



Wedded to the Deviant Duke

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Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "Oh little rabbit, you should have never caught the attention of a man like me."

During the Orions' Hunt, ladies wear masks of prey...ready to be chased by the Ton's wolves.

And that's the ball Lady Thalia sneaks into, uninvited.

She should have known better, but she was desperate to save her family.

Now she's caught by the Ton's most ruthless -and handsome- Duke. And it's not fear that has her trembling...

Duke Gabriel should punish the little rabbit for trespassing...

But she begs so well for him to keep her secret.

So he agrees to help her, on one condition: she must spend five nights with him.

"I agree, Your Grace. But no touching!"

Now Gabriel smirks... For he knows.

He'll enjoy the hunt.

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

Total Pages (Source): 86

CHAPTER1

This had truly been her worst idea yet. Thalia would never admit such a thing out loud, however, as that invited doubt into a mind which couldn't afford it. It should have been enough to have a lead to follow, to finally find the proverbial light at the end of a long and tumultuous tunnel.

Unfortunately, that tunnel led straight back to Oslay Hall, a place where Thalia both dreamed of and dreaded returning to. And as the wheels of her familial carriage rumbled across the stone pathway, and the gates of the manor swung open to greet her, she found herself quickly catastrophizing within the confines of her mind.

She very much doubted Giles sent the invitation to welcome her back home with open arms. No. After the scene she'd made, the wound she'd delivered against his pride, Thalia was quite certain her cousin had no intention of making things easy. It was possible—entirely likely, if she were being honest—that he was to present some new information regarding the will of her family's estate.

Perhaps some horrific clause her parents (God rest their souls) had included to ensure their daughter wouldn't grow old and alone within Oslay Hall. But there was no reason now to assume the worst. For now, all she could do was sit in the carriage and contemplate her next move as she slowly approached the front of the manor.

Thalia glanced down at her gloves, fingers just about to pick at a fraying seam across her thumb. With a huff, she folded her hands tightly against her lap, noting the slight wrinkles across her open-robed dress while seated in place. It was dyed a plain shade of olive, the bodice decorated in clusters of artificial eglantines that mimicked the

look of a proper sash.

In the seat beside her sat a straw-gold bonnet, similarly covered in the same florals as a pink ribbon sprawled up across the cushion. The entire ensemble was beautiful, but entirely tainted, as the box had been delivered earlier that day with her cousin's grand signature across the letter of address.

Thalia sighed, tucking a loose curl of briar-black hair behind her ears as she carefully patted her updo. Something about dressing up for Giles—in clothing he specifically picked out for her—felt horrendously wrong.

But her wardrobe could hardly fit in her brother's home in Whitechapel, and she wouldn't dream of forcing him to make any further accommodations on her behalf. It'd been a fight just to keep him at bay, as Giles would certainly not speak to her with him present. "I love you, Robin," she murmured under her breath. "But this is something only I can do."

Finally, her carriage rumbled to a halt, her door pried open by the manor's footman. She exhaled quickly, gathering her bonnet and placing it atop her head before giving the ribbon a quick tie beneath her neck. Then, after a beat to reconsider the entire ordeal, she extended a gloved hand, allowing the footman to help ease her out of the carriage.

Two lines of servants stood attentively along the manor's front step, leading up to the front door where an older lady and gentleman waited—the head housekeeper and butler, respectively.

The former wasn't anyone Thalia recognized, though it didn't surprise her at all that Giles had replaced members of staff with his own people. The latter, however, was someone she was relieved to still see working within Oslay; she wrestled with her smile, tempering it to appear far more uninterested than she was.

“Good afternoon, Miss Sutton.” The butler spoke with a professional briskness to his voice, as if Thalia was as common a guest as any other. “Lord Tilbury was pleased to hear of your quick acceptance of his invitation.”

Thalia nodded gently in return. “It pleases me greatly to be invited back to Oslay for a visit, Mr. Cooke.”

George—she so desperately wanted to address her only ally left in full. But, for both their sakes, she remained at arm’s length, even if every nerve in her body screamed to rush forward and embrace him.

As long as Giles believed her to be without any ally, she and Robin could move about with a bit more freedom. If not for George’s—Mr. Cooke’s—interference, today’s visit would have taken Thalia completely by surprise; the extra few days had done wonders for her nerves, and now, she could face Giles with a little more confidence.

So, as much as it burned to simply accept Mr. Cooke’s invitation inside, to not even thank him for the care package given for her first few nights at Whitechapel, Thalia persisted.

Instead, she took the opportunity to inspect the mansion’s interior, relieved that it appeared to be in working order. The main hall looked ready to receive guests, with one maid dusting the golden banister of the grand staircase. Though, as she was led to one of the many parlor rooms, Thalia took note of the empty spaces along the wall, the displays that obviously once held artwork.

“Lord Tilbury has ordered the staff to partake in early spring cleaning,” the head of housekeeping offered quickly. “He insisted on decluttering the home of its more...ostentatious decorations.”

The excuse stabbed worse than any blade ever could; Thalia recognized the missing

pieces as family portraits featuring her, or items specifically purchased by herself or Robin. Her smile thinned, and she coaxed as much warmth as she could into her reply. “Oh, of course. A new lord’s manor is a reflection of himself, is it not?” Bare and entirely void of personality—but she kept that part to herself.

Eventually, they arrived at the parlor, which appeared far more decorated than the other rooms Thalia had peeked into. A pair of paisley settees were positioned around a crystal coffee table, tiered serving trays full of delicate sweets, and a large teapot serving as an amicable example of a proper, afternoon tea. Thalia inhaled deeply, the rich and earthly tang of black tea drawing her to sit.

“Lord Tilbury is finishing some work within the study,” Mr. Cooke explained. “But he invites you to begin without him.” Both he and the head housekeeper offered a bow and curtsy before heading on their way, but Thalia caught a brief, over-the-shoulder smile from the butler before she was left to her own devices.

She then turned her attention to the table, determined to take advantage of it before Giles’ arrival spoiled her appetite. Candied fruits, pontefract cakes, strawberry and rhubarb biscuits— she eventually settled on a lemon tart with almond crusting, and a cup of tea. The urge to simply pile her plate and rush to the door was so terribly strong; Giles hardly deserved any of the niceties the title of marquess had gifted him.

Before she could even take a bite, a boisterous ring of laughter numbed her entirely. She delicately placed the pastry onto her plate, opting to move her cup and saucer into her lap, as her cousin finally made his grand entrance.

She observed him quietly, gingerly taking a sip to explain her lack of greeting. It was hard to claim Giles was anything other than attractive. His tall frame was always dressed in beautiful suits, and colorful neckties played into his persona of being excitingly eclectic. He was the approachable sort, the kind of man you find pleasant and charming; someone you’d want within your inner circle.

But Thalia knew her cousin personally, and he often reminded her of a lanky goat prancing about the stud's farm. It wouldn't surprise her at all if a pair of curling horns hid beneath his flaxen hair, as they'd perfectly match the unnatural ice frozen within the blue of his eyes. It was an excellent comparison, and she was quite proud of it. Giles Tilbury embodied the beauty of winter, but could easily kill any man or woman who spent too long in his frigid presence.

"Dear cousin!" Giles beamed, crossing the room quickly to take a seat directly across from her. "I'm so thrilled you took me up on my invitation." His gaze lingered upon her longer than she would have liked, a smile cutting across his lips. "You look quite lovely in that ensemble."

"Well, you do have impeccable taste, my lord." Thalia chuckled lightly, trying desperately to clear her throat without making it obvious. "I daresay no other woman will look as fresh as I do on this lovely spring day."

More laughter tumbled out from Giles, as if the entirety of life was one, endless joke. "No, no, there's no need for titles here, sweet Thalia. We're family, after all! And family doesn't make blood bend a knee before them."

She wanted nothing more than to wrinkle her nose at the hypocrisy, but Thalia remained pleasant. "Yes, well, it isn't everyday one gets to greet a marquess. Allow me to address you as such, my lord; I fear I may become forgetful in public otherwise and cause quite a stir."

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“Ah...so you’re still making appearances, then?” Giles asked. “I know our last conversation ended quite sourly—truly, I hadn’t intended your social circles to cut you out so viciously.” He shook his head, as if such a thing were only inconvenient for him and him alone. “The things women will do to each other—why, it makes the acts of war look like child’s play!”

His words rubbed against her skin like sandpaper. Thalia found she could only offer a slight smile in return, quickly lifting her cup for another sip.

“I suppose we wouldn’t want your image tarnished any further. So, if you simply must refer to me by title, I won’t stop you.” He leaned forward in his chair, his eyes leering between the dessert trays. “Still, if you had taken me up on my previous offer...”

His words lingered heavily in the air. Thalia set her cup back against the saucer, suddenly feeling uneasy.

Then, just as quickly, Giles’ expression brightened once more. He sat back into the settee, his hand waving in the air as if brushing the tension away.

“Ah, but I’m being a poor host. Please, settle yourself before we discuss the reason for your visit! I’d hate to impose myself upon you straight away.”

His grin turned wicked, as he produced a pipe from his vest pocket and eagerly watched Thalia. “Go on, don’t be polite on my account. I’m sure you will hardly get the chance to indulge like this back in Whitechapel. If you decide to return, that is; I think you’ll find my proposal quite to your liking.”

Thalia took another sip of tea instead, focusing on the scald against her tongue instead of whatever snappish remark she wished to hurl her cousin's way. "Forgive me if I sound impudent, my lord, but there is much that still needs doing at my end. If you have a reason for my summons, I beg you to move past these pleasantries and enlighten me."

Gile's jaw visibly tightened against his smile. "Yes, well...I suppose you have quite a bit to do, what with the new move and all." He lit the end of his pipe and inhaled deeply, staring through Thalia as smoke lingered between his lips.

Then, after a beat, he set the pipe against a platter, rising to cross the room once more and dig about the nearby shelves. Thalia watched with bated breath, nearly spilling her tea across her dress given how much she'd leaned forward in her seat.

"I do hold remorse for my actions, you know." Giles continued shuffling through various folders, producing a packet of paper before closing the drawer behind him. "But you must understand—I have a very demanding position now, and being rejected by you in such a public way...well, a man can't be expected to hold fast to his temper after such an attack."

Thalia wanted to snort; "public" was a gross exaggeration, and he well-knew it. But she remained silent, leaving Giles to continue his performance.

"That is why, when I found these papers—" He took the seat next to Thalia this time, offering the stack her way. "I thought to myself, 'Giles, this is a sign from God, it is.' A chance to make amends for how...poorly things were resolved between us."

Thalia's brow furrowed, and she set her tea against the table, accepting the papers against her lap. She quickly skimmed through the lettering, a spark of hope beginning in the depths of her heart. "This...is my grandmother's handwriting." She looked up, tears pricking the corners of her eye. "These are estate deeds under my maternal

family—Giles, where did you find these?”

He looked obviously pleased at her response, chest puffing out in slight exaggeration. “The family lawyers discovered them while organizing my new office, kept in some miscellaneous journals. I was just as surprised to find them myself.”

Thalia leaned against the settee, suddenly quite dizzy. Estates under her mother’s maiden name; it was exactly the light she’d hoped for at the end of the tunnel. And though she was certain Giles had tried every trick to claim them as his own first and foremost, the fact he ended up showing these to her had to mean something.

“Oh, m-my lord—this is incredible! There’s quite a number of properties listed here—I could convert some into boarding schools, take children off the streets who need a proper second chance!”

She shouldn’t have judged him so quickly. She should have had faith that, deep down, her cousin was a kind and just person.

“There’s just one matter that needs to be resolved, first.” Gently, Giles took the papers back from Thalia, radiant smile lowered to a warm glow. “Just a simple legal matter; one that can be taken care of today. Do that, and the deeds are yours to do with as you see fit.”

Thalia nodded, trembling hands clutched against her chest. “Of course—what do you need from me... Giles?”

His expression brightened at the use of his name. Thalia was willing to give him that small win, especially after everything he was doing for her. The flutter in her heart quickened as he took her hand, thumb gently rubbing across her knuckle. Then, he spoke four words that brought everything crashing down around her.

“Marry me, Thalia Sutton.”

CHAPTER 2

Thalia blinked furiously, tears all but dried as she tried to pull her hand free from Giles’ grasp. “I...” her breath caught in her chest, as her cousin’s grip tightened. “Giles, I—you already tried proposing to me.”

“But, I hadn’t known of the properties then,” Giles insisted. “Now I do! And you very well can’t reject me now, can you? Not with Oslay Halls and the properties within your grasp.”

The world began to spin again; Thalia squeezed her eyes shut, hoping briefly this was all a terrible nightmare. “What does marriage have to do with my grandmother’s estates? You—I don’t need your partnership to claim them; they are already mine by law.” Again, she tried to free her hand, only to let out pained gasp as Giles squeezed harder. “G-Giles, stop. You’re hurting me.”

He seemed in a daze, the ice in his eyes seemingly creeping through his veins and causing an unnatural rigidity in his posture.

“Giles—?”

“That’s ‘lord’ to you,” Giles hissed. “If you will not take the title with me, you’ll show it the courtesy it deserves.”

A shiver ran down the nape of Thalia’s neck, and her eyes flickered around Giles; the documents sat just on the edge of the seat. Her cousin followed her gaze, quickly snatching the papers up with one hand as the other kept a vice-like grip around her wrist.

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“You know, I really did pick that dress out just for you.” He suddenly stood, yanking Thalia to her feet as the pair moved toward the fireplace. Low flames flickered within the brick hollow, proving a modest warmth to chase away whatever chill remained of wintertime.

Realization struck her terribly, and Thalia began to shake her head, clawing at Giles’ grasp. “Don’t—Giles,” she swallowed rising panic, forcing herself to speak. “M-my lord, please.”

“The modiste made it special.” Giles spoke as if holding the conversation entirely with himself. “I’d told her all about you, and she said a green fabric would bring out the color of your eyes.”

His gaze bore directly at Thalia’s chest, and she reflexively moved to cover it with her free hand. A twinge of anger caught against his lip, and he turned back to the fireplace, the documents lifted at his side. “Beautiful, venomous eyes, you snake of a woman!”

It all happened so quickly, accompanied by a snapping crack. Whether it was from the first pages of paper being consumed by the flame, or Thalia’s wrist as she finally broke free from Giles’ grasp, she couldn’t say for certain. All she knew was one moment, her upper body practically dove into the hearth, grasping for the deeds as licks of flame seared across her skin.

Bits of ash slipped between her fingers—her gloves had long-since begun to burn away—and in an instant, cold air rushed past as someone forcefully yanked around her waist, forcing her back onto the parlor floor. Anger thrashed along her limbs,

until a familiar voice cried out in desperation.

“Thalia, stop!”

She blinked, suddenly aware of Mr. Cooke’s presence. At some point, he’d entered the room and gotten behind her, currently holding her back as the fireplace crackled before her. The last bits of paper smoldered into brilliant orange flame; inhibitions dissipated in a similar manner.

“You bastard,” she spat, her attention back on Giles as he stood off to the side. “Witless, thieving rake! You’re no better than the rats that scurry beneath the floorboards, stealing whatever scraps they can manage!”

“Appropriate, that you would know the daily tasks of vermin,” Giles replied. “Do let me know how they’re getting on in Whitechapel; I’m sure your brother is thrilled to have like-minded company.”

Hot tears stung her eyes and finally fell against her ash-covered face. Only now, with the adrenaline working itself out of her body, did she realize how much her forearms throbbed, her wrist ached, and her head swam as lingering heat from the fire flushed against her cheeks.

She allowed Mr. Cooke to guide her back to the settee, never once breaking eye contact with Giles, who still stood over the fireplace, lording over his accomplishment.

“Give her a moment to come back to her senses,” Giles instructed, brushing his vest as if the entire ordeal had been but a minor inconvenience to him. “Then escort her out through the servant’s entrance. I’m expecting members of the Ton’s Devils any moment now, and hardly want such esteemed gentlemen thinking I’m cavorting with some Whitechapel tramp.”

He left soon after, a heavy silence falling into the parlor room. Occasionally, it broke from the crackle of flames, and Thalia couldn't help but shudder each time it did. Mr. Cooke simply sat with her, arms back at his side out of respect. Thalia partially wished he'd keep hold of her as the world fell to madness around her. But this wasn't the time; there was far too much to be done. "D-Did he...mention the Devils just now?"

Mr. Cooke nodded fervently.

The gears slowly began to turn in Thalia's head. Slowly, she managed to get back to her feet, much to the butler's concern, and she made her way towards the writing desk. Though one hand trembled and throbbed painfully, she was entirely able to pick up a quill with the other.

"Wh-what are you doing?" Mr. Cooke asked.

Thalia exhaled sharply, dipping the tip into the inkwell before beginning to write. It was slow, and agonizing, but she managed a short missive before the pen clattered against the desk. "If you could address this to my brother in Whitechapel."

"I'll ensure it gets into his hands personally," Mr. Cooke promised. He moved towards Thalia, but she stood on her own, staring down at the message with anger rising in her chest. That was the emotion to hold on to, now; to pull her out of despair and continue down the proverbial tunnel. Darkness be damned, but she would not let Giles take the light away so easily.

"If I can ask, though..."

Thalia glanced towards the butler, her expression softening as she tried not to take out her fury on him. "I'll be out a bit later than he expects. There's a few favors I've been holding off on using, but...I don't think I have a choice, anymore. He'll likely need

supplies as well, given the work I need him to do.”

George’s brow furrowed, obviously confused. “What work would that be, my lady?”

Hesitantly, Thalia allowed herself a hopeful smile. “It would be quite difficult to forge an invitation without the proper supplies, don’t you think?”

* * *

Orion’s Hunt was not, in fact, a hunt in the traditional sense. There were no guns, no mounted stallions or bloodied individuals on the prowl for prey—not unless the participants truly involved themselves in their role. It was nothing more than a masquerade, a fanciful gathering that plucked and utilized the core of what made a hunt so exhilarating in the first place. The chase.

Orion’s Hunt took place during the start of every Season, ensuring no doe-eyed debutantes would stumble onto the metaphorical hunting grounds and ruin the fun. And, all in all, that’s what those invited expected from the private event; a bit of harmless, if not somewhat dubious, fun. Thrills set outside the typical parameters of a seasonal ball, for those willing to chase after a more forbidden pleasure.

At least, that was what Gabriel hoped to instill. And that, for the most part, was what he witnessed as he patrolled the outer perimeter of the Orion’s club estate. Members and guests alike seemed fully engrossed within the theme, a sea of fine garments and mammalian masks chatting and laughing across the lawn and below the nighttime sky.

Gabriel eyed a couple as they strolled towards the back garden; the gentleman wore a red rose in his breast pocket and a black, domino-style mask in the shape of a wolf, while his lady friend showed the visage of an ivory rabbit, its ears decorated in a crown of delicate white roses.

Prey and predator. Hunter and hunted. The delicate dance always fascinated Gabriel, and he enjoyed testing the line between proper society and animalistic tendencies. It was entirely the reason he had created the Orion's Hunt in the first place; desire was inevitable, and caging it entirely led to an insatiable madness. But the line, though toed, was strictly upheld amongst him and his peers, and Gabriel had worked many years to ensure no one thought otherwise.

He adjusted his own wolf's mask, distinguished from his guests by its more complex coloration. It was not merely black, but a blend of purples and blues, and dotted with tastefully placed gemstones to replicate a starry-night sky. His own rose sat tucked between his vest pocket, an eager heat thrumming in his chest.

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Skillfully, he produced a tarnished pocket watch from his back pocket, focusing on the subtle tick of gears and mechanisms. Through it, the rest of the world faded away; he could properly prepare himself for a long night of socializing. Four, five, six—the seconds clicked alongside his steps, leading him across the front lawn and through the club's double doors.

The mansion's interior was just as lively a place, couples and companions enjoying what amenities the club had to offer. Wolfish-faced men lounged among the curling smoke of pipes and cigars within the parlor, a few younger pups curiously leering beneath the door's frame at rabbit-faced beauties.

They, in turn, might brush their open fans across the air, as if shooing a particularly rowdy group of flies away. But, if a man were so lucky, a slender-gloved hand might extend towards the pack of whelps, who seemed eager to jump over the others to get the prize first.

Gabriel occasionally lingered at the scene, pocket watch clicking ominously, as if issuing one and only one warning. And the warning was received loud and clear, as every man reined himself in and remembered his manners before greeting the woman in question.

“And here I was sure I'd find you already throwing the first punch, Duke.”

Gabriel slipped his watch back within his breast pocket, attention turning to another gleaming wolf mask seemingly appearing from the air at his side. His gaze flickered down the man's chest, scrutinizing the loosely-fitted necktie.

“And here I thought you’d finally look presentable for once in your life, Christian.”

Even through the mask, his playful irritation was palpable. “Remind me why I tolerate you, again?”

“This club would still be in its infancy without my aid,” Gabriel replied coolly. His hand then extended a hand towards the tie, undoing it in its entirety before making it proper. “Christian, how can you still get this so horrifically wrong? Don’t you have a wife to help you, now?”

Christian chuckled lightly, his chest somewhat puffed out at the mention of his bride. “Jab at me all you want, but I’ll still be hunting the most beautiful prize tonight.”

Gabriel followed his friend’s gaze, catching the silhouette of a willowy woman near the refreshments table. Even with the mask covering a portion of her face, her familiar freckles and reddish-blond hair were instant identifiers. “Louise willingly came?” Gabriel asked, somewhat surprised.

“She’s already given me a mile’s worth of rules to follow,” Christian explained, sounding somewhat deflated. “If I make her move faster than a brisk jog, she’ll lock me in the garden for the night.”

“Seems a reasonable request for someone in her condition,” Gabriel pointed out.

Christian sighed lightly, his gaze still fixated on his wife, Louise, as she helped herself to a cup of punch. “Yes, well...I didn’t come all this way to exchange witty remarks, Gabriel.” He leaned in close, his voice barely above a whisper. “Some of the members started their game a bit earlier than expected; a few deviled rats decided to try and slip between the cracks.”

Ah. It didn’t surprise Gabriel at all that the Ton’s Devils were trying to stir trouble

tonight. “Do you need me to take care of it?”

“Oh, no, no. I wouldn’t want to pull you away from opening ceremonies.”

A slight scowl crossed Gabriel’s face. Christian seemed a bit too thrilled to force his friend up on stage.

“I’m just saying that, during your speech, keep an eye out for anyone who seems particularly...” Christian trailed off, giving his friend a knowing look, even with masks covering their expressions.

“I’ll remind any uninvited guests what happens when rules are broken,” Gabriel reassured.

With a slight nod and a clap against Gabriel’s back, Christian slipped back into the crowd, quickly moving towards the refreshments table. Gabriel lingered in his spot for a few seconds too long, observing as his friend snuck up behind Louise and brought his arms around her waist.

Though briefly startled, she seemed delighted to see Christian and moved to be as close to his side as possible. Both their hands lingered over the slight bump in her midsection, and Gabriel stood in place, watching them.

He turned his focus back to the thrum of footsteps, and the drone of the grandfather clock located up the grand stairs. It would chime in less than ten minutes, and he still had to find his way to the main dining hall.

Once more, Gabriel started forward, his ears tuned into his own footsteps, and the beat of his own pocket watch. Six hundred, five hundred fifty-nine, five hundred fifty-eight...

CHAPTER3

Thalia was willing to amend her previous statement. Entering her familial home and willingly trapping herself in a room with Giles had been foolish; absolutely so, and she would not deny that.

But infiltrating a gentlemen's club with no escape plan or clear idea as to what she was searching for? That was a strong contender for one of the worst ideas she'd had to date.

"Not that it's entirely due to my own machinations," she mumbled behind her rabbit mask. "I suppose this is what happens when two Sutton minds come together in agreement over something."

It hadn't been easy convincing Robin at first. But by the time she'd returned to their humble abode, Thalia had cashed in every favor she could recall. Friends were short in supply, but no upper class woman wanted to be willingly in debt to a fallen socialite such as herself.

She'd managed to acquire a carriage, suitable attire; everything was in place, minus a proper invitation. And forgery was as close to second nature as breathing for her dear brother, much as he didn't like to admit it. Robin wouldn't want all her effort to go to waste, and that's entirely what she was counting on.

Even now, within the walls of the Orion's mansion, Thalia could feel her brother's anxiety all the way from Whitechapel. She nervously tugged at the hem of her opera glove, the splint hidden beneath twinging against her wrist.

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Robin had done everything he could to help her, and was fully ready to storm Oslay Hall to deliver unto Giles tenfold what he'd done to her. Instead, he'd channeled his fury into his task, stalking the upper echelons of Londoners before returning two days later with an invitation to the Orion's Hunt.

The lace hem of her blue-tinged dress skirted against her feet, and as her exposed shoulders shuddered in the evening chill, Thalia wished she'd tried harder to get a sleeved dress. But it was a perfectly acceptable gown, empire-styled and adorned with a modest selection of pearlescent jewelry.

The mask was the most eye-catching element, almost perfectly matched with her cream-colored outfit, but it was the most ostentatious part of her. Her hair was done simply, and makeup was unnecessary due to the mask. Tonight was about blending in, slipping about undetected so she could find...

...In truth, Thalia wasn't sure what she was in search of. The former half of the plan came quickly to her while she was still under duress; the Ton's Devils didn't play nicely with the Orions, and it wasn't far-fetched to believe the gentlemen's club had some form of dirt against their rival.

And with Giles invested in the Devils' side, there had to be something within the Orion's halls that could damage his reputation. But as Thalia finally entered the gentlemen's club, her plan began to fall apart at the seams.

If all she could discover equated to idle gossip, it was less than useless to her. And if she discovered something sinister, then she'd just traded the viper's pit for the lion's den.

She meandered through the front hall, letting the flow of the crowd take her forward. It isn't like I can simply ask them for help, she thought. And even if I did, why would they care?

More and more threads began to unravel as panic climbed up her throat. If she, an unescorted, dishonored woman, was discovered sneaking into a gentlemen's club without invitation...there would be no going back from it. She was a nobody now, but to be the uninvited nobody meant complete social obliteration.

Thalia suddenly came to a halt, thrown out of her contemplative state. The crowd she'd been following had come to a stop within the main dining hall, joining what seemed to be the rest of the guests for the evening.

Members of the club stood along a makeshift stage, with a domineering figure overshadowing them all by a mile. His suit was strangely mesmerizing; not purely black, but a deep and rich navy, with silver decorations clipped to his sleeves and pinned against his chest like the stars themselves.

Even with a similarly-complex wolf mask covering his face, the man held a presence that commanded the room's attention, without having but spoken a single word yet to the crowd. And when he did speak, it was like listening to a lyrical beast, his deep and somber tone a low howl against the moonlight night.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us for our long-standing tradition here with the Ton's Orions." He stretched his hand outward, plucking a champagne flute from a nearby waiter's tray.

"For those returning for the hunt, we welcome you once more. And to our newcomers..." He paused, seemingly staring directly at Thalia before lifting his glass in a faux toast. "We welcome you to explore the darker parts of yourself tonight."

Heat flushed across Thalia's face, and she was relieved to be wearing her mask. She had only heard whispers as to what occurred within a gentleman's club, and the Orions were one of the more reputable organizations. Surely, they couldn't fall too deeply into depravity? Not without the whole of London discovering their deviant ways.

"For those who have graced our halls before, you know what is to come," the speaker continued. "And for the uninitiated, I'll keep my explanation brief, as I sense the former party is eager to begin."

A ripple of laughter went around the crowd, only feeding deeper into Thalia's panic. What had she stepped into?

The speaker drained his glass in one, swift motion, and as if on cue, another server appeared at his side. Oddly, his mask was that of the rabbit, and Thalia couldn't help but furrow her brow.

"You will find the rules quite simple for both parties. Wolves..." the speaker lifted his hand and—with a surprisingly delicate touch—rested his hand against the server's shoulder. "Your task is to 'chase' after your prey within the limits of the estate."

He deftly slipped his rose free from his vest pocket and added it to the mask's white crown. "Claim your 'kill' with the rose provided at entry, then make your way back to this hall. If the hunted so chooses, she may give you her mask; a promise to remain loyal at your side for the remainder of the evening."

Something warmed briefly in his tone, and Thalia couldn't help but latch onto it. Even if she were imagining it, even if it was self-perceived—any form of comfort was welcome to keep her from breaking under the pressure.

"For her to make herself so vulnerable is the greatest show of trust, gentlemen."

Something cold now bit at his tone, and Thalia found herself shuddering. “You shall wait for her to hand you such a gift, should you be so lucky. And if any Orion tonight catches word of non-consensual affection between predator and prey—if you try and force her trust—you will quickly find yourself removed from the premises. Whether that is consciously or not.” His knuckles cracked loudly, sending a confusing mix of ice and heat across Thalia’s core. “That is entirely up to you.”

Nervous laughter petered away as the room turned deathly still. The tension was palpable, produced by a respected fear the speaker clearly possessed. He then removed his rose from the server’s mask, placing it back in the square fold of his vest.

“Now, rabbits.” He reached towards the server once more, only for the man to step away. “Evade capture for five minutes, and you may choose whomever you wish to have the first dance with. Tonight, you hold just as much power as what hunts you down.”

These were words Thalia hadn’t realized she needed to hear. Something about the way the speaker held himself, the way he spoke to the women of the crowd instead of around them; it pooled as tingling warmth in the center of her chest, and she found herself unable to pull away.

Once more, a flickering light appeared at the end of her tunnel, but she so desperately wished it hadn’t. She couldn’t allow herself vulnerability again. And yet, as she suddenly found him staring through her mask, Thalia felt exposed all over again.

“That is all.” The speaker produced a pocket watch from his vest, glancing at the ticking hands before giving a light shrug of his shoulders. “Run.”

* * *

Thalia desperately held her breath as she crouched behind a lounge chair, listening to the footfalls of a pair of wolves as they quickly passed through. After entirely too long, she dared to peek out from around her hiding spot, relieved to have the room to herself.

Standing upright, she took a mental note of where she'd explored so far, recalling the layout of her familial mansion to try and compare. Carefully, she stepped out of the drawing room and glanced down the hallway. Sure enough, the layout was vaguely familiar to her; perhaps the Orions had hired the same architect as her family had?

She took a few tentative steps, her foot raised in the air as a horrific squeak suddenly sounded behind her. Nearly losing her balance, she spun on her heel and found herself face-to-face—or mask-to-mask—with not just any wolf, but the speaker from before.

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He gazed at her with that same, all-knowing presence, as if her mask did little good to hide anything from him. She quickly stumbled backwards, her hand catching against the wall. He, in return, took a leisurely step forward, then paused, seemingly distracted by invisible lint across his vest.

Her heart still racing, Thalia took another series of quick steps away. He seemed to contemplate, then took another slow, deliberate step. Her face flushed as hot irritation rose from her chest.

“D-Do you think me an easy target, sir?”

In reply, he simply plucked the rose from his vest, twirling it by the stem before glancing her way once more.

Thalia scoffed, her shoulders squaring up as she stared defiantly down the hall. He didn't seem surprised, per se, but it wasn't entirely the reaction he'd expected, either. Somewhere, another delighted squeal rang out, and as the man's leg twitched, Thalia shot off around the corner.

Oh, but she was furious; angry for letting herself get wrapped up in this stupid game. She hated aiding in whatever sick pleasure that—that man—had taken from cornering her. Worst of all, Thalia hated how much she had enjoyed the brief moment between them.

It wasn't the same as Giles' attack against her. It held the same feeling of helpless desperation, yes, but this had been oddly... enticing. There was a level of danger when she had nearly been caught by the speaker just then. Her heart still hammered in

her chest, and adrenaline coursed through her veins, pushing her instinct to flee from such a dangerous beast.

Yet, some unspoken promise had been made between her and the speaker; no danger would come to her, so long as she didn't wish it. She truly held a level of sway over the situation, a level of power unfamiliar to her.

Thalia slowed her pace, uncertain how long she'd been running. A long hallway of doors presented itself, and she decided to check the knobs in the hope that one hadn't been locked. After a few jiggles, one actually gave under her weight, and she stumbled into what looked to be a joint study.

Dozens of writing desks and chairs had been placed haphazardly around the space, the walls lined with shelves and filing cabinets likely associated with club business.

She breathed a sigh of relief and stepped further in, targeting her search towards the nearest desk. Whether she'd outrun her pursuer or not, her time was almost up.

If she stayed here, and waited for guests to gather back in the main hall, she could search without worry of interruption. Maybe even find a few unbarred staircases, travel the upper floors in search of more sensitive information—

“Caught you, little rabbit.”

* * *

She quite obviously hadn't been invited—the way she shifted her constantly, and her fingers occasionally picked at the hem of her glove. The moment Gabriel picked her out from the crowd, he could feel the guilt rolling off her.

This woman truly embodied the nervous energy of the animal she wore on her face,

and it had been too tantalizing an opportunity to waste. He could have stopped her before the game started, could have alerted club members to pull her aside and take her off the grounds. But she was the perfect prey, and Gabriel simply couldn't let her get off so easily.

To her credit, their meeting in the hallway had been a pleasant surprise. He hadn't expected her to wield so much bite behind that trembling visage, and he was willing to admit she had gotten him briefly excited. But now, as they stood across the study from each other, Gabriel knew their game had come to an end. Whether she was a Devil's girl or a passing stranger, he couldn't rightly say. Yet.

"Seems I've won our little game," Gabriel began lightly.

The woman remained frozen in place, a stack of papers still trembling in her arms. Good; he wanted her terrified. A cruel lesson for the thief, while sending a thrilling rush throughout Gabriel. Two birds, one stone. He opened his mouth to speak further, but was surprised when the woman interrupted him instead. "Y-You've done no such thing, sir."

"Elaborate."

Her resilience continued to surprise him. Even now, caught red-handed, she held herself proudly and spoke as if she belonged. "You... haven't won the hunt. You never touched me and... and..."

Somewhere in the house, a grandfather clock chimed for the hour.

"And... your time is up."

Gabriel couldn't help but raise a brow. He let the moment linger alongside the chime of the clock, genuinely impressed. He'd barely taken a step when a flurry of papers

flew at him, the woman spinning on her heel to try and flee.

Lunging past the storm, his hand stretched out to grasp for something, anything, before firmly grabbing her wrist. But the pained shrill that escaped her throat nearly had him release his hold immediately. He knew he hadn't hurt her; something was terribly wrong.

"Please," she begged, her legs nearly giving out there and then. "Don't t-turn me in. I swear, I can explain."

He pulled himself closer, peeling her glove down the length of her arm before revealing the hastily-created splint. Immediately, he released his hold around her wrist, acutely aware of the sound of footfalls drawing close.

A flurry of emotions raged in his chest, but for the time being, he could only think of one course of action.

"I'm taking you to the infirmary," he commanded, taking her uninjured hand again. "You will submit entirely to me, little rabbit."

CHAPTER4

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Anger was an excellent tool, when used in the proper circumstances. It could motivate the weaker willed to action, be channeled physically to defend one's self, and when tempered to a frigid chill, command absolute respect.

Gabriel had spent much of his life exploring the depths of his anger, honing it like a finely pointed blade. It was never unsheathed to settle petty matters, but for circumstances most dire. And yet, the moment he'd seen that splint, almost three decades of carefully built walls nearly came crashing down.

He led his little rabbit throughout the manor, easily evading detection through the longer routes and lesser known corridors. If he wanted to be found, he would be, and for the safety of both the guests and Orion members alike, he forced himself into obscurity. Not only because his unexpected guest was understandably skittish, but Gabriel was certain that the first man he came across would be beaten well past submission.

Anger—true, boiling anger, the kind that burned in one's veins and lit their vision in red—had overtaken him completely. No one deserved to become a casualty of his lack of sense, not unless he discovered the culprit of her injuries within these walls.

It took a mere seven minutes before Gabriel finally slipped into the infirmary. He'd nearly lost count of the seconds, distracted by the occasional whimper or stumbling gait from his little rabbit.

She'd said nothing as he led her on, and the occasional glance over his shoulder revealed her injured arm to be firmly pressed up against her chest.

If she did belong to a Devil's member, it was a terrible shame; even with the mask, Gabriel could tell there was something uniquely alluring about this prey in particular.

“Choose one of the cots,” he commanded. “We'll get that wrist properly dressed.”

An air of indignation briefly enveloped her, but his little rabbit eventually relented. She gently stepped towards the closest bed, gathering her lace skirt before sitting along the edge.

Gabriel couldn't help but note the obvious shift in the mattress as her body settled; she was no mere wisp of a woman, but a fully endowed lady deserving of proper admiration.

The curves of her waist, the fullness of her chest—God, but it really would be a damn shame if the Devils had gotten to her first. He shook the thought free, gathering a few supplies from the medical drawer before joining her. “The time for secrecy has ended, I'm afraid.”

His little rabbit hesitated, clearly struggling with whatever she was debating on doing next. Eventually, she exhaled softly, lifting her good hand towards the face of her mask.

Gabriel's hand stopped her, surprising even himself. “Not you; I won't be able to see properly with mine on.”

The corners of her mouth fell into a befuddled frown.

“You have not willingly given me your trust, yet,” he explained coolly. “Though you were not meant to be a part of the games, you will still benefit from them. Your mask may remain, but I would appreciate an explanation.”

Soft. Am I being too soft with her? Surely, there was nothing wrong with creating a sense of security. She would do him no good in a panicked state, and as soon as he got what he wanted out of her, Gabriel resolved to snap the trap shut without hesitation.

* * *

Thalia found it difficult to speak for a number of reasons. Her wrist had begun to throb terribly, and she was still very much coming down from a massive rush of anxiety and excitement. And, as the speaker finally removed his mask, the grand reveal left her a touch more breathless than she'd expected.

Beautifully dark curls, beautifully dark eyes—if the common man had been sculpted from the earth, he had been expertly crafted from the night sky itself. But more than anything, the man was instantly recognizable as Gabriel Harding.

As in, the Duke of Stonewell. As in, the co-owner and founder of the very club she'd broken into. As in, a man so terrifyingly high up the social ladder, Thalia was shocked she hadn't simply been struck down after her first utterance against him.

And she had thrown an entire stack of papers in his face, taunted him so casually beforehand. A brief dizzy spell overtook her, and she felt herself beginning to sway.

“Easy, now.”

The duke had been so quick, hands immediately moving to support against her shoulders. She stared at him for a moment, brain still whirring from such a major revelation, and inhaled for a breath. A dry, heady scent of wood filled her being—his scent, Thalia realized with a start—brought on especially after exertion, mixed with the slight musk of natural perspiration. And, now that they weren't chasing each other, she could appreciate the... the... “Gracious, but you're strong.”

The duke's brow rose slightly. She could now see his every expression, quickly realizing how foolish she sounded. Thalia buttoned her lip in a panic, suddenly interested in the corner of the room.

He worked in silence after that, occasionally brushing his hand against her wrist and waiting for her to... give permission, she guessed. Eventually, her attention drew back to his diligent task, and she watched as he gingerly cradled her wrist in the flat of his palm, muttering the exact number of times he wrapped her wrist with gauze before suddenly stopping.

“That should be far more reliable, now.”

Again, Thalia inhaled sharply. He sounded so... cold. Angry, she supposed, and for good reason. She'd taken him on quite the chase, and here he was, fixing her up without even so much as asking for her name.

Gently, too—every interaction between them had been considerate, though if she wasn't previously injured, Thalia wondered if that would have not been the case.

The duke simply could be following the rules of the hunt as well, and every bit of this was a ploy to get her guard down. She would be right where she had been two days ago, on the grounds of her familial home, the looming shadow of a far-too powerful man leering at her.

Thalia exhaled, long and controlled. This wasn't a path she wanted to tread; she didn't want to wander in this lightless tunnel without hope. Life was give and take; an exchange of trust between individuals.

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And, though her initial plan had been horribly slapdash, and she deserved whatever punishment the duke thought fit... everything had to happen for one reason or another. It had to, or all the suffering up until this moment would have been merely that.

Slowly, she lifted her hand and removed the rabbit mask.

* * *

When Gabriel lifted his gaze after finding the new splint, he was surprised to find his little rabbit's face revealed in its entirety. She looked terrified, yes—wide-eyed and visibly trembling—but he had expected as much.

What he hadn't expected was how breathtaking she really was; strands of dark, ebony hair grasped against her face like briars, protecting the flowers that thrived within their barbed grasp.

Every moment that passed, he found something new that delighted him—the flush in her cheeks, the curl of her lips, the soft features of her chin—and her eyes. It was like watching spring coming to life, grass revived from the death of winter and fighting to free itself from the frozen earth.

Yes—his little rabbit was in a perpetual state of blooming. It was the only way to describe it. Gabriel had to quickly clear his throat, refusing to show whatever brief trickle of weakness she'd managed to coax out of him. Beauty. It was her appearance that took him off-balance.

She's like any other woman, he fought to convince himself. Like every other prey he'd hunted and caught in his lifetime.

"I... appreciate you trusting me with your identity," he began. "Though I suspect you know me already, allow me to introduce myself properly. Gabriel Harding, my lady; Duke of Stonewell, co-founder and owner of the Ton's Orions."

She hesitated, but that spark of courage he'd seen during their chase welled up in her throat. "Thalia." A beat passed, and she sighed, sounding almost defeated. "Thalia... Sutton, Your Grace."

Sutton. The name rang with familiarity, and Gabriel thought back to the idle gossip and chatter he'd picked up from within London's inner circle. "Osley Hall, yes? The marquess, God rest his soul—you were on everyone's lips for quite some time, Miss Sutton."

And she clearly knew that, given her expression.

"I recall hearing about the new lord's interest in the Devils," Gabriel went on, satisfied as the pieces quickly fell into place. "Did he promise you a room back in Osley in exchange for this act of espionage, Miss Sutton?"

Immediately, her timid glance fell into a frown far darker than Gabriel expected. "Certainly not. He could promise the Queen's palace to me, and I'd sooner return to Whitechapel."

Interesting.

"No, I..." Thalia paused, inspecting her splinted wrist with a tinge of regret in her tone. "I'm afraid my reason for the intrusion is far more childish than that, Your Grace." Her fingers picked at a stray strand of gauze. "You give me far too much

credit. My scheme was not nearly as clever as you make me out to be.”

Anger. Again, it bubbled unexpectedly in his chest, and Gabriel fought to keep it under control. At least he had a name associated with Thalia’s pain, now. “Elaborate.”

Thalia hesitated, her splinted wrist pressed against her chest.

“You’ve come this far, haven’t you?” He had to know how much fight she had in her. How long would his little rabbit struggle in the snare life had caught her in? “Truly, I have nothing to gain from knowing of your inner machinations. And truthfully,” he offered the slightest smirk her way. “I’m curious to hear how such a strange woman’s mind works.”

That did it; a split second of anger crossed Thalia’s face, building that bravado he’d seen in her during their chase. God, but it was exhilarating to watch it unfold.

Gabriel wanted nothing more than to prod her further, explore the depths of her resilience in a more... intimate situation. But it was hardly the time or place; he was content with observing from a distance. For now, at any rate. “Let’s start simple, then. How did you manage to get in without proper invitation?” Forgery was the obvious answer, but the ‘who’ was far more interesting to Gabriel.

“I...had someone forge an invitation, your Grace.”

Gabriel waited for a beat or two, somewhat disappointed that was all she would offer up. Still, at least he knew she wasn’t capable of such an act, meaning the late Marquess’ daughter still had rather fascinating connections. “And your reason for coming tonight?”

“I,” Thalia paused, still picking at her linen dressing. “I was hoping to find

information, Your Grace. Not about the Orions, but the Devils.” She sighed, seemingly fixated on her sprained wrist. “My cousin—the new lord of Oslay Hall—he’s slighted me terribly, you see. I wanted to find something about the gentlemen’s club he’s grown so interested in, but...”

Gabriel nodded slightly. “You assumed we, as their rival, would have sufficient ‘dirt’, as it were.”

Thalia chuckled bitterly. “Hearing it aloud, it all sounds so childish. I’m not even sure what I could possibly find that would help me.”

“Nothing specifically about your cousin, no,” Gabriel agreed. “And nothing about the Devils that could land him in any real trouble.”

Another soft sigh escaped Thalia’s chest, and she eased her wrist to her side. “Well... thank you, Your Grace. I certainly haven’t earned this much kindness from you.” She paused, visibly wrestling with what to say next, before settling on an apology. “I... am sorry for coming to your event without permission. It wasn’t my intention to cause so much trouble.”

“On the contrary, Miss Sutton, you’ve made my evening infinitely more... interesting.” He enjoyed her startled expression, the way her eyes quickly whipped upward to greet his gaze.

Truly, a rabbit fighting to free herself from the snare. “I find myself quite drawn to your plight; truly, you had my attention when the Devils’ name crossed your lips.” It certainly helped that she gave him an excuse to tamper with the Devils’ proceedings, but to get revenge on the man who wounded her? “I wish to offer my aid.”

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She blinked, utterly taken aback.

“You mentioned your cousin slighted you,” Gabriel continued. “Though I am uncertain in what way, I’m sure you would be more than willing to give more detail. Not tonight, though,” he added. “As I still very much have an event to help run. You understand.”

Thalia nodded, hope sparking across her gaze. “O-Oh, yes—of course, Your Grace! I’m not even sure what to say.”

Gabriel held up his hand, a warning edge seeping into his tone. “Say nothing further until you hear my offer, Miss Sutton. You’ll come to find I am a man who often deals with a detailed set of rules.” One by one, he lifted a finger into the air, until his hand had completely unfolded. “Five nights; to earn my assistance against your cousin, you will spend five nights with me.”

Oh, but it was entirely too easy to send her into a panic.

“F-Five nights, your Grace?”

Gabriel took a bit too much pleasure in watching Thalia squirm. “Your thoughts betray you, Miss Sutton. I mean for you to spend five nights in my mansion as a guest. But, to the social world, you are my one and only, attending formal events and sharing your arm with me and only me.”

Quietly, Thalia mulled the offer in her head, seemingly looking for any loopholes he could exploit against her. “Five nights... and you swear it never goes beyond a proper

courtship?”

Again, Gabriel nodded.

“But, why?” Thalia asked. “It seems this offer far favors me over you. What do you gain from this, Your Grace?”

“Let’s just say... ” he paused, rubbing his temple as a headache began to bloom. “A little birdie has been singing rather loudly on my shoulder as of late.”

A gentle knock interrupted their conversation further. Thalia scrambled to place her mask back over her face, with Gabriel leaning to block her from view.

He spotted Christian propped against the frame, Louise by his side with her crown of roses adorned with a red one. Her smile quickly faded to a gasp as she hurried past, to Thalia’s side.

“Gracious—what happened, Gabriel? Are you alright, Miss?”

Christian tsked, his arms crossed in mock-scorn. “Breaking your own rules, are you? I suppose you’ll have to walk back out and pummel yourself into submission.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes as Thalia quickly spoke up on his behalf. “Oh, no, no! His Grace isn’t the culprit—I chose poor footwear tonight, you see.”

Louise didn’t seem entirely convinced, but her husband’s reassuring arm against her shoulder seemed to soothe her worry. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, and I’d quite like to get home and rest after all the excitement.” Thalia stood, gathering her gloves before crossing Gabriel’s path. “Thank you again, Your Grace. I’ll... happily accept your help, should we cross paths again.”

As she left, Gabriel felt a weight against his back, Christian's face pulling into view. "Ah, that's a shame, friend. Looks like your prey got away this time."

Gabriel smiled knowingly, hand brushing against his red rose. "On the contrary, Christian; I say the hunt has only just begun."

CHAPTER 5

Thalia had an awful sleep that night, though that wasn't saying much as a resident of Whitechapel. If her mind hadn't been buzzing with the duke's proposal, then her neighbor's nasty cough certainly would have been the reason for her headache.

The putrid scent of the unwashed from the streets below also kept her awake, slipping between the cracks of the boarded-up window within the hovel she claimed as her room.

Not that she dared to complain; anyone would be so lucky to own a rookery for themselves, and her brother had worked hard to earn it. Though he shared it with a handful of young men—his tosher crew—it was certainly better than the nearly one hundred folk she'd seen crammed into such small housing.

No. Thalia knew to hold fast to whatever blessings she had. The home was warm, the kitchen stocked well enough to not go hungry, and the men Robin had surrounded himself with proved to be as morally straight as he was. There had to be a deep level of trust, she supposed, between individuals whose well-being relied upon each other.

She'd never personally been down in the sewers (and fervently hoped never to visit), but from the occasional story Robin would tell of his exploits, it seemed a rather dangerous occupation. She had learned long ago that no job in Whitechapel was safe, and at the very least, her brother had a good group of companions to watch his back.

It was still nerve-wracking every time he set out for the evening, and the mornings drew out terribly whenever Thalia waited for his return. Today was especially difficult, and as she sat at their makeshift dining table, sipping a watery cup of tea, she found herself wondering exactly how to explain last night's ordeal to her younger brother.

He certainly hadn't been thrilled when she arrived on his doorstep all those weeks ago, but Thalia could tell Robin had been greatly enjoying her presence in the home.

The other men had as well, eagerly looking forward to whatever meager meal she could come up with before they headed out for the night. "To tell him now that a duke wishes my company for nearly a week..." Thalia sighed, setting her mug against the ring-stained table as she chanced a look out of the partially-boarded windows.

The factory smog rolled thickly today, obscuring even the closest of buildings and fading the dirty cobbles to near obscurity. Every so often, a hunched figure or tattered-skirt hem appeared from the haze, followed quickly after by wet, chest-wracking coughs.

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Thalia quickly stood, gathering a slip of newspaper before pressing it against the exposed windowpane. The last thing she needed was the household getting sick. Not that their expeditions to the sewers helped in the matter, but at least this way, she felt like she was doing something to contribute.

Finally, the sound of the back door's lock clicked, and Thalia's heart skipped a beat. By sheer habit, she reached for a vegetable knife against the kitchen counter and stood, ready to run out the front door if needed.

"My, but the robins are looking rather handsome today!"

Thalia's shoulders relaxed, the knife returning to its place. "And the flowers are perfectly in bloom," she called back. "Now, come greet me properly, Robin! I'm here in the kitchen."

The scuffling of feet followed soon by the appearance of a younger man, the spitting image of Thalia herself. His frame was far lighter, though, indicative of the constant challenges of survival given to him on the daily.

He kept his own dark hair cut short and close, his face clean-shaven and currently obscured by a cloth tied around his mouth and nose. That drew Thalia's attention to her brother's eyes—richly brown and tinged in a honeyed hope whenever the light caught against it. The sort of optimism she hoped would persist throughout his difficult life.

Robin made his way towards a rickety-looking chair, slipping out of his canvas trousers and undoing the strings of a thick apron. It all went clattering to the ground,

though he seemed to wrestle with the lantern secured to his shirt via knotted rope.

“Here,” Thalia stepped across and over his pile, picking at the knot with her good hand. “You really ought not to tie this so tightly.”

“And risk losing it in the water?” Robin’s laughter didn’t seem entirely humorous, a tinge of genuine panic settled deep in the back of his throat. “No way; I’d rather you chastise me about my knots than be stuck in the sewers blind.” His gaze settled on her bandaged wrist, and he added softly, “How’s the wrist?”

“Better than it was a few days ago. I think it truly was just a sprain.” She knew Robin wanted to add something to the conversation, but he remained quietly fuming instead.

It wouldn’t do them any good to relive bad memories anyway, and perhaps that’s what kept him silent. Eventually, Thalia got the knot free, gingerly setting the lamp on the table as her brother continued to strip down. “Did everything go alright on your side of things?”

Robin nodded, eventually making it down to a pair of rather patched-up long johns. “Pretty decent haul to clean later—boys wanted to take advantage of the smog and do some resurrectionism.” He held up his hand, the other covering his heart in a sort of mock-promise. “That’s why I made sure to come straight home. A promise is a promise, after all.”

“And I appreciate you making it in the first place. Best to leave the dead as is.” Thalia paused, quietly watching her brother shift his work clothes into a slightly-worn basket, before adding, “Thank you again, Robin. I know it must be hard to pass up on opportunities, no matter how macabre they may be.”

He slid the basket toward the door, gesturing to it with a guilty groan. “I’m just sorry I have to put you through all this. It’s hardly the life you deserve, washing a tosher’s

clothing.”

“You were in no way responsible for my current circumstance,” Thalia insisted. “I’m thankful you took me in at all. The least I can do is ensure your clothes aren’t completely putrid the next time you head out. Now, go on upstairs; there’s a warm bath waiting for you, and I’ll tell you all about Orion’s Hunt over a freshly-brewed pot.”

Robin’s expression wavered, a misty glaze casting over his eyes. “You really didn’t have to do all that, Thalia.”

“I absolutely did,” she replied with a teasing wink. “You positively reek, dear brother, and I refuse to share tea with you otherwise. I’m a sophisticated lady, after all.” She added a mock-curtsy at the end, pulling another snort of laughter from Robin as he made his way towards the staircase.

Once he’d completely ascended, Thalia allowed herself a heavy sigh before preparing the teapot over the fireplace one more. At least, until someone began to knock on their front door.

Thalia moved to open it, but hesitated, hand lingering just in front of the door’s knob. Robin had made a point to tell his crew to always use the back entrance, to call out their code phrase so she knew it was them.

The front door usually meant trouble—beggars, debtors looking to collect, the constables looking for one criminal or the other—and her brother was upstairs.

She debated on calling out to him, only for the door to rattle once more with impatience. Once more, the vegetable knife slipped into her hand, positioned behind her back as she peered through the door’s seam.

It took a minute to make out the shade, but once she did, Thalia gasped. Quickly, she undid the locks and threw the door open, completely taken aback to see the Duke of Stonewell standing on her front stoop.

“Y-Your Grace! I—you came so much sooner than I—how on earth did you find me?” Her eyes flickered to the stinking basket of clothing, and she cursed inwardly at the poor timing of it all.

“You mentioned your residency was in Whitechapel last night,” he explained, hardly seeming to notice the clothing—or the overbearing smell—at all.

“Yes, but Whitechapel is massive!”

“And its residents don’t typically consist of disgraced daughters of late marquesses. Or how they came to live with their half-brothers, the illegitimate sons of said Marquesses.” The duke arched his brow, his arms settling loosely against his chest. “You’re quite the topic of gossip around these parts, Miss Sutton. I would have thought you’d known as much.”

Thalia’s face flushed horribly. She did know, of course, at least to some extent. But to have rumors so rampant that a stranger could easily find her place of residence? It didn’t settle well in her stomach; she made a note to warn Robin, later. “W-well, that still doesn’t explain why you are here, Your Grace,” she said.

The duke’s expression remained terrifyingly neutral. “I’ve come to collect you, per our arrangement. Or were your last words to me not an acknowledgement of consent?”

“Well, n-no—” Thalia quickly shook her head, then decided to nod. “I mean, I truly do wish to accept your help, Your Grace.”

“If that’s the case, you may want to start by setting that weapon down.”

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Thalia blinked, realizing she still hid the kitchen knife behind her back. Quickly, she discarded it across a splintered entryway table, gesturing farther into the rookery. “I’m...sorry.”

The duke shrugged. “Your caution is understandable—I’m impressed you were willing to stab whomever stood on the other side of this door.” He eyed her still-bandaged wrist, and Thalia quickly folded her hands behind her back.

“W-well, I’ve been forcing you to stand out in the smog for far too long. Please, come in, Your Grace,” Thalia insisted. “We can discuss further details of our... arrangement.”

She didn’t think he would, and Thalia couldn’t blame him. What duke would be caught dead entering such a horrid place?

He was already risking quite a lot simply being in Whitechapel, and yet, he seemed unbothered by the request, even entering the home and finding a seat at their table. Thalia stood by the door, her mind reeling. There was a genuine duke in her home—her brother’s home—and he hardly looked nearly as aghast as she felt.

“Are you going to offer me a cup?” he asked.

Thalia blinked, suddenly aware of the whistling kettle. She quickly removed it from its hook over the fireplace, setting it against the table before scrounging up another mug from the shelves. “Ah...we only have an inexpensive black, I’m afraid. It’s likely quite old.”

“That will be fine,” the duke replied coolly.

Thalia put a cup together and set it against the table, unable to do anything else but stare. Eventually, the duke slid the cup closer and raised it for a sip; she didn’t see a single line of grimace or hear a groan from him. “Your wrist is improving, then? That was quite a bit of strain against it just now.”

“W-well, one cannot worry about such minor discomforts in Whitechapel,” Thalia replied. “But, yes—your aid was quite helpful. It’s remained quite still, and I’m certain it will be better soon.”

The duke was quiet for a moment, scrutinizing Thalia entirely before speaking once more. “As I said last night, my aid will cost you five days within the walls of my mansion.” He set the mug back down, gently swirling the contents within. “Five days of elaborate courtship, to put rumors of my romantic endeavors to rest. In exchange, I will help you dishonor your cousin and return all you have lost.”

Thalia nearly fell out of her chair, her hand catching against the table. “I—what?”

The duke took another sip in return, never once breaking eye contact with Thalia. It fell to her to explain herself, then.

“N-no, I couldn’t possibly—I only want what’s legally mine, your Grace. Giles has the title of marquess by law, but I—there were estates on my mother’s side—documents he burned.” Thalia paused, only now realizing how impossible of a task this truly was. “I’m...not even sure how one would go about reclaiming those documents, now. I doubt there are copies, and it would be his word against mine.”

“It would be his word against a duke’s,” he corrected. “And the specifics of my plan are hardly your concern. All you need to worry about is behaving properly in public with me.”

Thalia couldn't help but let out a snort, completely forgetting whose presence she was in. She cleared her throat awkwardly, quickly standing from her chair and turning back to the fireplace. "Would you like any milk with your tea, Your Grace?"

Silence. A shiver ran down her spine, and Thalia reached for the upper shelves, trying to grasp at the condensed milk. Her fingers just barely brushed against the container, and she grunted, straining to reach, to ignore the duke's cold gaze against her back. If her wrist wasn't still sprained...

"Allow me, my lady."

Every nerve ending erupted as Thalia felt a sudden weight against her back. Her eyes flickered, catching the duke pressed against her back as he stretched his arm upward, grasping the sugar bowl with ease.

"You may hide the severity of your injury all you want, Miss Sutton," the duke whispered into her ear. "But for the next few days, I won't allow any form of harm to come to you."

His warm breath caught Thalia's in her chest, bubbling into a rush of exhilaration. Or, no; she was embarrassed, and rightfully so at such close proximity.

"Of course..." The duke set the bowl against the table, his hand cradling her splinted wrist. "If you begged nicely for it, I would happily consider leaving my mark on you..."

She would. No, she wouldn't?! A dizzying euphoria flushed across Thalia's cheeks, and she tried desperately to calm herself. He was toying with her, playing with his food like the deviant predator he was. And yet, he held her wrist so gently, brushed his thumb across her knuckles as tenderly as one might the bare skin of...of...!

“Get off Thalia, you bastard!”

CHAPTER 6

Gabriel wasn't the type to be snuck up upon. Having impeccable hearing certainly helped with such a boast, and especially in somewhere as dangerous as Whitechapel, he made sure to keep his attention entirely on his surroundings.

But the moment he heard Thalia's laughter for the first time, it was the only sound he could focus on. He found himself standing against his will, moving towards her and leaning—leaning—against her back in pursuit of the milk. And his words...he hadn't meant to say anything aloud. But he had, and he could feel her heat radiating beneath him.

At least, until someone had thrown him off-balance. Instinct quickly took over after that, and before the young man had a chance to swing his arm forward, Gabriel had sidestepped, using the attacker's momentum against him as he grabbed his collar.

Swinging him around, Gabriel managed to pin the young man against the table, ready to beat his face black and blue.

“Your Grace!”

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Thalia was probably used to such intrusions. But he had meant the words he spoke aloud, and no harm would come to her so long as he was here.

He only fully registered her presence when, quite suddenly, she appeared at the table as well, having thrown her body's weight against the attacker's arm in a desperate bid to...keep him safe, Gabriel realized. Or ensure the young man didn't rot in jail for striking a duke.

"Thalia, who the hell is this?!" the young man spat, trying to push her free and behind him—or, as "behind" as he could manage, still sprawled out on the table as he was. "How did he get in here? Get off me—I'm trying to?"

"Trying to make the situation worse, it seems," Gabriel replied icily. Still, Thalia seemed to know the man to some extent, and he released his hold on the young man's collar, stepping away to avoid whatever trick the man tried next.

He stood quickly, still held back by Thalia—a lover, perhaps? The thought burned in Gabriel's chest, and he fought to calm his anger. It would do him no good to lose control.

"Robin, remember when I told you I'd explain my evening to you?" Thalia glanced Gabriel's way, offering a weak grimace. "Well... he was my evening."

'Robin' blinked, staring at Gabriel as if trying to find some fault within him.

"Robin..." Thalia sighed, gently taking the man's hand—a hand Gabriel wanted nothing more than to break there and then. "This is Gabriel Harding. Co-owner of the

Ton's Orions... the Duke of Stonewell?"

It took a moment, but Robin seemed to finally connect the dots. "This is the man whose invitation..."

"You forged, I assume, yes," Gabriel interrupted curtly. "I admit, it was impressive work; none of my guards noticed any imperfections."

Robin seemed outwardly pleased by the praise, though a dark scowl remained as an arm protectively hovered between him and Thalia. "All right, so, what are you doing here?"

"Robin, manners." Thalia gave an apologetic nod of her head. "I apologize, Your Grace; my brother isn't entirely familiar with social etiquette."

Her brother. Oh, the rush of relief that flooded Gabriel was practically intoxicating. He fought to keep his expression neutral, though, and tempered his voice to appear indifferent. "If I had known you had a brother, I would have brought more than one carriage."

"Carriage?" Robin turned to his sister, clearly confused. "Thalia, what on earth did you get up to last night?"

"A tale I'm sure she'll tell on the way to the manor." Gabriel gestured towards the door, producing his pocket watch from his vest. "I had hoped to have departed by now—my men will stay here and guard your belongings, and we'll send more carriages to collect what you need."

"Collect what we—wait, are we going into town?" Robin shook his head, forcing his sister to step back with him. "I—I can't go there. The Ton..." he spat. "And if I can't go, there's no way I'm letting Thalia."

“You’d be surprised what a duke can get away with,” Gabriel replied curtly, still eyeing his pocket watch. “But I must insist we get going; I promised my sister we’d return by luncheon, and tardiness will not be tolerated.”

He watched as Thalia squeezed her brother’s hand. “It’s all right, Robin. I’ll explain everything on the way.” She stepped around Robin, an air of bravado overtaking her. “Lead on, Your Grace.”

* * *

The ride was... uninteresting, to say the least. Gabriel had expected only himself and Thalia, and thus planned to interrogate her further on details about her cousin, the estates, her... interests.

But with her brother sitting directly beside her, glaring daggers while Thalia told a story with which he was intimately familiar, the duke found himself absentmindedly staring out of the window, determined not to give Robin the satisfaction of his attention.

He was going to be a major thorn in his side, Gabriel could tell already. But, he hadn’t gotten to where he was today without operating under unusual constraints, and an unexpected sibling wouldn’t stand in his way.

Stand in his way... the phrase gave him pause, and Gabriel mulled the meaning over. What did he hope to gain out of all of this? Thalia had been right, of course, as five days of courtship was hardly anything compared to the regaining of one’s estates.

Charlotte would leave him be for a time, certainly, but once she realized Thalia wasn’t coming back... by all accounts, his proposition was less an exchange and more a favor, and Gabriel Harding didn’t do favors. He couldn’t do favors; that implied he had close ties with people. Ties that could be exploited.

His thoughts were interrupted as Thalia gently got his attention. “Um, Your Grace?” Her gaze flickered away as he looked to her, and she folded her gloved hands into her lap. “What... are we to do about my cousin?”

Gabriel had put quite a bit of thought into it. A quick and painless demise seemed too good for the new little Lord of Oslay. No. He wanted the small man to suffer long and terribly, have his social status and good graces stripped as violently away as he had done to—

“Because, the last thing I’d wish is to make trouble for you, Your Grace.” Thalia sighed, grasping her hands. “I appreciate you offering your home to us for the next few days, but Giles is certain to hear.”

“Good.”

Thalia blinked, clearly looking taken aback. “Th-that’s...good?”

Gabriel sat back in his seat, arms crossed against his chest. “I do not fear your cousin discovering our alliance, Miss Sutton. If anything, it will only work to our advantage.”

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Before Thalia could argue, a pair of white-painted gates let out a hinged squeak, opening up on a wide expanse of landscape perfectly curated to fit the lofty aspirations of a duke and his family. The lawn looked straight out of a fairy garden, decorated in beautifully-blooming flowers and shrubbery that naturally gave off a sense of otherworldly awe.

It was evident in Thalia's expression that she adored it, and why wouldn't she? He'd worked quite hard to cultivate the landscape in such a manner; a pang of pride rang through his chest, and it was difficult not to show such feelings across his face.

As for his sister, he found her taking a ride on one of her horses—a chestnut-coated stallion, dressed in a pair of mismatched white socks and diamond patterning on his muzzle. She wore her equestrian garb as if were an old friend, dark ribbons of hair tied back in a tight ponytail as her long frame held fast to the horse's sides.

The carriage clearly caught her attention, and as she drew her horse closer, her face lit up immediately, and she smiled in delight. Then she directed her steed towards the mansion's front, determined to beat her brother there.

“Who was that, Your Grace?” Thalia asked.

Gabriel restrained the pride in his voice, not wanting to come off as too sentimental. “Your hostess, Miss Sutton. I expect you'll treat her as if she were your own flesh and blood.”

He intentionally made the last part sound more threatening than was necessary, but Robin's dark scowl hadn't yet passed. A reminder would do him good; it was a

privilege to be here, and Thalia's brother or not, it was a privilege Gabriel was more than willing to revoke.

The carriage eventually rolled to a stop at the manor's entrance. Sure enough, Charlotte was already waiting at the bottom step, her stallion being led away by one of the stableboys. She bounced eagerly in place as Gabriel pushed the carriage door open and, without even waiting for the footmen to approach, immediately rushed into her brother's arms. "Gabriel!"

"Charlotte." He offered a warm smile, embracing his sister affectionately. "I told you I wouldn't be long; you act as if I've been gone for months."

Charlotte pulled away, her lips pulled into a pout. "You might as well have, after the news you dropped during breakfast. Had me in an absolute state—a lady friend, Gabriel? I've been handing you brilliant offers on a silver platter, and you've rejected each and every one!" Her brow furrowed, a curious smirk crossing her face. "What makes this one so different, hmm? Or are you suggesting I have poor taste?"

Gabriel chuckled lightly, gesturing toward the carriage. "See for yourself."

She did so, bounding past and nearly scaring Thalia off the steps. "Oh my—you're quite lovely, you know that?" Charlotte grinned, casting a glance her brother's way. "All right, I shall trust your taste from now on, dear brother of mine."

Gabriel's grin fell as Thalia fully exited, settling to a neutral frown. "Charlotte, why don't you show Miss Thalia Sutton the back gardens while the men discuss some matters?" He shot a look Robin's way, pleased to see the young man flinch.

"Code for, 'Charlotte, save this woeful damsel from a long, boring chat between the big, strong boys'." Charlotte winked, offering a laced hand Thalia's way. "Come on, then; I've got another friend enjoying an early lunch in the rose section. Do you like

roses, Thalia?”

Thalia cast a withering glance Gabriel’s way; he simply replied with a shrug. “I... suppose I do, yes.”

“Wonderful! You’re going to love what I’ve managed to get growing out of the ground. It took a lot of work, but I have some of the most brilliant minds on my staff. Why, you’d practically think they had literal green thumbs...”

Charlotte’s chatter faded away as she dragged Thalia towards the back, leaving Gabriel to face the remaining Sutton family member. He gestured inside, watching Robin carefully to see what his first move would be.

His attention lingered on his sister, following her and Charlotte until they completely vanished behind the house. Then, with a nod, Robin started towards the steps, Gabriel following close behind.

CHAPTER7

“I hope this doesn’t sound too terribly rude, but...”

Thalia pulled her attention back to Charlotte, having been looking over her shoulder for quite some time. She’d tried to watch Robin for as long as possible, but as soon as they rounded the house, she found herself wildly uncomfortable.

Not that she didn’t trust her brother to behave himself, but this was such a vastly different world from the one he grew up in. And to be cornered by the Duke of Stonewell, of all people... it was a feeling she was well versed in.

“...that is who you are, isn’t it?”

Thalia blinked, realizing she'd completely missed Charlotte's question. She smiled awkwardly, tugging at the fray of her old gloves. "I'm so sorry—who am I, exactly?"

Charlotte's expression was soft, inquisitive—nothing at all like her brother's. She let her hair down, brushing a long, curling strand of hair over her shoulder as it bounced just against the middle of her back. "Thalia Sutton. As in, the late marquess' daughter." Charlotte grimaced, adding almost hesitantly, "Whose... cousin banished you from Oslay Hall."

A wave of nausea briefly overtook Thalia, and she began to shake her head.

"Oh, no, I don't mean to sound judgmental!" Charlotte insisted. "What happened to you was absolutely unjust; if I had it my way, I'd have Gabriel storm the manor walls and simply bully the man into apologizing."

A nervous snort of laughter escaped Thalia. "Th-that does sound like something His Grace would do."

Charlotte made a slight face. "Ugh; he has you refer to him by his proper title? How horribly unromantic." She shook her head and sighed lightly, her hands folding behind her back. "I love my brother, I truly do, but he's absolutely hopeless when it comes to courtship. Perfectly adequate if you need to scare someone, but I hardly think he wants to scare you away."

Thalia could only nod a nervous reply, keeping close to her hostess' heel. It hadn't been long since she treaded the grounds of a manor, but her time in Whitechapel helped her appreciate all the little things she never had before.

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There was a lack of refuse, for starters, bunched into piles along the side of the white-polished walls curling with the start of blooming ivy, nor had it tangled itself between half-rotting stumps or chewed-apart bushes.

The air felt clean against her face, and inhaling deeply wouldn't cause horrific wheezing. And the people; each gardener she and Charlotte passed offered a friendly smile or nod, and Thalia couldn't believe how sorely she'd missed such basic acts of kindness.

She was so lost in her thoughts that Thalia hadn't realized Charlotte stopped them long ago. They appeared to be beneath a wide gazebo, painted a beautiful birch-white and sparsely walled-off with beautiful, rose-hued silks. A cavalcade of rose bushes cradled the picnicking spot, filling the air with a rich, perfumed scent that mingled nicely with the fresh, spring air.

A tea table had been set at its center, decorated with lovely vases of white-and-red roses, and another finely-dressed woman closer to Thalia in years sat in one of the chairs, sipping delicately from a china cup. Bright red hair caught in the sunlight, and as a freckled-face turned to greet the pair, Thalia's heart skipped a beat.

"Louise, I want you to meet my brother's latest obsession." Charlotte practically skipped to the side, hands held aloft in dramatic fashion as she introduced her guest. "Thalia, this is one of my dear friends, Louise. Her husband, Christian Wright, is the Duke of Egerton." Charlotte paused, adding with a chuckle, "I suppose I should have technically introduced her as Her Grace Louise Wright, Duchess of Egerton..."

Louise, in return, waved a gloved hand in the air. "Entirely too much of a mouthful;

Louise is just fine.”

“Her husband and my brother founded the Ton’s Orions together,” Charlotte grinned. “Thick as thieves, those two, though you’d hardly ever hear Gabriel admit it.”

Thalia could only smile and nod in response.

“And before it becomes far too awkward to broach,” Charlotte said. “Louise, this is Thalia Sutton, of Oslay Hall.”

Again, Thalia’s face lit up crimson. She wanted nothing more than to run inside the manor and hide away for the next five days, but much to her surprise, Louise’s expression held genuine sympathy.

“Thank goodness the new marquess is only your cousin; I couldn’t imagine being directly related to such a spineless coward.” She shifted in her chair, revealing the sizable bump against her dress, and gestured to the empty spot beside her. “You rode all the way from Whitechapel, yes? Come, don’t let us make you stand any longer.”

“I was just about to invite her to sit!” Charlotte insisted, quickly choosing a chair directly across from Louise. “You are ruining my first real hostess experience.”

Louise replied with a rich, deep laughter, the sort that filled one’s core instantly. Thalia moved to take her seat beside the duchess, eyeing their luncheon nervously.

“Do you want me to help with anything?” Charlotte immediately stood, reaching for a sampler plate and a pair of tongs. “I couldn’t help but notice your wrist; is it a recent injury?”

Thalia immediately tucked her splint beneath the table, feeling Louise’s eyes boring into it. “Ah, no. It—I mean, I suppose it is.” She dared a glance towards the duchess,

a cold sweat breaking out against the back of her neck.

Louise looked visibly concerned, an obvious realization spreading across her face. Then, without warning, she let out a groan and eased herself upright, using the table for support as her other hand rested against her midsection.

“Gracious, I think the little one’s feeling restless. Charlotte, would you mind setting up another plate for me?” Louise asked. “I think I need a quick walk among the roses.”

Charlotte nodded, eagerly placing a finger sandwich onto the sampler plate. “Oh—do you want me to walk with you, in that case?”

“No, no, let Thalia come with me,” Louise insisted. “She hasn’t seen the loveliest parts yet herself.” Her attention then turned to Thalia, her expression flawlessly apologetic. “I’m terribly sorry for this; and here I just invited you to sit.”

“N-no, Your Grace, it’s quite alright.” Thalia quickly stood, looping an arm around Louise’s to help support her. “Um... I’ll follow your lead, then.”

“I’ll have tea and snacks ready when you return!” Charlotte grinned, waving the two off as Thalia stepped down from the gazebo. She dared one more glance at Louise, whose calm and unsuspecting demeanor hadn’t once faltered.

But her stomach knotted regardless, and she felt a pained twinge on her wrist. The Duchess of Egerton knew something was off, and Thalia suspected she wouldn’t be getting away from her interrogations so easily...

* * *

Gabriel had been staring across his desk at Robin, silently, for the past five minutes

or so. He'd immediately led the Sutton boy to his out-of-home study, adjacent to the main library and stocked just as thoroughly.

Dozens upon hundreds of books lined the walls of the room, a few armchairs set behind a large, stained glass window currently filtering in slivers of colorful, mid-afternoon sunlight.

In the corner, a small fireplace crackled delicately, given only enough logs to create a soft ambiance and hold a slight tinge of smoke in the air. Robin had chosen to sit closest to it, staring at the flames in quiet contemplation.

No one seemed willing to speak first. Gabriel could respect that; he had been the one to call the meeting, as it were, and it was wise to allow one's enemy to speak themselves into a corner. Whitechapel truly had made itself another distrusting member of London society.

"It was a foolish plan at best, you know."

Robin's jaw visibly clenched. "What was?"

Gabriel leaned back in his chair, his brow raised slightly. "Your forgery attempt."

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Robin's expression remained dark, but Gabriel knew his assumption was right. So the young Sutton had been the mastermind behind Thalia's infiltration; an interesting connection, indeed. "I consider it in rather poor taste, when a man sends someone else to do their dirty work. Their sister especially," he added icily.

Robin's expression remained dark. "That wasn't my idea. You don't know Thalia. You can't stop her once her mind's made up."

"Excuses."

His fist slammed against the chair, nearly toppling it over as Robin jumped to his feet. "I don't need the approval of a duke, sir."

Pain. There was clear pain in the man's voice, and Gabriel could detect guilt just from the way the young man's lip curled. Naive certainly wasn't the word he'd use for Robin, but the young man was foolish to wear his heart so obviously on his sleeve.

"But your sister does, Mr. Sutton. High society has shaped her past and will determine her future; you should take that far more seriously than you have."

Robin's expression burned. He looked ready to make a grievous mistake, hands curled and trembling at his side. Briefly, Gabriel's mind went back to that terrible, terrible night. To the little boy who held his sister close in bed, burning with as much anger as this young man showed.

He was a liability but Gabriel found himself unable to deny him the vengeance he so

obviously craved. He knew a thing or two about such ambitions.

“What do you really want with my sister?” Robin finally asked. “No duke simply decides to help a disgraced daughter of society and her bastard half-brother. Not unless there’s something in it for them.”

Ordinarily, such accusations would’ve earned this man a quick trip into unconsciousness. But Gabriel was genuinely impressed with the young man’s insight. He leaned forward in his chair, his hands folding on his desk. “What do you know of the Ton’s Orions and Devils, Mr. Sutton?”

Robin’s expression visibly churned as he ran throughout his mind. “Gentlemen’s clubs. Wildly exclusive places, wildly hell-bent on taking the other out.” He paused, then hesitantly added, “through any means necessary, if you believe in rumors.”

“And do you believe in rumors, Mr. Sutton?”

Robin gave him a long, hard stare. “I believe what’s been said about you. And I believe you care quite a bit for the social standing of your club; enough that underhanded tactics would be something you’d store away within your repertoire.”

Gabriel nodded slowly, pleased he’d been correct in his assumption. Robin was entirely too knowledgeable about the truths of the world; there might be a use for him, yet.

“The real question,” Robin continued cautiously. “Is if my sister or I risk that reputation you’ve so carefully crafted for yourself, or the Orions. And if we do,” he added, “how you plan to handle this... problem.”

Gabriel offered a cold smirk. “Now, why do you think yourself a problem, Mr. Sutton?”

“Because you haven’t properly answered my initial question, and men who stall are men who quietly plan the demise of others.”

That got a dark chuckle out of Gabriel. Robin was good, and he would internally offer such deserved praise. The boy was incredibly perceptive for his age.

“So?” Robin asked. “What do you really want from my sister, Your Grace?” The last part was practically spat out across the floor; Gabriel was beginning to enjoy the Sutton family in its entirety.

“As your sister mentioned previously, I have a personal stake in the clubs’... rivalry, shall we say.” Gabriel shifted in his chair, producing a few papers from a drawer beside him. “So, anything I can do to cause the Devils trouble is a net positive.”

He brandished the paperwork for Robin to see, gesturing toward what appeared to be a list of names. “I like to keep track of who takes an interest in our rivals, and it seems your cousin has been trying awfully hard to catch their leader’s attention.”

Cautiously, Robin approached the desk. His hand reached for the list, but Gabriel quickly pulled away; there certainly wasn’t enough trust between them to share every secret just yet. And Robin seemed to respect that, enough to let it go and take a seat.

“If rumor is to be believed,” Gabriel continued, “the marquess has, perhaps, been a touch reckless in his pursuits. A new wardrobe, expensive gifts for Devil’s members, paying for multiple years on his membership card... Your cousin seems determined to drain the lake before the rains can replenish it.”

A slight smirk crossed Robin’s face. “And, do your sources give an exact number to his accruing debt?”

Good; the young man was hooked. Gabriel set the papers across his desk, hands

folding once more. “Unfortunately, my club needs to stay above the law when it comes to the gathering of information. I can’t simply wander into Oslay Hall and check for myself. But if one was to, say, accidentally come across the marquess’ spending ledgers, and that person were to accidentally share those numbers with a more influential party...?”

Robin’s brow rose slightly. “An interesting hypothetical, certainly. Though it won’t distract me from your lack of disclosed intentions with my sister.”

Gabriel’s lip curled slightly upward, and he couldn’t help but let out a chuckle. Oh, yes, this was a young man he could easily see himself adding to his vast array of resources. “For the next five days, she is under the protection of the Harding family. My title may mean little to you, but I’m certain you appreciate the promise of one brother to another.”

He could. Robin visibly relaxed in his chair, appearing far less guarded than when they first entered the study. He exhaled sharply, the last bits of his personal reserves blowing away, and he faced Gabriel as a new man. “Alright—where exactly do I fit in your grand plan... Your Grace?”

CHAPTER8

The roses really were quite lovely. They came in a wide variety of colors, and Thalia suspected it had been the supplier for Orion’s Hunt. But it was difficult to truly enjoy the sights, as she was far more fixated on Louise.

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They'd been walking for mere minutes, drawing farther and farther from Charlotte and the gazebo, and Louise hadn't spoken a single word. Thalia hadn't either, but she hadn't known what to say. She was certain she knew why she'd been chosen on this walk; it was only a matter of waiting for the metaphorical dam to break.

Finally, when they had put a good distance between themselves and the gazebo, Louise finally spoke. "You were the woman in the infirmary, weren't you? During Orion's Hunt; you were being tended to by Gabriel."

There was no use in lying. Thalia nodded sheepishly. The pair drew to a stop before a long wooden bench, and Louise took a seat. Thalia followed suit, gloved hands wringing in her lap, and waited for the inevitable scolding.

"Are you alright, Thalia?" Louise gently took her splinted hand, cradling her wrist with genuine concern in her tone. "It wasn't Gabriel who did this, was it?"

"Wh-what?!" Thalia sputtered, completely taken off balance. "Oh, gracious, no! He—he really was helping me, Your Grace."

Louise's expression was so warm, so inviting. "Refer to me by my name, please. I would like to think we can become friends."

Thalia nodded, her ravaged nerves beginning to ease.

"That's good to hear, though." Louise released her hold, hands returning to her side. "My husband adores the man, but Gabriel has always been..." she paused, her lips pursed. "Well...I hadn't expected to see such a private man in such a delicate

situation. He's not exactly known for his caring demeanor."

That didn't entirely surprise Thalia. And yet, everything she'd seen from the duke suggested otherwise. He wasn't overly emotional, certainly, but the man did seem surprisingly open.

"I'm just saying that, if Gabriel has put you in an awkward position—" Louise began.

Thalia quickly shook her head, offering as reassuring a smile as she could. "On the contrary, he's working to help me out of such a position. The mere fact that I'm no longer forced to be in Whitechapel is... is..." She blinked, then blinked furiously, surprised to suddenly find herself in tears.

"Oh, Thalia..." Louise offered her hand, and Thalia quickly took it, squeezing tightly as horrible shudders overtook her body. "You are safe here." She gestured a hand, calling one of the gardeners to their side. "Why don't you excuse yourself to your chambers? I'll let Charlotte know you're feeling unwell. The staff can escort you, and if you'd like, there's a beautiful selection of scented oils for baths. I enjoyed one just the other day; the Hardings are quite renowned for their scents."

Briefly, the smoky earth-scent of Gabriel overtook Thalia, pulling more tears from her eyes. "I-I couldn't."

"You absolutely could," Louise insisted. "And you shall. Don't fret; Charlotte may be young, but she is ever the gracious hostess. Besides," she added, setting a hand gently against her bump. "She'll hardly argue with a woman in my condition, and you shouldn't either."

That got a wobbly laugh from Thalia. Wiping her face, she finally relented and stood, giving a deep curtsy to Louise. "Thank you so much, Your Grace—ah, I mean, Louise."

She offered that same, warming smile back. “Of course, Thalia. Take as much time to yourself as you need.”

* * *

She had forgotten how grand a room could be. As the waitstaff drew her bedroom door open, Thalia almost collapsed beneath the weight of her frame, gobsmacked by the size of it all. It easily filled the space of half of Robin’s rookery, decorated in beautiful cool colors of rich blue and faded lavender.

The sweet, almost woody scent of the aforementioned flower stood tall in a number of vases, intermingled with floral notes of jasmine and peace lilies. Thalia immediately found herself drawn to the king-size mattress, its plush comforter and array of soft pillows looking ever so inviting.

“Let us know if you need anything, Miss.” The maid gave a quick curtsy and gently closed the door behind her, leaving Thalia to bask in the vastness of it all. Her eyes stretched around the room, finally settling on her small collection of suitcases and wrapped frames brought over from Whitechapel.

Her belongings seemed so...insignificant, in comparison. With a gentle sigh, Thalia moved towards her things and began to unpack, feeling the need to tidy up a small amount before she explored the lavatory. Such a nice room deserved to remain nice, after all.

Suddenly, a knock came from her door, and she quickly stood upright. “Come in!” Much to her surprise, it was Gabriel Harding who appeared on the other side, and she quickly offered a curtsy. “Oh, Your Grace! Please, come in. I apologize for the mess; it seems my things from Whitechapel arrived without my knowing.”

The duke’s eyes immediately fixated on her small pile, and Thalia resisted the urge to

block his view. “Yes, the footmen informed me a few minutes ago. I wanted to ensure nothing had been lost or damaged on the trip over. We’ll be taking a trip into town soon enough, in case anything needs replacing.”

“Oh.” Thalia’s face flushed, and she quickly nodded her thanks. “That’s very kind of you, Your Grace, but hardly necessary. Everything seems in perfect order. Thank you kindly again.” Silence hung between them, and Thalia couldn’t help but offer a nervous grin. “Um...would you like to see for yourself, Your Grace?”

He didn’t offer a reply, but did move towards her collection. Slowly, methodically, the duke began to unwrap frames and gingerly open suitcases, immediately abandoning them if any sign of cloth or clothing hid within. His attention turned to a pair of large canvases propped against the wall, and nerves knotted in Thalia’s stomach. “Th-those are mine,” she quickly offered. “My own—well, of course they are, but I meant to say—”

“You paint?”

Thalia nodded, biting her lip. “They’re... not very good. Or finished. It’s hard to find the time, as of late.”

The duke nodded, moving back towards her suitcases once more. Slowly, he opened a few latches filled with knick-knacks and personals, taking a particular interest in her collection of books. He held them aloft with great respect, glancing along the spine curiously. “The Romance of the Forest, hmm?”

Now Thalia’s neck felt hot. “It... it was my mother’s.”

The duke set the book gently atop the pile. “I have my own copy in my study, though I find poetry easier to read during my busy schedule.”

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“Oh?”

“I’m a fan of John Donne’s work myself.” The duke finished perusing her books, his gaze now fixed directly on her. “Tell me, have you read *The Flea*?”

Thalia had not been expecting a literary discussion when she first entered her room, and she certainly hadn’t expected one from the duke. She drew towards her belongings, taking a book in hand as some excuse to do...something, she supposed. “I’m afraid I haven’t, Your Grace.”

He seemed pleased with her response, and cleared his throat lightly.

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,

How little that which though deniest me is;

It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,

And in this flea our two bloods mingled be

The duke paused, seemingly gauging Thalia for her reaction. “It’s one of my personal favorites. I wonder... if you could deduce why that is?”

It was worded like a challenge, but not one Thalia was so eager to take on. Still, it felt rude to simply brush past his question, and Thalia set her book to the side, kneeling down to collect a few dresses from one of the abandoned suitcases. “It’s... a unique poem, certainly. And you yourself seem drawn to unique things, Your Grace.”

From the corner of her eye, she watched him draw closer to her side. “Do you consider yourself unique, Miss Sutton?”

Briefly, her breath caught in her chest, and she forced it out as nervous laughter. “I would say I’ve had unique circumstances, though in the whole of London, I would consider myself quite average.”

She moved to put her dress away, her skin tingling as the duke’s hand found hers. The splinted one, precisely, and he held it with just the right amount of tenderness and restraint. He wanted her to stay, but not if it injured her further.

“Do... you see me as wholly unique, Your Grace?”

* * *

He did. Gabriel Harding did, and he was not willing to admit as much to himself, let alone aloud for Thalia to hear. Oh, he’d had women come and go in his life, hunted and pleased dozens far above Thalia’s own stature.

Yet this woman who stood before him—dress in arm and green eyes so wide and desiring more than life had offered her—was so inexplicably different. The urge to pull her close, to devour her there and then, was almost inescapable, and Gabriel fought to keep himself under control.

There was nothing outwardly alluring—typically alluring—at any rate. Her dress was rather modest, her hair done up in a typical manner and powder practically nonexistent.

But all of this only served to accent what made her so desirable; the curve of her waist, the grace of her stance, the warmth and optimistic gleam that hid buried deep within her expressive face.

Even the way her lips pursed—the way she looked questioningly at him now, as if waiting for him to make the next move. A little rabbit, familiar with carefully watching the wolves life had sent after her.

Gabriel gently tugged against her hand, and to his delight, she pulled closer. He cradled her splinted wrist, fully taking it in under the guise of careful inspection. “This is healing well, then?”

Thalia nodded, the scent of sunshine bouncing off her curls and infecting Gabriel’s mind. “Thank you again for helping. You really didn’t need to.”

Oh, but he would do so much more to help. Gabriel was ready to destroy any standing Giles Tilbury hoped to have among high society, and to his utter bemusement, he still hadn’t a proper reason as to why. Deep down, he had an inkling, and deep down, he suspected Robin had guessed it as well.

What are your intentions with my sister?

Gabriel gently placed a kiss against her bandaged knuckle, gaze rising to meet Thalia’s. “Such matters aren’t your concern anymore, little rabbit.”

“B-but...”

“Consider this time for you to recover,” Gabriel added. “So I may have the chance to catch you properly. Prey is hardly worth the chase if it is injured, after all.”

There—he could feel the pleasant shiver running up from her fingertips and traveling the length of her hand, sending her cheeks into a bright flush.

Gabriel stood upright, daring to pull Thalia even closer to his person, and she obliged. He inspected her face, the roundness of her cheeks and fullness of her lips, and he

wondered what part of her body would taste the most divine. “What are you thinking about?”

Thalia looked as if he’d just asked her a wholly intimate question. “Th-Thinking, your Grace?”

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He nodded slowly, a bemused smile crossing his face. “Such a unique woman must have such a unique outlook on life.” Closer; he dared to inch closer, their noses but a hair’s breadth from each other. If he wanted to, he could tilt his head and nip the lobe of her ear. But, whispering would suffice, and given the visible shiver running the length of her back, she seemed equally as taken by his act.

“I-I...” she leaned away, their eyes meeting once more as she dared a slight furrow of her brow. “I recall the exact phrasing being ‘strange’.”

“Was it, now?”

Thalia nodded weakly. “I was... a strange woman, with a strange mind.”

Gabriel chuckled deeply, lips barely brushing against Thalia’s; a gentle test, the first bite to see if she was fully alert. Warmth flooded his body as she leaned in for more, and of course, he was more than willing to give it.

* * *

What was she doing? What was she doing?! Thalia should’ve pulled away—she shouldn’t have allowed for a kiss to begin with. There were so many emotions running through her upon arriving at Stonewell manor, and she hadn’t expected them to come at her so violently.

She assumed her room could have been the place to let said feelings out, but then the duke came, and the way he spoke to her, drew close to her, touched her hand and pulled her closer while talking about... about...!

She had to pull away. She had to stop, but she found herself unable to. The duke tasted of smoke, of the outdoors, and his hands settled so perfectly against the curve of her hip. And—and he was leaning into it, grasping at her, trying to discover every inch of her being through the use of his hands or the taste of his tongue.

Her imagination flew past her, reminiscing the sensations she felt during Orion's Hunt; Thalia wanted nothing more than for him to take her to the ground, pin her beneath his body and restrain her like...like...

Suddenly, he pulled away, and Thalia found herself dizzy. His arms remained around her, keeping her balanced, and he scrutinized her with those beautiful, all-reaching eyes.

Deep and dark, like the forbidden reaches of a forest, prowling with predators far too dangerous for someone like her. And yet, she was leaning, pressing against his chest, hoping for another taste. A bite, she mused, facing burning hot and core positively melting.

But, he was right to move away. He was of far saner mind than she, and Thalia pulled away completely, her hand brushing curls of hair behind her ear. "I... I...should take a bath. I mean, I wanted to... that was my original intent. For coming up here."

A look crossed the duke's face, and Thalia swore he wanted to suggest he join her. But, no, he had proven himself an honest man, and she was simply imparting her own beliefs. Her own twisted desires, corrupted by the stress and hardship she'd faced the last month or so.

The duke eventually nodded and started towards the door, offering a glance over his shoulder as his hand grasped the knob. Gracious, but if his hands were only grasping—Thalia shook her head furiously, fighting to pay attention to the buttons on his vest. Anything but his face, the expression of polite disgust he was likely to be

wearing.

“I would suggest the bottle of ‘Chamomile Dream’, Miss Sutton. It helps one settle the mind,” he suggested.

Thalia nodded furiously, offering a low, long curtsy that she didn’t break until her door clicked shut. She listened intently for the duke’s footsteps, and as soon as they faded away, her legs gave out completely, and she collapsed in a disparaging state.

D-Did I just kiss the Duke of Stonewell?!

CHAPTER9

The afternoon wove seamlessly into dinner, with only the Suttons remaining at Stonewell manor. Louise had long-since excused herself back to her own home, and Gabriel couldn’t help but feel some relief in the matter.

It would be difficult enough to eat in a composed manner with Thalia directly to his right. The fewer folk he had to mask in front of, the better, especially with Charlotte being immediately up to her old antics.

“Did you end up having a bath, Thalia?” Charlotte asked, her fork having long-since abandoned the remainder of her slice of spinach pie.

Thalia appeared startled, looking up from her own plate quickly and... rather flushed. Almost as if lost in a particularly indecent thought, one perpetrated mere hours ago. “O-oh! Um, yes, I did. Thank you again for the suggestion, Lady Char—ah, Charlotte.”

Gabriel eyed his sister, who looked as pleased as a fox in the henhouse. “I saw my brother went to your room as well. Tell me, did he... help you choose a scent?”

Thalia's face brightened considerably. As much as Gabriel enjoyed seeing her squirm, he'd rather not be dragged into his sister's machinations.

"She had a few things to still unpack, dear sister of mine. I was doing my job as host and offering a hand."

The conversation needed to steer away from Charlotte's fixation, and so Gabriel added off-handedly, "how has your latest artistic endeavor gone, Charlotte?"

Thalia immediately latched onto the change in subject. "Oh! Are you a creative soul, Charlotte?"

Charlotte beamed, plucking her wine glass off the table as she gave the contents a swirl. "I like to consider myself as one, yes! Though, I tend to race around different interests—like, this week I've taken to really learning embroidery, but last week, I really had a desire to become a professional pianist."

Gabriel winced inwardly, the memories of off-key practice ringing fresh in his mind. Thank goodness that interest hadn't lasted as long as the others.

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“Why, there was an entire month I dedicated myself to being the next Sir Francis Chantrey!” Charlotte grimaced, adding after the fact, “I’m... pretty certain the west wing is still coated in a fine layer of pottery dust. But I know for a fact there’s still some of my first few attempts at sculpting around there.”

“Oh, there certainly are,” Gabriel interjected. “I made sure of that.”

Charlotte groaned, falling back into her chair with a whine to her tone. “Oh, they’re positively horrid, Thalia! I tried to make a bust of my brother, and he looks like a frog!”

“A frog?”

“Wide eyes, puffed out cheeks—ooh, I know he’s hidden it away somewhere, and he won’t tell me where it is.” Charlotte’s arms crossed tightly, and she let out a dramatic huff. “One of these days, I’m going to dedicate an entire day—no, a week!—to searching the whole of the manor.”

Thalia tried to cover her laughter with the back of her hand, but failed spectacularly. Gabriel certainly didn’t mind; her laughter was still the greatest sound to his ears. He found himself paying close attention to the dimples of her cheeks, the way her forehead crinkled the wider her smile grew.

“Oh, Robin,” Charlotte suddenly gasped. “I’ve completely neglected you as a hostess! Here I am, going on about myself, and you’ve been left with only the company of your plate.”

Gabriel's attention swerved, taking note of the hunched-over young man devouring his fourth helping of sauteed salmon. He swallowed quickly, at least having the courtesy to wipe his mouth before addressing his sister. "That's quite alright, Lady Charlotte—I'm perfectly content keeping to myself."

"Certainly not. I would bet my brother didn't even show you your room during your men's talk." Charlotte pushed herself free of her chair, rounding the table and looping her arm through Robin's. "Gabriel, keep Thalia company, won't you? I'll show Robin his room—oh, and maybe we'll come across one of my horrible vases along the way. It really is a sight to see, Robin, you'll get a fantastic laugh out of it."

"It's considered rude not to let a guest finish what's on their plate," Gabriel began.

"Ooh, he doesn't mind!" Charlotte insisted. "Do you, Robin?"

Robin looked quite disappointed to be leaving the large table of food, though obliged nonetheless. Charlotte's chattering continued well after the pair had left the dining hall, and Gabriel resisted the urge to groan as it persisted into the depths of the manor. But, much to his delight, Thalia's laughter quickly filled the space between them.

"And what, pray tell, is so humorous?" he asked.

Thalia quickly took a sip of water, working to calm herself. "Your sister—she certainly isn't subtle with her attempts, is she?"

It took him a moment, but realization struck Gabriel there and then. Now the groan came willingly, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. "And here I thought she was simply being an eager hostess."

Again, Thalia chuckled lightly. "Poor Robin; I'll have to make sure they don't clear

his plate.”

“I apologize if she?—”

“No, really. He’ll manage just fine, I’m sure. Besides, I think it’s very sweet, how eagerly she cares for your future happiness.” Thalia’s attention returned to her plate, fork prodding against her own slice of salmon. An uneasy silence hung between them, and for a moment, Gabriel wondered if he should simply bring up their kiss.

He had thoroughly enjoyed the spontaneity of it all, not daring to believe Thalia would have ever gone along with him. There was something utterly attractive about someone so willingly to go with the motions and he hardly wanted to scare her off by bringing up the topic too soon.

Instead, he turned his attention to his own plate of fish, digging free a forkful of mushrooms before taking a bite.

“So...” Thalia glanced up, seemingly desperate for conversation as well. “Did this fish come from a farm, your Grace?”

It stung Gabriel to hear her still refer to him so properly, or to bring up conversation one might with a passing stranger. Charlotte had so easily convinced Thalia to be casual around her; he would have to ask his sister for her secrets.

He swallowed hard, doing his best to keep his tone neutral and as uninterested as Thalia seemed. “There’s a few lakes and rivers around the property I like to keep stocked with fish. It’s very likely that this was freshly caught today.”

“Really?”

Gabriel’s attention perked; for a topic so mundane, Thalia suddenly sounded

intrigued. “Is that so unusual, Miss Sutton?”

Thalia shook her head. “I would have never thought to do that back at Oslay Hall. That would explain the taste—and the herbs? They don’t look like the typical arrangement one might find in a kitchen, and these mushrooms aren’t the common white ones I might use in stew.”

“That’s because they’re all wild,” Gabriel explained.

“All picked on the property as well?”

Gabriel nodded. “My sister may enjoy the organized look of a garden, but I find myself needing something more... untouched by mankind.” He set his fork down, reaching for his glass of wine as he tilted it Thalia’s way. “I sometimes find myself taking a satchel and foraging for what the forest has to offer.”

Thalia looked entirely enamored; it was as if the concept of living directly off the land had never occurred to her. “You mean to tell me you go out and pluck whatever you find in the forest to eat?”

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Oh, but her naivety was a delight to behold. “Certainly not. There is plenty in nature that would kill a person.” Gabriel took a sip of his wine, enjoying her attention thoroughly.

Perhaps his sister had the right idea after all; not that he would ever let her hear of it. “I have been taught what is safe and what isn’t, Miss Sutton, and I would strongly advise anyone against eating whatever they happen to come across in nature.”

Thalia offered a bashful smile in return, suddenly very interested in her plate. For a moment, Gabriel sincerely regretted how demeaning his tone might’ve sounded, the exact wording he had chosen that very well may have come off as overly patronizing. Then, he stopped himself, realizing how strange it felt to genuinely worry about how anyone, a woman especially, took his words.

Even more so, it was strange to feel relieved when, instead of being upset, Thalia only seemed further interested in the topic. She scooped a forkful of mushrooms and herbs from her plate, holding it aloft for Gabriel to see. “Then, you found these in the forest?”

“Very likely, yes.”

The sudden excitement in Thalia’s being was infectious; her eyes lit up like glimmering emeralds, and the tone of her voice tickled Gabriel in all the best ways.

“Oh, it must be such a useful skill, to feed oneself from nature! Why, imagine if the people of Whitechapel all knew how to find food this way, or if I could teach classes to children in need of such skills? There would be no need for them to steal to

survive, and perhaps they could use the skills to find work.” Thalia’s voice caught, and she quickly looked away.

“Why did you stop?” Gabriel asked.

Thalia’s gaze remained downcast, her splinted wrist pressed against her chest. “N-no... it’s nothing. Forgive me, your Grace—I hadn’t meant to go on as I did.”

A spark of rage began to billow in Gabriel’s chest, and he wanted nothing more than to take it out on that bastard, Giles Tilbury. Instead, he channeled it into an approachable warmth, rising from his chair and crossing to meet Thalia.

Her shoulders visibly stiffened, then somewhat relaxed as he knelt to try and meet her gaze. And, when that failed to pull her attention, Gabriel’s hand gently settled beneath her chin, tilting it just enough for their eyes to meet. “Do not ever feel the need to hide yourself from me, Miss Sutton.”

Her eyes briefly grew misty, and she blinked furiously.

“After all,” Gabriel added with a slight smirk. “I’ve already captured you once, little rabbit. One could say your ability to hide is subpar, at best.”

Thalia’s brow furrowed, and she managed a weak laugh. “Perhaps so, but at least I do not tell fibs, Your Grace. You have yet to properly catch me—you ran out of time, if memory serves.”

God above, but he was thoroughly enjoying the tongue on his prey.

Gingerly, Thalia pulled away and rose from her chair, and the way she stood over him sent pleasurable shivers down Gabriel’s spine. “I... think I’d like to retire to my room, if that’s all right.”

Before Gabriel could be too disappointed with the end of their conversation, she shyly offered her hand. “Could you... perhaps... escort me, Your Grace?” Hesitancy quickly filled her expression, and Gabriel moved to quell it as quickly as possible. He immediately grasped her hand and placed a kiss on her knuckle, looping his arm around her and pulling her to his side.

“I would be delighted to do so, Miss Sutton.”

CHAPTER 10

The sun shone brightly through her curtains as Thalia woke the next morning, completely stretched out across her massive mattress. Her first night at Stonewell had been... less than peaceful, as she'd found herself keenly alert to every small sound within the walls.

Memories of the day before—of the duke within her room, how gently he'd escorted her to bed with little more than a nod goodnight—stirred warmly in her stomach, and it took quite a bit to shake the flush from her cheeks.

“He was simply being polite,” Thalia reminded herself. “Just polite.”

Yes. Very polite, the way his lips felt against hers when they'd—!

She rose quickly, pulling at the hem of her comforter with another short huff of breath. Today; Thalia needed to focus on what today would bring. She glanced about her guest room, not surprised at all to see Robin slumped against one of the plush reading chairs, arms folded over his chest as he silently dozed.

“Oh, Robin...” Thalia smiled gently, slipping quietly from bed as she dragged her blanket towards her brother, covering him with a tender kiss on his cheek.

Drawing a borrowed bedjacket from the closet, Thalia slipped quietly out of her door and strolled through the halls, a vague recollection of the route to the dining room. She spotted a maid dusting what looked to be one of Charlotte's vases, and she approached for greeting and directions.

"Oh, Miss Sutton!" The maid curtsied smartly, feather duster still grasped in her hand. "Good morning to you; My Lady thought it best to let you sleep in as much as you'd like, and wished to inform you that she and the duke are attending a social ceremony in town for a newly-built park."

Thalia glanced at a large, grandfather's clock at the end of the hall, holding back a startled gasp at the time. Ten in the morning—she hardly remembered a time she'd slept in so late.

"The kitchen has prepared a small picnic for you and your brother," the maid continued. "And you have been invited to bring said meal to enjoy the park alongside the duke and lady of our manor." She offered another curtsy, adding after-the-fact, "Of course, Lady Charlotte made it known that you may stay here at Stonewell, should you not wish to entertain the public today."

Thalia's heart softened at such consideration. "Please let the kitchen know I'm grateful for their work, and would be happy to take the picnic into the park."

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“Very well, Miss Sutton. Her Ladyship also wanted me to tell you that her wardrobe is your wardrobe; if you are in need of anything, please do not hesitate to ask.”

Thalia tried her best not to grimace—another very kind offer, though Charlotte’s petite and willowy frame was hardly comparable to her own...fuller attributes. “Perhaps if she has a sunhat I could use? Nothing too grand, if you please.”

The maid gave a curt nod and hurried to accomplish her task, leaving Thalia to her own thoughts. Her most appropriate dress for a day within society was the one Giles had purchased, and even thinking about touching the fabric caused a painful twinge in her wrist. “I would sooner wear a flour sack,” she grumbled, pulling at the hem of her bedjacket before returning back into her room.

Robin was sitting up as she entered, arms outstretched and yawning wide. He ran a hand through his hair and blinked groggily, then slid back into the chair, the blanket pulled up towards his chin. “Good God, that was the best night of sleep I’ve had in years.”

Thalia made a slight face as she opened her closet, shuffling a handful of simple dresses back and forth in the hopes that one would become fancier than it currently was.

“You woke up at least three times—the third you sat up with me and read over my shoulder.” She grasped for a burgundy with bubble sleeves, patterned in faded stripes, and hemmed with a frill of lace. Then, she considered hanging it back in its place.

“Infinitely better than sleeping in Whitechapel,” her brother argued. “In that I actually

fell asleep, short though it may have been.” He watched his sister quietly fuss about her wardrobe for a moment more, gesturing towards the dresses with a slight tilt of the head. “I always thought you looked nice in green—why not wear that one today?”

Her eyes followed his hand, and she immediately bristled at the sight of Giles’ “gift” to her. Still, it really was the only proper dress she owned—the one for Orion’s Hunt had long-since been returned to its rightful owner—and Thalia mentally prepared herself to dawn the olive-hued dress once more.

“The Hardings have invited us to promenade about the new greenery park with them. Will you be joining me?”

Expectedly, Robin wrinkled his nose at the prospect. “I think I’ve been lucky enough to have set foot into Stonewell. Wouldn’t want to push my luck—besides, I should really let the others know I’m all right.”

Thalia smiled softly, still in her nightgown as she drew close to her brother. “All right... but be careful, won’t you?”

He stood from his chair, offering a tender embrace to his clearly-concerned sister. “I always am, Thalia. I always am.”

* * *

If there was any benefit to her age, Thalia would immediately note that the Season no longer held any sway in her mind. Once upon a time, she might have been among the many outdoor garden celebrators, trying to work her way around the guest list and socialize with as many influential individuals within the Ton as possible.

Now, she simply enjoyed the sights of spring through her carriage window, appreciating the decorated spaces rented out for this Season’s young ladies. They

were all lovely affairs, each more grand in appearance than its predecessor. Gentlemen in fine suits, ladies wearing beautiful pastel gowns and highly decorated bonnets; a pretty picture to admire, but Thalia was more than happy to remain on the sideline.

The Stonewell carriage soon came to a pause, parked just outside a massive acre of perfectly manicured greenery. Budding catkins dangled from large, English oaks, their lines perfect against the brickwork pathway where couples and friends alike had already begun their long walks.

A few gingham blankets had been set along the grass for fellow picnickers, with a few more influential hands having dragged entire tea tables and stands of desserts out to enjoy beneath the springtime sun. As Thalia stepped down from the stairs, she began to search for signs of the Hardings, already beginning to pick at the thumb of her opera glove.

“They did say this was the park, correct?”

“Yes, ma’am,” an older maid affirmed from her side.

Thalia nodded nervously to her chaperone, still glancing around for some familiar face.

“Miss Thalia Sutton! Is that you standing there at the park gates?”

Thalia’s blood froze, and she stood stiffly in place. The voice was familiarly bright and cheerful, like a flock of twittering birds hoping to swoop down and steal one’s food straight out from one’s hand. She coaxed as much warmth as she could to her face for a smile, her gaze settling on the small group of women at a tea table.

Their obvious leader daintily waved a gloved hand for attention, petunias woven into

her bonnet which practically gave her an extra foot in height.

“Miss Ann Fitzwilliam; so good to see you after all this time.”

Ann giggled rather childishly for a woman her age, her hand remaining upright in the air. Thalia squinted, the sunlight catching what looked to be a band around her left ring finger.

“Oh, it’s Mrs. Harrington now, Thalia dear.”

“No, no, it’s Lady Worsely, now,” one of the women corrected her.

“Ah, so it is—forgive me, but the title of marchioness is one I’m still getting used to.” Lady Worsley sat daintily, sweeping the delicate beading of her dress aside so as to show it off to all who passed her by. “Oh, but I don’t mean to bring up sore memories, Miss Sutton. You must still be getting used to... well, you know. No title at all.”

Thalia gritted her teeth and continued to grin, making her way through the gate in order to greet the women properly. It would do them no good to continue shouting across the way; already, onlookers were beginning to stare.

“I had long since made peace with that, Lady Worsley. The title was never mine to have, and thus, I never had grown used to its presence.” Some of the women visibly recoiled as she approached their table, one going as far as to flick open her fan and avoid Thalia’s gaze.

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“Yes, but still,” Lady Worsley insisted. “What a terrible thing to have happen to a bright, up-and-coming socialite like yourself. I do miss you terribly at my gatherings, but as you said, the pressures of a marchioness’ title are simply beyond your knowledge.”

She wanted to leave, turn immediately on her heel and storm back to the carriage. It would be horrifically embarrassing, yes—to give Lady Worsley the petty win she was trying to wring out of her—but Thalia had already gone through the upheaval of her social reputation.

If she could, she’d avoid reliving the experience. Unfortunately, the new marchioness seemed hardly ready to let her go that easily, and as such, Thalia was trapped.

“Certainly, Lady Worsley. I’m afraid I would have little time to accept any invitation you would have sent, regardless.”

“Oh, of course! I’m sure Whitechapel has kept you quite...” Lady Worsley pursed her lips, clearly holding for dramatic effect. “Busy, as of late.”

A few conspiratorial whispers flooded the table as more ladies produced their fans. Not that it entirely hid their voices from Thalia; they hadn’t even the decency to completely cover their lips.

“But a woman has to do all she can in this world, yes?” Now it was the marchioness’ turn to produce a fan, and she wielded it with a deft hand, gently fanning the tightly-wrung curls against her perfectly porcelain face.

“We hardly judge you, Miss Sutton—I find it quite inspiring how willingly one may throw away their ego to keep themselves afloat. And with you approaching the age of spinsterhood—why, it’s better for those without prospects to learn to care for themselves.”

“I wholeheartedly agree, Lady Worsley.”

Thalia had never watched so many pretty faces grow pallid so quickly. She felt an arm loop through her own, and a glance upward revealed the face of the Duke of Stonewell, having seemingly appeared from the very air behind her.

He was positively frigid to look at, expression stone-cold as his jaw remained set in a perpetual, disapproving scowl. The only note of color on him revealed itself as a soft-pink pocket square and tie, matching his sister’s dress exactly.

His sister’s—Thalia glanced to her opposite side, finding Charlotte hanging on her arm as well. Her blushing-rose dress flared out at the side, as if she’d just hurried a great length to meet her, and while her face was far more inviting, her tone left plenty of room for one’s imagination.

“Oh, Lady Worsley! I didn’t think I’d see you and your lady friends today—that spot of sickness has simmered down at the estate, then?”

Every woman at the table swiveled to the marchioness, her mouth slightly agape. She snapped her fan shut, scrambling to recover with a grimace of a smile. “It... it has, Your Ladyship. Thank you again for... your concern.”

“Gracious, but of course! I would hate for anyone here to catch their death.” Her emphasis on ‘death’ sent a shiver up Thalia’s spine; Charlotte truly was a Harding, through and through. Just as terrifying as her brother, perhaps even more so, what with how effortlessly she slipped between social and personal roles.

Of course, the absolute killer look on the duke's face wasn't preferable, either. The duke held fast to Thalia's arm, yet still made sure to gently grasp around the splint hidden beneath her opera glove.

"Well, ladies, I apologize for interrupting your little get-together." Charlotte leaned her head against Thalia's shoulder, sighing as loudly as polite society would allow. "We've got our own soiree to get back to, so if you'll excuse us?—"

"—you're welcome to join us, Your Ladyship!" Lady Worsley quickly shooed at a few ladies with her fan, trying desperately to make room at her table. "I—I would hate for you to walk all the way back to your spot without offering some form of refreshment. Please—if only for a moment! I would be a poor hostess if I didn't at least try."

Her voice caught in her throat, and she visibly swallowed as the duke's face remained unchanged. Without a word, he turned and began to walk away, Thalia's arm still entwined in his while Charlotte offered an apologetic grin. She soon skipped after the pair, and as Thalia glanced over her shoulder, she watched the whole of Lady Worsley's table seethe quietly at their supposed hostess.

"Wasn't that fun?" Charlotte asked, and Thalia thought she saw the duke suppress a smile.

Then again, she couldn't be sure. The next minute, he was a man made of stone. And she was a woman... well, intrigued.

CHAPTER 11

Charlotte continued to laugh loudly once the trio were well out of earshot, having returned to their own personal spot just past the brush line.

She'd long since kicked off her shoes and dipped her legs ankle-deep in the gentle stream that wound past them, giving their grove a delightful ambiance alongside springtime's songbirds.

And, though she greatly appreciated her hostess' help, Thalia remained at her spot beneath a large, shady oak, helping to unpack the picnic basket across the blanket spread out long before her arrival.

"Oh, but did you see her face, Thalia?" Charlotte grinned, giving the stream a kick as water sprayed across the air. "Like an old lemon tart molding away in the back of the kitchen—and she's such a busybody, minding your personal business as if it were her own!"

"You certainly aired her personal business for all to hear," the duke commented lightly, having found interest in a bed of wild clover that he'd plucked and begun knotting together on his lap. Thalia found herself occasionally distracted by his work, uncertain if she'd ever see such a wildly incompatible picture again in her lifetime.

"She started it," Charlotte retorted. "And Father always said if you're going to start a fight, you best be ready to..." Her voice trailed off, suddenly very interested in the stream's reflection as she twirled a loose curl of hair nervously around her index finger.

Thalia dared a glance back at the duke, whose face hardly seemed any different than usual; stone-cold, unreadable, carefully neutral so as to not betray his thoughts. But something clearly had spooked Charlotte, which rightly terrified Thalia herself.

As such, she decided to change the subject as best she could, lifting a plate of salmagundi and trying very hard to keep her voice even. "I'd be rather upset if we didn't enjoy this meal your kitchen staff made for us; let's eat, shall we?"

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Charlotte glanced over her shoulder, slipping her legs out from the water before sheepishly making her way towards the blanket.

* * *

It wasn't her fault. It wasn't her fault, and Gabriel knew very well he shouldn't be so cross about it. And as he watched his dear sister nibble nervously—loudly—on the end of a sliced pickle, he was aware that she could feel the anger roiling off his body.

Thalia could too, though the exact reason why was probably lost to her. Still, both women kept their voices soft, their conversation vague and polite, all while giving him a wide, social berth.

He decided to take advantage of the space to cool his head, setting the start of a flower crown aside before reaching towards a pitcher of lemonade. The day really was too lovely to let sour so easily, and the grove was just as beautiful as the day he found it.

Whether the other socialites knew well to steer clear due to his personal interest, or couldn't stand the thought of 'roughing it' in the wilderness long enough to reach this spot, hardly mattered to him.

Eventually, he and Charlotte would have to emerge from the woods and socialize, but at least for now, they could let their guards down. For now, time could pass by him without being tracked so carefully.

As he sipped his drink (and inwardly made a face—someone in the kitchen really

needed to learn how to temper their sugar use), Gabriel found his gaze lingering on Thalia. She looked as lovely as always, the olive hues of her dress a perfect complement to the brilliance of her eyes.

Of particular interest was her hair, done up in a neat bun without a curl left out of place. He noted how it wasn't simply black, but a myriad of rich, brown shades when exposed to beams of sunlight. It was full, lively; like the fur of a black cat sunbathing at noon. More than anything, he wanted to see it undone and freely flowing against her body.

"Oh..." Charlotte made a slight face, setting a slice of buttered bread back onto her plate. "There are no ramps."

Gabriel rose a slight brow, watching as Thalia gave a bemused smile. "Ramps, Charlotte?"

His sister nodded enthusiastically. "Wild onions—gracious, have you never tried them with butter before, Thalia? Gabriel makes them sometimes when the mood strikes him." She turned towards him, eyes wide and pleading.

"Charlotte, I can't simply make ramps appear because you desire them," Gabriel said.

"I know that!" Charlotte huffed. "But you've told me before that they grow around here—can't you go and find some?"

He chuckled lightly at her sheer audacity; it was only made more humorous at Thalia's blanching face. Setting his cup aside, Gabriel rose from the ground and brushed off his trousers, offering a hand forward.

"Then you have to come and get them with me."

Just as quickly as she offered, Charlotte quickly declined. “Absolutely not! You always make fun of me when we go foraging.”

“You mistook a species of destroying angel for a button mushroom,” Gabriel deadpanned. “I hardly consider keeping us alive, ‘making fun of you’.”

Charlotte made a face, leaning conspiratorially towards Thalia before whispering loudly, “Don’t listen to him, he’s lying through his teeth. He’ll tease you, too, if given the chance.”

Gabriel made a similar, if not somewhat more reserved, face back at his sister. Immediately, though, his mood brightened inwardly as Thalia spoke next.

“Well, if His Grace doesn’t mind the company, I’d love to see what foraging is like for myself.” She smiled shyly, her hand absentmindedly covering her splinted wrist. “It sounded very... interesting, when we discussed it last night.”

Charlotte’s eyes went wide, her eyes traveling between the two before she suddenly stood. “That’s actually excellent timing! I promised Louise I would visit her picnic grounds at some point, so you two go on ahead. Just meet us over there when you’re finished, and make sure to bring the ramps!” She quickly hopped to her feet and began to dart away.

“Shoes, Charlotte,” Gabriel sighed lightly.

His sister giggled nervously, returning to the blanket and quickly slipping her flats back on. “Oh—and I’m taking this as well,” she added, snagging the half-finished flower crown. “It’s atrocious work and I need to rescue it from your fat, uncoordinated fingers.”

With a slight wave, Gabriel watched as his sweet sister bounded off through the

brush, every bit the wild animal he was inwardly. Her poor maid hurried to keep pace, hardly wanting to be chided for leaving the young lady without a chaperone.

His attention then shifted to Thalia, whose own maid sat across the blanket, unfazed by Charlotte's antics. Thalia, meanwhile, looked completely in shock.

"Believe me, I tried to tame that side of her for years." He offered his hand, which Thalia graciously took. "She swore if I ever made an honest attempt to change who she was, she'd never speak to me again."

"Did she really?"

Brief memories flooded Gabriel's mind as his ears began to ring in recollection—of shouting voices and slamming doors, of harsh words and hot tears that seemingly fell in endless waves down his sister's youthful face. "I... wasn't willing to test her and find out." Something unspoken passed between them; he could feel it in the pit of his soul.

Thalia's eyes had softened considerably, a slight overcast to what was usually bright and luminescent. She tried her best to maintain her smile, but the corners of her lips seemed strained, as if she tried to force her own memories away. In that moment, he spoke not to his shy little rabbit, but another eldest sibling who knew exactly—entirely—what he'd been through.

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“Are... ramps often mistaken for anything poisonous?” Thalia asked softly.

Gabriel allowed the smallest hint of a smile—a genuine one—to slip across his lips. He gave her hand a soft squeeze before helping her to her feet, leading towards an old footpath to head deeper into the brush, as the old maid followed them silently a few steps behind.

Making sure they were not overheard, he leaned in and whispered in Thalia’s ear, “There’s only one way to find out, my Lady. Are you willing to take the risk?”

* * *

This. This had been her absolute worst idea, without any doubt in her mind. Thalia knew for certain she was in no danger; the duke had proved himself a gentleman time and time again, disregarding his outwardly frigid demeanor.

And she was certain, as they continued down the footpath, that their distance from the park grounds wouldn’t suddenly cause him to discard the wool from his wolfish exterior. Regardless what others might have spoken about him, Thalia knew in her heart that she was perfectly safe.

But gracious, it was so horrifically cold between the pair of them. The duke didn’t seem the type to willingly engage in small talk, and Thalia couldn’t think of any topic that didn’t involve his family. His reaction after Charlotte mentioned their father still weighed heavily on her mind, and their brief discussion of his sister’s teenage years conjured images of dramatic fights and tearful apologies.

All were things she so desperately wanted more information about, but simply could not inquire further. Whatever relationship she had managed to build with the duke was fragile at best, and she did not wish to destroy it all with ill-timed curiosity.

Instead, Thalia did her best to simply enjoy what nature had to offer. In truth, she found herself utterly captivated at how differently the woods presented themselves.

She had long-since grown used to neatly-trimmed bushes and rows of evenly-spaced flowers, whose color palette had been carefully considered by the landscapers well-before the seeds had been planted. Out here, everything seemed to breathe deeply, free of societal constraints that strove for an impossible perfection. Flora grasped in every which direction, while the fauna called out loudly, without rhyme or reason.

“Organized chaos,” the duke suddenly stated.

Thalia blinked, glancing upward as their gazes met. She managed to hold it this time, face turning warm beneath a stray ray of sunlight through the trees.

“There’s still an order out here, even among what we consider untamed wilderness.” The duke gently led Thalia forward, the pair standing just ahead of the stream. Dark stones rippled beneath its crystal clear surface, while dozens of minnows shot past, hiding beneath the tangled roots and large rocks.

“Your Grace,” the older maid piped up from behind them. “I hardly think the lady is prepared to walk off the path.”

“I’ll ensure she’s safe,” the duke promised. “And you’ll still be within earshot if we need assistance.”

Thalia watched as the older maid’s brow furrowed; she clearly didn’t look convinced.

“You’ve known me since I was young,” the duke began.

“And as such, my concern is well-founded,” the older maid finished.

He chuckled—had Thalia ever heard him properly chuckle like that?—and offered a wave of his hand. “I promise to return her in one piece.”

Thalia’s grip tightened around his arm, and she allowed herself to be led farther off the path. The pair followed the small stream until it led into a massive pond, filled to the brim with the sound of croaking frogs and humming insects. Thalia watched as a blue-tinged stork waded the deeper parts, eyeing the waters before piercing the surface, a frog grasped in its beak. She gasped, grasp tightening further around the duke; once more, she heard him chuckle.

“The water churns so the aquatic life can flourish,” he said. “Which draws the birds to eat what isn’t fast enough to flee. A perfect thread to follow, one that easily snaps if even one part is out of balance.”

“Organized chaos,” Thalia repeated.

The duke nodded, and the pair continued well past the pond. Tree limbs began to bend and twist outward, the scruff of bushes and grass dispersing as the way opened up more and more. Thalia blinked furiously as they reached the mouth of the forest, not used to the sudden shift in sunlight.

Then, as she lowered her hands, she inhaled sharply at the sight, immediately overtaken by the rich, floral scent of hundreds—maybe thousands—of wildflowers blooming in a rolling, open field. Tulips, daffodils, bluebells; there was such a wide assortment that Thalia couldn’t rightly keep track of it all, appearing as a myriad of colors amongst freshly-sprung prairie grass.

She felt the duke's hand squeeze hers, and she looked to him once more, surprised to find a slight, if not clearly satisfied smile, on his face. "I thought you might like it. Exactly the place a little rabbit might call home."

"And the place a mighty wolf might hunt?" Thalia was delighted to see his smile persist, allowing him to pull her down the incline and into the flowers proper. She couldn't resist picking a few along the way, and when the duke finally released her hand, she had a colorful bouquet in the making.

"Such lovely flowers, Little Red," the duke teased. "Awfully dangerous, though, letting your guard down out here in the open."

Thalia raised her brow, presenting the bouquet with an elaborate flourish. "I hardly have anything to fear out here."

"Is that so?"

Thalia's face flushed as Mr. Harding inched closer, a smirk drawn across his face in playful fashion. "The wolf of fairytales is far more interested in the grandmother, if you recall. Little Red is quite safe until then."

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“Ah, but you’re forgetting something rather important.” Gently, the duke lifted the bouquet from her hands, gasping it with his own as he pulled close to her ear. Then, in a delicate whisper that ran across her skin, he said; “I’m no imaginary wolf, and my tastes are far more refined.”

Nervous laughter quickly fluttered from Thalia’s throat as she dropped to the ground, feigning interest in a clump of grass. “S-So the ramps! Um—they’re here somewhere, yes?”

Mr. Harding nodded, getting down on one knee as he pushed some of the taller grass aside. If he was disappointed in her unwillingness to continue their game, he hardly showed it on his face. “It’s easy to miss if you only look for it.”

“I’m... not entirely sure what other way there is to find something other than looking,” Thalia quipped. She wasn’t entirely sure if she’d taken the banter too far, as the duke’s shoulders seemed to stiffen slightly. Best not to press her luck. “How does one find ramps, if not by sight?” she asked.

The duke held out his hand. Thalia took it without hesitation, allowing herself to be brought down to a kneel beside him. She could feel the damp of the dirt begin to stain her dress, but it was likely to be an improvement. At least she’d have a reason to throw it out. A happy occasion indeed.

“You’ve smelled raw onion before, yes?”

Thalia nodded, leaning closer to the ground as to copy the duke exactly.

“Imagine that smell, but far more pungent.” The duke inhaled deeply, his eyes closed. “Even among these flowers, you’ll be hard pressed to miss it.”

Thalia did so, breathing deeply and trying to filter out the smells that followed. It was all so very floral, so very fresh—until suddenly, it wasn’t. She wrinkled her nose slightly, turning her head to follow the scent.

“Oh! Is this it, over here?” Her gloved hand reached to grasp at stalks of bright green, only to find the duke’s hand instead. Immediately, a hot flash ran across her skin, and she turned to face him for what felt like the dozenth time that day.

And then, quite suddenly, she found his face drawing closer to hers. And then, quite suddenly... she wanted nothing more than to pull forward into a kiss.

“You have a stray petal in your hair, Miss Sutton.”

Thalia blinked, acutely aware of the duke actively pulling away the offending petal pinched between his fingers. She was certain it was the reddest she’d ever been in her life, and she hastily looked down at the ground, still gripping the stalks of grass in between her hands.

“Master Harding? Miss Sutton?” The maid’s voice cut through the air as Thalia exhaled, not realizing she’d been holding her breath. “Are you two quite alright?”

“Yes; we’ll be heading your way shortly.” Mr. Harding rose to his feet, offering a hand to Thalia as she weakly took it. “And, by the way,” His hand found hers, still gripping the grass as he helped pull the plant free. “These are indeed ramps. Excellent catch.”

“Y-Yes,” Thalia replied breathlessly. Excellent, indeed.

CHAPTER 12

He'd never wanted anything as badly as he wanted Thalia Sutton in that moment. Gracious, but this woman; someone who was both delicate and robust, demure in her speech yet so quick with a witty retort.

His appetite was ravenous, demanding to devour her here, in this field, with the wildflowers and the bright, springtime sky as their only witnesses. And he was certain she had felt the same, if only for a moment. But he had quickly snuffed whatever flame had begun to build between them, and the pair walked back to the park grounds without another word spoken.

Thalia was quick to rejoin Charlotte and the other ladies, and he could hear her excitedly share news of the flower field. His sister, expectedly, took the bait and chatted about how romantic a spot that was, how special and secret it was; how clearly, her brother truly cared for Thalia in every conceivable way. Every way, of course, aside from reciprocating any physical affection she tried to give him.

Grow up stronger than me, Gabriel.

He shook his head, rubbing his temple as his father's words echoed back like a cold specter.

Protect yourself, your sister—don't be so easily swayed by emotion.

"Gabriel, are you alright?"

He blinked, Christian suddenly by his side and wearing a slight look of concern. Gabriel sighed, lowering his hand to fish out the old pocket watch from his vest—people were sneaking up on him far more frequently than he'd like, as of late.

“Fine, Christian. Just lost in thought.” He concentrated on the sound of ticking machinery, counting the seconds between Thalia’s laughter.

Sometimes, it took ten before she let out a chuckle. Sometimes it was as short as three. But every time, it rang in his chest and pulled at his heart, urging him to join the small party. To stand beside her, settle a hand against her hip. To claim her as his own; his little rabbit, with a kick in her step and a bite to her teeth.

Don’t be so easily swayed by emotion.

“Thinking about all the ways you’ll end Lord Tilbury’s existence?”

Gabriel scowled, closing the watch with a loud snap before glancing Christian’s way.

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“Louise told me a little about your... guest,” Christian began carefully. “Thalia Sutton, isn’t it? Cheated out of her life by her wormy little cousin?”

“Awfully interested in the affairs of others, aren’t we?” Gabriel asked, his brow slightly raised.

“Interested in club affairs, you mean,” Christian corrected. “Lord Tilbury has made moves to join the Devils, and is doing so rather loudly. Making an awful amount of grandiose claims about his wealth and standing—gets a bit under the skin, wouldn’t you say?”

Gabriel allowed himself a dark chuckle, arms crossing loosely as he continued to passively observe the women at the tea table. Again, Thalia’s laughter caressed his ears, with Charlotte and Louise looking just as pleased to be in her presence. “I have plans of extracting the splinter, as it were. Did you know Miss Sutton had a younger brother?”

“Does she, now?”

“Stepbrother, technically. Been hiding away in Whitechapel.”

Christian stroked his chin, clearly interested. “Must have picked up a lot of useful skills, living for as long as he has.”

“So he says.”

A smirk crossed Christian’s face, and he gave a slight wave to his wife, who replied

with a warm smile of her own. “Should I let my wife know that we’ll be late at the club? She’ll be awfully cross, you know.”

“I’m sure you’ll determine some way for me to pay you back,” Gabriel said. “For now, enjoy the picnic. The young man still needs to prove his skills to us, after all.” He cleared his throat loudly, gesturing a hand to Charlotte as she approached the pair. “And are the ramps to your approval, dear sister?”

She pursed her lips and huffed, playfully setting her hands against her hips. “Very funny, my loving brother. Just so you know, Christian, Louise very much enjoyed the concoction, and she’s positively pleased you thought to ask for it.”

“Did she, now?” Christian laughed, offering Charlotte a dramatic wink. “I suppose I owe you for getting me in my wife’s good graces, Lady Charlotte.”

“Then, perhaps I can convince you to let her come shopping with us?” Charlotte asked innocently.

Gabriel’s expression deadpanned slightly.

“I made my rounds to the nobles we discussed while you were on your walk with Thalia,” Charlotte pleaded. “Please, can I be released from this boring event? I woke up early to go with you, didn’t I? And,” she added, jabbing at her brother’s chest. “You owe Thalia a new dress.”

“How so, Sister?”

“It’s positively filthy, Gabriel!” Charlotte gawked. “I don’t know if you two rolled in the mud during your little rendezvous, but stains like that are going to be nearly impossible to get out.”

Gabriel highly doubted his sister's claim, given how many of her own gowns had been rescued from permanent grime marks. Still, the sun had begun to settle into an afternoon daze, and even the more important families had left to continue their day elsewhere.

"Promise me you'll find a gown for your Season's event, then."

Now it was Charlotte's turn to make a face.

"You swore we would host a proper one this year," Gabriel began.

"I know, I know." She huffed, rolling the proposition in her head for a moment before extending her hand forward. "Fine; I accept your terms, loving brother of mine."

"Don't I get a say in where my wife goes?" Christian asked.

Gabriel shook his sister's hand firmly, patting his friend awkwardly on the back as she skipped happily back to their table. "When Charlotte is involved, no one has any say in anything. Best to simply learn flexibility."

Christian sighed loudly, giving one more longing glance at his wife as Charlotte gave her invitation out. "Well... if they're going to be out and about, we could go for a few rounds down at the lot? I'm a bit rusty with my right hook, and you make for the perfect, slow-moving target."

Gabriel could feel the insult boil in his blood. "Since you are such a tidy man, Christian, I'll do you the favor of giving you a matching pair of black eyes."

* * *

"Oh, come on, Thalia, it'll be fun!"

Thalia did her best to give a grateful smile, but it came out somewhat strained. Meeting and mingling with Charlotte's friends had been one thing—many were in their early twenties like her, and reminded Thalia of her impending march to spinsterhood—but to go shopping in boutiques felt like too much.

Not that she didn't enjoy the experience; if anything, she thoroughly enjoyed observing the latest fashion and sampling the fabrics, ranging from impossibly soft velvets to a gossamer-like tulle. And Giles had failed to return any of her nicer dresses, likely because they were no longer in his possession. But going to the boutique usually implied one was a paying customer, and Thalia was the furthest from that.

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Still, she hated to disappoint Charlotte after all she'd done for her. So, against her true desire, Thalia gave her an affirmative nod.

“Oh, perfect!” Charlotte clapped excitedly, turning to Louise next. “You must let me know if you start to grow weary. I don't want to be known for bullying a pregnant duchess into early labor.”

Louise chuckled lightly, giving a meaningful look Thalia's way. “I'll keep you informed, Charlotte.”

This seemed to satisfy her, and Charlotte turned to the rest of her entourage expectedly.

“Oh, we would love to, Lady Charlotte, but?—”

“There's an engagement I have to attend immediately after this, though—”

“My father has a meeting arranged with a possible suitor—”

Their words struck numbly against Thalia's chest. She had been certain that, after living through her own social circle's rejection, the comments of strangers wouldn't have stung as much as they had.

Evidently, and with much disappointment in herself, her self-worth relied more heavily on the opinions of others than she thought. As she watched the ladies curtsy and wish Charlotte well, Louise's hand found hers and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“Ooh, they think they’re being so slick,” Charlotte huffed, sinking into her chair as she crossed her arms with a huff.

“Mind yourself, Charlotte,” Louise offered lightly.

“Oh, social etiquette be—be thrown away, Louise!” Charlotte suddenly sat upright, reaching across the table to grasp Thalia’s hands as well. “Well, don’t worry yourself with them, Thalia; they’re entirely missing out on a wonderful friendship. They’re absolutely uninvited to my seasonal event,” she added with a venomous side-eye.

“They aren’t,” Louise corrected. “But you are welcome to give them a frigid reception during said event.”

Another angry huff escaped Charlotte, and Thalia couldn’t help but chuckle lightly. “She’s right, Charlotte; it will do you no good to make unnecessary enemies.”

“What if I want to make enemies, though?” Charlotte grumbled under her breath. “Gabriel does it all the time, and he hardly seems bothered by it.”

Thalia felt her smile tightened, and she gave Charlotte’s hand a gentle pat. “How does the saying go again, Louise? Keep your friends close...?”

“Keep your enemies closer,” Louise finished. “Sun Tzu, I believe. And your brother would agree that keeping those you don’t trust close by means you’ll know immediately of their treachery. And,” she added with a slight smirk, “when the time is right to cut them off entirely.”

Charlotte scoffed, though her frown eventually broke into a slight grin of her own. “I can’t have two mothering figures ganging up on me like this. It’s hardly fair.”

Thalia’s face flushed at the compliment, and Louise laughed in reply. “Entirely fair,

I'm afraid. Now, let's call the carriage; I'd hate to wait on my feet any longer than I need to."

"Do you mind if I accompany you?"

The women turned their heads, surprised to find a startlingly petite young lady standing stiffly at the end of their table with her own maid as chaperone. Her flaxen hair had been tied partially up and adorned in springtime flowers, leaving waves of gold to tumble well past her shoulders and down the length of her back.

The floral pattern continued on her off-white dress, depicted in colorful beading that gave the impression of a garden in bloom. And her eyes—Thalia was certain she'd never seen such a warm shade of blue— flickered between the women nervously before eventually settling on something far more interesting on the ground.

"Madeline!" Charlotte immediately leapt to her feet, bounding around the table before embracing the floral figure in a tight embrace. "Oh, I knew you wouldn't be taken by the societal tides. Thalia, this is my dear friend, Madeline; we've been absolutely inseparable since we were young."

Thalia offered a polite nod of her head, surprised as Madeline offered a deep curtsy in return. "I'm glad to make your acquaintance, your Ladyship."

"Oh, there's no need for that," Thalia insisted. "I'm no longer the daughter of a marquess in the eyes of society."

Madeline's head tilted, her wide eyes furrowed beneath her thick brows. "But, you are still a lady of society. And, no matter what, you deserve a level of respect."

Thalia fought to keep her mouth closed, watching as Charlotte let out an audible gasp. "Gracious, Madeline. I don't think I've heard you speak so much before to a stranger

in my life!”

Madeline nervously curled her hair behind her noticeably-flushed ears. “Sorry. I don’t mean to be so chatty.”

“Not at all!” Charlotte beamed, giving her friend another hug. “You are absolutely welcome to come with us, Madeline.”

“I certainly don’t object,” Louise smiled. “Your presence will only add to this lovely ambiance we’ve been fostering between the three of us.”

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Madeline nodded, making brief eye-contact with Thalia before once more glancing away. Something in her stirred with a sense of familiarity, and Thalia found herself rising to personally greet the young woman. “I would be honored if you were to accompany us, Madeline. To be seen beside someone as kind as yourself would please me greatly.”

Madeline looked ready to faint there and then. Instead, she nodded frantically and clung to Charlotte’s arm, as if she were a life preserver amidst the vast sea.

“Now that we have our little group put together,” Charlotte beamed. “I believe it’s time we left this place. Onward; to the boutiques!”

Boutiques. Thalia did her best to remain cheerful as she was led off toward town, though a small panic had begun to spiral inside her chest.

CHAPTER13

One of the major benefits to owning a gentlemen’s club was the allowance of certain... practices, not entirely acceptable by the standards of polite society. Orion’s Hunt was one such example, as its peculiar nature would likely have never found root without the Ton’s Orions.

It certainly wasn’t anything so crass that it warranted public outcry, but Gabriel could see the more delicate of constitutions not fully understanding why the Hunt drew such interest in the first place.

The same could be said for the club’s boxing outpost, located in a long-since

abandoned fishing warehouse and owned jointly by both Orions and Devils. It was an unusual purchase upon the surface, but members of both sides soon realized the benefit of having a well-maintained space to legally—and safely—express their club rivalries.

As such, when Gabriel stepped away from his own sparring match to grab a drink, he wasn't surprised at all to spot a number of Orions in the ring with Devil opponents. Sweat-soaked and red-faced, each side seemed to have their own style of fighting, perhaps inspired by the way their leaders handled themselves during a fight.

The Devils, of course, had Tristan Lovell to observe; a brute of a man who preferred to overwhelm his opponent with an all-out offense. This reflected the very nature of the Duke of Tolford and perfectly summarized the nature of the Devils themselves as fiery-spirited individuals unwilling to back down from a challenge.

And it was that hot-blooded nature that Gabriel observed from this Devil club member, his fists a blur as he forced the Orion's member toward the rope.

The Devil grinned, having already won the bout in his mind, and threw one more slug towards his opponent's face. Or, where his opponent's face should have been; the Orion seemingly pulled from an unseen reserve of stamina, darting around the jab as he rounded to his opponent's side.

As the Devil staggered forward from the weight of his own momentum, the Orion struck fast and hard, delivering a series of punches that quickly winded and dropped his opponent against the very ropes he seemed destined to become entangled in. Their makeshift referee called the match with a sharp whistle, and Gabriel inwardly beamed with pride as his Orion offered a hand to his defeated opponent.

Raw power was one thing, of course, but not what ultimately made a predator so dangerous. To plan, to conserve, to wait until the right moment to strike; this is what

the Ton's Orions represented, what Gabriel instilled in every member. And as he finished his drink and tossed the cup into the trash, he cracked his knuckles and returned to his own corner of the warehouse, where Christian eagerly awaited for their second round.

"You certainly took your time," Christian quipped.

Gabriel rolled his eyes, settling back into his sparring stance. He waited patiently, knowing full well his friend typically broke under the pressure and would strike first. Sure enough, Christian darted forward after a few moments passed, and their bout began once more.

It felt good to get lost in the act, feel his heart race and count the steps it took to dodge his friend. A two-step to the left, a sweeping duck followed by a shuffle—he was struck now and again, but that was more due to Christian's talent than his inability to dodge.

Suddenly Christian pulled away from their sparring circle, hands held up to pause their bout. Gabriel managed to pull his arm back before it struck against his friend's face, and as he followed Christian's gaze, it became obvious why he wanted to stop. Entering through the front warehouse was the devil himself, Lord Tristan Lovell, immediately pulling the attention of other club members with his presence.

But more important to Gabriel was the dandy of a man who followed behind him, whose outfit was hardly proper for such an active place. His hair looked too light to be real, and his eyes, regrettably, gave the duke a surprising shiver at the ice they held.

"Seems the little marquess has finally made his entrance," Christian mused, wiping the back of his neck with his towel.

Gabriel watched the pair begin to tour around the warehouse, the duke too far away to fully pick up on his conversation with the newest Devil recruit. But observation alone was all he needed to know what kind of man Giles Tilbury was.

The pronounced swagger in his step, the dramatic puff of his chest, how obviously unfitted his suit was in particular areas; all signs of a man whose wallet wasn't close to matching his ego. Every fiber of Gabriel's being wanted to approach the man, here and now, and show him what happened to those who tried to hunt his prey. But he kept himself grounded, reminded himself how important the first move was even outside of a sparring match.

His patience eventually paid off, as soon, Tristan's eyes met with Gabriel's, a glimmer of interest immediately crossing his face. "Your Graces—what excellent timing on your parts!"

The Duke of Tolford quickly crossed the warehouse, Giles stepping quickly to keep pace. "Have you met the newest Devil's recruit? Seems our ranks continue to grow by the day—not that I can blame the young men of London for having such good taste." He sighed lightly, as if truly overburdened by his good fortune.

"I believe industry has a phrase for just this occasion," Christian chuckled lightly, throwing his towel to the side as he approached the group for greetings. "'Quality before quantity', wasn't it, Gabriel?"

"Indeed." Gabriel's reply was curt, cutting; the less he had to say on the matter, the better it was for Giles' long-term health.

The little marquess looked red in the face, though Tristan simply laughed at the response. "There's that spirit rivalry I've come to love between our clubs. It's all in good fun, Mr. Tilbury—you'll have to gain quite the thick skin if you decide to stay with us."

Immediately, Giles' expression shifted, a holier-than-thou smirk crossing his face. "Oh, yes, of course. A little ribbing from the competition will hardly chase me away, Your Grace."

"Good to hear, Lord Oslay!"

Gabriel's frown persisted, noting a curious tone in Tristan's voice. It was barely perceptible, though it spoke volumes as the smaller tics of his face, the posture of his body, were observed and compared beside it.

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As Christian continued to hold polite conversation, Gabriel began to get a sense of the Devil leader's true feelings towards Giles, and much to his surprise, it wasn't entirely different from his own opinion.

Giles seemed similarly interested in quiet observation, with Gabriel catching his eye every few moments or so. Of course, the little marquess would quickly find something else to occupy his sight, but it was obvious he knew exactly who Gabriel was—and what he was doing for his cousin.

Whether he would do anything about that, or simply stare at the Duke of Stonewell in hopes of intimidation, Gabriel couldn't say. Just this time, for the sake of Thalia, he would break his rule and make first contact.

“And how do you find Oslay Halls, sir?” he asked during the conversation's lull. “It must be quite the change for you, having suddenly acquired so much responsibility?”

It clearly stung the little marquess to not be addressed by his new title, though he hardly was going to fight about it in the presence of three dukes. Instead, Giles managed a strained smile and a slight bow to his head.

“It is... a sudden change, but I'm more than willing to step up to the occasion.”

“Yes, so I've heard,” Christian commented lightly. “A shame you have no family to help you with the day-to-day. Whatever did happen to the old marquess' daughter? I would think she'd be an invaluable asset to have.”

Once more, Gabriel was reminded why he was such good friends with Christian. If he

had his way, Giles would already be on the ground, bloodied and unconscious. But there was an innate satisfaction to humiliating someone in such a dignified, and acceptable, manner. Christian might have had a terrible right hook, but his silver-tongued wit was unmatched.

“I—y-yes, well,” Giles visibly sweated, pulling at his cravat while glancing Tristan’s way. The leader of the Devils seemed obviously distracted, having slipped away and talked to another member about business clearly far more important than whatever the little marquess was going through. “It—w-we had differing opinions on management, unfortunately. She decided to leave in haste—a shame, really.”

Blood filled Gabriel’s mouth as he bit his tongue. Lying, deceitful snake.

“Oh, is that so?” Christian mused. “And she willingly brought herself to Whitechapel—that must have been quite the difference in opinion.” He turned to Gabriel, offering a good-natured grin. “You hear that, Gabriel? The young lady was entirely happy to stay where she was—your invitation to Stonewell may have been all for naught, I’m afraid.”

Gabriel immediately watched as Giles’ face blanched. “I-Invitation, you say?”

Christian metaphorically took a step back, nodding for his friend to continue. Gabriel happily jumped on the opportunity, drawing closer to Giles as he spoke. “She’s been a perfectly lovely guest; I hardly regret extending my invitation. And she’s become quite close to my dear sister—I fear they’ve become thicker than thieves in the last two days.”

“O-Oh?”

Gabriel inwardly sneered, taking entirely too much pleasure in how easily he leered over the now-trembling man. “Yes—I wonder what secrets they’ve discussed

between themselves? You know how ladies are—or maybe not.” He stood directly over Giles now, his scowl smoldering in dark disgust. “I suppose you don’t, do you... sir?”

A spark of rage flew Giles’ fist forward, and Gabriel caught it with ease. He slowly lowered the man’s hand, now fully trembling as his gaze bore through the marquess’.

“You should take those nice clothes off first before stepping into the ring,” Gabriel whispered. “Wouldn’t want to ruin such a... nice fitting outfit.”

He threw Giles’ fist back to his side, Tristan miraculously returning to the conversation. He gave Gabriel a slight glance and a smile, maintaining the polite facade the pair of club members upheld in public.

“Apologies for vanishing on you, Giles! Devil business and all that—you know how it is.” He clapped a hand against Giles’ back, nearly knocking the man over. “We’ve still got quite a bit to show off to the newest member, so I wish you gentlemen a good afternoon.”

“Oh, of course,” Christian beamed. “But, before you go, may I ask, is the newest Devil going to be participating in any of the up-and-coming club events? I heard a rumor that the Duke of Arkley was looking to host our competitive cards tournament this year.”

Tristan laughed a little too forcefully, his arm tightening a touch too much around Giles’ shoulder. “Well, we’ll see if this one manages to play all his dues in time. Save me a spot at your table, though—I’ve been looking to win that brooch off of you for years, Your Grace, and I feel this is finally my moment!”

With that, the pair of Devils started back towards the front of the warehouse, leaving Gabriel to seethe in still-bubbling anger. He immediately turned to a dangling

sandbag and gave it a proper one-two strike, popping the seam from impact as sand began trickling free to the ground.

“That’s the third one in need of replacement,” Christian said. “Though, I prefer it being broken over one of our club members.” He glanced Gabriel’s way, watching as his friend cracked his knuckles in clear frustration. “At least Tristan sees him as the obnoxious slug he is.”

“Not that it would save him otherwise,” Gabriel grumbled, reaching for his own towel as he wiped his face clean.

“I wonder if our newest little asset took advantage of the marquess’ absence...?” Christian shrugged, shaking his arms out as he settled into his own fighting stance. “Suppose you’ll find out later tonight; for now, let’s channel some of that rage, shall we? You hardly want to take it out on your lady friend back at the mansion, do you?”

Gabriel certainly didn’t. His anger was specially reserved for Giles, and Thalia deserved none of it. With that, he broke his rule once more and lunged after Christian, throwing himself into the breathless blur of boxing.

CHAPTER14

It had been quite some time since Thalia had properly been inside a modiste’s. Indeed, it had been some time since she’d had a moment to leave their home in Whitechapel at all, given how devious some individuals could be. Simply holding the deed to a place did not outright make it yours on those streets, and there was many a weekend Thalia spent ensuring their property remained unstolen.

But to walk the downtown marketplace, to simply allow herself the pleasure of window shopping and idle conversation when one found a particularly lovely gown; Thalia had forgotten how it felt to let her guard down. More than that, she had

forgotten how wonderful it felt to be among genuine friends.

“Ooh, let’s check this one, next!” Charlotte squealed, pointing to one of the smaller shops set just across the street from them. Thalia followed her gaze, observing a number of riding breeches and some equestrian gear hanging on display.

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“Charlotte Harding, you promised your brother you’d find a Season’s dress,” Louise reminded her.

“The day is still young,” Charlotte insisted. “Besides, I could use a new pair of riding boots.”

Thalia chuckled lightly, checking the time from a large clock’s tower. To call the day “young” was a touch of an over-exaggeration, as it had been a handful of hours since their shopping excursion had begun.

The sun had long since begun its descent, a few lamp posts being lit to guide whatever shoppers remained in the streets, and Thalia took note of how full the hands of the servants had become, how many trips each had to take back to each woman’s carriage.

“It’s... actually getting quite late, Charlotte,” Madeline’s gentle voice piped in. “We should try and limit our time to one more boutique.”

“A proper boutique,” Louise chided. “One specializing in ballgowns.”

Charlotte’s lips formed a pout as she looked to Thalia for aid. She could only chuckle in reply and offer a reassuring pat on the little Harding’s head. “You did promise your brother, my Lady. But, I’ll tell you what; if you visit this last boutique without too much fuss, I’ll happily accompany you tomorrow on whatever outing you desire.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened at the prospect. She held out her hand, eyes narrowed and expression quite serious. “Do you promise?”

Louise and Madeline gave a cautionary look, but Thalia shook her friend's hand eagerly. "I solemnly swear, Lady Charlotte."

Charlotte let out a squeal, glancing around the streets before pointing out a large, more ostentatious boutique. As she skipped ahead, Madeline offered a look of condolence as she hurried after her friend. "Gracious—you would think I agreed to walk into an early grave," Thalia said.

Louise smiled lightly, setting a hand against Thalia's shoulder. "You might as well have; giving Charlotte that kind of power is rather unwise."

Thalia's laughter built in her chest. "You make it sound like I cannot keep up with the young woman! I'm certainly not that old yet, Your Grace."

"Charlotte will certainly make you feel that way," Louise chuckled lightly. "I'm not sure where she finds so much energy in a day. Come on, then; we better catch up."

Arm in arm, Thalia followed beside Louise into the shop, enchanted by its springtime decor. The whole of the boutique smelled heavily of flowers and perfume, likely from the dozens of filled vases and the ladies of the Ton still shopping within. Rows of gowns hung delicately on display, a mixture of tulle skirts and sleeveless bodices to fully embrace the up-and-coming warm weather.

And, of course, many of the designs took inspiration from the flowers yet to come, with many having similar beading to Madeline's own gown. Thalia found herself particularly drawn to a beautiful lilac gown, its rectangular cut and flowing skirt paired nicely with the floral lacework across the bodice.

"Oh, that one's gorgeous!" Charlotte beamed, having seemingly appeared behind the older women out of thin air. Another Harding family trait, Thalia mused.

“Would you like to try this one on as well, my Lady?” the modiste asked, already holding a number of pastel gowns in her arms. The sight was something of a relief, as at least Charlotte was eagerly keeping her end of their bargain.

“Hmm...” Charlotte inspected the fabric closely, gently brushing the skirt against her fingers. “It’s not really a color I would often go for... but I bet it would look lovely on my friend, Thalia!”

Thalia blinked, immediately trying to think of any excuse not to agree to such a fitting. “Oh, Lady Charlotte, that’s very sweet, but—”

“It would bring out your eyes quite nicely,” Madeline added.

“I daresay it would,” Louise beamed.

Thalia shot her a somewhat sour look, looking back to Charlotte with a strained smile. “Charlotte, it really is a lovely dress. But, unfortunately, it’s just not within my budget to purchase it right now.”

Anything her brother made toshing went directly into their emergency funds, though more often than not, it had to be spent on the absolute essentials. Many times, she had to argue with Robin not to waste his money on dresses or accessories for her; it simply wasn’t wise spending.

“But, you wouldn’t have to buy it,” Charlotte insisted. “We still owe you a dress, remember?” She gestured to the dirt and grime smeared along the bottom of Thalia’s dress, her brow raised slightly.

“I’ll accept a dress of equal value,” Thalia said. “But this appears to be one of the boutique’s top pieces.” And not that she would ever say such a thing out loud, but based on the modiste’s cold reception towards her, Thalia doubted she would even be

allowed to leave with said dress. Not with the reputation she now carried on her shoulders.

“Oh, fine,” Charlotte eventually conceded, looping her arm around Thalia’s as she pulled her free from Louise. “Then, come with me and show me where my budget lies.”

“I’m going to take a sit for a moment,” Louise called after the pair. “Madeline, would you mind joining me?”

Madeline quickly nodded, accompanying the duchess on one of the plush chairs as Thalia was led towards the opposite side of the shop. Even now, she could feel the number of eyes against her growing, the quick turns of ladies’ backs and their faint whispering. Charlotte seemed utterly immune by the growing gossip, pausing at a rack of gowns decorated in fake florals.

“How about these, Thalia? We could probably find a dress fairly close to the one you have on.”

She hadn’t meant to wrinkle her nose. Thalia realized it a touch too late, however, and Charlotte’s curious expression made her blush. “It’s...not my favorite look.”

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“Really?” Charlotte gave her a once-over, clearly surprised. “But green is such a lovely color on you! And the briar roses are a nice touch; it makes you seem approachable, but dangerously so.” She giggled, catching a strand of Thalia’s hair. “A bit like a briar bush—pretty to look at, but lethal if you’re not careful.”

Thalia’s stomach swam, and she quickly grabbed for a rich blue dress decorated in bluebells. “Wh-what about something like this?”

Charlotte scoffed, pulling out a bedgown style dress hemmed in intricate lace and patterned with a light iris design. “I still think something purple suits you far better. Besides, bluebells hardly fit your personality—you are bold, and daring, and almost as wise as Louise is! Bluebells are far too... humble for your personality.”

Again, Thalia felt her skin growing clammy, and quickly pushed the dress away. “I... I don’t know, Charlotte.”

“Thalia, whatever is the matter?” Charlotte guided her friend towards a nearby settee, a note of concern tinging her voice. “You’re trembling like the last leaf in autumn.” She removed her gloved hand, gently pressing the back against Thalia’s forehead. “You don’t feel too terribly flushed, but you look awful. I’m sorry—was I too persistent?”

Thalia removed Charlotte’s hand from her forehead, grasping it gently before settling it into her lap. “You’ve been wonderful to me. I’m afraid it’s... my fault. It’s...” she swallowed nervously, realizing how ridiculous she was about to sound. “I’m afraid I’m simply out of practice, being out in public.” Her gaze flickered to a group of whispering women, and her stomach pitted when Charlotte’s gaze followed after

hers.

“Absolute children, the lot of them,” she hissed between her teeth. “Should I go tell them off?”

Thalia chuckled nervously, giving her new friend’s hand a squeeze. “I’d rather you didn’t. But, I appreciate you wanting to stand by me.” She sighed heavily, glancing at a nearby clock once more. “If it’s all right, I think I’ll make my way back to Stonewell. Maybe I am coming down with something...?”

“Oh, goodness, of course!” Charlotte stammered. “I’m sorry if I made you feel like a prisoner—let me call the carriage for you. I’ll ride home with Madeline, perhaps make a night out of it.”

Louise wasn’t kidding; Thalia did feel old in comparison. “Are you sure? I would hate to come off as ungrateful.”

Charlotte shook her head, squeezing Thalia’s hand this time. “Nonsense; you know yourself better than I do. Besides,” she added with a cheeky wink. “I think Gabriel will appreciate having a companion for dinner.”

“I’m sure he would,” Thalia chuckled lightly. She went to stand, but was surprised as Charlotte tightened her grasp, forcing her back to sit for a moment more.

“Thalia...” Charlotte sighed, clearly looking uncomfortable. “I—I can’t say I fully know what you’ve gone through, what with Oslay Hall and moving to Whitechapel. I’m afraid I’ve been rather blessed, in my lifetime.”

Her expression hardened, and her eyes rose to meet Thalia’s. “But, I want you to know that you deserve good things in your life, even if people say otherwise. And—and if things don’t end up working with my brother, you’ll always have my

friendship.”

Thalia blinked, tears pricking the corners of her eyes. “Charlotte... you’ve barely known me for a day.”

“And I can already tell you’re a lovely woman,” Charlotte insisted. “Someone I would very much like to help, in any way I can.”

Thalia sighed herself, offering a weak smile. “Then...I suppose I’ll accept that purple dress. The one with the iris design,” she added in a warning tone. “If I find out you purchased that beaded lilac one, I will be terribly cross with you. And you hardly want me cross when I join you tomorrow for your morning activities.”

Charlotte laughed, pulling Thalia in for a tight hug. “I certainly don’t, Thalia. You’ve got yourself a deal.”

CHAPTER15

Gabriel wasn’t surprised to find himself alone at Stonewell after his business with Christian finished. Knowing his sister, Charlotte would keep their guest out and about as long as possible, delaying the purchase of her Season event dress as well. He chuckled lightly, imagining poor Thalia being pulled by the arm between each shop.

His mind drifted back to her small collection of simple dresses, and he reminded himself to ensure she had proper attire for Charlotte’s up-and-coming ball. That was, unless Charlotte had already bought out an entire store’s worth of inventory for her guest.

He traveled through the manor’s first floor, coming across the head butler and requesting they visit the kitchen to inform them about dinner preparations. “On that note,” he added before the server could turn his back. “How did Mr. Sutton enjoy his

day alone at Stonewell? I assume you kept him out of trouble?”

“Absolutely, Your Grace,” the butler said. “He actually spent very little time within the manor’s walls.”

“Is that so?”

His butler nodded curtly. “He requested a small breakfast and a packed meal for the road, Your Grace. Spoke of visiting family today, if I recall.”

Gabriel repressed the urge to grin; then Robin had chosen today to ‘visit’ Oslay Hall. Whether he had spent his time staking out the grounds, or acted boldly and broken in already, Gabriel couldn’t rightly say. But, given how Giles had seemed mostly on an even keel at the warehouse, Robin certainly hadn’t been caught.

Or news of his capture hadn’t reached the ears of the owner just yet.

“If you hear word of Mr. Sutton’s return, request he meets me in my personal study. Have the kitchen send a small plate of dinner that way as well, if you please.”

“With haste, Your Grace.” With a curt bow, his butler made his way down the hall, leaving Gabriel to make his own way towards his study. Then, suddenly, his butler’s voice called out once more. “Oh, Your Grace? I forgot to mention Miss Sutton’s early return; she took her dinner to the dining hall and is likely still there.”

Immediately, Gabriel spun on his heels, his interest piqued. “How did she seem?”

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“She mentioned feeling under the weather, Your Grace,” his butler said. “And requested a light dinner of soup.”

Gabriel’s heart skipped a beat. “Have dinner sent to the dining hall instead; I’d like to check in on our guest.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

* * *

Sure enough, as Gabriel entered the dining hall, he immediately spotted Thalia near the front of the table. She sat in the same seat as the night before, delicately sipping a cup of tea with a small book in hand, half a bowl’s worth of soup and a slice of crusted bread seemingly abandoned before her.

Much to his surprise, she had changed out of her olive dress and into a nightgown, a robe tucked under her chin while her hair laid flowing well past her waist.

Gracious, but it really was as majestic as he hoped it would be, still damp and curled from the bath she must have taken upon arriving home. The faint scent of lavender filled his nose, intermingling with the light smell of smoke from the crackling fireplace nearby.

“A touch early to be preparing for sleep, don’t you think?” Gabriel asked.

Thalia gasped, quickly setting the book against the table as she rose to curtsy. “Y-Your Grace! I’m terribly sorry; I didn’t hear you come in.”

Gabriel allowed himself a soft chuckle, approaching Thalia's seat with a curious glance towards the book. "Poems of John Donne..." He leaned over her shoulder, giving her a sidelong glance. "Looks like my personal copy, if I'm not mistaken."

"One of the maids offered it to me," Thalia quickly explained. "I wasn't entirely sure where the library was, and she mentioned she knew where..." She shook her head, offering the book Gabriel's way. "Forgive her, won't you? If anything, it's my fault she felt the need to rummage in your personal collection."

"Are you enjoying it so far?"

Thalia paused, then nodded gently. "I haven't... quite reached The Flea just yet."

"Then you must hold onto it. Make it worth the maid's bold act."

Gabriel pressed the book against Thalia's chest, fully insistent on the matter. It was hard to ignore the firmness of her bosom, how a mere collection of pages were all that separated them, and... he quickly distracted himself with a new topic of conversation. "I heard you managed to free yourself from my sister's grasp? Quite a feat, if I do say so myself."

Thalia offered a nervous smile in reply. "She seemed awfully upset, but ever the gracious hostess. And," she added quickly. "Miss Louise was very insistent on her purchasing a gown for the Season."

He nodded, noting the pallid look of her face. "And... you're feeling better, now?"

Thalia blinked, clearly confused.

"The butler mentioned your early return was due to poor health."

“O-oh.” Thalia’s gaze tilted towards the soup, hands wringing in her lap. “Yes, I... I felt a bit overwhelmed, being in public for so long. I suppose I’ve forgotten how much it takes out of me.”

The desire to gather her in his arms, to push the rest of the world out and protect her fragile heart, intensely thrummed in Gabriel’s chest. Little rabbit indeed; she was in desperate need of a distraction, it seemed. “So you don’t get my staff in any further trouble, little rabbit,” Gabriel offered his hand, “Shall I show you where the library is?”

“A-are you sure?” Thalia asked, attention fixated on Gabriel completely. “I would hate to intrude on your evening, Your Grace.”

“I’ll decide what—or who—is intruding on my evening. Besides,” he added with a smirk. “You have yet the pleasure to witness my sister’s sculpting era.”

Thalia’s eyes widened, a bright smile crossing her face. “You actually kept her works, then?”

“Suppose you’ll have to come and see for yourself, little rabbit.”

* * *

True to his word, the duke had, in fact, kept many of his sister’s attempts. Thalia wandered the halls of Stonewell at his side, marveling at the many lopsided vases filled with freshly-cut flowers, or small sculpts of beasts she rightly couldn’t put names to.

All the while, Gabriel fed her interesting tidbits about not just Charlotte’s art, but the framed pictures or crown moldings along the corners of the hallway. There was so much character in each room he took her to; Thalia could feel pride radiating off the

duke with each new discovery.

That wasn't all she could feel, of course; every so often, his hand might find hers and direct her through a doorway, and that brief connection caused her heart to flutter. His scent was ever-present, even after they'd separated and kept a polite distance from each other. Smoke and wood; the outdoors in its rawest state.

“Did you really keep that frog-faced bust?” Thalia suddenly asked. “Or is that something you simply like to torture your sweet sister with?”

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The duke gave her a faint, if not mischievous grin, and led Thalia down the closest corridor. After a few more twists and turns, the pair ended up standing before a massive oak door, carved in beautiful detail and stained a brilliant dark shade.

The duke grasped the knob and pushed inward, revealing a dimly lit room filled wall-to-wall in shelved books. Thalia's gaze tilted upward, catching the night sky through a glimmering glass dome.

“Oh, my... I don't think I've ever seen anything like this.”

“You'll never see something like this, either.”

Her attention turned, suddenly aware that the duke had left her side. He moved across the library briskly, approaching what seemed to be a writing desk propped against the wall; there was barely any space for the chair to fit. With a quick and easy shove, he turned the desk sideways and slipped beneath, producing a small bust cradled in his arms.

Thalia blinked, laughter bubbling out from her chest. It really did look like a frog—his eyes bulged out from the squashed features of his head, and his lips were stretched entirely too long across his face.

“It's uncanny, isn't it?” the duke asked.

“It truly is!” Thalia laughed. “How on earth has she not found it yet?”

The duke returned the bust beneath the writing desk, pushing it back into place. “My

dear sister is interested in a great number of things, but books are entirely too stationary of a task.” He leaned against the desk, the faintest traces of a smile crossing his face. “She’d always tell me that living the adventure was far more interesting than reading about it.”

“That certainly sounds like her,” Thalia said. “Whoever manages to catch her eye will be a lucky man, indeed.”

“Luck will have nothing to do with it,” the duke insisted. “It shall be she who pursues him, mark my words. Whoever the man is, she will hunt him down to the ends of the earth, regardless of the obstacles.”

“Just like her brother would?”

Another mischievous glint passed his eye, and Thalia felt her core positively melt. “She had to have learned it somewhere.”

Thalia chuckled lightly, glancing back toward the bookshelf with feigned interest. There were certainly a number of titles that caught her eye—*The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *Mansfield Park*—though she was surprised to spot a particular book partially pulled from its place. “*Pride and Prejudice*, Your Grace?”

The duke offered a light shrug. “I’d hardly be considered a proper connoisseur of literature without Jane Austen’s works among my collection.”

“I mean no disrespect—I quite enjoyed her work myself, back in Oslay Hall.” Thalia eased the book back into its place, offering the duke a sincere smile. “I’m just... surprised to see it looking so well loved. Romance didn’t strike me as an interest that took you.”

“Truth be told...” It was the first time Thalia saw the duke hesitate in anything he

did, let alone during conversation. He exhaled loudly, crossing the room before slipping the book back out from its place. “It’s my mother’s favorite. This is likely her personal copy.”

As if to prove his point, he opened the book and flipped through a few dog-eared pages; Thalia immediately took note of the hand-written annotations along the page’s borders.

Immediately, it became strange to her that such a cherished memento would be put in such a public place. Not stored away safely to reminisce, but be fully exposed to whatever damage other hands may have wrought on it. Thalia frowned, wanting to ask about it, but the duke seemed lost in his conversation; she hardly wished to interrupt.

“She often enjoyed telling me stories around this book,” the duke continued, his expression clearly in a place of reminiscence. “How she often carried it like a security blanket during schooling, how she tried to emulate the titular heroine herself.”

He flipped through a few more pages, pressed flowers tucked between little snippets of writing. Thalia noted the stark difference in penmanship, the flirtatious language used.

“Are these notes...?” she dared to ask.

The duke closed the book, gently returning it to its place. “My father’s handwriting. Yes, it is.”

Thalia recalled the horrid tension after Charlotte dared to mention their paternal figurehead. And yet, the atmosphere now only seemed heavy with regret, a bitter sadness she could practically taste on her tongue. The duke looked at the book with equal parts disgust and longing, as if some good memory still lodged itself within its

painful existence. “Your Grace,”

“But the past is the past,” the duke spoke curtly, ending whatever conversation they might have had in its place.

“My mother ensured it stayed as such.” He glanced to Thalia, stone walls once more built between them. “I must excuse myself, Miss Sutton. There’s business I need to attend to this evening, and I hardly wish to impede on yours.”

Thalia bit her tongue, a coppery tang of disappointment coating it as she watched the duke leave. Briefly, she outstretched her arm, splint catching against the moonlight from the skyline above, and she grasped hopelessly at the air where he once stood.

“I should decide that for myself,” she murmured softly as the library door swung shut. “Shouldn’t I?”

CHAPTER 16

True to her word, Thalia woke up early the next morning, ready to partake in whatever antics Charlotte chose to get the pair into. Anything to try and get last night’s encounter out of her mind; the duke had a habit of digging into her thoughts and holding fast.

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Even now, the smokey scent of wood wafted about her head, and Thalia found herself unable to be rid of it, even with a few changes of clothing. Of course, a majority of her changing had been due to Charlotte's choice in activity—horseback riding—as the younger Harding had bought a number of equestrian garbs for her to try on.

“I know you technically told me I could replace your dress, but this directly ties into your promise, so, it still makes us even!” Charlotte had then proudly proceeded to devour the last of her toast and jam before scurrying up to her room, no doubt to dress in her own riding attire. Thalia, meanwhile, managed a light sigh and savored whatever breakfast she could before Charlotte came thundering back downstairs.

It wasn't as terrible as she was making it out to be, of course. The morning was fairly pleasant, if not a bit chilly, with dew still clinging to the low-cut lawn. Occasionally, Thalia could spot sunlight between the gray sheet of clouds, providing a touch of warmth to the somber atmosphere.

For a moment, she wished Charlotte had chosen painting instead. The scenery was really quite inspiring, stirring her into an artistic mood she hadn't felt in quite some time. And the duke had to remain back at the estate for work matters, meaning there would have been a greater chance of them crossing paths if she'd remained behind.

Thalia paused, shaking her head furiously. Out with you, already!

“Oh, don't worry, Thalia!” Charlotte reassured, arms wrapped around the neck of a familiar chestnut stallion. “I'll be taking Wanderlust for our little jaunt. He gets absolutely green with envy if I ride anyone else.”

Thalia blinked, realizing she'd completely missed what Charlotte had been saying entirely. "Ah. Yes, that... comes as somewhat of a relief. I admit, it's been some time since I've ridden, and... Wanderlust... seems quite the proud creature."

"Oh, he's just a big baby," Charlotte insisted. "But, he would probably be a bit too much for you; he's a bit too much for Gabriel sometimes, too."

Thalia chuckled lightly, trying not to imagine such an undignified sight. "I must admit, that's hard to believe."

Charlotte simply grinned, glanced around the barn in search of the right steed. Her eyes immediately lit up as she pointed towards the stall across from hers. "Oh! Why don't you take Forget-Me-Not? She's a bit older, but has a much better temperament for... beginners, I suppose?"

Thalia laughed, mockingly crossing her arms with a huff. "I said it's been a moment! I'm not entirely inept, you know." Still, she crossed to greet the horse in question—a beautiful palomino, clear of any blemishes or markings along her body and face—and gave her a gentle approach with her hand. True to Charlotte's word, the mare was quick to warm, nuzzling Thalia's hand with a gentle snort.

"Perfect—she likes you already!" Charlotte beamed, already pulling Wanderlust out of his stall to set his saddle.

Thalia opted to let the stable hands help her, stepping to the side as she observed the fitting. Her conversation with the duke still buzzed around her head, and she couldn't help but sigh in frustration. He seemed distant one moment, then desperate to close said distance the next. Cold, yet inviting; an absolute enigma of a man.

"Don't tell me you're going to try and wiggle your way out of our agreement?" Charlotte asked.

“Oh—no, nothing of the sort,” Thalia reassured.

“Then what on earth has you sighing in such a matter?” Charlotte tugged against the belt of her saddle, ensuring it sat firmly in place. “Miss Thalia Sutton, it is far too early and nice a morning to make such a forlorn noise.” She paused, moments away from grasping her reins, and turned to face Thalia with a gasp. “Wait—what did my brother do? He’s upset you somehow, hasn’t he?”

Thalia hesitated, fidgeting with the hem of her glove as she debated her next question carefully. “He... showed me *Pride and Prejudice*.”

Charlotte blinked, clearly confused. But after a moment to reflect, the realization dawned across her face. “Oh.”

“Y-yes, I’m afraid so.” Thalia’s brow furrowed, the evening fully arranging itself clearly in her mind. “I don’t mean to pry, of course—your family business is your own—but the way he spoke of it seemed so... so...?”

“Wistful?”

Thalia nodded.

Charlotte slipped the reins over Wanderlust, coaxing him to bite the bit before straightening out the straps. Another beat passed between them, and she let out a heavy sigh of her own. “I don’t remember too much of Mother, honestly. Only what Gabriel says of her.” Her hand stroked the length of her stallion, her shoulders visibly stiffening. “Which doesn’t always paint her in the kindest of lights.”

“You don’t have to...”

“It’s not exactly a big secret,” Charlotte insisted. “The whole ordeal, I mean. Lots of

people know of it, but no one's foolish enough to dredge up old gossip while Gabriel's still alive." She paused, hastily wiping her face as her back remained to Thalia. "Father went to defend mother's honor, and he died because of it."

"You don't have to speak of it if it's too much," Thalia insisted.

Charlotte shook her head, but she remained turned away. "No, it's just—it seems so stupid, whenever I think of it. I mean, Father said he'd do anything for Mother, but to throw your life away in some ridiculous show of masculinity—she didn't even wait for his body to be cold in the ground, Thalia!

"Her 'honor' means far less than my Father's life, and he so stupidly—if my future husband ever told me he were getting involved in a duel for my honor, I would think him to be the selfish one, protecting his own, fragile, misshapen—!"

Thalia quickly moved to Charlotte, her arms grasping around her in a tight hug. She heard a slight gasp of surprise, her body trembling horribly as she tried to catch her breath. "I'm sorry, Charlotte. That must have been a terrible thing to carry around."

Charlotte suddenly turned, burying her head into Thalia's chest. Her arms wrapped fiercely around Thalia's waist, and though she continued shaking, Charlotte fought valiantly for a breath to speak with. "I d-don't even really remember them all that much. But—but I could have, if F-Father hadn't... if Mother wasn't so..."

She paused, a fresh wave of tears slipping down her face. "Gabriel becomes terribly c-cross—well, crosser than usual—I think... this is the first time I have really... talked about it, though."

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It pained Thalia to see the poor girl in such distress. She embraced her tightly, slowly undoing Charlotte's updo in order to gently stroke her head.

"Thalia?" Charlotte's eyes were rimmed red, hazel hues flooded with tears. "Am I a terrible daughter? For saying those things about Father—I miss him, I really do, I just wish he hadn't wasted his life—I wish he hadn't—I wish—!"

Thalia slowly eased Charlotte to sit with her, waving the stable hands to tend to the horses. They worked with quiet efficiency, taking off Wanderlust's saddle and reins before ushering him back into his stall. Then, just as quickly, they filed out of the barn, leaving only the sounds of Charlotte's crying and Thalia's soothing tone. A great deal of time passed before her tears turned to light sobs. And soon, she managed to pull herself somewhat together, hastily wiping her splotchy face.

"How are you feeling?" Thalia asked.

Weak laughter escaped Charlotte, briefly turning to a fit of hiccups. "Awful. I didn't want to spend the morning with you like this."

Thalia smiled, warmly bringing Charlotte in for another embrace. "Don't have another thought about it. I enjoy our time together, Charlotte, no matter what we do." They pulled away once more, her expression becoming more concerned. "Does your brother know about all of this? How you truly feel about your parents?"

Charlotte quickly shook her head. "I meant it when I said no one brings it up. Gabriel becomes so enraged, and—and then so distant." Again, she shook her head, pulling her legs up against her chest. "He's all I have left for family, Thalia. If I upset him..."

if he abandons me...”

“He would do no such thing.”

Charlotte blinked a few tears free, staring up at Thalia in surprise. In truth, Thalia herself was taken aback at the curtness of her tone, but the sentiment rang true in her chest.

“I haven’t been among your family long, Charlotte, but it’s plain as day that your brother adores you. And if he knew you were carrying this sadness around...” she paused, her hand clenching against her chest. “Charlotte, it would break his heart.”

“Or he’ll never talk to me again,” Charlotte insisted. “He loved Father—practically worshipped him! If he knew what I thought—and I don’t even know if these feelings are real.”

“Charlotte.”

“No, Thalia.” Charlotte suddenly stood, brushing her pants before heading for the barn’s entrance. “Come on; I’ve got something else we can do together.”

* * *

It was difficult to focus on his work when Gabriel’s mind was occupied elsewhere. Last night had begun so... well. Fully in his favor. If he had played it right, he might’ve managed to steal a kiss from Thalia that time around. But therein laid his ultimate problem; what to do about Thalia Sutton.

He rolled his quill between his fingers, his gaze drifting from the stacks of paperwork on his desk towards his personal collection of books. A large gap stood towards the center of the shelf, and he imagined, briefly, Thalia comfortable in her room, curled

up on a chair and reading John Donne's greater works. With nothing but a sheer nightgown, clinging to her curves and hugging her bosom like... like...

Well. Like one more facet of his ultimate problem.

Gabriel sighed, abandoning his desk for a glance out the window. What was he to do with his little rabbit? The chase was fun, yes, but he never considered what happened after the fact.

Other women would've left by then, leaving him to prowls the night alone in pursuit of different prey. But Thalia was not something he could simply "leave"; it had been by his own hand that she remained so closely at his side.

And it wasn't even just her that he'd entangled himself with. Robin, too, had become quite integral to the operation, a key component in making that little marquess pay dearly for his transgressions.

A slight not even against his own family, Gabriel realized with a dark chuckle. From the start, he'd done everything for the benefit of the Sutton family, and as for himself...

What are your intentions with my sister?

Before he could continue his mulling, Gabriel's attention was grabbed by a knock on his door. He straightened, expecting it to be the young Sutton awakened at last and ready to report his findings on Oslay Hall. He'd barely gotten the invitation out of his mouth to enter when his study's door flew open and Charlotte came charging in, a few maids hot on her tail.

"Where did we put my painting materials?" Charlotte demanded.

Gabriel blinked, his mind still catching up to the present situation. He tilted his head around his sister's imposing form, catching Thalia standing just beyond the door's frame with a nervous knit to her brow.

"Sorry," Thalia managed to mouth as the maids came into the room next.

"My lord, we're so terribly sorry," the first began.

"She barged right past us," the second stammered.

Gabriel raised his hand gently, quieting the maids as his attention fixated on his sister. "Charlotte, what is the meaning of this?"

"I want my painting supplies."

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Once more, he leaned across his desk, catching Thalia nervously slipping into the office as well. She opened her mouth to try and explain, though nothing came out of her lips. Instead, Thalia stood awkwardly off to the side, uncertain where she fit in during this family... squabble.

“Charlotte, you have two maids here more than willing to help you,” Gabriel began.

Charlotte waved the thought away, hands now smacking against Gabriel’s desk in an absolute fit. “Painting supplies. Please.”

Now it was Gabriel’s turn for a furrowed brow. This was not the first time he found his sweet sister in such a sour mood; it had been through the act of painting that she beat back whatever darkness filled her previously. And now, she held her gaze with such intent, that he was surprised at how much of a predator she’d become herself. It was the first time Gabriel had really looked and saw her for the young woman she was.

“We are terribly sorry, my lord,” one of the maids began. “We can go and find them—”

“No, it’s all right.” With a gentle sigh, Gabriel stood from his desk and rounded it, offering his hand outward. “I’m sure it’s stored somewhere in your old art room. We’ll go look together.”

Pleased with her victory, Charlotte slid her arm through Gabriel’s grasping his hand in a tight squeeze. “See, Thalia? I told you he would help.”

Thalia could only nod awkwardly by the door, smile clearly strained.

“Will you be joining my sister, then, Miss Sutton?” Gabriel asked. “I recall you had a few paintings of your own in need of finishing.”

She looked ready to argue, but seemingly reconsidered at the last moment. With a gracious nod, Thalia trailed behind the Harding siblings, looking as if she were being led deeper into the lion’s den. As far as Gabriel was concerned, she wasn’t wrong.

CHAPTER 17

As Gabriel suspected, finding the painting supplies took very little time, and soon, both women were out in the garden, easels erect and palettes messily mixed in a myriad of paint shades. He took to the gazebo and had a small arrangement brought up from the kitchen, consisting mainly of seasonal fruits and cold slices of meat.

He sat with a cup of green tea, eyes drifting between his sweet sister and the little rabbit, their backs turned and fully concentrated on their canvases.

Charlotte took interest in a butterfly’s bush, her strokes quick and somewhat messy as she tried to capture the various insects fluttering about the flowers. Messy for now, perhaps, but Gabriel knew well that refinement came later, in the confines of her art studio. Minimal sound, minimal distraction; Charlotte worked best that way.

His attention then turned to Thalia, who was paying very little attention to the scenery and instead completing what looked to be a portrait. Gabriel recognized the background as the rookery in Whitechapel, the person of interest appearing to be slumped over in their chair, half-dressed in canvas slops and a thick apron.

Curiosity got the better of him, and he rose from his chair for an approach, ensuring to give ample warning as to not cause her brush to jump.

“A secret suitor of yours, Miss Sutton?”

Thalia glanced over her shoulder, a dab of gray paint having somehow made it onto her nose. He wanted nothing more than to brush his thumb across it, dragging his fingers down the length of her face and grasping her jaw to pull her in for a kiss. Instead, Gabriel focused on her painting, determined not to appear so desperate.

“Unless you’re worried my brother will woo me, your Grace,” Thalia chuckled lightly, “there’s no suitor here but yourself.”

Sure enough, as Gabriel inspected the weary man’s face, it did hold a likeness to the younger Sutton.

“What inspired such a somber scene, if I may ask?”

Thalia’s expression softened, her attention going back to the painting as she gently added layers of ashen gray to the foreground.

“He’d come home very late from toshing—I couldn’t rouse him for anything. And, the way he sat there, deep in sleep,” she shook her head, setting her brush aside to stare at the piece for herself. “I’d never seen him look so... so...”

“Vulnerable?”

Thalia’s eyes met Gabriel’s; he was surprised to find them so stern, so void of the softness he’d grown used to. “Exactly so.”

“That’s the curse of the eldest,” Gabriel offered. “Acutely aware of the pains our siblings are going through.”

“Yet, at times, unable to do anything more for them.” Thalia turned back to her

painting, gently rubbing her hands clean on a stray cloth already stained from previous works. “Sometimes, I think about what might have been. The fate of Oslay, how much better it would be in Robin’s hands. If things had been different—if he were the true heir, and I the afterthought of some tryst—”

“Don’t say that,” Gabriel interjected, surprised at how harsh he sounded. “You are not an ‘afterthought’, Miss Sutton, regardless of life’s happenings.”

Thalia tilted her head, a weak chuckle escaping her lips. “You are a strange one, your Grace.”

Gabriel blinked; he wasn’t entirely sure if she’d meant to say that aloud. Thalia must have realized it herself, because they quickly broke eye contact afterwards, her hands once more busied with her brushes. He watched her quietly for a moment, adding details and shading that further brought the painting to life.

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“I understand that feeling, though,” he finally said. “That... desire, to put your own needs aside for the sake of your sibling. Bearing the weight of all the world’s horrors, and yet somehow, it still finds a way to sink its claws into them. That agony once they’re grown, once they learn for themselves...”

Thalia paused mid-stroke, shoulders stiffening. “It’s awful.”

Gabriel glanced toward his own sister, still in a frenzy of brush strokes. “You can appreciate why I’m concerned for my own sister’s well-being right now.”

“Then... you should talk to her, Your Grace. “

Infuriating. She knew very well what ailed Charlotte and refused to speak. Gabriel wished dearly he could take her to his office, sit her down, and interrogate her into submission.

He paused, his imagination briefly spiraling into thoughts of his hands pinning hers to the desk, their faces close enough to feel the hitch of her breath, and her neck fully exposed, pristine, eager for a claiming bite.

“I mean no disrespect, Your Grace,” Thalia added hastily afterward, breaking Gabriel free from his machinations. “Nor to heighten any anxieties you may have for your sister. It’s simply not my place to speak Charlotte’s mind.”

She gently added a stippling of color to the rookery’s walls, rinsing the paint in a small cup of water before utilizing a mixture of oranges and whites to paint more detail across Robin’s face. “She is feeling vulnerable right now, Your Grace. I admit,

I had a hand stirring these feelings free from her, but more than anything...”

Gabriel found himself leaning on her every word. Even more infuriating.

“More than anything...” Thalia sighed lightly, giving him a pleading glance once more. “I think she would like you to listen to her.”

Her words stung briefly, harder than any slap to the face he’d ever received from a woman. For a moment, Gabriel considered the request quite insolent, entirely unaware of the relationship he’d fostered so carefully with his sister. Charlotte had as many freedoms as he could allow her—she need not find a husband so desperately.

She could fill her days with horseback and running barefoot instead of more ladylike tasks—and yet this practical stranger claimed to know better? Prey indeed; this little rabbit deserved more than a bite to the neck. She deserved far worse for her presumptions.

But, no. There was no malice in Thalia’s eyes, no self-righteous lilt to her tone or a posture that suggested her to be holier-than-thou. The way she spoke, the way she practically begged; Gabriel realized she truly wished for nothing but the best for his sister.

Perhaps this was her way of repaying Charlotte for all her kindness shown, or perhaps this was simply the sort of person Thalia Sutton was. A little rabbit in a world filled with wolves, undaunted from changing her morals in the face of complete annihilation. And he would not join the scavengers who hoped to take advantage of, or misread, her intent.

He rested a hand gently against her shoulder before walking off, directly focused ahead on his sister. Before he could open his mouth to speak, Charlotte interrupted him.

“Don’t be cross with Thalia on my account, dear brother.”

Deflective. Audibly agitated. Somewhat truly was wrong. “Miss Sutton has done something to upset you,” Gabriel began.

Charlotte snorted, another flick of her brush creating a jagged line across her backdrop. Her shoulders remained still, her posture rigid, and she spoke with an increasing bite in her tone. “She was quite helpful, as a matter of fact. Once more, your taste in women has proved impeccable.”

Gabriel frowned, drawing closer to his sister’s side. “Charlotte.”

“I’m perfectly capable of handling my own emotions, thank you.” A slight break in her voice, hastily covered by a flurry of movement. Charlotte attempted to dip her paintbrush in water, find a new brush to mix her paints with, catch the last sight of a monarch before it vanished into the brush—and instead, she found her wrist gently grasped by Gabriel’s hand, stopping her in mid-motion. “Let go.”

Gabriel remained still.

“Gabriel Harding, I’m not afraid to kick you where it hurts!” As if to prove a point, his sister’s leg struck out, though a step to the side easily kept him from harm. Her body was trembling now, her voice catching in what had to be the largest lump growing in the back of her throat.

“Charlotte.”

“Leave me alone, Gabriel!”

He shook his head, gently beginning to hum under his breath.

“What, do you think me a child having a tantrum?” Charlotte angrily spat, wrenching her arm free from his grasp. “That some stupid lullaby will magically make everything better?” She crossed her arms and stood before him, scowl deepening as the song persisted;

Hop, Little Rabbit, hurry home.

Through the tangling briars and nighttime’s gloam.

For a moment, her expression softened, a twitch of her brow betraying the hurt beneath her dark expression. “S-Stop.”

To your little rabbit’s burrow, deep in the ground

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Where all is still, and safe, and sound.

Her arms uncrossed, and she furiously wiped at her face with the back of her hand. But she didn't move to cross her arms again, didn't stiffen her posture or try to turn away from her brother's influence. She had every opportunity to leave, and she remained firmly in place.

Little Wolf howls against the moon

His lullaby singing, 'Let's play again, soon.'

"You know this part," Gabriel said softly, holding out a hand. "Sing with me, Charlotte."

Choking back tears, Charlotte's stubborn streak soon wore itself down. With an irritable huff, she stomped across the field and practically headbutted into Gabriel's chest, allowing his arms to fall over her body. He waited patiently, stroking her hair and humming the verses once more to himself, until finally, her wobbling voice met with his.

Little Wolf howls against the moon

His lullaby singing, 'Let's play again, soon.'

'We'll run through the meadow, beneath Orion's star.'

For now, sleep soundly, wherever you are.

How long had it been since he'd sung that song? Gabriel continued to hum the tune gently, stroking his sister's hair as she slowly began to let herself open up to him. Briefly, his eyes met with Thalia's gaze, having long-since abandoned her portrait.

Her expression looked... relieved, radiating with a warm understanding only another eldest could fully comprehend. She then blinked, face reddening as she waved a servant toward her, indicating the cleanup of their art supplies before excusing herself with a neat curtsy.

And as she crossed the lawn and headed back inside, Gabriel made it his mission to hunt her down.

* * *

Thalia was glad she had left when she had. Once it became clear that the duke had taken her advice to heart, she watched him a mere moment more before slipping away. This wasn't her moment to intrude upon, after all; she hardly wanted to take attention away from the Harding siblings.

Many hours passed, and she took to occupying herself in the library, wanting to give the pair as much space as she possibly could. She tried to busy herself with reading, exploring the shelves—Thalia even took to digging out the frog-eyed bust from behind the writing table. Staring at the duke's ridiculous visage gave her a modicum of comfort, and still, her stomach twisted and soured. She had truly stuck her nose too far into their business, and for that, Thalia wondered if she should begin packing her things.

As she stood to do just that, though, a light knock came from the library's door. Before she could answer, a gasp slipped out in its place, and Thalia found herself staring at the duke himself.

To say he was unreadable was a horrific understatement; his posture remained firm, his expression cool and unflinching. But the eyes entirely gave way to his true thoughts, and the man looked...tired. Hurt, perhaps, as he returned her gaze, but weary through and through.

He crossed the door's threshold and closed it gently behind him. The room's tension buzzed in Thalia's ear, and it was all she could do not to completely tear her gloves apart.

She opened her mouth to speak, but found her tongue dry, her lips disconnected from her mind. And thus, she kept silent, unwilling to break away from her predator's stare. To look away would mean certain doom; she was sure of it.

Finally, the duke spoke to her, his tone nearly as unreadable as the rest of him. "I'm not sure I've seen her so upset in quite some time."

Thalia's blood ran cold. This was it.

"She spoke quite in length about our... parents," he continued, slowly making his way closer to Thalia, gaze unmoving. "Everything she had told you earlier this morning."

"Y-Your Grace."

"I won't stand here and say my ego remained unaffected by all this," the duke interrupted, "because that would be a lie. To think, my own sister—my last blood relative, for whom I have cared since our parents' departure—shared such intimate and troubling thoughts with someone that isn't—that she didn't come to me at all without coaxing is simply—it's..."

Thalia blinked, watching as the duke struggled with his words. It was... unnerving, to

say the least, and his mouth eventually snapped shut in a frustrated grimace. He ran a hand through the length of his hair, a flicker of something vulnerable crossing his face briefly before being pushed away. Anger? Or, something more refined ...irritation? Disappointment?

“Guilt,” Thalia murmured softly, unaware she’d spoken her thoughts aloud.

The duke’s eyes widened, and the emotion fully encapsulated him. His posture hunched inward, his shoulders tensed terribly, and his face—no amount of rigidity could hide the ache he must have held deep in his heart.

“You’re... feeling guilty,” Thalia repeated, “Because Charlotte didn’t feel as if she could share those thoughts with you.”

He stared at her, long and hard; when was she going to learn to keep her mouth shut?

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“I-I’m sorry, your Grace. That was completely out of line—I should have never interfered with your family’s business.” Thalia dipped her head low, bending down into an uncomfortably deep curtsy.

If she was lucky, he would forgive her for her insolence. He would allow her time to pack; the dignity of walking out of the estate on her own two feet instead of being escorted out like a common criminal.

She listened to the thud of his footsteps, his shoes appearing in her field of view. From the corner of her eye, Thalia could barely perceive movement from his arm, and her wrist ached terribly. She squeezed her eyes shut, awaiting the oncoming sting of a slap, the squeeze of a hand around her arm, her neck, her—

—chin.

His hand barely even held against it, a brush of fingers coaxing Thalia to tilt her head upward and stare into his eyes properly. His expression was unexpectedly soft, for someone handling a busybody troublemaker such as her.

If Thalia were feeling courageous—and she was uncertain if she had any courage left, at this point—she might have assumed the duke was quite close to tearing up. That he, perhaps, was feeling quite... quite...

“Vulnerable.”

Once more, she hardly registered the audibility of her comment. And, once more, the duke hardly seemed to notice her audacious remark. He seemed far more interested in

peering well past the depths of her eyes, giving Thalia a chance to explore his own as well.

Dark, yes, but their complexity was noted for the first time. The duke's eyes weren't simply "dark", but shades of umber mixed with sepia. They were wet sand dyed by midnight's embrace, the oldest bark in an ancient grove, rough earth hewn, and speckled with flecks of gold.

Her hand brushed against his cheek, lingering far longer than she expected. His skin felt rough, the barest prickle of facial hair sending a tingle of nerves up the length of her arm.

The urge to lean in closer, to observe those eyes with everything she had, pulled Thalia's face inward, their noses a hair's breadth away. She was warm all over, acutely aware that the duke's arm had settled around her waist at some point.

His hand slipped down her neck and pressed lightly between her shoulder blades. For all intents and purposes, he was holding her completely upright, her legs limp and useless beneath her body's weight.

Something small kept her at a distance. Memories of her room that first evening, of their stolen kiss and the gut-wrenching shame that followed. It flooded the corners of her mind, freezing the last bit of her core as it tried to melt into the duke's grasp entirely.

Her free hand lifted from her side, attempting to grasp some part of him, to push herself free and not place the man in a compromising position. It failed, of course, lingering against his shoulder as her other arm followed suit; she had secured herself around his neck, and briefly, she was in panic.

At least, until the duke caught her lips with a kiss of his own.

CHAPTER 18

Finally. Finally, Gabriel held her within his grasp. She resisted at first, and expectedly so, frozen in place as he stalked across the library to take her down.

But the moment he coaxed her face upward, the moment he could fully engross himself within the brilliant gleam of those emerald-cut eyes, was the moment instinct took over.

His body moved of its own accord, slowly disabling her from any chance of fleeing from him, and as soon as her arms settled securely against his shoulders, he finally went in for the kill.

The kiss started slow and deep, his hands remaining securely around Thalia so she could fully enjoy it. It was a mere preview of what was to come; exploring territory, if he were to put it so crudely. Her taste was addictive, floral and oily from whatever paint remained stained on her skin.

He pulled free eventually, excitement trembling through his body as she inhaled deeply, then gasped sharply while he leaned across to nip her in the ear. A light, playful bite; nothing so egregious that he may scare her away just yet.

A groan slipped free from his throat as her nails dug into his back, and he took it as a sign to continue his exploration. From the line of her jaw down to the nape of her neck, Gabriel tenderly pressed his lips against her skin, resisting the urge to bite her there and then.

Her chest was far too exposed, far too publicly available; he wouldn't mark her just yet. Not just yet. Not until she begged and pleaded, his sweet little rabbit.

Suddenly, her hands pressed against his face, and Thalia caught him in another

dizzying kiss. His tongue snaked about, recoiling as Gabriel himself pulled away with a pained hiss.

A coppery tang coated his wounded tongue, and he couldn't help but raise a brow. She looked ready to apologize, but he stopped her with his lips, not wanting whatever trance they'd fallen into broken by spoken words.

Nipping prey was not something he ever expected himself to enjoy, and yet, he hoped feverishly she'd dare to take another bite out of him.

He lifted her towards the back of the room, hands drifting past her waist as he secured her firmly against a bookshelf. He found new purchase against her chest, now that she had something firmer against her back, and he slipped his fingers beneath her bodice, fingertips brushing lightly against her nipples.

Another gasp escaped Thalia's lips, and her legs gave out beneath her, forcing Gabriel to hold her completely in his embrace. "My, my. That small amount wounds you so?" he crooned, kissing her exposed neck.

Thalia's hands grasped at his arms, her nails digging as she continued to pant.

"Poor little rabbit. No one has treated you before, have they?" Gabriel couldn't help but smirk, removing his hands so one could secure comfortably around her waist.

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The other, meanwhile, drifted across her leg, disappearing beneath her skirt before he settled his palm against her inner thigh.

“Say the word,” he whispered, giving her ear another gentle nip. “I’ll do nothing further unless you do.”

Her body stiffened briefly, her hand covering her waist as wide eyes glanced up towards his. It was a wide range of emotions—desire, terror, hesitancy—and she was looking to him for the answer.

“The gift of trust is yours to give, Thalia,” Gabriel emphasized softly. “I cannot take it from you.” He watched her eyes light up with... surprise? Delight? Lust? But his hands remained—one around her waist, one against her leg—and he waited.

“Higher,” she finally moaned.

“Are you certain?”

She nodded, stretching her neck for another brief, tender kiss. “Yes, please.”

And in that confirmation, Gabriel obeyed; his hands drifted farther up, carefully exploring her as if she were new, uncharted lands. Her breath began to hitch, her chest heaved, and his free hand slipped up the length of her waist, catching her breast as he finally found her sensitive nib.

Another gasp, another groan, and as he massaged her gently, Gabriel could feel warmth spreading between them, her posture stiffening as pressure no doubt built

within her. He felt it himself, pressing against his trousers and desperate to be freed—but this moment wasn't about him. He wanted this to be about Thalia.

It didn't take long for his little rabbit to cry out, her whimpering and moaning climax a beautiful sound of found desire. And as she relaxed, as she pressed into his chest and both of his hands secured around her waist, something warm pulsed throughout his chest.

She was perfect. God above, she was everything he wanted and more.

...don't let emotion...

Whatever warm haze had built between them froze and shattered. Gabriel immediately loosened his hold around Thalia, having enough sense to ease her gently to the ground.

As soon as she was safe, his arms recoiled to his side, a cold sweat forming on the back of his neck. What was he doing? Had his own instinct just completely betrayed his father's trust in him?

He watched Thalia on the ground for a moment, beautifully sprawled out like the wounded rabbit she was. Her chest heaved heavily, her face flushed from their interaction as she visibly wrestled air back into her lungs.

A pang of guilt shot through him, and Gabriel had enough sense to offer a hand and help her upright. And then, silence. She continued to breathe, and he simply listened; not a word was spoken between them.

A knock on the door brought clarity back to Gabriel's senses, and he cleared his throat before answering. "Come in."

The door creaked entirely too slowly for his liking, and his absolute worst nightmare stood on the other side; Robin Sutton, finally roused from his sleep, stared at the pair of them with a slightly befuddled expression.

Before realization could further sharpen his gaze, Gabriel quickly moved to greet him, speaking in hushed tones as to not alert Thalia—or give them further away. “I told you to wait in my study for your report.”

“Charlotte sent me this way,” Robin hissed back. “Though, perhaps I should return later? I seem to be...” he paused, glancing around the duke as Thalia found interest in the point of her shoes. “Interrupting something.”

He wanted nothing more than to slam the door in his face. Hell, the boy deserved at least a swift punch to the face for his insolence. But that would mean Gabriel had emotional investment in... whatever had occurred between himself and Thalia just now. That thought alone soured the duke’s stomach. “Five minutes. My study. I’ll be keeping time.”

“I’m sure you will.”

Gabriel inhaled slowly, quelling his own bubbling rage, and shoved past Robin, doing everything in his power to keep his footsteps light and not simply storming away like a disheartened schoolboy.

* * *

She bit him. She bit the Duke of Stonewell right on the tongue. Thalia nearly doubled over in absolute shame as she watched her brother and her... her suitor? Her accomplice? Her forbidden lover? She couldn’t rightly say who Gabriel Harding was to her, anymore, only that he was currently in heated discussion with Robin.

Oh, God, was he telling him about her indecency?! But, she hadn't even initiated it—at least, she was fairly certain she hadn't.

Once their lips locked, things became a whirl of thoughts and feelings, of hot breath and warm skin, of a deep, throbbing ache that screamed to be soothed by the duke's full and undivided attention.

And—and even if she had initiated it, the duke seemed more than willing to oblige her. More than willing. In fact, he looked almost desperate. As desperate as she was. Or at least she hoped he did.

Finally, he left the library, leaving her brother standing beneath the door's frame. His attention immediately fixated on her, and she found herself unable to meet his gaze.

How could she, knowing what she'd done? How could she, after staring so long into Gabriel's—the duke's—own eyes long enough to memorize every detail? Everything had felt so right mere moments ago, and now, it all felt horribly wrong.

“I’m not going to ask, you know.”

Thalia’s head shot upright, completely taken aback.

Robin had entered the library fully now, having reached the writer’s desk where the frog-faced bust laid beneath. He’d propped himself against the edge, arms crossed loosely against his chest, and breathed a heavy sigh. For himself? For Thalia? Perhaps for the both of them, as life had only continued to throw trials and tribulations their way.

“R-Robin.”

“I’m not going to ask, because it’s none of my business.” Robin’s expression softened from his once-dark scowl, and he seemed genuine now as he spoke. “God knows you’ve put too much of yourself aside. For our father, for Giles, for m—” His voice caught in his throat, and he hastily shook his head. “If... whatever just happened in here brought you happiness, I shouldn’t be the one to shame you for it.”

Thalia blinked, touched by the sincerity of her brother’s words. But she was still on edge, waiting for the inevitable “but” he wanted to add.

“But—”

Her shoulders sank, her stomach souring at the word.

“But I want you to promise me you’ll be careful around him,” Robin finished. “The duke—he’s not all he presents to us. He has secrets—dark ones—and I don’t want

you getting hurt because of that.”

Now it was Thalia’s turn to breathe deeply. For herself...for Robin... the both of them, she supposed. “You seem well-versed in his darker machinations.”

Robin’s lip thinned, his arms tightening against his chest.

“I won’t ask, either.” Thalia crossed the room, gingerly wrapping her arms around her brother for an embrace. “But I would ask for the same caution you’ve instilled unto me. Be careful, Robin; you’re my entire world.”

Robin remained stiff for a moment, hesitant in his next action. Eventually, his arms loosened, and he freed them from under Thalia, wrapping them around her back to fully hug his sister.

“Three more days,” Thalia offered softly. “Three more days, and the duke will have kept his end of the bargain. I don’t know how he’ll do it,” she added. “But I’ve learned quite quickly that the Duke of Stonewell is a man of his word.”

Robin nodded, resting his head between the crook of her neck. “Three more days.”

“Three more days,” Thalia repeated, hugging him tighter than she ever had before. Three days, and she would be lucky enough to even pass the duke on the streets of London.

CHAPTER19

“That was stupid. That was so incredibly stupid.” The scene played on an endless loop in Gabriel’s mind, and it was all he could do to sit at his desk and not simply charge back into the library. To... do what, exactly, he couldn’t fully say.

His intent wavered between committing violence against Robin, or testing Thalia's boundaries further than he'd had the chance to. Images of her sprawled out in his bed, her wrists bound lightly in silk, a flicker of fear mixed with a deep desire to be completely overtaken...

Gabriel stood abruptly, moving towards a large, antique globe set beside a small bookshelf and reading chair. He easily pushed a hinge upright, opening the top of the globe to reveal a bottle of whiskey he immediately snagged and took a quick shot from.

The hot rush of burning alcohol set his hair on end, chasing away the flush he'd been growing over thoughts of... Miss Sutton. "Miss Sutton," he repeated aloud, taking another swig before setting the bottle back in its place. "It is Miss Sutton, not..." Not Thalia. It couldn't be Thalia. And she certainly shouldn't be his little rabbit.

Someone rapped forcefully against his door, and Gabriel moved back to his chair, slicking back his hair and squaring his shoulders. He took a deep breath, steadying his nerves, then occupied his hands with estate papers and a pen. "Enter."

The door swung inward, Robin entering as his hand remained gripped against the knob. Based on his expression—which he was trying desperately to keep neutral—he'd received at least some information from Tha—Miss Sutton. How much, Gabriel couldn't rightly say. And it would remain forever a mystery; the less he brought attention to it, the better.

"Did I arrive on time, Your Grace?" Robin asked, a note of sarcasm coating the honorary title.

Gabriel blinked, realizing he couldn't answer properly. Never once, had he glanced at the clock in his office, though now it was loudly ticking in his ear. The weight of his pocket watch suddenly became more noticeable; he hadn't even bothered to take it

out upon entering his study.

“I’ll give you a pass, considering the late night you had,” he replied evenly.

Robin fought to keep his brow even.

“Take a seat,” Gabriel instructed. “Start at the beginning. Leave out unnecessary detail.” He felt more at ease, sinking comfortably into his chair. The memories of the library began to fade in the background, and he sharpened his mind for the task at hand. Anger certainly was a useful tool, especially in regards to chasing away notable distractions.

Robin wasted no time getting comfortable himself, slouching against the side of his chair with one leg propped against the cushion. Gabriel couldn’t help but scowl at the sight, but dirt could easily be cleaned. He would put up with the child’s antics, if only to ensure he got what he needed.

“You were right about Giles. He’s really been cozying up to the Devils.”

“Elaborate.”

Robin seemed pleased to do so. “Had a whole bunch hosted at Oslay, though they didn’t stick around for long. He probably didn’t want to start coming up with excuses as to why the manor’s so empty.”

Then the little marquess was well out of reserves, if he’d taken to pawning off household items. “Any idea where he took them?”

Robin shook his head. “Didn’t think it mattered too much. All I cared about was the empty house.”

Though a part of Gabriel was morbidly curious, Robin was correct. Deep beneath his back-alley attitude, there was the makings of a shrewd businessman; someone who knew what to fixate on and what drivel to tune out. “Continue.”

“Getting inside was simple enough,” Robin continued. “There’s this butler guy—Cooke, I think his name is—he came by the rookery hours after Thalia first arrived with a big ol’ basket. Had some of her stuff, favorite snacks—figured if I could find him, I’d have no problem getting inside.”

Gabriel scratched the name quickly onto a piece of paper. Cooke... seemed like another potential ally to his ever-growing list.

“So I went to the servant’s entrance and claimed I had a message for him. And when he came out, I told him I was there for Thalia, that I just needed a secluded way into the manor.” Robin sighed, shifting his position so both legs were now pulled up

against his chest. “If I’d asked him to shoot a man, I think he would’ve done it.”

Gabriel ignored the growing prints across his nice, leather chair. “So, you got in. And you found the spending ledger, given how willingly you’ve shown your face.”

Robin smirked, digging into his jacket before producing a tightly-folded clump of papers. He tossed it across Gabriel’s desk, much to the duke’s displeasure—someone desperately needed to teach this boy proper etiquette.

Still, he plucked the papers and unfolded them, impressed at the straightness of the columns, the legibility of the penmanship. If Gabriel hadn’t watched the younger Sutton directly hand these to him, he would’ve thought a proper lord wrote these.

“This is rather impressive work,” Gabriel began. “Especially for someone who’s lived in Whitechapel practically all his life. Who taught you to write like this?”

A slight smile crossed Robin’s face. “Thalia did. Whatever short time I spent at Oslay, she made sure I could do the basics. Then, once I got sent away, she’d mail me paper and writing exercises she wrote herself.”

“Then, your mother was a maid for Thalia’s mother?” Gabriel surmised.

Whatever light had been coaxed out of Robin quickly diminished. “Was... yes, she was. Dear old Father didn’t understand what any sense of the word ‘loyalty’ meant.”

Delicate subject, then. Gabriel’s attention went back to the papers, clearing his throat without another thought towards the Suttons’ family dynamics. “Apologies; we were discussing your discoveries.”

Robin seemed more than happy to change topics. “The ledgers there confirm what we already had guessed. Giles is hemorrhaging money; he’s spent the whole of the late

marquess' inheritance on his wardrobe and... other exotic pleasures.”

Gabriel quickly flipped past a page marked heavily with the same, colorful-sounding business' name, skin prickling at the little marquess' growing depravity.

“That's not even the worst of it, unfortunately.”

Gabriel's eyes swiveled, practically boring a hole into Robin's forehead. The younger Sutton reacted accordingly, legs dropping to the floor as his hands grasped the chair's armrest. “Elaborate,” he hissed, dangerously close to losing his cool.

Robin swallowed, knuckles turning white. “The deeds. The ones Thalia said he burned?” He grimaced, his own flicker of rage sparking across his eyes. He opened his mouth to continue, but closed it just as quickly, visibly biting the inside of his mouth to keep his temper in check.

Instead, Robin slipped his hand back into his pocket and produced what appeared to be a pair of letters, addressed from Oslay Hall to someone at an attorney's office.

Gabriel snatched the envelopes and pulled out its contents, quickly skimming through the first letter, then the next. His mind raced to pull out what mattered most, collecting all the information together before coming to the startling realization. “These are authentic?”

Robin nodded, visibly smoldering.

Gabriel sat back in his chair, letters crumpling in his fist. “These letters... they speak of the incident in its entirety.”

Again, all Robin could do was nod.

Gabriel exhaled sharply, temper clawing in his chest. The information settled into the pit of his stomach, souring and bubbling alongside his growing anger. He'd willingly written of his unlawful act to a lawyer, and nothing had been done to correct the situation. Deceitful, backhanded tactics—and against all the odds, she hadn't caved to his pressure.

Images of Thalia's bandaged wrist flashed through Gabriel's mind, and he stood abruptly from his desk. "Theoretically, our little marquess could bypass the law and ascertain those deeds, given they were the last asset he could draw upon."

Robin was quiet for a moment more, mulling the theoretical in his head. "If they were all he had," he began at last. "But, he doesn't have them anymore. Why would he fall back on something he doesn't have?"

Gabriel rolled his neck and stared out of the window, his hands clutched behind his back. "Desperation breeds stupidity. If we make it so it is his only option—hand him the rope, so to speak—"

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Robin nodded, message received in-full. “I’ll need to talk to some of my guys. Make an excuse if Thalia asks for me; it’ll take some time, but I can get him to that level of desperation.”

Gabriel nodded, watching as the door swung shut behind the youngest Sutton. If the marquess saw himself a snake, then he had no problem playing the role of king cobra.

* * *

Thalia ensured she’d avoid the duke for the rest of the afternoon. Her rather... intense moment with him still sent her into a distracted swoon, and it rang with her brother’s warning about the duke’s darker disposition.

She promised to find Charlotte—once she managed to recall how to walk without wobbling—to dedicate her time to the youngest of the Hardings before the eldest could ensnare her once more.

“Of course, she seemed rather distressed after her big talk...” Thalia frowned, uncertain if Charlotte even wanted to socialize at this time.

She exhaled loudly, finding the nearest chair within the library before taking a seat. Her lack of a social circle now fully pressed upon her, and she wished desperately that wasn’t the case. Going out into town would be the perfect excuse—the perfect means to avoid the duke—but she had no reason to go, nor any friend to go with.

“Gracious—why am I acting so ridiculously over him?” A furious blush quickly came as her answer, and Thalia let out another groan.

Finally, she stood and clenched her fists, shaking whatever lingering heat welled in her core.

“Oh—I don’t plan on simply gushing all day about it. You’ve made your own way before, Thalia Sutton, and you can make your own way now.”

She forced herself to think of something else—a memory that, perhaps, would steer her in the right direction. She moved towards the library windows, throwing them open as the smell of springtime swept through the dim. Thalia inhaled deeply, allowing the sharp scent of grass, the floral of flowers, the slight bitter tinge of... of...

“Wild onions?” Thalia glanced over the sill, delighted to find she was right. Bright, green stalks grew below her in a small patch, the wind catching against their leaves and wafting the notable smell her way.

“Charlotte did mention she liked them with butter,” Thalia mused. And like that, she had her purpose, immediately turning on her heel with a grin before setting off to the kitchen.

* * *

Thalia once more found herself strolling the walkway of the newly opened park, keeping towards the fringe so as to not attract too much attention. A small satchel bounced against her hip, and she walked with a distinct skip in her step.

She’d taken to a more comfortable dress, as she was certain to get rather dirty during her impromptu foraging adventure. “Not that the previous outfit wasn’t ‘dirty’ already,” she flushed, quickly cutting through the brush as she did her best to remember the route back to the Hardings’ grove. At least from there, she would have a better chance at recalling the path toward the field.

As expected, the secluded grove lacked the presence of others, and Thalia took the opportunity to reorient herself. She reached into her forager's pouch and produced what looked to be a handmaid pocket book, stuffed to the brim with scribbles and sketches. Each page was a treasure trove of forestry knowledge, specifically focusing on the various wild edibles one could pick for later consumption.

“It would be an awful shame to rush straight to my destination... and the cook was so kind as to lend me this. I really should try and bring her something back.”

Thalia flipped through what felt like a dozen or so pages dedicated to edible fungus alone, giving the grove a cursory glance to try and find a match. “Oh!” she gasped, scurrying towards the bank as she knelt down to peer at a white, spongy orb.

“That might be a puffball mushroom!” She eagerly reached out to grasp it, but hesitated, giving the page another look-over. “Or... it's a death cap.”

With a grimace, Thalia skipped past the mushroom section, confidence waning. “All right, well, silverweed doesn't seem to have any devious look-alikes...small, yellow flowers, twelve toothed leaflets...”

She stood, glancing around the grove once more before finding a large patch. Before her hopes could rise prematurely, Thalia triple-checked the notes for a good minute or two, finally nodding in approval before kneeling down to pick some. “A unique substitute for parsley—gracious, and to think this has been here my entire life, and I never thought to consider?—!”

Her voice caught as the loud crack of a stick pulled her attention behind her. Someone was moving through the brush, following another pathway into the grove. Thalia quickly stood, trying in vain to make herself presentable as she stuffed the plants into her pouch.

For some reason, she couldn't get her heart to stop racing in her chest. Perhaps it was simply another park goer who had wandered off the trail? No one would willingly risk coming here to face the Hardings' wrath.

"Unless..." Thalia swallowed, hands suddenly feeling quite sweaty. "It would be just my luck if the duke chose to calm his nerves here, of all places..." Not that it would be unusual. If anything, she was the one trespassing on such a special place.

"But they don't own it," Thalia reasoned. "I can be here if I like." Her bravado meant very little, however, and the nerves in her stomach tightened into knots as the figure finally revealed themselves, sending an anxious skitter across her skin that rose each individual hair.

"My, my," Giles Tilbury smirked. "What a fortuitous happenstance finding you here, my sweet Thalia."

CHAPTER 20

It was moments like these that Gabriel was thankful for his title as duke, as it often kept his schedule quite busy. Instead of allowing himself time to be overrun by thoughts of Thalia—of Miss Sutton—there was paperwork to be done, wages to be paid, and general upkeep of the manor's overall state.

Once Robin had left his office, he got to work immediately, settling at his desk for what was certain to be hours of busywork. The methodical nature of it all was soothing to his soul, the ticking lull of his clock helping to remain focused.

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Gabriel caught up on any notes taken by his staff—grievances, obvious wear-and-tear of the estate, restocking on supplies—and attended to his calendar to make absolutely certain he was aware of every up-and-coming event.

“There’s the cards tournament for the two clubs coming up soon,” he mumbled under his breath. “And Christian insisted on a home visit sometime next week. I’ll need to discuss with Charlotte when she’d like her Seasonal event to take place as well...”

“Did you say my name, brother?”

Gabriel glanced up, having completely missed his sister having entered his office. Her face still looked tinged raw from earlier tears, but she appeared in far better spirits—a touch somber, he noted, but the morning had been quite the emotional display.

“You actually heard me just now?” he asked. “In enough detail to discern your name being used?”

Charlotte offered a slight grin. “When you’re a woman of high society, you develop a wicked sense of hearing. Always need to be in the know if someone’s gossip involves your name. Though, I was coming in regardless of my name’s usage,” she insisted. “It’s well into the afternoon at this point, and I figured you hadn’t had anything to eat since breakfast.”

Gabriel glanced at his office clock, resisting the urge to balk at the time. How had he become so absent-minded to his surroundings?

“Thank you for the concern, but at this point, I think I’ll simply wait for dinner.” He glanced back at his schedule, sensing the weight of his sister’s gaze remained. “Unless...you need something else from me?”

Charlotte’s arms crossed lightly, a slight pout pulling at her lip. “Well, I was going to see if Thalia wished to go on a trip into town with me, but I can’t seem to find her anywhere.”

Gabriel found himself equal parts relieved and disappointed to hear that. “Perhaps she took to walking the manor’s boundary herself? She is not a prisoner trapped indoors, after all.” Still, he didn’t like the sense of unease her absence left in his chest. Perhaps he could take a look himself, ask the servants if they’d seen any sign of her.

“I know she’s not a prisoner!” Charlotte huffed. “I am... simply expressing my disappointment, is all.”

Gabriel’s expression softened, noting the slight tender twinge in his sister’s tone. He stood from his chair, rolling his shoulders as he offered her what reassurance he could. “Let’s take a walk together, then. See if anyone’s seen her.” It would help his nerves as well.

The siblings made their rounds quickly, checking the places Thalia had been found lingering beforehand. The library, the garden’s gazebo; their search turned empty until they crossed paths with a kitchen maid, who eagerly shared what she knew.

“Oh, yes! The lady had taken to the farther reaches of the woods; said something about foraging for wild onions.”

Gabriel hadn’t meant to sigh with such heavy relief. So that’s what she’d gotten up to.

“But, I hadn’t seen her near the edge of the garden,” Charlotte insisted.

“It’s possible she followed the path towards the glade,” Gabriel suggested. “Where the new park opens out into.”

“Ooh... it does wind out that way now, doesn’t it?” Charlotte’s expression furrowed, finger curling at a strand of loose hair. “You think she’ll be all right? What if she gets lost?”

“I’ve made that path quite impossible to stray from,” Gabriel insisted. Still, his own anxieties hadn’t quite been quelled over the news of Thalia’s whereabouts. “Why don’t we meet her at the end of the path, at the park proper? If she did happen to get lost, we’ll just follow it back to the house.” He gestured towards the servant, adding under his breath, “Ensure a few able bodied hands are keeping an eye on the manor’s path. Have one or two of them tread a few paces past the estate line.”

The maid nodded, hurrying to gather who she needed.

“Thank you for doing that, Gabriel.” Charlotte’s expression flickered, genuine worry covering her face. “I’m probably just overreacting, but...”

Gabriel nodded, offering a warm smile her way. Regardless of the nagging voice in the back of his head, he put on an air of warm confidence for Charlotte’s sake. No point in worrying her further, especially if it turned out to be nothing. “You really like her, don’t you?”

Charlotte partially mumbled something under her breath; a rare sight, given her usual boisterous attitude. She looked to Gabriel, sighed at his bemused grin, then said louder, “It would be rude not to thank her for today, okay? I thought, maybe, we could go back to a boutique we visited after the park’s opening, and she could finally pick out a proper dress for me to buy for her. I wanted to tear my hair out,” she

added, a touch of her old spark back in her voice. “Watching her walk by all those pretty dresses and fabrics she obviously wanted.”

Gabriel’s brow raised slightly. “You mean she left empty-handed that day? I had assumed her purchases...” his sentence trailed off, as he rightly realized he would’ve seen anything Thalia bought. Giles would hardly let her store anything back at Oslay. “Let’s stop there on the way, then. You can show me what she was interested in, and it could be a nice surprise for later.”

A smirk crossed his sweet sister’s face, her hands folding innocently behind her back as she rocked on the heel of her feet. “Thinking about wooing her with expensive wares, are we? Honestly, I’m surprised you haven’t bought out an entire store’s supply for her yet; I am thoroughly ashamed of you, dear brother! You really need to increase your efforts, or Thalia will start to see you less as her suitor.”

Memories of the library crept along the edges of his mind; it was the first time Gabriel felt any sort of heat linger across his face.

“Though I don’t see Thalia as that shallow,” Charlotte added matter-of-factly. “I think you could rightly give her a single, wilted flower, and she’d be just as delighted.”

She would. She truly, sincerely would. Gabriel offered his hand outward, Charlotte quickly accepting it as she looped her arm between his.

“I’m certain you already have thoughts as to help me woo her further?”

“Of course!” Charlotte beamed. “Visiting the boutique is a good first start, but we’ll need to do far more. You’re lucky I’m an expert in the art of planning.”

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“Says the one who still hasn’t presented me her plan for her Seasonal event,” Gabriel noted lightly. “Perhaps a stroll through town will inspire a final decision on your part, hmm?”

She offered a cheeky grin in return, practically pulling Gabriel out of his office and down the hall.

* * *

Her legs refused to listen to her mind’s desperate scream to run. Unladylike behavior be damned; Thalia couldn’t stay here, not with Giles looking at her like that. Blood rushed through her body, her heart pounding in her ear, and it was all she could do to remain standing.

He observed her, inspected her, leered at her with those eyes of ice. It was as if winter had come crashing into the grove, racing to claim every inch of her in its terrible frostbite.

“Well?” Giles asked. “Aren’t you going to greet your dear cousin?”

Thalia’s lips trembled, and somehow, she managed to speak past the growing lump in her throat. “G-Good afternoon, Giles.”

He cocked his head, stroking his chin in mock-contemplation. “No; I think I’d prefer it if you address me properly.”

A cold sweat formed on the back of Thalia’s neck. “Good... afternoon.”

“Properly, Thalia.”

Something primal flashed across Giles’ eyes, tearing a hitched gasp from her throat. His look of satisfaction nearly brought her to tears, and Thalia bit the inside of her cheek, clinging to the taste of copper and faint throb of pain to keep herself together. Slowly, she lowered herself into a curtsy and held it, avoiding Giles’ wandering eye. “Good afternoon, Lord Tilbury.”

She didn’t need to see his face to feel his utter contempt. “Yes, it has been a good afternoon, hasn’t it? Especially now, with your sunny disposition here to brighten it considerably.” His shoes appeared in her vision, his hand snaking out to grasp her chin.

She grew rigid, forced to rise from her curtsy and meet his gaze.

“You looked very at-home just now. On your knees, rummaging for God knows what on the ground.”

Thalia remained silent, jaw aching at his vice-like grip.

“Suppose a duke’s hospitality means very little, if you’re forced to scavenge for your daily meal.” His expression softened alongside his grip, and for a moment Thalia wondered if he truly felt any ounce of remorse.

Pity, she supposed, was a closer guess to his feelings toward her. “You shouldn’t have to debase yourself like this, you know. Come home, sweet Thalia; it truly pains me to see you in such a state.”

A spark of anger melted through her hesitance, and Thalia forcefully stepped back, breaking free from her cousin’s grasp. “You shouldn’t speak of others so brazenly, my lord. One hardly knows who could be listening in.”

Giles' face hardened, and he stepped to close the distance between them. "I agree! To speak such open disdain about one's superiors; why, it's liable to get you in quite a bit of trouble. Shame no one ever seemed to teach that butler of mine—or, I suppose former butler, is more indicative of his status."

Thalia's foot caught against the stream bank, fighting not to lose balance as her cousin's words sunk in. "Y-You didn't."

Giles shrugged simply. "I can't have disloyal staff at Oslay, now can I? Rather unwise of him, speaking so candidly about his new lord and master."

"You're lying." Thalia was surprised at how sharp and direct her voice was, compared to how horrifically terrified she remained. "Mr. Cooke isn't one to stoop to such juvenile acts." Her fist tightened, casting a brief glance over her shoulder at the churning stream. "Your childish vendetta is against me; don't take it out on others because you lack the appropriate grace to handle your emotional tantrum."

His hand came as a blur, grasping for her neck as rage overtook Giles completely. By instinct alone, Thalia managed to duck down, his legs catching against her curled form before he went crashing into the stream.

Then, pushing her hands against the ground, she flew across the grove and into the woods, sprinting blindly while the furious howls of her cousin lingered behind her.

Every inch of her screamed, every breath she gasped for burning inside her lungs. Twigs whipped at her face while roots seemingly rose to catch her in a stumble; the very forest was conspiring to cause her end.

Just run, Thalia repeated in her mind, over and over. Just run, Thalia.

There was no chance of tripping, of falling down and allowing Giles any form of

advantage. The blinding panic, her mindless sprint, a lack of direction and a numbing resolve to escape—Thalia knew if she were to be caught, it would mean death for this little rabbit. There was no honor in this hunt; her cousin would be out for blood.

She stumbled through a row of brush, blinking furiously as full sunlight greeted her. No longer was the sky obscured by a canopy of trees, but bright and expansive, complementing the neat and tidy look of the park.

A brief spark of hope spurred Thalia onward, ignoring the scrutinizing looks of society as she kept to the outskirts. The path meant accessibility, a lack of cover on her part, and judging by the startled outcry of folk behind her, she hardly had the luxury to take the paved ways.

Eventually, her cover came to an end, replaced with towering buildings and confined flower plots of perfectly curated florals far too tiny to hide behind. Thalia's head swiveled, trying to find another place to go, another direction to run, only to let out a startled shriek as a hand clapped against her shoulder.

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Her body no longer froze in fear, hands striking out with everything she had as nails found purchase against flesh. And she dug, and raked, and kicked, and welled for another scream—

“--Thalia, stop!”

The familiar tone snapped her free of her frenzy, and Thalia suddenly became aware of her surroundings. Of the lingering crowd of proper folk, staring and whispering and pointing at her state of duress. Of her hair, undone and wild, adorn with leaves and tiny twigs, and her dress, far muddier than before, with knicks and tears the forest had inflicted upon her.

Of the man’s face to whom she attacked, red and bruising, with clear marks of her nails red and certain to ache. The man’s face—it took a moment to piece together, to pair with the voice she’d come to associate with an iota of comfort and protection.

“G-Gabriel?”

CHAPTER21

She used his name. His proper name. The attack against him had been a surprise, but that simple word uttered by Thalia practically shattered the whole of Gabriel completely.

For a moment, all he could do was stare back at her, hands resting securely against her shoulders. He was aware of the staring, the whispers, his sister’s panicked questioning, but it all fell into the background. Gabriel...she had called him Gabriel.

His arms moved around Thalia's waist before she could collapse onto the ground. She looked an absolute mess, pallid face covered in tiny scratches with her undone hair full of natural bits and bobs.

There was no obvious tearing on her dress—nothing that would indicate anything more than a thorned bush snagging at the fabric—and it almost looked as if she'd willingly smeared dirt all along the hem.

“Thalia!”

The hairs on Gabriel's neck immediately rose, and he turned to find the little marquess stumbling through the crowd, face twisted in a smoldering rage and completely soaked. Their eyes locked, and Giles suddenly looked as if a stiff breeze would knock him over completely.

“What did you do?” Gabriel was surprised at how even his voice was, given all the horrific things he wished to do to the man who stood before him.

“I did nothing!” Giles snapped, pointing an accusatory finger Thalia's way. “She's the one who was trouncing around the wilds like—like some sort of witch!”

The weight of Gabriel's body swung him completely around, Thalia in his arms as he easily towered over the little marquess. “She is a guest at my manor. You will watch your tone.”

“She is my cousin,” Giles retorted. “And clearly, she needs to be returned home immediately.” He eyed the growing crowd and offered a smirk Gabriel's way. “This is a family matter, your Grace; I'm sure you can appreciate the desire one has to protect their family.”

An immediate ripple ran through the crowd. Gabriel visibly bristled as his father's

name passed their lips. He wondered, perhaps, how many kicks it would take before Giles collapsed to the ground, how long he could stomp against his body until he remained motionless. A mere fantasy, of course, as he was trapped by social expectations.

“Come now, Your Grace,” Giles sneered, his arms extending outward. “I appreciate your help, but I think my sweet Thalia’s time at Stonewell has come to an end.”

Gabriel’s embrace tightened, spurred on by the half-conscious murmur of the woman in his arms. No; there wasn’t a force on this planet that could pry her from his grasp. If the little marquess wished for death so eagerly, he would happily trade the sky for a lifetime staring behind bars. Anything to keep her safe. Anything to ensure—

“—Oh, Thalia! I can’t believe I let this happen!”

Gabriel blinked, having nearly forgotten his sister’s presence. Charlotte had quite abruptly inserted herself into the drama, fawning and fussing over Thalia’s lingering state. All the while, she gave her brother a long, lingering stare, a clear command he needed no vocalization for; remember who we are.

“Lord Oslay, I do so apologize for putting you in such an awkward position,” Charlotte went on, grabbing Giles’ hand as she held it with tight regard. “Why, I was in such a frantic state, looking all over the estate for poor Thalia. Could you imagine my panic, realizing I had let her go and get into such a dangerous situation?”

She freed one hand, producing a handkerchief while dabbing the corner of her eyes lightly. “Why, if something had happened to her, I daresay I would never forgive myself! To think, if you had never stumbled upon her, completely turned around in the woods after simply wishing to enjoy what nature had to offer...”

Giles visibly flushed at Charlotte’s trembling voice, and the crowd seemed just as

drawn into her miserable state. “Y-Yes, well... I certainly couldn’t leave her as she was. Poor thing was... horribly turned around. In quite a state,” he added hastily.

“And you certainly couldn’t blame her! Gracious, but she must have been lost for hours...” Charlotte sobbed lightly, burying her face into her kerchief. “It’s my fault, really; I’ve failed her entirely as a hostess. I fear I shall never invite another into my home again!”

The crowd began to murmur their pity, and Gabriel couldn’t help but feel a rush of pride. How easy it was for him, to speak boldly and demand his way.

Meanwhile, his sister had slowly worked the crowd into her sympathies, turning the entire situation against Giles, should he so choose to continue playing the part of an angry brute. A clever wolf indeed; one who learned not to rely on her teeth and claws, but to wear the wool of the mindless sheep she paraded around.

“Please, my lady,” Giles hastily replied. “I had not meant to cause any upset.”

“And yet, you have done just that,” Gabriel interjected, stepping before his sister as she partially swooned behind him. “Not only have you caused this horrible scene, but you insult my sister’s capabilities.”

Giles cleared his throat loudly, taking note of the shifting tide and glaring eyes. “N-no, I—I’m certain you are a lovely hostess indeed, Miss Harding!”

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“Your ladyship,” Gabriel corrected coldly.

Giles visibly swallowed, shoulders hunching as he curled underneath Gabriel’s stare.

“Y-Yes. Your Ladyship, I mean.”

Thalia stirred briefly in his arms, and Gabriel brought her closer to his chest. “Now, I believe I’ve exercised quite a bit of patience on your behalf, Lord Oslay.”

“Oh, yes,” Charlotte agreed a bit too chipperly. “We really should get our guest back to Stonewell. You don’t mind, of course, do you, my Lord?”

Gabriel watched a flicker of rage cross the little marquess’ eyes, but the crowd had him bound. Whatever anger tried bubbling to the surface was expelled with a loud clearing of his throat. “Of c-course not.”

Gabriel’s gaze narrowed further.

“Of course not... y-your ladyship.”

The crowd parted quickly, allowing the Hardings through and leaving Giles behind. Gabriel let their stirring gossip fall by the wayside, far more intent on keeping his arms steady and Thalia unmoving in his grasp.

“That was a sight to behold, Charlotte. Remind me not to cross you publicly.”

Charlotte exhaled sharply, her nerves now clear as day in her face and tone. “You liked it? I know you wanted to kill him there and then, so, I thought my interjection

would make you cross.”

“I was,” Gabriel admitted. “That little marquess would be digging his own grave, had I had my way.” Once more, Thalia stirred in his arms, and he shifted gently to allow her head to settle against his chest. “You were inspecting her... rather closely.”

Charlotte’s expression hardened. “Can’t be too careful, especially after what I’ve heard about the man. Nothing seems to have happened, but I won’t know for sure unless Thalia mentions it. Not that I’d make her,” she added with a somber tone. “Poor thing’s been through enough already.” She stood behind Gabriel as their carriage approached, ensuring enough space was given so Thalia could be eased into a seat.

He could sense her unease, a desire to ask what remained unspoken between them for so long. “It was a cowardly blow,” Charlotte murmured. “Mentioning family the way he did. He knew exactly what he was doing.”

He did. To have used his father’s death like that... it still sat heavy in Gabriel’s stomach, welling a sour taste up his throat. No one had mentioned his father’s death in years; today had been the most he’d thought, or spoken, of the man.

“Are you all right, Gabriel?”

He sighed lightly, the weight of the world suddenly noticeable against his shoulders. “I will be,” he replied as coolly as he could manage. “The sooner the name ‘Tilbury’ is ruined, the better. You don’t need to worry.”

“I always do, though,” Charlotte retorted. “And I’m insisting you get yourself patched up when we get home. I’ll make sure Thalia makes it to her room.”

“She’s not leaving my side, Charlotte.” Gabriel caught the anger in his tone, noted the

surprised look on his sister's face. He inhaled deeply, wrestling whatever emotions flared up briefly back into the pit of his chest. They could be dealt with later; it was not Charlotte who caused such fury. "I'll have the doctor look at my face after Thalia's is checked."

"Promise?" Charlotte scowled.

Gabriel nodded, settling inside the carriage as his sister followed suit. He carefully maneuvered himself beside Thalia, gently easing her against his side as her eyes fluttered. Feeling eyes on him, he glanced up, catching a smirk crossing Charlotte's face. "What's that for?"

"She said your name," Charlotte beamed. "Your proper name, dear brother."

She had, indeed. And it was destroying Gabriel from the inside out.

CHAPTER 22

She had vague memories amidst fluctuating consciousness. Of panic, of pain, of someone gathering her up and cradling her so tightly against their chest.

There was a vague understanding that she'd been in a carriage, the scent of chamomile alongside warm water, and the plush of a pillow that she sank so deeply into. Then there were the nightmares, breathless and cold, where she ran through the sinking snow as the shadows themselves stretched after her. And then...

Thalia's eyes fluttered open, and she found herself staring at a silk canopy. She groaned, sitting up against a wide array of pillows while pushing tangles of hair free from her face. It was clear she was back in Stonewell.

Giles would never place her in such a nice room unless it were his own, and the

distinct scent of earth and smoke she'd grown to associate within the Stonewell manor was all too present. Her face throbbed terribly, and she brushed her fingers lightly across small bandages, while the memory of grasping tree limbs skittered across.

She did her best to peer through the dimness, noting the partially-drawn curtains displayed a night sky full of stars. The bed table was covered in a variety of medical supplies—salves, linen, clean water—and as her eyes trailed across, Thalia took notice of the partially slumped figure curled up in one of the reading chairs. “Is someone here?”

Immediately, the figure was on their feet, rushing to her side as Mr. Harding—as Gabriel—came into focus. There was a wild look to his eyes, and as he grasped her hand, Thalia could feel seething heat rolling off his body. “You’re awake.”

Thalia nodded, still taken aback by his intensity.

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He must have noticed, quickly releasing his hold before pulling away from her. Gabriel stood before her, disheveled and sleepless, a clear twitch of anxiety causing him to pace slightly.

“Gabriel—”

“You slept past dinner,” Gabriel stated plainly.

Thalia’s mouth closed, a knot forming in the pit of her stomach.

“You drifted in and out of consciousness, and whenever you were lucid—the things you said—!” Gabriel looked ready to tear something in half, though opted instead to pull a nearby chair across the way before dropping into it.

“Gabriel, I’m so sorry.”

“Why didn’t you tell me he wanted you like that?”

Thalia’s blood ran cold. She could only stare helplessly at Gabriel, watch as his foot bounced and his fingers curled against the chair’s headrest. Smoke; gracious, but she’d miss the smell of smoke on him. “It... it doesn’t matter, now.”

“It does matter.”

“There’s nothing you can do about it—!”

Gabriel was suddenly at her side, barely a breath of space between them. The snarl

that rumbled deep from his throat hummed in her chest, and Thalia found herself prone to swoon once more. “When will you understand there is nothing I cannot accomplish?”

Thalia opened her mouth to reply, finding herself at a loss for words. Lost in the intense glare of his eyes, of an anger not direct at her, but for her. The thought curled in the back of her mind, flickering into a gentle warmth that crept across her body and pooled into her middle. Had anyone ever been angry for her sake? Her breath hitched; she couldn’t rightly remember.

She suddenly felt quite feverish, trying to push the comforter off in an attempt to put distance between them. “What happened with Giles, then?”

“He was completely disarmed by my feminine charms, of course!” Charlotte’s cheerful demeanor broke through the tension, her grinning face appearing around the door’s frame as she welcomed herself into the room. “It was quite a sight, if I do say so myself. There was nothing he could do but submit to all my wishes!” She dramatically flicked a strand of hair behind her shoulder, smiling smugly.

Thalia couldn’t decide if she should be impressed, or horrified. “You...really are a Harding, through and through.” She turned to address Gabriel, finding he’d retreated back to the chair against the bedside. A slight pang of hurt filled her chest, but Charlotte quickly grabbed her attention, bounding over and gently grasping at her hands.

“How are you feeling, Thalia?” she asked. “I won’t pry and ask any details, but Gabriel’s been going quite mad with all the waiting.”

Thalia glanced Gabriel’s way, noting his shoulders visibly stiffen at the comment. “I’m... groggy, I suppose. How long was I asleep for?”

“Only a few hours,” Charlotte reassured. “It’s about... one? Maybe one-thirty in the morning.”

“One thirty-seven,” Gabriel corrected, a pocket watch suddenly set in his hand.

And you’ve been in here this whole time...Thalia realized. She sighed, giving Charlotte’s hands an apologetic squeeze. “You two are very sweet to be concerned with me. But, I promise, I’m feeling much better than before. She rolled her next words around in her head for a moment, then decided it would be best to give the Hardings at least a bit of information. “I went faint from exhaustion, for the most part.”

“You truly looked as if you’d been running for days,” Charlotte said. “And, Giles didn’t...?”

“Giles didn’t hurt me,” Thalia fibbed, her chin still aching from his grasp. “Not in any significant way, at least.”

The look Gabriel cast her way sent a shiver down Thalia’s spine. He knew the truth, though his gaze flickered back to the pocket watch.

“He made you faint in public! And he tried to play it off as hysterics and besmirch your good name,” Charlotte argued.

Not that her name wasn’t besmirched as it was, but Thalia opted to keep that thought to herself.

“At any rate, you can rest easy about him,” Charlotte continued. “Giles is, without a doubt, banned from entering Stonewell, for any reason. Not that Gabriel would let him take even one step inside,” she added with a wink. “But the staff and servants know to keep an eye out for him, or anyone associated with him. Servants,

maids—heavens, even his butler won’t be allowed!”

Something horribly sour welled up in Thalia’s throat, and she nearly fell out of bed trying to stand. “Oh, God—I have to find him!”

“What? Find who—Thalia!?” Charlotte’s arms flew out, but Gabriel was faster, grabbing Thalia and catching her around the waist before she fell completely out of bed.

“I have to find George!” she cried out, trying to push free in a desperate bid for the door. “I—Giles let him go, and it’s all my fault!”

Immediately, Gabriel’s arms wrapped around her form, and she did everything she could to break free.

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“Let go, Gabriel!” Thalia shoved her trembling arms against him, mind suddenly light and drifting. “I—I need to... it’s my fault he’s?—”

“Thalia, take a deep breath.”

Her face flushed, furious that her own advice was being used against her. “Gabriel, please?” But he kept his grip firm—not enough to hurt her, but enough to make his point. With a sigh, Thalia inhaled and exhaled sharply, trying once more to wiggle free.

“Thalia.”

It was an unspoken command, gentle, but unwavering in its intent. Thalia sighed heavily, then found her breath hitching painfully in her chest. She blinked furiously, the first few drops of tears streaming down her face well-outside of her control.

“Someone reminded my sister that her emotions are nothing to be afraid of,” Gabriel said softly. “I would hope that someone took her own lessons to heart.”

Thalia’s arms worked free to grasp Gabriel’s waist, and she took another, far deeper breath. She held on for dear life as everything rushed to the forefront—exhaustion, terror, resentment, shame—and she found her legs too weak to support her, allowing Gabriel to hold her in its place.

“Charlotte, go let the kitchen know we need a tray made up,” he said softly.

Thalia hardly saw the door open and close behind Charlotte; she held far too fast to

Gabriel, trying desperately to remember how to breathe. All the while, he stayed there, holding her upright, ensuring she wouldn't collapse under the weight of it all.

* * *

He couldn't help but stare as Thalia gingerly took another sip of chamomile. Thalia. Yes, he was back to a first-name basis with her, after having so boldly proclaimed to himself to put distance between them.

But Gabriel found he couldn't help himself, especially after his interaction with Giles. And he'd spent enough time waiting for her to recover, so now both he and Thalia took to the gardens, seated beneath the gazebo as the night sky shimmered with astral wonder.

The tea table held a small pot and platter of dinner leftovers, though Thalia seemed only keen to nibble on some bread. Not that Gabriel would push the subject; the mere fact she was willing to eat anything was good enough for now.

"And you're certain that's what Giles said to you?" he asked.

Thalia nodded, setting her cup back against its saucer. "It was never explicitly stated, but... I wouldn't put it past Giles to fire someone I cared dearly for." Her teacup trembled, hands rushing to her lap as she no doubt clutched them tightly. "Poor Mr. Cooke... it's unlikely he'd get a proper letter of recommendation, either. I don't know how he's going to survive—his wife passed away years ago, and his children are scattered across England."

"Remind yourself that Mr. Cooke's misfortune rests solely in Giles' hands," Gabriel remarked.

"B-But he openly treated me with kindness," Thalia argued. "Even after everything,

and knowing full well that would create enemies.”

“That only cements him as a man I’d like to keep around.” Gabriel reached for his own cup, swirling the contents and watching curls of steam filter into the air.

“Worry not for him any further; you’ve already given me his address, and though I have no need for another butler, he is welcome to the small cabin farther out on the property line. That will at least expel his concerns for property tax.”

Thalia remained uneasy in appearance, staring at her hands as if they would come to life and bite her. Gabriel sat back against his chair, wrestling with what he wanted to say next. Everything felt too obvious, too patronizing, and he found himself well and truly stuck.

That was, until his little rabbit spoke up first, much to his surprise. “Would it be alright if I asked you something, Your Grace?”

He smiled, setting his cup down as his hands folded against the table. “No ‘Gabriel’ this time?”

Even in the dim, Thalia’s face blushed brightly.

“It’s quite alright,” Gabriel reassured. “I’m... pleased that you see me as being so approachable. If it does not cause you unease, I would ask you to continue using my name.”

Thalia nodded slowly. “Alright... Gabriel.”

Music to his ears.

“Then, you should refer to me as ‘Thalia’, consistently, from here on out,” she

insisted. “Unless you find me unapproachable?”

Gabriel chuckled now; it was quite the opposite, in fact.

“No, I do not find you unapproachable... Thalia.” Her name tingled against his tongue, finally used in a context where emotions weren’t at their absolute pinnacle. It felt as if he’d passed a barrier held between them, one he’d been so insistent on keeping. Still keeping; she made it so easy for him to lower his guard.

“What is your question?”

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Thalia exhaled, clearly still nervous to ask. But she did so anyway; another aspect he was growing to adore about her.

“From the beginning of our arrangement, it was very clear that I benefitted more than you. Even more so, now with your charitable aid to Mr. Cooke.” She glanced at her lap, then rose her gaze to meet him, those emerald eyes iridescent beneath the moonlight. “You even allowed my brother to come with me; a very generous offer, but not one you had to propose.”

Gabriel shrugged lightly. “I did not think it proper to leave him in Whitechapel. You would spend your days at Stonewell fretting over him.”

“I... would, yes,” Thalia admitted. “But you still didn’t have to do that. And, I admit, when I first arrived here, I had expected to play this grand role of infatuation. That I would be paraded about in public to showcase your interest in me, that I would need to fully convince your sister that I was in love with you.”

“Charlotte would believe you regardless,” Gabriel said. “The convincing was mostly on my end.”

“But certainly, more frequent social outings would solidify the ruse, and my end of the bargain would be more properly paid for?”

This was true, and it had been something Gabriel considered. He leaned back in his chair, taking his cup once more before giving it a long, considerable sip. “Did you wish to be paraded about, Thalia?”

The question gave her pause.

“Or did you wish to play the part of a lovesick fool to my sister, or to your old social group?” Gabriel set his cup down, giving her a long, careful look. “Did you hope to convince Giles, perhaps, that the terrifying Duke of Stonewell was pining after you?”

Her face blanched slightly. “I wouldn’t use you in such a way, Gabriel.”

She was being truthful. Painfully honest; if there was even a slight chance that Gabriel’s reputation would be affected by a decision on her part, Thalia would sooner put up with the consequences of her non-action. He shook his head, offering her a rare smile of warmth.

“So serious with your reply, Miss Sutton.”

“Thalia,” she corrected, managing a small, bashful grin of her own.

“Yes... Thalia.” Gabriel stood from his chair and rounded the table, getting down on one knee to fully face Thalia eye-to-eye. Gently, he extended his hand, and was delighted when she took it. “You have shown great courage and trust in me, Thalia, and I have kept many secrets from you. The very least I can do is grant you your own autonomy.”

Thalia chuckled weakly,

“It’s funny... when I first met you during Orion’s Hunt, your speech had a similar feeling to it.” She squeezed his hand lightly, a more genuine smile crossing her face. “I had thought your talk of a woman’s choice was merely for show, but... you’re not as unapproachable as you seem, Gabriel.”

He wasn’t. That thought scared him, the realization that, regardless of his pledge to

his father, Gabriel Harding allowed himself this minor vulnerability.

“Do... do you mind if I give you a kiss?” Thalia whispered.

A brief squirm of guilt settled into Gabriel’s stomach at her. She truly trusted him with everything. And he had kept her in the dark, willingly used her brother to his own end. Gently, he lifted her hand and brushed his lips against her knuckles. “Ask me again when you are not so wounded, little rabbit. After all, I prefer my prey to be healthy when I take them for a hunt.”

CHAPTER 23

Thalia’s third day at Stonewell Manor had started earlier than anyone anticipated, and thus, the rest of her time was dedicated to staying on the grounds. Charlotte had insisted heavily upon doing so, and in his own way, Gabriel (it seemed so strange, referring to him as such) seemed more than willing to accommodate.

Whatever activity Thalia even briefly brought up, he immediately ensured it happened. Painting in the garden, an easy horseback ride around the mansion proper—if she wanted to swim about the fountain near the front of the manor, she was certain he’d allow her to do so. Her only source of anxiety was her brother, or a lack thereof; Robin had been entirely absent since yesterday.

“Your brother?” Gabriel pondered for a moment, rolling a freshly-picked strawberry between his fingers. “He mentioned going to Whitechapel to ‘check in on things’. I assumed you would know what that meant.”

Thalia frowned, having barely touched her own bowl of fruit. Something about his tone, the way his posture stiffened—it set her entirely on-edge.

She tried to distract herself with Charlotte’s antics, noting her empty berry basket and

her body stretched across their blanket like a cat lazing in the sun. She only wished she could be so relaxed.

“I’m sure he’s just roughing it with his friends.” Charlotte practically purred, stretching an arm out as she plucked another strawberry straight off the bush. “You mentioned he had quite the loyal crew back in Whitechapel—I’d be worried myself, if I hadn’t seen them in a few days.”

That sounded at least a touch more reasonable. Still, Thalia couldn’t help but cast her eyes Gabriel’s way, unease skittering across her skin.

“Gracious, but these are divine!” Charlotte wiped her red-stained face with the back of her arm, eliciting a slight groan from her brother. “I wish Louise was here—she had such a terrible craving last we chatted. Oh, and Madeline is a genius with strawberries—Thalia, you would never taste another strawberry tart the same!”

“Maybe we could fill our baskets again and bring some to them?” Thalia proposed.

The Harding siblings immediately sat to attention, exchanging worried looks between them.

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“I haven’t returned from war, you know!” Thalia scoffed, arms crossing against her chest. “I wouldn’t mind stretching my legs a bit.”

“You could stretch your legs on Stonewell ground,” Gabriel offered lightly, but the veiled danger underneath wasn’t lost on her. He was telling her ‘no’.

“I can’t simply hide away from yesterday’s embarrassment,” Thalia said. “The sooner I get myself back into society’s eye, the better my reputation will stand. Besides, both women have proven themselves to be lovely individuals. I expect nothing less, though,” she added with a slight smirk. “Given their part of your inner circle, Charlotte.”

Charlotte beamed, ego clearly stroked and chest puffed out proudly.

“Well, I do have a knack for identifying honest folk. Oh, let us go, Gabriel! It wouldn’t be that long of a trip; Madeline’s hosting a sewing circle at her home, and I have no doubt Louise is there as well.” She squealed, clapping excitedly as she added, “They’re probably making little hats and booties and mittens for the baby! Please, Gabriel, please?”

Gabriel visibly gritted his teeth, and for a moment, Thalia wondered if this would be the first time he exercised his influence against them. But, after a moment, he let out a light sigh and waved the two away, popping a strawberry into his mouth.

“You aren’t taking any of mine, then. And I’m not helping you pick any new ones.”

“That’s rather un-gentlemanly of you,” Thalia teased.

“Yes, how dare you make your sweet, sweet sister pick strawberries all by her lonesome!” With a huff, Charlotte stood and gathered herself, marching off towards the bushes with nothing but the hem of her dress outstretched.

“Charlotte Ann Harding, don’t you dare use your dress as a basket!” Gabriel snapped.

“Ooh, let her be,” Thalia laughed. “I know an old family recipe to remove difficult stains.”

“Do you, now?”

Thalia’s cheeks burned at Gabriel’s suggestive tone. She turned back to face him, a strawberry pinched between his fingers as he offered her a bemused grin. She eyed his expression, then the strawberry, and with little thought, she launched forward and snatched it between her teeth.

“H-Hey!”

Thalia couldn’t help but squeal in delight at Gabriel’s genuine surprise. She did her best to get away, only for his arms to grab her waist and hoist her upright. Her own panicked cry fluttered into laughter between them, him rolling her back across the blanket, splayed out, hands pinned across. He stared down at her, breathing heavy, and she couldn’t help but note the predator spark in his eyes.

“Awfully daring, putting your hands so close to a wolf’s jaw,” Gabriel growled softly.

“Suppose this rabbit doesn’t mind getting bit,” Thalia replied, breathless.

For a moment, she allowed herself to be looked over. Allowed that hunger in his eyes to swirl, to hold that control over Gabriel for a brief, wonderful moment.

The anticipation was unbearable, her legs squirming beneath him, and she wanted nothing more than for him to bite her around the neck. But a rustling from the brush pulled them upright, a call from Charlotte to get moving spurring her back to her feet.

“We’re not done just yet.” Gabriel’s voice was rough, curt; he was just as disappointed as Thalia was.

“Of course not,” Thalia replied, trying her best to keep herself upright on still-quivering legs. “That was just a taste, after all.”

* * *

Charlotte had, in fact, been incorrect about Louise. When the pair arrived and settled into the parlor, it was only Madeline herself who greeted them. “She did wish to visit,” their hostess explained. “But, she was feeling unwell.”

Charlotte made a spectacular face. “Thalia, remind me never to become a mother myself. It sounds simply awful.”

“I would reserve your judgement until you find someone for yourself,” Thalia chuckled. “By then, you may very well be singing a different tune.”

“Doubt it,” Charlotte huffed.

Madeline offered nervous laughter herself, shifting both baskets of strawberries more securely into her arms. “Well, thank you again for the fruit. I’ll make sure to bring a bit of whatever I make.”

“You know me far too well,” Charlotte beamed.

“Thank you kindly, Madeline,” Thalia said.

Madeline offered a small smile, her eyes suddenly lighting up. “Oh! Before I forget...” she darted behind the door, returning soon after with two, beautifully-made cards decorated in florals. “I wanted to invite you two to my Seasonal event. I’m...surprised how many have already confirmed their presence, and having a few familiar faces will make it so much more bearable.”

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Charlotte immediately snatched the card out from her friend's hand, though Thalia was a touch more hesitant. "You're inviting me as well, Madeline? Are you sure? I'm not certain you've heard what happened yesterday."

Madeline nodded curtly, surprising Thalia with mid-interruption. "It's like I said before, my Lady. You are deserving of respect."

Thalia's smile warmed, wanting nothing more than to embrace Madeline there and then. Instead, she cleared her throat lightly, tucking her invitation between the seam of her light jacket. "Well, at least I'll be able to attend someone's Seasonal event while I'm here." She eyed Charlotte teasingly, her replying with a mocking scowl.

"Between Gabriel's fathering and your mothering, it feels as if I never lost my parents to begin with." Charlotte said, then turned to Madeline, putting on her brightest grin. "Madeline, dear, would you mind terribly hosting us for the afternoon? Gabriel has barred us from returning home."

"Only for a few hours," Thalia clarified. "If it's not too much trouble."

"Oh, not at all!" Madeline insisted, gesturing out the parlor doors. "I was already prepared for Louise visiting. Please, follow me; you're excused for now," she added to the lingering maid. "Take a moment to the kitchen and relax."

As the maid nodded, Madeline led the pair inside, and Thalia took the time to truly take in the manor's decor. The stained wood walls and clean flooring was pleasant enough, though the real beauty came from the assortment of potted ivy and floral arrangements that appeared to be trying to escape from their vases.

It reminded her of an enchanted cottage from a children's book, complete with an assortment of books and glimmering crystals and other natural oddities.

"Your decoration is so lovely, Madeline," Thalia crooned.

"Oh." Madeline paused, allowing Thalia a chance to catch up as she adjusted her spectacles. "Thank you so much. You're one of few who thinks so."

"Some unsavory individuals find Madeline's taste too 'country' for 'the finery of London society'," Charlotte groaned. "But I think it's straight out of a fairytale."

"My thoughts exactly," Thalia grinned. "It feels like we've stepped into an entirely different world."

A red flush crossed Madeline's face, and she nervously twirled a strand of hair hanging over her shoulder. "That's very kind of you to say. Father allows me to decorate as I please...I had hoped to create a haven of sorts, from the persistent gaze of higher society. I'm glad you find it so effective."

It truly was. Thalia found herself taking mental notes as they walked; surely, such universal decorations could easily be obtained once she was back at the rookery.

And the drawing room they ended up in looked positively otherworldly, heavy with the earthy scent of potting dirt and a fresh breeze that occasionally blew in through the window.

A few books had been abandoned alongside the window's reading seat, bookmarked with dozens of pressed flowers no doubt created by Madeline herself. Then there were a pair of settees surrounding a glass coffee table, cushions covered in a number of small, half-stitched dresses and freshly started embroidery pieces.

“I apologize for the mess. My maid offers to remove those every day but—” Madeline said.

“Don’t fret, Madeline.” Charlotte laughed. “We’re the ones who surprised you.” She skipped towards one of the settees, carefully handing a white-linen nightgown decorated in tiny asters and morning glories. “Gosh, you’re absolutely talented; look how adorable this is, Thalia!”

“It looks professionally made,” Thalia beamed.

Madeline blushed wildly, fiddling with her glasses once more. “That’s very kind of you to say. I’m not sure if it’s as good as the others, though.”

“Others?” Thalia inquired.

“She’s making one for every month in autumn and winter,” Charlotte explained. “That’s when Louise is supposedly delivering.”

“Gracious, Madeline!” Thalia marveled. “That’s six gowns in such a short time! And you mentioned ‘others’—you’ve finished some already?”

Madeline nodded sheepishly.

“Well, I would be honored if you’d let us help,” Thalia said.

Charlotte gasped, clapping her hands together excitedly. “Ooh, yes!” I haven’t made anything for the baby yet; this is the perfect chance! Thalia and I could embroider the flowers while you sew!”

“I would think the actual sewing part would be more time-consuming,” Thalia chided teasingly, finally joining the pair at last. “Feel free to direct us, Madeline. We’re your

unexpected guests, so the least we can do is be of use.”

Charlotte made a slight face, but Madeline looked more than thrilled by her offer. “Actually, I could use help with tidying up August’s florals—and, Thalia, if you truly don’t mind, I’ve only cut the shape out for October.”

“I’ll handle the florals!” Charlotte cried out, immediately scanning the couches before snatching up another linen dress embroidered with colorful poppies. A few did seem to be missing their petals and stems, and the designs were small and detailed. Thalia was somewhat relieved to be handling construction.

The trio eventually fell into a peaceful rhythm, with Madeline occasionally giving creative direction. Charlotte had immediately fallen into her own little world, embroidering up a storm with a look of absolute concentration.

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That left Thalia to bear the brunt of conversation, though she hardly minded, given how much of a mystery Madeline still was to her.

“So, your father runs a boarding school out in the countryside?” Thalia inquired. “I must say, that would entirely explain your taste in decor.”

Madeline nodded, having grown far more at-ease as time passed. She hardly stumbled over her words, and her once soft, mousy tone had grown slightly bolder.

“He had little opportunity to advance in society h-himself as a child. He never told me exactly how it happened, but one day, he received an amazing schooling opportunity and worked very hard to gain the r-respect of the upper class.” A dreamy look crossed her eyes, as if recalling a fond memory. “That’s where he met my mother, and... w-well, I simply wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

Thalia mindlessly slipped her needle through the fabric, operating on instinct as her attention went to Madeline. “Gracious, but that truly is serendipity at its finest.”

“It is,” Madeline agreed. “And he wanted nothing more than to pass that good fortune on to others in need of a little extra luck.”

“Thus his choice in location,” Thalia said, letting out a longing sigh as she finished another stitch. “Gracious, but he’s done exactly what I hope to accomplish someday. It—” she hesitated for a moment, needle wavering in her hand. “I had the brief fortune to learn of estates left from my family’s maternal side.”

“I didn’t know that,” Charlotte piped up, fully present once more in their

conversation.

“Gabriel never mentioned it?” Thalia asked. “It’s... partly how we met. He’s helping me obtain the deeds—I’m not entirely sure how he’s going to do it, though, given how my cousin burned them.”

Charlotte gasped sharply, Madeline offering a sympathetic frown. ‘Oh, Th-Thalia... that’s terrible.’”

Thalia nodded, lining up the next pairs of fabric before making the first, quick stitch. “For a brief moment, the vision was so clear; a collection of boarding schools, accessible for children in similarly bleak situations.” She paused, adding hastily, “This must stay between us, though. The last thing I need is Giles learning of my gossip.”

“Hardly gossip if it’s true,” Madeline offered gently. “B-but, I’ll keep it to myself.”

Charlotte groaned, her tone sour and expression even more so. “Well, I’m glad Gabriel invited you to stay with us. Gracious, but could you imagine if you were still in Whitechapel? After what I witnessed yesterday, I tremble to think what that witless cousin of yours would try.”

“I’m very grateful for your brother’s intervention,” Thalia admitted. “By all accounts, he’s doing it simply because he can. I can hardly see how he benefits, and he refuses to tell me otherwise.”

“That certainly sounds like him. Always keeping his cards close to his—” Charlotte suddenly froze, her eyes locked onto Thalia. “Wait... what did you say?”

Thalia blinked, uncertain as to what the young woman could mean.

“Why would Gabriel expect anything from you?” Charlotte asked. “If anything, he should do it purely out of courtship. I mean, he’s your suitor, for goodness sake, and I would hardly think he’d expect something from someone he...” her sentence trailed off, realization settling across her face.

“Charlotte, w-wait—” Thalia let out a pained hiss, having jabbed her needle into her finger absentmindedly. A drop of blood pooled against her pointer finger, and she watched as crimson blots stained the gown she’d been working on.

“Oh, g-gracious—let me get you a linen, Lady Thalia!” Madeline halfway towards the door, clearly desperate for any excuse to leave. The room fell silent afterwards, anxiety tying knots in Thalia’s stomach as Charlotte’s rage visibly built.

“Charlotte,” Thalia began.

“My brother isn’t actually courting you,” Charlotte hissed. “Is he?”

Thalia couldn’t find the words to reply.

CHAPTER 24

Their visit was cut short, Madeline apologizing profusely while Thalia insisted she wasn’t at fault. Soon after, she found herself on the worst carriage ride she’d ever endured, the tension thicker than a knife could possibly cut through.

She hardly knew where to look, gaze flickering between the window, the floor, her hands tightly wrung against her lap. Their poor chaperone looked as if she were trying to sink into the chair itself, and Thalia could hardly blame her. Every so often, she’d lift to catch Charlotte’s eye, only to turn away from her smoldering gaze.

“Charlotte, I’m so sorry,” she began. “I shouldn’t have kept this a secret from you.

I'm not even sure why I did."

"Because it's horribly demeaning, that's why!" Charlotte hissed between her teeth, slouching back into her seat while her arms crossed tightly.

It was horribly unladylike, but Thalia hardly thought the proper time to point that out. She watched her friend fume for another moment or two before a frustrated snarl escaped Charlotte's lips.

"I just—I can't believe him! I mean, I absolutely can—I knew it was suspicious when he brought you home without any prior warning."

Thalia nodded half-heartedly, uncertain still as to what she could say to make the situation any better.

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“Then, you made a deal with him?” Charlotte asked. “Pretend he’s courting you for... for what reason, though?”

“He didn’t want you worrying about him anymore.” Not entirely the truth, but Thalia couldn’t bear to be so blunt about it. To know your brother found your efforts annoying, distracting... it was simply too much.

“So he wanted me out of his hair,” Charlotte grumbled. “Good to know he thinks so highly of me.”

“Charlotte.”

“He’s so—so emotionally stunted, Thalia!” Charlotte groaned loudly, flopping onto her back as she threw her hands up in frustration. “He has this whole notion of being in control of everything, and—and I know he’s the head of the house, and he quite literally is in control of so many people’s livelihoods, and the well-being of Stonewell—I just—!” She stopped herself, forcing a breath before falling silent. Thalia watched as her chest rose and fell, her eyes squeezed shut, and she muttered something under her breath.

“Are you alright?” Thalia asked.

A beat passed, and eventually, Charlotte sat up once more. “I... will be. But, are you alright? I mean, he hasn’t done anything... untoward, right?”

“N-No, of course not!” Thalia shook her head furiously, memories of the library turning to ash in her mouth. “Charlotte, your brother has been nothing but cordial

with me. I promise; he hasn't done anything I disapproved of."

Charlotte appeared somewhat relieved, but she looked... more tired than Thalia had ever seen before. "I guess... I didn't realize how much I hoped he was being genuine. When I see you with him... I don't know. He felt different to me, like he was enjoying the idea of courting you. Like he really wanted to give the idea of marriage another go."

Thalia's eyes widened slightly, and she did her best to keep her voice even. "Gabriel... has no interest in marrying?"

Charlotte shook her head, fists clenching. "Since the day Father died—after Mother betrayed us all, he swore he'd never let himself be open like that. Love someone like Father had."

This was so much, and so suddenly. Thalia felt herself grow faint, and she leaned against the back of her seat. "I... had no idea she'd done that to you. Charlotte, I'm—I'm so sorry."

Charlotte remained quiet, her gaze boring into the cushion beside her.

Thalia swallowed, wanting both to comfort and satiate her curiosity. She felt terrible for even considering asking further, and instead, reached out to grasp Charlotte's hands. It felt like such a hollow gesture, but Charlotte squeezed back immediately, panic overtaking the younger Harding's voice.

"Thalia, if he's toying with your heart—you would tell me, wouldn't you?"

Could she tell Charlotte? What was there to even say? Thalia was still reeling from the previous revelations—their mother's betrayal, Gabriel's adamant stance against marriage—and Thalia's being felt as if she'd been torn to pieces and scattered to the

winds. But, that wasn't what Charlotte needed right now. So, Thalia exhaled softly and offered a nod.

"If... if he is, I will let you know."

"Promise?"

Gracious, but that little word felt like a dagger to Thalia's soul. She hadn't even done anything wrong, and yet, it felt so much like the final twist. "It's... the least I can do, after lying so long to you."

Charlotte offered a weak smirk, a peal of loose laughter escaping her lips. "It hurts to find out, but... I understand why you did it. I promise I'm not upset with you, all right? I just," she sighed, visibly exhausted. "I wish I knew what was real and what isn't. Gabriel is entirely too convincing of an actor, sometimes."

You have no idea, Thalia thought bitterly.

* * *

It was the first time in quite some time that Gabriel felt giddy about anything. The truest sense of the word, untainted by a desire for vengeance or control. As soon as the ladies left the mansion, he wasted no time preparing the mansion's interior for the alluded-to shipment, and now, nearly the whole of the entryway was filled to the brim with customized gowns, all specially tailored for Thalia.

Brilliant emeralds, rich and deep burgundies—it was a myriad of beautiful colors that spoke of wealth and sophistication. After today, no one in the ton would look upon his little rabbit with disdain.

The crunching of wheels against gravel caught his attention, and Gabriel gestured

toward the servants to abscond throughout the house. Running a hand through his hair, he approached the front doors and pushed them open, greeting the carriage with a relaxed smile.

“Welcome back, ladies. Your arrival is just in—” he stopped, shoulders stiffening as Charlotte came bounding up the stairs with a storm cloud hanging over her. “Charlotte, what’s wrong?”

She immediately pushed past him, stumbling into the entryway before finally noticing the dresses. With a snarling outcry, Charlotte shot him the dirtiest look to date before making for the main staircase.

“Charlotte?” Gabriel tried calling after her, only to hear another pair of footsteps climb up the entryway. He turned, facing Thalia head-on as she, too, looked rather melancholy. “Why is it every time you’re alone with my sister—”

“Please, Gabriel,” Thalia begged. “Not now.”

Gabriel frowned, stepping to the side and allowing Thalia to pass. His hand instead went to help the maid, who quickly excused herself with a nod of her head and hurried into the nearest door. Before he could speak, he heard Thalia’s choked gasp at the sight of the dresses. “I suppose this comes at an inopportune time, then?” he asked.

Thalia met his eyes, weariness replaced with trepidation. “What is this?”

Gabriel extended a hand, disconcerted as she loosely accepted it. “Charlotte... told me you barely got a gown during your shopping trip.” He gestured towards the racks, a sour fury bubbling in his stomach. “I had thought this would be a pleasant surprise, but you look... disappointed.” He frowned, then shook his head. “No, you’re angry, aren’t you?”

Thalia opened her mouth to argue.

“You are,” Gabriel interrupted. “You just don’t wish to upset me by confirming it.” He tried to give her hand a reassuring squeeze, but she pulled free quickly, stepping ahead of him and into the sea of gowns. In three steps, Gabriel caught back up to her, trying again to grab her hand, snarling as she pulled away from him again. “What happened?”

Thalia turned to him, clearly shocked by his outrageous tone. She slipped behind a dress mimicking the ocean itself, her face partially obscured. “It’s nothing. I’m simply tired, your Grace.”

Gabriel could feel his temper beginning to rise into his chest. “This isn’t fair, Thalia. You’re clearly upset with me.”

Thalia pretended to be preoccupied by the gown’s beadwork, delicately tracing the pattern with her bandaged finger.

“What on earth happened to your finger?” Gabriel stepped forward, trying to grasp

her hand once more. And, once more, she pulled away, his voice nearly snapping with impatience. “Thalia Sutton, I swear to all that is holy, if you don’t stop playing coy with me—”

“What, Your Grace? What will you do?” Thalia’s face flushed with anger, hands trembling at her side as she glared Gabriel down. “Will you hunt me through the mansion like the pathetic prey I am? Or perhaps you’ll simply drag me upstairs and take what you want from me once more!”

It was the first time a woman had genuinely wounded him in such a manner, as if she’d raised her hand and slapped him. Hard.

“What are you talking about? I do not take what hasn’t been given to me; you know that, Thalia.”

Thalia laughed, cold and cruel, teetering on the brink of collapse. “Do I, though? I hardly know you at all, so obscured in your own secrets and ploys. What sick pleasure do you derive from playing these games, Gabriel Harding? What does a wolf benefit by helping the rabbit live a few hours longer, knowing full well she’ll soon be left bleeding in the woods once more?”

Gabriel was positively reeling; it was getting harder by the second to remain composed. “You make it seem as if I’m going to simply abandon you.”

“Aren’t you, though?” Tears edged at the corner of Thalia’s eyes, but she completely ignored them, with every word she spoke to him. “Once you get what you want—once the hunt is over, and you’ve fed on your kill—won’t our little arrangement come to an end? That’s all it’s ever been about, hasn’t it? That’s why you’ve never explicitly stated what you truly desire from me—and I was stupid and naive enough to believe that... that...”

“Thalia...” he said, his arm outstretched, desperate to take her hand, to bring her in and dry her tears. “You’re clearly upset, and this is no place to discuss such delicate matters.”

“Everything I am has been stripped away, Gabriel,” Thalia sobbed. “My home, my title, my social standing—I have nothing left that remains a delicate matter.”

Those last words stung in a way he hadn’t expected. Gabriel’s mind whirled, their shared moment in the library rushing to the forefront of his mind. Fractals suddenly came together into one, devastating picture, and he exhaled sharply, realizing he’d been holding his breath.

“I knew it wasn’t real from the start,” Thalia said. “You told me as much. It’s my fault, at the end of the day, for allowing myself to get caught up in it all.”

He could have died there and then, struck down by the absolute hopelessness in Thalia’s voice. Gabriel internally berated himself for his weakness, for allowing them to develop beyond mere strangers.

There was a chance, here and now, to break their tether completely. To re-construct his image as cold and distant, repair walls built up over years and torn down in mere days. She was giving him a chance; his little rabbit stood in the open field, no longer hidden away, and waited for the inevitable.

And Gabriel remained still. Remained silent.

A short, breathy sigh escaped Thalia, still tinged in tears as she worked to wipe her face. “Thank you, Your Grace. The gowns... really are quite lovely. I’ll make sure to wear them, if you deem me worthy to be seen in public by your side.”

“Thalia...”

“I wish to go upstairs,” Thalia continued. “Rest before dinner, if Your Grace wills it.”

He wanted to reach out. Grasp her hand and pull her into his chest, then hold her so she would never escape him again. To snarl in her ear at the absolute lack of respect she was showing him as the master of the house, as the Duke of Stonewell.

But, even now, Gabriel stared at her bandaged wrist, and found his anger directed not at her, but the man who’d twisted her good nature in the first place. And, much to his concern, at himself.

“You are free to be yourself in this house, Thalia. Do as you wish.”

CHAPTER 25

Neither lady came down to dinner that evening. Not that Gabriel had expected anything different, but a small part of him hoped they would have joined him, Thalia especially. He and Charlotte had had plenty of fights before—it was the nature of being siblings, after all—but Thalia... it was the first time he genuinely wanted a lady he was “courting” to come back to him. To let him speak, to properly explain himself. The fact that she was upset with him in any way was infuriating.

He sighed heavily, pushing cutlets of pork around his plate before eventually giving up completely, rising from his chair and gesturing towards the servants. “Clear this,” he instructed. “But make sure two plates are made up for Tha—Miss Sutton and Charlotte.”

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His servant nodded, curtly clearing the dishes and slipping back to the kitchen. Gabriel stared at the table for a long, absent moment, then pulled his pocket watch free from his vest pocket. The subtle tick of mechanism once held great comfort to him; now, it cracked against his skull, punctuating every word spoken by Thalia not hours ago.

What sick pleasure do you derive from playing these games, Gabriel Harding?

Another sigh, and Gabriel clicked the watch's lid shut. "Summon a carriage for me," he ordered. "I'll be going to the club for a few hours."

"Of course, Your Grace," the servant bowed. "Would you like us to place the gowns in a spare room for now?"

Gabriel nodded curtly, wanting them out of his entryway and out of sight as quickly as possible. God, but he needed a strong drink right now.

* * *

The club's manor was packed to the brim with members, loitering about the entryway while chatting amongst their peers. Many greeted Gabriel's entrance with a polite nod or a firm handshake, and he settled into his usual visage among his fellow Orions. His brow remained somewhat furrowed, mouth dipped into a perpetual scowl, and he ensured his tone remained neutral and uninterested.

He strolled through the walkway and straight through the dining room, where a number of men smoked and drank together with loud conversation. A few had card

decks sprawled out on the main table, no doubt practicing for the upcoming tournament.

Gabriel pinched the bridge of his nose, realizing how little he'd done to prepare for the event. The last few days had felt like a whirlwind of activity; hopefully Christian hadn't slacked off on his duties.

"Gabriel?" Speak of the devil; the perfectly-preened man appeared from the kitchen doors, quickly moving to greet his friend. He hardly waited for a reply before grasping Gabriel's hand and shaking it vigorously, a wide—if not somewhat fatigued—smile painted on his face. "What on earth are you doing here so late? Not that I'm disappointed, mind you, I'm just a bit surprised."

Gabriel's expression darkened slightly.

"Oh, no need for that face," Christian joked. "I simply meant that your current company at home was far more interesting." He paused, smile loosening as his gaze narrowed slightly. "Unless... you're here because of said company?"

The drone of chatter amidst the dining room softened, and Gabriel became acutely aware of a few dozen eyes turning their direction.

"No, wait," Christian said with a slight smirk. "You probably want to see what progress has been made on the cards tournament, and your being here has nothing to do with Miss Sutton! Not to worry, Gabriel. I promised I would handle it this year, and I am not one to break my word so easily. Come; I'll show you what I've put together so far."

Without another word between them, Gabriel trailed behind his excitable friend, watching as he took the time to greet and hold polite conversation with passing members.

They wound through the hall and up the staircase, having finally been cleared of its blockade from Orion's Hunt. As they made their way up the stairs and further into the manor, Christian occasionally offered a glance behind his shoulder, clearly concerned, but unwilling to voice it just yet.

Finally, they reached the end of the hall, a large plaque carved with, "Christian Wright, His Grace the Duke of Egerton" in bold lettering. He twisted the knob and pushed it open, allowing Gabriel to pass through first before following after, pulling the door shut behind him.

Christian's office was as neat and organized as his appearance, with few to no personal touches or decorations to distract him from club work. At least, there hadn't been previously; Gabriel took note of a dried bundle of wildflowers in a hand-painted vase, a knitted scarf hanging on the back of his work chair. He passed by his friend's writing desk, catching a glimpse inside a partially-opened drawer with a black, oblong box tucked away inside.

"Louise was hinting about getting a one-of-a-kind writing quill," Christian beamed. "Don't tell her you saw anything, though." He crossed towards a small reading corner as Gabriel dropped into an armchair, glancing through the shelves before pushing a few books aside and producing a beautifully-aged bottle of scotch.

"We're obviously going to need this," he mumbled, grabbing a pair of glasses before joining Gabriel in an armchair set across from him. He quickly poured and served his friend a glass, then worked on his own before settling into his chair.

In the blink of an eye, Gabriel polished his glass off and set it loudly against the glass table.

"You really are in a sorry state, aren't you?" Christian mused, having just barely put his lips to his own drink.

Gabriel shot daggers in reply, reaching across their table to take the entire bottle's worth for himself.

"You know that bottle costs more than your entire--"

"Not now, Christian." Gabriel took a long, hard swig, allowing himself to experience the deep burn at the back of his throat. He set the bottle against the table, eyeing his friend with a challenging look in his eye.

Christian rose a brow, offering his full attention instead as he gave his own glass a slight swirl. "Are you in need of an ear, or are you in need of advice?"

Gabriel's fingers drumming impatiently against the arm of his chair; he wasn't entirely sure how to answer.

Christian took a sip from his glass, setting it on the table before leaning forward in his seat. "If you simply need somewhere to stew, I'm happy to leave you be."

Gabriel gritted his teeth, acutely aware how deafeningly quiet it was in Christian's office. Once more, he pulled out his pocket watch, opening the lid as he focused on the ticking mechanism once more. One, two, three, four... He exhaled, not realizing he'd been holding his breath, and did his best to quell his mind.

"How... did you know Louise was someone you wished to spend your life with?" He lifted his gaze, nearly launching out of his chair at Christian's ear-to-ear smirk.

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“I’m sorry! I’ll remain cordial,” Christian begged. “I just—give me a moment. That wasn’t—I don’t think I was quite ready for that.”

Somehow, that felt far worse than if he’d simply laughed at Gabriel. He watched impatiently as his friend gathered his own thoughts, grabbing his cup and taking a long, pondering sip. This had been a terrible idea; he should have just gone to the warehouse, thrown a few punches and lost himself in the rush of violence.

Hell, he’d rather be back in his room as a boy, watching as his father completely broke down in front of him. A cold shudder ran up his spine, and Gabriel took another swig directly from the bottle.

“I think...” Christian began, a note of hesitancy in his voice. “Honestly, I wasn’t so certain until what felt like the very last minute. I’d only known Louise for a few days—and you know very well it was nothing like a love match at first. A mere marriage of convenience... It seemed ridiculous, thinking I could grow to adore someone in such a short time.” He stared wistfully at his scotch glass, giving the contents another swirl before taking a short sip. “When I watched her father strike at her... I don’t know.”

“Something snapped,” Gabriel said.

Christian shook his head. “That’s not entirely right. I’ve been angry before—I’ve beaten men for less of a reason—but seeing Louise so willingly throw herself into danger...” He sighed, finishing his own glass before setting it against the arm of his chair. “It felt...primal. An uncontrollable urge to ensure nothing and no one would hurt her again. Not as long as I was alive, at least.”

Gabriel nodded, feeling as if the veil over his mind had somewhat lifted. "I'm certain you've heard of yesterday's incident in town?"

"With the little marquess?" Christian chuckled darkly, hand squeezing tightly around his glass. "I'm amazed you didn't kill him, honestly."

"You can thank Charlotte for my lack of action," Gabriel said.

"She really is growing into a terrifying beast of her own," Christian laughed.

She was, indeed.

"But, back to the subject at hand..." Christian leaned across the table, glass tilted towards Gabriel. He relented, pouring his friend another before taking a shot himself.

Christian made a slight face, but chose to continue on with his sentence instead of chastising the man. "I think I fully realized it at that moment. When the thought of any harm coming to Louise was worse than anything I could imagine. And you know me," he offered with a wink. "I can be quite inventive when it comes to torture."

Gabriel let out a frustrated hiss, setting the bottle back onto the table before leaning back into his own chair. "This isn't as helpful as you think it is."

"You're the one who posed the question," Christian pointed out. "And, I think it's unhelpful because you already knew the answer, Gabriel." He frowned, shifting in his seat before knocking back his entire cup. "What exactly happened between you and Miss Sutton?"

An irritable growl escaped Gabriel's throat. "She finds me as repugnant as her cousin. A deviant only looking out for his best interests."

“Were those her exact words?” Christian asked.

“What do the particulars of the incident matter?” Gabriel snapped.

Christian sighed, setting his cup against the table once more. “I know I sound pedantic, Gabriel, but these sorts of matters need careful consideration. I nearly made the same mistake, internalizing and demonizing the words spoken by Louise.”

“Nothing’s been internalized,” Gabriel argued. “To do so would mean I have some emotional regard for Thalia.”

Christian's brow furrowed.

“And I do not.”

Christian’s brow furrowed further.

“And your persistence in this matter will send you home in a matchbox, you obnoxious snoop.”

Christian sighed louder than before, leaning back in his chair before kicking his feet up onto the glass tabletop. “See, that’s your problem, Gabriel. You want it both ways; to come off as cold and uncaring, yet showcase a level of intimacy that will invite women to stay by your side.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “I’m hardly interested in keeping any woman by my side.”

“You’re right,” Christian agreed, a somber note edging into his tone. “You’re interested in one particular woman.”

The scotch now burned terribly in his stomach; Gabriel wished now more than ever

he'd gone to the warehouse instead. Knocking his friend's teeth out would possibly have to do.

“You know, you came to me in search of solace,” Christian began, clearly offended. “And all I've gotten from you is overt threats of violence and an embarrassing display of self-pity on your part.”

“Christian, I swear—”

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“This isn’t hard, Gabriel. All you have to do is answer one, simple question.” Christian’s tone was sharp, no longer tinged with empathy or his usual fair nature. “What is Thalia Sutton to you? Is she just another fun hunt? Is she a means to the end of an obnoxious little marquess?”

“That’s the problem!” Gabriel snarled, nearly knocking his chair over as he shot to his feet. “I don’t know what she is to me, anymore. I have no clear definition, because circumstances have changed outside of my control and there’s absolutely nothing I can do or say otherwise!”

Christian’s eyes widened slightly, and Gabriel could feel shame twist his already-sickening stomach. He bit the inside of his cheek, furious at himself for such an emotional outburst. At Giles Tilbury, for causing this entire mess to begin with. At Thalia Sutton, for making him feel so... so...

“Vulnerable,” Gabriel muttered under his breath. He shifted in his chair, feeling a warm jolt from the scotch working its way through his system. But, that was only an excuse, he realized; something to hide behind to avoid confrontation altogether.

He stood abruptly, reaching for his night coat slung over the back of his chair. “I’m headed back to Stonewell. You’ll keep things here in order, I presume?”

“I always do,” Christian assured, rising to bid his friend a good night. He gave Gabriel a firm grasp on his shoulder, sincerity still present in his once-more playful tone. “Get it done, Gabriel. Don’t let yourself—or Miss Sutton—go to bed upset.”

Thalia paced between her bed and her small pile of suitcases, some partially filled with her possessions while others remained untouched. It felt like mere moments ago, a fire burned in her chest to be rid of this place, and she nurtured that flame through the act of packing her things.

Half-folded gowns had been tossed without care, followed soon after by books gently placed within. Thalia's hand hovered over a small bouquet of wildflowers—a gift from Charlotte, picked earlier that day—and she felt her eyes fill with tears once more.

“What am I doing?” she asked, returning to her bed's side before dropping across it. Her burning desire had since diminished into a small smolder, a gentle glow of coals that needed effort to maintain.

But Thalia had no desire to put in said effort, and instead curled up against the plush of her bed, staring above at the silken curtains and wood-carved canopy. “Why did I say all those terrible things?”

She knew in her heart that Gabriel had been wounded by her words. And some small, disgusting part of her enjoyed that idea quite thoroughly. A modicum of control in her life, at the expense of a man's peace.

“A man who has been nothing but kind to you,” Thalia chided herself. “Who you slandered in front of the entirety of his staff. And in his own home—oh, Thalia Sutton, you've really done it this time.”

She groaned, arm stretching across the mattress as she snatched her pillow and buried her face deeply. Maybe she packed in fear that Gabriel would send her away tonight. Maybe she hoped he retaliated in such a manner, to prove her cutting words held weight.

“Maybe I deserve to be abandoned,” she muttered into the silken pillowcase. “He would be entirely in his right to throw me out.” Thalia fully deserved such a punishment, after the way she acted. She had known from the start their courtship was fake; it was her fault for indulging in the fantasy so carelessly.

Someone knocked gently against her door, and she barely had the strength to lift her head. Slowly, Thalia sat upright and ensured she was decent before calling out an invitation.

“Come in.” She half-expected it to be Charlotte, coming to commiserate with her over their shared revelations. It was well past dinner, of course; perhaps the staff wanted to ensure she wouldn’t wither away. Perhaps Gabriel sent something up out of concern.

“May I, really?”

Thalia’s face flushed with heat, immediately standing upright at the familiar tone. She rushed to cross her room, grasping the door before pulling it open. Sure enough, the spoken-of devil himself stood stiffly in the hall, wearing a night jacket that lingered with the scent of smoke and alcohol.

“Gabri—” Thalia paused, bowing her head slightly. “Y-Your Grace.”

“Gabriel,” he insisted. “I...ask that our familiarity doesn’t deteriorate any further tonight.”

Thalia nodded, stepping aside before bidding him to enter.

“Is that what you truly wish for?”

Her breath hitched, a moment of hesitancy paralyzing her completely. After a beat,

Thalia nodded once more, and as Gabriel passed her by, a rush of air escaped her lungs. Gently, she closed the door behind her, standing awkwardly in place as she watched him inspect her space. His gaze clearly lingered on her suitcases, and she cleared her throat to explain herself.

“I wish to apologize,” Gabriel began softly.

Thalia’s mouth hung open, and she closed it quietly.

“You... clearly have not felt as safe as I would have liked, here in my home.” His back remained turned, and he stepped towards her things, picking one of the books out from within the luggage and seemingly inspecting the detailing of the cover. “However it happened—whenever it occurred—I bear responsibility as Duke of Stonewell.”

Thalia blinked, taken aback by the lack of edge in his tone. No. It was far more than that. She’d never heard him sound... remorseful, before. Warm, even.

“I have always felt safe here,” she insisted.

Gabriel shook his head, turning to face her with the book still clutched in his grasp. “That outburst earlier says otherwise.”

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“I—I simply was emotional,” Thalia said. “Lingering hysterics from yesterday, perhaps. It wasn’t your fault, I simply—”

“Don’t speak about yourself in such a way.” It was back, but only briefly; that cold, precise tone Gabriel used when trying to intimidate someone. When stalking after his prey. “You treat yourself as badly as your cousin does.”

Once more, Thalia fell silent, wringing her hands as she leaned against the door. “I’m sorry.”

“No, that isn’t—” Gabriel exhaled loudly, starting forward to try and close the distance between them. “Thalia, I don’t want your apologies.”

“Then what do you want?” She asked, feeling her legs grow weaker the closer he drew. Five paces, two paces—he was a mere arm’s length away now, dark eyes burning with a desire to...to be heard? Understood?

Gabriel sighed, his breath prickling against the exposed parts of her chest. She suddenly felt quite cold in her nightdress, and Thalia wished she had thought to put on some sort of robe.

Without a word, Gabriel shrugged off his outer jacket, gently draping it across her shoulders. Thalia’s fingers grasped at its collar, a familiar earthy scent mixed with smoke warming her core completely. Her cheek brushed against it, and she inhaled deeply.

Tears pricked the corners of her eyes, and she hastily straightened herself, trying to

give the jacket back. Gabriel's hand gently pressed against her shoulder, ensuring it stayed in place.

"I-I'll ruin it," she said through gritted teeth, trying to keep her tears from spilling.

"I don't care," Gabriel insisted.

Thalia allowed herself a few tears, wiping her face before speaking once more. "I had no right to speak to you that way. You told me the truth from the start."

"I did."

"You said this was to be a ploy to please your sister."

"It was."

Thalia's heart skipped a beat. "Was?"

Gabriel seemed to think long and hard about his next sentence, finger tracing the seam of his jacket while seemingly committing every detail of Thalia's face to memory.

Those midnight eyes... far more complex than she originally assumed. But, everyone was more complex beyond their walls. Everyone held up a mask for the social masquerade.

"I apologize if my actions toward you muddled our understanding of each other."

She was holding her breath, hoping—daring to hope—that the conversation wouldn't go where she thought it might.

“I do not—I did not intend to insinuate your usefulness ended at...” Again, Gabriel sighed, brow furrowed in clear frustration towards himself. It was the first time Thalia had heard him speak so ineloquently. “What happened in the library... that isn’t your only purpose to me.”

Thalia let his words wash over her, wrestling between a desperate desire to believe him, and the stinging ache of distrust. “Why won’t you say it?”

Gabriel fell quiet, unable to hold his gaze with her any longer.

“Charlotte told me,” Thalia continued. “On the way home... she told me you had no intention to marry.”

He looked as if she’d just slapped him across the face.

Gently, Thalia pushed him away, removing the jacket from around her shoulders. “I almost wish you had said otherwise. That you required more from me, that our arrangement simply wasn’t beneficial enough.”

“Thalia.”

“Because, at least that way—” She struggled to keep her voice steady. He had to understand; he had to. “At least that way... I wouldn’t have gotten my hopes up. I wouldn’t have allowed myself to be misled so easily.” Thalia held the jacket outward, forcing her arm not to tremble under its weight. And, after a long, terrible silence shared between them, Gabriel took it back. “I’m sorry I was short with you,” Thalia said.

“I’m... sorry it came to that point at all,” Gabriel replied.

She felt as if she would come undone, there and then. It wasn’t his fault—he wasn’t

the reason she'd placed so much emotional trust into him. That wasn't fair; it wasn't what he asked from her. Thalia let her next breath burn in her chest, tears blinking free and streaming down her face. Then, she let it out in a rush, forcing herself to face Gabriel one last time.

“The dresses really are lovely, thank you. You have excellent taste.”

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Why was he doing this to her? Why couldn't he go back to that glimmering-eyed predator during Orion's Hunt? Why couldn't they be strangers once more?

"I... hope to get a chance to wear them soon."

Gabriel nodded, taking a step back before donning his coat once more. "I had planned to take you and my sister to an art gallery."

"I would like that. It would be a nice opportunity to... be seen in public together."

Silence hung between them after that, and Thalia's fingers drifted against her neck. It was so choking between them, so lifeless; and he stared at her with those haunting, dark eyes, as if the night sky itself had wanted to share some intimate secret with her. Whatever starlight might've been was gone, now; it was for the best.

"Then..." Gabriel gestured toward the door, and Thalia opened it with a gentle twist. He nodded her good night, passing by without so much as a glance. She closed the door once he fully left her room, and only then did her legs finally give out and the tearful sobs came in full, miserable waves.

I wish I could run from you more, she thought. Do anything to lengthen this chase between us.

Before it all came to an end in a little more than a day's time.

CHAPTER 27

Thalia's fourth morning at Stonewell Manor began with a gloomy overcast. Breakfast was brief and void of conversation, save Gabriel's invitation to accompany him at the art gallery.

"I have no choice but to attend, as is expected from a duke," he explained over a cup of tea—the only thing he'd touched from the table's grand spread. "But both you and Charlotte are welcome to stay at home, or attend to other matters of interest."

Thalia glanced across from her, Charlotte slumped in her chair and lifelessly stirring a bowl full of porridge. "I had some time last night to write a few invitations for my party," she said. "I'll pass them out at the gallery."

"I agreed to attend with you last night," Thalia added. "Charlotte, would you help me pick a dress from my new collection?"

Charlotte immediately stood, relieved to have an excuse. She quickly rounded the table and looped her arm through Thalia's, giving her brother a dirty stare before leading them out the dining room.

"Still cross with him?" Thalia asked.

"Aren't you?" Charlotte inquired.

Thalia offered a tired shrug. "I only have today and tomorrow left. Why waste it being angry when I can spend it making nice memories with you, instead?"

Charlotte's frown softened, a note of compassion tinging her tone. "You're far too good, Thalia Sutton."

Thalia hardly felt so herself. "Just, promise me you won't remain cross with your brother for long."

“All right. But only because you asked.” Charlotte paused, a thought visibly crossing her face. “Speaking of brothers, I’ve hardly seen Robin as of late. I wonder what mischief he’s been getting up to?”

“He’s quite talented in that regard,” Thalia chuckled, doing her best to ignore the anxious pang in her chest.

Robin had gotten on just fine without her; there was no use in worrying just yet. Not that she had anything else to occupy her mind, now; she’d been very clear and firm last night, and Gabriel seemed more than receptive. There would be nothing further between them, and she would ensure it stayed that way.

To the best of her ability.

* * *

The gallery was slightly delayed, as many of the art pieces had been put on display outdoors. Servants worked quickly to erect standing tents, as the sky only grew darker with each passing minute. Thalia glued herself firmly to Gabriel’s side, matching his slate-gray suit with a silvery-blue, open-robe style dress.

The interior layer had been decorated with petite, lacy flowers, gathering in greater quantities at the hem of her skirt for a fuller, more eye-catching design. And truly, she held the attention of many as they wove through the crowd, yesterday’s incident in the Ton far from their minds.

“Gracious me, my Lady! That dress is positively ethereal!” Lady Worsley approached with a gasp, a far smaller entourage trailing behind. “I had no idea your suitor had such wonderful taste.”

“Miss Sutton chose this dress of her own accord,” Gabriel corrected.

Lady Worsley's smile strained, and Thalia did her best to hide a smile. Even now, she was taken aback at how upfront he was with his support for her. Even after their conversation last night, Gabriel played the part of suitor beautifully.

“Your Ladyship, are those invitations I spot in your hand?” Lady Worsely asked, clearly desperate to change the subject.

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“They are, indeed,” Charlotte hid her grimace far better than Thalia expected, lifting her hands so the ladies could get a better look. “I have one here for you, in fact. For my upcoming Seasonal event—do let me know if you can attend.”

“Oh, but of course!” Lady Worsley looked practically giddy, barely able to keep her composure as she accepted the invitation wholeheartedly. “I’ll ensure my schedule is cleared—perhaps I can entice you to join me on a stroll while we await the exhibit? There’s a fascinating display of watercolors just around the corner, and I’d be most honored to ensure your invitations reach the right hands.” She paused, eyeing Thalia with a nervous smile. “You are most welcome to join as well, Miss—ah, Lady Thalia.”

Charlotte looked ready to scoff and admonish the woman, but Thalia simply shook her head. “I’m afraid my place is by the duke’s side today, Lady Worsley. But thank you for the invitation regardless; we’ll have to try and get together soon.”

With a curt nod, Lady Worsley soon slipped back into the crowd with Charlotte in tow, her entourage following close behind. A small snort came from Gabriel, and Thalia glanced up to give him a slight scowl.

“Be nice.”

“She took my sister hostage,” Gabriel commented lightly. “I shall be as unpleasant as I’d like. Besides, I have not yet forgotten her insulting behavior at the park’s opening.”

“She hardly had a choice, treating me as she did,” Thalia insisted. “Society is quite

cruel to women who act outside the norm.”

Her comment gave him pause, and instead of an audible response, Gabriel simply indicated his head forward. Thalia allowed him to direct her across the lawn, the pair quietly observing a number of art pieces slowly being covered by elegant white tents.

It really would have been enjoyable, taking in the artwork beneath a nice, sunny sky. Still, the day was pleasant enough to tolerate, and Thalia found herself keenly interested in a number of oil-based portraits.

“Do you think you’d ever put your work on display?” Gabriel asked.

“Hardly,” Thalia replied, lingering at a particular piece depicting a mother and her newborn child amidst a garden of wildflowers and tangling vines.

“You’re certainly talented enough,” Gabriel insisted.

Thalia sighed lightly, glancing up to face Gabriel once more. “Talent means very little without connections, I’m afraid. I have very few left as is, unless Giles has ruined those as well.” She knew what he wanted to say—that she had him as a connection, that he could and would do anything to ensure she was happy—but Gabriel Harding remained silent, observing the piece for himself.

“It’s quite lovely, isn’t it?”

Thalia blinked, realizing the question had been directed her way. She turned to a rather eccentric-looking gentleman beside her, far beyond her in years and sporting impressively thick facial hair that he kept combed and neatly waxed.

Curls of sandy-gray hair looked considerably lighter in what little sunlight poked through the clouds, and his large spectacles enhanced the golden-brown flecks

amongst olive-tinged eyes.

“The painting, you mean?”

He nodded, stroking a curling part of his moustache with a grin. “Reminds me of the day my child was born. Her mother—bless her soul—was always the type to indulge in nature. I do my best to allow my daughter the freedom to explore her interests, though some may call me quite foolish for doing so.”

Thalia blinked again, a sense of familiarity gripping her completely. “I don’t mean to sound intrusive, but your daughter wouldn’t happen to be named Madeline, would she?”

The older man smiled brightly. “Why, yes, she is! You know her?”

“My—ah, suitor’s sister—knows her quite well,” Thalia explained. “Charlotte Harding, of Stonewell Manor.”

He adjusted his spectacles, eyes widening as he stared at Gabriel. “Oh, gracious me—that is you, isn’t it, Gabriel?”

“Hello, Mr. Beaumont,” Gabriel replied, a touch of warmth added to his tone. “I was hoping we’d cross each other’s paths today.”

“Where there is art, a Beaumont is never far behind!” Mr. Beaumont’s laughter wheezed, and Thalia wondered if she should perhaps offer him a drink. “So, who is this lovely lady who so eagerly stands beside you, Your Grace?”

“Thalia Sutton, once of the Oslay Hall,” Gabriel introduced.

Thalia offered a polite curtsy, watching as Mr. Beaumont’s face fell into something

more somber. “Ah, yes...I heard about that business not long after arriving in London. Terribly sorry about your father, Miss Sutton, and for that cousin of yours.”

“Th-That’s quite alright,” Thalia said hastily. “Giles...is doing his best as the new marquess. He hardly had the time to train for the position.”

“Well, one hardly needs training to be a decent person,” Mr. Beaumont scoffed. “There’s plenty of rumors swirling around him to convince me of his lack of moral compass. But, I hardly wish to take up too much time with such dour conversation; Gabriel, send me a letter and we’ll have dinner! Of course, you are invited as well, Miss Sutton,” he added with a smile. “Any friend of my daughter is a friend of mine.”

Thalia offered another curtsy as Gabriel bowed, the pair watching Mr. Beaumont slowly make his way back towards the front. After a moment, she gave Gabriel a hard glare, scrutinizing his face for any tell he may give away.

“You hoped to cross paths with him, hmm?”

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“You sound as if you’re insinuating otherwise,” Gabriel replied coolly, once more taking the lead as they continued their walk around the gallery.

“It seemed simply a rather fortuitous coincidence,” Thalia remarked lightly. “Meeting a man not only interested in the arts, but whose career is one I’m interested in pursuing as well.”

“I never told him you painted,” Gabriel said defensively.

A small smirk crossed Thalia’s face. “I know that, I was here for the conversation, Gabriel. Or, do you perhaps mean some other time you two communicated?”

It was the first time she’d seen Gabriel look so flustered, so lacking in terms of what to say next. A thrilling rush filled Thalia to the brim, and she suddenly understood why the duke so thoroughly enjoyed the concept of a hunt. To be in such control, to catch your prey off-guard; there really was no feeling like it.

“I only tease, Gabriel,” Thalia chuckled. “Thank you for introducing him to me.”

Gabriel remained silent, staring ahead through the crowd with a hard scowl on his face.

“Gabriel, I hadn’t meant to upset you,”

He suddenly released his hold, practically tearing through the crowd like a hunter’s dog catching the scent at last. Thalia stumbled, nearly losing her balance completely as she tried her best to spot what had put the duke on such an edge.

A number of socialites were minding their own business, enjoying paintings and statues beneath the now-erected tents, now coated with a light layer of drizzling rain that filled the air with a sticky humidity. She caught a brief flash of a familiar dress—of Charlotte’s—and made her own way delicately through the crowd beginning to form where she'd last seen both Hardings.

Thalia finally reached the front, immediately frozen at the sight before her. Charlotte practically hid behind her brother’s massive frame, who appeared tense and ready to pounce if anyone made one false move.

Across from them stood an older lady of society, her own gown reminiscent of the color of yellowing paper. Her hair was as dark as the Harding siblings’, partially undone and falling past her shoulders rather like dead seaweed. She hardly looked her best, the wrinkles across her face heavy and deep, with a sort of desperate look in her eyes akin to that of an animal trapped in the corner.

“You can’t have an invitation.” Charlotte practically spat the words from her mouth, an uncharacteristic venom seeping into her tone. “I didn’t write one for you.”

“Charlie, angel, that hurts me to hear.” The woman tried to take a step towards them, only for Gabriel to wrap his arms protectively around Charlotte’s frame and push her farther behind him. She stood in place, as if struggling to find her next words. “I... I only wish to celebrate with you, sweetheart. You’ve grown into such a fine young woman; how could you not want your own mother at your Seasonal event?”

Thalia’s heart skipped a beat entirely, her mouth going completely dry. Mother; this woman called herself mother. Charlotte and Gabriel’s—she was still alive? Thalia had simply assumed—the way Charlotte spoke of her, it sounded as if both parents had long-since passed on. But, no; the Hardings’ mother stood before them in her disheveled state, pleading with them as a beggar might on the streets.

“Charlotte has no mother,” Gabriel snarled, holding Charlotte even closer than before.

“Gabriel, darling, please.”

“You forfeited that title long ago, Lady Fletcher.” He spat her surname like it was poison in his mouth. “Now, leave us. Or do I need to involve the constable once more?”

Again, Lady Fletcher—Gabriel’s mother—moved to close the distance between them.

“Children, darlings... I’m so sorry for what happened all those years ago. There isn’t a day that goes by when I don’t regret my actions fully.”

A soft sobbing came from Charlotte, whipping Gabriel into further frenzy. “Feeling remorseful, now that Oliver has lost interest in you? A punishment well-deserved, after what he did to his best friend.”

Best friend? Thalia’s eyes widened, realization settling into a sour lump at the back of her throat; Oliver must have been the duke’s second during the duel.

“I’m sorry, Gabriel,” Lady Fletcher cried out. “I-I didn’t truly think your Father would go through with it.”

“Don’t lie to me!” Gabriel snarled. “You knew from the start how Father would react, how he’d stand up for you! You used his honor against him, and for what? For a marriage that lasted barely a year?”

The crowd visibly trembled at Gabriel’s outrage, and Thalia found herself cowering alongside them.

“I-it’s not my fault, Gabriel!” his mother sobbed, hands covering her face as she trembled horribly. “It’s not my fault. It isn’t!”

“Your hands are just as bloodied as Oliver’s,” Gabriel hissed. “He may have shot my father, but you orchestrated his death. And now, you dare come to us, begging to be allowed the privilege of my sister’s hospitality?” He spat defiantly in her direction, gathering Charlotte in his arms before turning to leave. “Crawl back beneath the stone you emerged from, miserable wretch.”

“No—no!” His mother tore at her hair, it coming completely undone as it partially draped across her face. “You’re not allowed to do that—you’re not allowed to paint me as the evil one! You’re still young, still foolish; when you love someone—truly, and deeply, as I did with Oliver—you’ll find yourself willing to commit any act to be with them!”

Gabriel turned sharply on his heel, his back arched and visibly ready to attack the very woman who gave birth to him. But just before he could, Thalia suddenly found herself standing between them.

She had no idea when she’d moved, nor was she entirely sure what she was meant to accomplish. But instinct had taken over her body, taken over her mouth; she was surprised entirely by what she said next. “Your perception of love leaves much to be desired, ma’am.”

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The older women froze, eyes wild and fingers curled. She eyed Thalia like one might dinner on a plate, but Thalia remained stoic, her posture straight and tone dangerously calm.

“Y-You—you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Gabriel’s mother babbled, still pulling at fine strands of hair. “I—I loved Alexander; I did! I loved him so much, but with Oliver... Oliver was...”

“I don’t know you, Lady Fletcher,” Thalia began, tone level and far more even-keel than she expected. “But I cannot sit back and watch while you’re hurting people I... I care for.” She was uncertain where her anger welled from, but one look at Charlotte’s tear-stricken face, at Gabriel’s stunned silence, cemented it completely.

“They’re not your kindling, Lady. Fletcher. Your happiness should have sprung from theirs as well.” She paused, suddenly feeling the all-too familiar sense of eyes weighing against her shoulder. “That... th-that is what I’ve observed, Lady Fletcher. You have no right to pursue that love at the cost of another’s peace. They have moved on—thrived without your presence. I think it best you keep it that way.”

The elderly woman before Thalia mumbled something incoherent under her breath, beginning to rock in place while her fingers dug into her scalp. A few men from the audience stepped forward to take control of the situation, gently grasping Lady Fletcher’s arms before leading her through the crowd and into the streets. Those left behind stood amidst a deafening silence, filled only by the pitter-patter of rain falling against the tent.

“Thalia.”

Thalia turned, Gabriel standing alone as Charlotte quickly rushed to her own group of friends. His expression was unreadable, his stance too stiff for her liking.

“Come with me.”

Thalia obeyed.

CHAPTER 28

It was decided that moment had been, without a doubt, Thalia’s worst idea to date. And she hadn’t even consciously made the decision. But now, as Gabriel led her across the gallery grounds and towards the furthest back lot, she wondered what terrible words he had in store for her.

Perhaps if she were lucky, he’d allow her the chance to go home and pack her things. That was, of course, if she survived this encounter with him, first.

Gabriel brought them to what appeared to be a makeshift stable, set aside for carriage horses who may have come a great distance to visit the gallery today. Stalls were filled with gentle braying and the sweet scent of hay, the constant drip of rain falling off its roof as the storm only worsened.

Thalia quickly took shelter beneath the stable, doing her best to wring her dress free of water. As she bent down to squeeze out the hem, she found Gabriel already on his knees in front of her, wet material gathered in his hand as he, instead, wrung it dry.

“G-Gabriel...?”

Slowly, his hands worked up the length of her dress, pressing water free before settling against her waist. Something about him was entirely different from before; whatever anger or resentment he held had seemingly vanished, washed away by the

rain during their walk over. His eyes no longer looked cruel and cutting, his expression no longer etched with hate. Thalia blinked, uncertain as to what she was meant to do.

“I wasn’t fully honest last night, Thalia.” He moved to stand, one of his hands moved to gently sit against her face; it was cold, soaked still from the rainwater he’d squeezed from her dress, and yet Thalia found herself leaning into it entirely.

“There was more I needed to say, but...” his voice lingered, clearly struggling to say his piece. “I allowed my cowardice to come between us.”

Thalia’s brow furrowed ever so slightly. “‘Cowardice’ is not a word I thought you held in your lexicon, Gabriel.”

He sighed lightly, stroking her cheek as his arm tightened around her waist. “What you just did... what you’ve done for my sister...” his face leaned in closer, his breath warm and causing a flush of heat across Thalia’s cheeks. “I don’t want you to misunderstand me this time. I don’t want etiquette or polite speech to stop us from a complete understanding.”

“U-Understanding?”

He was so close; a drop of rainwater fell from his face and settled against Thalia’s lips. She suddenly felt far too warm, knowing full well that she should pull away, that she shouldn’t allow him to make the same mistake.

“My goals have always been around the hunt, Thalia. The chase, the cornering, the inevitable devouring.” He pressed his body against hers, forcing them against the stable’s wall as his hand ran through her hair. “Every part of my life plans in such a way, and yet...”

“And yet?” She asked, breathless.

Gabriel’s lips hovered between hers, hesitating, before settling into a long, tender kiss. More rainwater from his hair speckled against her face, and Thalia’s hands reached out to caress against his face, to hold him steady as he fully explored her. His hand slipped up the length of her back, pulling lightly against the strings of her bodice.

“G-Gabriel.”

“I want this,” he insisted. “I long for you, Thalia Sutton.”

Thalia turned her head, unable to meet such an intensive gaze. “I... b-but Gabriel?—”

“I can’t say I’ll be willing to marry you so quickly,” Gabriel said. “I can’t say the idea will never bring me discomfort. It could take months, or years—but I can’t let my weakness push you away, Thalia.” He lightly kissed her again, pulling away and brushing stray droplets of water from her face. “I am broken inside, Thalia. No more a predator than you are prey. I—” He swallowed, visibly shaken. “I am afraid. Afraid to be... to be...”

“Vulnerable,” Thalia finished softly.

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He kissed her once more, pressing against her while pulling at the laces again. Her hand reached behind, helping undo the bodice as the dress loosened significantly around her waist, her bosom, her shoulders. Gabriel's hands were quick to grasp the hem of the neck, to pull it down enough to expose Thalia's glimmering chest, wet from rain and growing perspiration. Again, his fingers worked to undo the corset's lacework; again, Thalia helped him.

It fell open entirely, her nipples perked from the cool, humid air. Gabriel immediately bent over, kissing the top of her chin to the nape of her neck, slowly working his way towards her chest.

A shiver of pleasure ran through Thalia, anticipating building in her core as he teased her. She closed her eyes, her head tilted upright, and waited for the moment of contact. Then, suddenly, she felt his lips around her, a shiver skittering across her skin as a whimper slipped free. "G-Gabriel...!"

His hand slipped across, caressing her other breast as he continued to kiss each peak. Each brush was like a thousand currents racing through her; Thalia thought it impossible to feel this way again, especially after his performance in the library. But this—it was somehow even greater, the thrill of his touch clashing with the anxiety of being discovered. A crack of lightning blinded the sky, and the rumbling thunder trembled through her legs.

"You were mine to hunt, little rabbit," Gabriel crooned. "And I'm not yet done with our game of chase."

Another bolt cascaded through the sky, and as Gabriel's hands stroked and teased and

pinched, Thalia found herself a mess. Her soft whimpering had grown to pleasurable moans, and as his teeth found purchase against her nipples, a familiar chain of explosive activity flooded her system. Lighting blinded her already-spinning senses, and the thunderous boom shook her trembling frame until she collapsed into Gabriel's arms completely.

"Our deal has changed," Gabriel whispered, lips drawing toward her ear as his breath tickled against her skin. "This courtship is now very real, Thalia Sutton."

She exhaled, heat rising throughout her body, and she found herself stealing an unexpected kiss from Gabriel. Fueled on by euphoria, Thalia clenched her teeth gently around the duke's prying tongue, drawing blood that drifted between them. Gabriel refused to let go this time, refused to let her win. And, in that moment, Thalia was more than happy to play the game alongside him.

* * *

It was a good ten minutes or so before Gabriel considered stopping. He might have gone... a touch too far, given the state to which he'd brought Thalia, and a large part of the time was spent simply cooling her flushed face.

It had been ages since Gabriel had intentionally lain across a pile of hay, and even longer since he had a woman curled up against his chest (he'd forgotten how quickly his arm numbed, being used as an impromptu pillow).

But the way Thalia looked right now—her hair let down, gently splayed across her heaving chest and shaping the delicate curves of her waist—he'd willingly sleep in hay for the rest of his life.

Her head shifted slightly, then settled against his chest once more, eyes fluttering as raindrops plunked against the shed's roof. "I'm not sure I want to leave."

“I wouldn’t object to exploring you further,” Gabriel chuckled, hand tucking a loose strand of hair away from Thalia’s face. Gracious, but those eyes...he really could get lost in them, as encompassing and deep as the emeralds on a crown.

Thalia lifted her neck, a teasing scowl across her face as she gave him a light shove against his chest. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

He did know it. Gabriel knew very well what returning to the party meant; hand in hand, with warm, affectionate looks and an obviously closer proximity than before. Rumors he could handle, but the idea of genuine courtship... of no longer playing the role of suitor, but becoming one entirely.

“No one would dare say a word.”

“Oh, Your Grace,” Thalia giggled lightly, her hand gently brushing against his cheek. “My reputation is the farthest thing from my mind, as of late.” She shifted her upper body a top of his, lounging across as her head nuzzled beneath his neck. A soft sigh escaped her lips, eyes downcast as her fingers traced one of his vest buttons.

Gabriel sat upright, arm around her waist as he propped himself against the barn’s wall. “It’s a bit too late to grow quiet now, little rabbit,” he said. “What are you thinking about?”

Another gentle sigh as Thalia leaned fully into Gabriel’s embrace. “You spoke of vulnerability earlier. Being afraid... it sounds silly, thinking about it now.”

“Elaborate.”

Thalia’s brow furrowed slightly. “I... it sounds terribly cliched. But, I’m afraid this is a dream I’ll have to wake up from. That we’ll get ready for the art gallery, remain pleasantly distant from each other, and then...” she met his gaze, eyes already misty.

“Are you worried about my aversion to marriage?”

She hesitated, then nodded slowly.

“You have every right to be,” Gabriel insisted. “This is hardly an arrangement we can maintain, regardless of your care for reputation.” He gently plucked a strand of hair from her hair, kissing her forehead lightly. “I... don’t want to hurt you, Thalia. And I certainly will not use you.”

Thalia’s grip tightened against his vest, hands trembling slightly.

“I meant what I said earlier,” he continued. “About marriage, about showing any level of... vulnerability.” He chuckled, hand running down the length of her hair.

“I hardly see what’s so funny.” Thalia pulled herself somewhat away, expression far more stern than Gabriel expected. “This is the bravest thing I’ve seen you do to date, Gabriel Harding, and I will not have you diminish it.”

Gabriel went to laugh again, but the way Thalia stared into him, the way her expression remained unmoving; she was entirely serious. His laughter petered away, the somewhat forceful nature of his smile softening. “You prefer this over the man you met during the ball?”

Now it was Thalia’s turn to snort with laughter. “Oh, no; I’m afraid you’ve done something quite irreversible to me, Your Grace.” Her eyes narrowed, a mischievous glint catching across her eye as she leaned in closer to Gabriel’s face. “I’m no stranger to fear, but the way you use it is... something entirely different.” She exhaled, visibly exhilarated, and Gabriel’s heart skipped a beat.

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“You genuinely enjoy it?” he asked.

Thalia inched closer, teasing him terribly with those beautiful lips of hers as they slightly pursed. “I think... it’s the power I wield as well. If I told you to stop...”

“I would do so in a heartbeat.”

Thalia’s expression warmed, placing a gentle kiss against Gabriel’s lips. It turned into something deeper, something with quite the literal bite against his tongue. Genuine laughter escaped Gabriel’s throat this time, and he took her to the ground, pinning her hands against the hay as her legs curled beneath his chest.

“You have a terrible habit of nibbling, little rabbit,” he growled.

Thalia’s face flushed, head tilting as a coy smile crossed her face. “Why don’t you show me a proper bite, Mister Wolf?”

Hot blood rushed through Gabriel’s veins, and he reminded himself to keep any injury he might cause easily hidden. “What should I listen for, in case we go too far?”

Thalia’s breath hitched, legs twisting beneath him once more. “I—y-you would never. I would never ask you to.”

“It’s for your safety,” Gabriel protested softly. “And for my ease of mind. If I ever hurt you, even if you think you wanted it...”

Thalia’s smile was like the sun poking through the storm. One hand wriggled free

from his grasp, and she gently stroked against Gabriel's cheek. "Ramps, then. I'll say ramps if I feel unsafe."

Ramps. Gracious, but he was going to have a hard time associating them with anything but this moment for quite a while. "Alright, then."

* * *

It was like day had shifted suddenly to night; the moment affirmation had left Thalia's lips, they were utterly consumed by Gabriel's once more in a deep, reaching kiss. He forced her beneath the weight of his frame, hay cushioning her body as his entire being—his presence—pressed heavily down upon her.

His hands were around her once more, feeling between the loose ties of her bosom before fingers once more slipped between, fondling her breasts and teasing the rigid nipples. A startled gasp escaped her at his speed; already, she felt ready to give herself entirely.

"Not this time, little rabbit." His hands withdrew, trailing up the length of her neck as he applied slight pressure. Gracious, but she was already having a hard time breathing—!

"I want you to hear you work for every gulp of air," Gabriel murmured, pulling her lips into another kiss. "Want you to feel every subtle flick of my wrist, every twitch of my finger." His thumb pressed against the front of her throat, and she could feel air bobbing beneath the increasing pressure. "Every breath you take is one I allow, little rabbit."

Thalia's own fingers curled beneath the hay, nipples perked and aching for his touch once more. But the grasp around her neck was something... entirely new. Dangerous, yes; if he wanted to, he could close his grasp and restrict her breath in its entirety.

“Beg for me, little rabbit,” Gabriel crooned, applying more pressure against her throat. “Beg for life as I bite clean through your neck.”

Thalia’s gasp was ragged, air dragging against the narrowing windows and burning in her lungs in a desperate bid. “S-Stop—please, I—!” Her hand shot around his arm, fingers clawing across his suit jacket’s sleeve as she managed a breathless moan. His hold loosened for a moment, a flicker of concern briefly crossing his eyes.

“What’s the word?” he asked.

Her legs curled up against his back, and Thalia’s hands ran down the length of his arm, squeezing his wrist as a tingling rush filled her head. It was like falling from a great height, dizzy euphoria that spun around her head and left her, somehow, more breathless than before. Her eyes found his, hands remaining around her neck, but only as a lingering threat. He was waiting; he wanted to hear her affirmation.

“R-ramps,” she managed with a ragged hiss. She was struggling, yes—fighting against his hold, fighting to breathe underneath the entirety of his presence—but it was exhilaration. She dug her nails into his exposed flesh, earning a pained hiss from Gabriel himself.

“Naughty rabbit,” he growled, grasping her wrists and forcefully pinning them across the hay. “Who said you could fight back?”

Thalia struggled briefly, still gasping through a haze of light-headedness. He leaned into her, lips pressing against the now-sensitive parts of her neck and nipping between every kiss or so. He was going to ruin her; again, her knees pressed against his back, an uncontrollable spasm striking him harder than she’d anticipated.

But he persisted, dragging his teeth across her chin and catching her bottom lip before forcing her head to lean into him, else risk a painful bite. He kissed her, stealing what

precious breath she had left, and suddenly, his hand shifted, slipping beneath her skirt as his fingers brushed against her inner thigh.

She moaned terribly. His hand lingered. “Our word...?” he crooned, lips nipping at the lobe of her ear.

“Ramps,” Thalia whimpered. “I r-recall it.”

She let out a startled gasp, his fingers suddenly pushing past her folds and teasing her clit. He massaged the area gently, waiting, giving her the chance to use her own power against him. Her answer came in the form of another kiss, teeth trying to catch his tongue before he pulled just out of reach.

“Naughty rabbit,” Gabriel growled.

His fingers pushed deeper past, sending Thalia into a state of frenzy. Slowly, he began to work her, exploring her, each twist and thrust sending her into uncontrollable shivers. Her hands reached out to grasp his arm once more, but his free hand grasped her wrists instead, pinning them against her chest as he did his work.

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He was entirely in control—of her breath, her body’s reaction—all she could do was cry out, writhe beneath his touch, his pressure, his entire being. A building pressure radiated from his fingers, skittering across her skin, piercing her every nerve in a way their previous encounters hadn’t. It built—God, it was entirely too much to handle—and as her final, desperate cry rang throughout the stable, she fell apart entirely. Breathless, spinning, tingling... and in his curving arms.

CHAPTER29

The storm hadn’t let up since their time spent in the stable, and as such, the gallery was ended prematurely to ensure any water-sensitive artwork was brought back inside. Not that Thalia minded; she was quite exhausted after her extensive “exploration” of Gabriel’s physique. Her head was still reeling from it all.

“You two nearly gave me a heart attack!” Charlotte’s scolding persisted well after the trio had reached the carriage, her back rigid and finger pointed accusatory toward her brother. “Gabriel Harding, I was convinced you left Thalia in the wilds! She did a wonderful thing, and you went and made her out to be the villain!”

Thalia grimaced; she really should interrupt Charlotte, explain that the situation as a whole wasn’t deserving of her anger. But Gabriel remained quiet and accepting of his sister’s beratement, seemingly determined to let her expel whatever foul mood she’d been holding onto since last night.

And, quite honestly, she was less worried about his dignity and more intrigued that he was still holding her hand. There was no one to pretend in front of, no one who needed to see him play the part of the smitten suitor. But, Gabriel kept the connection

going, even setting her hand against his leg and squeezing it every so often.

“—and furthermore, Gabriel, you shouldn’t have made Thalia your—your little distraction for me! I find it honestly quite offensive that you think I can’t tell the difference between your acting and genuine infatuation!” Charlotte let out a loud harrumph, slouching in her seat as she crossed her arms tightly.

“I’m sorry for the ruse, Charlotte,” Gabriel said simply.

“Oh, don’t start with your excuses! I’ve had it up to here with how you’ve been treating—” Charlotte stopped mid-sentence, blinking furiously as the apology fully processed in her head. She silently stared at her brother, then flipped to Thalia, before finally noticing their entwined hands. “Wait... wait! What on earth did I miss?! Thalia, is he—Gabriel are you actually?—?!”

“You are so very, very loud,” Gabriel winced. “I will be deaf well before reaching old age.” He only cringed harder as a high-pitched squeal erupted from his sister next.

“No—no! That’s completely unfair—I was mad at you! I—you can’t just go and actually be a couple!” Charlotte’s outcry pulled a giggling smile from Thalia; she couldn’t help but react to the young woman’s overreaction. “I’m still mad at you—I want to be mad at you, Gabriel!”

“I’m so sorry, Charlotte,” Thalia chuckled, trying to shape her grin to something more sympathetic. “I hadn’t meant to ruin everything.”

“What?! No! This is fantastic!” Charlotte squealed, upright and clapping her hands excitedly. “I mean, I’m still cross with you, Gabriel, but how could I be mad at you, Thalia? You finally broke through my brother’s icy, rigid, stone-carved—”

“—Yes, I’m an emotionless void, Charlotte,” Gabriel scowled darkly. “Very well put.”

“Oh, you know what I mean, sourpuss,” Charlotte waved a hand frantically, practically bouncing in her seat. “So, what happens now? Do you announce your official courtship? When are you getting married? Oh! If you have a little girl, are you going to name her after me?”

“Slow down, Charlotte!” Thalia laughed. “There are quite a few details to work out between us. I still need a place of proper residency—”

“You certainly do not; you’ll come and live with us at Stonewell!” Charlotte insisted. “It would be entirely inappropriate now if you didn’t!”

Gabriel shook his head curtly, cutting his sister off before she grew too excitable once more. “The opposite of that, dear sister. An unwed woman could not possibly live alone with her suitor; it’s completely out of the question.”

“I’m there, though,” Charlotte pointed out.

“All day, every day, at every waking moment?”

Charlotte’s energy dampened, sliding back into her seat with a furrowed brow. Thalia couldn’t help but feel sorry for her, and though she thoroughly agreed that living at Stonewell was preferable, it would do no one’s reputation any good.

Regardless of her rather outrageous claims in the stable, Thalia knew she needed to try and repair her social image as best she could. Especially now, when she was no longer individually impacted by it.

“Well... she’s not going back to Whitechapel, is she?” Charlotte asked.

Thalia winced as Gabriel’s hand squeezed hers a touch too tight. He reacted immediately, expression softening as he lifted her hand to kiss the knuckles gently.

“I would never allow that to happen.” He set her hand gently back against his leg, a warm flush rolling up her arm and across her face. He’d done it so easily, with a moment’s hesitation. He truly had meant what he said about properly courting her.

“Bold proclamation, dear brother,” Charlotte mused. “But words are not sufficient material for housing.”

Gabriel chuckled, clearly amused. “You act as if I haven’t been carefully planning the retrieval of estate deeds this entire week.”

Thalia blinked, somewhat taken aback. “W-Wait—you’re still going to get them from Giles?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Again, Thalia blinked. “B-but... our deal has changed. I’m not actually—I mean, you’re actually courting me, Gabriel. You’re truly getting nothing from this, now; I couldn’t possibly—!”

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Gabriel gently pulled her arm, forcing Thalia to face him. Her heart nearly burst from her chest at the determination on his face, the genuine sincerity in his voice.

“On the contrary, I would say our deal has only sweetened significantly on my end. And an Orion never goes back on his word; I would lose all face as co-founder if I did so.”

Warmth now bloomed from Thalia’s core, and she wanted nothing more than to kiss him as furiously as she had in the hay. Charlotte’s gaze, however, was far too heavy to ignore, and thus, Thalia settled on a quick peck on the cheek; it still warranted a delighted squeal from the younger Harding.

“If you’re going to do that every time,” Gabriel groaned. “I’ll ensure we only show our affections privately.”

Charlotte shook her head furiously, covering her mouth with her hand as she sat up in her seat like a proper lady should. Still, a cheeky smirk worked its way across her face when she dropped both her hands on her lap, and she couldn’t help but wiggle excitedly in her seat. Her energy was positively infectious, and if Thalia were being honest... she felt just as ecstatic over the situation.

* * *

Everything had been leading up to this evening.

Gabriel bid both his sister and Thalia one last goodbye as they stood outside Egerton Hall. Louise stood at the bottom step to accompany her new guests inside, briefly

pausing to catch a kiss that Christian had blown before vanishing into the carriage.

Briefly, Gabriel wondered if that was something he was supposed to do for Thalia's sake, and based on his sister's sneer, she was all but goading him to do it. But Thalia waved her off and offered him a gentle wave and a smile as the manor's doors closed behind them.

"What do you suppose they'll get up to while we're gone?" Christian asked.

Gabriel settled in his seat as the carriage lurched forward, driving down the way and out the property's inner gates. "If I had to hazard a guess, they'll be up all night asking Thalia to tell and retell the scene at the art gallery today."

"Yes... I heard word through the grapevine about that." Christian leaned forward, offering his friend a reassuring hand against his shoulder.

"Are you going to be alright tonight? If it would put you at ease to be with Thalia..."

"I trust Louise will keep her safe," Gabriel said. "Besides, my sister would throw an absolute fit if I did intrude on their ladies' night." He sighed, running a hand through his hair before fully committing to his next sentence. "I'm sure she's been dying to get Thalia alone ever since we arrived home. Interrogate her for information, as it were."

"About the art gallery? Why? She was there as well, and Thalia doesn't have the same history with your mother as you two." Christian paused, his expression growing blank. He leaned back into his chair, visibly processing, and Gabriel found his foot tapping impatiently. "Did you...?"

Gabriel remained quiet.

“Wait, did you actually—?”

Gabriel offered a raised brow in reply.

“My God, you like to be obtuse about things, don’t you?”

“You’re the one who can’t finish his question,” Gabriel pointed out. “But, yes. I had an... honest discussion with Thalia. About us.”

Christian reacted nearly as childishly as Charlotte had. At the very least, he had the sense to cover his mouth before his smirking grin could be fully exposed. “And... how did it go?”

Gabriel glanced out the carriage window, eyeing the rolling landscape as it shifted away from the perfectly manicured lawn of Egerton to the collection of brickwork buildings of the Ton.

“Let’s just say... tonight’s tournament is no longer simply about embarrassing the little marquess.” His expression darkened, attention turning back onto his friend. “By the by, has a Mister Robin Sutton visited your estate at all in the last day or so?”

“You mean Thalia’s brother?” Christian shook his head, brow knitting with worry. “He hasn’t come back from his little trip, then?”

Gabriel shrugged, repressing whatever anxiety dared to try and spin itself together. “I couldn’t say. I’m hoping he’s simply being wise and lying low.” Though, if Oslay Hall had indeed been robbed, Giles would have certainly made quite the scene over it. The fact that he had remained wholly absent from gossip...

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it,” Christian reassured. “If anything, Giles would be the type to keep up appearances. To admit your home was pilfered from would be

quite the stain on one's reputation as the new marquess."

It was uncanny how his friend seemed to read his mind at times. Gabriel nodded, attention drifting back through the carriage window. Regardless of the details, he couldn't afford any distractions. There was entirely far too much on the line.

CHAPTER30

Lord Isaac Cecil was another high-ranking member of the Ton's Devils, having close ties with Tristan and owning a fierce record on the battlefield.

Though he had long since been retired, there wasn't a man in London who would dare step out of line under Isaac's single-eyed gaze; Gabriel even included himself among that number.

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And that level of respect hardly stopped at the duke himself, as his sister was just as well-known, and well-feared. Though, while Isaac's harsh exterior helped to get his point across, Gabriel considered Sybella far more terrifying, reminiscent of a flytrap. Harmless at first glance, until you let your guard down around her.

It was she who greeted both Gabriel and Christian when they arrived at Arkley Hall at last, dressed in a rubescent gown to show her support for the Devils. Her rich, umber hair had been cropped short just past her chin, with a decorative tiara acting as a headband to keep the more stubborn wisps away from the sharp angles of her face.

"Good evening, gentlemen," she purred, her voice surprisingly deep and smooth for one as feminine as she appeared.

"Good evening, Lady Cecil." Gabriel grasped her extended hand, careful not to kiss her wedding band. "Or, should we refer to you by Fitzroy?"

"I would appreciate the latter, if you please."

Gabriel nodded, offering a nod of respect. "Thank you again for hosting our little clubs in your home this evening."

"'Little' is not the word I would use for them," Sybella chuckled. "I daresay you gentlemen will eat clean through our food stocks by the end of the hour."

"Apologies for your poor food stocks," Christian grinned. "Ensure that your groceries are billed to the Orions."

“I may take you up on that offer,” Sybella crooned. “Though, you may not want to make such lofty promises just yet. From what I’ve been hearing, your men have been on quite the losing streak.”

“Well, let’s see if we can’t even the scales,” Christian said, offering a slight bow. “Until we meet again, my Lady.”

“Do let Louise know that I’ll be writing her back soon,” Sybella called after the gentlemen. “I simply must catch her for tea before the little one’s arrival.”

Once the pair were certain they were out of earshot, each exchanged a look of relief. “God, but she’s still absolutely terrifying,” Christian groaned. “I’m not entirely sure how the late marquess lasted as long as he did.”

“Fitzroy was simply a man of commitment and focus,” Gabriel said.

The winding halls of the estate eventually led both gentlemen to the dining hall, its once massive table exchanged for smaller round tops in order to accommodate as many players as possible.

A makeshift staging area had been set farther back, accompanied by a few booths where chips could be exchanged or cashed out. These had a number of burly-looking men posted, though there wasn’t a man within these walls that would dare try and steal within Arkley’s manor. Well... hardly a man.

Gabriel quietly passed through the room and towards the refreshments table, eyes glancing at the back of a particular little marquess’ head. Giles Tilbury looked right at home among the multicolored stacks of betting chips and emptied glasses of whiskey.

He held his cards close to his chest, laughing among Devils and Orions alike, having an infuriatingly large pile of chips at his side. It was incredulous, how such a worm of

a man could seemingly command the entirety of a table's attention.

"Suppose putting pressure on him didn't work out," Christian whispered under his breath.

Gabriel ignored the twang of panic in his chest. Robin had failed, which meant he no longer knew where Robin resided. Thalia was absolutely going to kill him when she found out... unless she refused to speak to him ever again. And just when he'd finally opened up to the idea of genuine courtship...

"Ah, Your Grace! I was hoping to see that ugly mug of yours tonight!" An arm clapped against Christian's shoulder as the devil himself inserted himself between both gentlemen. Tristan Lovell looked positively tickled, his own glass in hand while he offered another toward Christian. "I've been saving you a seat at my table. Tonight's the night I win that brooch off you!"

Christian offered a smirk of his own, accepting the glass and downing it with one swig. "From what Sybella tells me, your newer recruits are pulling in quite the haul."

Tristan beamed with pride, as if his very own children had been given the compliment. He leaned in close, his voice barely above a whisper while glancing toward Giles' table.

"Honestly, I'm shocked Lord Tilbury is as good as he is. You'd think with how quickly he's going through the late marquess' inheritance, some of it had to have been lost via gambling."

Curious indeed. "You think he's playing fair?" Gabriel asked.

"Looking for any reason to gain the lead, Your Grace?" Tristan chuckled lightly, but it was clear the thought had occurred to him as well. "I haven't had to break up any

fistfights yet, so if he is cheating, he's doing a terrific job of it." He winced slightly at a victorious outcry, followed soon after by groans of discouragement; Giles cackled madly as he pulled a massive pile of his chips to his side of the table.

"Not exactly the picture of subtlety," Christian quipped.

"Can't blame him too entirely. I'd be equally thrilled winning so much; let's see if he knows how to hold onto it." Tristan finished his glass off as well, handing it off to a passing waiter while his arm wrapped around Christian's shoulders. "Come on now, no more delays! The brooch, man, the brooch!"

Christian rolled his eyes, giving Gabriel an apologetic nod. "Excuse me, but someone is eager to lose the entirety of his estate." As he allowed himself to be pulled away, he offered a reassuring nod to his friend; a reminder that there was nothing a Harding couldn't accomplish, obstacles be damned. And he was right, of course, as Gabriel hardly planned to quit just yet.

Robin had only meant to make things easier, and the Duke of Stonewell had never grown accustomed to simplified tasks. And, thanks to Christian, he had an inkling as to how he could accomplish his task.

He quietly took a seat at the table opposite Giles, ensuring he faced away as to not arouse suspicion. The men seemed an even split between Orions and Devils, with many a brow rising to see Gabriel Harding himself join their little game.

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Their dealer quietly continued his task, passing two cards to each gentleman until everyone had a pair. Vint-un, then, Gabriel thought. A seemingly simple game that could bankrupt a man in seconds, if he allowed himself distraction.

The rounds went by quickly, chips taken off the table just as quickly as they were pushed off. One by one, the dealer would draw his card, waiting for the adjacent player to accept it, or stand.

More often than not, a gentleman would only take two or three extra cards before running the odds in their mind. It all added up quicker than expected, after all, and twenty-one only seemed a far-off number at first.

“Ah. Looks like I went over again.” Gabriel sighed, leaning back in his chair as he watched the chips be divided amongst those who managed to stay under twenty-one.

“This game truly despises you, Your Grace,” a Devil smirked.

“Oh, he’s just getting warmed up,” an Orion spoke in his defense.

Gabriel shrugged in reply, ears twitching at the sound of a chair pushing out behind him. “Maybe the stakes simply aren’t interesting enough for me to be fully engaged.”

“I wondered when you’d up the ante, Your Grace.” A swish of red fabric passed the corner of Gabriel’s eye, and the servant dealing for the game bowed his head before stepping aside, allowing Sybella herself to take his place. “You don’t mind if I have a hand in this, do you? I’d love to personally observe your losing streak myself.”

“Not at all, Lady Fitzroy,” Gabriel said. “Though you wound me with your words; one’s luck is bound to change eventually.” He hunched his shoulders and purposefully leaned across the table, counting down in eager anticipation. Three, two, one—the chair beside him scraped its legs across the floor, and a man hastily sat to join in. Gabriel hardly needed a glance to know who it was; the little marquess had taken the bait.

“Do you mind if I join in?” Giles asked a touch too eagerly.

Gabriel shrugged, offering nothing more in reply.

The game began once more in earnest, now with jewelry pieces and priceless cigars being added to the betting pile. Sybella quietly watched with an unspoken grace, fingers working the cards as if she’d been born with a deck in hand.

She twirled the joker absentmindedly as she waited for the player’s choice, and when it came to Gabriel’s turn, she arched her brow his way. He, in turn, drew a card, letting out a sigh in defeat.

“A shame, Your Grace,” Sybella said. “This really isn’t your night.”

The table jumped as Giles let out a shout of laughter. “Gracious, but I hadn’t realized your luck was so finite, Your Grace!” He eagerly watched as Sybella divided the winnings, adding to his overall pile significantly.

The remaining Orions shot daggers across the table, and even a few Devil members furrowed their brows. But Gabriel remained even-keeled, leaning back in his chair as he sipped brandy from his glass. “Yes; it seems I can only take so much from you, Lord Tilbury.”

The man’s expression faltered, and he gathered his winnings up into his arms. “Yes,

well, at least I know how far my luck can take me. I'll be seeing you, gentlemen; there's quite a bit I need to cash out."

"That's a shame," Gabriel commented lightly. "Things were just about to get interesting."

And there it was. The brief second of hesitation, the waning confidence of his steps as he hovered over the table in mid-decision. Gabriel imparted an aura of casual disinterest, the idle chatter of the room fading to the background as the little marquess' breathing hitched in his chest.

"Then you're finally going to make things interesting, Your Grace?" Something in Sybella's voice rang with familiarity, and it sent the other players completely on-edge. Gabriel recognized the sharp edge of her tone, the anticipation as she leaned ever so slightly across the table; Sybella was fully aware that she was about to witness the end of a long, tumultuous hunt.

Gabriel slipped his napkin out from under his glass, reaching for a pen within his jacket before scribbling something down. He then placed it gently toward the center, watching as Sybella's smile drew a thin slit across her lips.

"If it's alright with you, I'd like to offer my collection of summer estates as collateral for this next round."

Immediately, members from both Orion and Devil rose from the table, making as graceful an exit as they could without offending Gabriel. Mutterings of needing a drink, feeling peckish, desiring some fresh air—their excuses ranged in variety, and soon, only Giles Tilbury remained.

"Oh, gracious me." Sybella sighed lightly, a hand resting against her cheek. "You scared everyone off, Your Grace."

“Hardly,” Giles snapped, his face flushed with anger. “I’m still sitting here, aren’t I?” He pushed half of his winnings into the center of the table, glaring Gabriel’s way. “You’re pushing your luck quite far, Your Grace.”

“And you’re not putting enough on the line.” Gabriel commented lightly. He turned to Sybella, her cool exterior occasionally betrayed by a flicker of mirth across her lips. “Lady Fitzroy, will you be accepting Lord Tilbury’s wager as equal collateral to mine?”

“Oh, heavens no,” she exclaimed. “Your estates are worth at least four of the piles he possesses. I’m afraid you’ll simply have to lower your stake, Your Grace.”

Somehow, Giles’ face turned an even brighter shade of red. There was no feeling worse, being belittled and spoken about as if you weren’t present. And by a lady, no less; the little marquess might feel confident bullying his untitled cousin, but even Giles knew not to cross Sybella Fitzroy.

By now, a significant crowd had gathered around their table, overhearing their hostess’ outcry and lured in by their own, morbid curiosity. The pressure visibly built in the air, aided by whispers and an impatient tapping of Sybella’s fingers.

“Th-then... I’ll offer some of my own estates.”

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And like that, the trap had snapped shut. Gabriel watched as Giles scribbled furiously on his own napkin, then slapped it in the table's center.

"For being such a good sport," Gabriel began. "I'll allow you the choice of going first, or second."

The crowd went deathly quiet, the tension absolutely suffocating. Giles visibly trembled, but puffed out his chest with false bravado and turned attentively towards Sybella. She nodded and passed a pair of cards to both men, then fixated on Giles.

The seconds stretched on for what felt like hours, every member of both clubs watching intently as the cards passed between hands. Eventually, Giles let out a gasp of air, leaning back in his seat before setting his hand against the table.

"I stand."

Every eye turned to Gabriel next.

"Suppose it's my turn, then." Gabriel gave a casual glance at his cards, then nodded Sybella's way. She slipped a card between her fingers and offered it his way, and he added it wordlessly to his hand. Again, without barely a glance at his collection, Gabriel gave his hostess a nod.

Once more, she passed him a card. Each exchange seemed to build the pressure in the room, Giles' eyes flickering wildly between the pair as he began to visibly sweat.

A glance.

A flick of the deck.

Another addition to his hand.

Sybella paused, card set firmly between her fingers. She arched her brow Gabriel's way, and as he moved to grasp the card, a chair clattered beside him.

"Cheaters! The two of you are cheating!"

CHAPTER 31

The dining room erupted with a cacophonous uproar. Orions moved to try and defend their de facto leader, while Devils tried their best to shield Giles Tilbury from being completely massacred. Gabriel himself remained seated, keeping his gaze level with Sybella's own as she simply stood in place, wearing a coy smile and a fiercely intent gaze.

He wasn't certain how she'd discovered his ruse, though it was equally possible she hadn't any inkling at all. She had simply sensed a vague intent, or was drawn in by the impending chaos he would soon cause. Whatever her reasoning, Lady Fitzroy was thoroughly enjoying herself.

It was uncanny, Gabriel realized. As if he'd been staring directly into a mirror.

"What on earth is going on over here?" Tristan's voice easily carried across the room, he and Christian appearing through the parting crowd. But it wasn't either man who led the way, nor were they the reason others moved so quickly to the side. That honor stood with the lord of the manor himself; Isaac Cecil, the Duke of Arkley.

With hair cropped so close to his head, it was impossible to ignore the wide myriad of scars across his face. In particular, one that dragged from the top of his brow to the

bottom of his chin, vanishing beneath an eyepatch that hinted at whatever void remained of his eye.

He quickly moved to his sister's side, offering a curious tilt of his head. She silently replied, an unspoken conversation held between the siblings, and Isaac locked onto Giles next, his expression cold and unmoving. Gabriel stood from his chair, allowing Tristan to draw closer to the little marquess. He took his place beside Christian, who looked just as rigid as the other men in power. An unspoken rule had been shattered; there would be hell to pay, one way or another.

“Lord Oslay, I knew you were easy to excite,” Tristan began with a smiling grimace. “But even I don’t have to tell you how incredibly rude it is to accuse anyone—our hostess especially—of such a vulgar act.” He offered a wider grin Sybella’s way, somewhat forcing Giles’ head to bow. “Apologize to our illustrious hostess, for indulging a bit too much in her collection of strong beverages.”

Nervous chuckling rippled throughout the crowd of club members. Gabriel’s gaze lingered on Giles, impressed at how red his face had become.

“I’ll do no such thing!” Giles straightened himself immediately, lurching free from Tristan’s grasp before pointing an accusatory finger Sybella’s way. “I saw her! She was making signs for Stonewell to interpret—they were about to steal my money and a number of estates from me!”

Another wave of incredulous murmurs followed soon after; Gabriel remained still, biding his time and waiting for his moment.

Isaac’s expression remained unmoving, his sister exhaling sharply. “How very dare you, sir. I hardly have any need for a little marquess’ trinkets; take yourself out of my home at once.”

“Prove it, then!” Giles snapped. “Show us the card you were about to give to Gabriel! I saw you, arching your brow his way. I saw you do it before; you planned to humiliate me, just like the duke’s so desperately trying to do!”

“Awfully bold, believing you even cross my mind to begin with.”

The room collectively held its breath as Giles swiveled, glaring daggers as Gabriel spoke up at last. He sighed, feigning irritation, and gestured toward their table. “Well, go on then. If you’re so certain, check my hand.”

“Gabriel,” Christian began.

“No one’s accusing you of anything,” Tristan interjected.

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Gabriel shrugged, hands raised in mock-surrender. “I have nothing to hide. Go on; the total should be seventeen.”

Giles moved to check the cards, but Isaac’s reaction could barely even be perceived. The cards seemingly appeared in his hands, his eyes flickering across the top before he offered a nod.

“Seventeen, then,” Tristan confirmed.

“And I had nineteen,” Giles spat. “Which means the odds are entirely in my favor. You’d be stupid to pull another card, Gabriel Harding, which means you knew ahead of time what the card was!” He pointed an accusatory finger, words practically venom on his tongue. “Admit it! You’ve had it out for me from the start, Duke of Stonewell! Why else would you take such a keen interest in my cousin, unless you wanted to spite me?”

Gabriel exhaled slowly, doing his best to remain in control. The urge to knock the man off his feet was intense, but he had a role to play.

“A cousin you all but washed your hands of, you mean,” Christian snapped. “You’d better stop now, before you cross a line you can’t return from.”

“He started it!” Giles shrieked, turning toward Sybella with a wild glare. “And I’ll prove it—I’ll prove to all of you what a two-faced coward your beloved duke is!” The little marquess barely took a step towards her when he was suddenly on the ground, face smashed against the floor as a small puddle of blood ran out from his mouth.

His arms were pinned tightly behind his back, legs briefly flailing before one was pressed beneath the heel of Gabriel, causing the other to fall completely prone. “Temper, little marquess,” he commented lightly. “Attacking a Devil is one thing, but their leader’s own flesh and blood?”

Gile’s face twisted with rage, spitting incoherently as Isaac moved protectively to his sister’s side.

“Gracious, but I hadn’t meant to cause so much commotion.” Sybella sighed, the damning card in question twirling between her fingers. “Here; if it will ease your mind, Lord Oslay, I’m happy to show you what you accuse me of.”

Giles’ face went deathly pale as a card was revealed; the king of hearts. “Y-You—you mean...?”

“Terribly sorry, Gabriel,” Sybella crooned, flicking the card away without a second’s thought. “Suppose tonight just isn’t your night.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Tristan finally spoke up once more, moving towards Gabriel as the pair worked together to hoist Giles onto his feet. “Since Lord Oslay here decided to act like an absolute fool, I’m marking this game as a win for the Orions.”

“I suppose that will make up for this slight against my honor,” Gabriel sighed, stepping away to brush his coat clean.

“What?!” Giles gurgled, blood still streaming from his mouth. “B-But I would have won!”

“You would have, yes!” Tristan’s expression appeared cheery, but his tone could cut through metal itself. “A shame you went and caused such an unforgivable scene. Gabriel, let me know if there’s any problems gathering up your winnings this

evening; I'd hate for the Devils to gain a reputation of not paying their debts. Even if it's from an ex-member," he added, perhaps a bit too chipperly after the fact.

Some unseen rush of adrenaline charged through Giles, and he nearly tore free from Tristian's grasp "No! Y-You can't do this to me! It—those estates weren't even mine to begin with!" Realization crossed his face too late, and all Giles could do now was clamp his mouth shut as angry chatter began circulating around the dining room.

"That money wasn't, either!" a club member shouted out.

"You said you'd win me back twice as much!" another snarled.

"Seems as if you have quite a few debts to pay off, my little marquess," Gabriel replied coolly. "That is, after the members of Arkley are finished with you. I don't imagine you'll be letting this one get away with attempted assault against your sister, Isaac?"

The duke of Arkley slowly shook his head, a cold murder building behind his gaze. He easily took hold of Giles, the man letting out a pained squeal as his arms tightened behind him.

"Well! That was a fun little detour," Tristan beamed. "I'll walk with Isaac and make sure Giles is fully acquainted with local law. Until next time, Gabriel!"

Gabriel offered a shrug in response, watching as Giles was practically dragged kicking and screaming. "Th-this isn't over! You can't do this to me!" The little marquess met Gabriel's gaze, burning with an intense hatred never seen before within those icy-blue eyes. "You think so highly of yourself, but I still hold the card you want most. Once you're done with my cousin, I'll take her back, ruined and all."

He wasn't quite sure when it happened, but Gabriel quite suddenly found his fist

plowed into Giles' face, blood spurting from the man's nose as red filled the duke's vision. Isaac had no trouble regaining control of the weak-kneed marquess, seemingly ignorant as Gabriel grabbed the man entirely by the collar of his shirt.

"Speak of her again, and I promise you it will be the last use your tongue has," Gabriel snarled.

Somehow, Gabriel paled further than before.

It wasn't long after that Isaac dragged him from the dining room, the crowd of club members dispersing back to their tables or higher ranking members in hopes of retrieving lost funds. Gabriel exhaled loudly, suddenly feeling as if a massive weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He suddenly remembered the presence of his friend and, without missing a beat, turned to greet him properly. "Sorry—I hadn't even asked if you lost the brooch or not."

Christian stared at him for a long, hard moment, then broke out into laughter, slapping his friend against the back.

* * *

Thalia could hardly stand to look away from the clock. It was well past midnight, and she'd taken near-permanent residence in the drawing room closest to the entryway.

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It'd been easier to pass the time when everyone was still awake; Charlotte was a non-stop chatterbox, poking and prodding for information about the "courtship". Not that there was much to tell, but Thalia was willing to look at past interactions with a new lens, disregarding any stories about the library. Or the stables.

It had been nice, thinking back throughout the week with fresh perspectives. Orion's Hunt, the park opening, their walk through the field; everything suddenly had a far more intimate tinge to it, and Thalia wasn't afraid to view it as such, now.

Of course, that only made it harder when Charlotte could no longer keep her eyes open, whisked off to the guest bedroom a mere fifteen minutes after ten. And Louise, ever the wonderful hostess, had long periods of time where she needed to step away, whether to handle matters of the home, or because the little one demanded more attention than she could muster in front of guests.

Thus, Thalia sat in the lightly-decorated drawing room, an embroidery project long since abandoned amidst a small pile of novels. Currently, a sketchpad provided by the servants sat across her lap, charcoal stick abandoned across the tea table as she remained fixated on the clock.

"Five till one," she sighed, rubbing her eyes tiredly. Her body certainly was tired enough to head to bed, but her mind refused to settle. Not until Gabriel came back.

A gentle rap sounded against the drawing room's door, Louise lingering beneath its archway. She held a silver tray with two cups of steaming tea, offering Thalia a sympathetic smile.

“Mind if I join you?”

Thalia immediately shifted over, opening a space beside her on the settee. Louise moved with a carefully cultivated grace, hardly impeded by the swell of her stomach. Even so, Thalia moved to take the tray from her, setting it across the table as Louise gratefully took her seat.

“You didn’t have to go to all this trouble, Louise.”

“I certainly did,” Louise insisted. “You are still my guest, regardless of my circumstances.”

Thalia offered her hostess a cup first, accepting hers next as she inhaled the pleasant aroma. A hint of sweetness and a fair share of earth and apple; it warmed her to the core after the first sip.

“I still stay up sometimes,” Louise sighed lightly. “Especially when the little one is just as restless.”

Thalia blinked, the tea’s warmth flushing across her face.

“I think it’s just natural,” Louise continued softly. “To worry about the one you love. It doesn’t matter how often I hear it, or how much I know it myself; until I can see Christian for myself, I am simply unwavering.”

“Love...” Thalia repeated the word gently, as if afraid it might shatter in her mouth. “That’s... a strong word, Your Grace. I don’t know if we can use it for my and the duke’s... situation.”

Louise chuckled lightly, taking a sip from her cup before awkwardly leaning forward in an attempt to set it back against the table. Thalia moved quickly to assist, and her

hostess let out a far louder sigh, practically sinking into the cushion of the couch.

“There’s no need to rush toward it. Honestly, I’m impressed you managed to wrap Gabriel’s mind around the idea of proper courtship at all. Christian was convinced he would live out his life a bachelor.”

“I imagine they had a bet going about it,” Thalia giggled.

“If not between them, then certainly between my husband and his clubmates.” Louise laughed, hands folding against her midsection with a slight wince. “Ooh, so particular, this one is. Just like his father; must have every little detail perfectly so.”

“Are you in pain?” Thalia asked.

Louise offered a warm, if somewhat strained, smile. “Some days, I am. Right now, I’m simply uncomfortable.”

“I really don’t need the company, if you require—?”

“—Oh, lying in bed sounds positively dreadful at the moment,” Louise interrupted with a groan. “You’re only some of the reason I’m sitting out here.” She shifted in her spot, looking terribly uncomfortable while doing so. But, after a moment, her expression looked less tight, and she let out another relieved sigh.

The question danced around her mind, but Thalia bit her tongue to ensure it didn’t slip out.

“Some days, I don’t feel it was worth it.”

Thalia let out a startled gasp, her hand shooting to cover her mouth. Louise laughed loudly in reply, pulling an embarrassed flush across Thalia’s face.

“Gracious, Louise! I thought I had said something aloud!”

“You’re very easy to read,” Louise admitted. “It’s what I adore most about you; I’m sure that’s what drew Charlotte in.” Her smile softened, and she held her hand outward. Hesitantly, Thalia accepted it, allowing her hostess to guide it over her stomach and settle atop.

“Some days, it’s very painful. Some days are filled with anger, or anxiety, or a fight that seems impossible to overcome.”

A slight flutter passed underneath Thalia’s hand; she couldn’t help but inhale sharply once more.

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“Then... I imagine my life without any of this,” Louise said softly, a note of somber recollection in her tone. “And I know it’s all entirely worth it. It’s frightening, certainly, to trust someone with all you are. But I think you’ve already gone through one of the hardest parts, Thalia.”

Before Thalia could inquire further, the telltale crunch of carriage wheels immediately caught her attention. She nearly dropped her cup as she stumbled to her feet, managing a hasty apology before moving towards the door.

She almost missed Louise’s words after the fact, though they didn’t fully process until she’d run through the hall and rounded the corner into the entryway. She was out of breath, her hair a mess from hours of nervous fidgeting, and she hadn’t changed out of what was certainly a wrinkled mess of a gown.

But the moment those double doors opened, and Gabriel came tumbling in, equally out-of-breath and somewhat scattered in appearance, nothing else mattered to Thalia.

And as his expression lit up like the moon in the sky, Louise’s last sentence came flooding back to her mind.

You’ve made Gabriel Harding smile.

CHAPTER32

Everyone clamored around Christian for the story, regardless how much he insisted it would make for better telling after a few hours of sleep. In all the commotion, Thalia allowed herself to be led away by Gabriel’s hand, the pair trailing to the kitchen as

laughter filled the halls behind them. “They’re not going to let him rest, are they?” She asked.

“He does it to himself,” Gabriel replied.

“I cannot believe you’re abandoning him to that ravenous pack,” Thalia teased.

Gabriel raised his brow slightly, pausing at the kitchen doors. “Hardly. I’m simply making a pot of tea for everyone.”

“And you need me because...?”

A coy smile crossed Gabriel’s lips as he held the door open. “The tray can be quite heavy.”

“Oh, of course!” Thalia gave a delicate curtsy before sweeping inside, squealing in surprise as her waist was suddenly snagged. “Gabriel—!”

“You were waiting for me,” Gabriel crooned.

Thalia’s face flushed terribly, hands working to free herself from his arms. “I—I was not!”

“You were,” Gabriel insisted. “You were going to stay up all night, weren’t you?”

“No!”

“Rabbits aren’t nocturnal, you know,” he continued, leading the pair toward the cupboards.

“W-Wolves aren’t either,” Thalia argued, trying to reach a hand to grasp at the closest

tea pot on the shelf. More laughter spilled out as he hoisted her up onto the counter, gathering both teapot and cups before shooting a playful glare her way. “I thought I was here to help carry the tray?”

“The tray isn’t ready, yet,” Gabriel replied coolly.

“Ah, yes.” Thalia sighed, hands settling against her lap as she watched Gabriel busy himself with preparations. It wasn’t long before an urn was set over the fireplace, water bubbling within as it came to a boil. “You have an answer for every little thing, don’t you?”

“I certainly like to,” Gabriel replied.

Thalia glanced at her hands, doing her best not to pick at her fingernail. There was no reason to be nervous, after all; old habits simply were hard to break. “Was... there another reason you separated me?”

Gabriel was quiet for a moment, checking the urn before drifting to Thalia’s side. He propped himself against the counter top, ensuring his full attention was on her, and her alone.

“I assume it’s in regards to the estate deeds.” Thalia sighed lightly, bracing herself for the worst. “Please know that I truly appreciate everything you’ve done up until this point.”

“I’m... glad to hear that.” Gabriel’s brow rose slightly, giving Thalia a bemused look. “Though I admit, I had hoped to place the deeds directly into your hand. Legalities, and all that; while the estates are technically under my name, it won’t take too terribly long to transfer ownership back to you.”

Thalia blinked, staring at Gabriel blankly.

“You look as if I’ve grown a third eye,” Gabriel chuckled.

“N-No! I just—” Thalia shook her head furiously, face heating up horrifically from embarrassment. “Forgive me; I had no doubt you would keep your word, but I wasn’t certain how exactly...?”

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“It’s not a perfect solution, I admit.” Gabriel frowned slightly, and it was the first time Thalia noticed that he, too, fiddled with his fingers. He seemed to notice, quickly producing a small pocket watch from his vest and rubbing its surface instead. “While the deeds to your estates have been burned, that fool left himself a massive paper trail leading back to the crime. My lawyers will have no problem adding the estates under the Stonewell name, and afterwards, I’ll simply sign them back under your name.”

“And... Giles is...?”

“He has nothing left, Thalia. No money, no reputation to fall back on.” A hand gently grasped her chin, and she allowed Gabriel to tilt her gaze to meet his. “He has ruined himself completely, and will no longer cause you anguish.”

Thalia swallowed past a growing lump in her throat. “I just... can’t believe it. To think, he’d truly go as far as he had...” Her sentence faded into the back of her throat. Unfortunately, that seemed entirely like something her cousin would do. “How on earth did you find that paper trail at all?”

Gabriel sighed, suddenly looking far more tired than before. “That was your brother’s doing, actually. He entered Oslay Hall while the little marquess was out and about and discovered it.”

“H-He did?” Thalia wasn’t sure why she sounded so surprised; it absolutely sounded like something Robin would do. “Then, is that where he’s been?”

* * *

This was it. The moment Gabriel had been dreading. He had to tell her, of course; that he had lost touch with Robin, that their last agreed-upon deed had fallen through, and he was entirely uncertain where the younger Sutton was. He opened his mouth to speak, to fully explain himself and hope that, somehow, Thalia would forgive him.

“You didn’t tell her where I was this entire time?!”

Gabriel didn’t often find himself at a loss for words, but this happened to be one of those instances. His head swiveled towards the kitchen doors, where a rather furious-looking Robin stood, hunched and jabbing accusatory fingers like some horrific creature who had risen from the sewer’s depths. He certainly played the part well, appearing disheveled and trash-laden, oozing a puddle of some unfortunate-smelling liquid beneath his feet.

“Robin Alexander Sutton—!” Thalia immediately slid off the countertop, running toward her brother before stopping a good five feet away. She gagged, hand covering her mouth before nearly falling over; Gabriel managed enough sense to rush up behind and catch her. “What on earth have you been doing?!”

“Oh no; I’m not going to be played off as the bad guy!” Robin pointed a finger Gabriel’s way, and the duke couldn’t help but curl his nose at the putrid stench. “You were supposed to tell her what happened!”

“Tell her what? Your explicit instructions were to keep your dealings secret!” Gabriel wrestled to keep his tone from a snarl, helping Thalia to her feet before pointing his own accusatory finger Robin’s way. “And on that note, where have you been?”

“Breaking into Oslay!” Robin snapped angrily. “What else would I be doing?!” He shook his arm free of filth, scattering flecks of grime across the kitchen floor as Gabriel resisted the urge to gag.

“Why?!” Thalia cried out, having since found dinner napkins and handed one to Gabriel for use.

“To help you!” Robin exclaimed. “Or, what, did you think this useless excuse of a man would have managed as much as he had without—”

“What is all the yelling for?!”

Gabriel wasn’t sure how he’d missed the thundering of footsteps, but it was impossible not to hear the outcry of his friend. Christian and the others stood huddled around the door, expressions of shock and anger all twisting to abject horror as the smell overtook everyone at once.

“G-gracious—what is that?!” Charlotte gagged, grasping the nearby wall for support. “Louise, get out of here—that smell can’t be good for the baby.”

“What is causing that vile odor?” Christian cried out, having undone his vest in an attempt to cover his mouth with his shirt.

“I’m not a ‘what’,” Robin snapped. “And how did no one get my message? I specifically told Mr. Cooke to find someone from Stonewall, or from the Orions!”

Gabriel could feel a pounding headache begin to form in the back of his head. “Enough! Charlotte, help Louise to her room.”

Charlotte needed no further prompting, taking Louise’s arm and leading the rather green-faced woman away from the scene.

“Christian, go wake some servants and help them draw a bath for Mr. Sutton.”

“Mr. Sutton—is that walking blob of fetid muck Robin?!” Christian gasped.

“Christian—!”

“Right, of course!” As Christian vanished around the door, Gabriel did his best to inhale as little stench as possible. “As for you—” He jabbed a finger Robin’s way, holding fast to Thalia as he felt her legs threaten to give out. “Start talking. Now.”

* * *

It was well past five in the morning when things finally settled at Egerton Hall. Layers of filth had finally revealed themselves as Thalia’s brother, and he somehow managed to talk during the entire process. About his meet-up with his Whitechapel friends, about the increased security at Oslay and how they had planned to break in through the sewers, given their familiarity with the routes. How they’d run into problems and, as far as Robin knew, Mr. Cooke was still working within Oslay. That whatever maid or servant he’d spoken to would have passed the information his way.

“Figures Giles would’ve fired him,” Robin grumbled, face still bright pink from all the scrubbing he went through. He scowled darkly, arms crossed and fully sunk into one of the reading chairs within their guest room. “I’m sorry, Thalia—if we didn’t get stuck behind that wave of garbage, I would’ve come back myself and told you.”

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Thalia could only offer a tired sigh, pacing about the guest room as the information finally settled into her mind. “Robin, you know that was horribly reckless of you.”

“Yeah, I know,”

“No, Robin, I’m serious!” Thalia quickly crossed the room, practically falling to her knees as she grabbed his hands firmly. “I’ve kept quiet about your business, but this has to be the last time! No more toshing, no more heists, or thieving, or—or whatever else Whitechapel forced you to do in order to survive.”

Robin looked ready to argue, but his mouth simply hung open. Maybe it was the fatigue that stopped him—maybe being safely indoors, dressed and bathed, far away from the dangers of the sewer sweeping him away—made him reconsider. Whatever the reason, her brother simply nodded, giving her hands a squeeze back.

“Good.” Thalia stood abruptly, exhaling sharply as her hands settled against her hips. “I’m... I’m glad you’re not going to fight me on this.”

“I assume you have a plan for me, given how serious you sound,” Robin said.

She had. Faintly, at least. But now wasn’t the time to consider it; she still had to properly thank Gabriel. For everything.

“You gonna go find him, then?”

Thalia paused, glancing back at her brother with a confused stare.

“You’re pretty easy to read, sis.” A large yawn escaped Robin as he stood, arms stretching out toward the ceiling. “And I already gave Gabriel the business for you.”

Thalia’s gaze narrowed slightly. “Did you, now?”

“Someone has to make sure you’re given away to the right guy,” Robin replied nonchalantly. “Father can’t do it, so, it falls to me to ensure that happens.” Something tender briefly slipped into his voice, and Robin quickly wiped his nose on the hem of his sleeve, suddenly interested in the bedframe.

Thalia smiled warmly, embracing her brother in a tight hug. “I’m not going to leave you, Robin. Not this time.”

A sniffle passed between them, and Robin managed a gentle pat on her back. “Y-Yeah, well... I’ll hold you to that.”

* * *

She found him outside, standing amidst the sprawling lawn neatly manicured while its garden looked practically molded into place. Thalia allowed her hand to brush across a row of azure hydrangeas, taken in at how uniformed it all appeared.

“A perfect reflection of Christian’s personality,” Gabriel chuckled, not even turning to greet her. “Entirely too orderly.”

“Perhaps a touch on the unnerving,” Thalia grimaced slightly. “I think I prefer the gardens at Stonewell.”

A peal of deep laughter rang from Gabriel’s chest, filling Thalia’s chest with warmth. He turned to greet her properly, hand gesturing towards a blooming, floral archway. Stretched out across the property was a magnificent pond, adrift with lily pads and

quite literally buzzing with activity.

The throaty singsong of frogs ripped across the water, and Thalia found herself guided to sit at a beautiful, wood-carved bench, its leg curling with ivy. Gabriel soon joined at her side, the pair still holding hands as they stared out across the pond. “He’s alright, then?”

“Robin? Oh, yes; I gave him a stern talking to, had him really evaluate his future.” Thalia sighed, taking in the damp scent of the pond. “Something we can discuss later.”

“Of course.”

It really was a glorious morning; not yet too warm or humid, as the rising sun remained beneath a rosy curtain of clouds. The temptation to lean against Gabriel’s shoulder grew with each passing second, but Thalia remained strong. Agreeing to courtship was one thing, but being overly affectionate may very well scare the man away. She couldn’t help but chuckle at the thought; the Duke of Stonewell, terrified over a showcasing of affection. Her gaze drifted down to their hands, still entwined, and a slight guilt tightened in her stomach.

“Gabriel?”

His head tilted her way.

“I know... you agreed to become my actual suitor,” Thalia began. “But, I want that to involve activities you enjoy as well.”

Gabriel cocked an eyebrow, looking her up and down. “I haven’t exactly been subtle in voicing my desires, and you’ve been more than receptive to them.”

Thalia blinked, face flushing slightly. “No, that wasn’t what I—you’ve been entirely too considerate with my own feelings and boundaries, and I just want to make sure that... that I’m...” her sentence drifted off, watching as Gabriel’s eyes followed hers to their hands.

A slight smirk crossed his face, and he replied with a slight cheek to his tone. “Should my word of safety be ‘ramps’ as well?”

Thalia scowled, shoving his shoulder with her free hand. “I am quite serious, Gabriel! If you are making yourself show affection that you’re uncomfortable with, I wish to know of it.”

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Gabriel's smile persisted for another moment or two, then faltered into something far more reserved. "You are serious."

Thalia nodded curtly. A small part of her wondered if she'd been too presumptuous, wounded his ego in a manner he found rather distasteful. There was a time that such considerations would never cross her mind.

But more time had passed between them, and Gabriel Harding was no longer that terrifying wolf stalking in the woods. He had a tamer side, though to call him a trained dog was an insult in itself. He was... a beast with compassion, a hunting hound with a wild streak still alight inside him.

And right now, his smile was not one of a predator cornering his prey... but a man allowed to briefly let his guard down.

"On the rare chance there is, in fact, something I cannot do... I will let you know."

"Will you?"

He nodded slowly.

Thalia let out a sigh of relief, leaning against the back of the bench as a brief flicker of sunlight poked through the clouds. "Thank you, Gabriel. That's... reassuring."

Gabriel waited patiently. If Thalia wanted, she was certain he'd wait a hundred years for her to speak.

“Would you—” Thalia’s face flushed terribly, feeling as if steam itself were rising from her cheeks. “I mean, we don’t have to, if it doesn’t sound pleasing.”

She paused, waiting. Gabriel simply waited for her to continue.

“Perhaps, if we’re all not too exhausted,” Thalia continued. “Would you like to... accompany Charlotte and me to a Seasonal event? To Madeline’s I mean—it shouldn’t be too chaotic, and the invitation mentions it’s for the evening, so we could spend the morning resting... if you’d like.”

Gabriel visibly rolled her proposal about in his head, and Thalia couldn’t help but giggle nervously. He really wanted to stretch this out. “Do I get to choose your attire?”

Thalia rose her brow slightly. “That depends; will you permit me to wear anything at all?”

Gabriel’s laughter filled her with a sort of warmth the rising sun could have never provided. “Alright, yes. But afterwards...” his voice trailed off, leaning close to catch Thalia in a sudden, deep kiss. She pressed into him, arms loosely coiling around his shoulders as his hands settled perfectly against her hip.

Afterwards. Yes; they could always consider everything that came next afterwards.

CHAPTER33

The entirety of last night’s affair was told, in full, during a very late breakfast at Egerton Hall. Christian wove a fantastic tale out of it, gesturing wildly while occasionally popping chunks of fresh fruit in his mouth. Charlotte was positively enraptured, with Louise sitting beside her husband, hand-in-hand, occasionally offering a raised brow or bemused grin.

Thalia found it difficult to listen—she'd hardly touched her own bowl of porridge, the strawberry slices having long since sunk to the bottom—and instead found her attention solely on Gabriel. Every so often, he'd offer a slight scowl or a roll of his eyes at some exaggeration Christian made, though he made no indication of interrupting the narrative.

“You should have seen his face after Gabriel took him down,” Christian cackled. “I’m certain the little marquess lost a tooth during that skirmish.” He stabbed his fork into a link of sausage, gesturing toward Gabriel with a wide grin. “Truth be told, I’d half-expected the plan to have only involved knocking him out.”

Gabriel shrugged lightly, his hand finding Thalia’s before setting it against his leg. Thalia’s face lit up, and she hoped feverishly no one would take notice.

“I cannot believe I missed that,” Robin groaned, having polished off his second bowl of porridge before pulling his still-full plate closer.

“I’m not the one who told you to wade in sewage,” Gabriel reminded him lightly.

“No, but you—!” Robin caught his sister’s seething glare, filling his mouth instead with a huge bite of sausage.

“Well, I’d say it all came together quite nicely,” Louise beamed, taking a gentle sip of tea. “Though, I must say, I’m eager to hear how you’ll be helping to fix my bathroom, Duke of Stonewell. And there were quite a few linens I had to throw out after last night’s escapades.”

A tinge of embarrassment covered Robin’s face as he shoved a forkful of eggs into his mouth.

“Don’t worry,” Gabriel assured. “I have a few thoughts as to how Mr. Sutton can pay

you back.”

Again, Robin looked ready to argue, only to be shut down by Thalia’s stare. “You could start a fire with that look,” he grumbled, taking a huge swig of juice before snagging a stray cut of toast.

Thalia chuckled lightly, offering a glance Gabriel’s way. His expression immediately defaulted into its typical cold and stone exterior, though she could still detect a hint of a smirk beneath it. He was very much proud of himself, and he had every right to be so. If anything, Thalia was thrilled that she was privy to his true emotions, however fleetingly they lasted.

“As much as I enjoy all your banter, I’m afraid Thalia and I have business to attend to.” Gabriel offered his hand beside him, to which Thalia graciously accepted. “Would you be so kind as to join me? We agreed to coordinate our outfits last night, and I want to ensure we make the perfect statement at Madeline’s get-together.”

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“Of course, Gabriel.” Thalia rose after him, glued to his side as Charlotte flashed the widest grin her way.

“Oh, tell me this isn’t a look into my future,” Robin bemoaned.

“Hush, you,” Charlotte admonished. “Do not ruin this for me; it’s been quite literally years in the making!”

* * *

The evening approached far quicker than anyone anticipated, and for some reason, Gabriel found himself quite nervous. It made no sense; Thalia had been the one to invite him in the first place, and he already knew what she would be wearing. There was no reason for him to be so anxious, and yet, he found himself pacing at the bottom-most step of Stonewall manor.

“Quite pacing, would ya?” Robin groaned from beside the carriage, still fidgeting with his tie. “You’re making me feel all jittery.”

“Hush, you,” Charlotte admonished, slapping his hands away as she quickly tidied his appearance. “He’s allowed to be nervous for his first real outing with Thalia.”

“Neither one of you are being particularly helpful,” Gabriel hissed.

Robin offered a shrug in reply, still trying to mess with his collar as, once more, Charlotte slapped his hands away. “Why did I get dragged along to this, anyway?”

“Because I still need a proper chaperone,” Charlotte reminded him. “And this way, Gabriel and Thalia can spend the entire night together, without having to worry about us.”

“Worry about you, maybe,” Another pained yelp escaped Robin as Charlotte slapped his hands.

“Honestly, stop fussing with those buttons. You’re as bad as Gabriel was at this age...” Charlotte’s chatter fell to the wayside as Gabriel stared up at the front door. He’d forced himself to stay rooted in place, producing his pocket watch as he watched the hand tick by. He wasn’t keeping time, though; he could hardly keep focus as it was. He just needed something to stare at, something to fixate on. The seconds added up to a minute, and he turned the watch onto its back, staring at the engravings along the back.

Find the time.

His father’s initials were barely legible after all these years, and Gabriel found he’d been holding his breath. Maybe this had been a mistake. They didn’t have to appear as a proper couple; Gabriel was certain he could run upstairs quickly and change, match himself to his sister’s daffodil-themed attire. He could just be Gabriel Harding, Duke of Stonewell, chaperoning his sister as she attended her friend’s Seasonal event.

“Get whatever machinations you have out of your head,” Charlotte demanded.

Gabriel glanced over his shoulder, giving his sister an incredulous stare. “You know, we should really discuss how disturbing it is that you can seemingly read the minds of—”

“Ooh, Thalia!” Charlotte clapped excitedly, cutting her brother off with a loud gasp. “You look positively divine! I knew purple suited you entirely too well—you’re

going to be the absolute envy of everyone!”

Gabriel followed his sister’s glance, immediately standing as he fully took in Thalia’s appearance. She stood hesitantly at the top of the stairs, the evening hues and candlelight perfectly accenting the soft lilac shade of her gown. Its flowing skirt billowed at the slightest shift of her hip, with carefully-detailed lacework around the ample curves of her bodice.

A rectangular window tastefully presented the fullness of her bosom, and the way her hair had been done—decorated with a number of small, lavender florets—left small curls and dark strands to help shape the soft features of her face. She offered a shy smile towards the Hardings, and in that moment, Gabriel wanted nothing more than to sweep her off her feet and take her to his room.

“So?” His sister pressed against his side, her eyelashes fluttering and her smile as smug as could be.

Gabriel exhaled slowly, reining in his thoughts before speaking. “Like watching the perpetual blooming of a flower. You are ethereal, Thalia Sutton; I daresay I won’t be able to compliment you as you so deserve.”

Even from this distance, Thalia’s face grew rosy. “The mere fact you wish to stand beside me is compliment enough... Gabriel.”

Gabriel’s smile turned to a grimace as Charlotte squealed loudly beside him. He shot her a glare, to which she bid a hasty retreat towards her carriage, Robin in tow. His attention turned back to Thalia, having since descended the stairs to meet him fully. He extended his hand, and in moments, Thalia’s gloved fingers interlaced with his own.

“Let’s not keep her waiting much longer,” she said.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Gabriel mused. “I was considering letting them stew for a while. At least until I’ve had my fill of you, first.”

Thalia’s laughter rang like a bell, and she gracefully stepped off the stairs and into Gabriel’s embrace. “Feeling territorial, Mister Wolf?”

His arms tightened around her waist, a slight growl added to his tone. “Perhaps I am, little rabbit. Perhaps I am.” He leaned in close, catching Thalia’s lips in a brief, but wanting kiss. She was left breathless as he pulled away, that familiar spark of intrigue crossing her eyes as the moment stretched out between them.

“Another week,” she whispered softly.

Gabriel offered a bemused look in return.

“I was considering ways to thank you,” Thalia explained. “As our previous deal has become entirely unbalanced. I thought, perhaps... I could offer another week as a guest in your manor. One not burdened with schemes and plans of ruining a man’s reputation.” Briefly, her gaze drifted towards the ground, but those emerald-green eyes of hers soon found their way back to Gabriel. “A week to... properly get to know one another. To... give chance for opportunities of courtship.”

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“You wish me to act the suitor properly this time,” Gabriel teased.

“I wish you the chance to...” Thalia hesitated.

“To...?”

Once more, her eyes met his. Once more, they were but a hair’s breadth away. But the spell broke with a loud swinging of a carriage’s door, and Gabriel turned to find Charlotte’s head poking out, impatience fully on display.

“You two are awful, do you know that?” she whined, cheeks puffed and arms crossed against her chest. “Were you going to have me wait for hours on end?”

Gabriel’s laughter rang out this time, and he—regrettably—pulled away from their close proximity. “Suppose we shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

“Suppose we shouldn’t,” Thalia agreed.

* * *

Madeline’s event took place amidst her garden space, and Thalia found it even more whimsical than the home’s interior. It became strikingly obvious where Charlotte had gained inspiration for Stonewell’s own layout, with mossy stones and ivy-covered lantern posts acting as a border for their walkway to the garden proper.

Low-hanging trees created the illusion of secretive hideaways, with a wide assortment of flowers and produce that tempted passersby to partake in.

At the center of the party sat the crown jewel of the garden; a beautifully-crafted pond, featuring a small waterfall and thrumming with the gentle sounds of crickets and frogs hidden between the shadowy spaces. A few candles had seemingly melted on top of the stones that kept the pond in place, and the lights followed the twist and bends of a small stream that cut through the rest of the garden.

“Organized chaos,” Thalia mused aloud.

The trio turned eyes the moment they entered, and Thalia was tempted to hide herself behind Gabriel’s intimidating frame. But the duke would have no part, purposefully adjusting himself so Thalia was on full display. She thought, at first, the guest list would be quite small, as Madeline had seemed the type not to engage in the endless climb of society’s ladder.

But much to Thalia’s surprise (and, perhaps, embarrassment), the garden was quite the lively affair, and she spotted a number of well-known members of the Ton in attendance.

“I told you,” Charlotte whispered, arm wrapped around Robin’s. “The absolute envy of all.”

The soft thrill of stringed instruments grew louder as the trio moved throughout the party, eventually finding themselves amidst a number of clothed, circular tables decorated with individual tea trays for guests to enjoy. This particular spot of the garden had been neatly trimmed and filed down for ease of travel, and many couples had already taken advantage of the space with a flurry of activity from dancing.

And there, across the way and amidst the largest table, sat the woman of the hour herself, politely engaged in small conversation with whatever guest happened to place themselves before her. Thalia immediately recognized the older gentleman sitting beside her as Mr. Beaumont, who seemed just as rigid when it came to socially

interacting with guests.

“The two of them truly are related,” Gabriel commented lightly.

“I’m sure they’d much rather be having a quiet night in the library together,” Charlotte giggled.

Thalia shot both Hardings a chiding look. “Gracious, but I could say the same for you two. The Harding family; well known for speaking whatever happens to cross their minds.”

Both Charlotte and Gabriel suddenly found the scenery more interesting to look at. Robin chuckled, clearly glad to not be on the receiving end for once, and Thalia sighed lightly, leading Gabriel by the arm towards their gracious hosts.

“Good evening, Mr. Beaumont. And thank you again for your gracious invitation, Madeline; your garden is a sight to behold.”

Madeline’s blush was outshined by her father’s beaming pride.

“She was born with her mother’s green thumb, that’s for certain. And it’s a delight to see you once more, Miss Sutton! As well as your entourage,” he added, rising to give Gabriel a shake of the hand.

“Good evening to you, Mr. Beaumont,” Gabriel said.

“And this is my brother, Robin,” Thalia introduced, stepping aside to allow Charlotte to pull him reluctantly forward.

Mr. Beaumont’s smile brightened, and he shook Robin’s hand with great interest. “Charmed, my boy! I see you have your sister’s eye for detail; you’ve been staring

nonstop at this ring of mine, yes?”

Thalia made a slight face, Robin only able to offer a weak smile in reply. “It’s...real gold, right? But the gem’s not quite right for diamond... maybe moissanite? A bit over a carat in weight?”

Mr. Beaumont’s brow rose. “Impressive! Thalia, your family proves to be more fascinating by the second. We’ll have to talk later, Mr. Sutton; I’m very interested in your opinion on a few pieces I have inside the house.”

“Madeline, you look like an angel!” Charlotte immediately rounded to table to embrace her friend, and Thalia found herself in agreement. While it was common for the debutante to wear white at her Seasonal event, Madeline’s open robe was especially well-made.

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The “robe” itself appeared to be made of a more sheer material, complementing the opalescent gown beneath. Her fair hair had similarly been adorned with glimmering pearls, and even her spectacles appeared far more regal than previous pairs.

“Thank you,” Madeline said. “But I can’t take full credit. Louise was a big help in choosing the fabric.”

“Oh, but Louise always has such wonderful taste.” Charlotte’s head swiveled, her interest clearly piqued. “Has she arrived yet with Christian?”

“Louise actually came a touch earlier,” Mr. Beaumont explained. “Before the majority of guests arrived. Poor dear was feeling rather faint today. Something about an upset stomach.”

Robin suddenly looked far more interested in the refreshments table, and Thalia’s smile strained somewhat. “That’s a shame. We’ll have to visit her and see what can be done to help ease her troubles.”

“That sounds like you’re volunteering me for chores!” Charlotte gasped.

“Would you not volunteer yourself to aid your cherished friend in her time of need?” Gabriel asked innocently.

“Oh, well, we would, of course, but,” Robin quickly pulled on Charlotte’s hand, dragging the pair free from the conversation as he made a dash for the refreshments table proper.

“A-ah! Sorry, he’s my chaperone this evening!” Charlotte called out. “Have to stay by his side—you understand!”

It took everything Thalia had not to roll her eyes. And given Gabriel’s strained look, he was holding in his own admonishments toward his given sibling. “Well, let’s not take too much of the Beaumonts’ time, then. I’m sure there’s plenty of other guests still in need of greeting.” She offered a curtsy Madeline’s way, who replied with a grateful nod and a deeper curtsy of her own.

“Oh, but before we leave,” Gabriel interjected. “I’d like to arrange for a visit sometime, Mr. Beaumont. Thalia has recently come across a number of properties, and I believe she would find your expertise in managing boarding schools quite helpful.”

Thalia’s face warmed as Mr. Beaumont’s expression brightened considerably.

“Is that so? Well, congratulations, Miss Sutton! I would be delighted to share my wisdom, though I can’t promise much. I certainly have no proper background or education in the matter, but I’ll offer what my experience has brought to me.”

“That alone would be of great help,” Thalia insisted. “Thank you ever so much, Mr. Beaumont.”

With one more round of handshakes, hugs, and curtsies, the trio departed from the presence of their host, their spot quickly filled by another group of guests.

“I hadn’t realized Madeline had such a prominent standing in society,” Thalia said.

“It’s more so her father that holds that title,” Gabriel explained. “Madeline has made it a goal of hers not to stand in the spotlight, but that’s a bit difficult when your father helps to manage some of the most esteemed schools in London. Eton, Winchester,

Westminster—I believe he was recently appointed on the board for Harrow as well.”

Thalia gasped, catching her balance on Gabriel’s arm. “But, when we first met, he spoke of such a simple desire. Boarding schools for those in the country, helping those less fortunate and in need of a second chance..?”

“Oh, he would much rather do all that,” Gabriel reassured. “But you can do so much more with money lining your pockets. The man's quite good at persuading the purses of the more influential families.”

“That’s why he often isn’t seen at home,” Thalia finished.

Gabriel nodded. “He’s constantly traveling between districts to ensure his high standards of education are being met.”

Thalia found herself suddenly quite dizzy. “But, he appears so... so...?”

“Salt of the earth?” Gabriel offered. “Yes; it’s quite a useful tool in his arsenal. He really should be spoken to as ‘Lord Beaumont’, but like his daughter, the idea feels a bit too grand for his taste.”

And now, such influential people were to visit Thalia over tea. It all honestly felt too good to be true. She glanced about the party, feeling quite lost as to what to do next. Charlotte had been by her side for such a majority of her visit, it was strange to have her absent. Though, she seemed fully dedicated to keeping Robin entertained, showing off a number of strawberry-themed sweets as he happily added them to his plate.

“Well, it seems the younger siblings are fully occupied,” Gabriel’s voice dropped to a low whisper, breath heavy against her ear as a shiver of pleasure ran up her spine. “What say we pick up where we left off last during Orion’s Hunt?”

A coy smile crossed her lips, and Thalia playfully pushed against his chest. “Five minutes?”

Gabriel smirked. “I only need three to catch you, Thalia Sutton.”

CHAPTER 34

The garden party stretched well into the evening, after the sun had fallen and the brightest of stars managed to break through the twilight sky. With a glass of strawberry gin-and-tonic in hand, Gabriel entertained himself with polite conversation between guests, eyes scanning the crowd in search of Thalia for the third time that night.

He’d been right, of course; it’d taken only three minutes to find Thalia the first time, as she thought herself clever to hide among the wave of arriving guests. She demanded the best two out of three, and of course, Gabriel agreed. But this time, she enlisted both Robin and Charlotte’s aid, keeping the man thoroughly off the scent. Every so often, Gabriel thought he saw a blur of lilac, only to find his empty-armed sister standing alongside Robin, a branch of purple flowers in hand, a coy smile across her lips.

That round, much to his frustration, went to Thalia.

They met once more at the center of the garden, a slow waltz guiding them across the dance floor as Thalia caught her breath for their last bout. She propped her head against his chest, allowing him to guide her entirely as they swayed gently to the bright thrum of violin strings. “Seems we’re tied,” she finally said.

“Hardly,” Gabriel scowled playfully. “You cheated that last round.”

“You never said I couldn’t use outside help,” Thalia teased. “Besides, a rabbit has to use every trick she has to escape.”

He spun her gracefully, daring a slight dip as childish giggling escaped her lips. “You’re going to get us caught,” he admonished, glancing around at the drifting gazes of other partygoers.

“Me? You’re the one being obvious!” Thalia bit back more laughter, pulling herself upright as she took control of her portion of the dance. “Gracious; must I do everything?”

That got a chuckle from Gabriel, and he allowed Thalia to dictate their direction for a moment. It had been ages since he’d played such childish games, hide-and-seek especially, and was thrilled at how much of a challenge Thalia put up. “I feel for this last round, perhaps we limit it to hiding places that don’t cause damage to the garden.”

Thalia made a slight face, eyes following Gabriel’s hand as it plucked a stray leaf

from her hair. “I swear, those bushes looked like that before I dove into them.”

“Charlotte is going to have a fit if you ruin that dress,” Gabriel chuckled.

Thalia sighed, head settling against his chest once as she relinquished control once more. “She would, wouldn’t she...?”

* * *

The pair took to the farther reaches of the garden for the last round, laughing and teasing while following the bends of the stream. It eventually spilled out into a more impressive river, flowing just outside the home’s property line and into the forest beyond.

Between it, a large field swayed in the springtime air, having cooled significantly since that morning. Thalia shivered in his embrace, and Gabriel was quick to offer his jacket.

“I promise not to give it back this time,” Thalia smiled sheepishly.

“You could certainly try to,” Gabriel replied coolly. “But I’d sooner let it fall to the ground.”

Thalia chuckled lightly, grasping around the coat’s collar and pulling it tighter against her body. She inhaled deeply, eyes fluttering, and Gabriel wondered what could possibly be going through her mind. So, he decided to ask for himself.

“What are you thinking about, Thalia?”

She exhaled loudly, her hands clinging tighter around the coat. “I was wondering... if this stream fed into the one at the park. If this open field connected to that forest, and

if I could follow the path back to the grove we spent that afternoon in.”

Thalia paused, taking in another audible breath. “And, I was thinking... now that the pretense of our courtship being a facade is over, it’s easier to remain at ease around you. To simply enjoy the moment as it is, and not overanalyze every spoken word between us.”

Gabriel found himself in complete agreement. Still, Thalia’s expression looked troubled, and thus, he persisted.

“What else are you thinking about?”

Thalia hesitated, wiping her face with the back of her gloved hand before offering a nod. “Occasionally...I am beset with a terrible wave of guilt.” A tear caught against the moonlight, and Thalia left it to run down past her chin. “It doesn’t seem as if I should be allowed to feel so happy. Or, that such joy can still bring me such waves of painful memories.”

“We are creatures of complex emotion,” Gabriel offered gently. “You are allowed to experience pleasure, alongside pain.”

A weak giggle escaped her lips, and Thalia exhaled sharply once more. “I hardly knew him growing up. Robin, I mean; he’d gone to live with his mother once Father believed him old enough, and while I certainly wrote...” she paused, tugging at Gabriel’s jacket once more. “I feel I owe him so much. For taking me in after the disastrous encounter with Giles, and caring for me so intently, when I myself never thought to do so.”

“And now he’s here,” Gabriel reminded her gently. “Enjoying this night alongside you.”

Her laughter came stronger this time. “He’s enjoying it alongside that scheming sister of your’s.”

Gabriel pretended to be insulted, a playful scowl crossing his face as he let out a gasp. “How dare you say such horrible things about my sister! This will not stand, Thalia Sutton; when I win this final hunt, I will take my time devouring you wholly.”

A visible shiver ran across Thalia’s body, and she offered a sly smirk of her own. “Bold proclamation, Mister Wolf. Let’s see if your actions are equally so.” She quickly darted into the treeline, jacket fluttering alongside her dress before being fully enveloped into the shade. Gabriel chuckled lightly, turning around as he mentally began to count down from a minute. She would need it, after all; he was hardly going to go easy on her this time.

A sharp click interrupted his internal clock, and something cold pressed itself against the back of Gabriel’s head.

“What a disgustingly sentimental scene to wander into,” Giles Tilbury hissed into his ear.

* * *

It didn't seem real, at first. Certainly, this had to be a nightmare; Thalia had taken a midday nap, after all, just after lunch. She was still asleep, suffering from the unspoken fear her cousin had carved into her mind. That had to be the case. Certainly, that had to be the case.

But, no. Everything was perceived with far too much accuracy, felt far too real to be anything but a part of the waking world. Her arms trembled as she held fast to the tree she'd hidden herself behind, vision swaying between the shadows of the brush and the pistol Giles held in his hand. Held up to Gabriel's head.

“What a disgustingly sentimental scene...”

Even from this distance, his words dug their claws into her, dragging Thalia into a horrific abyss. Every nerve stood on end, skin crawling with the desire to get as far away as humanly possible. But she couldn't; Gabriel was there, entangled in a web of her own doing. Giles was here because of her, and he wouldn't leave without her in hand.

* * *

Someone was going to die tonight. Gabriel knew that, had instinctively resigned himself to the fact once the pistol's muzzle had pressed firmly against the back of his head. But as God for his witness, that fate would not be dealt unto Thalia Sutton.

“What? Suddenly lacking that charming wit of yours, Your Grace?” Giles spat the

title in disgust, forcing Gabriel forward across the field. He moved at a sluggish pace—or had time simply slowed in Gabriel's perspective?

Whatever the reason, Gabriel had to take the opportunity. "A shame; I had hoped to end your life in the boxing ring, but the coward's approach suits you."

The pistol stuck the back of his head, and Gabriel caught a glimpse before stumbling to the ground. A flintlock—he knew it had to be, for certain—which meant he only had to handle one shot.

One shot, and he could end things. One shot to decide which of the two men walked away.

"You don't know when to shut up, do you!" Giles' voice was practically shrieking, barrel pointed to face Gabriel head-on. "Even staring death in the eye, you act so smug!"

Gabriel gritted his teeth, trying to find his window. The flintlock was trembling in the man's hands, but he was so close. Too close to hope for a misfire, a slip of his aim. He could grab it, but when? "Didn't your father teach you not to play with grown-up toys?"

"I could say the same for you," Giles mused. "I would think you would've learned not to touch other people's belongings. But we can blame your mother for that confusion, I suppose."

He just needed the right moment—a brief second of hesitancy from Giles.

"But what you lack in refinement," Giles went on. "You'll make up for in continuing your family's legacy."

“Elaborate.”

Giles’ smile slipped into the deranged. “I’m sure by now you’ve realized what sort of gun this is. I admit, I never thought I’d use it myself—terribly macabre business, duels are—but fate has a funny way of playing out, doesn’t it?”

Gabriel’s eyes narrowed, an unspoken dread clawing its way from the back of his mind.

“Poor Gabriel Harding. Fallen into the same trap his father did all those years ago...” Giles’ laughter was cruel, cutting, and he angled the pistol forward once more. “And once you’re gone, I can tell whatever story I wish. How you and your little clubmates belittled and blackmailed me into giving away my fortune. How you set me up to lose my estates during the tournament—”

“—they weren’t yours to lose.”

“And how horribly you’d treated poor, sweet Thalia!” Giles shrieked, raising his voice to overpower Gabriel’s remark. “I had no choice but to try and protect her honor with a duel, really! What else was I supposed to do?”

“No one in their right mind would ever believe that,” Gabriel hissed.

“It doesn’t matter,” Giles sneered. “I’ll be their only source to rely on.” He cocked the gun, and Gabriel readied himself for the fight of his life. He only had one chance—one chance to ensure death remained off the table.

Only for the world to drop out beneath him as Thalia Sutton burst out from the forest.

CHAPTER35

“I’m here!”

Thalia wasn’t sure when the words had escaped her lips, wasn’t sure when she’d revealed herself for Giles to see. All she knew was that the pistol had vanished from sight, that Gabriel had grown quiet and she simply couldn’t wait any longer. “I—I’m here, Giles.”

Both men froze, looking as if she’d just dumped cold water across their backs. Gabriel’s expression was one of abject horror while Giles looked... bemused. Thalia swallowed the growing lump in her throat; she hadn’t expected such a reaction from her cousin.

“You’re... here?” Giles glanced around, as if the very idea were novel to him. “Why, yes sweet Thalia; we can all see that.”

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She clenched her fists, arms trembling terribly at her side. “No, I... I’m here, Giles. I’ve...” her eyes briefly met Gabriel’s, his gaze narrowing as he caught up with her plan.

“Don’t.”

Thalia shook her head, taking another step forward. “I’m here, Giles, to accept your offer.”

Giles blinked, looking genuinely taken aback. He exchanged a glance with Gabriel, piston still pointed at his head, before turning his attention back to Thalia. “You... accept?”

“Your offer,” Thalia repeated. “Yes, Giles. Your offer of marriage; I accept that, here and now, in front of this witness here.” She held her gaze on Gabriel for a moment, forcing every ounce of cold detachment she could into her voice. “We’re done. He’s finished with me; this was our last night together, as our contract stipulated.”

Giles blinked, visibly still processing her words.

“A contract, Giles!” Her voice jumped an octave, and Thalia forced herself to use that anguish to her advantage. “You were right; Gabriel Harding is nothing more than a deviant. He had me trapped in a five-day contract, and—and today was the last day!” She forced a smile across her face, pushed desperate relief into her words, and held her hands outward. “Everything—everything was his doing. You were right; I should have accepted your offer from the start.”

A coppery tang filled her mouth; Thalia wanted nothing more than to throw up.

“I... I’m sorry.”

She tilted her head down, trying to look meek, defeated, done with the world and in desperate need of rescue. For a long, terrible moment, she was certain it hadn’t worked.

That Giles hadn’t been so gullible, that he was simply adjusting the aim of his pistol to kill Gabriel in the most painful way possible. And then, much to her horror, a pair of wiry arms curled around her body, constricting her tightly like a snake with its prey.

“No, no! Thalia, my love, don’t apologize!” There was entirely too much pleasure in Giles’ tone, and he embraced her tighter than before. “It’s not your fault; how could I ever expect you to stand up to such a terrifying bully?” He loosened his grasp, only to grab her chin and forcefully drag it to meet his eyes.

Wide, deranged, and cold; truly, like the deepest depths of winter. “All is forgiven, my dear. We’ll start anew—somewhere far, far away. I hear the German countryside is pleasant this time of year; we’ll figure it out, you and me!”

“You and me,” Thalia repeated, forcing her gaze to remain. “Of course; it was always meant to be you and me.”

Giles, a brief moment of clarity returning to his expression. “A shame it had to come to this, Thalia. I had hoped to give you the life you so fully deserved, but I suppose a fresh start will be best for our relationship.”

“Of course,” Thalia agreed, her hand slipping around his shoulder. “I agree, wholeheartedly. And Gabriel can go back and tell them all about us, as our witness.”

“Our witness...”

Her hand stretched too far, fingers just grasping the pistol’s handle when Giles suddenly came to. He saw her eyes flicker behind him, and as he spun around, Thalia watched Gabriel Harding become enveloped in a blinding flash of light.

* * *

The world went silent for the first time in Gabriel’s life. Something hard slammed into him like a ton of bricks, knocking him briefly off-balance before he took Giles Tilbury straight to the ground. For a moment, all he could hear was the ringing between his ears, the numbing buzz flooding from his shoulder as he pinned Giles to the ground. He lay beneath him, disoriented, cringing at what terrible pain was to come.

Yes. It was going to be painful. Unbelievably, mind-shatteringly painful. Every ounce of fear he inflicted onto Thalia would be delivered tonight—he would do far worse than sprain his wrist, make him wish Gabriel Harding had taken his life, there and then.

He would walk the streets as a reminder, with the constant fear of something horrible looming over his shoulder. Constantly hunted, constantly in fear; just as someone like Giles Tilbury deserved.

“—briel!”

Gabriel blinked, every sense rushing back in a burning agony. His ears rang horribly, the scent of gunpowder fresh in the air and practically choking. He blinked again, bright lights from the pistol’s flash still partially blinding him, until a pair of soft, trembling hands grabbed against his shoulders.

“Gabriel!”

Thalia—her hair had come undone at some point, black curls slick against her sweating, tear-stained face. She shook him—he was being shaken, yes—her pretty lilac dress torn and dirtied, stained along the bodice in bright, crimson blood.

Instinct completely took over. Suddenly, Gabriel was up on his feet, watching as Giles slithered back into the shadows of the forest. Suddenly, Thalia was in his arms, and he was running back to the garden party, back to people who could help her. Help her—she’d been shot. She’d been hurt, and it was all his fault. The world buzzed aimlessly around him as Gabriel put another foot in front of him, stumbling across the stream as his foot caught against the bank.

Thalia.

He curled his arms tightly, catching the brunt of the fall as they tore through the underbrush. As the sky opened up and a dozen or so faces loomed over him, expressions a blur of silent screams and fuzzy outlines. Thalia—he tried to reach out, tried to grasp for her, only to find one of his arms wouldn’t cooperate. The other did, though, and he pushed himself up, pushed people off of him, pushed through the blooming ache in his shoulder as he tried to find her.

“Gabriel, stop!”

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There—there she was. Her face came back into focus, flushed and dirty and sweat-stained and—God, she'd been brave. She'd been so brave, and he'd let her get shot.

“Gabriel, please don't move.”

Don't move? No; he had to go find Giles. He had to make sure that man never darkened Thalia's doorstep.

“Gabriel, you're going to bleed out!”

Bleed out. The words felt empty in his swimming head, and Gabriel suddenly found himself lying across the ground, once more staring at the sky. Again—again, he tried to move his arm, only getting that terrible ache in his shoulder as a response. Someone tore his shirt open—something silver and in pieces scattered across his vision—someone pressed their hands against his aching, aching shoulder.

Bleed... out. Don't... move?

“Ah,” he sighed, as if solving a particularly tricky problem. “I was the one shot. Thank God.”

Unconsciousness claimed him soon after.

* * *

Not a single noise ever got past Gabriel Harding. The chatter among ladies whenever he approached them on the streets, the subtle exhale when, instead of confrontation,

he walked straight past them.

The man was cursed with superb hearing, unexplained even after all these years by physicians. Overall, it was considered a non-problem; over time, it actually became quite the useful skill. That was, until the day Gabriel Harding was shot.

Consciousness was a slippery thing, especially when he wanted nothing more than to grasp it. He'd occasionally wake to Charlotte's red and blotchy face, to a doctor inspecting the burning ache in his shoulder, or to Thalia, gently spoon-feeding whatever soup he could manage.

Thalia.

He wanted her to say something—anything—but all that left her mouth was a high-pitched ringing. It was ever-present, constantly at his heel and tearing at the inside of his mind. He could only escape it in his dreams, and after a while, that was all anything felt like; a dream. At times, he wondered if he'd already passed on, occasionally greeted by the sight of his father, delicately turning through the thick, scribbled pages of *Pride and Prejudice*.

He'd open his mouth to speak. And there would only be ringing in its place.

* * *

Thalia's eyes fluttered open, back stiff from arching over Gabriel's bed for another night. She rose with a grimace, stretching her arms toward the ceiling as a tumbling breeze caught against her face. Her attention shifted toward the window, curtains tumbling from the springtime air, and she stood, hesitating, body still faintly twinging even now, after so many weeks had passed. She used the frame of Gabriel's bed to maneuver across, eventually finding a rhythm to her steps before crossing the room on her own.

Another breeze caught her face, bringing with it the overwhelming scent of flowers. Every square inch of available surface within Gabriel's room had been decorated in a number of bouquets, accompanying cards stacked neatly atop his writing desk. Save one, slightly out of line from the others, and Thalia's hand gently moved to fix it, her gaze lingering on a small cloth covered in broken bits and parts of an old, silver pocket watch. She sighed lightly, folding the cloth over said pieces; it still hurt to think about what could have been, had that watch not been in his pocket.

She eventually made it to the window and latched it shut, feeling the room was plenty aired out. A sudden chill overtook her, and Thalia stiffly moved towards a coat jacket draped gingerly over the armrest of a chair, mud and blood stains having long-since been washed from the fabric.

She wrapped the jacket around her shoulders, inhaling the faint scent of earth, of smoke, of all the parts that made Gabriel up. "I think I've finally fixed it up," she began softly, attention turning back to the bed as Gabriel quietly slept.

Thalia moved back towards the bedside, abandoning the chair and simply taking a seat along the side. "It's not very well-done, I'm afraid. Madeline helped, but I wanted to do most of it myself." She sighed, lifting her hand as it trembled faintly. "I still... dream about it, sometimes. Him, his arms around me, squeezing like barbed wire..." She paused, wiping a stray tear as her attention turned to him.

His expression was peaceful, cuts and bruises having long since faded from his face. And maybe, for a moment, she could have pretended it had all been some terrible dream. At least, until her eyes caught the cast securing his shoulder in place.

"He's not entirely sure you'll hear again." Thalia paused, chuckling bitterly to herself as more tears fell. "The doctor, I mean. Honestly, I'd be happy if you just stayed awake for a few minutes longer." She inhaled sharply, a sob escaping her lips. "I hate that th-the last thing you heard were those—those things, I said to him. About being

forced to stay at your side, about Giles being my one and only.”

Thalia’s breath hitched, trembling hands taking Gabriel’s as they lay atop the blanket. “I can’t tell you that those were lies. Some foolish attempt to try and help you.” More sobbing laughter escaped, and she loosened one of her hands to try and wipe her face free. “Gracious—a-at least you would have the decency to propose properly to me. He never once did; man didn’t have a romantic bone in his twisted body.”

She watched as Gabriel’s chest rose and fell beneath the blanket. Gently, she leaned across, brushing a wet kiss across his forehead. “You caught me, love. Now and always; you’ll always catch this little rabbit.”

A slight groan escaped Gabriel’s chest, and she felt her hand receive a gentle squeeze back. His mouth began to move, and Thalia’s breath hitched as she leaned in close, desperate to hear him. Suddenly, she broke down into weeping tears, arms grasping his torso as she threw herself across him, grabbing at whatever part she could.

“Th-Thalia?!” Footsteps followed soon after as the door flew open, Charlotte flanked by a handful of others all desperate to see what had caused such a distressing sound. A few men—Christian, Mr. Beaumont, Robin—all swarmed around Thalia, gingerly lifting her off the now-groaning Gabriel as they helped to sit him upright.

“Thalia! You can’t just—” Christian’s voice stumbled to a halt, staring at a rather fierce glare from his now fully-conscious friend. “G-Gabriel?!”

Gabriel made a grimacing face.

“O-Oh—it’s too loud.” Sobbing laughter escaped Thalia’s throat, and she quickly covered her mouth, desperately trying to soften herself. “I—he’s alright, it—there’s too many people. Charlotte!”

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“Doctor, yes! Going to get him now!” Charlotte quickly slipped past the crowd, helping pull them back out as Robin helped usher away any stragglers. Thalia moved to walk with Christian, only to feel Gabriel’s hand tighten around hers.

“Oh... oh, of course.” Thalia glanced Christian’s way, who simply nodded. He turned to leave, but stopped, doubling back and kneeling in front of Thalia.

“How’d you know he was awake this time?” Christian asked.

Thalia managed a wobbling smile, gently pressing her wet cheeks against Gabriel’s hand. “He replied to me.”

“With what?”

Thalia’s smile brightened considerably. “‘I know’.”

CHAPTER36

Of all the ideas she’d had in her life, Thalia Sutton—soon to be Harding—knew this was one she’d never regret. She stood before the mirror with a slight daze, uncertain if the woman staring back really was her. Madeline had truly outdone herself with the wedding gown, perfectly layering the lace hem of the skirt so it billowed with each movement.

A cresting of lilacs embroidered around her waist and along her bodice, perfectly matching the smaller florets pinned throughout the curls of her hair. It felt like she’d been placed inside a pillow; silken and light, as if she were wearing nothing at all.

“Thalia, Thalia! Tell me you’re ready, huh?”

Thalia chuckled lightly, practically gliding across the room as she gently cracked the door open. As expected, Charlotte came bounding in, dancing around her with her own beautiful, floral-printed gown. “Ooh, I knew it, I knew it! You really outdid yourself, Maddie!”

Madeline’s face appeared next, nervously pushing her frames up the bridge of her nose. “Everything is still fitting nicely, then?”

“Like I was born to wear it,” Thalia beamed, gathering both ladies in for a tender embrace. “Thank you; both of you. I can’t imagine having done all this in under a week without your help.”

Charlotte’s lower lip stuck out dramatically, and she hastily waved at her eyes. “No, Thalia! Don’t make me cry yet! I put powder on just for you, and you’re going to ruin it already!”

“Now, if only you could dedicate as much effort to planning your own Seasonal event...” Thalia teased.

Before Charlotte could reply, gentle rapping on the door pulled attention towards Robin’s appearance, standing stiffly in the frame in a hand-tailored suit of his own. Charlotte crooned loudly, now fawning over the young Sutton with gushing adoration.

“Thalia, make her stop,” Robin begged.

“Charlotte, we should go find our seats,” Madeline said.

“Oh—oh, right! We’ll see you out there, Thalia!” With one more quick hug,

Charlotte bounded down the hall, Madeline in quiet pursuit. As soon as the pair had put a fair distance between them, Robin exhaled loudly.

“Is my wife going to be as crazy as she is?” he asked.

Thalia gave him a teasing frown and a light swat across the shoulder. “You would be lucky enough to have a woman as lovely as Charlotte.” The siblings stood in quiet contemplation for a moment, and Thalia wondered if, perhaps, she should say something.

“When I said—” Robin began.

“I want you to know,” Thalia started.

The pair stopped, a fit of nervous giggles passing between them. With another sigh, Robin offered his arm to his sister, who graciously accepted it. “I love you, too,” Thalia beamed.

Robin rolled his eyes, but offered a slight smile as he led her outside.

The Orion’s lawn had been decorated in a dazzling display of deep blues and rich purples, with the occasional splash of yellow to mimic the sparkling stars in the night sky. Members wore their traditional garb while friends and family dressed in their best, all eagerly awaiting to catch a glimpse of the bride before she made her grand entrance. Beneath a flowering archway, a gentle show of petals greeted Thalia, and Robin dutifully led her up the aisle. He lingered near the front, however, giving his sister the chance to grasp hands with Mr. Cooke.

“I wish your parents could have seen you,” he wept, dabbing his handkerchief at the corner of his eyes. “You’re breathtaking, your Ladyship.”

“Thalia,” she insisted gently, pulling her dear friend into an embrace. “We are family, George, and family has no title between them.”

Robin indicated his head, and Thalia returned her gaze to the altar. It was hard not to simply kick off her shoes and sprint the rest of the way; Gabriel looked so irresistible in his own astral suit, arm freed of its cast and proudly tucked behind his back. Her face warmed at the sight, and soon, Robin’s arm left her own, allowing Gabriel’s to take its place.

She hardly heard a word from their officiant, drifting between their vows and the exchanging of rings. She watched, giddy, as Gabriel slipped the ring onto her finger, and eased his ring on next; a silver band made especially for him, melted down from whatever parts of his father’s pocket watch remained. He lifted to inspect the craftsmanship, a beautifully warm smile crossing his lips as he caught the inscription. “‘Find the time’,” he said softly.

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“I thought you’d like to have those words with you,” Thalia beamed warmly.

And as the priest ran through the last few rites, as she managed to get the words, “I do” out from her lips, a burst of joyful applause filled the lawn.

“You may now kiss the bride,” the priest beamed.

And as Gabriel leaned in to kiss his wife for the first time, his lips brushed against her ear, whispering something incoherent over the cacophony of cheers.

“What?” Thalia asked, still smiling like mad.

“I said ‘run, little rabbit’.”

Immediately, Thalia’s eyes narrowed as a devilish smirk crossed her face. She took off down the aisle in a flash, folks standing from their chairs and cheering her on as she raced past. And then—only then—once she reached beneath the floral archway, did she dare a glance over her shoulder, and spotted Mister Wolf in hot pursuit.

EPILOGUE

Gabriel popped their bedroom door open with very little effort, immediately moving towards their bed before placing Thalia down, as if she were his most precious cargo. She couldn’t help but giggle, watching as the top half of her husband’s attire quickly dropped to the ground, and he joined her in bed, a familiar air of predatory aggression surrounding him.

“You know, I get the strange feeling that you allowed yourself to be ensnared,” he growled, nipping her ear as he worked his way down to the nape of her neck.

Her toes curled as a familiar tingle ran through her body, and Thalia couldn't help but giggle. “Such a bold accusation! I would never ruin the sacred rules of the hunt.”

“Ooh, I think you would, little rabbit.” Gabriel continued his journey down the length of her body, kissing her chest before rising slightly, a playful frown across his face. “That display wasn't befitting the prey who evaded me for so long...”

More giggling as Thalia allowed him to pull her up by the wrist, his hands working the strings of her bodice before her dress came off in one, fluid motion. It soon joined the pile of clothing, and a cold shiver ran across her skin, now protected only by the thinnest of undergarments.

“And what are you going to do about it, Mister Wolf?” she asked, hands pressing against her curves with a flutter of her eyelashes.

“I'm simply going to have to do it all again.” Gabriel's belt slipped free from his trousers, removing both and adding to their growing pile. His defined form graced Thalia's eyes at last, and she drank up the sight, committing every definite line of muscle to memory. Her eyes lingered around his shoulder, still scarred from that terrible night, and she pulled herself closer, lips gently brushing across the wound.

“Does it still hurt?” she asked gently.

Gabriel chuckled, glancing at the scar for himself. “Stiff, if anything.”

“Poor baby...” she gave the scar a few more kisses, hiding a grin at Gabriel's growling displeasure for the use of childish monikers. “Oh—I'm awful sorry. I seemed to have upset you again. Let me make it up to you...?”

He allowed it, if only for a brief moment, her lips meeting his as she lulled him into a deep kiss. Then, in a twist, his teeth found her tongue and pressed down, drawing the slightest of blood that filled her senses entirely.

“You need new tricks,” he growled, hands already working to free her breasts from the corset. “Or learn how to play fair.”

“I’m fighting for my life,” Thalia replied breathlessly. “Playing fair is hardly on my mind.” Her corset joined the pile, and Gabriel pushed forcefully against her chest, Thalia collapsing against their bed in a peal of laughter. She did her best to remain still, a squirm of pleasure rolling up her legs as her husband’s teeth dragged her delicacies slowly across her bare skin. “S-Slower...”

He obliged, eliciting another pleasurable shiver. But all things came to an end, and finally, their pile of clothing was complete. He shifted his weight on top of her, hands caressing her breasts and working up to the shape of her neck. “The hunt always starts slow, little rabbit. First, the scent is caught...”

Thalia inhaled deeply, taking in the earth, the smoke; everything that made Gabriel Harding the man he was.

“Then... he stalks her.”

His fingers brushed lightly across her throat, pressing occasionally as panicked squeals escaped Thalia’s lips. He massaged her throat, finding just the right spots to increase pressure, to fill her with that dizzying euphoria from before. Gabriel leaned closer, eyeing the elegant line of her neck, and she couldn’t help but swallow, feeling his lips press against it.

“Then...”

He caught her lips in a kiss as his hands began to squeeze around her neck once more.

“The jaws come down around her neck.”

His face obscured her vision as the world began to haze once more, and Thalia fought for her very right to breathe. Every swallow was earned, every inhale and exhale ragged and quick. A startled gasp escaped her lips as she felt his member stiffen, then enter her fully, hands loosening their hold around her neck before he began to rock. Slowly, finding a rhythm she could keep pace with.

“Our word,” he demanded between grunts.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:17 am

“Ramps—!” A pained cry escaped Thalia’s lips as his hands once more pressed against her throat, the spinning black of the room greeting her briefly before releasing into a rush of euphoric oxygen. Whatever he’d done before hardly compared to this; his warmth practically filled her entirely, her hands clawing across his back as she tried to find purchase amidst the spinning euphoria. Her core ached impossibly for more, and she wanted nothing more than to live in the moment in its entirety.

As she let out another moan, his pace increased, and Thalia was certain she wouldn’t last much longer. He leaned in to catch her lips, share whatever air he had as her breath continued to hitch and stutter. “I will devour you wholly, Thalia Harding,” Gabriel snarled, hands cupping her face so he was all she could see. “I shall be the last thing you see before your life comes to an end. Every night, for the rest of your life.”

Her entire body seized, his last thrust sending a flush of heat throughout. Thalia’s hands fought against Gabriel’s restraint, her back arching as her cry surprised even herself.

Everything was suddenly alight, warm and sharply detailed, and she wondered if this was perhaps what paradise was meant to feel like. Sweat pooled between them, salty and harsh against her tongue, and as Gabriel’s head tilted back, everything he was revealed in a glorious instant.

Thalia cried out once more, panting heavily as Gabriel finally removed himself from within. He rolled beside her, both taking a moment to breathe, to return into their bodies, and as they exchanged looks, an unspoken feeling of desire settled across them. Gabriel’s arms enveloped her frame with ease, and she moved to curl against

him, head perfectly fitting beneath his chin.

Thalia tried to remember how to piece words together. And even when she did, finding the exact word to describe what she was feeling felt impossible. So, instead, she gently pressed her lips on the underside of Gabriel's chin, still gasping gently. He returned the gesture in full, holding her tightly, protectively, kissing every sensitive part of her neck as his member continued to stiffen between them.

"You're still ready to hunt?" Thalia laughed breathlessly. "Gracious, Gabriel; give yourself a moment to digest, yes?"

He lifted his gaze to meet hers, an appropriately wolfish grin crossing his lips. "I warned you, didn't I? There'd be consequences, interfering with the hunt."

"I hardly objected," Thalia teased, giving him a light kiss against his nose. "Though, this little rabbit needs to build stamina. It's a large task, outrunning a wolf each and every night for the remainder of my days."

"As if I'd even consider letting you escape," Gabriel growled softly. "You're mine, Thalia Harding. To stalk, to hunt, to ravish to my heart's content."

Thalia's smile softened, hand briefly grasping for the hem of the comforter. Gabriel was more than happy to pull it over the pair, hiding them beneath its dim lighting as they simply stared at each other. A tangible warmth built once more between them, and Thalia leaned across to kiss her husband deeply. "Promise?"

Gabriel's grasp around her tightened, and a predatory gleam caught beneath his eyes as he stared lovingly back at his wife. "Promise."

The End?