It is custom,” he stated matter-of-factly, getting up.

* * *

Lavinia waited anxiously in the hallway. After Arthur had presented her with the ring, she and her sisters had been ushered out of the room. Rebecca and Agnes had wanted to stay with her, but she had urged them to return upstairs.

Minutes passed like they were hours, but eventually, the doors to her father's study opened, and Arthur strode out.

"Your Grace, I beg a word," Lavinia urged, walking toward him.

"It seems you have won, Miss Dennis," Arthur stated coldly, taking confident strides toward the door. "Our parents are ironing out the rest of the details of our upcoming nuptials, but I must take my leave. There are things to be put in place."

"Arthur, wait," Lavinia pleaded, reaching for his hand.

He rounded on her so suddenly that it startled her, and she began to back up. His eyes locked on hers, he followed until her back was pressed against the wall.

It was the closest she'd ever gotten to him in the daylight, and behind the rugged handsomeness of his face, she could strife written all over him. Her heart ached for the pain she had caused him.

"You like what you see?" he asked, placing his hands on the wall behind her, caging her in. "You have no choice now but to be married to this monster everyone is so afraid of."

Anger and shame were bright in his eyes, but instead of being frightened, Lavinia slowly reached up and gingerly touched his scarred face. For a moment, his eyes closed, and his shoulders dropped, as if he enjoyed her touch. Then, suddenly, his eyes snapped open, and he pulled her hand away.

"I'm not afraid of you," Lavinia breathed. "And I'm not unhappy that this has happened. Please, let us speak about this."

Arthur let go of her hand, only to bring his fingers up to her face. He traced the line

of her jaw, then upward toward her cheekbone. Lavinia felt a shiver of pleasure at his touch, and her breath hitched as he caressed her cheek tenderly.

He studied her face, his gaze lingering on her lips, and she was sure he was going to kiss her. In fact, she realized she wanted him to.

“You played me like a pawn,” he stated, his voice low and full of rage.

“We were both pawns in this game,” she breathed, feeling her arousal grow despite his anger. “I just happened to knock you over first.”

Arthur leaned closer, his nose so close that he was able to gently nudge it against her own. Instinctively, Lavinia’s body gravitated forward. Their lips were so close...

Suddenly, Arthur pulled away, letting out a growling exhale.

“I’ll see you soon, wife,” he called bitterly over his shoulder as he headed for the door. “Try not to create any more scandals before our wedding.”

CHAPTER TEN

“I think you should take it, Miss,” Mrs. Smithe urged, her hand poised in front of the finely decorated china plates. “It was your mother’s set from her marriage, you know. She wanted you to have this.”

Lavinia held up the fine, bone-china plate next to the window, watching the light cast through. A touch of homesickness—even though she hadn’t left yet—swept through her, and she found herself gripping the plate harder, almost desperately.

“Mrs. Smithe is right,” Rebecca urged gently, patting Lavinia’s shoulder.

“Mama would have wanted you to have them,” Agnes added from her little perch.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“Pack them up,” Lavinia agreed, holding out the plate in both of her hands to the housekeeper. “Even if the Duke has one hundred sets of dishes, I must still have something of my own.”

A week had flown past in the blink of an eye, and there was still much to do before Lavinia and Arthur’s wedding. Every morning since announcing their engagement, she’d woken up hopeful that Arthur would finally be willing to speak with her about the kiss—but it had never happened.

He had stopped by twice to ask her father a few questions regarding estate matters. And once to inform her that his mother and the Modiste were working together on her wedding dress. But that was all. And with each day that she hadn’t been able to clear the air with him, she had only grown more anxious.

“Pardon me, Miss Dennis, but you have a visitor,” a footman stated as he entered the kitchen.

“Is it the Duke of Whitekin?” Agnes asked excitedly.

Lavinia looked up immediately, her heartbeat pausing a moment as if waiting for the answer.

“I’m afraid not, Miss Agnes,” the footman apologized. “It is Lord Stonehames.”

Lavinia felt a sweep of disappointment before a small dusting of contentment settled over her. It was not the man she truly wanted to speak with, but she was thankful that Timothy called on her. Even though she presumed he was not here to congratulate her

exactly, she still wanted to see him.

“Thank you, I shall be out momentarily,” Lavinia replied to the footman, then turned to Mrs. Smithe. “Do get a pot of tea and some biscuits ready for Lord Stonehames, please, Mrs. Smithe,” she instructed. “Perhaps something calming.”

“Of course, Miss,” Mrs. Smithe agreed, hurrying toward the kettle.

“Can we come greet him with you?” Agnes asked.

“We should let them speak privately,” Rebecca replied before Lavinia could. “Come, let us go upstairs and work on our going-away present.”

Lavinia gave Rebecca a look of appreciation and then left the kitchen to go meet Timothy in the sitting room. Any other time, she would have happily let her sisters visit with her dear friend, but today, she suspected that the visit was not going to be pleasant.

“Lavinia,” Timothy uttered, his tone full of worry when she entered the room. He shot up quickly from his seat, going to her with both hands held out. She gave him a soft smile and accepted them.

“There, there, no need to make a fuss,” she urged gently, wishing he’d drop the subject. “It may be rare for a spinster to get married, but it is not impossible,” she tried to joke.

“I’d rather you be a spinster than have you married off to that foul beast,” Timothy spat out, his voice suddenly so full of venom that Lavinia snatched her hands away from his.

“My dear friend,” she stated calmly as Mrs. Smithe hurried in with the tea and

biscuits.

The older servant went to leave, but when Lavinia sent her a pleading look, she stopped and took a silent stance next to the wall.

“I know that the circumstances surrounding the marriage are less than ideal, but I promise you that it is indeed a blessing,” Lavinia stated, her tone soft but resolute.

“I would be against this even if he would have taken the proper steps to court you,” Timothy bit out, shaking his head. “He’s not good for you, Lavinia. Surely you must know that.”

Lavinia said nothing as she prepared him a cup of tea.

Have you ever thought that it could be I that is actually no good for him?

“You’ve never thought anyone was good enough for me,” she soothed as Timothy took the offered cup she held out. “Even after you married Emily. Do you remember when you tried to tell my father that you had to have a say in whom I married? So that you were sure that I was being betrothed to someone you approved of?”

For the first time, a smile drew across Timothy’s lips, and he looked up at her as he held his teacup. “Your father thought I was ridiculous,” he admitted, recalling the memory.

“You were ridiculous,” Lavinia teased, gripping his free hand. “You’ve always been overprotective.”

She looked over at him, smiling. “When I was younger, I always wished that I had an older sibling. A brother or sister that could take the brunt of the family weight for me. You were the closest thing I had. And I will always be grateful.”

Timothy looked back at her, his eyes full of pain and sorrow. “I will protect you now,” he swore, setting down his tea so that he could wrap both hands around her hand. “Just say the word. I will challenge him to a duel, and by tomorrow afternoon, we will be celebrating something else entirely.”

Timothy had never been a particularly vicious man. He was a fan of floral prints and games and outings. He picked flowers instead of going to boxing matches. And yet, here he was, threatening to spill a man’s blood just for her sake. She knew she should be touched, but instead, this new attitude frightened her and made her ill at ease.

Lavinia tried to pull her hand away, but Timothy’s grip only tightened.

“Just say the word, Vin,” he urged, his eyes growing with desperation.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“Timothy,” Lavinia pleaded, her tone gentle. “As much as I...appreciate your offer, you know I could never agree to such a trial. I find duels inhumane.”

“And what is human about the man you are betrothed to, hmm?” he asked.

No longer feeling comfortable with Timothy’s view of things, Lavinia used all of her might to pull her hand from his and took a few staggering steps back from him.

“That is enough, Lord Stonehames,” she hissed, holding her bruised hand. “Promise me now that you will not hurt a single hair on the Duke’s head. He may not be the man you hoped I would marry, but he is to be my husband nonetheless, and I will not hear of you threatening him anymore!”

Timothy flinched. She knew he hated it when she addressed him with his proper title. He tried to reach for her hand again, but she took several steps back.

“So, you are going to wed him, then?” he asked, looking as if he were about to fall apart.

Raising her chin in the air, Lavinia gathered herself. “The rumors are true, Lord Stonehames,” she stated evenly and clearly. “The Duke of Whitekin was meant to marry my sister, but he and I fell in love. Our parents were gracious enough to allow us to marry instead. We shall be joined together next week.”

“Lavinia, please,” Timothy urged, taking a step toward her.

“You and your wife are invited, of course,” Lavinia went on, stepping out of his

reach, “but I must ask that if you plan on doing anything untoward to my husband, do not come at all.” She turned to Mrs. Smithe, her body trembling from the stress of the conversation. “Send the footman in, would you, Mrs. Smithe?” she asked. “Lord Stonehames will be leaving.”

“You’re not safe with him, Vinnie,” Timothy called after her as she left the room.

Lavinia flinched but kept going. Behind her, she could hear the footman urging Timothy as politely as possible to leave.

“I’ll be there for you when you realize that!” he called. “Nothing will keep me away!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“I must say, old boy, your bride is a rather stunning creature of the opposite sex,” Archibald murmured, his eyes glued to Arthur’s new bride as they stood on the church steps.

Stunningly clever and ingenious, Arthur thought, watching as Lavinia hugged and kissed her sisters over and over again.

The wedding had been, to their parents’ credit, a success. The rumors of their “true love” had spread like wildfire, and any person deemed worthy of an invitation had come to see the beauty be married off to the beast. Arthur knew that it wasn’t out of love that these people showed up, but out of morbid curiosity.

But he had given them nothing and, in fact, played the perfect role of the new husband. He had smiled at her lovingly, held her carefully, and repeated the holy words with emotion. They had no idea how angry he was at her.

“She is quite beautiful,” Arthur agreed, almost not wanting to admit it.

It was true, though. No matter how angry he was at her for playing him for a fool, he still couldn’t deny that her beauty made his heart pound and his breath hitch any moment he was around her.

Beside him, Archibald murmured something in agreement and then pulled out a flask from his coat. “Well, my boy, I know you need to be going off to start your new life and all of that, but we need a toast before you go,” he insisted, untwisting the top of the flask. “To your new bride and all the happiness she may bring to your home.”

“To my new wife,” Arthur agreed aloud, and her destruction of my soul, he added silently. He tipped the flask back and upended half of its stinging contents down his throat, relishing the pain.

Lavinia had tried constantly over the last two weeks to speak to him privately about what had unfolded between them. Even today, before the ceremony, she had pleaded that he come to her to speak privately. But he couldn’t. He didn’t trust her.

She had manipulated him before, and he didn’t want to give her the opportunity to do so again. The worst part was that if he got too close to her, he was certain he would forget all of his anger.

Arthur and Archibald said their goodbyes after their toast, and with no other place to go or person to distract him, he made his way toward his new wife and family. His mother was already with them, her smile wide as she chatted happily with the youngest Dennis sister, Agnes.

Despite his lack of enthusiasm over being trapped, Arthur found his heart softening. At least his mother would be happy.

As he approached, Lavinia seemed to sense him and turned her gaze directly to his. She smiled at him softly, almost desperately. As if to say, “Please, just listen to me.”

“Well, it was a lovely ceremony, was it not?” he asked, doing his best to be cordial to their new united family.

“An absolutely darling affair,” his mother agreed, letting go of Agnes to come to him. She gave him a tender kiss on the cheek and patted his other one with her hand.

“It was so pretty,” Agnes agreed, clutching her hands around the many bouquets of flowers she had been given. “Vinnie says I can keep the flowers, since they won’t last the journey to Whitekin.”

“But of course you can,” he replied jovially. “Do you like flowers?”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Agnes's smile widened, and she nodded her head excitedly. "Yes, very much so. I love their colors and the beautiful scents they give off."

"Well then, you must be sure to visit us in Whitekin as soon as possible," he replied, giving her a kind smile. "My mother and sister share your love for colorful blooms. I swear their garden is the biggest and brightest in all of England."

"Oh, I would love that!" Agnes exclaimed, looking pleadingly up at her father. "Can we please visit soon, Papa?"

"Most assuredly," Kenneth promised her, giving her a kind look. "Within the month, to be certain."

The united family continued giving their well wishes until there was nothing left to do but for Lavinia and Arthur to take their leave. Arthur watched as bittersweet hugs were exchanged between Lavinia and her two sisters, and for a moment, he felt a sweeping emotion of guilt.

He pictured Rebecca in Lavinia's place, and it didn't sit right with him. Even if Lavinia had betrayed him. But either way, he would have taken one of the sisters away from the two others.

Arthur then shook Kenneth's hand and assured him that he would be informed of their safe journey as soon as they arrived. His mother was next. She hugged him tightly, and then assured him that she would be arriving in the morning. Agnes, in her flurry of loving energy, wrapped her arms around him and gave him a tight hug.

As he looked at Rebecca, her blue eyes shining with tears, he gave her a simple nod, which she returned with the faintest of smiles.

“Shall we?” he asked Lavinia, holding his hand out to her. Lavinia smiled at him graciously as she took it and nodded. Dutifully, he helped her into the carriage and waited until she was situated. “All in hand?” he asked when she turned back to him expectedly.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she replied, patting the seat beside her. “Please, come join me.”

“Another time,” he replied numbly. “It is a beautiful day. I shall ride with the driver a bit.”

As he watched Lavinia’s look of happiness crumble in despair, he almost took back his words and got in. Instead, he closed the door with care and then climbed up to the open seat beside the driver.

* * *

Lavinia wasn’t sure why, but when she realized that Arthur was not going to ride with her inside the carriage, she felt tears start to prick at her eyes. She had hoped that sometime within the last two weeks, she could speak to her new husband, to clear the air and let him know that their marriage was more than just a trick to her. But the moment had never come.

Then, today, as they were wed, she had been filled with hope that they would have a three-hour carriage ride back to Whitekin to finally talk. She had been sure that he’d have no choice but to listen to her then. And now, here he was, riding beside the driver and leaving her alone, once more, with all of her thoughts.

She spent the first hour trying to distract herself by the changing scenery outside of

her window. She'd never traveled north that much and found the roads and pathways beautiful. But soon, even the pretty landscape bored her, and she pulled out a small book from her reticule. After a half hour, though, she tossed it unceremoniously onto the vacant seat beside her and abandoned it.

Lavinia was starting to fear that she wouldn't have the opportunity to speak with her husband at all—perhaps even ever again—when the carriage slowed to a stop about an hour away from Whitekin. She sat up in her seat expectantly, wondering what was happening, and felt relief when the carriage door opened and Arthur appeared.

“Insects are dreadful things,” he declared as he climbed in, wiping some sort of dark matter from his cheeks. “I had no idea they appear in droves on roads.”

Insects? That is why you are finally riding with me? Insects?

“Dreadful creatures, to be sure,” she agreed.

A moment of silence enveloped them as the carriage began to move again, and Lavinia gathered her strength to finally speak to her new husband.

“Your Grace, please,” she implored. “I beg a moment of your time. I wish to speak of our marital matters.”

“Speaking of such things, there is no need to call me by my title when we are alone,” Arthur replied matter-of-factly. “Arthur is fine. Husband will do as well.”

Thinking this was a good start, Lavinia happily nodded.

“Arthur, then,” she replied. “If I may—”

“Your trick was rather good,” Arthur retorted, suddenly busying himself with his coat

buttons. "I am still angry about it, but it was well played. Now, you will no longer bear the title of spinster, but instead Duchess. Your enemies will hate you more now, but they will be forced to respect you due to your rank. Well played. Very well played."

Arthur's words stung, but she wasn't going to waste her time with hurt feelings.

"My only goal was always to get my sister out of harm's way, and you know it," Lavinia retorted matter-of-factly. "I've never hid that from you."

Arthur scoffed, "So, you do believe the rumors that I am a beast." He laughed coldly. "Of course, you do. Even with your pretending, I knew."

"That is not true at all," Lavinia replied quickly. "Though your behavior is certainly not gentlemanly at the moment. I meant harm from a broken heart. She is in love with someone else."

“So she says,” Arthur murmured.

“What was that?”

“Shesaysshe is in love with someone else, and yet the mystery man never makes himself known,” he stated articulately. “It’s a fallacy. A way to ensure that I marry you, not her.”

“So, youwantedto marry my sister?” Lavinia asked patiently.

Arthur seemed to start a little in his seat, and then he looked at her again. There was still anger, but not as much.

“Did you?” she asked gently. “Would you rather Rebecca be seated here and not I?”

“I would have rather not got wrapped up in scandal,” he replied. “That is all.”

“As would I,” she agreed. “But it happened, nonetheless. So, I ask you once more. Please listen to what I have to say.”

Arthur studied her suspiciously a moment more, then nodded. Knowing she wasn’t going to get much more than that, Lavinia continued.

“I was trying to save my sister, yes,” she admitted. “But when you kissed me that first night, I felt something. I think you did, too.”

“I did,” Arthur admitted. “But then, you had to go through with that garish act at the

Conservatory ball, and I realized you had played me a fool.”

“I did not,” Lavinia urged calmly, leaning forward. “Or perhaps in a way I did. But it was a kiss, Arthur.”

“You had a choice,” he bit back, his eyes glittering with anger. “You didn’t have to take such an intense course of action.”

“I had no choice!” she replied vehemently, leaning forward and putting a bold hand on his knee. “My sister needed her freedom, and I-I was beginning to realize I was drawn to you.”

He scoffed again, rolling his eyes. “You honestly want me to believe that you, Miss Prim and Perfect, wanted to kiss me? That you were drawn to me? I may be an outcast, Lavinia, but I am not desperate enough to believe such lies.”

“I did want to kiss you, Arthur,” Lavinia whispered, her eyes pleading with him to hear the truth. “You may choose not to believe if that is your wish, but it is my truth. And I know you’ve been mad at me. I know you’ve pushed me away because of your displeasure over my actions, but believe me when I say that memories of our kiss and the way it made me feel have stolen every spare thought that I have. Not because of how ashamed or how poorly I felt about it, but because I wanted you to kiss me again.”

Lavinia hated the silence that filled the carriage the next quarter hour or so, but she had said her piece, and she had vowed to herself to allow Arthur to do the same.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity of wasted time, Arthur spoke.

“Do you still want to kiss me now?” he asked, staring directly into her eyes.

Lavinia felt hope rise in her, and she smiled at him. “Yes,” she breathed. “I very much do.”

Arthur’s coiled-up body language slowly unwound, and he moved from the seat across from her to the seat beside her. Lavinia immediately felt the warmth of his much larger body radiate off him, and the tension she didn’t even realize she was holding began to release. Her shoulders began to ease away from her ears, her stomach unknotted, and she felt her first true, deep breath of the day fill her lungs.

Arthur looked at her with tenderness, true tenderness, not the false emotion he’d emitted throughout the day. It had fooled everyone else, to be sure. But it hadn’t fooled her. This look was real.

They held one another’s gaze as he slowly reached out to her face and gently stroked her cheek with his knuckles. It was a soft, feathery touch that felt far too gentle to be caused by such calloused, worked fingers. And yet... it was.

Not wanting to make any subtle movements, Lavinia slowly rubbed her cheek against his hand, wanting him to know it was all right. A soft smile touched his lips, and he stroked her cheek again, this time with the pad of his thumb. He started close to her ear, stroking the baby-haired smoothness of her cheek, then slowly moved downward until his thumb caressed her lips.

A spark of delicious electricity ran through her as he touched her bottom lip, and she gasped softly. Her eyes darted to the scar that surrounded his left eye, and she longed to reach out and trace the delicate white lines that highlighted the old wound. She wanted to press kisses along every trace of it, putting to test all of the fairytales she read growing up that swore on the magic of a good heart and make his scar fade away.

As if sensing she was about to speak of such things, Arthur’s thumb traveled to her

chin, and he dipped his head to hers. Pleasure rushed through her as their lips met, and beneath her corset, she felt her nipples harden suddenly. Arthur let out a low, heady moan as he deepened their kiss and brought her body closer to his, moving her with ease into his lap.

Much closer now, Arthur brought his hand up to the nape of Lavinia's neck, and he cradled her head in his large hand as his kiss forced her lips to open wide and reveal her tongue. She whimpered in pleasure as she felt his lips suck the tip of her tongue into his mouth, and she trembled in pleasure when his tongue danced over her own.

Lavinia's world became dizzy with pleasure, and she felt herself begin to cling to Arthur as if he were the only thing that could steady her.

As suddenly as the kiss had started, however, it stopped. Arthur pulled away from her so abruptly, his chest heaving, that it made Lavinia's head spin, and she had to brace herself against the carriage wall to steady herself. With one hand, she pressed her palm to her chest and found her heart beating rapidly. Was it as confused as she was?

"What's wrong?" she rasped, moving her hand from her heart to her head.

“Not a thing,” Arthur replied, still trying to catch his breath.

Part of Lavinia was pleased, seeing him like this. She liked knowing she had such an effect on him.

“But we have arrived,” he continued, “and I would much rather continue this upstairs, rather than in front of all of my servants.”

Lavinia had been so wrapped up in the intensity of their kiss that she hadn’t even realized the carriage had stopped moving. Looking out the window, she saw that they were indeed parked outside a rather magnanimous estate, with a fleet of servants standing on the steps, awaiting them.

“I do like it when you blush like that,” Arthur teased, finally catching his breath. He gave her a mischievous smile, then offered her his hand. “Come, I’ll send them away. I shall give you a tour of your new home later, but for now, will you join me in your new chambers?”

CHAPTERTWELVE

Arthur didn’t believe Lavinia, nor did he trust her. Not entirely anyway. Especially after Grace had betrayed him, he wasn’t sure if he could ever trust another woman outside of his family again. But in the confines of the carriage, he could no longer get away from what he had been trying to avoid all day—the alluring beauty and sensuality that was his new wife.

Her long, curly dark hair was pinned up in ringlets that framed her face and shoulders

perfectly, and the natural soft pink of her cheeks matched the shade of her pouty lips as if they were alluringly identical.

She had chosen what he could only describe as a dark white silk that complemented her skin tone perfectly and was wrapped around her in a design that was practically made for her figure. Her looks alone were enough to drive him to distraction, but it didn't stop there. Arthur had caught whispers of jasmine in the air whenever he'd been in her presence before, but now, mixed in with the familiar aroma, he detected something else. Something delicious and mouth-watering, something both primal and natural.

The moment her scent had hit his nostrils, his lower belly had tightened, his cock had begun to harden, and he had had to breathe through his mouth to control himself. It had been long, so long, since he'd touched a woman, and the cravings he'd once thought dead had come back to him with vengeance. He'd had the patience to kiss her gently at first, but the moment he had felt her relax at his side, his more dominant nature had taken over him, and he'd pounced immediately, dragging him to her as if she were his prey.

Her words were pretty, and, he admitted, possibly touching. But her response to his kiss was what he truly wanted. He wanted to know that she liked his touch. In fact, needed it. Even through his anger for her, it was something he worried about. After all, if it was a ruse, then she'd recoil from him, would she not? He had to know.

So, when he'd felt her melt into him, cling to him as they had kissed, he had let his feelings of hurt and anger go and embraced her instead.

As promised, he made quick work of dispersing the servants and even noticed a few of the maids giggling as they scurried back to their work.

Good, he thought. Perhaps some positive rumors could leak out after such a

rambunctious entrance. He held Lavinia's hand through the first two flights of steps, but as his impatience grew, he hoisted her over his shoulder and carried her up the final one. A mirthful giggle came from Lavinia's lips as he picked her up, and though he still didn't quite believe her, it made him smile.

"You are quite athletic, husband," Lavinia breathed when he finally put her back down on her feet.

"When the time comes for it, at least," he teased, making quick work of his cravat.

The moment he ripped it loose from his neck, Lavinia stepped back toward him, pausing his hand by placing hers over his own. With a soft smile, she drew closer, and then leaned up on her toes to place a gentle kiss on his neck.

Arthur felt himself shiver at the delicate touch but stayed still as his new wife continued her exploration. As her lips continued to trail over his neck, her fingers worked the buttons to his shirt free until she could slip her palm beneath the fabric. The moment her hand touched his naked, scarred flesh, he took a sharp breath.

He couldn't hide the scar on his face, but he was used to being able to disguise all of the others. And there were many. On his back, his abdomen, his pectoral muscles—there were far too many to count.

Arthur waited, breath held, for her to shrink away from the feel of his scar. To see her eyes suddenly pop open wide in horror and look at him like some monster. Instead, only a soft sigh left her lips, and she nuzzled her cheek against his bare flesh, her lips slowly making their way toward his scar.

Unable to take such tenderness, Arthur lifted her into his arms once more and captured her mouth with his. As they kissed, he walked her to the large bed and gently laid her down.

As they continued to kiss, his hands worked at the ties of her gown, yanking them this way and that until her dress fell away one piece at a time, leaving her only in her shift. It was only as he was poised to take it off did he stop long enough to look into Lavinia's eyes, and he felt a well of emotion bulge in his throat.

Her deep brown eyes, so cloudy with lust, shone brightly up at him. There was a raw pleasure emanating from her gaze, and he nearly got lost in it.

"Let me undress you," she whispered, her hands going for his shirt again.

Arthur caught himself before he felt himself fall fully into her spell, and gently dragged her away.

"Soon," he murmured, capturing her mouth in another kiss before she could say anything else.

Lavinia's words quickly turned into moans, and she let her hands slide away from his body with ease. The shackled beast of pleasure chained tightly inside of Arthur's soul finally broke loose, and he accidentally ripped apart Lavinia's chemise trying to get to her. Like an animal starved for weeks, Arthur's mouth ravenously moved over her body.

He enveloped her breasts with his mouth, one at a time, as Lavinia gasped and writhed beneath him. Taking in her sweetly taut nipples before trailing his tongue around her areolas, then finally pulling each perfectly shaped mound of delicate tissue into his mouth, suckling needily.

"Arthur, Arthur, Arthur," Lavinia panted, saying his name with every ragged breath she drew in as his mouth continued its ministrations further down her body. First back up to her neck, where he traced the delicate line with the tip of his tongue, then down to her hourglass-shaped abdomen, where he lifted her backside from beneath

and lapped his tongue over each small divot of her muscles and then navel.

When his teeth first scraped over her left hip, Lavinia gasped and writhed so much at the touch that he had to do it again. Pinning her hips down so she couldn't buck into him, Arthur lowered his head once more to her hip, and when his teeth scraped over the delicate flesh stretched over her hip bone, another beautiful, erotic sound left Lavinia's lips.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Arthur was quickly becoming addicted to her reactions. They were so raw, unencumbered. Not at all like the over-exaggerated moans of pleasure heard at a brothel. These were moans from a person experiencing erotic satisfaction for the first time—and falling in love with it.

Wanting more, Arthur finally let go of her hip and dipped his head between her legs to continue his exploration.

* * *

Lavinia felt herself levitate as Arthur dipped his tongue between the delicate folds of her mons. Her hips bucked upwards, her shoulders pressed heavily to the bed. She had been shy for a moment before Arthur had started removing her clothes. A man had never seen her naked before, and she had been nervous about showing herself to Arthur for the first time.

All of her insecurities fell away, however, when Arthur began to kiss and touch and tease her body the way he did. In fact, he made her tremble with so much pleasure that her clothes had felt more like an annoyance than a shield of virtuous protection, and she had been thankful when the last garment had been ripped away from her.

She'd tried, eagerly at first, to help her new husband out of his clothes as well. How badly she wanted to run her hands over the muscled expanse of his chest and arms! But every time she had tried, she had found her wrists newly pinned, and when Arthur dipped his head between her legs, she forgot about it altogether.

Her fingers twisted immediately into his dark, tousled hair as his tongue flicked over

her most sensitive bud. Another low, heady moan of approval could be heard from Arthur's throat as he licked her again, and she once more tried to buck her hips into his mouth.

"Patience, little one," he whispered, splaying his fingers wide over her thighs. "All things come with patience."

Lavinia wasn't sure if it was the words Arthur was speaking or the tone in which they were spoken, but she felt another wave of pleasure pass through her as he talked to her. Before she could ask him to do it again, though, his tongue became occupied by something else, and Lavinia threw her head back as she felt a whole new type of pleasure sink in.

With each flick of his tongue, Lavinia began to feel a string in her lower belly be wound tighter and tighter, sensually pulling all of her muscles toward one another. Then, just when she thought she was finally catching her breath and gaining control over the sensations, she felt Arthur's pointer finger slowly glide between the hot, slick folds of her passage.

"Arthur!" Lavinia gasped, her back involuntarily arching off the bed as she experienced this new sensation.

Arthur's dark green eyes shot up at her then, capturing her gaze as he continued his meal. Lavinia felt a shiver of something darkly erotic go through her as their eyes met, and she somehow felt like they were speaking without words.

Lie back down, Arthur's eyes seemed to command. Then, as if to prove such communication was real, he slipped another finger inside of her, the sensation so pleasurable that Lavinia let her body fall back onto the bed, and she began to writhe atop the blankets.

There was a rhythm within her body that Arthur seemed to know how to control with his tongue and fingers—one that she had had no idea existed up to this moment—and as he began playing the rhythm faster, she felt the pleasure within her build higher.

The string in her lower belly had now grown as taut as it possibly could, and it was pooling, gathering everything into a giant wave that she knew she couldn't control once it was released.

“Wait,” she panted, unsure of what was happening to her body as it began to tremble. “I-I don’t—”

“It’s all right, little one,” Arthur moaned into her mons, increasing the speed of his fingers. “Give in to me.”

As if her body had been waiting for permission all along, Lavinia suddenly felt a pleasure she’d never felt before explode within her. Her thighs trembled, and a cry broke from her lips as the string inside of her finally broke, and the power of her first orgasm rushed over Arthur’s greedy lips.

A bestial moan left his lips as her juices rushed into his mouth, and she felt the fingertips of his free hand dig even deeper into her thighs.

* * *

Arthur felt the heavy fog around his brain begin to lift as he shakily rose to his knees and looked down at Lavinia. It was as if some primal, driving force had taken over him, and he was just now getting loose from its grips. He took a steadying look around and discovered Lavinia’s clothes scattered across the floor. He had taken them off, he was sure of it. He just couldn’t remember.

Focusing his gaze on Lavinia, he groaned. Everything about him was wound tight.

His muscles, his tendons... his cock, were all drawn back as if held by taut bowstrings, just ready to be let loose. He'd been so incensed with tasting her body that he hadn't noticed how gloriously perfect she looked naked and sprawled beneath him. And, quivering and lax from her orgasm, she looked even more delectable.

He could see the ache in her eyes, the sheen of his saliva on her lips. His eyes continued down, and he took in the deep rise and fall of her chest, the spasms in her lower belly... and the dewy moisture between her folds that beckoned him to taste her all over again. He wanted to give in. To feel his cock thrust through the hot, tight, wet folds between Lavinia's legs and claim her as his own.

"Come, my love," Lavinia panted, her arms weakly reaching out to him. "Lie with me."

Arthur wanted to. In fact, his entire body felt as if it demanded it. But instead, he shuffled backward to the edge of the bed and stood up on wobbly feet. As if sensing something was wrong, Lavinia rose on her elbows, her hand reaching for the nearest blanket to cover herself.

"Did I do something wrong?" she asked.

Her tone and eyes were so full of worry that Arthur had to fight his need to go and comfort her. He wanted to lie down with her, to let her explore his body the way he'd explored hers, to give in to the other deeply erotic needs he'd missed so terribly—but there was something in him that wouldn't allow it. Something that forbade him to share that part of him with her.

"No," he rasped, tugging his pants and shirt back on. "But I believe this is as far as we should go tonight."

Lavinia looked a little disappointed, but she nodded her head and continued to hold a

hand out to him.

“That’s all right,” she soothed, her voice gliding smoothly into his ears. “We can take our time. Perhaps we could just lie together, though? I-I had no idea that this—” She waved her hand over herself for emphasis. “—was what married couples do, but I did know that they sleep beside one another. Won’t you come to bed with me?”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Arthur shook his head as he stuffed his cravat into his pocket and gathered up his jacket. “Not tonight,” he told her, silently fighting the sexual urges rising inside of him. “You need your rest. I shall go stay in my quarters, but I will see you tomorrow.”

CHAPTERTHIRTEEN

A knock on her door roused her from her sleep immediately, and Lavinia sat up from the halo of pillows surrounding her. As if waiting for her, memories of the night before rushed toward her, and she felt her body respond to them almost instantly. She had thought, after Arthur had left the way he had, that she wouldn’t get any sleep at all. But now, she felt as if she’d just awoken from a week-long slumber.

“Coming,” Lavinia called out as another knock sounded at her door.

She took a confused look around the room as she got her bearings. She had been so consumed with Arthur the night before that she hadn’t noticed the room or any of its grand baubles or accents. It was plush and comfortable—a room fit for a duchess, to be sure.

Spotting her shift on the floor, she quickly pulled it on and tiptoed across the floor to her door. Was it Arthur? Had he come back like he had promised? She had been disappointed when he’d left, but had he meant that he only liked to sleep alone?

Her smile and predictions faded as she opened the door and found a small young woman dressed in fine clothes flanked on either side by two servants. She immediately noticed that the woman in the crushed silk peach gown with dark green

eyes and long, curly, dark brown hair, and something in her memory recalled talks of Arthur's little sister.

"Hello, Sister!" the green-eyed young woman greeted joyfully. With a squeal, she opened her arms and wrapped Lavinia up in a tight, bone-crushing hug. "Oh, I am so happy to meet you!" She laughed, holding Lavinia tight. "I've always wanted a sister!"

"I'm happy to meet you, too." Lavinia laughed softly. She was able to pat the woman lightly on the shoulder in a return hug before she was let go, and the woman and the servants immediately moved forward and into her room.

"I'm Susan," the woman explained as the servants went about opening curtains and making the bed. "Arthur's sister. I'm so sorry I wasn't there to meet you in London, but I did perhaps get a little carried away with the excitement of Society's events there."

Susan said the last part with a little giggle, making Lavinia smile and feel more at ease. For as dark and mysterious as Arthur was, Susan was the complete opposite—a bubbly ball of sunshine. Lavinia liked her immediately.

"Well, that's all right," Lavinia replied. "I'm just sorry that we didn't get to meet each other earlier. I'm, um, I'm not sure what you might have heard, but I am not actually your brother's intended."

Lavinia was trying to speak about the matter gently, not sure if Susan knew all that had happened. But the younger woman simply giggled and shook her head as she opened one of Lavinia's trunks.

"I know that, silly," Susan teased. "I may have been sent home, but my brother kept me apprised on all of the London happenings. You're Lavinia, not Rebecca. Which I

wish I could say I was sad about, but the truth is, I didn't have the opportunity to meet either of you, so I am happy to meet you all the same."

Susan's honesty was almost intimidating to Lavinia, but she soon realized it was a relief, and yet another stark contrast to her brother. While he kept everything in, Susan thrust it all forward, creating a beaming light that ebbed from her very center. Lavinia decided immediately to happily accept Susan as her new sister.

"And I am very happy to meet you," Lavinia replied, smiling as she took a nearby seat. She watched in silence for a moment as Susan carefully pulled her dresses from her trunk and noticed that her new sister-in-law admired something or other in each and every one of them.

"Lovely. Absolutely lovely," Susan praised, picking up a dark maroon gown. "But this one today, I think. You shall need to look powerful. My brother has gone away to do something dukely or other, so I am to show you the estate. You will be meeting the staff, be given schedules, and you will be required to state any additional demands you might have outside the house's previous needs. What you like to eat, how often you want a bath to be readied, what soaps you like. Anything you need to be provided, our staff will see to it that it is obtained immediately. Has my brother discussed your allowance with you?"

Lavinia felt a deep well of disappointment open inside of her when Susan so casually mentioned the absence of her husband. Had she done something wrong? She had thought, by the pleasure they'd both seemed to experience last night, that their talk in the carriage had gone well.

"What was that?" Lavinia asked, not catching Susan's last question.

"Ah, your hot water is ready," Susan announced, sidetracking as a servant carried in a large pitcher of steaming water. "Go on behind the curtain and wash up so you may

dress.”

Deeming it wise to not interrupt Susan’s flow, Lavinia obediently went behind the privacy curtain as soon as the servant poured the water into a basin and left, and undressed.

“Your allowance,” Susan said from the other side of the curtain as Lavinia began to wash. As she did so, she caught a hint of Arthur’s musk, and a pang of hunger thudded in her lower belly.

“I do not know of an allowance,” Lavinia admitted, her washing slowing as she started to recall the feel of Arthur’s mouth on her body.

His lips had looked so chiseled and hard but had melded so tenderly to her delicate flesh. She shivered as she drew a warm sponge over her abdomen and shook her head to dissolve the memories. She had to concentrate.

“My brother has set you aside an allowance of eight hundred pounds a month,” Susan replied matter-of-factly as if the number was no larger than that of one. Or two.

Lavinia’s eyes grew large as she heard the sum, and gasped. Eight hundred pounds? What could she possibly spend all that on?

“Surely you are jesting.” Lavinia laughed, stepping out from behind the curtain with a towel around her.

Sweet-faced Susan suddenly stilled, and as her eyebrow drew up, so did that side of her lips in a mischievous smile.

“We are fond of jokes in our family,” Susan said, “but one thing we never jest about is money. It is not just to help you grow your collection of personal belongings, but to

use it how you see fit. If there is a charity or cause you wish to donate to, you may do that as well. It never looks bad for any member of our family, married or not, to be seen helping others.”

“I see,” Lavinia murmured, enjoying her peek into the inner workings of Arthur’s family.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Suddenly, Susan snatched her towel away, and Lavinia quickly tried to cover herself with her arms. “Susan!” she exclaimed.

“God in heaven, you are gorgeous,” Susan stated, ignoring Lavinia’s cry and looking her over.

“I’m starting to see how your mother may have thought it best that you leave London early,” Lavinia replied dryly.

“No wonder my brother was pleading with Mother to let him marry you,” Susan said, ignoring Lavinia’s comment. She picked up a bundle of white clothing and tossed it to her sister-in-law. “Here, put this on.”

Lavinia almost didn’t catch the undergarments Susan threw her, so shocked to find yet another insight into her new husband.

“He asked your mother if he could marry me?” Lavinia asked, dressing quickly.

Once finished, Susan brought over her stays and began lacing her up.

“From what he wrote, he was quite insistent on it,” Susan revealed. “He said you were a much better match and that Rebecca was already taken. But Mama said no. That Rebecca was much more appropriate. I suspect it made him quite frustrated. My brother does not do well with frustration.”

“Yes, I’m starting to understand that,” Lavinia agreed, her mind churning as Susan finished lacing her up.

When she finished, Susan brought the dress over, and together they put it on. Susan's fingers were quick to put the ties in each of their places, and soon, Lavinia was being led over to the vanity.

"Our family was tainted by rumors," Susan stated, brushing Lavinia's hair. "As was yours. And your little faux pas at the Conservatory ball was quite the scandal." She paused, her eyes meeting Lavinia's in the mirror. "But we can recover, and create something new," she continued, beginning to work Lavinia's hair into a modest bun. "If you have the strength and open mind for it."

Susan pinned a stylish, small black hat with matching netting to Lavinia's head, and then smiled as she bent over so that the two were cheek to cheek, their eyes still meeting in the mirror.

"Whatever brought you here, just know that the rumors you have heard are not true. We have happiness here. We have love and warmth. If you're just patient enough for Arthur to show you."

"I know that," Lavinia said, meaning it. She could sense it all around her. Change. Freedom. Happiness. A life she'd dreamed of come to reality.

"You look beautiful," Susan praised, her tone kind. "And powerful."

Lavinia smiled and patted her sister-in-law's hand. "Thank you."

"Are you ready to learn what it means to be a duchess?" Susan asked, reversing her grip on Lavinia so she could help her up.

"I hope I am," Lavinia said bravely as she stood up.

Thoughts of Arthur had ventured naturally to the background, and her mind was

quickly filling with excitement over the impending adventure that was her new life.

* * *

“How did you know how to do all of this,” Lavinia asked, looking at Susan in awe. She was exhausted, but delightfully happy.

The Dowager Duchess had arrived shortly after the two of them had finished breakfast and joined them for Lavinia’s lessons. To Lavinia’s surprise, the Dowager Duchess did not interfere much with Susan’s instructions, but mostly nodded and smiled in agreement.

At first, Lavinia had felt a little nervous speaking so blatantly about her needs to strangers, but Susan had given her assuring wink, and she soon found herself espousing her wishes. She read the faces around as best as she could and didn’t find one look of annoyance or disappointment among the staff.

The Dowager Duchess was kind and polite throughout the process, but Lavinia did notice she was also a bit distant. Shortly before their lunch, Marianne excused herself to go lie down and didn’t reappear the rest of the day.

After lunch, Susan showed Lavinia the entirety of the estate and had even had the printers make her a map of the property. In the house alone there were three living floors, an attic that housed the live-in servants, a wine cellar, and then a root cellar. There were also the outer buildings. A separate kitchen, an ice house, a guest house, the stables, and three barns beyond the gardens.

After the tour, they had tea on the lawn, and when they returned inside, Lavinia discovered that the local Modiste had been called and was there to show the new Duchess all of the new designs and fabrics her store had received.

Throughout the day, Lavinia had found herself looking now and then for a glimpse of Arthur. Susan didn't know when they should expect him back, and so every time she heard someone approaching, Lavinia would lift her head, only to discover that it was another member of their staff who awaited her instructions.

Now, as the sisters-in-law sat together in Lavinia's quarters, both of their aching feet soaking in hot water and salts after having their supper and making one more stop into the Dowager Duchess's room to say goodnight, Lavinia wondered if Arthur was even coming home that day at all. Not wanting to think about it, she turned her attention back to Susan and asked her questions.

Susan turned her head slowly toward Lavinia's, both of their necks resting on the high-backed couch, and smiled in a happy but sad fashion. "Our mother was convinced Arthur was going to be killed in the war," she confessed, her eyes glossing over as she recalled the memories.

"That must have been horrible," Lavinia breathed, trying to picture the fear of sending a son off to war.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“It was,” Susan agreed. “But Papa and Arthur were adamant that he would survive, and he went anyway. Mama was so mad at Papa. For a long time. But then, Arthur came back for a visit after his first seven months abroad. Then again eight months later, and so on and so forth. And finally, when the war was over, he came home for good. But in one of those times when Mama feared Arthur was going to die and Papa was dead, she decided to teach me everything she knew. She worried about our future if some stranger got the title.”

“That’s so much responsibility,” Lavinia said in wonder. “How old were you?”

“Fourteen.” Susan sighed. “You’d know something about that, wouldn’t you?” she asked, smiling softly as she turned the subject back on Lavinia. “You practically became a mother when you were just a child yourself, didn’t you? Not by birth, of course, but because of your mother.”

Lavinia felt a stir of sadness in her heart, and she returned Susan’s sad smile. “Yes,” she admitted. “I did. But I don’t regret a single second of it. I love my sisters with all of my heart, and I think my mother would be proud of how I’ve taken care of them.”

“Do you miss them?” Susan asked, reaching out to squeeze Lavinia’s hand comfortingly.

“Every second,” Lavinia confessed, feeling her chest tighten. “I’ve never spent more than a few hours away from them before, and it is... excruciating. But I do appreciate your lessons. They were a great distraction, and wonderfully educational.”

“You shall write to them tomorrow,” Susan urged. She patted Lavinia’s hand one

more time, then signaled to the nearby maid to come over with a dry towel. “Tell them that they are most welcome and that we can receive them as soon as this weekend,” she added as her feet were patted dry.

Lavinia stared up at her, happiness welling up inside of her. “That soon? Are you sure?” she asked.

“Of course!” Susan said, slipping her feet into her satin slippers. “I shall want to meet my other new sisters, and there is no use for you to be in pain when it isn’t necessary. You are the duchess after all, you can invite whoever you want in your home.”

“Oh, Susan.” Lavinia sighed, standing up so she could hug her. “ You will love them, I swear.”

“I know I will,” Susan agreed, hugging Lavinia back. “Now, I’m off to bed, and you should be, too. You did wonderful today, but tomorrow brings new challenges. Sleep well, Sister.”

CHAPTERFOURTEEN

“Welcome home, Your Grace,” the doorman greeted, taking Arthur’s coat and hat.

“Thank you, Miles,” Arthur replied, taking a long look around the foyer.

He had expected so much to change now that Lavinia was here, but his home looked exactly the same. He wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or disappointed. He feared Lavinia looking at him the way Grace had, and he almost wished that she would so he could stop wondering when it would happen.

“Did you see my wife today?” he asked, making a slow turn back to the servant.

Miles nodded, a polite smile gracing his face. “Yes, Your Grace, I did,” he replied.

“And how was she?” Arthur asked, then quickly followed up with, “How did she seem?”

“Oh, you have picked a wonderful lady to be your bride, Your Grace,” Miles praised. “Lady Susan made the introductions today, and I believe the new Duchess shall be very efficient at her new role here.”

It wasn’t exactly the answer Arthur was hoping for, but he was relieved that Susan had taken his request seriously. He knew that it should have been him who assisted in making Lavinia more comfortable, but after the horde of emotions that had hit him the night before, he couldn’t. Instead, he had chosen to throw himself into work hoping to distract himself.

The only issue was that now that the work was over, there was nothing to keep his thoughts away from Lavinia. His body had screamed in irritation all night after he’d left her room, not giving him a moment of sleep. He had wanted so badly to give in to his needs, but his warring heart wouldn’t allow it. Finally giving up on sleep altogether, he had left home before the sun was even up, hoping that his duties would provide relief. They had, but they had been nowhere near as effective as he’d needed.

Every spare thought he’d had went straight to Lavinia. The taste of her lips, the feel of buttery-soft naked flesh tight against him, the sound of her sweet, breathy moans, it all rushed back to him, making his hunger for her rise over and over again.

If he hadn’t been focused on his wife’s body, his mind would rush back to the past. He had already trusted a woman before, he could not afford to do it again. Especially with Lavinia. He was battle-hardened. He was scarred. Lavinia had sworn she didn’t care about the scars, but he couldn’t believe it. He’d seen himself in the mirror. He knew what he looked like. And no woman could ever love his face.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Arthur finally responded, realizing he’d gotten lost in thought yet again. “Good night, Miles.”

He heard the doorman reply in a similar fashion as he made his way up the stairs. As he reached the third floor, Gregory, his valet, was there to meet him.

“Good evening, Your Grace,” Gregory greeted him politely. “It is good to have you home.”

“It is good to be home, Gregory,” Arthur returned, clapping him on the shoulder as he walked past him.

“Your room is prepared, Your Grace. Shall I send up water for a bath as well?” Gregory asked.

Yes, you should.

Arthur knew it was the responsible thing to do. And yet, as he thought the words, he shook his head as he stopped in front of Lavinia’s door.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“That’s all right, Gregory,” he replied, his fingertips touching the doorknob. “There’s no need.”

The lust he’d felt yesterday in the carriage, the same that had haunted his every spare thought that day, was building like a storm inside of him. He may not trust her, but by God did he want her.

In the distance, he heard Gregory say something along the lines of “Very well, Your Grace,” and in his peripherals watched him walk away.

Arthur murmured some sort of response, but he wasn’t sure at all what it was. His mind was focused on something else.

Opening the door, he was greeted by the sweet, clean scent of his wife. Jasmine. Perhaps lilies, too? He walked through the darkened sitting room, and into her sleeping quarters. Her rooms were part of a turret, and the room had more of a circumference than an angle. Panel after panel of windows lined the entire curved room. In the distance beyond her bed, which sat in the middle, he could see that some of the windows had been left open and that the curtains had been drawn back to let in the cool night air.

The openings allowed the light of a half-full moon to shine upon his bride as she lay in bed, her body clad in only a white linen sheet. Desire stirred in him as he realized she wore no nightgown, and his eyes began to search the dim, moonlit room for the discarded apparel. He found it tossed carelessly at the end of the bed, as white as the sheets. He’d only noticed it when he had looked down at the dark brown fur rug and spotted the bright white of the cuff of one sleeve.

She must have gotten too hot.

Immediately, his mind conjured a picture of him running his tongue slowly down Lavinia's inner thigh, catching any beads of perspiration that he could. He was deranged, he figured, but he'd save the inner judgment for this particular sin another time. For now, he let his mouth water and his cock harden as he recalled how she had tasted the night before.

Quietly, so as not to wake her, Arthur began to undress. While removing his cravat, vest, and shirt, his eyes never left her figure. She was so still. Peaceful and hauntingly beautiful. So drawn to her was he that he nearly forgot to remove his shoes, and then fumbled with the laces because he could not look away.

He told himself that his need was so great only because he'd craved being with a woman for so long, but he knew that wasn't the whole truth. The reality was that he wanted Lavinia. From the very first moment he'd seen her, his entire body had reacted. It was as if he'd been jolted back to life after sleeping for years, and he was famished in every aspect of the word. It was only her that could satisfy his cravings, and that had been proven last night.

With predator-like stealth, Arthur moved to the bed, carefully lifting the covers just enough so that he could settle himself between her partly spread legs. Pleasure burst through his pores as his flesh pressed against hers, and he couldn't hold the sudden gasp that left his lips.

His member pressed hard against the mattress, begging for release.

Steeling himself against the urge, he nestled further down, and then gently grazed the tip of his nose over Lavinia's bare left breast. A breathy sigh suddenly escaped her lips, and she stirred, her arms and legs instinctively wrapping around him. From beneath him, he felt her hips and back arch as she stretched, unknowingly teasing his

cock.

He used his tongue next, lapping it softly across Lavinia's small, already taut nipple, and he was rewarded again. An almost cat-like purr came from her as she wiggled beneath him again. This time, though, her hand went up into his hair, her nails scraping gently across his scalp, making his eyes roll to the back of his head, and then she gently clenched his brown locks as if she was holding him to her.

“Arthur?”

Lavinia's voice sent a shiver of desire down Arthur's spine. It was breathy and full of sleep, but there was pleasure laced through her voice. And hope. She wanted it to be him.

“Shhh,” he soothed before enveloping her breast with his mouth.

Lavinia gasped softly as her back arched into him, and the hand in his hair tightened.

Arthur groaned in pleasure at her reaction and continued his sensual ministrations. Not wanting to rush, he took his time, letting his tongue lap lazily over her perfect nipple over and over again before suckling or nipping it. Eventually, he went from left breast to right as he pleased, and whichever breast was free was sensually being teased by his fingertips.

As he continued at his leisure, Lavinia's breaths slowly became deeper, her moans lower. Her hips had begun to move against his in a sensual motion, her mons gently caressing his turgid shaft over and over again. Arthur knew what was building inside of her, and he wanted it badly.

He was fascinated, enamored even by how sensitive she was to his touch. She felt every touch, no matter how light, and responded to it so naturally that it drove him to

want to explore her more. His fingers and tongue began to work with different strokes, new techniques, and Lavinia's hypnotic state of pleasure seemed to only deepen.

There were many ways a man could please a woman. He, himself, just like his good friend Archibald, had been quite studious of such a subject in his younger days and knew that there were many ways a woman could come undone. Some built fast and intensely and then shattered like a wave crashing. Others could be built slowly, delicately, and gradually—building up like an overflowing lake, and then breaking through its dam.

The latter was what he'd chosen for tonight, and Arthur reveled in watching and feeling Lavinia's release slowly begin to build up. Her body was still relaxed, but she clung more to him now, letting herself ride her sex against his hard cock shamelessly. He loved it, but if his cock grew any harder, he feared he'd break through his own skin.

Still, he ignored it and focused on building up Lavinia's pleasure. He was rewarded when her hand suddenly tightened at the back of his head and her other dug into his back. A pleading, gracious cry left her lips as her back arched once more, forcing even more of her breast into his mouth, and he felt her wetness soak both his cock and the sheets.

Satisfaction filled him like a drug, and he moaned deeply as he finally pulled away from her breast. With quick movements, he seized her by her throat and rose to kiss her deeply. Immediately her lips parted for him, and he delved his tongue in deep, loving the way she moaned into his mouth as he did so.

With a groan, he broke away from the kiss, turning her neck to the side so he could kiss down the graceful column. Lavinia writhed beneath him as he did so, then tried to speak.

“Arthur, please—”

Arthur’s hand came firmly down on her lips, muffling her words, and he rose on his knees so he could look down at her.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked, searching her eyes for any signs of discontent. Quickly, she shook her head no, and he felt her tongue flick teasingly across his palm.

“No talking, then,” he commanded, his tone gravelly as he went back to his erotic studies.

* * *

Lavinia had been sure she had been dreaming at first when she had felt Arthur's body slide against hers. Even though they had only been together once, she had known, without needing to look, that it was him. It wasn't just the way he felt, but the delicious, masculine scent that he gave off. It reminded her of hardwood being burned in the winter. When, even indoors, you could still catch notes of snow as it came down outside. It made her feel warm. Safe.

But then, when she felt Arthur's tongue dance across her bare nipples, and her arms tightened around him, she knew it wasn't a dream. Relief, happiness, and, most of all, arousal soared through her as she realized he had come back. She'd tried to speak, to tell him of her feelings, but when he had silenced her, it had only heightened her arousal.

At a certain age, Lavinia had taken it upon herself to learn how babies were made. After quickly studying her bible again once she had finished, she had concluded that while there was pleasure for the man, it could, at most, be a pleasant experience. But this. What Arthur was doing to her. This was not how babies were made.

And as he built her pleasure again, this time only by touching her breasts, she wondered what it was these dark pleasures were, and why no one ever wrote about them. This wasn't sex, she knew. Yet... somehow, it was deeply sensual.

When she orgasmed for the first time that night, Lavinia felt a rush of pure bliss. She felt as if she were levitating in the air, weightless and free. But then, when Arthur kissed her, every part felt as if it were on fire again, needing him as she had all day.

She wanted to know where he'd been, why he'd left, why he had stayed away. But once again as she tried to speak, Arthur silenced her. And then, once again, her body responded erotically to his commands. Finally deciding to let herself think of such questions tomorrow, Lavinia let her body sink once more into the pleasure of Arthur's skilled tongue.

Lavinia gasped and shivered in ecstasy as Arthur licked her lips and clitoris hungrily as if he'd craved her all day. She had no idea how, but he knew just where to push, where to caress, where to nip, to get her body to reach new heights of arousal. Deep inside, she could feel her womb clenching tightly, as if it craved to feel something, too. In reaction, she felt her insides throb with need, and she moaned desperately as she bucked her hips into his face.

Again. She needed her release again, the pleasure was building too much this time, too fast.

Lavinia attempted to grip Arthur's shoulders in her desperation, but he immediately got hold of her wrists and pinned them down against the bed. A deep, rumbling chuckle came from his chest, and between licks, he asked, "What do you need, little one?"

Immediately, Lavinia felt her cheeks flame up as she was put on the spot. "I can't," she pleaded, not wanting to say it aloud.

"Yes, you can," Arthur encouraged, his deep voice only arousing her even further.

God, how can he be talking and licking at the same time?

"Tell me."

Lavinia whimpered again, trying to find the right words to describe the image of last

night that was flashing in her mind.

“Your fingers,” she whispered meekly.

“Hmm?” he teased, nipping her clitoris.

Lavinia let out a yelp and blushed because she had to say it again. “Your fingers,” she said louder, her voice trembling.

Arthur stopped then, his head slowly rising from between her legs so that he could look up at her.

“Where do you want them?” he asked, his voice thick with need.

Lavinia licked her bottom lip and drew it into her mouth as she looked down at him. He had a look of raw, primal pleasure on his face, and his eyes almost seemed to glow in the darkness.

“Inside me,” she whispered, holding his gaze.

A slow, wolfish grin spread across Arthur’s face as they looked at one another, and he gently began to slide his middle finger between her tight, wet folds. Pleasure flooded her as he began to thrust his finger inside of her, crooking it so that it caressed a sensitive spot she never knew she had inside. Throwing her head back on the pillows, Lavinia moaned deeply and spread her legs wider.

As if satisfied by her reaction, Arthur dipped his head again, his tongue and lips working in time with the gentle, sure strokes of first one finger, then two. Soon, her head was spinning from the ecstasy of his touch, and when she came undone once again, her thighs clamped tightly around his head, and her body shuddered with such great violence that she almost rolled over onto her side.

Arthur let out a groan of pleasure as her orgasm rushed forth, and he replaced his fingers with his tongue as soon as she began to tremble. He suckled at her mons greedily, as if wanting to ensure he'd caught each drop, then wiped his mouth with his forearm before crawling up to lie beside her. As soon as he did, his large, muscular arms folded around her, and he pulled her close.

With her head to his chest, Lavinia could hear the rapid beating of his heart, the quickness of his breath. A sheen of perspiration had also formed on his chest, and she nuzzled closer so she could run her tongue across his skin. As she did so, she felt her mouth touch a smooth bump of flesh. In an instant, Arthur was pulling her away. Not out of his arms, but moving her so that he could kiss her.

“Arthur, please,” she whispered between kisses. “Let us talk.”

“Later,” he promised, suckling on her bottom lip.

Lavinia wanted to say more, but as his hands began to massage her hair and backside, she let out a soft gasp and closed her eyes.

Nestled into his body, being massaged and sated, Lavinia quickly fell asleep, her need for conversation once more disappearing.

* * *

Arthur awoke a few hours later and slipped quietly from Lavinia's bed. He paused before he left, letting himself drink her in. He wanted more. Somuch more. And she had wanted to give it all to him. But he couldn't.

It took several moments before he finally was able to pull himself away, but when he did, he headed back to the stairs instead of his room. To his surprise, he met his mother on the third landing. She was dressed for bed, but it was nearly three in the morning, and her presence concerned him.

"What are you doing out of bed, Mother?" he asked, studying her. "Are you unwell?"

Marianne laughed at him and swatted his arm. "Is it not I that should be asking you these questions?" she retorted, giving him a mothering look.

Then, she smiled and took his arm so they could walk down the stairs together. "I am quite fine. I was a little fatigued from my journey earlier and went to bed early. Now, it seems I am wide awake before the new day has had a chance to begin. I think I shall have breakfast with your new bride when she awakens. We did not get much of a chance to discuss anything, as your sister had her preoccupied, and I was most exhausted."

"I am glad to hear you are well," Arthur replied, shoving his erotic thoughts of Lavinia out of his mind, "and that you plan on meeting with your new daughter-in-law. I am sure she will appreciate it."

Marianne gave a curt nod, and they took the rest of the stairs in silence. “How is our new Duchess faring, anyway?” she then asked. “Is she comfortable here?”

Arthur felt a little guilty that he didn’t have a true answer to his mother’s question, but he wasn’t about to explain why he and Lavinia had yet to have a conversation.

“I believe she is finding everything she needs,” he replied instead.

His mother’s eyebrows drew together slightly, and she stepped closer to study his face. “This was the woman you once implored me to accept in Rebecca’s stead,” she said gently. “Are you still of the same mind?”

Yes, Arthur thought immediately. His situation with Lavinia was certainly not ideal, but even so, he knew she was the better choice. He could have never experienced the pleasure he’d just shared with her with Rebecca.

“Yes, I am,” he replied calmly.

“And yet, you took off with your work first thing this morning, or so I heard,” his mother mused.

Realizing how much he did not want to have this conversation at this particular time, Arthur let out a chuff of a chuckle and shook his head.

“There is always work to be done, Mother,” he replied as cheerfully as possible. “One way or another. Which is why I must be off. Take care. Enjoy the day with Lavinia and Susan. I shall try to make it back for supper.”

Knowing her son, Marianne understood that their conversation was over, and she nodded as she reached up to pat his cheek. “Have a good day, my son,” she replied, shoos him off. “We shall await your return.”

Arthur gave her a final nod and then headed toward the door. As he stepped outside, he realized he had no idea where he was going. He had been tired when he'd first gotten home, and the couple of hours of sleep he'd gotten beside Lavinia had rejuvenated him. But his first appointment in the next town wasn't until seven, and it was too early to rouse the horses or the stablehands.

He couldn't stand still, though. His body was raging from all of the sexual frustration that was still trapped inside of him, and he needed to do something to let it out. It had been so difficult to stop himself from burying his cock deep inside of Lavinia, but something hadn't let him.

Deciding that boxing was the best thing for him, Arthur headed toward the small addition next to the stables and began wrapping his hands.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lavinia stirred in her sleep, sensing the start of the day. She stretched lazily, her body deliciously satisfied from yet another night of Arthur's erotic visits, and took in a deep breath. As usual, as her hand stretched over the other side of the bed, she found it empty.

That was the way it was.

Every night since they'd arrived at Whitekin Estate, Arthur would wait until she'd fallen asleep before joining her in bed. And then, in the most delicious way possible, he would wake her so that he could find new ways to devour her body.

Even with almost no light, he had been able to discover nearly every inch of her flesh that made her gasp and writhe the most. Her mons, her breasts, her backside. It was heaven in the moment. But in the morning, when she awoke alone, her heart always felt a little heavier.

“Good morrow, Sister!” Susan greeted in a sing-song voice as she threw open Lavinia’s door.

Quickly, Lavinia wrapped a sheet around her body and flew off the bed. As she did so, Susan and two maids came through the sitting room entrance. The two maids branched off as they normally did each morning to tidy up, and Susan jumped onto Lavinia’s mused bed.

“Good morrow, Susan.” Lavinia laughed, growing accustomed to her morning antics. She walked behind the changing curtain without being told to, knowing that Susan was going to urge her there if she didn’t go on her own.

“So, tell me,” Susan began as she waited for Lavinia on the other side of the curtain.

As she washed, Lavinia froze. Her sister-in-law had yet to question her about Arthur’s whereabouts or visits. What was she to say? That he had come into her room at night like a hungry wolf, only staying long enough to eat his prey?

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“Whatever do you mean?” Lavinia asked, hoping her voice sounded as calm and nonchalant as she wished it to be.

Susan let out a laugh and peeked her head around the corner of the curtain. “We’ve only been preparing for it the last couple of days,” Susan teased. “Your family’s visit? They will arrive this morning. Are you excited?”

Relief flooded Lavinia as she laughed, followed quickly by happiness and excitement. Of course, they were! Still nestled in parts of the sensual cocoon that Arthur had wrapped her in, she must have forgotten briefly that her family was coming to visit her.

“I cannot begin to tell you how happy I am,” Lavinia replied honestly, coming out from behind the curtain so she could dress. “When do they arrive? They will be here for breakfast, yes? Do you think the cook made the cherry tarts my father likes? Your mother will be here, too, yes?”

“Breathe, Sister.” Susan laughed softly as she helped Lavinia into a pomona green gown. “Yes, they should be arriving within the hour. Yes, I believe the cook did as he was told. And yes, my mother will be here. She has grown quite fond of Agnes and is looking forward to seeing her again. Everything is going splendidly, so far.” She paused as a mischievous smile spread across her face, then added, “And perhaps I shall have a visitor, too.”

“Really?” Lavinia asked, immediately intrigued as the maids helped her dress. “And whoever could this mystery man be?”

Susan smirked. "I might have caused a little drama for myself back in London on purpose," she confessed. "Mama wanted me to find a husband there, but the truth is, I've already found him. He's been away with the King's Navy for some time now, but I received word from him last night that he is finally back home."

"Susan!" Lavinia exclaimed, shocked at this news. "Why did you not tell me? This is wonderful news!"

Susan shrugged, then got up from her seat to fiddle with the hair accessories the maids had laid out. "Joshua made me agree to not wait for him when he first left for the Naval Academy," she explained. "I think he feared he would die before we could marry and leave me not even a widow. I did try to heed his wishes, but I just couldn't. I had faith that he would come back to me. And now, he has." She suddenly gave Lavinia a dazzling smile. "I am hoping that Mama is so busy hosting your family that she won't have time to be disappointed in me," she added.

Lavinia took a moment to study her reflection in the mirror as the maids finished primping her, and she smiled back at herself, satisfied. "Why would your mother be disappointed?" she asked. "He is a nobleman, is he not?"

"He is," Susan confirmed. "But he's one of many children of a viscount. I believe the third or fourth-born out of seven. Aside from a modest inheritance when his father dies, he's not what Mama would consider a 'prominent fellow.'"

Knowing what it felt like to not be considered prominent, Lavinia felt a soft spot open up in her heart for Susan and her suitor. "Well, I hope the day goes as well as you hope it does," she replied sincerely.

"Thank you, Sister," Susan said as the two women rose and walked to one another. "And I hope the same for you. Now, come, let us get ourselves downstairs. Your family will be here any moment!"

“Vinnie! Vinnie!”

Lavinia heard Agnes’s familiar voice echoing up the staircase as they descended, followed quickly by her father’s “Agnes, keep your voice down, please. It is not polite to shout.”

At her side, Susan squeezed her arm tightly. “Looks like they are early,” she whispered, her eyes twinkling with excitement.

Picking up their pace, the two of them rushed down the stairs, bursting into laughter when both Rebecca and Agnes squealed with joy when they saw her. Quickly, Lavinia was encompassed by the arms of her sisters, and bursts of giggles echoed through the foyer.

“Who is this?” Agnes excitedly, throwing her arms around Susan with the same enthusiasm.

“Our new sister,” Lavinia replied gleefully, her smile stretching wide across her face. “Rebecca, Agnes, this is our new sister-in-law, Susan. Susan, these are my younger sisters.”

“Oh, it is such a delight to meet you both!” Susan replied happily.

As the four of them hugged and laughed, Lavinia caught sight of her father and another familiar face. Gently, she untangled herself from the small group and walked over to them.

“Papa, Timothy,” she greeted warmly. “It is so good to see you both.”

“My darling girl,” Kenneth praised emphatically, holding her close. “You look so wonderful. Marriage suits you well.”

“Thank you, Papa,” Lavinia whispered emphatically, hugging him back.

“Indeed,” Timothy agreed. His tone was dry, but he wore a polite smile as he waited to reunite with her. “And where is your husband today? Will he be joining us?”

For a moment, a dark cloud threatened Lavinia’s happy day. The fact was, she had no idea where her husband went or what he did during the day. She only knew that he was gone and that when he returned, he came to her room for a reason she most certainly could not share with her friend or father.

“My son will be joining us this evening.”

The announcement came from the stairs, to which they all turned. There, standing on the landing, dressed in finery, was Arthur’s mother, the Dowager Duchess. Her eyes were trained solely on Timothy as she began to descend.

“He is a very busy man, my son,” Marianne continued as she walked closer. “And your patience for his arrival is much appreciated.”

She walked right past her daughter, Agnes, Rebecca, Lavinia, and Kenneth, before stopping only a short distance from Timothy. For a moment, she simply looked at him, her eyebrow arching high as her sharp eyes took in the man questioning her son’s whereabouts.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“I trust that won’t be a problem?” she asked, directing the question to Timothy alone.

Lavinia watched as Timothy shrunk before the Dowager Duchess, and he lowered his eyes to her as he made a most formal bow. “No, Your Grace,” he replied calmly. “It most certainly is not.”

Silence stretched through the foyer as Marianne continued to study him. “Who are you?” she asked. “What are you doing in my home?”

Realizing now was the time to speak, Lavinia felt herself move toward the two and smiled pleadingly at Arthur’s mother. “Your Grace, might I present Timothy Hill, the Earl of Stonehames? He has been a dear friend to our family since my childhood.”

“Yes,” her father agreed, also being stirred out of his silence. “He has been most concerned for Lavinia. I thought bringing him along on our visit would soothe his constitution. If you are disappointed by his presence, I implore you to take it out on me, Your Grace. It was my doing.”

For a moment, Marianne said nothing as she continued to study Timothy. But then, suddenly, she smiled and turned her attention to Kenneth. “Lord Donset, I welcome you, your family, and your guest,” she informed him pleasantly. “Come, let us break our fast. I’m very much looking forward to speaking with you again.”

Collectively, everyone seemed to exhale as Kenneth and Marianne both laughed together and Kenneth offered her his arm.

“You are either very brave or very stupid,” Susan jested as she joined Timothy and

Lavinia.

Timothy let out a sharp, timid laugh as the three of them began to walk together toward the breakfast room.

“I don’t believe that he has decided yet,” Lavinia jested. Quickly, she was flanked by her sisters, and she giggled. “Come,” she urged. “Let us not think on it any longer. I want nothing to ruin this day.”

* * *

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Lavinia asked, realizing Timothy had just spoken to her.

It was afternoon, and thus far, the day had gone wonderfully. They were now all outside, her father and Marianne perched on the patio, watching them, and Lavinia and the others on the lawn. Agnes, Rebecca, Susan, and Joshua were playing some sort of game that involved running, and Lavinia had quickly opted out.

As she’d sat down at the table laden with tea and trays of treats, her mind had immediately gone back to thoughts of Arthur. She’d had no idea that he was actually going to be here for her family’s visit. Or that he’d even known about the visit at all. She had wanted to tell him, but during his nightly visits, he’d never let her talk. Not that she minded, especially in the moment.

But now, and in every spare moment she had, she contemplated why her husband was only visiting her bed at night, and why he didn’t want to talk to her.

She was so wrapped up in these thoughts that she hadn’t realized that Timothy had also left the game and had taken a seat beside her. In fact, it startled her when she heard his voice, and she even jumped a little. This, of course, only drew another odd look from Timothy—one of many that he had given her all day.

“I said that I have found out some more information,” Timothy repeated, looking at her in disappointment. “About your husband.”

“Timothy, please,” Lavinia urged, already knowing where this conversation was heading. “No more rumors. You know I despise gossip. Even before I got married, I hated it. Let it go.”

“It’s not gossip if it’s factual,” Timothy replied, shifting in his seat so he could turn fully toward her. “I have several sources that confirm that your dear husband was engaged before.”

“What?” Lavinia asked, suddenly wanting to pay attention.

Timothy nodded, obviously pleased that she was finally listening to him. “Turns out you were right to pity the man,” he continued. “My research has concluded that he was engaged to Grace Stewart, the daughter of the Earl of Westrow, some years ago. She was quite young, I was told, when they fell in love, and they became engaged shortly before he went off to war.”

“They were in love?” Lavinia breathed, consumed by the story.

Timothy gave her a pitying look and nodded. “Apparently, though, when she saw how much he’d been scarred, she left him the very day he returned. The same day he received the news that his father had died.” He shook his head sorrowfully. “Poor chap. I couldn’t imagine taking such heavy blows at once.”

Lavinia’s heart ached as she heard this new news about her husband. Details were linking into place, mending the broken chain of thoughts about Arthur.

“That must have been awful,” Lavinia whispered, shaking her head, slightly dazed. “After everything he went through. After everything he survived to get to her. She

just left him over a few measly imperfections?”

“It is awful, I know,” Timothy agreed. “And I am deeply remorseful for judging his appearance.”

Lavinia finally looked back up at her friend and gave him an appreciative smile. “Thank you, Timothy. I’m so glad you’ve learned to accept him.”

Timothy’s smile dropped, and he averted his gaze as he reached for her hand. “Listen to me carefully, Vinnie,” he whispered sincerely. “You mishear me. I am remorseful for judging his appearance. But not for anything else. This man is still a beast in every other sense and will only bring danger to you. I’m just letting you know that I pity him, is all.”

Lavinia felt her chest contract as her veins turned ice cold. Timothy’s familiar touch suddenly felt repulsive, and she held back a shiver as she tried to pull away.

“I can still get you out of this, Vinnie,” Timothy continued, his voice low as his grip on her hand tightened.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

He'd finally lifted his eyes back up to hers, and there was a look in his eyes that suddenly terrified her. Who was this man that used to be her friend?

"Let me take you away from here. You can get an annulment. Everyone knows his temper is as foul as his looks. No one will blame you for running away. I can keep you safe, hidden. Until it's all over."

"Timothy, let go of my hand," Lavinia commanded, her tone low but firm.

"I'll never let go of you," he replied, shaking his head. "I will always protect you, Lavinia. Always."

The soft hairs on the back of Lavinia's neck suddenly tingled as another dose of uneasiness slid down her spine. She didn't like this Timothy. She didn't know him at all.

"I believe my wife has asked you to let go of her hand, Sir," Arthur stated, suddenly making his presence known.

Lavinia finally took her first deep breath as she heard her husband's voice, and she was filled with relief when she turned her head and saw him just behind her. It had been days since she'd seen him in full light, and as her eyes drank him in, her body instantly reacted. Thoughts of their nights together flooded her mind, and she felt her cheeks flush.

Arthur's mouth was set in a straight, grim line, and his brows were furrowed in a most serious manner. But his eyes glittered with desire for her, and she could

practically feel his lust emanating from him.

Timothy's hand suddenly flew from hers as if she'd burned him and was so startled that he nearly knocked himself and the chair he was sitting in over.

"Husband," Lavinia breathed, smiling at Arthur as she stood up. "I'm so happy you've joined us. Look who has joined my family on their visit."

CHAPTERSIXTEEN

"Lord Stonehames," Arthur uttered. His eyes stayed focused on Lavinia for a moment longer and then he turned to Timothy. As he did so, Lavinia watched the brightness in his eyes diminish into a dark look of intimidation. "I don't normally like surprises, but for friends such as you, I will always make an exception."

Timothy's eyes grew wide with confusion as Arthur stuck his hand out to him in greeting. He looked cautiously from Arthur's stony face, devoid of any emotion, to his hand.

"Thank you for the welcome, Your Grace," Timothy finally responded, accepting Arthur's handshake.

"However, you must understand the change of position you've inherited," Arthur continued, speaking to him in a patronizing tone.

"I beg your pardon?" Timothy asked, their hands still locked.

Lavinia watched this all with fascination, not sure at all of what her husband could or would do next.

"Your friend, mywife." Arthur paused, adding emphasis to the last word. "Is a

duchess now. Her station far exceeds yours, therefore, when she gives you a command, you must obey it. To not do so is to invoke legal punishment, and I must warn you, my laws are strict, and my punishment is fierce.”

“Y-your Grace, I—” Timothy sputtered, trying to pull his hand out of Arthur’s grip.

“Say you understand,” Arthur said calmly, his grip tightening.

“I understand,” Timothy stated quickly, his face turning red. “I beg your pardon, Your Graces, I was out of line.”

Arthur wanted to continue squeezing Timothy’s hand until he felt the bones inside snap. He’d first felt furious at both of them when he had seen them holding hands, but then, as he had approached and heard the tail end of their conversation, he’d realized Lavinia was trying to pull away, and that she was terrified. His fury had been immediately redirected solely toward the cocky Earl, and he had wanted so badly to unleash it.

He let go of Timothy’s hand now, freeing him so suddenly that the man stumbled back. Arthur took a deep breath, cracked his knuckles, and forced his anger down deep.

“Very good,” he stated, stepping away from Timothy and toward Lavinia.

He looked down at her and saw that her dark eyes were wide. Not with fear, but with gratitude, awe, and lust. Arthur couldn’t help the smirk he gave her as he held out his hand to her, which she quickly took. She stepped toward him.

“I have yet to greet our parents,” he informed her. “Shall we go together?”

“Of course,” Lavinia agreed, lacing her arm through his.

He turned his head back toward Timothy, who still looked frightened and confused, and gave him a curt nod. “We’ll be back shortly,” he informed him. “Then, perhaps we could all play a game of cards before dinner.”

“I am very happy to have you home, husband,” Lavinia said to him quietly as they walked up the hill toward the patio.

“I am home every night,” Arthur stated, feeling a sudden stir of lust as he smirked down at her. “Or have you forgotten?”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Lavinia blushed deeply and turned her eyes to their feet. “I certainly have not,” she replied, her voice taking a soft, seductive note. “But it has been too long since I have been in your presence during the day. It is good to see you, husband.”

Arthur paused, both of them turning toward one another. Every night he visited he would return a little earlier and leave a little later. In fact, with each passing erotic visit, he was finding it harder and harder to leave her bed.

“I want to know you, Arthur,” Lavinia went on, her eyes and voice pleading with him to listen. “I know you’re still angry about how we ended up here, but if you would forgive me, I could show you how much I enjoy being with you.”

Arthur felt what little ice he had left around his heart begin to melt. It was exactly what he’d been contemplating every night after he’d left her room. Was he truly still hurt by Lavinia’s stunt, or was he just being stubborn? His pride had gotten him into trouble many times in the past, and it was possible that it was doing so again.

“You are right,” Arthur replied. “On one condition.”

“Yes?” Lavinia prompted.

“I’m a civil man, and I want this to be a good day for your family,” Arthur explained, doing his best to balance the intense feelings raging inside of him. “But after they leave, I want you to tell me what Timothy said to you. The truth. That is my condition.”

Lavinia gave him a look of understanding and nodded her head. “I accept your

condition, husband,” Lavinia agreed.

“Good,” Arthur stated with a nod before they started walking again.

“Now, who is that fellow out on the lawn playing with our sisters?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Oh.” Lavinia giggled, glancing at the young man. “That is Mr. Joshua Worth,” she informed Arthur, squeezing his arm in a familiar fashion. “He is Susan’s suitor. You will like him if you give him a chance.”

“What a day of surprises,” Arthur said dryly, not overly excited at the news.

“Don’t worry, he’s much better behaved than Timothy,” Lavinia promised.

Amusement filled Arthur as he turned to Lavinia and chuckled. He hadn’t expected her to poke fun at such things, and he was pleasantly surprised.

“I see there is no love lost over the way I spoke to your friend, then?” he asked, curious.

“Not at all,” Lavinia replied, suddenly serious. “His actions were far out of line.”

“Good,” Arthur stated, his eyes drinking her in as they walked.

He adored seeing her completely bare on the covers of her bed, but he didn’t realize how much he’d missed seeing her in a gown. He loved the way the bodice hugged her waist, how her corset raised her breasts up high. Perhaps it was time to finally lower his guard and let his wife in.

* * *

“You have a lovely home, Your Grace,” Kenneth praised as they all sat around the large dining table.

Lavinia finally took her eyes off her husband so that she could look at her father. She hadn’t meant to stare at Arthur the way she had, but there was something alluring in the way he did things. How careful he was when he cut his meat, how elegantly he brought the fork to his mouth. It was all perfect, but also somehow stifled. As if to use his true strength would break the very table they ate on.

“I thank you, and you and your family are welcome anytime,” Arthur replied politely.

“Do you mean that, Your Grace?” Agnes asked, looking at him giddily.

Lavinia watched as her husband smiled at her youngest sister, and her heart warmed.

“Why, yes, I do,” Arthur assured. “Why? Do you have a plan in mind?”

“We could have a party,” Agnes replied excitedly, snatching Lavinia’s hand beside her. “Oh, sister, could we have a party?” she pleaded, leaning toward Lavinia with an imploring look.

Around them, a chorus of laughter rose up from everyone at the table but Timothy, who had remained silent since Arthur’s arrival.

“I’m sure we can have one in a few weeks’ time,” the Dowager Duchess responded, speaking for both Lavinia and her son. “Your sister will need help and time. She has never thrown a ball of this size before.”

Though Marianne’s tone was polite, Lavinia felt the dig all the same. She had thought that once she and Arthur were married, the Dowager Duchess would warm up to her as much as she’d warmed up to Agnes, but thus far, she’d been proven wrong.

Though she was never icy, nor did she speak to her the way she spoke to Timothy, it was clear to Lavinia that Arthur's mother still held her transgressions against her.

"My mother is right," Arthur agreed, giving Lavinia a pitying look. "It is a much more sophisticated affair when throwing a party as a duchess." He then turned to Agnes and winked. "Rest assured, though. Your invitation will be the first one sent out."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Another round of laughter went around the room, and the evening continued.

After dinner, they all gathered in the parlor for a small digestif, and then Lavinia's father announced that it was time to go home. Soon, Lavinia found herself wrapped up in her sisters' arms once more, and she held them close. Part of her wanted to go with them, but she knew she was where she belonged.

"Lavinia," Timothy called, his voice low and full of regret.

With a sigh, Lavinia let go of her sisters and turned to her old friend. To her surprise, though, Arthur suddenly appeared beside her, placing a hand on her waist.

"Yes, Timothy?" Lavinia asked, subtly leaning into her husband's touch.

"Please forgive my behavior from earlier today," Timothy pleaded. "The both of you. It was incredibly untoward of me, I know. But I promise you that it is only because I have cared for you since we were small children."

"I am caring for her now," Arthur stated, meeting Timothy's eyes with a steady gaze. "I assure you that she is in no danger here."

"He is right, Timothy," Lavinia affirmed. "I appreciate all you have done for me, but I believe that it is time you turn those concerns toward the safety of your own wife."

"Indeed," Arthur agreed. "In fact, I would request that she be in attendance any time you visit henceforth."

For a moment, Lavinia was sure she saw annoyance rise up in Timothy's expression, but if it did, he quickly controlled it and tucked it away.

"Yes, Your Graces," Timothy replied in a stiff, tight-lipped fashion.

Once Timothy left to go join Lavinia's sisters and father in their carriage, they bid goodnight to Joshua and then were left alone with Susan and Marianne in the foyer.

"Well, that was fun! Was it not?" Susan asked, clapping her hands together happily.

Marianne gave her daughter an exhausted look. "You and I shall speak tomorrow about your gentleman friend, Susan," she warned. "Your antics are becoming tiresome."

"Yes, I would have appreciated some sort of warning that this fellow was coming," Arthur interjected.

A cross look came over Susan's face as she folded her arms across her chest and huffed. "I would have told you if you were here, Brother," she all but hissed. "But someone keeps running away in the middle of the night."

Beside her, Lavinia felt Arthur stiffen. Not wanting to risk the talk she'd been hoping to have with him for days, she gently put a hand on his chest and smiled up at him. "Perhaps we could discuss this at breakfast tomorrow, husband?" she offered. "If you'd be so kind to join us. The four of us have yet to share a meal together alone, and it would be good to have a topic of conversation."

"For once, a good idea from your bride," Marianne stated dryly, turning her gaze to her son. "You will be joining us for breakfast tomorrow, won't you? With your sudden disappearances, we can't be too sure."

Arthur felt annoyance stir inside of him at his mother's snide comment toward Lavinia. "Yes, Mother," he replied calmly, choosing to push the emotion away. "I will. Very well then."

Though the day had gone well for the most part, Lavinia could feel the ropes of tension strung around her new family. She wanted to intervene and try to help, but she wasn't sure if her efforts would be appreciated. Instead, she joined Arthur in bidding Marianne and Susan goodnight and let him lead her up the stairs.

The moment they were alone in her room, Arthur locked the door behind them. He turned to her with an intense gaze, and she watched his jaw tick. Suddenly, she sensed that the conversation was going to be much more tense than she'd hoped and took a deep breath to steady herself.

"Timothy may seem a little too involved," she began, "but it is only because he cares—"

"For you, obviously," Arthur finished, cutting her off.

Lavinia gave him a look.

"For our family," she continued. "He has grown up helping me care for my sisters and knows the struggles I've gone through. I admit that his actions were out of line, but he has always had the best intentions."

"And what were these 'best intentions' that he spoke of today, hmm?" Arthur asked quickly, beginning to pace the floor. "Was he planning on running out of here with you by dragging you by the hand? Because from what I saw, that man was not going to let go of you if I had not intervened."

"He told me about Grace," Lavinia replied, her voice low and soft.

Arthur froze as he heard his ex-fiancée's name and turned to Lavinia with an intimidating gaze. "Did he now?" he asked, anger lacing his voice. "What else did he say?"

"It doesn't matter," Lavinia replied quickly, taking a step toward him. "Because all I heard was that you were betrayed by the woman you loved simply because of a scar."

Pain shone in Arthur's gaze, but he didn't respond.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“Arthur, I’m not her,” Lavinia urged, gripping his arm. She looked at him pleadingly, then sighed. “If you would just get to know me—if you would just let me get to know you—you would see that.”

Arthur’s gaze finally locked on hers, and when she saw the pain and distrust there, she nearly flinched.

“And what if I do?” Arthur asked, studying her closely. “You just want me to accept the pain and betrayal I feel when you leave?”

“I will not leave,” she promised, desperate for him to believe her. “I don’t want to leave, Arthur.”

Arthur studied her face intently for a moment as if trying to decipher the truth. He then nodded his head and let out a sigh. “Even so,” he murmured.

“So what?” Lavinia asked, urging him to explain.

“There’s something wrong with that man,” Arthur went on, stepping back from her. “Everyone worries that I am the beast because of the way I look. But he is the one who carries darkness. I can sense it.”

Lavinia looked at Arthur, taking in his tense stance and his untrusting gaze. Then, she nodded calmly and uncrossed her arms. “I believe you,” she said simply.

Arthur looked back at her distrustfully, his eyes moving up and down her figure. “You what?” he asked.

“You say there is no trust between us,” Lavinia explained, walking toward him. “I want to change that. Trust does not come instantly or easily. So, I must start with something small. If you say Timothy is up to no good, then I believe you. Because I am trusting that you are telling me the truth.”

Arthur’s eyebrows went up in surprise as Lavinia continued, “We can never get out of this cycle unless one of us breaks it. I understand why it can’t be you. So, it shall be me.”

Though there was more Lavinia wanted to say, she forced herself to stop talking. She had wanted her chance to speak to Arthur, and he’d given it to her. But now, it was up to him to decide what to do next.

Lavinia waited. She was willing to wait all night. But, after several minutes slowly ticked by, Arthur abruptly walked to the door and left.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“You have an awfully sour expression about you this morning, Arthur,” Marianne noted, tapping open her soft-boiled egg with her small, silver spoon. She lifted her eyes away from her breakfast, her eyes sympathetic, but her mouth forming a smirk. “Trouble with your new bride?”

Arthur drew his eyes up from his plate of untouched food, annoyance coursing through him at a rapid speed. “It’s best to keep such suspicions to yourself, Mother,” he replied, feeling his body tense. “Lest a servant hears and spreads another ridiculous piece of gossip. Is that not what we’re trying to avoid?”

Marianne’s eyes hardened as she looked at her son, and then she threw a suspicious glance around the room at the several servants standing by and gave a furtive nod.

“Let us discuss business, then,” she replied diplomatically. “I have heard you’ve been traveling, checking up on our family’s holdings. Is all well?”

Grateful for the subject change, Arthur nodded and began informing her of his most recent work. It was far better than thinking and discussing his new bride, who was befuddling him more by the day. He was still waiting for her to drop her mask of goodness. To show him the real woman behind her beautiful, kind exterior that surely must be terrified of him.

He had slept awfully last night, turning constantly and unable to get comfortable. His discussion with Lavinia last night had been tumultuous, to say the least, and had left him at war with himself. He had been sure that she was going to defend her friendship with Lord Stonehames tooth and nail. That she was going to call him mad or jealous. Instead, she had agreed with him and spoken of building trust.

But what good was building trust with someone who was going to eventually run from you?

“Ah, at last, the master of the manor has deigned to join us for breakfast.”

Arthur rolled his eyes as he heard his sister’s voice, but his heart skipped a beat when he saw Lavinia walk in with Susan. She wore her black hair long today, the curls cascading down her back. A small, jeweled hairpiece held some of it back from her face, highlighting the graceful curvature of her neck. She’d chosen a pale lavender gown with black lace trim for the day, and it did wonders for her figure.

Immediately, Arthur felt his lust for her rise again, flooding his very bloodstream and creating a stir in his groin. Her eyes, so dark and mystifying, were focused solely on him as Susan led her by the hand to the table.

“There are some things more important than work,” Arthur murmured, unable to keep

his gaze off Lavinia as she sat down at the table. Finally, he was able to make himself look away, and he focused on his little sister. “Like the discussion of your new beau, for example,” he continued, his voice shifting to an almost paternal inflection.

“Oh, enough, Brother.” Susan sighed, making a shooining motion with her hand toward him. “It’s not as if we eloped. He is a perfectly respectable young gentleman who has fought valiantly for our country. Surely you can appreciate that.”

“Appreciation is one thing,” Arthur retorted, “but knowing is another. You sprang his visit on us without preparation and gave us little opportunity to get to know him.”

“That’s what tonight is for,” Susan replied with a shrug, seemingly unfazed by his displeasure.

“Tonight?” Arthur asked, surprised.

Susan laughed and shook her head at him as if he were a young boy. “The Andersons’ ball?” she prompted. “Surely you haven’t forgotten.”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

He had. In fact, the only details he didn't have trouble keeping track of anymore were the ones about his wife. Especially her scent, her touch, her taste...

"Not at all," he replied, lying.

"Lavinia and I have had the most beautiful dresses commissioned by the Modiste," Susan went on. "She should be arriving this morning to make the final adjustments."

"Something with color, I hope." Marianne sighed, looking over at Lavinia. "You wear black quite well, my girl, but it would do you well not to don it this evening lest people shall believe you are in mourning instead of celebration."

Arthur felt his annoyance at his mother's sniping comments and was about to tell her to desist when Lavinia suddenly gave her a calm smile and nodded. "Of course not, Your Grace," she agreed, her voice clear and gentle. "Susan has been most helpful in assisting me with picking out tonight's gown design and fabric so that I may bring pride to this home."

Marianne seemed to be building up some sort of witty retort when the bells suddenly rang. Immediately, Susan jumped up, excitedly taking Lavinia's hand and pulling her up with her. Arthur was grateful. Though he didn't trust his wife, he also didn't want her tormented by his mother.

"She's arrived!" Susan exclaimed with a smile. "Come, Lavinia, we have much to prepare for before this evening."

Lavinia got up out of her seat to go with Susan, but as she reached Arthur's chair, she

stopped, looking down at him, and boldly put her hand on his shoulder. Even through the layers of fabric, he could feel her touch sending warmth into him. He wanted to wrap his hand around hers and bring her palm to his mouth. He wanted her to look into his eyes as he slowly enveloped her fingers one by one with his mouth. He wanted to hear her faint gasp, watch her eyes grow wide and glazed.

“I have had something made for you as well, husband,” she told him, her voice soft as she held his gaze. “It would be most appreciated if you join us in a moment to ensure the fitting.”

Not trusting himself to speak, Arthur only nodded, his jaw twitching with restraint.

A short time later, after having another spirited conversation with Marianne, Arthur followed the sounds of laughter and girlish whispers into the parlor. The Modiste had her changing wall and garment tools ready to go for last-minute touch-ups, and sprawled neatly on a long table was a wide assortment of women’s clothing. His eyes were immediately drawn to a particular nightgown lying beside a new, dark purple crushed velvet robe, and he knew right away they were Lavinia’s.

The nightgown was a French design, much more immodest than that of its English counterpart. There were practically no sleeves, and the bodice seemed to dip quite lower into a point that he imagined would almost reach his wife’s navel. Instead of it being made of standard cotton or linen, it was crafted delicately of white lace, leaving little to the imagination. He easily pictured his wife wearing such an alluring piece, and before he knew it, it was in his hands, his rough fingertips gently running over the delicate flower designs.

“What do you think of it, Your Grace?” the Modiste asked, suddenly appearing at his side.

Arthur glanced over to the well-dressed, voluptuous woman at his side and saw she

was smiling with pride.

“I made it with special silk newly imported from China,” she informed him. “It feels divine, does it not?”

“Indeed,” Arthur murmured, looking toward the changing wall behind which Lavinia and Susan were still dressing. “How many of these did Her Grace commission?”

“Just one, Your Grace,” the Modiste replied.

“That won’t do.” He shook his head, laying the nightgown down gently. “She’ll take six more, half of them in black, the other half in white.”

“Black, Your Grace?” the Modiste asked, surprised.

Arthur nodded. “She wears it well, does she not?”

“Oui, Your Grace,” the Modiste agreed quickly. “And thank you. I shall work on your new order straight away.”

Before they could discuss anything more, Susan and Lavinia both stepped out from behind the changing wall, giggling like two young school girls. The moment Lavinia saw him, her eyes shifted quickly to the nightgown she’d just put back down, then back up to him as a soft blush colored her cheeks. Arthur smirked and swore her cheeks grew even redder.

“What beautiful gowns,” he praised, starting to shed some of last night’s bad mood.

Susan had chosen a light pink gown with an assortment of pearls sewn into the bodice and down the skirt, and Lavinia had chosen a deep yellow satin gown that shone and moved like liquid gold. Her design had no need for pearls or jewels to make it stand

out, for on her, it was glorious enough on its own.

Lavinia beamed at him as she dipped her head in a small, grateful bow. “Thank you, Your Grace,” she replied, moving toward him. “I recall you stating at one time that you are fond of the sunset. When I saw this fabric, that was exactly what I thought of.”

“You chose this for me?” Arthur asked, unable to hide his surprise.

Admittedly, the shade was his favorite color, but he had no idea that Lavinia would have remembered such a small thing.

She nodded her head happily, her smile growing. “I spoke with your valet and was able to obtain some of your sizes,” she explained. “I’ve had a new cravat and cummerbund fashioned for you. I thought, to celebrate our first ball as husband and wife, that it might be festive to match.”

She waved the Modiste’s assistant over to her, who carefully placed the cravat in her hands.

Smiling, Lavinia held the accessory up to Arthur’s neck and smiled. “Yes, just what I thought,” she said. “It highlights the depth of your eyes wonderfully.”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Arthur did not consider himself an emotional man. But as Lavinia put the cravat in his hands, he felt a long-forgotten stirring inside of him. A pleasure that was not brought on by sexual gratification, but by being emotionally touched by another person's thoughtfulness.

"That is most kind of you," he managed to say while grappling with the foreign feeling.

Lavinia's smile grew wider, and her eyes lit up. "You are most welcome, husband," she replied, stepping closer as she put her hand over his. "I meant what I said last night," she whispered so that only the two of them could hear. "I pray you give me the opportunity to prove it to you. No matter how long it may take."

Arthur was struggling to come up with a response when his valet arrived at the door, announcing the arrival of the family solicitor. He was both thankful and annoyed by the interruption and dropped the cravat back into Lavinia's hands.

"It is a suitable color," he agreed, not responding to her statement. "Have Gregory take them to my rooms. I will be sure to wear them tonight."

With a polite bow toward her and the rest of the ladies in the room, Arthur turned and quickly left, hoping that, by the time he sat down in his study, his mind would focus on something other than the clashing emotions Lavinia seemed to cause within him.

* * *

"Lavinia, please, forgive me," Timothy pleaded, keeping up with Lavinia's brisk pace

as she made her way back to the ballroom. She had snuck off quickly to use the powder room, and when she'd emerged, she'd found Timothy waiting for her with the look of a sticker pup on his face.

"Now is not the time, Timothy," she replied dismissively, refusing to look at him. "I must make my way back to my family."

"Yes, I spoke to your father, and I think if you'd give him a moment, he'd tell you that he has the same reservations that I—"

"You misunderstand me," Lavinia stated coldly, cutting him off. She wanted to stop and look at him, to show him how serious she was, but she kept moving. "I meant my new family, Timothy. My husband. Who, if I recall correctly, demanded that you address me properly. We are no longer children, Lord Stonehames, and I demand that you see me for what I am. The Duchess of Whitekin."

She wasn't sure if it was the sharpness of her voice or that they were starting to draw attention, but Timothy stopped in his tracks and let her step into the ballroom alone. Relief swept through her as she was left to herself, and she took a moment to gain her bearings.

Arthur had given her no promise of revisiting their conversation from the previous night, but after their interaction that morning, she was hopeful that they were on the precipice of change. The last thing she wanted was to jeopardize that by giving in to Timothy's whims of imaginary danger.

"Your Grace," a familiar voice called to Lavinia's left.

She looked over and felt a maternal urge to protect Lady Stonehames. Emily was a beautiful young woman with the fragility of a fawn—a woman most men would die for. Suddenly, she felt another streak of annoyance go through her as she thought of

how Timothy sometimes took her for granted.

“Lady Stonehames, a pleasure to see you again,” Lavinia said, smiling at her.

“And you, Your Grace,” Emily replied with a polite curtsy.

Lavinia noted her breath seemed strained, but before she could ask if she was alright, Emily’s expression quickly became one of worry, and she added, “I hate to bother you, but I seem to have once again lost my husband. I always do that when we attend such gatherings together. Pray, have you seen him?”

Lavinia was struggling to give a proper answer when Arthur appeared in front of them. He gave her a calm, almost empty stare, then the corners of his mouth turned up, and he bowed to Emily.

“Lady Stonehames, you look well,” he told her.

“I am quite well, thank you,” she replied with a timid smile.

Lavinia watched as the other woman’s eyes locked on her husband’s scar, and she felt a stir of disappointment. Must everyone see Arthur as a monster?

“I was just asking your wife if she’s seen my husband,” Emily continued. “I always seem to lose him at such things.”

“I believe he is in the gentlemen’s parlor, My Lady,” Arthur replied kindly. “I could escort you there if you’d like.”

Emily’s cheeks turned bright red as she quickly but politely refused his offer and moved away from them. Lavinia wanted to stop her, to tell her she should be ashamed of her reaction toward Arthur, but in truth, she pitied the woman. For having

to put up with Timothy's strange behavior, and for not having the ability to see the good in people—a trait she had once thought the two of them had shared.

“You were gone for a while,” Arthur stated as Emily left their side. “Is all well?”

Not wanting to risk any advantage she might have gained since the night before, Lavinia smiled at him and took his arm. “For me? Perfectly. For the poor Lady Stonehames? Unfortunately, I do not think so,” she replied.

Arthur smirked. “Indeed,” he agreed. “I thought the poor woman would drop dead of fright right in front of me. Perhaps this evening was not a good idea.”

Lavinia looked at her husband as he stared ahead. There was a stoicism about him that almost read as emotionless strength. But behind his mask, she could see the threads of strain begin to form around his eyes and mouth.

Paying more attention to Arthur's face than the path in front of them, her left foot caught on a chair, and she suddenly felt herself falling forward.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Immediately, Arthur turned, his strong arms wrapping around her and preventing her from falling into the nearby table of guests. A collective gasp went up around the table as Arthur halted her fall just a breath away from the table's surface. Suddenly a burst of laughter left her lips, and she watched as Arthur's wide eyes suddenly gleamed with curiosity.

"You are my hero, dear husband," she stated loudly, caressing her gloved hand over his cheek.

Traces of a smile were starting to form on Arthur's face when a lady at the table guffawed and whispered, "A hero of women? Can't say I've heard the beast called that before."

Unable to keep her tongue still, Lavinia righted herself and turned toward the table with a beaming but cold smile. "I assure you that my husband is more than just a hero of women, Madam," she replied sweetly, staring the woman straight in the eye. "In fact, he saved all manner of lives in the war. Some of which you may know personally. Perhaps you should be thanking him instead of spreading slander."

"Lavinia," Arthur murmured, the strain on his face more apparent. "There's no need."

"Oh, but there is," she whispered back, feeling like an alley cat ready for a spat.

"Forgive us, Your Graces," a gentleman interjected, darting a glaring look at the offending woman. "My wife has been known to have a loose tongue. Especially when imbibing."

“We are compassionate people,” Lavinia replied coolly. “Forgiveness is always given when asked for. But I beg you to leave such slander at home.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” the woman answered quickly, bowing her head. Then, as if she thought Lavinia wouldn’t hear, she murmured under her breath, “Though how are we to know otherwise? He barely socializes and has yet to prove us wrong.”

“That is something easily fixed,” Lavinia replied matter-of-factly, meeting the woman’s eyes. “We are planning a ball to celebrate our happy union, are we not, husband?”

She turned toward Arthur, whose lips were drawn into a smirk. His eyes were radiating warmth as he looked at her, making her giddy.

“Well, it is your duty as Duchess to arrange such things,” he agreed with a nod. “Yes, a ball for our dear neighbors and friends to help us celebrate.”

“A ball at the Duke’s estate?” one of the other women asked, her eyes lighting up. “Why, there hasn’t been one in ages!”

“I remember your father, Your Grace,” the elder gentleman beside the lady stated, looking at Arthur. “I seem to recall he had one of the finest collections of early hunting rifles.”

Arthur looked surprised for a moment, but he quickly gathered himself and agreed. “Yes, he did, and he passed them on to me,” he stated. “I would be happy to give a tour of his armory at our upcoming celebration.”

“You will find—if an invitation graces your doorstep—that we have a warm and welcoming home to open to our guests,” Lavinia added sweetly.

A rush of questions began coming from the ladies at the table, but Lavinia put up a hand and smiled at them serenely.

“Perhaps we could talk more later,” she told them, her other arm embracing Arthur’s. “But for now, we are here to enjoy ourselves, and my husband has promised to dance with me.”

Lavinia turned to Arthur, feeling full of spirited satisfaction for what she’d just done. “Will you be so kind, husband?” she asked with a smile.

Arthur grinned back at her as he subtly shook his head, his arm squeezing tight around hers. “Of course, my love,” he replied confidently. “Allow me to lead the way.”

CHAPTEREIGHTEEN

“That was quite an impressive feat you accomplished back there, my Duchess,” Arthur stated, giving Lavinia a devilish grin.

Lavinia smirked back at him, the mischief in her eyes still glittering brightly back at him. As they danced, he subtly pulled her closer, liking the feel of her waist in his hands.

“It would appear that one of us has been named incorrectly, Duke. Perhaps it is I that is the beast, after all.”

Arthur chuckled, feeling better than he ever had in quite some time. “You are certainly full of surprises,” he teased. “Who knew that under that beautiful exterior of yours was the heart of a lioness?”

“I did try to warn you,” she teased back.

Arthur moved into the next step of their dance, twirling her artfully as other guests looked on. The whispers had stopped since they'd joined the dance floor. Lavinia's voice and strong defensive words had echoed throughout the other tables, and now it seemed no one dared to say a bad word.

"You certainly did," Arthur mused, pulling her back into his arms. "I may have to admit that I was wrong about my previous opinion of your manner, and I am not used to that. Normally, my judgment is quite accurate."

"As I said earlier to our gossiping counterparts," Lavinia replied, "forgiveness is always given when requested sincerely."

The sharp, tall edges of the wall Arthur had built so carefully around his heart began to soften and disappear as he looked at his new wife. He had never met a woman so brave, so fearless... so just. Perhaps he couldn't have believed it before, but he was certainly becoming convinced right now.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

As the dance ended, they performed their final steps beautifully, bowing toward one another as they finished. To his surprise, he heard a round of polite applause rise around them, and he finally took his eyes off Lavinia.

Around them there were no sneers or looks of horror, but instead polite smiles and nods. He looked from face to face, unable to believe what he was seeing. But when he saw an old, familiar face that he hadn't laid eyes on in nearly eight years, he froze.

Grace was not seated like the other guests but was on the arm of a man who looked deeply involved in a conversation with his small group. Instead of facing her suitor or friends, though, Grace was staring directly at him, a look of clear shock on her face.

Arthur felt his chest constrict, and for a moment, he lost himself. There was no disgust or fear on Grace's face, as there was when she'd broken his heart, but instead pure shock. He wasn't sure how long Lavinia had been trying to get his attention—it could have been seconds or minutes. But he finally heard her soft voice full of concern whispering, "Arthur, are you well?"

He didn't want to take his eyes off Grace. Nor did he want to go over to her either. He didn't know what he wanted, other than to leave. Finally, he was able to turn his gaze back to Lavinia and saw she had the most worried expression on her beautiful face.

"I am," he assured her, raising his hand to caress her cheek.

It wasn't a move he'd meant to make, it just happened. But the moment his palm touched her cheek, Lavinia nestled into it tenderly.

“I believe we should retire for the evening,” he told her, ignoring the stare he felt from Grace. “I wish to revisit the offer you made me last night.”

Immediately, Lavinia’s eyes lit up, and she nodded. “Very well, dear husband. Let us bid our goodbyes and go home. I have had a wonderful time.”

“As have I,” he replied, meaning it.

Arthur led Lavinia to his mother and Susan, and after assuring they had a proper carriage to take them home, the two of them left the party. Little was said on their ride home, his mind being pulled in two conflicting directions. However, once they reached the top floor and were in Lavinia’s rooms, his wife rose on her toes, her hands gently cupping his face, and she gently kissed the monstrous scar around his eye.

The ache of the past hurt suddenly dissolved as a more feral sensation took over, and Arthur lifted his face so that he could kiss Lavinia’s lips. An incredibly sensual moan left her lips as his mouth took possession of hers, and instantly, all of his thoughts became about her. How she was patient with him. How she defended him. Lavinia had more than proved her loyalty to him, and he no longer wanted to hold back from being with her fully.

With a heady groan, he picked her up, taking her from her sitting room to her bedroom. Immediately, Lavinia’s arms wrapped around his neck, and her small, pouty lips rained kisses over his neck and the cravat she had made for him. He made a mental note to take it off carefully when the time came, not wanting to ruin the thoughtful gift.

“I missed your touch last night,” Lavinia breathed as he placed her at the foot of her large bed.

Dark lust came over Arthur as he watched Lavinia begin to pull at the pins out of her hair and remove her jewelry as if she were as thirsty for him as he was for her.

“Shall I relieve your ache tonight?” he asked, trailing his fingertips down the front of her bodice.

Lavinia’s cheeks flushed a dark red as she nodded.

“Tell me,” he urged, his hands trailing further down her dress until he was on his knees.

He lifted the hem of her dress and shift then, his hands running up her bare, sculpted legs. His fingers hooked into the edges of her undergarments, and he looked directly into her eyes as he slowly began to drag them down.

Lavinia drew in a conquering breath, seemingly willing to rise to his challenge, and a teasing, confident smile spread across her lips.

“I want you to be with me fully, Arthur,” she told him, her eyes hot with arousal. “I want to be with you as a wife is meant to be with her husband.”

Arthur’s need spiked as he heard the sultry tone in Lavinia’s voice asking for him, and he grinned devilishly as he lifted her skirts again, this time pulling them back down over him so that he was beneath them. Lavinia gasped, then moaned as his fingertips began to massage her hips and backside, and he pressed his face into her mons, taking a long inhale of her sweet scent.

He knew immediately that he was ready to give in to her request, but before doing so, he couldn’t help but taste her sweet juices first. Lavinia moaned and trembled as he began to flick his tongue over her already swollen clitoris. With a vice-like grip on her legs, he held her steady, not allowing her to fall back onto the bed for support.

All too soon, Lavinia's moans of gratitude turned to quieter mewls of need, and her hands were pressing hard into his shoulders so she could steady herself. Arthur felt her hips beginning to buck, silently urging him for more, and his pleasure heightened.

He had told himself over and over that Lavinia didn't truly want him. But now, with her body so easily consumed by his touch, he couldn't deny the truth anymore. Lavinia ached for him as he ached for her, and he was not going to deny either of them anymore.

Arthur's name came out as a strangled cry from Lavinia's lips as she came undone. Hearing the sound of it nearly drove him to make love to her, clothes and all.

* * *

Joy and pleasure burst through Lavinia as Arthur came out from under her skirts and began to undress her with haste. Her legs trembled, still rocked by the intense orgasm Arthur had just given her. Hands shaking, she pulled at his jacket and was relieved when he actually let her slide the fabric away from his shoulders. One by one, their articles of clothing were dropped to the floor, and when they finally stood bare in front of one another, Arthur lifted her and laid her on the bed with surprising gentleness.

A gasp left her lips as she felt Arthur's hard body slide atop her, and her hands gripped his bare shoulders. This time as her fingertips roamed down the tapestry of scars over his back, he did not pull her hands away. Instead, he moved closer to her, as if reveling in her touch. She felt his hips press into hers, and between them, his hard, throbbing member nestled against her mons. Instinctively, she bucked her hips against him, and Arthur let out a groan as he captured her lips in another world-spinning kiss.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" he asked, his voice raw with need when he

finally pulled his lips from hers. “It may hurt quite a bit at first.”

Yes!

Lavinia wanted to scream. She was so close to her happiness that she could practically taste it, and she didn't want to risk losing it.

"Arthur, please," she whispered, wrapping her legs around his waist. "You are all that I've wanted."

Arthur's eyes locked on hers in the candlelit room, and she could see a myriad of emotions swirling in his deep pools.

Please, don't run away again. Let me show you how much I want you.

When Arthur's cock began to slide between her folds, she let out a gasp of surprise. She had felt his length against her thighs, her hand, but now inside of her, it felt impossibly large.

Arthur gathered her closer to him as he finished sliding himself fully inside, and as promised, a fountain of pain bloomed in her lower abdomen. A whimper of pain escape Lavinia's lips as she kept her eyes on her husband, and she was rewarded with the sincerest look of passion and grace.

"Breathe with me, sweet one," he commanded gently, his hips beginning to rock back and forth. "Relax into me. I have you."

Lavinia pulled in a deep breath through her nostrils and allowed her body to relax further into the bed. Slowly, the pain began to ebb away, trickling out of her as

pleasure began to take its place. Her trembling stopped, and she let out a sigh of relief as Arthur pulled his cock almost completely out of her, and then deftly thrust back in. As if knowing what to do on their own, her walls clamped around him tightly, pulsing and suckling as the pleasure grew.

“That’s it,” he praised, gently cupping her neck as a small smile graced his lips. “See how beautifully you’re opening for me?”

Unable to find her words, Lavinia only nodded as her hips began to move in time with his. As she did so, another deeply erotic moan slipped from Arthur’s lips, and he began to thrust faster. The pain was completely gone now, and her pleasure built inside of her like a fire taking off from kindling. Together, their soft moans began to grow louder as Arthur’s passion carried them both toward the precipice of desire, and everything began to fade away.

Her lies, her deception, and Arthur’s lack of trust all became nothing. Just dust of crumbling walls that no longer needed to exist. Something newer, stronger began to develop between them, taking Lavinia higher and higher until she felt a completely different pleasure wrack her body and make her shiver. Between her legs, she felt a rush of liquid flood forth onto the sheets, similar to what she had felt when Arthur’s tongue had danced over her mons, but also, somehow, completely different.

Arthur groaned her name as her orgasm made her tight walls grip him like a vice, and with a final thrust and animalistic growl, she felt a rush of his seed shoot deep inside her. They remained locked together, Arthur poised above her as he panted and trembled with his release. She could feel the light sheen of perspiration covering his muscles along his shoulder blades and back, and she felt a surprising swell of pride as she realized she had been the cause of such exertion.

After a few moments of stillness, Arthur finally opened his eyes again, and in an almost heartbreakingly gentle way, he touched his lips to hers and withdrew from her

folds. Lavinia trembled as he did so, immediately missing the feeling of him inside her. As if his cock was the only thing protecting her from the previous pain, her womb began to clench, and she felt a dull ache begin to radiate from inside.

“Come here,” he rasped, rolling onto his side.

Languidly, Lavinia let her body follow his, and Arthur’s arms wrapped tightly around her. His hands rough but his touch gentle, he began to massage soothing circles into her lower back and backside. She trembled at his touch and snuggled deeper into his chest.

“Are you in pain?” he asked, pulling away just enough so that he could look into her eyes.

Lavinia let out a soft laugh, feeling fatigue begin to seep into her deliciously sore body. “No,” she replied, “and yes. It is strange.”

Arthur chuckled as he shook his head and pulled her back to him. “While I am no expert, I believe that is normal,” he replied, showering her mussed hair with kisses. “Allow me to pour you some wine, it will help,” he added. “I shall ring for a servant for hot water and fresh sheets as well. Once we’re clean, we may rest.”

“Clean?” Lavinia asked.

As Arthur got out of bed, she looked down at the sheets and gasped. Her white sheets and thighs were stained with bright red blood, making panic rise within her.

As if sensing her fear, Arthur returned quickly with the wine and helped her out of bed and into a robe.

“It is all right,” he assured her tenderly, sitting her down on his lap after taking a

chair. "Every woman must experience this the first time. I wish it weren't so, but I'm afraid it is inevitable. A warm bath and wine will help. Drink."

Obediently, Lavinia lifted the goblet to her lips and drank with gusto, accidentally spilling the red liquid out of the corners of her mouth. She felt it dribble down her chin and between her breasts, which Arthur quickly lapped at before it could stain her robe. She gasped, almost giggled, as she felt his tongue lap at the valley between her breasts. Already, she felt better.

Within moments, servants knocked on their door, and with bowed, respectful heads, they filled Lavinia's tub and changed her sheets. Once left alone, Arthur slowly pushed Lavinia's robe off her and helped her settle into the large, copper tub. The heat of the water immediately began to subdue her pain and make her sleepy, and she was thankful when Arthur slipped in behind her and allowed her head to rest on his chest.

"So, what do you think?" he murmured as he scooped water with his palm and let it dribble gently over her hair. "Was it everything you wanted?"

Lavinia giggled against him, feeling giddy and relaxed. "More so," she confessed. "It is unlike anything I've ever experienced. Almost magical. Certainly spiritual. Two bodies entangled as one, their passions feeding off the other." She leaned up and turned to him with a mischievous smile. "I want it again."

Arthur's chest rumbled against her back as he laughed, and he leaned down to kiss her cheek. "Insatiable woman," he teased.

"I did not know that about myself," she replied, turning quickly to kiss his lips, "but I think you are right. The pain was awful at first, but then... it became the most extraordinary experience of my life. I've never... never felt that close to someone." She paused, thinking, then added, "Is it so for all women?"

She felt Arthur sigh, and when he spoke, his voice had a tinge of sadness to it.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“Sadly, not so. Some men become so overpowered by their lust that they don’t consider what the woman is feeling. Others are too selfish to care. I am relieved to hear that it was not that way for you, though.”

Lavinia slipped a washcloth off the edge of the tub and absentmindedly began to drag it over her stomach and thighs as her mind began to churn.

“How did you learn about lovemaking? How did you know what to do?” she asked.

Behind her, Arthur’s body tensed. “That is not the most polite conversation to have,” he said at last. “Young men are taught differently, I suppose. Our...experience is expected to begin at a younger age. It is not a practice best heard of by a lady such as yourself. Let’s talk of other things.”

Lavinia didn’t want to change the subject. If anything, his response only made her more curious. But the moment felt so peaceful. So perfect. She didn’t want to risk losing it.

“Very well then,” she relented, turning in the tub so she straddled his lap. “What would you like to talk about?”

“This evening,” Arthur replied, looking at her with a steady gaze. “Not that I am complaining, but did you defend me so? I have been a beast to you since we wed. If you agreed with them, I wouldn’t have blamed you.”

“Beast,” Lavinia sighed, gently tucking a lock of his dark hair behind his ear, better revealing the scar around his eye. “I have grown to despise that word.”

Her fingers traced gently over the thin white lines, and then she leaned forward, feathering kisses over the old wound.

“You are no beast,” she stated, shaking her head softly. “You are a man who has been deeply hurt.” She grazed her hand over the scar one more time, then placed her palm on his chest above his heartbeat. “Not just in your body, but your heart.”

Arthur’s eyebrow drew up suspiciously. “And how would you know such things about me?” he asked. “Most people believe that I no longer have a heart. I sometimes even question if I do.”

Lavinia thought of what Timothy had told her the day before, and then the woman Arthur had been staring at. She didn’t quite know how she knew, but in her heart of hearts, she understood immediately. The war may have scarred his body, but that woman had scarred his heart.

“I know,” she whispered, meeting his eyes. “I know the way I know my heart has begun to beat for you. It is a sense of knowing that is almost like a feeling. If that makes sense.”

Arthur shook his head slowly, his eyes on hers. “I’m afraid it doesn’t,” he murmured.

“Perhaps it can only make sense when you feel it yourself,” she mused. Then, drawing up her courage, she asked, “That woman tonight. She is your ex-fiancée, isn’t she? Grace Stewart.”

Arthur’s arms tensed around her, and he looked away. “She is of no consequence anymore,” he told her, irritation lacing his voice.

“Even if she is not,” Lavinia replied, tucking her fingertips under his chin to make him look back at her, “I would still like to strike her across the face for hurting you as

she did.”

Suddenly, a loud burst of laughter erupted from Arthur’s mouth, and he leaned up and wrapped his arms around her small waist. “Listen to you.” He chuckled. “You sound just as bloodthirsty as I!”

“Maybe I am,” Lavinia replied haughtily, elated to see the shift in his mood.

“Oh, my darling.” He chuckled, shaking his head. “Perhaps we are perfectly matched, after all.”

Smiling, Lavinia leaned down and kissed his lips. “I tried to tell you.” She giggled.

“Will you forgive me for not believing you earlier?”

Lavinia let out a dramatic sigh as she rolled her eyes and pretended to think. “Perhaps,” she teased, a sly smile spreading across her face. “If you take me to bed again and then spend the entire night, I may find forgiveness in my heart.”

“Well then,” Arthur stated, his eyes growing dark with lust as he lifted her out of the tub. “I suppose I should get to it, then.”

CHAPTERNINETEEN

Four Weeks Later

“First I couldn’t get you to stay in the house, now I can’t get you to leave,” Marianne huffed. “What has that woman done to you?”

Arthur pulled himself from the particularly dirty thoughts he was having about his wife and looked at his mother with an amused smirk. Last night, Lavinia had worn

one of her black nightgowns to bed, and he had been rather careless with it while ripping it off her. He was happy he had ordered several, but he thought perhaps he should go ahead and order a few more. He had rather enjoyed peeling the fabric off her breasts, making them bounce slightly as they were freed.

“Is there no way to make you happy anymore, Mother?” he asked. “Our business is tended to, our family is on solid ground, and your new daughter-in-law has taken to her new role as Duchess quite well. The ball we are to throw this evening will be exquisite, and you’ll be happy to know that everyone has accepted our invitation.”

Marianne let out a humph and shook her head. “So you say,” she replied. “The girl is cocky—arrogant, even.”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“Much like you,” Arthur replied, tiring of his mother’s passive-aggressive nature. One minute she was singing Lavinia’s praises, and the next she was nitpicking every small thing.

“Howdareyou!” his mother gasped.

“Oh, come now, Mother, please be off this front,” Arthur urged, rising from the breakfast table. “You like her, and you know it. You’re just still upset that your plan wasn’t followed as you hoped. But don’t you see? This is far better! Susan is no longer being a hellion. The household’s responsibilities are being taken over seamlessly. My wife is not a young girl terrified of her husband, but a woman who cares for and respects him. What is there to complain about?”

Marianne’s mouth opened as she seemed to get ready for another speech, but before she could do so, Susan breezed in, and asked, “Good heavens, why the shouting? Is it not too early for this?”

“Mother is still disappointed that I did not marry Rebecca,” Arthur replied dryly.

Susan let out an unladylike squawk of a laugh. “It is good he did not, Mama, trust me,” she stated as her tea was poured. “Lavinia and I were just going over the final guest list for this evening when a letter arrived from Miss Rebecca. It turns out that her story of a beau was true. A soldier, much like my Joshua. Her family is bringing him along this evening.”

Joshua’s name left Susan’s lips with a soft, love-filled sigh, and Arthur couldn’t help but smile. Now that he was experiencing happiness of his own, he was relieved that

his sister had found the same. He was even happy that Rebecca had, despite her poor treatment of him earlier.

“Come, Mother,” Arthur pleaded. “It is time to move on. We are all happy, save for you.”

“Do not talk to me of happiness,” Marianne chastised. “When you were sulking around her for days after your marriage.”

As she said this, Lavinia walked in. Arthur watched as the smile on her face suddenly dropped, and she looked at him with worried eyes. Arthur gave her a reassuring look and walked over to her side.

“I have changed, Mother,” he stated, looking at Marianne as he kissed Lavinia’s temple and put his arm around her waist. “For the better.” He smiled down at Lavinia proudly. “Come, darling, it’s a bit abrasive in here,” he told her. “Let us break our fast on the patio while we still have the summer’s favor.” He gave his mother another look, and in a calm voice stated, “Really, Mother. Let it go.”

“Have I done something wrong?” Lavinia asked him as he led her down the hall.

“Not at all,” he assured her. “Mother is just sour that her plans for me were not carried out. Give her time. She will drop her barbs eventually and embrace you for the wonderful woman that you are.”

“We both know my penchant for patience is strong,” Lavinia replied, leaning into him as they walked.

“Indeed, it is.” Arthur chuckled, escorting her outside.

A footman had followed them outside, and once he received their breakfast order, he

scurried away, leaving Arthur and Lavinia alone.

So much had changed in just the last few weeks. Arthur had forgiven Lavinia for her original deceptive plan, and since they'd first made love, he found himself transforming into a completely different man. He had always thought he was a man who did not care for chatter, but he and Lavinia had filled dozens, if not hundreds, of hours with talk.

They had shared their pasts, all of it, and he had learned much. Not just about his wife, but himself. So many things he'd held onto had been shed, and he felt lighter, giddy even. And he was starting to believe that Lavinia was right. That he wasn't a monster, after all.

"So, I hear your sister's mystery man is real, after all," he said, reaching for Lavinia's hand. "I'm very happy to hear it."

"As am I," Lavinia agreed, rolling her eyes. "I look forward to meeting him. Rebecca says that Father is not exactly joyous about the match, but he is allowing it."

As she mentioned her father, Arthur noted a slight change in Lavinia's behavior, and he squeezed her fingers gently.

"Are you nervous about seeing your father this evening?" he asked. "He seemed more content with our marriage during his last visit. I believe he has let his disappointments go."

"No." Lavinia sighed, giving him a strained smile. "It's not that. At least not entirely."

She seemed to struggle with her thoughts for a moment, and she said nothing as a servant brought them their breakfast and tea. Finally, when he left, Lavinia spoke

again.

“Rebecca wrote that Father has invited Lord Stonehames as his personal guest,” she confessed at last. “I am sorry, Arthur, but I assure you I had nothing to do with it.”

Arthur knew what she said was true, but he still felt the old stirring of darkness rise within at the mention of Timothy. He had had little research dug up on the man after the incident during Lavinia’s family’s first visit and had received some discomfiting information. One piece in particular was about his wife, and how she always seemed to be coming down with some sort of ailment or other. Another piece was that Timothy often visited a chemist in the unsavory parts of London. Something was not right with the man. But he was to be his father-in-law’s guest, and he didn’t want Kenneth to be offended by Arthur turning Timothy out of the party.

“I know you didn’t,” Arthur assured Lavinia, letting go of her hand so she could break her fast. “I shall keep an eye on him, and if a situation arises, I will be sure to handle it with utmost discretion.”

Relief flooded Lavinia’s face as she thanked him, and he allowed her to change the subject.

“What plans have you before the party this evening?” she asked.

“You,” he stated, raising his eyebrow coyly as he smirked. Lavinia’s cheeks blushed as her smile widened, and he leaned in closer. “I know you are busy today with the final arrangements, but tonight will be long, and too many hours will pass before I get to taste that delicious body of yours again. Could you spare your husband an hour or two before our guests arrive?”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

A wicked, hungry grin stretched across Lavinia's face, and she nodded. "Let us go now," she urged him. "The hunger I have is not for food anyway."

"I must say, dear wife," Arthur teased, helping her out of her chair, "you are the most delightful creature I've ever met. Thank heavens you tricked me into marrying you."

"Bite your tongue." Lavinia laughed as they walked away from their plates of untouched food.

"Bite it for me," Arthur challenged.

* * *

"Do you truly think your mother is still angry at me?" Lavinia asked as she and Susan dressed together in Susan's quarters.

After her little mid-day tumble with Arthur, which had been as lovely and satisfying as always, she had met with her sister-in-law again, and they had worked together to coordinate the final arrangements. Now, there was nothing left to do but dress and be ready to receive their guests.

"Mother is angry, period," Susan replied dismissively, pointing somewhere in her reflection.

The maid behind her touched up her rouge dutifully, and she gave a satisfied nod.

"I do not think she is angry at you. I believe it must be hard for her to watch her

legacy be passed on to someone she didn't approve of," Susan continued. She turned away from her mirror and smiled at Lavinia. "But you have gone above and beyond in your royal duties in regard to the estate, and seeing how happy you've made my brother, I have no doubt that you will also fulfill your duty of providing an heir. Do not worry about her. Once you are with child, she will have no room for anger."

Lavinia smiled, looking down at her stomach. It was still too early to tell, but she hoped that her and Arthur's future child was already in there, silently growing. She had pictured what their children would look like many times in the past month. Her curly hair. Arthur's green eyes. Her wit and his strength. The thought of them made her extremely happy.

"Your brother is happy, then?" she asked.

Her sister-in-law rolled her eyes as she smiled. "Are you joking?" She laughed. "I've never seen my brother like this, not even when we were children. I don't know how you did it, but you fixed him."

"I don't know about that." Lavinia laughed dryly. "But I have certainly enjoyed getting to know that part of him that he had buried so deep."

Their conversation faded as they finished getting ready. Susan had chosen another pink gown, this one a blindingly brilliant shade of fuchsia, while Lavinia dressed in a green one the exact same shade as Arthur's eyes. As always, she adorned her look with black accessories and wore green satin shoes with black buckles.

After showering one another with compliments regarding their chosen attire, they descended the stairs. Lavinia had thought that no one would show up on time, but to her pleasant surprise, dozens of their guests began arriving promptly at seven. Even Susan looked taken aback by the drove of guests coming their way, and she seemed to bounce with giddiness as they went to greet them.

“Lavinia!” Agnes’s voice called above the fray of arriving carriages.

“Pardon me, Lady Sumter, Lord Sumter,” Lavinia said to her most recently arrived guests, “I believe I hear my baby sister.” She turned just in time to feel Agnes’s arms wrap tightly around her waist. She giggled happily and hugged her back. “Whatever are you doing here?” she chastised in a teasing tone. “You are not old enough for this party.”

“Papa said I could come if I promised to stay with the nanny upstairs,” Agnes replied, looking displeased with the supervision. “I told him I was much too old for a nanny and that I could busy myself perfectly well, but he refused to let me come otherwise. Besides, we are still invited to stay for the weekend, are we not? It was better that I arrive with Papa and Rebecca today than on my own tomorrow. I detest carriage rides by myself. They are too lonesome.”

Lavinia pulled her youngest sister back into her arms, giggling. “Of course, loneliness can be quite dreadful,” she replied.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her father, Rebecca, and a handsome young man making their way up the steps. Excitement filled her when she saw the gentleman escorting Rebecca, happy to see that he wasn’t imaginary, as she had feared.

In front of her, Agnes made a face and leaned in. “Donotmention loneliness to Papa,” she warned in a whisper. “Now that you are married and Rebecca is betrothed, he’s been an awful bear, going on about how I will leave him soon as well and he will have no one.”

Lavinia felt herself flinch as she turned her gaze back to Kenneth. He didn’t deserve to be lonely. He wasn’t perfect, but he had been a good father, and she was certain he’d make a doting husband to some lucky woman. Though he’d never mentioned it, Lavinia sent up a silent prayer that her father would soon find love again.

“My darling girl.” Kenneth beamed, pulling Lavinia into his arms and kissing her cheek. “How happy you look!”

“Hello, Papa,” Lavinia whispered emphatically, kissing his ruddy cheek. “I am! My marriage has done me wonders.”

“I am happy to hear it,” he replied, pulling back. His eyes glittered with a mixture of sadness and happiness. “I may have been quick to judge this arrangement at first,” he went on, “but now that you and Rebecca are clearly so joyful, I believe that it has worked out exactly as God intended.”

Thankful for her father’s final approval, she hugged him once more before turning to her sister.

Smiling from ear to ear, Rebecca rushed into Lavinia’s arms, hugging her tightly before pulling back to take her fiancé’s hand. “Lavinia, may I introduce my intended, Sir Lawrence Abernathy, Lieutenant of Her Majesty’s Royal Navy Ship, The Elizabeth.”

The young man at Rebecca’s side bowed politely in front of Lavinia as she curtsied and took her hand to place a chaste kiss on her knuckles.

“A pleasure to meet you, Your Grace,” Lawrence said warmly. “I hear it is you I must thank for the upkeep of Rebecca and mine’s union. I am eternally in your debt.”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“The pleasure is all mine, Sir Lawrence,” Grace replied. “And protecting my sister’s happiness is the only debt you owe me.”

“Then his debt is settled,” Rebecca stated, looking at Lawrence with love-filled eyes.

“Please, go on in and make yourselves comfortable,” Lavinia urged, feeling herself become too emotional. “Susan and I shall join you as soon as possible.”

Lavinia’s family happily made their way inside, all of them smiling with jubilation as they chattered about the excitement of the party. She was still smiling when she turned back to the steps, but her smile slipped away immediately as she saw Timothy approach her.

“You do not have a smile for me, Your Grace?” he asked. Though he was smiling, his eyes held an odd look that made the hairs on the back of Lavinia’s neck stand up. Despite his proper dress and charming facial expression, he looked unhinged somehow.

“Welcome, Lord Stonehames,” Lavinia greeted cordially. “Please, go inside and help yourself to some refreshment and enjoy the entertainment.”

“I know I do not deserve it,” Timothy went on, standing still, “but I wish to apologize to you. I understand now is not the time, but perhaps later you can spare me a moment? Truly, I have much to be regretful for.”

Timothy looked at her pleadingly, and under the stress drawn across his face, she saw her dear childhood friend. Everyone was moving on with their lives, she realized.

Perhaps it was time she did so, too.

“Very well,” she agreed, taking pity on him. “There will be time after supper. We shall talk then.”

CHAPTERTWENTY

“Well, I must admit,” Marianne mused, standing beside her son as she looked on at their happy guests, “your wife can certainly throw a festive event. I haven’t seen so many royals in this estate since your father was alive.” She looked over at him, her eyes shining with regret. “Perhaps she is good for you, after all.”

Arthur looked back at his mother, his heart swelling with pride and affection.

“I am glad you finally see it, Mother,” he replied, giving her a small smile. “Everything Lavinia touches, she changes for the better.”

“Yes,” Marianne drawled, studying her son. “I am starting to understand that. Tell me, Arthur, are you falling in love with her?”

Arthur’s eyes left his mother’s gaze as he looked over the crowd and easily spotted his wife talking with Rebecca and her handsome young Lieutenant. As if able to sense his gaze, Lavinia immediately looked up at him and smiled warmly as she winked.

“I believe I am,” Arthur murmured, keeping his eyes on her. And he knew it was true.

He hadn’t said the words aloud to her yet, but he knew it was true. He could feel it in his bones, in his very being, that this wildly stubborn, crafty, protective woman was indeed the love of his life.

He felt his mother's hands clench around his right wrist, and he looked back to see her eyes welling with tears.

"What is the matter, Mother?" he asked quickly. "Do you need rest?"

Marianne laughed softly as she shook her head. "No, my dear boy. I need to apologize. It is clear Lavinia is who you are truly meant for. I promise, from now on, I will not doubt or sling barbs about this union. You chose well, my son. Even if I didn't see it at first."

"Thank you, Mother," Arthur replied, his voice full of awe.

Never once had his mother apologized for anything. It was so strange how much things had changed since Lavinia had come into his life.

"Ah, the beautiful Dowager Duchess of Whitekin herself," Kenneth Dennis boomed, walking up to them. "Your Grace, you look absolutely radiant this evening."

Arthur watched as his mother's face lit up as Kenneth joined them. He was thankful that his mother and Lavinia's father had become fast friends, even if they had been against their marriage at first. After a polite exchange of words, he excused himself so the two could talk.

"Is all to your liking, husband?" Lavinia asked, wrapping her arm around his as he approached her.

Arthur looked around his home, taking in the laughter and smiling faces. In the foray, a quartet was playing a fanciful tune, and some were even dancing already.

"You have done amazingly, wife," he replied sincerely, turning back to her. "And are you satisfied with your hard work?"

“Very much so.” She beamed at him. “Have you seen your friend Archibald yet?”

Arthur’s eyebrows flew up in surprise. “Why, no.” He chuckled. “I thought he was somewhere in Germany?”

Lavinia gave him a mischievous smile. “I can be very persuasive when I want to,” she replied. “Even through a letter. I received him earlier, so I know he is here. Why don’t you go look for him in the cigar room? I am sure the two of you have much to catch up on.”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Arthur looked down at his wife in awe, ever impressed by the lengths she was willing to go to ensure his happiness.

“You will be rewarded for this later,” he whispered lustfully, bringing her hand to his lips. He kissed and nibbled at each knuckle seductively as he gave her a heated look.

“I know I will,” she whispered back, giving him one of her minx-like smiles. “Go, find your friend, and be merry. Do not worry for me, I am well attended to.”

Despite the crowd, Arthur kissed Lavinia fully on the lips. His cock stirred the moment their mouths touched, and he once more whispered his promise of pleasure before taking off toward the cigar room.

As he passed through the crowds, he noticed there were no sneers, no whispers. Instead, glasses were raised, and heads were bowed to him respectfully. Smiles instead of frowns graced faces, and several greetings and thank yous for the party were directed at him.

He was astounded by how much had changed. And it was all because of Lavinia.

“Your Grace,” a voice called, stopping Arthur’s footsteps and thoughts. He knew that voice, would recognize it anywhere.

Slowly, he turned around and came face to face with his former fiancée. “Lady Grace,” he greeted calmly, giving her a polite bow.

Grace smiled at him as she gave him a polite curtsy, then put her gloved hands on

the shoulder of the man beside her. "It is Lady Blackney, now, Your Grace," she replied, smiling at him hopefully. She then turned to the man at her side and looked up at him lovingly.

The viscount by Grace's side greeted Arthur warmly, shaking his hand and looking him directly in the eye. "A pleasure to meet you, Your Grace," he stated cordially. "My wife has told me stories of your bravery."

Arthur looked from him to Grace, surprised. "Is that so?" he asked.

Grace pressed her lips together tightly, then looked back up at her husband. "Darling, would you give us a moment?" she asked.

The Viscount gave her a nod. "Surely. I shall go find you some wine," he replied. He turned toward Arthur and gave him a polite nod. "Excellent party, Your Grace."

Arthur nodded back at him, and he and Grace both watched as the man made his way through the crowd.

"You are surprised," Grace stated, turning back to Arthur when the Viscount was gone.

"Yes, I am," Arthur agreed, looking at her. "I never dreamed that you would deign to speak to me again, let alone allow yourself in my presence."

Grace's cheeks turned a bright pink as regret filled her eyes, and she nodded. "I would never dream of coming here without your knowledge, but your wife has written to me. We have spoken at length about you, Arthur." She gave him a small smile. "You are very lucky. Your wife absolutely adores you."

At this point, Arthur was no longer surprised at the lengths Lavinia would go to be

there for him, and he let out a dry chuckle.

“I assure you, I feel the same about her,” he replied.

“I am so happy to hear it,” Grace said quickly. “You deserve so much happiness.”

“Just not from you,” he couldn’t help but quip.

Grace flinched, but she nodded her head in agreement. “Arthur, I must tell you something,” she said, lowering her voice. “The way I left you that day—I should have never done that. It was incredibly cold and heartless, and I am eternally regretful for the way I handled things.”

“How could you have not?” Arthur asked.

At one point, such a discussion would have fouled his mood completely. But now, he looked at the past with a strange indifference.

“When I left, I was a handsome boy with hopes and passion. When I returned, I was a beast of a man, riddled with scares, carrying around a numbness that I could not conquer.”

“No,” Grace replied quickly, taking another step closer as her eyes welled with tears. “It was not your appearance I ran away from. I know, I allowed you to think that, but that was only because I was a coward. It was an easy way out. One no one would blame me for. But it was not the truth.”

Arthur looked at her, stunned. He wanted to believe her, but after so many years of being left to believe his scars were the reason for the end of their engagement, he was having trouble accepting it.

As if Grace could sense this, she shook her head ruefully. “When you were away, I spent more time with your mother and Susan, and I realized how much pressure there was being married into your family,” she explained. “I began questioning myself as to whether I truly loved you, and in your absence, I realized that I did not. I have and had love for you, that is true. But as a friend loves a friend. I began picturing my future with you once you returned and realized it was not what I wanted.”

“I was planning on waiting,” she went on when Arthur didn’t reply, “until after your affairs with your late father were sorted. But when I saw you that day, the way you looked at me so hopefully, so assuredly, I realized I could not wait. Your scars were difficult to look at, yes, but they were not the reason I left. And I am so very sorry for allowing you to believe that they were.”

Arthur felt a rush of emotions hit him like a giant wave. Disappointment, regret, anger. But also understanding, compassion, and rationality. He’d been so focused on how he’d needed and missed Grace while he had been gone that he’d never thought to question her happiness in any of his letters to her. How it could have all gone so differently... how different the last eight years could have been. But then, he realized, he wouldn’t have been led to Lavinia.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“We shall move forward with a new type of friendship, then,” he declared at last, choosing to let go of his ugly past. He had clung to it for so long, but now that he had a future to look forward to, it all didn’t matter anymore.

“Do you truly mean that?” Grace asked, her eyes wide with hope.

Arthur felt some semblance of a smile stretch across his face, and he nodded. “Indeed,” he replied, meaning it. “Lavinia and I shall send you and your husband an invitation for dinner next week, just the four of us. And we will all start fresh together.”

Grace let out a sigh of relief and patted his arm. “We would love that,” she said, looking as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

“As would we,” Arthur returned, realizing that he meant it.

At that moment, the Viscount returned, juggling three glasses of champagne. “I thought we might toast to your successful gathering, Your Grace,” he said jovially, handing a glass to Arthur.

“And to new beginnings,” Grace added, raising her glass.

Smiling, Arthur raised his glass to Grace’s and her husband’s. “To new beginnings,” he echoed.

* * *

“Your Grace, this has been an absolutely wonderful ball thus far,” Lady Blackney praised. “I cannot thank you enough for the invitation.”

Lavinia took Grace’s hand and squeezed it warmly. She had been mad at the woman at first. And, in a way, perhaps always would be for the way Grace had hurt Arthur. But Lavinia wanted a new future for all of them, so she had put her feelings aside. Hoping to create a bridge between Arthur’s past and his present.

“I am so happy you came, and that you were able to speak with my husband,” Lavinia replied. “Tell me, is all well with you now?”

Grace beamed at Lavinia and nodded softly. “I believe it is on its way,” she replied. “I never thought that we would ever be on speaking terms again, but thanks to you, I feel as if we will all soon be good friends.”

“I hope for that as well,” Lavinia said, meaning it. “Tell me, have you seen him recently? I know you spoke with him about an hour ago, and that he was to meet his friend Archibald in the cigar room after, but I did not find him there. Dinner will be served soon, and we planned to say a few words to our guests beforehand.”

“I have not,” Grace replied, her eyebrows dipping down slightly in concern. “Shall my husband and I assist you in finding him?”

“No need,” Lavinia assured her. “Please, both of you, continue enjoying the party. I shall go check his study.”

Grace and Lavinia exchanged a few more pleasantries before Lavinia headed away from her guests and toward Arthur’s study. It had been locked, but she and Arthur each had their own keys. As she made her way toward it, several of her guests raised their glasses to her and praised her for such a wonderful party. She smiled back at them gaily, happy that everything was working out exactly as she had hoped.

As she reached the door of Arthur's study, she heard footsteps come from the other side and felt a swell of relief. There you are, she thought, opening the door. As she stepped inside, she looked around, confused. She had expected to see her husband at his desk, but no one was there. However, a fire had been lit in the hearth, and there were two glasses of brandy sitting on the desk.

"Arthur?" she called out, taking a few more steps inside. "Darling, are you in here?"

Behind her, she heard the door close, and the lock slid into place. Thinking her husband was playing a trick on her, she began to laugh and turned around.

"Arthur, what are you—"

It was not Arthur who now stood in front of the locked door, but Timothy. The strange look he'd had on his face when she'd first greeted him had returned, and she once more felt a tremor of insecurity course through her.

"Lord Stonehames, what are you doing?" she asked, hoping her rising fear wasn't obvious in her voice. "This is highly inappropriate. Get out of my way at once."

"You know I hate it when you call me that," Timothy replied calmly, ignoring her command. "You used to never call me that, save for when we were in public. Now, it is all you refer to me as. Do you know how deeply that hurts me?"

"Much has changed between us," Lavinia stated, fighting to stay calm. "Now, please, remove yourself from the door and let me pass. My husband is looking for me."

Timothy chuckled darkly as he shook his head and took a step toward her. "Your husband," he stated, disgust filling his voice as he said the word, "is in his father's armory, too wrapped up in all the positive attention you've brought him. I assure you he is not looking for you."

“Lord—”

“Sit down, Lavinia,” Timothy commanded, moving toward Arthur’s chair. “All I ask is that you have a drink with me and let me talk. If you hear me out, I assure you that you will get out of here.”

Lavinia looked at him tensely as he took a seat on her husband’s chair and leaned back comfortably. It was only then she noticed that the chair normally positioned at the opposite side of the desk had been moved to his side. He picked up a glass, smiling, and held it out to her.

“Sit, please,” he urged. “Allow me this.”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Her eyes darted toward the door, and she wondered if she could make it there in time. As if knowing what she was thinking, Timothy chuckled and shook his head. From his jacket pocket, he pulled out a key.

“I promise to unlock it for you if you’ll only hear me out,” he urged.

“How did you get that?” Lavinia asked, eyeing the brass.

“I have my ways,” Timothy replied smoothly. His eyes then darkened. “Sit.”

Stiffly, Lavinia took a seat in the chair beside him and accepted the glass.

“To our friendship,” Timothy toasted. “Forever may it reign.”

Lavinia said nothing but raised her tumbler in a toast. She took a small sip of the drink, and it burned her throat instantly. Brandy was not her drink of choice, preferring wine, but she’d tasted it before, and it had not been like this. There was something bitter lying under the sweet notes of the liquor.

“Ah, see,” Timothy praised. “This isn’t so bad, is it?” He reached out, his fingers touching the bottom of her glass, and tipped it up so that more would flow into her mouth.

He only stopped when Lavinia let out a sputtering cough.

“Do you remember when we were children, Vinnie?” he went on as Lavinia touched her fingertips to her mouth. Her lips felt oddly numb, and a fresh wave of alarm

washed through her.

“We would play on my parents’ lawn together, pretending to be married. Rebecca would be our officiant, and Agnes would pretend to be your father, cheering us on.”

Lavinia tried to speak, but her tongue felt large and foreign in her mouth. The sensation of sleepiness began to course through her, and she struggled to draw in a full breath.

“I always resented my father for squandering my inheritance.” Timothy sighed. “If he hadn’t, that wedding would have been real someday. But he dried our coffers before he died, leaving me no choice but to marry into wealth. Unfortunately, your father’s wasn’t vast enough to make up for my father’s debts, and I had to look elsewhere.”

He gave her a sad look. “You have no idea how heartbroken I was that I had to marry Emily instead of you. But as you grew up and became averse to marriage in general, I started to think that things would work out. I would have you both. One for money. One for love. I was certain that after some time, you and I would finally admit our feelings for one another. It was all going to be perfect.”

Lavinia tried to speak again, but her words came out as an unintelligible mix of unsuited syllables. She felt her panic take full flight then, and she tried to rise from the chair. Immediately, her legs began to tremble, and she fell back into her seat.

“Now, now, don’t move,” Timothy soothed, leaning toward her to press his hands into her thighs. “The tonic is swift. You will hurt yourself if you try to stand.”

He reached up to her face then, tucking one of her curls behind her ear. The edges of Lavinia’s vision began to turn a fuzzy black as she looked at him, terrified.

“You almost ruined everything by marrying that beast,” he whispered, shaking his

head subtly. “But you don’t have to worry. I’m going to fix everything.”

“Aaarrtthhh heeelllppp,” Lavinia groaned in a weak, barely intelligible voice as her vision went completely black.

“Shhhh. It’s alright,” Timothy soothed, picking her up. “I’ve got you now. Everything is going to be exactly as it is meant to be.”

CHAPTERTWENTY-ONE

“Susan, have you seen Lavinia?” Arthur asked.

It had been nearly an hour since he’d left the armory to search for his wife, and he couldn’t find her anywhere.

Susan turned to him with a shrug. “Last I saw her she was looking for you so the two of you could deliver your toast,” she replied. “Which you should do soon. I, for one, am growing tired of these little treats being passed around, and I’m sure our guests feel the same.”

“I cannot find her anywhere,” Arthur replied, ignoring her jibe.

Susan rolled her eyes, clearly unconcerned. “I’m sure she is just upstairs, taking a nap,” she replied. “The first ball is always the most daunting to host. Perhaps she just needed a moment.”

“I just checked up there,” Arthur replied, shaking his head. “She’s not in her quarters, nor in any of the bedchambers.”

For the first time, Susan’s face showed concern. She passed her glass to Joshua and told him she would return shortly.

“Come, I shall help you look. Which rooms haven’t you checked yet?” she asked.

“I’ve checked every one,” Arthur growled, growing irritated. “Save for my study, but I had it locked.”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Susan made a sound with her tongue and shook her head. “Your wife is the lady of the house now, she has a key for every room. Come, I’m sure that is where she is,” she assured, leading the way.

Arthur wanted to let himself feel relieved, but as they walked toward his study, the knots in his stomach worsened.

Susan turned the knob, and just as she had predicted, the door opened easily. She gave him an “I told you so” look and swung open the door.

“Lavinia, darling, it’s time to give your toast,” Susan called out as she strode inside. “We are all—Lavinia? Strange. I thought for certain she was in here.”

Arthur followed his sister inside quickly, his eyes scanning the room. It was empty, but there was a fire roaring in the hearth, and there were two glasses of half-drunk brandy on his desk. He walked over to it quickly and found an envelope with his name on it.

“What is that?” Susan asked, joining him behind the desk.

“I don’t know,” Arthur murmured, ripping the envelope open, “but it wasn’t here when I left before.”

Pain, much worse than the one he’d ever experienced on the battlefield, ripped through him as he read through the note. He tried to read through it several times, but his mind could only focus on certain words.

The strain of this union is far too much for me to bear... My family has convinced me that an annulment would be best for both of us... I tried to tell myself I could love you, but... I tried. For my sister, I truly tried. Regretfully, Lavinia.

“Arthur?” Susan asked, putting a hand on his arm. “Arthur, who is it from?”

Arthur couldn’t breathe. He tried to pull air into his lungs, but it did not come. A red haze began to settle over his vision as his hands began to shake.

“Get everyone out of here,” he demanded, his voice hoarse.

Susan looked at him as if he were mad and took the letter from his hands. She read through it quickly and gasped.

“Arthur this is not from her,” she urged quickly. “It can’t be. Lavinia loves you. She’s told me so.”

“Enough!” Arthur hissed, pulling away from Susan’s touch. “Get everyone out of here immediately. You and Mother, too. Go stay at the Dennises, for all I care, but get out!”

“No,” Susan shot back, throwing the letter down on the desk. “Something is wrong, Arthur. Lavinia is in danger.”

“I said enough!” Arthur roared, slamming his fists on the top of his desk. “I am done with everyone’s lies! Get out of this house, now!”

Arthur had never raised his voice to his sister, not even when they had been children. As he looked at her with hate-filled eyes, he could see the shock and terror glistening back at him.

Without another word, Susan gathered her skirts and ran from the room. For a moment he felt regret, but his heartache soon welled up and swallowed it, leaving nothing but self-pity.

* * *

“Come now, darling, wake up. It’s all right. You’re safe now.”

Lavinia heard the soothing, masculine voice whisper through the heavy folds of darkness surrounding her. She tried to move, but her body felt thick and heavy, and her head thumped with a dull, annoying pain. As she took a breath, she became aware of her other senses. She could hear the crackling of a fire and smell the crisp fall air. A hand was rubbing soothing circles over her back.

Arthur, she thought, feeling a sense of relief as she felt her husband’s hands. She wasn’t sure at all what had happened. She remembered the party—the smiling faces of their guests, the sensual jests she and Arthur had murmured together. But she couldn’t remember going to bed.

Had she drank too much wine? Had Arthur had to carry her to their quarters?

Lavinia pulled in another deep breath, feeling herself become more one with her body, and smiled as she turned around.

“What happened?” she asked groggily, snuggling into the man beside her.

Sliding her head closer, Lavinia kissed the place on Arthur’s chest that held a scar. Only, instead of the rough edges of the old wound, she felt hairy, unscarred skin.

With a gasp, she opened her eyes and began to scramble away. Her heart hammered as the arms around her clamped around her like a cage, and Timothy smiled dreamily

back at her.

“Shhh, it’s all right,” he coddled, ignoring her hands as she pushed at him. “You’re safe now.”

“Timothy let me go,” she begged, trying to overcome the state of intense dizziness that hit her when she opened her eyes. “What am I doing here? Where’s Arthur?”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Her stomach seemed to lurch, and for a moment, she thought she was going to be sick and gagged. Only then did Timothy let her go and pushed her upper half off of the bed so that her head hung off the edge. Still feeling groggy, she kicked at him, making contact with his groin.

A growl of displeasure erupted from Timothy as he let her go, and Lavinia slid the rest of the way to the floor. She looked around wildly, trying to get her bearings, and suddenly realized she knew where she was.

Not in Whitekin, where she belonged, but far from it.

Timothy's father and hers had hunted together for many years, and this was the cabin they'd stayed in when they were in the countryside. She knew by the knickknacks on the hearth and the deer heads on the wall that this was the place, and her fear continued to blossom.

Praying for strength, she pulled herself up to her feet and shakily began to walk to the nearby table. As she did, she realized she was no longer wearing her gown from last night, but only the chemise that had been under it. Lavinia searched her memories frantically, trying to remember what had happened.

"Timothy, what have you done?" she asked, her heart pounding in her chest.

"There's nowhere to go," Timothy stated through ragged breaths. "Your husband doesn't want you anymore. No one knows you're here. And you cannot get out. This place only has one key for all of the locks and it is in my possession."

Ignoring him, Lavinia staggered to the door and began fumbling with the several locks in place, trying her best to get them undone.

“I told you that beast was bad for you,” Timothy went on, his voice closer now.

Lavinia turned, her head spinning with dizziness once more as she pressed her back against the door. The look in Timothy’s eyes—that of wild derangement—suddenly triggered her memory, and it all came flooding back to her. The study, the brandy. The fear she had felt in her body and soul as she realized she couldn’t move.

“All you had to do was wait.” Timothy sighed, shaking his head in disappointment.

“Timothy, please,” Lavinia urged.

“Emily is going to be dead in a few months,” Timothy went on. “It was going to appear as unfortunate kidney failure thanks to her penchant for sweets and wine. The poison I’ve been giving her works slowly, but the result resembles a more natural death.”

“No,” Lavinia whispered, her heart breaking for the young woman who had married her once best friend.

“Once she was gone and I took the appropriate amount of time to mourn, I would have taken you on as my new wife. With her inheritance and yours, we would have lived a wonderful life.”

Timothy said this part almost sweetly, his eyes glazing over. As if the thought brought him pleasure. Then, his eyes darkened once more, and in a flash, his hand was tight around Lavinia’s throat. She let out a strangled gasp as she felt the air in her lungs become trapped.

“Then you just had to meddle with Rebecca’s intended marriage with that thing,” he hissed in disgust. “You had to swoop in and save your vapid baby sister. You just couldn’t leave it alone, could you?”

Lavinia’s hands clawed at Timothy’s wrist, her nails pulling slivers of flesh away. Timothy let out a low growl, but his grip didn’t loosen.

“I gave you every opportunity to come away freely!” he roared, lifting her off her feet. “And you just couldn’t do it. You pitied the broken beast instead, stupidly giving him your love instead of me.”

As quickly as he’d snatched her throat, he let it go, and Lavinia dragged in a breath and coughed as her feet dropped to the ground.

“Yes, I did!” Lavinia said through sputtering coughs. “I love Arthur, Timothy. Not you!”

“You used to love me!” Timothy roared back furiously, his eyes glittering with rage.

“Not like that,” Lavinia replied, shaking her head as she wrapped her hand protectively around her throat. “Never like that. You were my friend. You were the older brother I never had and often sorely wanted.”

Timothy said nothing as he continued to glare at her for a long moment, then he took a long breath in through his nostrils and ran a hand through his wild hair. He then turned from her and walked to the cabinet of hunting rifles and pistols that was braced beside the fireplace.

“You will change your mind,” he stated calmly, pulling one of the pistols ever so delicately from its velvet-lined holder. He caressed the barrel softly as if it were a lover.

“By the time we reach Italy, you will change your mind.”

“Italy?” Lavinia echoed, feeling her panic rise up in her again.

“Not even Emily knows of the little villa my father had there,” Timothy explained. “It was one of the few holdings he didn’t squander before his death. It sits in the lovely countryside, far away from any town or village.” He looked up at her, smiling wide. “No one will be able to interfere with us there. And in our solitude, you will see you can love me.”

CHAPTERTWENTY-TWO

Two Days Later

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“Lady Susan,” Archibald uttered with surprise as he opened his door.

“Archie,” Susan greeted with a curt nod, pushing past him. “I was told you were staying in this inn. I’m glad to see you haven’t left yet.”

“Yes, well,” Archibald replied as he watched her walk to the center of his room. “With the state your brother is in, I wanted to be nearby. I was hoping he’d come to his senses and talk to me.”

“He won’t talk to anyone,” Susan replied, pulling two letters from her purse. “That’s why I’m here. Showing up at the estate with Mother or even Lavinia’s sisters didn’t work. He won’t open the door.”

“Poor lad.” Archibald sighed, shaking his head. “It took him eight years to recover from what Grace did. Who knows how long this will take? Lavinia was... well, she seemed so genuine.”

“She is, genuine, Archie, that’s what I’m trying to tell you,” Susan said quickly, handing him the two letters. “Look at the one she supposedly left for Arthur, then look at the one she wrote to Rebecca last week. The handwriting is similar at first, but if you look closely enough, you’ll see they’re actually quite different. Lavinia didn’t write that letter to Arthur, Archie. Someone else did.”

Archie furrowed his brow as he took the letters and studied them. His eyes widened as he realized Susan was right.

“So, what are you telling me?” Archie asked, standing up. “That Lavinia didn’t leave

on her own?"

"I don't think she did," Susan went on, already walking back toward his door. "I don't know the specifics, but something strange happened with the two of them and Lord Stonehames when he first came to visit us. And I know that the only reason he was at our party the other night was because Lavinia's father wanted him there. There's something else, too. Lord Stonehames rode with Lavinia's father to the party, but when Lord Donset left, they couldn't find him, so they left without him."

Understanding dawned on Archibald then, and he grabbed his pistol from his bedside table as Susan opened the door.

"We've got to go," he urged, walking straight through the doorway, trusting that Susan was following him. "We have to let Arthur know that Lavinia is in danger!"

* * *

"Your Grace, your sister has arrived again, with Lord Stanhope this time," Gregory stated from behind Arthur's locked bedroom door.

"Send them away," Arthur called out, not moving from his chair.

He'd sat down in front of the fireplace in his quarters two days ago and hadn't moved since. The flames had died many hours ago, but he had stared into the charred remains all the same.

It had been a lie. All of it. Lavinia's charms, her empathetic words. They had meant nothing. And he had been fooled again.

For a few moments, there was only silence from the other side of his door, but then suddenly, Arthur heard a cacophony of loud voices.

“I don’t care what he commanded!” Archibald’s voice sounded from the hall. “Let me pass, or I’ll knock your teeth out!”

As Arthur turned quizzically toward the door, it flew open, nearly ripping from its hinges. Archibald appeared in the doorway then and put his foot back down so he could stride toward Arthur.

“Get your arse up,” Archibald shouted, gripping Arthur’s arms. “We’ve got to go find your wife.”

Fury barreled through Arthur as he tore his arm away from his friend’s tight grasp, and he glared at him hatefully. “She is in no need of finding,” he growled back. “She made her choice, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to beg her like a fool to come back.”

The punch Archibald delivered to the right side of Arthur’s jaw wasn’t the hardest hit he’d ever taken, but it certainly did stun him.

“What in the bloody hell, Archie?” Arthur growled.

“Listen to us, Arthur,” Susan demanded, appearing by Archibald’s side. “Lavinia didn’t write that letter, and we have proof! We believe Lord Stonehames has taken her, and if he has, she could be in real danger!”

“What are you talking about?” Arthur demanded, rubbing his sore jaw.

“Just look at this.” Susan shoved two pieces of paper into his hands. “That’s not Lavinia’s handwriting. And Lord Stonehames arrived with the Dennises, but he didn’t leave with them. Lavinia didn’t run away, she was kidnapped.”

For the first time in days, Arthur listened to his sister and studied the two letters. With

a growing disgust in his belly, he realized she was right. His thoughts then raced back to the day he had had to threaten Timothy, and then to the folder of evidence he had on his desk from the private investigator he'd hired to find out more about the man.

Suddenly, it all made sense, and a wave of self-disgust rose up in him so forcefully that he thought he was going to retch.

Arthur closed his eyes tight, breathing heavily through his nose as he began to navigate the intense emotions roaring alive inside of him. His body trembled as he let himself feel it all, and then, as if something inside of him suddenly snapped back into place, he opened his eyes and felt resolve.

“Where can we find him?” Arthur asked, looking at Susan.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

His sister's face became awash with relief, and she grabbed his wrist. "Rebecca says she thinks she may know," she replied, leading him out of the room. "She is in the carriage, waiting for us. Come, quickly."

Arthur began to walk with his sister but then stopped short, pulled away, and went to his armoire.

"Brother, what are you doing? We must hurry!" Susan urged.

Arthur pulled open the drawer and opened the box inside, revealing his two favorite pistols and a case of bullets. He pulled them out and turned directly to Archibald. "Ready to go to war again?" he asked him.

Archibald smiled dangerously, holding his own pistol up. "Let's go get the bastard, old boy," he replied. "And save your Duchess."

* * *

"Arthur will come for me," Lavinia stated, glaring at Timothy as he tied her hands together.

The last two days had been hell. Timothy could not stop talking about his obsession—his plan to take her away. During the night, she would not sleep, fearful of what Timothy might try to do.

Aside from the first day, he hadn't tried to force himself on her, but she still kept a wary eye on him. On top of that, he'd given her no food since she'd awakened that

first day, and she felt her strength waning.

She'd been terrified at first, especially when he had pulled out a new gown and forced her to disrobe from her dirty chemise in front of him. It was then, as his greedy, lustful eyes refused to leave her most private of parts, that her terror turned into rage. He would pay for his crimes, she swore to herself.

Timothy looked up at her, his eyes glittering with jealousy, and with a swift movement, he grabbed her by the collar of her dress and forced her to her feet.

"I don't think so, darling," he replied, holding her only a hairbreadth away from his nose. "After that letter you left him, he's probably holed up someplace, drinking away his sorrows." He chuckled darkly, shaking his head. "I almost feel bad for him." He laughed. Then, his smile dropped completely, and he pressed his forehead so hard against hers that she gasped and tried to pull away.

"Except I don't. Now, stop trying to provoke me. Our carriage has arrived to take us to the port. Once we're on the ship, you'll settle down, and then perhaps we can talk more rationally."

"You think that I'll let you take me on a ship?" She laughed bitterly. "I will scream."

"You will get on the ship quietly, or I'll have my driver go to your precious beast and slit his throat," Timothy threatened.

Lavinia gasped and fought against the grip he had on her ropes, but Timothy was so strong that he could hold her still with one hand while unlocking the door with the other. Still, she struggled the entire way to the carriage, doing everything she could to get out of his grasp.

He'd tied her hands but not her feet, and she was sure if she could just get loose, she

could run into the forest and hide.

Nothing worked, though, and when they reached the carriage door and he flung it open, he picked her up like a sack of potatoes and flung her inside. She screamed at the driver for help, but this only made Timothy laugh.

“You think my driver will listen to you?” he asked in a condescending tone. “Unlike you, he understands that I am the master. Not you. Don’t you see how pleasant this could all be if you accepted that, too?”

“It is you that must accept that this is a poor plan!” Lavinia bit back viciously. “Arthur and I love each other, and he will see right through your lies. He’s going to kill you for this, Timothy.”

“Enough!” Timothy snarled, pulling her close to his face again as the carriage began to move. “You do not love that beast. You love me!”

His hands moved to her face and gripped her cheeks roughly, then he pressed his mouth to hers, tongue first, and kissed her.

Rage and disgust poured through Lavinia as she felt Timothy’s cold, oily tongue thrust into her mouth, and she bit down as hard as she could. A giant roar expelled from her captor as he shoved her away so forcefully that the back of her head hit the carriage wall hard, making her see stars.

Still, as the carriage spun and her head began to throb, Lavinia spat out Timothy’s blood and smiled at him ruefully.

Timothy glared at her as blood dripped down his chin, his madness seemingly coming fully undone. Lavinia knew that he could kill her then if he wanted, and in response, she raised her blood-stained chin in the air proudly.

“Arthur is ten times the man you’ll ever be, Timothy,” she spat out. “And I don’t love you. Whether you force me to go to Italy with you or keep me a prisoner for the rest of my life. I will love only him. I will never love you the way I love him!”

Timothy’s hand snaked to the back of her head, pulling her hair harshly as he brought her face closer to his. “Say that again, and I will strike you, Lavinia,” he threatened, spitting flecks of blood across her lips and cheeks. “You will learn, one way or another, that you belong with me.”

Lavinia laughed bitterly, shaking her head, even though it pained her to do so. “No matter what you do to me, I will never belong to you,” she hissed, glaring directly into his crazed eyes.

Timothy cocked his fist back as he murmured something about shutting her up, but just as Lavinia braced for the impact of the hit, the carriage stopped abruptly, throwing them both out of their seats.

As it happened, Timothy’s temple was knocked hard against the window, rendering him unconscious. From outside, Lavinia could hear the driver shouting at someone to stop, followed quickly by the sound of a fist hitting flesh. Immediately, the yelling ceased, and all she heard outside were the chirps of birds.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

A second later, the carriage door was ripped open, and Lavinia looked up to see Arthur standing in front of her. Relief and happiness soared through her as she smiled at him.

“Hello, you,” he said softly, giving her a sad smile as he ever so gently picked her up.

“You’re here,” she sobbed with relief.

“Of course I am,” Arthur replied, getting her out of the carriage. He eyed her up and down, his gaze full of worry and relief. “Did he do this to you?” he asked, caressing her blood-stained lips and chin.

Lavinia quickly shook her head. “He tried to kiss me, so I tried to bite his tongue off,” she replied.

Arthur chuckled as he shook his head and pulled out his kerchief to clean her up. “That’s my girl,” he praised, wiping Timothy’s blood from her lips.

From the carriage, they both heard a groan, and Timothy appeared in the doorway. He was bleeding from where he’d hit his head and looked shaky on his feet. But his eyes glittered with rage as he saw Lavinia and Arthur holding one another, and with a gurgle of rage, he lunged at them.

CHAPTERTWENTY-THREE

Arthur pushed Lavinia out of his arms toward Susan and Archie, and he grounded his feet as Timothy lunged at him. The man lashed at him like a wild animal, snarling

and pummeling his fists into Arthur with abandon.

“Get her untied!” Arthur managed to call out as he grappled Timothy with a wrestling move. He had seen this type of behavior in battle—when a man was no longer a man, but a beast with no capacity for sane thought.

Timothy’s back slammed into the dirt road as Arthur put him down, but he was able to successfully connect his fist to Arthur’s chin and knocked him backward. In an instant, Timothy was on top of him, his fists hailing down.

Arthur wasn’t sure if it was adrenaline or rage that protected him, but suddenly, he felt numb to the assault and delivered a hard blow to Timothy’s stomach.

“She’s mine!” Timothy bellowed as he fell back. “She’ll never belong to a monster like you!”

Arthur drew in a ragged breath as Timothy scrambled to his feet and pulled out a knife. His eyes began to track the man’s movements closely, waiting for him to make his move.

“I’m the monster?” Arthur roared, rising onto the balls of his feet. His pistols burned at his side, but he didn’t want to use them unless it was absolutely necessary.

Arthur had known many men like Timothy, who let their rage blind them. And he knew that it was only a matter of time before white-hot rage burned out, rendering the man useless.

“I would never kidnap a woman,” he continued, looking at Timothy with disgust. “I would never poison my own wife!”

This seemed to bring Timothy up short, and for a moment, he looked shocked.

“That’s right,” Arthur went on, squaring up as he kept his eyes on Timothy’s blade. “I know all about you. And if this wasn’t enough to get you put away, the evidence I’ve gathered on you certainly will be. Give it up, Timothy. You have failed.”

“Shoot him and be done with it!” Archie yelled.

Arthur’s lips curled into a wicked smile as he shook his head, his eyes still on Timothy. “He doesn’t deserve the bullet.”

“Timothy, please!” Lavinia urged, rushing between the two men.

Arthur, Archie, and Susan all yelled for her to stop, but she ignored them.

“Don’t do this,” she begged. “If you ever truly loved me, stop this moment!”

“Why?” Timothy snarled back, his sanity now completely gone. “So you can birth this-thisthing’swhelps?”

“Timo—”

“No!” he roared, his eyes full of hatred as he centered his focus on her. “I’d rather you die than give him that!”

At that moment, everything around Arthur seemed to move in slow motion. He saw Timothy raise his blade, watched as he sprang forward on his feet and ran directly toward Lavinia. And then, suddenly, Arthur was there, standing just a hairbreadth in front of his wife, and he felt the blade sink deep into the flesh of his right shoulder.

Behind him, he heard Lavinia’s scream, and in front of him, he saw Timothy’s bitter smile.

“Now you will know how I felt,” Timothy whispered, his voice laced with glee as he pushed the blade further into Arthur’s shoulder. “How much it hurt to see you with my woman.”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Arthur breathed against the searing pain, and with his good arm, raised one pistol high above Timothy's head. "She will never be yours," he growled, bringing the butt of his pistol down hard on the back of Timothy's head.

As the gun connected with Timothy's skull, the man's posture suddenly went rigid. Then, as if someone had turned off the light inside of him, Timothy's body slithered down onto the ground, falling into a pathetic heap.

* * *

"I'm fine," Arthur promised, trying in vain to soothe Lavinia.

Lavinia only shook her head, as if refusing to believe him, and added yet another layer of fabric to his already bandaged shoulder.

The vision of Timothy's blade sinking into Arthur kept playing over and over again in her head, and she was not at all convinced that he was all right. Even though Arthur and Archie had both assured her that it wasn't a life-threatening wound, she was still terrified that he would slip away.

"Lavinia," Arthur spoke, her name coming from his mouth like a caress. He captured both of her hands, wincing as he moved his bad shoulder.

"Arthur, please," she urged, "you must know that I didn't write that letter. I wasn't going to leave. I was never going to leave."

Arthur pulled her to him and kissed her tenderly, and she let out a soft sob as her

blood-stained lips connected with his.

“I know,” Arthur whispered, pressing his forehead against hers tenderly. “I was a fool at first to believe you could do such a thing, but Susan and Archie made me realize it was my own self-loathing that made me think that way. I’m so sorry I didn’t come sooner.”

Lavinia felt another sob escape her lips, and she moved to kiss him again. It must have been the hundredth time in the last hour that she’d done so, but she was unable to stop. She needed proof that he was still alive—that he was going to continue to live.

After Arthur rendered Timothy unconscious, he and Archie had used the rope that had been tied around Lavinia’s wrists to secure both him and the driver to a tree, and then Archie had rode off to fetch the constable. Susan, finding a way to deal with her own rage over having her new sister taken, had happily waited by the tree to pistol whip either man any time he attempted to break free or even speak. After being struck by her twice, Timothy had finally silenced himself and was now leaning against the tree in a resigned manner.

“I must tell you something,” Lavinia urged. “Now, before anything else happens.”

“Lavinia—” Arthur attempted.

“No, please, let me say this,” Lavinia insisted, cutting him off and giving him a begging glance. “I love you, Arthur. I began to feel it the moment we first spoke. And I know this all started because I was trying to protect Rebecca, but it doesn’t make my feelings any less true. I love you, Arthur. I love you so much.”

Arthur looked back at her, happiness glowing in his eyes as he pushed her hair away from her eyes. “And I love you, Lavinia,” he breathed, pure emotion emitting from

his voice.

She let out a sobbing breath. “You do?” she asked, feeling tears burning in her eyes.

Arthur chuckled softly as he shook his head at her and wrapped a hand around the back of her neck. “After everything you’ve done for me?” he said, his voice growing thick. “How could I not? I love you, Lavinia, like I will never love another. And I promise you, nothing like this will ever happen again. I will never again doubt you.”

“Oh, Arthur,” Lavinia breathed, relaxing into his chest.

With a simple movement of his fingers, Lavinia felt him tilt her neck back, and once more, his lips closed intimately over hers. She kissed him back needily, temporarily forgetting all about his injured shoulder as she wrapped her arms around him tightly.

They didn’t break their kiss until they heard the sounds of an incoming carriage, and it was only when they heard Archie’s voice directing the constable toward Timothy and his driver that they let one another go.

“Come,” Arthur coaxed gently, untangling himself from her only to take her hand. “Let us finally get this settled. Then, I shall take you home.”

“To our home?” she asked, nearly delirious with happiness.

Arthur nodded, kissing her forehead. “Right where you belong.”

EPILOGUE

One Month Later

“Well, Your Grace, I’m happy to say that your shoulder is healing nicely,” the

physician stated, tucking his instruments back into his bag.

Sitting on Arthur's bed was Lavinia at his head, followed by Susan and his mother.

Marianne hadn't spoken a harsh word to Lavinia since they'd all arrived home a month ago but had turned into a mother hen instead. If she wasn't checking on Arthur, she was constantly at Lavinia's side, asking how she was feeling or if she needed a cup of tea.

"Your muscles and tendons have nearly pieced themselves back together," the physician continued, "but they are still delicate, so be gentle with your right side for another few weeks. Unfortunately, you'll end up with another scar, but after seeing the rest of your battle wounds, I'm sure that won't bother you a bit."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

“Are you joking?” Arthur chuckled, squeezing Lavinia’s hand in his. “Not in the slightest. In fact, this one will be my favorite, to be sure.”

His eyes moved from the physician to Lavinia, who only rolled her eyes and shook her head as she smiled.

“As for you, Your Grace,” the physician said, turning his gaze toward Lavinia. “As I stated earlier, your baby appears perfectly healthy. But no more getting kidnapped, and no more unnecessary stress. Am I understood?”

“Perfectly, good sir,” Lavinia replied, her free hand immediately going to her belly.

“Congratulations to you both,” the physician stated with a smile. “I shall see you again in a month’s time to check on you. I trust you will keep each other safe.”

Lavinia and Arthur looked at one another again, their eyes full of love.

“You can be sure of that,” Arthur swore, not taking his eyes off wife.

With his work complete, the physical said his goodbyes and left the room.

The moment they were alone, Susan clapped her hands and looked from her mother to her sister-in-law. “So, does that mean we can move forward with my engagement party?” she asked excitedly.

Marianne laughed and patted her daughter’s knee. “Yes, darling, we certainly can,” she replied. “But we must invite Rebecca over soon to discuss the details. We don’t

want your engagement party to interfere with hers. There is plenty of time to celebrate you both.”

“Yes, of course,” Susan agreed happily, standing up. “I shall write to her straight away and have a messenger deliver it promptly. With luck, she can be here tomorrow, and we can officially start making plans.” She paused when she almost reached the door, then turned and flounced back to her brother’s bed. “I’m so happy to hear you are better, Brother.” She beamed at him before kissing his cheek. “You shall be walking me down the aisle, will you not?”

Arthur smiled back at her, nodding. “I wouldn’t dream of letting anyone else do it,” he replied.

“I should go, too,” Marianne announced after Susan left. “If Rebecca is going to be here as soon as tomorrow, I need to coordinate a monstrous number of duties.” She looked down at her son tenderly, then at Lavinia, and then squeezed both of their hands. “Is there anything I can have brought to either of you?” she asked eagerly. “Some food? Or perhaps tea? How are you feeling, Lavinia? Is the nausea back today?”

“It has abated for today,” Lavinia replied reassuringly. “And I am perfectly fine, thank you.”

“As am I,” Arthur agreed cordially. “Please, Mother, go. We are fine here.”

Marianne looked from her son to her daughter-in-law, smiling with tear-filled eyes, and then kissed them both on the cheek. “I shall return soon,” she promised. “Remember, you both still need rest.”

Arthur waited until he heard his door click shut completely, and then he snaked his good arm around Lavinia’s waist and pulled her into bed with him. A burst of girlish

giggles left her lips as he did so and were only silenced when he drew her close and kissed her soundly.

“Did you hear that?” Arthur asked, after a long, intense moment of kissing.

“Hear what?” Lavinia asked, still dizzy from the kiss.

Arthur grinned devilishly. “We’re finally alone,” he crooned, his voice thick with desire. “And with a clean bill of health.”

“Whatever shall we do with ourselves?” Lavinia giggled softly, kissing down the length of his jaw.

Arthur tried to roll her beneath him, but she pressed a hand to his good shoulder and drew her leg over his hip so that she was straddling him.

“We must still be gentle with your shoulder,” she teased, kissing her way down to his naked chest.

Arousal sparked in Arthur as Lavinia’s sultry kisses continued making their way down his abdomen, his cock already rock-hard and straining against his trousers. For the last month, they’d barely had any time alone, even if they had insisted. At any given moment, Marianne, Susan and even all members of Lavinia’s family had come to check on them or sit with them in the night. As if they were all terrified one of them may disappear again.

Arthur wanted his wife badly, and Lavinia was making it quite clear that she wanted him, too.

“Undress,” Arthur urged as Lavinia freed his cock.

Lavinia paused, looking at him with a surprised expression. “You heard your mother,” she replied in a whispered laugh. “We’re lucky if she doesn’t have someone come check on us in the next quarter of an hour.”

“Well then, we’ll give them a show, won’t we?” Arthur asked, his green eyes glazed with lust. His smile slowly dissolved, and the look that came over him next was enough to make Lavinia’s heart soar. “I have missed you insanely, my love. Please, undress so that I may see your full beauty. You have no idea how long I’ve waited for this.”

“Oh, but I believe I do,” Lavinia replied coyly, sliding off of the bed. With quick hands, she unfastened her gown and let it fall to the floor. She quickly removed her chemise next and went to move back onto the bed.

“Wait,” Arthur rasped, his fingertips grazing over her lower belly.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:39 am

Lavinia's breath hitched, and her heartbeat quickened as Arthur began to slowly run his fingertips over her entire body, leaving a trail of erotic flames everywhere he touched. When she couldn't take it anymore, she reached for his hand and slowly brought his fingers to her mouth, keeping her eyes on his as she sucked on them one by one.

"You are wickedly delightful, woman," Arthur hissed, his arousal heightening.

"Would you have me any other way?" Lavinia teased, sliding herself back atop his hips.

"Never," he promised.

They both let out a soft gasp as Lavinia lowered her hot, wet sheath down over Arthur's pulsing cock. He filled her until there was no room for him left, and then she began to ride him. Both of Arthur's hands went to Lavinia's hips, guiding her body into the new position as they made love.

Though they tried to keep quiet at first, neither could hold back the sounds of pleasure as they reached their heightened point of ecstasy. They had attempted in earnest to move slowly, but their need for one another grew too great too fast, and within moments, they were both moving with intense fervor, desperate for one another.

Arthur relished the way Lavinia's high, proud breasts swung as she rode him, how her perfect hips rocked back and forth over him deliciously. He knew at that moment that he would never want another woman like this again.

Time disappeared, and the world itself disappeared altogether then, and it didn't resurface until both of them came, clinging to one another tightly as their orgasms erupted at the exact same time.

For several moments, they didn't move, their bodies locked together in the middle as their mouths met in a deep kiss. Finally, when Arthur could catch his bearings, he cupped Lavinia's face gently and pulled her back just enough so that he could look into her eyes.

"I'll be ready for round two in just a few moments, my love," he promised, grinning wolfishly.

Lavinia laughed softly, turning her head in his hands just enough so that she could kiss the inside of his palm.

"As will I, dear husband," she replied, her eyes full of desire and love. "As will I."

As Arthur's body wrapped protectively around her, her thoughts traveled to the outcome of Timothy's assault. It had been a harrowing experience, one that had given her nightmares for weeks. Thankfully, though, Arthur had been there to wake her every time, soothing her with whispers of reassurance and gentle strokes of his hands.

"Your mind has gone somewhere else," Arthur murmured. He kissed her shoulder and ran his hand down her naked back. "I can tell by your breathing."

Lavinia chuckled softly and turned in his arms, burrowing her head into his chest. There was no hiding from one another now—they knew each other too well.

"I'm just wondering what's going to happen to Timothy," she whispered. "And Emily. I don't want her to die."

"She won't," Arthur assured her quickly, pulling her even closer. "Remember what

she told us? Her physician is very hopeful for a full recovery. And Archie hasn't left her side since we delivered the news."

Lavinia nodded, knowing it was true.

Emily had been devastated when Arthur, Archie, and Lavinia had gone to her with the news of Timothy. It was bad enough to discover her husband had attempted to kidnap Lavinia, but when she had discovered that he had been slowly poisoning her as well, she had sunk to the floor with grief, terrified that she was going to die.

Lavinia had hurried to the dear woman's side, but it was Archie who had gotten to her first. He had held her like a big brother held a heartbroken younger sister, letting her sob as much as needed while Arthur had gone to fetch the physician. Through gritted teeth, he had offered to break into the jail and kill Timothy for her personally, which, surprisingly, had earned him a bitter laugh from her.

The Crown was still investigating Timothy, even though a full month had gone by, and Lavinia was fearful of what they might find. What if she hadn't been the first woman Timothy had done this to? What if there were other victims of his obsessive love? And if so, where were they?

"As for Timothy, we shall never see him again," Arthur assured her as if reading her thoughts. "No matter how long the investigation takes, I have it from high authority that he will be permanently exiled and will serve his punishment in the Americas."

"Good," Lavinia whispered, stroking her fingers over her belly.

She was grateful that her child would never have to meet the man who almost ruined everything, but mourned for the friend that she had once thought she had. Whatever happened to Timothy, she hoped he had the strength to change.

Not wanting to think of the tragedy anymore, Lavinia moved her hand and wrapped it

tight around Arthur's naked waist, pressing him to her as tight as she could. A rumbling of desire rippled through Arthur's chest, and he captured her lips in a long, sensual kiss.

"Again?" she whispered into his lips, almost begging him.

"Yes, my love," he whispered, his voice raw with need as he settled her beneath his hips. "Over and over again. It will never be enough."

Lavinia gasped as she felt her husband's hard cock slide into her wet, hot sheath. No, she thought, moving her hips with his, never enough.

The End?