



# Whiskers and Wiles

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**Category:** Romance, Adult, Historical

**Description:** Whoever marries last will inherit a cursed castle.

Lord Waldorf Godwin has only loved once in his life, and that ended in ruin...

Since his long-ago affair with Lady Katherine Balmor, Waldorf has sworn off love altogether and focused on his duty toward his country instead. His entire country, since Waldorf is firmly on the side of uniting Britannia. He has been charged with one of the most important undercover missions the New Heptarchy has ever seen, but he cannot accomplish the mission alone.

Instead, he is asked to form a team with his arch nemesis, Kat...

Kat has remained furious with Waldorf for almost twenty years after the way he callously tossed her aside. If only her heart would agree with her head when it comes to Waldorf. And now, with the fate of Britannia entrusted to the two of them, her heart seems determined to ruin everything for everyone in Britannia.

When she and Waldorf are forced to pretend to be betrothed for the sake of the mission, anything could happen. And when the very man from the past who came between her and Waldorf shows up again to wreak more havoc, they could be torn apart once more if they cannot learn to let the past go and trust each other.

**Total Pages (Source):** 66

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## Prologue

OXFORD UNIVERSITY, MAY 1796

There was no feeling in heaven or earth better than rushing through a sunny, spring morning to meet one's lover, knowing that today was the day he would ask the question that would make your life complete. Lady Katherine Balmor could hardly contain her excitement as she left the ancient, stone building within Queen's College where she'd taken her final exam, and done brilliantly at it, she was certain, to make her way toward where Lord Waldorf Godwin was waiting for her.

There was a rush of other students around her, all of them laughing with relief or chattering away about examination questions, which required Kat to dodge and duck out of their way. Everyone was giddy with joy, now that they were free to go on their way, enjoying the summer, and for most, beginning the next chapter of their lives.

A few of the women Kat had attended classes with were returning to their home kingdoms to enter into marriages or other domestic duties, but some, like Kat herself, were about to embark upon rare and magnificent careers. Kat's own summons by Queen Matilda of Mercia to discuss positions within her government for which Kat might be suited, was set for two days' time.

That audience, which Kat knew would decide the trajectory of her life, seemed outrageously unimportant compared to the conversation she knew awaited her when she reached her lodgings across the Magdalen Bridge. Waldorf was her everything, and after their beautiful days together while studying, they would finally be able to make a life together.

“Kat!”

Kat paused and turned to find her dear friend, Lady Muriel Grouse, striding down the path from the examination building, a bright smile lighting her face.

“Muriel!” Kat called in return, stepping aside to let a few other students pass, then hugging Muriel tightly once they met. “What a glorious day today is,” she laughed as she held her friend.

Muriel laughed with her, but looked astonished when she stepped back. “I assume you did well in the examination,” she said, “but ending your Oxford career well hardly warrants this sort of exuberance.”

Kat laughed again, then handed her small stack of books to Muriel so that she could unbutton her scholar’s robes and shed them to reveal her stylish, sprigged muslin gown beneath. “Today is far more than a matter of examinations,” she said, grinning as she draped her robe over her shoulder, then took her books back from Muriel.

“Is it now?” Muriel asked with a teasing smile. She hooked her arm through Kat’s and the two of them walked on toward the High Street.

“I have it on good authority that a certain someone is waiting for me at my lodgings,” Kat said, brimming with joy and certain her face had gone as pink as her gown. “He intimated that he should like to ask me a certain question when we were together the day before yesterday.”

“Together, you say?” Muriel asked, mischief glittering in her eyes. When Kat only laughed and blushed in response to the cheeky question, Muriel went on with, “Then he better had ask you a certain question to avoid embarrassment in several months’ time.”

“Shush!” Kat bumped her friend playfully. “I took precautions. All is well.”

In fact, she and Waldorf had become so utterly mad for each other that she was not certain those precautions would be enough. They were both young, passionate, and impulsive, which made for blissful nights exploring the forbidden mysteries between men and women. There had been no accidents as of yet, but that was not a guarantee for the future.

“Well, I am deeply happy for you,” Muriel said, pausing as they reached a crossroads. “I demand to be invited to the wedding.”

“You shall serve as a maid of honor,” Kat told her. “Minerva and Bernadette will join you, of course.”

“Of course,” Muriel said, her smile wide and genuine. “I look forward to your happy announcement. But for now, my brother just arrived in town last night with the intention of sweeping me home to Nailsea the moment our commencement ceremony is complete. I need to go find him and entertain him before he lands himself in more trouble than he likely already has.”

“Yes, you must keep Arnold out of trouble,” Kat laughed, hugging Muriel again. She knew she was laughing too much and at everything, but her heart was too full of joy not to express it freely.

She parted ways with Muriel and started happily down the High Street toward the Magdalen Bridge, hugging her books to her breast with a sigh. Everything was so beautiful and perfect. She was convinced that she’d been blessed with a charmed life. She had a rare man that she loved who respected her and would allow her the freedom to work. She had the promise of an important position with Queen Matilda that would, no doubt, place her in the center of the exciting turns the world and Britannia were about to take, and she had?—

“Lady Katherine!”

Kat nearly tripped over her own feet at the regretfully familiar voice calling after her. She put on as much of a smile as she could as she turned to find Lord Anthony Headland hurrying toward the pedestrians on the busy street to meet her.

“Lady Katherine,” Lord Headland—who was from the Kingdom of East Anglia, and therefore addressed by his surname, rather than the much more personable styling of Wessex that allowed Waldorf to be addressed as Lord Waldorf—repeated his greeting. “You are looking particularly lovely this afternoon.”

Inwardly, Kat sighed and rolled her eyes. Lord Headland had singled her out at the beginning of the year. He had declared to anyone who would listen that he would woo her and win her and install her as his wife at his estate near Norfolk by summer.

Of course, he failed to take into account that Kat already loved Waldorf. Lord Headland barely deigned to acknowledge Waldorf. He considered Waldorf an insufficient match for Kat because he allowed her so much autonomy and license. Lord Headland failed to realize that the very things he disdained about Waldorf were all the reasons Kat loved him so.

“Thank you, Lord Headland,” Kat replied with a stiff, formal nod. “If you will excuse me, I am on my way to a prearranged meeting.”

Kat turned to walk on, but Lord Headland fell into step with her anyhow.

“Here,” he said, reaching for her. “Allow me to escort you.”

“No, thank you, Lord Headland,” Kat said, pulling away from him when he tried to grab her arm.

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“A lady should be escorted by a gentleman when she is out walking, otherwise, she should not be out,” Lord Headland said, almost as if he were scolding her. “I insist you allow me to take your arm.”

“And I insist you keep your hands away from my person, my lord,” Kat said, hugging her books and her robe tighter.

“Katherine,” Lord Headland said, speaking to her overly familiarly and giving her an indulgent, reproachful look, as if she were a child being deliberately difficult. “This sort of behavior is unbecoming of a young lady. You know that when we are married, I will not allow you to behave in such a manner.”

Kat stopped immediately, just before the Magdalen Bridge, and whipped to face Lord Headland with a sharp scowl.

“Let me make one thing clear to you, Lord Headland,” she said. “We will not marry. Ever. I have refused your suit more times than I can count over the course of this academic year. I have made my lack of intentions toward you very clear. I love another and he loves me, and this very moment, I am going to him, expecting a particular question to be asked.”

“Is that so?” Lord Headland asked, going stiff with indignation.

“It is,” Kat said, tilting her chin up and keeping her back straight.

“You live just on the other side of the river, do you not?” Lord Headland asked. “In that building there?” He gestured to one of the student houses across from where they

stood.

“Yes,” Kat said, feeling deeply uneasy about the man pointing out where she lodged. He’d known for some time and arrived at the house to call on her at least once a week, though she’d begun to pretend that she was not at home when he called. The servants in the house all knew he was pursuing her. They all knew she loved Waldorf as well.

Kat waited for Lord Headland to say something more about her living arrangements. Instead, without any warning, he grabbed her upper arms and yanked her close. Kat yelped in protest, but he used her startled reaction to close his arms around her and slam his mouth into hers in a kiss.

Kat shrieked louder and struggled. Lord Headland would not let her go until he’d finished imposing his kiss on her. As soon as he backed up, panting, Kat shoved him back as best she could with her books and robes in her arms. She wanted to slap the blackguard so hard he fell into the river, but her robe had tangled around her arms, and by the time she freed herself, Lord Headland had stepped out of her reach.

“How dare you?” Kat seethed. “I should call in the constable and have you arrested for assault, sir.”

“And embarrass yourself in front of all these people?” Lord Headland said, gesturing to the others on the crowded street, most of whom stared at them as if they had no idea at all what to make of the drama they’d just witnessed. They were in Mercia, but far too many of the men who had witnessed Lord Headland’s assault grinned at him, as if they approved, and far too many of the women appeared too afraid to do anything to help Kat.

Kat was livid. The day was supposed to be beautiful and magical. Lord Headland had just spit on her joy.

She absolutely would not have that.

“If you ever so much as look at me again, I will make absolutely certain that a particularly bony part of my knee makes firm, intimate contact with a tender part of your person,” she seethed. “And do not think I have not learned precisely how to administer such a blow.”

She had indeed learned. Her brother, Thomas, had taught her more than a few techniques to defend herself when she’d announced her intentions to attend Oxford. The rest of her family had railed at her and lectured her, and ultimately, her father had had her name struck from the family Bible.

Few people knew the sacrifices Kat had made to attend Oxford. Waldorf was one of those people.

“Surely, you must?—”

That was as far as Lord Headland got in his continued protestations. Kat turned and marched away from him, Careful to dodge a few of the pedestrians crossing the bridge so that she could put barriers between herself and Lord Headland, in case he made the terrible decision to pursue her.

She made it across the bridge and around the corner to Cowley Place without Lord Headland bothering her again. She did not look back to see if he was pursuing her. If he was, he would have Waldorf to contend with once he reached her lodgings.

She longed to reach home and throw her books and robes aside so that she could fold herself into Waldorf’s protective embrace for comfort just then. She was not one to admit any sort of weakness, particularly in such a way that would communicate that weakness to her lover, but Lord Headland had unnerved her completely. The man’s advances toward her had grown in intensity and boldness as the academic year had



wound to a close, but the man's outrageousness was now much too much for her to manage alone. And without her family to help her mitigate the threat Lord Headland presented, she was truly alone, but for her friends and Waldorf.

"Waldorf!" It was an utter relief to find Waldorf walking down the main stairs in the boarding house, as if he'd been in her room already, despite Mrs. Cornish's insistence her borders had no gentleman callers upstairs. Kat set her things on the nearest chair in the parlor to the right of the main hallway, then turned back, intending to throw herself in her beloved's arms, and to, perhaps cry. "You will never believe?—"

She stopped short when she realized Waldorf was glowering at her instead of gazing upon her with love and sympathy. More than that, he held up a stack of letters tied with a red ribbon that Kat had never seen before with a sharp, "What is the meaning of this?"

Kat gaped, too surprised by her beloved's harsh reaction to find her words at first.

"I do not know," she said as soon as she was able, shaking her head. "I have never seen those letters before." She wanted to ask where he'd found them, but instead said, "Waldorf, I am beside myself with upset. Lord Headland followed me from Queen's College, and?—"

"Yes, I know," he said in a low voice, narrowing his eyes. "I saw the two of you."

Again, Kat was stunned beyond words for a moment. She recovered as quickly as she could and shook her head, stepping closer to her lover. "Then you saw the way he accosted me without provocation and in public."

"Accosted you?" Waldorf's brow shot up in angry indignation.

A pit of dread opened in Kat's gut. "Waldorf, what is the matter?" she asked, her

heart pounding. “This is not like you at all.”

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“And this is not like you,” Waldorf said, shaking the packet of letters. “Or so I thought. Now I am not so certain.”

Tears of frustration and confusion stung at Kat’s eyes. “Please explain to me what those are and what you mean,” she said, unable to make her voice louder than a whisper.

“These, madam, are letters from your other lover,” Waldorf said, shaking the packet again. “The one you were just caught kissing in the street.”

Kat’s jaw dropped. Her confusion turned to anger, but her frustration remained. “I have no other lover and you know it,” she said, her entire body going stiff with indignation. “You are the only man I have ever loved.”

“And yet, you were witnessed just now by myself and many in this house kissing someone else,” Waldorf snapped.

Kat’s heart hardened with anger. “He accosted me, Waldorf. I was not in any way a willing party to that assault.”

He should have taken her word for it then and there. He was a good man, a patient man, for the most part. Their time together was always beautiful and enjoyable. She’d never seen him so rash or quick to judge.

Then again, that was not entirely true. Waldorf was a man of passion, like she was. He’d confronted someone who tossed a casual, teasing insult his way a time or two. He’d lost his patience with fellow students during study sessions or when at the pub.

Kat had always loved his fire, though. Though he was many years older than her, she'd always considered his impulsivity to be youthful high spirits. She loved those high spirits. She'd just never expected his occasional rashness to be turned on her.

“Assault, you say?” he demanded, thrusting out the letters to her. “And was it assault every other time that he kissed you? Was it unwanted when he spent nights right here, in your bed, when I was not there to warm it for you?”

“I have no idea what you mean,” Kat said, breathless with horror.

“Take them, madam,” Waldorf insisted, gesturing with the letters once more. “Though I am certain you’ve read them until each sordid word was memorized.”

Kat took the packet, now eager, though deeply wary, to learn what the letters were all about. “I told you, I’ve never seen these before in my life,” she said.

Waldorf humphed as she pulled at the ribbon, then tore open the letter on the top of the stack. It bore a date from the previous autumn at its top and immediately leapt into a salacious recounting of a supposed liaison the author had had with her. The descriptions of wicked acts was poetic, but it was clear that the intent of the author was to make Waldorf believe he had engaged in sexual congress with her. And, of course, the letter was signed with effusions of love and the name Anthony.

“These are lies,” Kat hissed, her anger now warring with fear within her. “You know full well that Lord Headland has attempted and, might I add, failed miserably to win me this past year. I have never, not once, encouraged him, and I most certainly did not engage in this sort of correspondence with him.”

“Are you telling me these letters are false?” Waldorf said, pulling himself to his full height, like he was looking down on her.

“Yes! That is precisely what I’m telling you,” Kat shouted at him.

“Mary!”

Kat blinked in surprised as Waldorf turned to one of the house’s maids, who Kat only just noticed was watching the entire confrontation from just around the corner in the hallway.

“Yes, Lord Waldorf,” Mary said, rushing into the room.

“Did you or did you not serve as messenger to deliver letters between Lady Katherine and Lord Headland all this past year?” Waldorf demanded.

To Kat’s horror, Mary nodded and said, “Yes, your lordship, I did.”

Kat gaped. “You liar! How could you?” A thought occurred to her, and she narrowed her eyes to ask, “How much is Lord Headland paying you to lie?”

“I ain’t lyin’,” Mary said, tilting her chin up stubbornly. “You and Lord Headland have been carrying on this entire time.” She flushed a dark shade of red as she spoke and her eyes darted anxiously to the window and everywhere but at Kat.

“Liar!” Kat repeated.

“You are the liar, madam,” Waldorf said, his voice growing cold. “You are the false, deceitful, wicked liar that led me on this entire time, thinking you were the only woman for me, that you were the only woman I could ever see myself wed to. You are the harlot who was just seen kissing another man in the open.”

“He assaulted me!” Kat cried out in indignation. “And she is lying. I’ve never seen these letters in my life.”

“I suppose you will deny that you wrote to him as well,” Waldorf said.

“Yes, I deny it, you blithering idiot!” Kat shouted, throwing the letters to the floor.

“How can you be so blind to what is transpiring here. Lord Headland has conspired to turn you against me because he could not win me away from you. He has clearly paid Mary to further his deceit.”

“You are the deceitful one, madam,” Waldorf shouted at her. “I saw your deceit myself.”

“Then you are a fool, sir!” Kat shouted.

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“And you are a whore!” Waldorf snapped in return.

The only thing that kept Kat from slapping him, hopefully to slap sense into him, was the genuine hurt in his eyes. He believed the lies he’d been told, and they had wounded him to the core.

Kat was hurt, too, though. “How dare you not believe me when I tell you I am true?” she seethed. “Do you think so little of me? Or are you simply stupid?”

“How dare you question my intelligence?” Waldorf gasped.

“How dare you question my fidelity?” Kat snapped at him in return.

“I will not stand here and be insulted,” Waldorf bellowed. “Good day, madam.”

“Get out of my sight!” Kat shouted, pointing to the door. A small voice within her whispered that now was not the time to let her anger get the better of her, but she was too wounded by the callousness of the man she thought loved her more than any other to listen to it.

Waldorf glared at her one last time, then turned and marched out of the room. As he left, Kat’s ferocious gaze turned to Mary. Mary yelped and hurried out of the room, looking as guilty as sin as she did.

Once she was alone in the room, all of Kat’s fight and bravado left her. She burst into tears, slumping to the side and sitting heavily on one of the room’s settees. She’d never fought with Waldorf before, not like that. They’d had their little disagreements

from time to time, but nothing serious. And yes, Muriel was forever telling her that she was too impetuous and hot-tempered. Bernadette had observed once or twice that Waldorf was a bit young for his age, particularly as he chose to associate with students at Oxford when he was approaching thirty himself.

That voice of reason in Kat's mind warned her that both she and Waldorf were young, and that both of them were likely equally foolish. She didn't want to hear that voice, though. She merely wanted to cry and rage and vent her emotions as loudly and fiercely as she could.

Except when Cromwell, the house's cat, entered the room and leapt onto the settee with her. He seemed to sense Kat's upset and came to her purring.

"Oh, Cromwell," Kat lamented, pouring everything into her tears as she pet the sweet, soft thing.

Cromwell nudged his head against her leg, encouraging her to pet him more.

"You are the only true man in the world," Kat wept. "You and your like."

Cromwell merely purred harder, rubbing his face against her side.

As if to prove her words to Cromwell, Lord Headland's quiet, "Oh, Lady Katherine, I am so sorry," sounded from the doorway to the hall.

Kat jerked straight and snapped her head up to glare at the bastard.

"I've just heard," Lord Headland said, dripping with false sincerity as he entered the room. "Allow me to comfort you in your hour of need."

Kat rushed to her feet, displacing Cromwell, who hissed at Lord Headland, proving



that he was wise as well as affectionate. “Do not come near me,” Kat warned Lord Headland.

Lord Headland ignored her. “This is, of course, a trying time for you,” he said. “But rest assured, I will not forsake you in your hour of need. My offer of marriage stands and always will. We will be married before the end of June, and?—”

Lord Headland made the fatal error of stepping to within arm’s reach of Kat and reaching for her. Kat reached back to him, but only so that she could gain purchase and sway near enough to him to do exactly as she’d promised before. She brought her knee crashing up into his groin so hard and so precisely that Lord Headland let out a cry that would wake the dead.

The blackguard doubled over as soon as Kat stepped back, clutching his bruised pride and eventually sinking to his knees. He groaned and gasped, as if the pain were so great he had trouble catching his breath.

“Do not ever come anywhere near me again,” Kat seethed, her anger hotter than any fire ever could be. “I do not wish to see you, or Waldorf, or any other man who thinks they can master me ever again for the rest of my life. You are all liars and deceivers, and I want nothing at all to do with any of you.”

Lord Headland could only crumple forward, rocking as he protected his wounded delicacies.

Kat didn’t care whether he answered or not. She didn’t care if Waldorf ever saw sense. She took a large step, walking over Lord Headland and into the hall.

“Come along, Cromwell,” she said, calling to the one creature who had shown her kindness and sympathy when she needed it. “You can help me pack my things. I am leaving this house and its deceitful staff tonight, and I’m taking you with me.”

She vowed to herself that she would always take what she wanted, from that day forward, and she would never forgive Waldorf Godwin for breaking her heart beyond repair.

One

LONDON – OCTOBER, 1816

Lord Waldorf Godwin had a great many regrets in his life, some due to his own actions and some because of things that were beyond his control. He regretted that he was forced to spend so much time away from his family as he worked in the service of King Swithin III of Wessex. He regretted that, as a cousin to the royal family, he was forced to spend so much time in the presence of men he disliked.

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“I think you need to put your foot down firmly, father,” Waldorf’s cousin, Prince Cuthbert, said with his usual petulance as the king presided over a small meeting of key ministers and counselors a fortnight before the Joint Parliament of the New Heptarchy was to convene. “We need to show those Mercian bitches their place in no uncertain terms.”

Mumbles sounded from around the table where the twelve men King Swithin sought council from were seated, some of them approving and some, like Waldorf’s, muttering about how much of an ass Cuthbert was.

Waldorf regretted that his uncle, the king, had insisted he attend the meeting and sit next to Cuthbert.

“Yes,” Lord Jeremy Liskeard agreed, banging his fist on the table. “Those Mercian cats must learn their place like every other woman.”

Waldorf sucked in a breath at the unexpected reminder of the greatest regret of his life. A sizzle of sharp, conflicted emotion shot through him, as if he’d been struck by lightning. Lightning wasn’t supposed to strike twice in the same place, but he rather felt as though that particular bolt coursed through him, causing pain and frustration, nearly every day of his life.

But now was absolutely not the time to think about such hopeless, long-passed things.

“Those Mercians are some of the strongest and cleverest people in the New Heptarchy,” Lord Desmond Andover, Waldorf’s cousin on the other side of his family, said in much more measured tones. “They cannot simply be ignored, as so

many Wessex gentlemen are inclined to ignore their female kin.”

Lord Desmond glared at Cuthbert in particular as he spoke. It was no secret to any of the important gentlemen at the table that poor Desmond had been in love with Cuthbert’s wife, Lady Kendra, before Cuthbert had bullied his way into marrying her instead, or that Cuthbert cared little for Lady Kendra, now that she’d given him an heir and a spare. The poor woman would have had a much happier life if she’d been allowed to decline Cuthbert’s suit and marry Desmond, the man she actually loved, instead.

“Female or male, Mercians are some of the brightest and most innovative people in all of Britannia,” Desmond finished.

Cuthbert snorted in derision. “They are women, damn them. How clever can they be?”

“I hear that a team of Oxford Society ladies have been developing a means of using steam power, such as is currently employed in textile mills throughout Mercia, to provide propulsion and power to mining carts,” Lord Gideon Taunton said, his face lighting up. He turned to King Swithin and said, “It is said that if they succeed in their endeavors, they could revolutionize transportation.”

The king grunted, but before he could speak, Cuthbert rushed in with, “Balderdash! No such thing is possible. Besides, they’re women. They’re probably lying about their accomplishments in any case.”

Another burst of emotion that felt a great deal like the steam that powered machinery blasted through Waldorf. Yes, women could be liars, alright. The course of his life had been changed by a single lie.

The trouble was, twenty years later, he still could not work out whose lie it had been,

Kat's or Mary's.

"Steam power is beside the point," Lord Jeremy said, pinching his face, like someone at the table had broken wind odiferously. "If those Mercians continue to hold Britannia hostage with their demands of unity under the Mercian Plan, then we will all suffer for it."

"Hear, hear!" a few of the councilors called out in support.

"There is nothing inherently wrong with the Mercian Plan," Waldorf said, stroking his ridiculously oversized sideburns. That was another major regret of his. He regretted having joined a secret society whose members were required to grow their whiskers long in order that they might identify each other.

"Everything is wrong with the Mercian Plan," Cuthbert protested so violently that his voice cracked as if he were a chorister reaching the end of his career. "It grants ridiculous rights and freedoms to women, for one."

"And it contains contingencies for the American colonies to separate from Britannia entirely," Lord Jeremy added, nodding at Cuthbert, like the two of them were in accord.

"The American colonies should have been granted separation decades ago," Desmond said, keeping his voice at a level, as if he were trying to be reasonable about a matter that had upset a great many people. "Their economy and self-governance is equal to any of the kingdoms of the New Heptarchy, and disputes over which of the colonial kingdoms belongs to which of the New Heptarchy Kingdoms threatens to damage our attempts at unity."

"It is clear that the Plymouth Kingdom should fall under the Purview of East Anglia while the Kingdom of Virginia should?—"

“That is not what we are here to discuss,” King Swithin cut Lord Jeremy off before he could take the side discussion too far. “We are here to discuss whether to encourage the First Minister, Lord Walsingham, to introduce debate about the Mercian Plan or whether we should align with Northumbria to block any consideration of the thing.”

“Clearly, we should side with Northumbria on this matter,” Cuthbert said, sitting back in his chair, crossing his arms, and sniffing like a spoiled child.

Waldorf was just about to roll his eyes at his cousin when he subtly noticed the king doing that very thing. It was a surprising enough show of emotion and the king’s true thoughts about his son that Waldorf held his tongue instead of joining the discussion.

“I say we should encourage debate about the Mercian Plan,” Lord Gideon said.

“And I say it would be a disaster,” Lord Jeremy snapped, not letting Lord Gideon say anything else about it.

“I think we should encourage debate on the plan,” Lord Edward Winchester, who had been silent up until that point, said. Waldorf was on the verge of smiling and agreeing with the old man, until he said, “That way, we can have the whole thing struck down, and we never have to hear a word from those Mercian upstarts again.”

Another round of murmurs of both agreement and disagreement went around the table. Waldorf clamped his jaw shut and frowned at the gentlemen around the table. Every time he and his fellow members of the Badger Society thought they were getting somewhere in the cause of uniting the New Heptarchy into one Britannia, something came along to push them back to where they’d started. Last time, it had been the interruption of Bonaparte’s wars. Now it was simple misogyny. At the rate the kingdoms were going, they would never unite.

If they didn't, Waldorf's entire life would be a complete waste. From the moment he'd grown into his title as Viscount Amesbury and joined the Badger Society, his sole aim in life had been to bring the kingdoms together and to unite Britannia under one banner. It had been clear to him from his earliest days of study that Britannia would be able to be more and achieve more as one nation.

Separate kingdoms had worked in earlier, simpler times, but it had become clear a hundred and fifty years ago, when Oliver Cromwell had attempted to wage war and force the kingdoms together, and through his spectacular failure, that Britannia would not effectively advance unless it was one nation.

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Someone else of his old acquaintance believed the same thing, if the whispers and evidence he'd stumbled across at various points in the past twenty years was anything to go by. He knew full well that Kat was a spy in service to Queen Matilda of Mercia, just as she knew, or at least thought she knew, that he was a spy in service to King Swithin. They each knew what the other was fighting for, and often in the past few years their paths would cross. But part of Waldorf despised the idea that his worst enemy was working to achieve the same goal that he was.

"Enough, enough!" King Swithin shouted, banging his ringed hand on the table.

The startling noise shook Waldorf out of his thoughts and silenced the other men around the table, who had continued to debate while he'd drifted off to the past.

"I've had enough of this discussion," the king went on. "We're not getting anywhere, and I'm hungry. This meeting is adjourned until such a time as one of you can bring me something more interesting to add to the discussion than you've already brought."

The men around the table glanced to each other in surprise, like they couldn't imagine anything new to add to the topic.

"What more do you need to hear?" Cuthbert asked. "It's a simple matter of keeping the men in charge, the way God intended. God is a man, after all."

"I believe there is a growing movement in Mercia to return to the old religions, where a Mother Goddess is worshiped," Desmond pointed out.

"Blasphemy!" Lord Jeremy gasped. "The Bible says?—"



“No, no, no!” King Swithin cut him off, grimacing and waving his arms as he did, before the man could go on. “Take your theologizing somewhere else. I’m not interested. Go! All of you!” After a few blinks and a moment of hesitation, the men at the table pushed their chairs back and stood. “Not you, Waldorf,” the king added in the midst of the din of scraping chairs, causing Waldorf to pause halfway through rising.

Waldorf glanced across the table to find Cuthbert staring peevishly at him. A few of the others looked jealous that Waldorf had been asked to stay while they had not. At least one of the others sent Waldorf a sympathetic look, like he was about to be dressed down for something, before rushing from the room.

“What a bunch of buffoons,” King Swithin said, pushing himself to stand once everyone else had gone and he and Waldorf were alone. “The whole lot of them doesn’t have a pair of brains to rub together.”

Waldorf arched one eyebrow at the unusual metaphor. “If you say so, your majesty,” he said.

“I do,” King Swithin said. He finished standing and gestured for Waldorf to follow him over to a much more comfortable set of chairs under one of the windows that looked out onto the streets of London below.

Even though Joint Parliament did not begin for another fortnight, all of the monarchs of the New Heptarchy and most of the important nobles in Britannia had already flocked to London. The city-state increased in size fivefold during the winter months, when Joint Parliament was in session. Waldorf could hear the hustle and bustle of merchants whose yearly livelihood depended on commerce during the next few months and smell the delicious scent of baking bread that wafted up from the bakery across the street from Wessex’s embassy, where King Swithin stayed while in London.

“I’m through with all this unity talk,” King Swithin said, as grouchy as ever. Waldorf nearly choked on his own spit in shock at the king’s seemingly divisive statement until he went on with, “I want unity for Britannia and I want it now.”

“That is good to hear, your majesty,” Waldorf said.

“Furthermore, I do not care if Britannia is united under the Mercian Plan or some other plan,” the king continued.

That shocked Waldorf almost as much as the idea of Swithin not wanting unity at all.

“You wish to see unity under Mercia’s laws?” Waldorf asked to be clear.

Swithin sighed and rubbed his hands over his face. “I’m not as young as I used to be,” he said. “I’m tired. I would like nothing more than to retire to my estate near Winchester and to live out the rest of my days shooting and napping in the sunshine.”

Waldorf couldn’t decide whether to frown or smile at that picture. “Why not simply abdicate to Cuthbert, then?” he asked.

“Because Cuthbert is a dolt who would drive Wessex into the ground,” the king answered quickly and loudly. “I would rather live forever and be forced to remain as king than have that idiot become king.”

Waldorf truly did want to laugh then, but he refrained.

“The only way I see myself gaining the peace I desire in life is if Britannia is unified and Wessex falls under central rule,” Swithin went on. “And the only way that is going to happen is if the Mercians get their way.”

“I agree,” Waldorf said cautiously. He did agree, and he believed the Mercian Plan

was the only way Britannia would unite. But to hear his uncle say he wished to covertly support the plan, which was what he was essentially saying, came as a surprise in so many ways.

It was a welcome bit of news, though. All these years, and at last, Wessex was about to comply with the mission of the Badger Society. Waldorf never would have thought that the deciding factor would have been King Swithin's reticence to have his own son assume the throne of Wessex.

"What do you wish me to do next, your majesty?" Waldorf asked.

King Swithin sighed impatiently. "I don't know, man," he said. "That's your mission, not mine. I simply want you to ensure that debate about the Mercian Plan begins when Joint Parliament does in two weeks. Once that happens, I should be able to order Wessex's ministers to vote for it."

Waldorf could hardly believe his ears. "Yes, your majesty," he said, pushing himself to stand. "I shall begin my efforts immediately."

"Go on with you," the king said, making shooing motions with one hand while rubbing his temples with the other.

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Waldorf left, feeling a bit sorry for his uncle. He didn't truly like the man, but he didn't wish any ill on him either. Swithin was his beloved, late mother's brother, and for her sake, he wanted to help the man get his way.

Part of that mission meant rushing to inform some of his fellows in the Badger Society about the astounding turn of events.

The Badger Society had existed for ages, long before Waldorf was born, let alone before he joined. It was highly secretive, especially when it came to who had founded the society—Waldorf's money was on Cromwell himself—and about who was currently the leader of the society. As with many secret societies, it was all about symbols and codes. The unfashionable whiskers were just one symbol. The black and white handkerchief he carried with him was another.

The Badger Society had its headquarters in a small building that masqueraded as a hotel on the north side of Hyde Park. That was where Waldorf intended to go straight away, to inform his brothers in the group of the startling new development. But before he could so much as collect his hat, cane, and jacket from the footman in the embassy's front hall, he ran straight into his father, Lord Gerald Godwin, Duke of Amesbury.

"Ah. Waldorf. There you are," his father said, shuffling forward from the side parlor where he'd evidently been waiting.

Waldorf huffed out a breath, then turned to his father with a tight smile. "Father," he said, putting on his coat in the hope it would signal to his father that he had more important things to do.

“Freddy, fetch my coat as well,” his father asked the footman. “It appears as though my son is going out for some air, and I will join him.”

Waldorf clenched his jaw. “I have business, Father.”

His father shrugged. “Lovely. I’ll accompany you on your business and we can discuss mine.”

“Your business?” Waldorf asked, dreading what that might be.

He didn’t receive his answer until his father’s coat had been fetched, and until he’d been helped into it by the footman. There was nothing to do at that point but to leave the embassy at his father’s side.

“Now,” Lord Gerald said as the two of them walked down the embassy’s stairs and headed toward Hyde Park at a much slower pace than Waldorf would have liked. He was relying on his cane more and more of late, which made Waldorf wonder if his father’s assertions that he was nearing the end of his life were actually true after all. “Tell me what you think of your brother and your cousin’s new wives.”

Waldorf scowled. He had half a mind to pick up his pace and leave his father behind. The only problem with that was that if his father truly was growing feeble, he would be a complete louse for abandoning him. The man wasn’t asking for his opinion about his kinsmen’s wives either. He was asking why Waldorf had made so little progress finding a wife of his own.

The answer to that question was bitterly obvious.

“I like them well enough,” he said gruffly. He nodded to a gentleman on the other side of the street with whiskers as big as his own, assuming he was a member of the Badgers. Not all of the Badgers knew each other, but that was part of the nature of the

secret society.

“They have friends, you know,” his father went on.

“Yes, I assume that all women have friends,” Waldorf grumbled.

“You misunderstand,” his father said as they crossed the street into Hyde Park proper. “Cedric’s and Alden’s wives have friends whom you know.”

Waldorf sighed and rubbed his free hand over his face. “We have discussed this before, Father,” he said. “Lady Katherine is a shrew who wronged me. That our paths have recently begun to cross again is of no consequence.”

“You were an impetuous, young arse,” Lord Gerald barked, startling a pair of young ladies promenading through the park as he did. “You stupidly took the word of a coward and believed a good woman was false. You’ve spent the last twenty years of your life suffering from your pride because of it.”

Waldorf paused and pivoted to face his father. “I’ve spent the last twenty years of my life in service to Britannia,” he growled in a low voice, conscious of who might overhear. “Are you not pleased with that?”

“Yes, very pleased,” Lord Gerald said. “And now I want you to right the wrongs of the past and marry the woman you should have married all along.” He sniffed and added, “You should be a grandfather by now. I should be a great-grandfather. And I would be too, if not for the curse.”

Waldorf huffed impatiently. The bloody Curse of Godwin Castle. It was the reason his father now had a bee in his bonnet about forcing his sons and nephews to marry. It was the reason Cedric and Alden were both wed now, both with babies on the way as well.

“I do not believe in the curse, Father,” Waldorf insisted.

“Blasphemy!” his father gasped, very much the way Lord Jeremy had balked at the idea of Mercian women returning to goddess worship. “The curse is real.”

“It is not,” Waldorf said. “If it were, greater calamities would have befallen me by now.”

“Great calamities have befallen you,” Lord Gerald insisted. “Though if you ask me, those were all your own damn fault.”

“I’ve had enough of this, Father,” Waldorf said, turning away and walking on. “I have very important business to attend to. I do not have time to debate an imaginary curse that brings misfortune to our family. It is silly. Curses do not exist. Nothing bad is going to happen to me if?—”

Waldorf stopped dead, blinking at the specter that had just appeared before him. In his haste to get away from his father, he’d charged on and nearly barreled headlong into Lady Kat herself.

Two

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“There can be no doubt in anyone’s minds. There can be no remaining question at all in what passes for the minds of the ministers who will discuss the matter this winter. The Mercian Plan must and will succeed.”

“Hear, hear!” Kat called out in response to Queen Matilda’s statement, raising her teacup as she did.

Several of her fellow operatives joined her outpouring with their own words of encouragement and support for their queen.

“It would be an unforgivable tragedy to allow any other plan, such as the Scottish Plan, to succeed,” Miss Plover, the young, scholarly woman who had most recently joined their cohort added, pushing her spectacles up the bridge of her nose.

“Indeed,” Kat agreed. “Women under Mercian law have thrived these many centuries while our unfortunate counterparts in other kingdoms of the New Heptarchy have been reduced to mere property, their intelligence and talents wasted. We cannot let another one of our British sisters remain unappreciated and undervalued for another moment.”

“Absolutely,” Lady Eileen, one of the Scottish women in service to Queen Matilda agreed, saluting Kat with a biscuit.

It was, perhaps, odd to some for the Queen of Mercia to host a meeting of her most trusted spies over tea and cakes in the parlor of the Mercian embassy in London, but Kat had always admired Queen Matilda’s ability to accomplish more than one thing at a time. They were engaged in the work of empires on the one hand, and enjoying



each other's company in a rather delicious way on the other. And if anyone were to gaze through one of the windows in an attempt to ascertain what the lot of them were up to, they would only see a group of ladies taking tea together.

"You must all be forever on your guard, my dears," the queen went on, taking up one of the miniature tarts that were her personal favorite from the plate offered to her by a maid. "We are outnumbered in the halls of government, and men are notorious for being unwilling to share their power. We must remain vigilant at all times, working for the respect and inclusion we deserve. Otherwise, the very men who claim to want nothing more than to protect and care for us will use us to wipe their boots instead."

A burst of old, cold fury shot through Kat at those words. She felt too keenly the sting of having loved a man who turned out to be no better than the rest of them. Twenty years had passed, and she still felt the misery and betrayal of the day when Waldorf had cast her aside because of vicious lies. Twenty years, and the fire of her hurt had barely diminished.

Of course, it did not help that she continued to see Waldorf in the course of her duties to Queen Matilda far more often than not. Since his betrayal, Kat had devoted herself to the queen's causes, performing perfectly as her most trusted spy. The trouble was, Waldorf was also a spy, for King Swithin, Kat assumed, and the course of their duties often saw them attending and observing the same events.

She longed for the day when she would not have to encounter Waldorf ever again.

"Would that we could rid ourselves of those troublesome men entirely," Kat grumbled, stroking Napoleon's back in an attempt to calm herself. Her beloved feline companion, Napoleon, yawned, showing his teeth, and went back to the nap he'd been enjoying.

"No, no," Queen Matilda said, turning a concerned look to Kat. "Men themselves are

not the enemy. My own, beloved Charles has been my closest ally these last fifty years. It is what they do when they gather together and throw sense out the window that we must fight against.”

Kat’s face heated, and she used the excuse of gazing down at Napoleon to avoid her queen’s censorious stare. She wanted to believe Queen Matilda. She wanted to feel as though male-kind were, indeed, allies waiting to have their full potential unlocked. Part of her even wished that she had enjoyed the sort of beautiful, life-long love story that the queen and her consort had enjoyed, and that she, too, might live to the wise, old age Queen Matilda had, happy with her spouse and happy with her life.

Waldorf had ruined all that, though. He had taken more from her than he could ever know, and for that, she would never forgive him.

“Let us return to the matter at hand,” the queen said, perhaps wisely seeing that she had touched a nerve where Kat was concerned. She let her compassionate yet calculating gaze rest on Kat for several more seconds before turning to the others and saying, “We are all deeply aware that the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, and the way to his mind is through his wife.”

Several of the others laughed and exchanged knowing glances. Many of the queen’s spies were married to prominent men themselves and knew from first-hand experience how to influence leaders.

“We must see to it that the Mercian Plan is brought up for debate in Joint Parliament this session,” Queen Matilda continued. “To do so, a majority of ministers must agree to open the debate. At present, we do not have enough men committed to our plan for that vote to go in our favor if it is called for.”

“We do not even have any certainty that First Minister Walsingham will allow the plan to be introduced for debate,” Miss Plover pointed out.

“Correct,” the queen said, nodding to her. “Which is why Lady Walsingham is one of our primary targets to influence.”

“Lady Walsingham rarely comes to London,” Miss Gilcrest, another of the younger spies, pointed out.

“She does not,” the queen agreed. “But I may have a plan to reach her. In the meantime, Lady Ryman’s ball is less than a week from now.”

Kat frowned slightly at the apparent change in conversation. She did not particularly care for balls, but everyone else in London seemed to lose their heads over them at this time of year, when everyone from every corner of the New Heptarchy had just come together in London and company still felt fresh.

“The quickest way to have the most influence with the largest array of people is through conversations at a ball,” the queen said, almost as if she sensed Kat’s reticence on the matter. “There is no better setting for not only conversations about political topics of the day, but for key ministers, or more importantly, their wives, to see that others hold opinions that may be different from theirs and to be exposed to those opinions. Never underestimate the power of popular opinion to sway someone who might think differently.”

“Too many ministers already believe the worst about Mercians and about our plan because they see so many other men professing negative opinions,” Miss Plover pointed out.

“Precisely,” Lady Eileen agreed. “And if enough men and their wives see that the Mercian Plan is favored by the majority, they, too, will sway their opinion in our favor.”

“You are correct, my dear,” Queen Matilda smiled at Lady Eileen. “Which is why our

most pressing mission of the moment is to convince as many of the recalcitrant ladies whom Lady Ryman has invited to attend her ball, even though they have said they will not.”

“Why would anyone refuse an invitation to what will surely be the biggest ball this month?” Miss Gilchrest asked, blinking rapidly, as if not attending a ball were sacrilege.

“People have more reasons for being foolish than the ocean has fish,” Kat said with a frown.

At the mention of fish, Napoleon raised his head and looked at her hopefully. Kat smiled down at him, scratching behind his ears affectionately and promising herself she would purchase fish for him before they returned to their rooms at the Oxford Society Club that afternoon.

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“They do,” Queen Matilda agreed with a nod of her head. “Which is why they must be convinced that their social standing for this season depends upon not only their attendance, but the attendance of their husbands. Martha.” She turned to her maid, holding out her hand.

The maid rushed to the side, taking up a small stack of what looked like calling cards and bringing them to the queen.

“Each of you will take one of these cards,” the queen said, handing them out as each of the ladies present stood and approached her. “On them, you will find the names of prominent ladies who are currently in London, who have received an invitation from Lady Ryman, but who have either declined or have yet to respond to the invitation.”

Kat shifted Napoleon to the side, and received a disapproving stare for doing so, then stood to take a card from her queen. On it were three names, Lady Honoria Thistlewhite, Lady Olivia St. Alban, and Mrs. Thomasina Bowman, who Kat recognized as the wife of one of the wealthiest mill-owners in London.

“Lady Ryman’s ball is next Friday,” Queen Matilda said as she finished handing out the cards. “I expect every lady whose name is on these cards to arrive at the ball with her husband on her arm. From there, we will use every bit of influence we have to sway their opinions to what they ought to be.”

Kat smiled as she resumed her seat, studying her card, even though it appeared as though the meeting was nearly over. For those who believed being a spy was a matter of danger and daring deeds in the middle of the night, they would have been surprised that the majority of her clandestine work in the past twenty years had been attending

social functions and having particular conversations with the right people.

“And what about Lady Walsingham?” Lady Eileen asked, tucking her card into her reticule.

Queen Matilda looked momentarily frustrated. “I am still formulating the best way to reach and influence her. I shall let you know what I have determined after the ball.”

That truly was the end of the meeting. The assembly of ladies stood and gathered their things, curtsying to the queen and offering her words of continued allegiance.

“Come along, darling,” Kat said, scooping Napoleon into her arms and placing him in the special basket she’d had constructed so that she might walk about town with him.

She noted that the queen was watching her as she secured Napoleon so that he could poke his head out the top of the basket and observe the world around him without leaping free and getting himself into trouble. The way Queen Matilda watched her made Kat nervous, if she were honest. The woman, her employer, her liege, and her mentor, clearly had something to say, but she was biding her time and holding her tongue.

“Good day, your majesty,” Kat said once Napoleon was secure, his basket looped over her arm, curtsying deeply.

“Good day, my dear,” the queen said, smiling. “Do be careful,” she added, a look of motherly concern in her eyes.

Something in that look caused a lump to form in Kat’s throat. Ever since her own mother died, far too shortly after Waldorf’s betrayal for her poor heart to have handled, Queen Matilda had filled the maternal role for her. They were not as close as Kat had been with her own mother, before her father had forced all contact to be cut

off. Queen Matilda was mother to everyone in Mercia, after all. But Kat felt a deep sense of affection and loyalty to her queen, and she was loath to let the woman down.

With the fire of loyalty and a determination to fulfill her queen's will filling her, Kat left the parlor and made her way downstairs so that she could leave the embassy entirely. She had three women to locate and influence, and she fully intended to have all three of them sending effusive letters of acceptance to Lady Ryman in no time.

Her mind went to work at once, conjuring up ideas and arguments to convince the recalcitrant ladies to attend the ball. She put every bit of her thought into it as she crossed into Hyde Park, intending to take Napoleon to his favorite spot by the Serpentine so that he might amuse himself chasing after the waterfowl for a bit before supper. It still felt deeply ironic that the queen had entrusted her with the mission of convincing ladies to attend a ball when she herself would rather have dunked her head in the Serpentine than gad about, pretending she found the conversation of odious gentlemen of thetoninteresting while they trod on her feet during the steps of a?—

Her thoughts were cut short as she suddenly and without warning found herself all but slamming directly into none other than Waldorf.

Within an instant, Kat's insides were a mess. Her traitorous heart conjured up affections that she had long ago tried to bury. Her ferocious soul burned with the anger of betrayal that had not been doused in all of the intervening years. And a certain sense of the ridiculous had her laughing once more at the absurd facial hair that Waldorf had maintained with laughable male pride for the last several years.

"You," Waldorf said, narrowing his eyes at her.

"Yes, me," Kat said, standing taller and tilting her chin up so that her neck appeared longer and her bearing regal.

“Oh, God,” the elderly gentleman standing beside Waldorf said, rolling his eyes.

Kat softened her demeanor for Lord Gerald Godwin’s sake. “My lord,” she greeted the man with as much kindness as she dared with his odious son standing right there. “It is a delight to see you again.” She emphasized the word to make clear that it was not a delight to see Waldorf. Ever.

“And you, Lady Katherine,” Lord Gerald said. He smiled a bit too widely and jabbed his elbow into Waldorf’s side. “We were just discussing you.”

“We were not,” Waldorf snapped, glaring at his father.

A sense of excitement and the thrill of an impending battle swirled through Kat. She refused to acknowledge that the feeling was akin to what she’d once felt as Waldorf kissed her and plucked at the ties of her gown.

“Oh?” she asked, sending Waldorf a superior look. “Pray tell, what were you saying? I cannot imagine it would be anything good.”

Waldorf looked surprised at her appraisal. “So you admit there is nothing good that can be said about you, madam?”

“Not at all,” Kat said with a smile. “I was merely assuming that you are incapable of stringing together words to form a sentence of any grace or meaning.”

“Oh, I can assure you, my sentences are brilliant,” Waldorf growled at her. “It is only those of very little understanding who fail to see that.”

“Ah. That explains why you have a habit of talking to yourself,” Kat said, stroking Napoleon’s head as he poked it from the top of the basket, as if to join her in the verbal joust. “I have heard that having those of weaker mind repeat things aids in



their understanding.”

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“I assume you know this from your own personal experience?” Waldorf asked.

“Yes,” Kat said, her smile sharper than ever. “I spent two years of my life during my time at Oxford attempting to educate a rat. I was unsuccessful.”

“Well, as they say, those who cannot do teach,” Waldorf fired back. “So I am not at all surprised that you would attempt to teach comprehension and communication, not at all.”

Kat fully intended to go on until she won the battle, but Lord Gerald burst into uproarious laughter. “Do you see what I mean?” he asked his son, thumping Waldorf on the back.

Kat’s heart sank with wariness. Whathadthey been saying about her?

“Father, please,” Waldorf said through gritted teeth, as embarrassed as if he were a lad of fifteen and not a man of nearly fifty.

Lord Gerald continued to laugh. “I have half a mind to let you inherit Godwin Castle and its curse after all,” he said. “The curse has already afflicted you with blindness.”

Kat’s back went stiff. So that was what this was about? Lord Gerald had been matchmaking? Kat knew full well from Muriel and Bernadette, who had recently married into the Godwinfamily because of Lord Gerald’s pronouncements about the curse, what the older man meant by his words.

She would not have any of it. Not even the enticement of being related to her closest

friends through marriage into the same family could convince her to waste another moment of her affections on a fickle, ignorant blackguard like Waldorf.

Fortunately for her, she spotted a way out of the annoying conversation walking along the path that circled the Serpentine. Lady Thistlewhite and her daughter, Beata, seemed to be out for an afternoon stroll, enjoying the sights and sounds of the park. They were first on the list that the queen had given her, and by the look of the way they were posing to attract attention, Kat felt it would be a simple matter to convince them that Lady Ryman's ball was the best place for them to make the connections they seemed to be after.

"If you will excuse me," she told Waldorf and his father pointedly. "I see someone I must speak with. Good day to you, Lord Gerald. It was lovely meeting you again."

"And you, Lady Katherine," Lord Gerald said, laughing.

Kat sent Waldorf a nasty, sideways look as she marched past him, directing her steps toward Lady Thistlewhite and her daughter. She did not care what Waldorf or his father had to say about her. Their opinion of her did not change what she chose to do with her life in the least. And if Waldorf thought he could prevail upon her to avoid a family curse, then he had another?—

"Kat, wait!" Waldorf's voice called after her.

Kat froze for a brief moment, anger flaring through her. She did not even deign to turn and glare at Waldorf for whatever he wanted. She would not let him humiliate her again. Ever. She had a mission to accomplish, so she walked on.

Three

The damnable, bloody impossible woman. Waldorf knew he should have let Kat walk

away, that he should take his father back to the family's London townhouse, and that he should continue on to the club to inform the others in the Badger Society about King Swithin's change of heart on the Mercian Plan. He absolutely should absolutely ignore everything about Lady Katherine Balmor and go about his business.

He couldn't do it. She had the look about her that she always had when she was about to cause a great deal of trouble.

"Wait here," he instructed his father before striding quickly after Kat.

"This should be interesting," he heard his father chuckle behind him.

"Kat, wait!"

He did not expect Kat to turn and fly back to him, eager to wait on his every word, but he didn't expect her to pause for only a moment, then continue on without even looking at him.

"Bloody annoying woman," he grumbled, picking up his pace so that he could catch her and demand to know where she was going with that expression of determination on her face.

He needed to protect her, from whatever danger she had a tendency to walk into, and especially from herself.

No, another voice in his head argued. She had washed her hands of him years ago after being deliberately false with him. She had spent the last twenty years proving that she was a deceptive cat, just like the creatures she had kept constantly with her, carrying them around as though they were handkerchiefs or hats, for twenty years now.

He wanted to argue sense into himself and leave her alone, but something deep within him would not allow him to, and by the time he'd decided he was only encouraging his father's ridiculous aims about him and Kat marrying, it was too late and he'd reached Kat's side.

"I do not require your presence, Lord Waldorf," Kat said in dry, clipped tones, without even looking at him. "I have no wish to be the butt of any jokes you might have with your father."

"That wasn't—we didn't—my father is an arse most of the time, and you know it," Waldorf grumbled. It aggravated him to no end that Kat was so perceptive when it came to how other people saw her. Or at least how she believed other people saw her. She'd made up her mind long ago about what he thought of her.

Unlike himself. He still, after twenty long years, was uncertain what his true feelings for the woman were.

"And I will thank you not to refer to me by any past diminutives," Kat went on, as if she'd never stopped speaking.

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“Why shouldn’t I?” Waldorf asked, returning to the exhilarating feeling of combat that he’d enjoyed with her earlier. “The moniker suits you well, since you behave much like your feline companions most of the time.”

Waldorf watched Kat’s jaw and neck tighten, like she was clenching her teeth. She sent him the briefest sideways glance, then snapped, “I shall take that as a high compliment.”

Waldorf was in the midst of formulating some response that would reflect the way cats frequently contorted themselves into obscene positions to lick their own backsides when he realized Kat was approaching a particular pair of ladies, Lady Thistlewhite and her daughter, by the side of the Serpentine.

Immediately, Waldorf was on the alert for a litany of other reasons. Lord Thistlewhite of Northumbria was one of the most outspoken opponents of the Mercian Plan among the ministers who would partake in the Joint Parliament session. He was a man who could influence quite a few others in Joint Parliament. But Waldorf had only the briefest of acquaintance with the man. If he could somehow ingratiate himself to Lady Thistlewhite, perhaps he could wheedle an invitation to supper out of the woman, and from there, he might make an effort to change Lord Thistlewhite’s mind.

Kat stopped just short of the Serpentine path and whipped to face Waldorf, jostling the ridiculous basket in which she carried her loathsome cat as she did.

“I do not require your presence any longer, sir,” she told Waldorf, peeking at Lady Thistlewhite and her daughter as they changed the direction of their amble to approach. “Go away.”

“I shall not,” Waldorf declared with a challenging smile.

“What possible reason could you have to dog me like this?” Kat demanded, partially forlorn.

Anything that would upset Kat and drag her down from her high horse was a good use of his time, as far as Waldorf was concerned. “Lady Beata Thistlewhite is unwed, is she not?” he said. “So am I. And you know my father is desperate to have all of his sons and nephews married.”

Kat turned a curious shade of puce and practically trembled with rage. Waldorf considered it a victory that he had found his way under her skin so easily.

Neither of them had time to do anything about it, however.

“Lady Katherine,” Lady Thistlewhite greeted Kat with a broad smile. “Lord Waldorf. What a pleasant surprise to see the two of you this afternoon.”

“Lady Thistlewhite,” Kat turned and greeted the woman as though the two of them were long-lost friends, and as if Waldorf wasn’t there at all. “It is so lovely to meet you once more. I do not believe I’ve seen you since Lady Clarissa’s tea in September.”

“Has it been that long?” Lady Thistlewhite said, taking Kat’s hands. The two women left feigned kisses on each other’s cheeks, though Lady Thistlewhite made certain to avoid the damned cat in his basket as she did.

Waldorf fought not to roll his eyes. He did not understand women and their bizarre fascination with pretending to have more affection for each other than they did. Men were so much more straightforward. They greeted with a handshake or a nod, then launched right into business. None of this tea party nonsense.

“Lord Waldorf, you are looking so distinguished and handsome with your magnificent whiskers,” Lady Thistlewhite greeted him. “Do you not think so, Beata?”

Lady Beata dropped a short curtsy for Waldorf, eyeing his sideburns as if they might sprout legs or claws and come after her.

“Why do we not take a turn around the park?” Kat asked, raising her voice a bit, almost as if she were jealous of the way Lady Thistlewhite invited her daughter to consider him. “Just the ladies. I am certain Lord Waldorf has no interest in gowns and balls and the like. Speaking of which, have you received your invitation to Lady Ryman’s ball?”

“Lord Waldorf,” Lady Thistlewhite said, ignoring Kat entirely as she stepped closer to him. “I understand that weddings have become quite the fashion in your family of late. I would so like to hear more about your brother, Lord Cedric’s, wedding, and your cousin’s, Lord Alden.”

Twin feelings of victory and frustration pulsed through Waldorf. On the one hand, he appeared to be thwarting Kat at whatever game she was playing. On the other, Lady Thistlewhite had just given him an opening which he might be able to expand in order to finagle an invitation to dine with Lord Thistlewhite.

But in the process, Kat had been cut from the conversation entirely. Surprisingly, Waldorf didn’t like that.

“They were both sudden and inexplicable affairs,” he said, feeling as if he was not the person to discuss the details of weddings with a woman. “I’d no idea that either of my kinsmen were interested in marriage until they sprung the announcements on us.”

“You did not?” Lady Thistlewhite asked, exchanging a quick look with her less enthusiastic daughter. “Why, whispers throughout London say that your esteemed



father has demanded that all of his sons and nephews marry. Is that not what we heard just yesterday, Beata?"

Waldorf's jaw went tight. He immediately discounted everything he'd just thought about the situation. Like far too many mamas before her, Lady Thistlewhite saw him as one thing and one thing only, a potential groom for her daughter.

Waldorf had not married for a reason. That reason was standing right there, observing the interaction with a tight expression and stiff shoulders. Kat had ruined him for other women, in more way than one. He did not think he could bear another deception like the one she had perpetrated.

At least, that was what he'd told himself for a long time.

"Lord Waldorf's cousin, Lord Alden, married a dear friend of mine, Lady Bernadette Attleborough," Kat said in what was clearly an attempt to pull the conversation back around to her. "That was most certainly a love match and not anything dictated by Lord Gerald Godwin." She paused briefly, then said, "I believe Bernadette and Lord Alden will be in attendance at Lady Ryman's ball. You must join us there. It will be the social event of the season."

Lady Thistlewhite turned suddenly stony. "I am not certain Lady Ryman is the sort one wishes to be seen patronizing," she said.

"Perhaps, but everyone who is of any importance will be there," Kat said, causing Waldorf to arch one eyebrow.

Since when did Kat care about balls? As far as he knew, she despised them. Then again, the Badger Society had their sights on several men who would be in attendance at the ball, and if Waldorf could add one more to those numbers....

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“I shall be in attendance at Lady Ryman’s ball,” he said, smiling amiably at Lady Beata.

Both Lady Thistlewhite and Kat turned to him in shock. Kat raised her eyebrows in fierce indignation.

There was not a chance for anything further to be said, however. At that very moment, Napoleon spotted something that caused him to jerk and leap in his basket. His movements caught Kat off-guard, and before she could restrain him, the blasted cat broke through the top of the basket enclosing him and scrambled down to the grass.

In a flash, the wretched cat sprinted off after an unfortunate cluster of ducks who had been feeding by the side of the water.

“Napoleon, come back!” Kat shouted, hurrying after her cat.

Waldorf would have been perfectly content to stand where he was, grinning as Kat set her cat basket aside, hitched up her skirts a bit, and leapt after her familiar. The bloody cat had already ventured into the marshy bits of the riverbank just beside the startled ducks, and Kat was certain to make a complete mess of herself in her attempts to fetch her monster.

But Lady Thistlewhite had other ideas.

“Lord Waldorf, you must lend your assistance,” she said, watching the unfolding scene of Kat chasing Napoleon with horrified eyes. “Lady Katherine cannot wander

into the mud alone.”

“She seems to be doing a fine job of it so far,” Waldorf said with a shrug.

Both of the Thistlewhite ladies looked scandalized by his nonchalance.

Waldorf cleared his throat and adopted a more serious mien. “I suppose it would only be proper to lend some assistance,” he said, starting forward.

If they were any other ladies and if he was not in such desperate need of winning Lord Thistlewhite over to the Badger’s cause, he wouldn’t have allowed himself to be drawn into the farce. As it was, he marched forward with a sigh, feeling as though it were a fool’s errand to attempt to prevent a cat from chasing birds.

“Call your creature back, Lady Kat,” Waldorf called out to Kat as he drew closer, avoiding the muddy riverbank as much as he could.

Kat twisted to glare at him over her shoulder. “One cannot simply give a cat orders and expect them to follow like a dog,” she snapped.

“No,” Waldorf agreed. “Cats are nowhere near as intelligent as dogs.”

Kat laughed, picking up her skirts and dashing on when Napoleon scampered farther along the river’s edge. “You are mistaken, sir,” she said. “A cat would obey if they wished to. They are creatures who know their own mind and have no wish to obey the orders of anyone they see as inferior to them.”

“I see,” Waldorf said, happy to be combative with Kat once more. “That is why this one ignores you, then, is it?”

Kat sent him a sidelong smile as he caught up to her, but one that was full of barbs.

“In this particular instance, I will agree with you, sir. Napoleon is far superior to any other creature that walks the Earth, myself included.”

An elderly woman who happened to be walking past them just then gasped in horror and hissed, “Outrageous! Traitor!” before marching on, her nose in the air.

Waldorf laughed before he could stop himself. “You must take better care in naming your familiars in future,” he admonished Kat.

“Perhaps I will name the next one ‘Waldorf,’” she said. “I do enjoy naming them after notorious villains.”

“I am certain that Waldorf would enjoy cozying up in bed with you as much as I?”

Waldorf stopped himself in the nick of time. Any reference to the glorious parts of the past he and Kat had shared would be of no use to anyone. It was better to forget the two of them had had two lovely years together.

By the suddenly stricken look on Kat’s face, she felt the same way. It was, perhaps, a stroke of luck that Napoleon chose that moment to pounce on a frog near the side of the river. The movement distracted the cat just long enough for Kat to leap after him.

She nearly had him as well. Napoleon was more intent on keeping the frog in his mouth as it kicked and squirmed than he was on preserving himself. Kat had to step through muddy, slippery ground, however, and as she did, her feet splayed out in two directions under her. She captured the cat, but she went sprawling into the mud as she did.

“Allow me,” Waldorf said, moving in with the intention of scooping her up.

Instead of allowing him to lift her, Kat thrust Napoleon at him, as if that was the point

of his assistance. The result was that Napoleon managed to scramble free, and Waldorf slipped and was forced to plant one knee in the mud in order to avoid falling over entirely.

“Oh! Hurry!” Lady Thistlewhite called from the side. “The cat is getting away.”

“Blast and damnation,” Kat growled, muscling herself up and stumbling to make it to drier ground.

Waldorf pushed himself to follow her, and in no time, the two of them were chasing after Napoleon as if he were a prize at a summer faire. They trailed mud after them as they dodged this way and that, attempting to corner Napoleon every time he hunched down to readjust the way he held the frog in his mouth and to growl at anyone who threatened to take his prize away.

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“Get behind him,” Kat ordered Waldorf. “Do not let him run farther down the path.”

“Why don’t you shoo him toward me and I’ll catch him,” Waldorf suggested. “Or get that blasted basket and trap him that way.”

“He’s smarter than that. He’ll run,” Kat insisted.

Waldorf doubted it...but he was proved wrong in short order when he was certain he had the beast trapped. He reached down for the cat, only to have Napoleon scramble away at the last minute and run like the wind across the grass of Hyde Park.

In the end, it took the help of a band of four, bedraggled urchins, three ladies with parasols to block and frighten Napoleon from running farther, and Lady Beata crouching down and holding the basket so that once Napoleon was caught, he could be wrestled into the conveyance. Both Waldorf and Kat were left scratched, bruised, muddied, and defeated.

“I’ve never seen such a thing in my life,” Lady Thistlewhite laughed, as if Waldorf and Kat had arranged an entertainment especially for her. “How invigorating.”

Waldorf huffed an ironic laugh. “That is not the word I would use for it, madam.”

“You were very heroic,” Lady Beata said, looking at him with new, appreciative eyes.

“Oh, good Lord,” Kat muttered under her breath as she attempted to straighten her disheveled hair and to tuck it back under her bonnet.

Waldorf would have done the same smoothing and straightening routine with his own hair, but he'd lost his hat somewhere across Hyde Park during the chase. He suspected one of the urchins had swiped it. Well, he hoped the wicked young boy would get a good meal and a warm bed for the night out of the proceeds from the hat.

"As loath as I am to part from you, Lady Thistlewhite," Waldorf said, brushing at his trousers, "I must return home to bathe and change clothes." Or rather, he should proceed on to the club to inform the other Badgers of the business of the day. And take his father, who had enjoyed the theatrics of the cat chase a little too much, home to Godwin House.

Waldorf was about to consider the afternoon a complete loss when Lady Thistlewhite said, "Your valiant efforts this afternoon should be rewarded, Lord Waldorf. I would be honored if you, and Lady Katherine, of course, would join my family for supper tomorrow night."

Waldorf stood straighter. It was exactly the invitation he'd hoped to win, and it had come far sooner than he'd expected it to. But Kat was also invited in the invitation, blast it.

"My son would be honored," Lord Gerald said, stepping forward to make himself part of the conversation. "As would Lady Katherine." He grinned at Kat.

"I...that is...I could not...er...." Kat seemed at as much of a loss as Waldorf felt in the face of the invitation, and his father's interference.

"I insist," Lady Thistlewhite said. "For I have not been so entertained in many a year. I am quite certain Beata would enjoy your company as well, Lord Waldorf."

Waldorf sent his chuckling father a scathing look. The old bastard was enjoying the whole thing entirely too much. He sent Kat a look as well.

Kat seemed exhausted and defeated. “I suppose I would be delighted to accept your invitation,” she said, shrugging as though she’d been worn down to the point where she was too tired to refuse. “Though I shall not be bringing Napoleon with me.” She frowned at the closed basket looped over her arm.

“That would be wise,” Lady Thistlewhite said, unable to hide her amusement.

Arrangements were made, and all parties took their leave of each other. Waldorf exchanged one last, narrow-eyed look with Kat, as if each of them were blaming the other for everything that had happened.

“Did I not tell you that you and Lady Katherine are perfectly suited for each other and always were?” Lord Gerald said as he and Waldorf continued on their way, heading out of the park.

“Father, I love you, but I do not have the mental faculties to engage in this conversation at present time,” Waldorf said.

Lord Gerald merely laughed. Waldorf had the sinking feeling that his father would get his way in the end, one way or another. But at least he himself was now one step closer to fulfilling his mission to turn ministers toward the Mercian Plan.

Four

In hindsight, as humiliating as the episode in Hyde Park had turned out to be, Kat was forced to admit it had been a success. Whether she made headway in convincing Lady Thistlewhite to attend Lady Ryman’s ball in the moment or not, she had secured an invitation to supper at the woman’s house. She had made progress in achieving her objective, and now she had an entire evening to continue to fight for the cause.

“If only Waldorf had not been invited as well,” she complained to Napoleon on the



evening of the event, as she donned a warm pair of stockings and secured them around her thighs.

Napoleon sat on the bed of Kat's room at the Oxford Society Club, licking his paws and giving his ears a bath, as if he, too had been invited to supper. Kat had no qualms about bringing Napoleon with her to nearly all social events, particularly as he was often useful as a distraction so that she could observe or even purloin something without being seen, but there were limits.

"That odious man," she huffed, standing and crossing to her wardrobe, where the gown she planned to wear that evening was waiting for her. "I still maintain that he embarrassed me in front of Lady Thistlewhite and her daughter on purpose."

Napoleon lifted his head and held still for a moment, either as if he agreed with her, or had seen a fly that needed chasing. He then yawned and returned to his ablutions.

"He always was callous and selfish," Kat continued as she gathered up her gown so she could shimmy into it.

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She should have had a maid to assist her in dressing. Indeed, the club provided every sort of maid to assist the ladies residing there. But Kat despised help of any sort. Not only had experience taught her that other people were unreliable and too often concerned only with gaining their own advantages, she hadn't trusted a single maid to come anywhere near her since Mary.

She would not make herself vulnerable to anyone, master or servant, ever again.

Though it did make for a lonely life. Many had been the time she had wished for someone she could trust to talk to and share her heart with, aside from her dearest friends. They all had lives of their own to contend with, though. Being alone was safe, but it had weighed on her heart more than she wanted to admit to.

Then again, that was why Napoleon, and his predecessors, were such ideal companions.

"If he attempts to undermine my mission this evening, I shall eviscerate him," she told Napoleon, reaching awkwardly behind her to fasten the ties of her gown. "If he thinks for so much as a moment that he can humiliate me in company again, he will have another think coming."

Napoleon finished his bathing and stood to stretch his feline limbs.

"Yes, I quite agree," Kat said, as if Napoleon had expressed his feelings on the matter with his movements. "My mission this evening is clear. Lady Thistlewhite must be convinced to attend the ball. I will not allow that to trivialize my aims or make me seem weak and ineffective before the others."

Even as she spoke, Kat remembered the painful emotions she had lived with for far too long in the immediate wake of Waldorf's deception and defection. She was furious with herself for opening her heart to the man to the point where he had caused such long-lasting damage.

"It was my own fault," she spoke her thoughts aloud, to Napoleon, as she finished securing her gown and moved to her dressing table to style her hair. "I never should have given my heart away so readily. I was young and deeply foolish."

And in love, she added to herself.

She had been so in love. She had never known anything like it. Waldorf had been her ideal man. He had been a bit older and had more experience of the world. He was a dazzling wit and a charming conversationalist. Whereas other men courting her friends had spoken down to them and treated it as a given that they wanted a man to deign to give them attention in return for unearned adoration, Waldorf had always had a care for her thoughts.

He hadn't treated her like a potential ornament, like he was choosing a bauble from a box filled with them. He had approached her as an equal from the start. He had taken her to lectures and debates that few women attended. He had not balked in the least when the two of them stayed up late drinking at any of the Oxford pubs that allowed women. And he had not treated her as some fainting violet when the flame of their passion rose to the point where they felt the urgent need to do something about it.

"How could a man who was so right in so many ways turn so wrong?" she sighed, gazing at her reflection once her hair was in place.

Her heart squeezed with old misery at the question. Twenty years, and she did not have an answer. She had thought Waldorf to be perfect in every way, but he had turned out to have feet of clay. Twenty years, and she could not decide whether he

was a deceptive fool...or if he had been deceived by a too-clever trickster.

Waldorf Godwin was not the only man that Kat would never forgive.

A soft knock sounded on her door, and Kat gasped and sat straighter. "Come in?" she called, uncertain whether she wanted any sort of company.

The door opened, and Regina, the Oxford Society Club's head footman, poked her head around the door. "My lady, your carriage is here," she said.

Kat smiled and stood, leaning to the side to retrieve her reticule. "Thank you, Regina."

As Kat headed toward the door, blowing a kiss to Napoleon as she went, Regina asked, "Would you like assistance with your gown, my lady?"

"No, I—" Kat bit back her instinctive refusal, then asked, "Have I done it up wrong?"

"A bit," Regina said with a kind smile.

A twist of regret pulled at Kat's heart as she turned to let Regina refasten her ties. Lack of trust might have kept one's heart safe, but it caused a myriad of other problems.

Kat longed for a life where she could trust, but that life had vanished before her eyes one spring day in Oxford.

She thanked Regina for her efforts once the woman was done, then hurried downstairs to where the hired hack was waiting. Lord and Lady Thistlewhite's townhouse was just a bit too far from the Oxford Society Club for Kat to walk the distance alone at night. She regretted the expense of hiring a carriage, but fortunately,

Queen Matilda paid her well, so it was not a strain on her finances.

She arrived unfashionably early for the party, thanks to a dearth of carriages on London's streets. There would be so many more later in the evening, and in a fortnight, once Joint Parliament actually began. Lord Thistlewhite's butler welcomed her into the house regardless, with apologies for the ladies of the house not yet being ready to receive her. He showed her into a lovely, if somewhat old-fashioned, parlor instead.

There were advantages to being alone in the parlor of the woman she was charged with influencing in a direction she might not wish to go. Kat busied herself perusing the room, attempting to gauge what sort of books Lady Thistlewhite favored, what other sort of entertainments she enjoyed, and if she was lucky, perhaps discovering which shops the woman favored on Oxford Street. Any small bit of information could be used to formulate an argument to convince the woman Lady Ryman's house was where she wanted to be on Friday.

She had just discovered a book of the poems of William Wordsworth, which Lady Ryman herself had recently become enamored of and spoke about to anyone who would listen, when the subtle sound of a man clearing his throat behind her caused Kat to straighten and turn to the doorway.

She expected to find the Thistlewhite's butler announcing a new arrival. She did not in any way expect to be faced with none other than Lord Anthony Headland.

"Good evening, Lady Katherine," Lord Headland greeted her with a smile that could only be described as triumphant. "What a remarkable surprise to find you here as well this evening."

He took a few steps deeper into the room, and Kat immediately seethed, "Do not come another pace closer to me, you villain."

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Lord Headland stopped, looking genuinely surprised. “I beg your pardon?” He blinked, then shifted slightly to the side, near to one of the chairs, like he would sink casually into it for an ordinary conversation.

Kat immediately trembled with rage. She had not seen the bastard except in passing while about her business in London since the day that ruined her life. She wanted nothing at all to do with the man now and was sorely tempted to leave at once.

The only problem was that her queen had set a specific mission for her, she had just discovered an opening to engage Lady Thistlewhite in conversation about an interest she shared with Lady Ryman, and the possibility of succeeding at her task was extremely high.

But only if she stayed right where she was, in the presence of the one person she despised more than Waldorf.

“I have no wish to speak with you, sir,” Kat snapped, tilting her chin up imperiously. “You destroyed something precious to me once. You destroyed my very life.”

Lord Headland blinked rapidly, looking shocked. “I cannot imagine what you mean, my lady,” he said. “I know our acquaintance at Oxford ended abruptly and under unfortunate circumstances, but I do not understand these accusations of?”

“Do not be false with me, sir,” Kat hissed. “You will do yourself no favors by feigning innocence. You pursued me, I rejected you, and you made me pay for it.”

The bastard continued to appear baffled. “I cannot imagine what you might mean by

that, my lady,” he said, taking a step toward her.

Kat stepped back, holding up her hand to him in warning.

She immediately regretted the move, however. It made her appear weaker and gave him the upper hand.

“You know what you did,” she said, keeping her voice low out of fear that she would scream if she did not keep herself under perfect control. “And all because you could not countenance being rejected by the object of your affection.”

“I was not rejected by the object of my affection,” Lord Headland said, still feigning innocence, but with a harder edge. “I was wed to my sweet Caroline less than a year after leaving Oxford.”

Kat narrowed her eyes. Now that she thought of it, she did recall hearing Lord Headland had married. Not that it erased what the man had done.

No sooner had she begun to let her guard down and ease her suspicion of Lord Headland when the blackguard said, “Alas, my poor Caroline breathed her last this past winter. I am a humble widower now.”

On the surface, his words were the sort that invited sympathy, but the covetous way he looked at her as he announced his wife’s death left Kat’s skin crawling.

All the same, she was forced by propriety to say, “I am sorry for your loss.”

“As am I,” Lord Headland said, daring to take another step closer to her.

It took everything Kat had to resist the urge to step back from him or to flee. She had to maintain her appearance of strength, though. She had to endure this trial so that she

might succeed in her mission for her queen.

“I am not certain I enjoy being a widower,” Lord Headland said, coming closer to her still, the light in his eyes growing hotter. “I do not think the state suits me.” He paused, almost close enough to Kat now to reach out for her, then said. “I understand that you never married, Lady Katherine?”

Fury and panic mingled in Kat’s gut. She could see at once that it did not matter how much time had passed or what sort of marriage Lord Headland had enjoyed for nearly twenty years, his intentions toward her had not changed.

“I have not married by choice, sir,” she said, keeping her chin up and her shoulders squared. “I have never met a man who I consider my equal.”

“No, I cannot imagine you would,” Lord Headland said, sweeping her body with a lascivious look. “I cannot imagine that anyone is your equal, Lady Katherine.”

His words were pretty enough, but they left Kat feeling soiled and prickly. Lord Headland had not improved at all with age. In fact, age seemed to have given him an additional boldness that he had not possessed before.

“We should renew our acquaintance, Lady Katherine,” he went on, taking yet another step toward her. It left her easily within his reach, but Kat refused to be cowed. “I would like very much to call upon you, now that we are both in London.”

“No, sir,” Kat said, meeting and holding his eyes firmly. “I do not wish to see you, now or ever. I will not accept you if you call on me, I will not agree to a dance if we should ever meet at a ball, and I will not ever consider renewing any sort of acquaintance with you.”

“You cannot possibly mean that,” Lord Headland laughed. “A spinster like you



should be grateful that a man of good character and good fortune should deign to notice you.”

Kat’s eyes flared with anger. “Would you like to renew your acquaintance with my knee, sir?” she asked.

Lord Headland’s eyes went suddenly wide with remembered pain, and he stepped back, his posture reflecting a pose intended to protect his assets.

The movement did not come soon enough, however.

“What is the meaning of this?”

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Kat and Lord Headland both turned to the parlor doorway just as Waldorf was shown in by the butler. Lady Thistlewhite was just behind him.

Kat wanted to growl with frustration and throw her hands up. Once again, Waldorf had discovered her in too close a proximity to Lord Headland, and knowing the lunkhead the way she did, he would likely misinterpret what he was seeing once again.

“Oh, Lord Headland, you have arrived,” Lady Thistlewhite said, sweeping into the room and approaching Lord Headland with her arms outstretched and a look of sympathy on her face. “You poor man.”

Waldorf was already looking at Kat, but his expression changed to one of indignant questioning.

Kat glared back at him, visually chastising him for whatever judgmental thoughts she was certain he was having.

“Lady Katherine, have you met Lord Headland?” Lady Thistlewhite asked, holding Lord Headland’s arm and turning him toward Kat. “The dear man was married to my sweet friend, Caroline, who passed away before Christmas last year.”

“We’ve met,” Kat said, knowing she was being rude, but unwilling to show so much as a crack in her resolve to the man who had made her life a misery.

That went for Waldorf as well. Waldorf’s brow flew up in shock and alarm, and he sent Kat another, different look. That one had an uncomfortable patina of

protectiveness about it that Kat did not like any more than his judgmental look.

“Are you acquainted with Lord Headland, Lord Waldorf?” Lady Thistlewhite continued her introduction.

“We knew each other many years ago,” Waldorf said in a low, flat voice.

“Lord Waldorf.” Lord Headland bowed curtly to Waldorf.

Lady Thistlewhite either did not catch the undercurrents in the room or she did not wish to acknowledge them and let them affect her supper party. She was fortunate enough to have help in diffusing the suddenly volatile situation as the butler announced more guests.

“Lord and Lady Sumac, your ladyship,” the man announced, showing a grey-haired couple into the room.

Kat breathed out reflexively the moment she was no longer the center of attention, particularly since Lady Thistlewhite drew Lord Headland across the room and away from her to make more introductions. That only left an opening for Waldorf to approach Kat, however.

“What is the meaning of this?” Waldorf hissed when he came close enough to speak to her without being heard by the others.

Kat turned to him, her eyes wide with offense. “What do you mean by that question, sir?”

Waldorf huffed impatiently. “Were you aware that he would be in attendance this evening? That he has been widowed?”

“No, of course not,” Kat snapped in return.

She wanted to give Waldorf a large piece of her mind, but Lady Thistlewhite turned toward them and said, “You know Lord Waldorf Godwin and Lady Katherine Balmor, of course,” as she introduced not only Lord and Lady Sumac, but another older woman who had a young lady with her.

Kat forced herself to smile, and stepped away from Waldorf so that she might be properly introduced to the new arrivals. The younger lady turned out to be a dear friend of Lady Beata by the name of Lady Vivien, and the woman with her was her mother, Lady Pollock. Judging by the way Lady Thistlewhite introduced Lady Vivien to Lord Headland, Kat was beginning to see that their hostess had the ulterior motive of introducing Lord Headland to what she must have considered eligible candidates for the bastard’s second wife.

That knowledge helped nothing at all, however, as the growing company of guests finally adjourned from the parlor to the dining room, when Waldorf caught Kat’s wrist and dragged her aside to say, “I do not want you to have anything to do with that man this evening.”

Kat’s eyes widened, and she yanked her wrist out of Waldorf’s grasp. For the second time that evening, she found herself caught between two terrible positions. On the one hand, she wanted nothing at all to do with Lord Headland and had told him as much. On the other, she resented Waldorf’s implication that he could order her not to speak to someone simply because he did not like them.

“You no longer have a say in who I speak to or not, sir,” she told Waldorf, narrowing her eyes. “You lost that right years ago.”

“He is a snake,” Waldorf hissed in return.

“So are you,” Kat fired back at him. “A snake who does not have the right to dictate a single thing that I do or say, particularly not who I choose to associate with.”

“Kat—”

Kat turned to march on to the dining room before he could continue. Until that moment, self-preservation had eclipsed her pride. But if Waldorf intended to humiliate her in public once more by behaving as if he owned her, then she would do whatever it took to thwart him. Even if that meant joining hands with her bitterest enemy.

Five

That blasted woman! What in God’s name did she think she was doing?

Waldorf sat across the richly appointed supper table from Kat, sandwiched between the elder Lady Pollock and a Mrs. Thomasina Bowman, who Kat had taken a particular interest in, for some reason, the moment the woman and her wealthy, mill-owning husband walked through the Thistlewhites’ front door.

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If Kat had kept her conversation to the ladies she seemed so suspiciously interested in, that would have been one thing. But the harridan had been vociferously overjoyed to find herself seated next to the snake, Headland, as soon as they'd all found their places around the supper table.

"Do you not find balls to be one of the most enjoyable forms of entertainment, Lord Headland?" Kat asked, though her gaze was directed across the table, at Mrs. Bowman, not at him, Waldorf noted, as she spoke.

"I adore a ball," Headland replied, seemingly delighted that Kat was offering him so much attention.

Their interactions had set Waldorf's teeth on edge from the moment they'd all taken their seats. He did not trust Headland as far as he could see the man. He'd learned too much about his questionable business dealings and had discovered things he rather wished he did not know about the way the bastard treated prostitutes down by the docks. And that was without considering the role the man had played in his break with Kat.

"Balls are the liveliest of entertainments," Mrs. Bowman agreed. "Provided one attends the right balls."

"You are quite right, Mrs. Bowman," Kat said with an openness in her smile that was not like Kat at all. It was a clear sign to Waldorf that she had some sort of ulterior motive in engaging in the conversation to begin with.

"Which balls this season are you most looking forward to, Lady Vivien?" Kat went

on, monopolizing the conversation to a degree that Waldorf did not like one bit.

“I—” Lady Vivien was caught off-guard by the question. She’d been too busy grinning at Lady Beata across the table, as if the two of them were not yet out of the nursery instead of being newly out in society. “I had not thought about it,” she answered after a pause. “They all seem so wonderful. Which are you looking forward to, Lord Headland?”

Waldorf frowned. Lady Vivien was seated on Lord Headland’s other side, no doubt in Lady Thistlewhite’s mind as another potential bride.

“I should not care a whit about balls at my stage of life,” Headland said, smiling condescendingly at the young woman. “I am a man still in mourning, after all.” Lady Vivien looked disappointed for a moment, but Headland made her smile again as he asked Kat, “Which balls do you plan to attend, Lady Katherine?”

Waldorf watched with narrowed eyes as a dozen emotions passed through Kat’s expression. She was torn about something, he could see. He knew Kat far too well to miss when she was in the throes of an emotional dilemma.

More than that, Kat fiddled with her fork for a moment, inching slightly away from Headland, and turning to Lady Thistlewhite at the end of the table. “I am particularly looking forward to Lady Ryman’s ball on Friday,” she said, smiling with her mouth but looking pained all the same.

Waldorf stroked his whiskers in thought with one hand, attempting to see through Kat’s veil of behavior to guess what covert mission she must be undertaking.

He was surprised to suddenly notice Lord Pollock matching his gesture farther down the table by rubbing his own overly long sideburns. Not only that, Lord Pollock stared directly at Waldorf as he made the gesture.

Waldorf nearly coughed in surprise. Clearly, Lord Pollock was another operative of the Badger Society. He wished he'd known another Badger would be at the supper before attending, but that was the price of belonging to a secretive organization. Even more, by the way Lord Pollock continued to scratch at his chin, Waldorf was certain the man had something he wished to relate to him.

His attention had been so taken by Lord Pollock that Waldorf had missed some of the conversation that had continued between Kat and Lady Thistlewhite. His attention returned to the conversation just as Lady Thistlewhite said, "Yes, but it is the principle of the thing. One cannot be seen to patronize a woman who has advocated for the independence of our colonies in America."

"The Independence of the American colonies is a given," Mr. Bowman said.

Lord Thistlewhite appeared shocked. "I'd no idea you held such views, sir."

Mr. Bowman shrugged. "An independent America would serve the financial interests of Britannia far more effectively than keeping them on as an adjacent responsibility," he said. "Their kingdoms are at such odds with each other that the kingdoms of the New Heptarchy could negotiate extremely favorable trading terms as the two major American kingdoms compete against each other for our business."

"I have never considered that," Lady Pollock said.

Kat looked alarmed, as though the conversation were slipping away from her. Waldorf knew the look of an operative being forcibly steered away from their mission when he saw it. He gathered that, for whatever reason, Kat had been charged with convincing Lady Thistlewhite to attend Lady Ryman's ball. Why else would she speak so incessantly about something he knew she cared so little about?

The damnable thing was, it was in his best interest as well to convince certain



members of the supper party to attend the ball, but for his own reasons.

It pained him greatly to support Kat when she had been nothing but snappish with him so far that evening, but he swallowed his pride and said, “I believe there will be two American ambassadors, one from the Kingdom of Virginia and one from the Kingdom of Plymouth, in attendance at Lady Ryman’s ball on Friday.”

The effect of those words was immediate.

“Will there be?” Mr. Bowman asked, his eyes practically turning gold. “Are they part of the trade delegation?”

“Perhaps someone could show them the benefits of continuing to belong under the umbrella of Britannia,” Lord Thistlewhite said.

“Perhaps that could be you, my lady,” Kat said to Lady Thistlewhite with an encouraging smile. She darted a pointed look at Waldorf as she did.

Waldorf couldn’t tell if it was a look of censure or one of thanks. Either way, it didn’t matter, Lady Thistlewhite’s countenance had changed from stony to considering. “Perhaps it would be wise to attend after all.”

Kat’s jaw went tight for a moment before she smiled at Lady Thistlewhite and said, “I, for one, should be very happy if you would attend. I would so like to see everyone at this table enjoying themselves at a ball on Friday night.” She glanced to Mrs. Bowman as she finished.

Kat’s eyes darted quickly to Waldorf. She was clearly frustrated with him for some reason, the daft woman. That only put Waldorf’s back up. He’d been helping her, dammit, but all evening so far, the woman had behaved with inexplicable rashness.

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As if to confirm that thought, the bastard Headland leaned closer to Kat and said, “If you will be at Lady Ryman’s ball, then I will be there as well.”

Waldorf nearly saw red, not so much because of Headland’s blatant flirtation, but because of the splash of anxious color that came to Kat’s face because of it.

It was wrong. The entire thing was wrong. Kat despised Headland, that much was clear. Whatever the past between them had been, her feelings toward the man were clear now. And yet, she laughed and said, “How very delightful,” even as she leaned away from him.

Waldorf gripped his fork tightly, caught between his frustration and his deep-seated need to protect the woman he loved—had loved—at all costs.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, he chose the path that would allow him to express his frustration.

“Yes,” he said, a bit too bitingly. “It will be a delight for Lady Katherine to renew old acquaintances. And I suppose you’ll be searching for a new Lady Headland as well.” He stared hard at Kat.

Someone farther down the table dropped their fork against their plate. Someone else made a choking sound, as if they’d been taking a sip of wine just as Waldorf had his outburst. Waldorf knew his comment was on the wrong side of appropriate, but if Kat did not see what was unfolding all around her, then it was his responsibility to make the point in the only way she might understand, obviously.

“Oh, I do not know if I am ready to consider another bride as of yet,” Headland said with utterly false modesty. “It is a bit early, do you not think, Lady Katherine?”

Kat had not pulled her gaze away from Waldorf. “I am surprised that you would wish to marry at all, my lord,” she said, radiating fury as she stared Waldorf down. “Marriage is the silliest of institutions.”

A few murmurs sounded around the table, but Waldorf ignored them. “You would, of course, say that, having never been married yourself, Lady Katherine.”

“I believe you know full well the reasoning behind my decision not to wed,” Kat said in a flat, voice.

Waldorf continued to hold her accusing stare. “Yes,” he said. “You had no taste for the singularity of marriage.”

He had no idea if the others at the table would grasp his meaning by the choice of the unusual word, but Kat would know. Kat hadn’t been faithful to him back then, and he doubted she would have been faithful if they had wed.

Except something in the hurt that touched Kat’s eyes left him questioning everything, and not for the first time.

“I should be less surprised that you never married, my lord,” she said, her words and look brittle. “You are too fickle and faithless to cherish anyone other than yourself.”

Another round of short, startled gasps sounded around the table.

“My, this roast gammon is delicious,” Mrs. Bowman said in an overly loud voice.

“Yes, our cook knows where to find all the best cuts of meat,” Lady Thistlewhite

said, her voice shaking.

Waldorf had gone too far, he knew. He broke eye contact with Kat, forcing himself to focus on the gammon in question instead. Blast and hell, he should have known better than to bait the vixen in company. She had an uncanny way to make him lose his temper and his better judgement with it.

Of course, when he glanced across the table a minute later to find Kat still staring at him, her color high, her bosom rising and falling in an aesthetically pleasing way, the fire she'd ignited in him took on an entirely different character.

She was indomitable, that much was certain. Not even he could dampen her fire. They'd fought before, when the understanding between them was still whole and beautiful, and more often than not, that bickering had led to some of the most exciting nights of his life. That was what Kat did. She used battle as a way to fire her blood.

She was angry with him, to be certain, but when Waldorf sent her the barest hint of a smile across the table, not shielding his ardor for her, despite his anger with her, Kat caught her breath.

She also snapped her gaze away from him, as if she had reached the limit of her self-control.

The supper continued without further incident. Waldorf kept his involvement in the conversation to a minimum, and so did Kat. The others at the table seemed perfectly content to continue on without either of them, though Waldorf was pleased to note that when the topic of Lady Ryman's ball came up once more, the other ladies at the table seemed far more inclined to attend than they had before. It seemed as though Kat's mission, whatever it was precisely, had been a success.

It was not until after supper, when the men retired to a gentleman's parlor near the

back of the house, that Waldorf learned Kat's was not the only mission to convince Lady Thistlewhite's guests to attend the ball.

"Lord Waldorf, might I have a word with you?" Lord Pollock waylaid Waldorf as they parted ways with the ladies and headed down another hallway.

"Yes, of course," Waldorf said, allowing Lord Pollock to steer him into a small study close by.

As soon as they two of them were alone, Lord Pollock stroked his whiskers and said, "That was quite an interesting sparring match between you and Lady Katherine Balmor. I assume there is some history between the two of you?"

Waldorf frowned, stepping deeper into the room. "It is not a subject I wish to discuss, and I dare say that you do not care one way or another," he said, far too curt, but not in a mood to be sweet. "You are a fellow Badger, are you not?"

Waldorf had once put that question to a man who had turned out not to be one of them, but who merely had horrible taste in facial hair. The man had gawked at him, then made some excuse before rushing off. Lord Pollock did not look at Waldorf as if he belonged in Bedlam.

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Instead, he stepped closer, glancing toward the doorway to be certain they were not in danger of anyone overhearing them, then asked, “Were you sent here to convince Lord Thistlewhite and Mr. Bowman to attend the Ryman ball as well?”

Waldorf relaxed by a hair once the truth was out. “I was not, as it happens,” he said. “I was invited to this supper purely by chance. But I grasped that there was a mission afoot and what it was fairly soon after the supper began.”

He kept to himself the fact that he realized the mission was Kat’s. He did not think Pollock had noticed that Kat was also aspy, and if the man hadn’t noticed, Waldorf would not be the one to reveal Kat’s identity.

Pollock nodded. “I believe we have succeeded, but I shall continue to press for the gentlemen’s attendance all the same.”

“If there is any way I can assist, do let me know,” Waldorf said.

He glanced toward the doorway, intending to be on his way, but Pollock caught his attention again with, “Everything depends upon those key gentlemen and the others attending the card games that will be held along with the dancing.”

Waldorf blinked and gave his full attention to Pollock. “I assume the games will be used to sway recalcitrant ministers to open debate on the Mercian Plan.”

“Precisely,” Pollock said with a nod. “We have some of our best orators lined up to make arguments in favor of the Mercian Plan as they play. Our commander has apparently gone through great lengths to train these men in the art of persuasion.”

Waldorf could not resist the opportunity to learn more about the organization he'd served for so long, so he asked, "You do not, by any chance, know who our grand commander is, do you?"

Pollock smiled. "Now, what would be the point of belonging to a secret organization of spies if we all knew who commanded us from behind the mask?"

Waldorf laughed despite himself. "Are we all mad for trusting in the unseen?"

Pollock shrugged. "Mankind has trusted in God or gods since the beginning of time without seeing any of them. I've been a Badger long enough to know that whoever is the power behind us, they are a force of benevolent good that can be trusted."

Waldorf smirked and thumped Pollock's arm. "You are more trusting than I am, then. I serve for the pay-packet."

It wasn't true. Like Pollock, he was a Badger because he believed in the cause of unity that underscored everything the organization did. But when it came to matters of trust, he always came up short.

He was on the verge of asking Pollock more when Kat marched swiftly past the doorway, radiating anger as she did. That was likely due to the presence of Headland, who was clearly following her and accosting her about something.

"Excuse me," Waldorf said, his scowl from supper returning and the fire in his belly igniting once more.

"Ah, yes," Pollock said, as if he did, indeed, see.

Waldorf marched out into the hall in time to hear Headland say, "You cannot walk all that distance alone in the dark, and finding a carriage to hire at this time of night will

be nigh impossible.”

“I will manage,” Kat said, approaching Thistlewhite’s butler, who stood ready by the front door.

“I insist that you allow me to drive you home,” Headland continued, pressing his suit as fiercely as he seemed to want to press his person so close to Kat that he would have her cornered in no time. “I have my own carriage at the ready, after all.”

“I neither need nor want your assistance, sir,” Kat snapped at the bastard, though that did not seem to deter him at all. “Go back to your brandy and tobacco with the other men.”

“Katherine, you know I cannot leave you alone,” Headland said in far too intimate a voice.

“Step back, sir,” Waldorf said, pulling himself to his full height as he reached the front of the hall. “Did you not hear Lady Katherine say she does not want you?”

Headland stepped back, but mostly so that he could glare at Waldorf. “I do not believe this matter concerns you,” he said.

“It most definitely concerns me,” Waldorf said. He turned to Kat and said, “I have already made arrangements to drive Lady Katherine home this evening. Your assistance is not required.”

Kat stared at Waldorf as if she wanted to spit in his eye. She did not, though. She must have known as surely as Waldorf did that his offer to share his carriage was the only escape she had from Headland. She must also have known that Waldorf would not let up until she accepted his help, as much as she claimed she did not require assistance.



“Thank you, my lord,” she told Waldorf, jaw tense, with a fire in her eyes that said she would just as soon drive a dagger through his heart. “You are most kind.”

Waldorf smiled and asked the butler, “Could you call for my carriage and bring my and Lady Katherine’s coats?”

“Yes, my lord,” the butler said.

Waldorf turned to Headland. “Your presence is no longer required,” he said. “Go away.”

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Headland stared at Waldorf for a long moment before saying, "This is not over." He then turned and marched back down the hall, leaving Waldorf and Kat alone.

Six

Nothing about the evening had gone as planned. But somehow, perhaps miraculously, Kat seemed to have accomplished her mission. When she left the ladies in the parlor, enjoying tea after supper, Lady Thistlewhite, Mrs. Bowman, and the others had been discussing what they might wear to Lady Ryman's ball so as to appear polite without seeming to endorse Lady Ryman's beliefs too much. That was a success.

But the humiliation Kat felt she had experienced at Waldorf's hands was simply too much. He had been a boor and an oaf. He had challenged her when he should not, although doing so had reminded her of the exciting sparring matches they had once had across supper tables with their friends at Oxford, and he had...he had....

He had supported her mission, helped her to make Lady Ryman's ball seem appealing. She doubted he knew what he was doing or the importance of it, but he had helped. Knowing that, seeing that purpose through the morass of bad behavior he'd also exhibited, filled Kat with uncertainty and awakened long-dormant feelings.

"If you will excuse me, Lady Thistlewhite," she said, setting aside her tea and rising. "I seem to have developed something of a headache, and though I have greatly enjoyed your hospitality this evening, I fear it is time for me to return home."

"Oh, dear," Lady Thistlewhite said, rising to escort Kat to the parlor door. "I hope it is nothing we have done. This evening's conversation has been rather...lively."

“I can assure you that it is nothing you have done or failed to do.” Kat smiled to reassure the woman. “I believe it is the weather.”

They’d reached the door, and suddenly, as if he had been lying in wait there, Lord Headland appeared and said, “You must allow me to drive you home, Lady Katherine.”

Twin feelings of alarm and anger rose up in Kat. She peeked slightly at Lady Thistlewhite, loath to cause more trouble for the woman, especially now that she had been pointed in the right direction politically, then marched straight past Lord Headland.

“No, sir. I do not need your assistance, as I have told you multiple times,” she said, walking as fast as she dared.

“I insist,” Lord Headland said as they walked past a small study.

Minutes later, Kat was uncertain whether it was a bit of luck that she had passed that study or if it only caused more trouble. Lord Headland would not take no for an answer, but then Waldorf became involved, muddling everything further. She was forced to accept Waldorf’s offer to drive her home over Lord Headland’s, though she did not feel any safer with Waldorf, the Thistlewhites’ butler went off to have Waldorf’s carriage called around, and Waldorf and Lord Headland faced each other down as if they were mortal enemies in some sort of Arthurian legend.

“Your presence is no longer required,” Waldorf growled at Lord Headland. “Go away.”

“This is not over,” Lord Headland said, glaring at Waldorf, then staring at Kat with such intensity that if Kat did not feel herself to be a woman of strength and resilience already, she might have been genuinely afraid.

Lord Headland did leave, however, and Waldorf's carriage appeared to whisk them away with surprising speed.

"I would have managed the situation on my own," she told Waldorf as the two of them hurried out through the light rain that had begun sometime during the supper.

"I am certain you would have," Waldorf said as he helped her into the warm, dry carriage. "But at what cost?"

Kat scowled at that statement as she settled herself into the farthest corner of Waldorf's conveyance. She did not want to contemplate how far Lord Headland might go to secure her compliance with whatever it was he wanted. It was fairly clear what he wanted. He'd wanted the same thing years ago, and he'd forced a kiss on her in public as a way to obtain it. How much more of himself would he force upon her now, now that he was older and bolder, and people would not care so much what fate befell a spinster.

"You could at least admit—" Waldorf began.

"Do not speak to me," Kat said holding up a hand to silence him. "Do not speak one word to me between here and the Oxford Society Club."

"Fair enough," Waldorf grumbled.

He crossed his arms and settled into his seat beside her, making a point of not touching so much as her skirt. Kat clasped her hands in her lap, using the brim of her bonnet, which she'd retrieved and donned while Waldorf's carriage had been brought around, to block her face from Waldorf entirely.

They stayed that way, both bristling with new feelings and old, for several minutes. Holding onto such frustration and upset did nothing for Kat's digestion, however. The

fire of her initial anger slowly turned to sullen, burning embers. Underneath those was the misery of knowing that, had their lives turned out some other way, she and Waldorf might be enjoying a pleasant carriage ride home while they spoke and laughed about the foibles of the company they'd just kept.

Kat's mood had flattened entirely by the time the carriage pulled to an inexplicable stop in the middle of a busy street in the heart of London.

"What is the delay?" Waldorf called up to his driver, opening the carriage window closest to him as he did. By his tone, he was just as unsettled as Kat was.

"The theater, my lord," the driver called back to him. "Play's just let out. The street ahead of us is a crush of carriages."

"Can you back up and go the other way?"

They jostled a bit, but barely moved.

"Sorry, m'lord," the driver called. "We're blocked in now. We'll just have to wait it out."

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Waldorf huffed a sigh and pulled the window shut. He pushed back into his seat and crossed his arms again, staring straight forward.

Kat went one step farther than that. She pulled the shade down on her window so that she did not have to be seen in Waldorf's company by any of the passing theatergoers.

Waldorf glared at her in the dim light, then pulled his shade down as well, plunging the carriage into near total darkness. The only light came from the small window at the back of the carriage and around the edges of the shutters.

"If you wish to sit in the dark, then we'll sit in the dark," Waldorf huffed.

"I do not wish to sit here with you at all," Kat said. "Not after the way you embarrassed me in front of all Lady Thistlewhite's guests."

"Balderdash," Waldorf fired back at her. "I did not embarrass you, I gave you an opportunity to stand up for yourself and show the others how it is done."

"You most certainly embarrassed me," Kat said, crossing her arms.

She undid the gesture as soon as she recognized she was mirroring Waldorf's stance.

She also noted a hint of approval in his suggestion that she teach the others how to stand up for themselves.

"You always did require everyone at the supper parties we attended to give you their full attention," she muttered, turning her head to stare out the window and realizing

too late there was no window to stare out of. She'd pulled the shade and blocked off her only route of pretend escape.

"I required everyone's attention?" Waldorf asked indignantly. "You were always the one who laughed the loudest, spoke the most, and bullied everyone who did not agree with you."

"We spent our time primarily in the company of your friends, most of whom were male, I might remind you," Kat said, turning to frown at him, though she could only see his outline in the dark. "I had to assert myself, otherwise they would have run roughshod over me and put me in the place they deemed fit for me as a woman."

Waldorf huffed a laugh, but it was not entirely unkind. "You did show those bastards a thing or two, didn't you."

Kat was stunned to silence for a moment. Was Waldorf actually expressing approval of the harriidan she'd been?

Memories suddenly assailed her. Waldorf had always liked her spirit and her fight. He'd told her as much on several occasions. He'd told her as she'd rode him in bed, taking what she wanted from him as freely as she could.

The memories of those nights had the inside of the carriage feeling suddenly unaccountably warm.

"You could have stood up for me then," she told Waldorf, the uncertainty in her voice reflecting the sudden uncertainty in her heart.

"Why should I?" Waldorf said. Kat could feel him shrug. "You were magnificent all on your own. It was like watching a work of art being constructed."

Kat drew in a breath. He had said the same to her before, in the height of their passion.

“If I was magnificent in that manner, it was because I had no choice,” she said. “I was alone in the world after insisting on attending Oxford. My father and mother never forgave me, never counted me among their children from the moment I left home.”

“I know,” Waldorf said with surprise tenderness. His hand found hers on the carriage seat, and he squeezed it.

“I was already alone, Waldorf,” Kat said with candor that surprised her. “And then you went and left me as well.”

“I did not leave you,” Waldorf said, his voice strong and peevish once more. He removed his hand from hers. “You were false with me, carrying on with Headland then, just as you were tonight.”

“He was accosting me,” Kat said, nearly breathless with anger, and with the lightning-quick shift in her emotions from sentimental to furious. “Both times. He importuned me in the street in Oxford, and his advances toward me were threatening this evening. Does a woman have no hope of protection from a predator because your lot all assume that if she is the object of a man’s rough attentions, it is because she deserved it and was somehow false?”

Waldorf was significantly silent. Kat could practically feel his doubt.

She would not leave it there. If he considered her a bully, then she would live up to that assessment. She twisted on the seat to face him, even though they could still barely see each other in the dark.

“You men cannot simply take whatever it is you wish to take,” she said, raising her



voice. “I did not want Anthony Headland then, and I do not want him now.”

“It did not seem that way during supper,” Waldorf said, far too sullenly for Kat’s liking.

“I was feigning politeness to him because you were being a colossal arse, and you deserved what you got,” Kat snapped.

“So you would flirt with a man you feel might harm you simply to make me jealous?” Waldorf demanded, sitting straighter.

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“I—” He was right. She’d been a damned fool at supper. “You aggravate me so!” she shouted, shoving at him.

She was surprised that she actually managed to hit him in the chest with some force. Waldorf caught her wrist as she did and held it.

“I have had my doubts over the years about whether I was in the wrong in Oxford, whether you were being true with me when you said your association with Headland was a lie and those letters were false,” he said in a low voice, causing Kat’s heart to suddenly beat so fast she was afraid it might leap directly out of her chest. “But now you admit to flirting with the man deliberately to aggravate me. What am I to believe now, Kat?”

Tears stung at Kat’s eyes before she was aware of them. That only made her angry. The very last thing she wanted was to dissolve into an ordinary ninny over a man, or over the mistakes of her past.

“There is not now and there never was anything between me and Lord Headland,” she said, trying her hardest to keep her voice firm and even. “Those letters were a deliberate concoction by Lord Headland, planted in my room by Mary, who was paid to tell you I was conducting an affair with that odious man.”

“And you have proof of that?” Waldorf sounded as though he might actually want that proof, want it to exist and for the whole thing to be proven a lie.

“You should not require proof from me, you louse,” Kat shouted, attempting to smack Waldorf with her other hand, since he held her right wrist firmly. “You should

have loved me enough to know I would never lie to you or be false with you.”

He caught her other wrist as well, and Kat let out the slightest whimper, as if she were defeated in every way. It was all so frustrating. She knew the truth, knew it like she knew the sun would rise and set. Waldorf should have known it as well. He should have known she could never betray him the way he thought she had. But it seemed the onus was always on the lady to prove that she was innocent, and that men would rather have believed women were all whores and shrews than warriors battling on the disadvantaged side in a battle that had raged since time began.

“I was young and foolish,” Waldorf said, stunning Kat out of her tumbling thoughts.

She caught her breath and lifted her head from where she’d lowered it in an attempt to find his eyes in the dark. She could just barely make them out.

“I doubted my conclusions and my actions from the moment I stepped outside the door of that boarding house,” he went on, his voice low and heavy with regret.

“Then why did you not come back inside and discuss the matter further with me?” Kat demanded breathlessly. “Why did you not come back the next day, or write to me at any point in the last twenty years.”

“Pride,” Waldorf answered simply. “I was too proud to admit I might have been wrong.”

At least he was honest in his answer.

But then he had to add, “You did not exactly comport yourself well after that, you know. I might have been reasoned with in time, but no sooner had I made up my mind that I should make amends when I heard stories of you carousing with every sort of man here in London. How many lovers have you had since we parted ways?”

“How many mistresses have you had?” Kat demanded in return. She had had lovers in the intervening years, either as part of her work for Queen Matilda or just because she fancied a dalliance. It was precisely what a man would do.

Her heart had only ever belonged to Waldorf, though.

“Neither of us are young and green anymore, Waldorf,” she went on. “Neither of us should have expected the other to remain true to a memory. One that was crushed mercilessly, might I remind you. You are no more innocent in matters of life than I am.”

“I loved you,” Waldorf said, a surprising amount of passion in his voice.

Kat’s heart flipped and her stomach filled with butterflies. She had not heard Waldorf say he loved her in twenty years. She hated hearing it in the past tense.

“I never stopped loving you,” she told him in return. “But I hate you as well.”

A heavy silence fell in the carriage. Kat barely noticed that they’d begun to move again. She lost the ability to notice anything else at all when Waldorf swept his hands from her wrists, up her arms, to clasp her face, then pulled her close to him and slanted his mouth over hers.

In an instant, it was as if the royal fireworks had been ignited inside the carriage. Waldorf kissed her as a man would who finally had the woman of his heart back in his arms. Hewas insistent and passionate, leaning into Kat to press her back against the seat.

Kat knew she should have resisted. She should have resisted with everything in her and kneed Waldorf in the balls, as she’d done to Lord Headland all those years ago. But she didn’t want to. She wanted to revel in the familiar taste of the man she loved.

She wanted to breathe him in, clasp him tightly, and fan the flames that had burned down to smoldering embers between them.

She wanted to regain the confidence and the power he'd stolen from her by rejecting her when she needed him the most.

With strength she summoned up from the deepest part of herself, she grasped onto Waldorf's coat and pushed him. She did not push him away, however. She thrust him back against the carriage seat, muscled herself so that she straddled him, and took control of their kiss as though it were a struggle of life and death.

Waldorf made a sound of carnal surrender and grasped Kat's waist as she punished his mouth with her kiss. She took what she wanted, reveling in the bulge that grew against her thigh as she bit his lip and sucked on his tongue. She wanted to brutalize him as much as she wanted to satisfy him. The feelings in her heart and in her loins were too big to be denied.

"Yes, my darling," Waldorf gasped when she leaned back enough to sweep her hands down between them, fumbling for the fastenings of his breeches. She intended to take what she wanted from him, and she would enjoy every second of it. "Yes," he sighed in agreement.

She had just managed to unfasten one side of his falls and to tug at her own skirts to free her legs when the carriage lurched to a stop.

"The Oxford Society Club, my lord," the driver called down to them.

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It was like being doused in cold water. Kat pulled back, shoving herself all the way into the rear-facing seat as she panted to catch her breath. What had she done? What had she been about to do?

It was too dark to see Waldorf's expression with any clarity, but the lamps outside of the club let in enough light through the cracks and spaces of the carriage that she could see the heat burning in his eyes. He'd wanted her as much as she'd wanted him, that much was clear. He still wanted her, she could feel it. Any other man would not have allowed her to stop when and how she just had.

Waldorf was not any other man.

"I must go," Kat said breathlessly, lunging for the door.

She fumbled for the handle and nearly spilled out of the carriage onto the street as the driver pulled it open before she was ready. The man was kind enough to help her and see that she made it to her feet and up the stairs to the club's front door. Beth was on duty as footman that night, and she opened the door with a welcoming smile, allowing Kat to rush inside without having to glance back to Waldorf to see what he must think of her now.

But no, Waldorf would not think any less of her for taking what she wanted. He had just told her that he'd admired her confidence when they were together. His voice and actions that evening told her that he still admired her that way.

That did not stop Kat from cursing herself inwardly and burning with the heat of both embarrassment and unfinished passion as she reached her rooms and unlocked her

door. She rushed into her rooms, closed the door behind her, then leaned against it, eyes squeezed tightly closed.

Napoleon meowed in greeting and jumped down from the bed to rub against her legs, but Kat barely noticed him for a change. Her heart was on fire with old passion, and her head wasscreaming at her that she was a fool. She could not allow herself a moment of weakness in which she might be hurt all over again. She had too much at stake now, her independence, her pride, and her duty to her queen. She could not let Waldorf distract her from any of that.

As if to prove that point, when she finally opened her eyes, she spotted a small, white card on the floor that had not been there before.

“Have you knocked something from the table?” she asked Napoleon as she bent to pick it up.

Napoleon purred and rubbed against her hand, so she scratched his head before standing and reading the card.

“The wolf is at the door.”

That was all that was written on the card, but Kat knew at once what it meant. Someone was aware of her actions, knew that she was a spy in Queen Matilda’s service, and if the code she and her sisters had developed held true, they were actively working against her.

It had to be Waldorf. She should have known it.

Seven

“I understand congratulations are in order,”Waldorf’s brother, Lawrence said,

inviting himself into Waldorf's bedchamber as he finished dressing for Lady Ryman's ball on Friday.

"What?" Waldorf snapped, frowning at his reflection as he attempted to tie his own neckcloth. His valet, Bambridge, was in bed with a head cold, and Waldorf had urged the man to rest rather than attend to him. Which meant that his neckcloth was an utter mess. "I've no idea what you're talking about."

"Lady Thistlewhite's supper party the other night?" Lawrence asked in a wheedling way, moving to Waldorf's side.

Lawrence batted Waldorf's hands away from his neck and turned him so that he could tie the neckcloth himself. It grated on Waldorf to be treated as the baby of the family. It'd grated on him when he was a child and everyone fussed over him, and those feelings still nagged him. He was a fully capable, grown man of nearly fifty. He could tie his own neckcloth.

At least, he should have been able to.

"I still have no idea what you are speaking of," he grumbled, looking down at Lawrence's deft hands. In fact, he had some idea what his brother had meant.

Lawrence, ever the smiling, amiable fool, met his eyes with delight. "Why, the gossip about you and Lady Katherine Balmor is all over London at the moment," he said.

"What gossip?" Waldorf snapped, scowling. "I never listen to gossip at any rate. It's all lies and?—"

He stopped midway through his sentence as he remembered that listening to gossip and lies was what had landed him in the desperately uncomfortable position he was in at the moment.



“So you were not witnessed flirting with Lady Katherine across the supper table, then?” Lawrence asked, finishing with Waldorf’s neckcloth, giving it a pat, then stepping back. “You did not escort her home in your very own carriage?”

“It’s the family carriage, not mine,” Waldorf said, though the excuse was ridiculous.

Lawrence knew it and smiled more. “Oh, I see. That makes a world of difference.” His voice dripped with honeyed sarcasm.

“And we weren’t flirting, we were doing battle, waging war,” Waldorf went on.

Lawrence tilted his head to the side in a way that caused the black and silver in his hair to catch the light. “It strikes me that flirting and waging war are not very different from each other,” he said.

“Bugger off,” Waldorf grumbled, turning back to his looking glass and taking up his brush to sort his hair. “Nobody asked for your opinion to begin with.”

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“Yes, I am well aware,” Lawrence said, still smiling, but perhaps a bit less. “I am the very last of the family consulted in any matter whatsoever. You all think me too frivolous and empty-headed to value my opinion on things.”

A twist of guilt immediately filled Waldorf’s gut. “Wedo value your opinion,” he reassured his brother.

“No, no, I understand,” Lawrence said. “I am just an artist, whereas you all have taken far more important things upon you. Cheese and reptiles and espionage, for example.”

Waldorf stared flatly at his brother through the mirror. Now Lawrence was simply toying with him. Waldorf could tell by the twinkle in the man’s eyes. In fact, Lawrence was an astonishingly talented sculptor whose works were on display in museums throughout Europe. He had been their mother’s favorite as well. She had seen his artistic talent early and had indulged it with art lessons and an abundance of whatever supplies he’d needed for all of the artistic disciplines he favored.

If he were honest, Waldorf had been a bit jealous of the attention Lawrence had received when they were boys. He had been the baby, after all, and?—

Waldorf blew out a breath through his nose. There was no point in sulking over the very thing he resented his brothers of accusing him of being.

“Yes, Kat was at the party the other night,” he said, finishing with his hair and putting his brush down to face his brother. A few of the bristles fell out of the brush, and Waldorf pressed his lips together as he noticed. He’d have to tell Bambridge to

purchase a new one, but only after the man was no longer a fountain of snot. “Yes, we had a lively discussion over supper. And yes, I drove her home. But only because it was raining, she did not have a carriage of her own, and Lord Headland was there, attempting to badger her into allowing him to drive her home.”

Lawrence’s expression suddenly went from teasing to serious. “Headland is back?” he asked, walking with Waldorf as he departed his room.

“Headland never left,” he said in a grim voice, walking to the stairs. “The man has been active in politics in East Anglia for all these years. He’s a minister for East Anglia.”

“I have not seen him at social events, or even attending lectures or exhibits of any sort,” Lawrence said as they started downstairs.

“I’ve no idea why not,” Waldorf said. “I only know that his wife recently passed, and now he appears to be searching for the poor woman’s replacement.”

“Which would explain his renewed interest in Kat,” Lawrence said, nodding in thought.

“He will not have her,” Waldorf said, stopping halfway down the stairs and whipping to face his brother with a glare.

Lawrence jumped in surprise, then smiled all over again. “You seem extraordinarily vehement for a man who callously dismissed the woman twenty years ago.”

Waldorf heaved a heavy breath and continued down the stairs. “It was a misunderstanding. And I am not vehement.”

“You are, and I would say it was beyond just a misunderstanding,” Lawrence said.

Waldorf stopped at the foot of the stairs to face him once more. "I believed Kat had betrayed me."

"Based on weak evidence and the say-so of unreliable sources," Lawrence said, nearly laughing with incredulity.

"I witnessed her kissing Headland with my own eyes," Waldorf grumbled, walking on to the front parlor, where he'd instructed Humbolt, Godwin House's butler, to leave his coat and hat earlier. "I saw them."

"Correct me if I am wrong, dear brother," Lawrence began, entirely too amused with the situation, "but did Kat not tell you Headland had accosted her?"

Waldorf sighed, dropping his shoulders entirely before he could reach the parlor. "Yes, I was a blithering idiot," he said. "I reacted on impulse and wounded pride. It hurt to think someone I loved so dearly could betray me so severely."

"You always were more fire than ice back in those days," Lawrence said, stepping ahead to fetch Waldorf's hat and coat while still remaining in Waldorf's sight. "Thank God you've gained more sense with age. Though not much, if the reports of the conversation at Lady Thistlewhite's supper are to be believed."

Waldorf snatched his coat from Lawrence, glaring at his brother's teasing grin. "I felt provoked."

"Like any captured bear would feel," Lawrence said with a pretend serious nod.

Waldorf's brothers were forever teasing him that his overgrown whiskers made him look like a bear, particularly when he was in a foul temper.

"You must think of the advantages of this turn of events, though," Lawrence went on,

handing Waldorf his hat once his coat was on. Waldorf sent him a questioning look, so Lawrence continued with, “You and Lady Kat have resumed your acquaintance. You have a chance before you to right the wrongs of the past.”

Waldorf frowned as he considered the possibility. Supper had been a disaster, he could admit, but the carriage ride after had been monumental. And not just because they’d nearly thrown caution to the wind and indulged the rampant, carnal feelings that evidently still existed between the two of them.

No, the carriage ride had been a profound turning point for him because in it, both he and Kat had expressed feelings that neither of them had spoken about in twenty years. He knew there were far more things that need to be said and much more discussion about the past to be had, but it was as if he’d been given a tiny peek into a room filled with treasure, a room he hadn’t dared to breach for fear that there was a dragon guarding the treasure.

“I cannot do a damned thing about the past now,” Waldorf grumbled. “I broke things between myself and Kat, and they’ve remained broken for too long. Fissures like that only grow with time.”

Lawrence made a doubting sound and shrugged, then stepped back into the parlor. He surprised Waldorf by returning with his own coat and hat.

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“What are you doing?” Waldorf asked, narrowing his eyes as Lawrence handed him his hat, then donned his coat.

“What does it look as if I am doing?” Lawrence asked. “I’m attending Lady Ryman’s ball with you.”

Waldorf had the distinct feeling he was being baby-minded. “You were not invited.”

“Yes, I was,” Lawrence insisted, taking his hat and popping it on his head. “I’ve got the invitation upstairs. Somewhere.”

With an even broader smile, Lawrence turned and headed for the front door. Jacob, one of the footmen, leapt from his position to hold it open for him.

“You weren’t invited,” Waldorf said in a long-suffering voice, pinching the bridge of his nose and following his brother outside.

“Fortunately,” Lawrence said as the two of them started down the street toward Lord and Lady Ryman’s townhouse, which was only a street and a half away from Godwin House, “renowned artists, such as myself, are generally welcomed at any ball, whether they’ve been invited or not.”

Waldorf rolled his eyes at his brother as the two of them walked on. He was devilishly proud of everything Lawrence had accomplished, but the man could be smug. It was just Lawrence’s luck that his overwhelming good nature and his easewith people, something Waldorf had never possessed, canceled out his smugness.

There was already a line of carriages in front of Ryman House when Waldorf and Lawrence arrived. They were pouring out what felt to Waldorf like half the population of Britannia. Then again, it was in the best interest of the cause Waldorf worked for that as many people as possible attend the ball. Quite a few conversations would take place that night that would, if managed correctly, plant the seeds of a whole new Britannic kingdom in the minds of the men who would shortly debate the issue, and hopefully vote on it.

All the same, Waldorf did not enjoy parties of any sort. Even though he and Lawrence had not had to wait in the carriage line, the servants of Ryman House were so overwhelmed with ladies and gentlemen entering the house that they were required to stand in the front entryway for longer than Waldorf wanted to while everyone's coats and hats were dealt with.

From there, Waldorf and Lawrence headed straight down the hallway and into the Ryman's grand ballroom.

One of the reasons such an important social event was taking place at Ryman House was because the house itself was one of the largest in London. The ballroom was reputed to be larger than the one in Kensington Palace. It rivaled some of the galleries in London's parliamentary buildings, and was decorated in a style that even Lawrence would approve of.

Waldorf was not particularly interested in ballroom decoration. He was more intrigued by the collection of men and women already milling about the vast space. Groups had formed, conversations were well under way, and even without the orchestra tuning in the far corner, the noise in the room was enough to make it difficult to think.

Waldorf spotted what, or rather who, he needed almost right away, however. It was hard to miss men like him, who had overgrown facial hair. Members of the Badger

Society were easy to pick out across a distance, which was the point. As soon as Waldorf spotted Lord Pollock, he made an excuse to leave Lawrence to his own devices and started across the ballroom.

“Lord Waldorf,” Lord Pollock greeted him. “What a pleasure to see you here this evening.”

“Lord Pollock.” Waldorf bowed stiffly to him, then to Lady Pollock, who was standing there with her daughter, Lady Vivien, and a younger, overwhelmed lady.

“Have you met my niece, Lady Elizabeth Hartley?” Lady Pollock asked.

Oh God. This was why Waldorf hated balls. He would be expected to smile like Lawrence and converse like Alden when he was capable of neither behavior. It was why he’d enjoyed Kat’s company so much in those days, why he’d gravitated to her in the first place. Kat could speak to anyone, and later, once they’d been disengaged from the conversation, the two of them could laugh about the ridiculousness of the togetherness.

A sudden, powerful wave of nostalgic pain hit him. He missed Kat. It wasn’t just her fire or her bull-headedness. He missed her laughter and her wit. How had he lived so long without her?

“Lord Waldorf?”

Waldorf blinked when he realized Lady Pollock had spoken to him. “I beg your pardon, Lady Pollock, Lady Vivien, and Lady Elizabeth,” he said with a polite bow. “I have just noticed someone I had hoped to speak with this evening, and it distracted me from our conversation.”

“It was not of any importance,” Lady Pollock said, sending a smile of understanding



to her husband. “Dearest, perhaps you would escort Lord Waldorf to greet his friend?”

“Yes, my dear, of course,” Lord Pollock said. He raised his wife’s hand to kiss her gloved knuckles. The two of them smiled at each other adoringly. “As you wish.”

Another, surprise pang gripped Waldorf’s insides. He and Kat could have had such a relationship. They had had affection for each other just like Lord and Lady Pollock had.

And he’d gone and ruined it all due to youth and pride and stupidity.

“Shall we, Lord Waldorf?” Lord Pollock asked, turning as if inviting Waldorf to take a turn around the room with him.

Waldorf said goodbye to the ladies and followed Pollock. They engaged in light conversation as they walked through the growing crowd in the ballroom at a reasonable pace, but as soon as Pollock turned a corner into one of the smaller corridors that led to refreshment and gaming rooms at the far side of the ballroom, their conversation and demeanor changed.

“It is imperative that we draw those ministers who are against the Mercian Plan to the third gaming room tonight,” Pollock said, gesturing down the corridor to one of the open doorways.

“I take it the Badgers have set the stage for minds to be changed?” Waldorf asked, nodding toward the doorway.

“Oh, no,” Pollock said. “Tonight’s mission extends far beyond the ordinary activities of our brothers. This particular mission has been set from the very top.”

Waldorf's eyes widened a bit. "Has it?"

Pollock nodded. "I've been told by Biddeford that nearly every operative from more than one organization has put their efforts into making this ball a success for the Mercian cause. Nearly everyone who needs to be swayed is in attendance. Whether we coerce them through erudite argument or through outright bribery, tonight is the night that we gain the votes we need to have the Mercian Plan debated in this session of Joint Parliament."

Waldorf nodded, feeling as though a great many things that he had been working years for could come to fruition that night. If they played their cards right, both literally and figuratively, Britannia could be united by springtime.

"I shall do my best to assist you and the rest of those working for our cause in any way I can," Waldorf said with a deep bow.

"Good," Pollock said with a nod. "You can begin by locating Lord Terrence Fawley and convincing him to join us for whist."

"I will," Waldorf said.

Pollock thumped him on the shoulder, and Waldorf turned to head back to the ballroom in order to locate Lord Terrence. He knew the man from Wessex, which meant he knew how difficult it would be to change the old bastard's mind.

But as soon as he turned, before he could take more than a few steps back down the corridor, he found Kat standing at the end of the hall, just inside the ballroom,

watching him with narrowed eyes. Every bit of the vulnerability and fire that had enveloped her during their time in the carriage had vanished, and the prickly, suspicious Kat was back.

Eight

The wolf was at the door.

Kat could think of nothing else as she arrived at Ryman House. So much depended on the outcome of that evening, and she was absolutely certain from the cryptic missive she'd received that someone was actively attempting to thwart not only her mission, but the entire Mercian cause.

"Lady Katherine, you look lovely this evening," Lady Ryman greeted her just inside the doorway to the ballroom, as she greeted every one of her guests. Curiously, she glanced past Kat, searching as if she expected to see someone with her. Indeed, she asked, "Are you alone?"

"Of course I am," Kat replied, blinking in surprise. "Who would attend with me?"

Lady Ryman blushed and appeared flustered. "I beg your pardon, Lady Katherine. Only, I heard whispers that you may not be a spinster for long and that a particular gentleman was seen in your company with whom you have a previous understanding."

Waldorf. Kat would skin him alive for whatever rumors he'd been spreading. Even if he had not been the one to spread them, after the spectacle he'd made of himself at Lady Thistlewhite's supper the other night, it was no wonder members of the ton had grasped onto the wrong idea.

"I can assure you, I am and shall remain quite independent, my lady," Kat nodded

regally to the hostess. “Now, if you will excuse me, I see some friends of mine whom I should greet. But I would very much like to introduce you to others of my acquaintance with whom you have much in common, once they arrive.”

“I should like to know them,” Lady Ryman said, the light of intrigue in her eyes instead of curiosity about Kat’s intimate life.

Kat had, indeed, spotted her dearest friends gathered off to one side of the ballroom, but as she marched toward them, she muttered under her breath about Waldorf’s madness if he thought he could pursue her now, and his boldness for telling others his aims to the point where it became gossip.

“I am aware that balls are not your favored means of enjoying company,” Minerva commented as Kat reached the cluster of her friends, “but you look positively dragonish.”

“You do,” Bernadette added. “And now that I have married Alden and reside at Lyndhurst Grove, not only do I know precisely what dragons look like, I could give you a detailed account of their mating habits.”

Bernadette smiled and dropped a hand absentmindedly to her stomach as she spoke. She was only just able to conceal her delicate condition with the cut of her gown. Lady Ryman’s was probably the only ball she would be able to attend that season, since she was expanding daily. Muriel was too far along to be seen in public already.

“If I am dragonish, it is because of a wolf,” Kat growled in greeting, glad, at least, to have her friends to support her.

Minerva and Bernadette exchanged a confused look.

“A wolf,” Minerva repeated, as if Kat had gone mad.

Kat huffed, then leaned in closer to them. “When I returned home from a supper party at Lady Thistlewhite’s house the other night, there was a note waiting for me. It read simply ‘The wolf is at the door’.”

“That is worrying,” Bernadette said, her expression matching her words.

Kat shook her head, more angry than worried. “And just now, as I entered the ballroom, Lady Ryman intimated that there are rumors about that I will soon wed.”

“That is absurd,” Minerva said, making a deeply unladylike sound.

“It is,” Kat agreed, tilting her head up a bit. “And it can only mean one thing.”

Minnie and Bernadette stared at her, as if they were eager to know what that thing was.

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Kat huffed slightly and lowered her voice to a tight whisper to say, “Waldorf.”

Kat’s friends said nothing. They looked as though they were waiting for her to say more.

Aggravated beyond reason, Kat said, “The wolf at the door. It must be Waldorf. He certainly has the whiskers of a wolf. And we have all suspected for some time that he is a spy for King Swithin. Someone has discovered that he is attempting to undermine my efforts on behalf of Queen Matilda.”

Minerva and Bernadette exchanged another look, neither of them appearing particularly convinced.

Bernadette cleared her throat and said, “It is true that we have long expected Lord Waldorf is in service to King Swithin.”

“What possible reason would he have to put it about that the two of you have an understanding?” Minerva asked without a fraction of Bernadette’s delicacy. “You are the one who he believes slighted him.”

Kat pressed her lips together and huffed through her nose. “There was an incident at Lady Thistlewhite’s supper,” she admitted, her cheeks flaring hot. “He may not have put the rumor about himself, but he?—”

Kat stopped, standing a bit straighter as she spied Waldorf himself walking hurriedly out of the ballroom into a small corridor with Lord Pollock. “There’s the bastard now,” she hissed, balling her hands into fists for a moment. “I will discover what

wickedness he has in mind, and I will put an end to it.”

“Kat, do you truly think?—”

Kat ignored Bernadette’s words and started across the ballroom in pursuit of Waldorf. She was certain that he was the wolf at her door. She’d been a fool to trust him, if even for a moment, and to let go of the guard she had kept up for so long.

Even if the moment between them had been wonderful. She had felt the connection between them so deeply in her heart. She’d remembered everything that had been between the two of them and had been made breathless by the thought of everything that could have been.

But to open her heart to the man who had been so cruel to her before would only be opening herself to devastation. She had fought too hard and for too long to allow Waldorf to?—

“Lady Katherine, you look absolutely stunning this evening.”

Kat’s thoughts were cut short as Lord Headland stepped into her path, causing her to nearly slam into him. He already had his arms out as if he would catch her. Indeed, he looked as though he was rather hoping for it.

“Would you care to dance once the orchestra?—”

“Not now,” Kat snapped at the odious man.

She dodged around him and continued on toward the corridor without giving Lord Headland a second look. She did not know how many times she would have to correct the man’s false assumptions of her, but at the moment, she had another man to set straight.

She expected to pursue Waldorf deep into the corridor and was surprised when she found him ending whatever conversation he'd been having with Lord Pollock to turn back to the ballroom. She narrowed her eyes, immediately suspicious about what the two men had been discussing. They seemed far too close for her liking, like two spies discussing the objective of their latest mission.

She would not allow unity under the Mercian Plan to be undermined by two men with horrid taste in facial hair.

"Lady Katherine." Waldorf approached her with a confident demeanor, but a good deal of confusion in his expression. "You look delightful this evening."

"Why does everyone insist upon commenting about my appearance," Kat burst, nearly stomping her foot as she did. "My appearance is the least interesting thing about me."

Waldorf's expression pinched and expanded several times in quick succession, as if he could not decipher whether he should be amused or taken aback. "It is the first thing anyone notices about another, because we do not wear our wit or our intelligence on our sleeves."

Kat clenched her jaw, certain Waldorf was toying with her.

For a fleeting, beautiful moment as Waldorf grew near enough to her that she could smell the crisp scent of his shaving soap and notice that someone had tied his neckcloth beautifully, Kat remembered the heated intensity of their moment in the carriage. She remembered how close she had come to forgiving everything and fighting for some way that she and Waldorf could make things right between them.

But then another gentleman with the same ridiculous whiskers as Waldorf stepped past them, causing them to shift to the side, as he entered the corridor. The man sent



Waldorfa significant look before continuing onto one of the numerous parlors along the corridor.

Kat nearly saw red. So it was true that Waldorf was spreading the rumor that he had conquered her. She knew the sparkle of gossip in a man's eyes when she saw it.

“What devilry are you causing, Waldorf?” she hissed. “You cannot hide the truth of your so-called mission to destroy everything I stand for.”

Waldorf seemed alarmed by her statement, which told Kat she'd guessed correctly. But instead of denying his mischief or feigning innocence in some other way, he extended a hand to Kat and said, “My lady, would you care to join me for this first dance?”

Kat absolutely intended to refuse him in no uncertain terms, but Waldorf glanced past her instead of looking at her with the sort of triumphant look she would have expected. She turned to see what had captured his attention only to find Lord Headland coming their way.

“Bloody bollocks,” she huffed, reaching for Waldorf's extended hand. “I told him no. You men are the bane of every good woman's existence.”

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“I believe the feeling is mutual,” Waldorf said in a low growl, stepping forward and tucking Kat’s arm into the crook of his elbow so that he could lead her on, past Lord Headland, and back into the ballroom, where couples had lined up for the first dance.

Kat did not want to dance with Waldorf. She did not want to be seen anywhere near the man, not knowing how he sought to undermine her. She wanted to return to her mission of steering the wives of prominent ministers toward Lady Ryman and the others who were in favor of the Mercian Plan so that Queen Matilda’s ultimate goal might be accomplished.

As the music began and she moved toward Waldorf in the first steps of the dance, she began to feel the hopelessness of her situation. Not so much because the dance prevented her from speaking to other women attending the ball, but because she was assailed by the memories of how expert a dancer Waldorf was and how much they had enjoyed flirting with each other in such a manner in the past.

“What has turned you so vicious after you were so pleasant the other night?” Waldorf asked as they joined hands and turned around each other in a tight circle.

Kat frowned and clenched her jaw, but had to wait until they’d spun on their own, then joined hands to turn a circle in the other direction to answer with, “I would think you already know the answer to that, you conniving snake.”

The dance moved them apart, and for a moment, Kat found herself standing next to Lady Gwendolyn, the wife of one of Wessex’s ministers, Lord Devon Hailstork. She smiled tightly at the woman, who grinned back at her, as if she were actually enjoying the evening.

Moments later, it was her turn to step forward and take Waldorf's hand for another turn.

"As is usual, I have no idea of which you speak," Waldorf said, frowning as well now. He lowered his voice further, then said, "I thought we had begun some new understanding." The dance took them away from each other for a moment, and when they came back to each other, face to face, he added, "I should very much like to repair what is broken between us."

The sharp retort that Kat had intended to give withered on her lips. Was that contrition in Waldorf's eyes? Was he sorry, at last, for his lack of faith in her in the past?

The dance separated them once again, leaving Kat standing next to Lady Gwendolyn once more. "He's very handsome," Lady Gwendolyn whispered to her.

Kat snapped her face forward to avoid Lady Gwendolyn's smile. Unfortunately, that caused her to meet Waldorf's eyes, since he was staring at her as he stood across from her, while the couple beside them took their turn in the dance.

He was studying her with confusion and regret, and a great deal of other emotions Kat could not decipher.

"He is not what he seems," she said, half to Lady Gwendolyn and half to herself.

He most certainly was not. Because in that moment, he seemed like her deepest hopes reborn. He seemed like her champion and protector. He seemed like the family she had lost and never quite regained.

The dance brought them together again for a longer sequence of steps that had them advancing together, hand in hand, down the line of dancers. Waldorf's grip on her

hand felt so sure and so warm. Perhaps there was a way to put the past to rest and to move forward together. Perhaps they could sit down somewhere and clear away the detritus of misunderstanding until they reached the clear, raw truths of who they were and what they wanted.

“Why are you so intent on ruining me and everything I want?” she asked in a tremulous voice as they reached the end of the line of dancers.

“I am not,” Waldorf said, surprise in his eyes. “I only want for you to be happy.”

The dance parted them once again, and since there was an odd number of couples, they were left hanging at the very end of the line, unable to participate in the set of steps the others were dancing through. They were also too far apart for conversation. All Kat could do was stare across at Waldorf, meeting and holding his eyes, wondering if he was playing false with her yet again so that he might accomplish whatever devilry King Swithin had asked of him.

It burned her that she could not discover the truth, that she couldn't outwit him and force him to reveal all. It burned her with a different sort of fire to think that everything that had almost happened the other night had been yet another move in a game where only one of them could win.

It had felt so good and so right to be in his arms again, to kiss him and to give everything she had, and to take everything he had in return. Knowing it might be an illusion had her caught between wanting to scream and wanting to weep. The frustration of not knowing what to do or what to believe, about doubting what she saw in the present because of the deep, deep wounds of her past had her feeling jumpy and reckless. She had to do something or she would go mad.

She had just about made up her mind to step forward, take Waldorf's hand, and lead him off to one of the small parlors so that they might speak about it all at length when

another man sporting thick whiskers stepped up behind Waldorf and tapped him on the shoulder.

Waldorf turned, and the man whispered something in his ear. Waldorf's eyes went wide, and as soon as the other whiskered man turned to walk away, Waldorf let out a breath, his shoulders dropping. He extended a hand to Kat, exactly as she had been imagining offering an olive branch to her, and when she took it, he led her out of the lines of dancers.

But instead of imploring her to go with him somewhere they might work through all their misunderstandings, Waldorf said, "I am terribly sorry, but my presence is required for a matter of great importance just now."

Kat's hopes shattered, which only made her angry. She was such a fool to have raised her hopes in the first place. How many times would Waldorf wound her before she'd had enough?

"You would abandon me in such a way, yet again, because a man I do not know, but who shares your laughable taste in facial hair, has called you away?" she demanded.

Waldorf looked stunned and alarmed by her question. His mouth fell open, and for a moment, he stood there, working to form words, and likely to know what to say.

At last, he managed to push out, "It is a matter of great importance, Kat. You know I would never abandon you if it were not."

"I know no such thing," Kat said. "You abandoned me before."

She was so dangerously close to tears of disappointment that the only thing she could think to do just then was to turn and march away from him. It was a childish action and one she would not have done, had her heart not been tenderized by him so much

as of late. And by tenderized, she envisioned that rebellious piece of meat being slammed by a mallet over and over.

She went straight to Minnie and Bernadette, who seemed to be having a grand time watching the proceedings of the ball from the side of the room. They both noticed her approaching them, however, and welcomed her with sympathetic faces.

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“What has happened?” Bernadette asked. “The two of you were dancing so beautifully, and you seemed to be getting along so well.”

Kat huffed a laugh, sniffing so that she would not cry. “Lord Waldorf was called away on a matter of great importance,” she said mockingly.

“Oh?” Minerva asked curiously. “What sort of importance?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” Kat said, gesturing too exuberantly as her emotions ran high. “Whatever sort of thing men with ridiculous facial hair discuss. Likely combs and grooming cream and?—”

The truth hit her so swiftly that she froze with her mouth hanging open. A man with whiskers similar to Waldorf’s. Lord Pollock had them, too. As did the other man who had passed them in the hall. All of those men were relatively young and handsome. None appeared at first glance to be the sort who would deny fashion for the sake of hair.

Waldorf had said to her outright that people were concerned about appearance because they could not, at a glance, determine someone’s wit or intelligence. Just as they could not determine whether someone was a good person or a bad person, a friend of a foe, at a single glance. But if, for example, members of a brotherhood of espionage all adjusted their appearances in an unusual way so that they would be easily recognizable to each other on sight, then they would do something foolish with their appearance.

“I must go,” Kat said with a gasp, starting forward.

“Kat, whatever are you on about?” Minerva asked as Kat marched off.

She did not have time to pause to explain to her friends that she had just deciphered a sort of code among spies. She needed to act and act swiftly. She refused to let a group of ridiculous men who were obviously in collusion with each other destroy what she and so many others had worked so long for. She would discover what the counter-plan was, and she would end it before any harm could be done.

Nine

As much as it frustrated him to leave Kat when she most definitely had her nose out of joint for some baffling reason, Waldorf felt a thrill of excitement when he entered the third gaming room to find the most perfect combination of men he could have hoped for already present.

Already seated at the table were Lord Pollock and a gentleman Waldorf was almost certain was Lord Angus MacLeod, the most influential minister from the Kingdom of Scotland. MacLeod had a large following of younger ministers who hung on his every word. They revered him for the outstanding role he'd played in the prior decade's battles against Napoleon. The youngsters would vote however MacLeod told them to vote in the Joint Parliament.

Standing around the room, looking as if they would either play cards or enjoy some of the refreshments that had been provided to the room while watching the game were several other key ministers of Joint Parliament. Lord David Gruffudd of the Kingdom of Wales was among them, as was Lord Percival Blackthorne of Northumbria. Mr. Richard Goodall was there as well. The man had just recently been elected as a minister for London, and though Waldorf knew the man vaguely through his export dealings with Cedric, no one was quite certain where he fell on the question of the Mercian Plan.



“Gentlemen,” Waldorf greeted the assembled party, gazing deliberately at the card table and rubbing his hands together, as if to signal his eagerness to perhaps earn a few guineas that evening. “It is a pleasure to see you all this evening.”

“Ah, Lord Waldorf,” Lord Pollock said, reaching for the deck of cards on the table. “So glad you could join us. And you’re just in time to settle a dispute I’ve been having with Lord MacLeod here.”

“Am I?” Waldorf said, feigning utter innocence as he took a seat at the table across from MacLeod.

MacLeod laughed openly, hinting that he was in a jovial mood. “This lad here thinks he can convince me that women make better barristers than men.”

Waldorf pretended to be surprised, but inwardly he was deeply proud of Pollock’s angle of attack. “Women as barristers,” he said, sitting back in his chair and rubbing his chin with one hand. “What an intriguing thought.”

The other gentlemen seemed to take Waldorf’s arrival as a signal to find seats of their own so that the game might begin. Indeed, Goodall pulled out his wallet and counted out a few bills to set on the table as indication he was ready to bet and to win.

“The idea of women accomplishing anything outside the home is absurd,” Lord Blackthorne said with a snort as he, too, placed money on the table for the game. A great deal of money.

Waldorf fought not to choke. He’d known he would have to bring a substantial amount of money with him to take part in the game, but he hadn’t accounted for the amounts the other gentlemen were presenting.

“Women are capable of working outside the home,” Goodall said, seemingly

surprised that Blackthorne would make the statement he'd made. "We've more than a few working at the offices of Goodall, Osment, and Bitters."

"In what capacity?" Gruffudd asked as Pollock began to deal the cards.

Goodall shrugged as he began to gather his cards up for the game. "We've a few that have taken on clerical duties. Women that were educated for the task at Oxford University, in fact. Their penmanship is superb, and they are better able to recall minute details than many of the male clerks we've employed."

Waldorf allowed his brow to go up in surprise. He was genuinely surprised by Goodall's statement, and the expression helped him to appear on the outside of the matter rather than looking like he was colluding with Pollock, which he was.

Instead of being impressed, however, MacLeod barked a laugh. "Oxford. Those Oxford Society ladies will be the death of us all one day."

"How so?" Waldorf asked, picking up his cards as they were dealt. No one had said as of yet, but he gathered by the number of cards dealt to him that they were playing the game that had recently become a novelty among London society, Mad Eights.

MacLeod snorted. "They upset the natural order of things, sir," he said, shuffling his cards in his hand and smiling. "They disrupt the natural female inclination to marry and raise bairns by thinking they should partake in things such as commerce and the law." He nodded to Goodall as he spoke.

"I see no reason why women of enterprise should not delay marriage for a year or two," Goodall said. "Is it any more important for a woman to give birth to seven or more children instead of three or four?"

"What if some of those should die?" Lord Gruffudd said, looking so unaccountably

sad that Waldorf feared the man had lost a child of his own. “They often do, poor things.”

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“If we improve medical care for women and children, then they need not perish as they have in the past,” Pollock said as he finished dealing, then set the remaining cards in the center of the table, the deck facing down and one card facing up. “I believe a great many of the women attending Oxford University are studying medicine, which will advance medical science, particularly in the care of female conditions and childbirth.”

“I will grant you that women are the best nurses and midwives for other women,” MacLeod said, finishing with his cards, then throwing a guinea coin into the center of the table.

The rest of them did the same, and the game had begun.

“There you have it,” Pollock said, as if he’d won the point. “If women are best for healing other women, then perhaps women would also be best at defending other women in court. And there you see the need for female barristers.”

MacLeod let out another of his loud laughs as each of the men around the table discarded a spade from their hands. At least, until Gruffudd did not have a spade and was forced to pick cards from the pile in the center until he had one to play.

“Men should always defend women,” MacLeod said, discarding a three of hearts atop the three of spades Gruffudd eventually played. “Just as men should always be the head of a household, and a nation.” He looked teasingly at Pollock, one eyebrow raised, as if in challenge.

“Ah, there you have me,” Pollock said. “I happen to believe women could accomplish

a great deal more than we give them credit for. Do you not think so, Mr. Goodall?"

"Are we discussing the Mercian Plan?" Goodall asked, perking up somewhat as he played a heart. "Because I most definitely have opinions about the Mercian Plan."

Waldorf drew in a breath and tried not to look overly excited. Whether Pollock had known in advance upon inviting the man to the game or not, Goodall seemed to be on their side. Waldorf had no qualms at all about him being the one to introduce the topic of the evening.

He attempted to move the discussion along by saying, "I've thought long and hard about the Mercian Plan myself."

Before he could get any farther, however, Kat stepped hurriedly into the door way, a searching look on her face. As soon as she spotted Waldorf, that expression turned to one of victory.

"There you are, Lord Waldorf," she said, entering the room by her own leave. "Come to cause trouble with these kind gentlemen?"

As happy as part of Waldorf was to see Kat, and as excited as he immediately became when he observed that she was in a heightened state of energy, dread also flooded him. Kat did not know the purpose of the card game. And while he could not be certain, he strongly suspected whatever mission she had been charged with for the evening, it was not so very different from his.

"Lady Katherine," Pollock said, looking as anxious as Waldorf felt. "How delightful to see you again."

Kat dragged her gaze away from Waldorf, glancing around the table to Pollock and the others. "Gentlemen," she said, stepping farther into the room. "Don't you all look

as though you are enjoying yourselves.”

“We are,” Waldorf said, intending to continue on to tell her off and to imply they would speak later.

“Oh, we are, we are,” MacLeod seconded. “But we would enjoy ourselves a great deal more with pleasant, feminine company, such as I know you could provide.”

Kat’s smile remained perfectly intact, but Waldorf saw the spark of defiance in her eyes. “What enjoyments are these?” she asked, striding boldly up to the table and casting her eyes over the cards and money scattered there.

“It is a new game,” Blackthorne said, somewhat dismissively. “Mad Eights. It is far too complicated for a woman to understand.”

“Oh, I would not be so certain of that,” Kat said, eyeing one of the two empty chairs at the table. “I daresay I would surprise you all with my abilities at the card table.”

“That truly is not necessary,” Waldorf growled, trying to catch Kat’s eyes so that he could hold them and tell her not to interfere.

Kat did meet his eyes, but the only emotion Waldorf saw there was pure stubbornness. Kat was angry with him, and while he did not have the first idea why, or at least what she could be angry with him for in the immediate moment, his stony expression appeared to have no effect on her.

In fact, rather than leaving, she said, “I would like to be dealt into this game.”

Waldorf let out a heavy breath, scrambling to come up with a way to get rid of her. Yes, they had a thousand things they needed to discuss, but now was most certainly not the time.

MacLeod was the one who set his cards down and said, "By all means, join us. We've only just begun this round, and it can easily be stopped and another player dealt in."

"Thank you, my lord," she said, taking the seat between Gruffudd and Blackthorne. "You, at least, are very kind." She glared across the table at Waldorf.

Waldorf wanted to scream in frustration. What was Kat doing, and what was she hoping to accomplish? There was no way to know unless he allowed her to continue with whatever quest she was on. He only hoped he could stop her from damaging the greater mission of the evening.

"Do you know the rules of this game, Lady Katherine?" Pollock asked Kat nervously as he shuffled, then re-dealt the cards. It was clear to Waldorf that he was attempting to speak with her as one spy to another, though whether Pollock knew who Kat worked for and in what capacity was unclear to Waldorf.

"Yes, of course, I do," Kat replied, picking up her cards as they were dealt, as the others did. "The purpose is to play the cards one has been dealt, is it not?" She stared at Waldorf as she asked her question.

"It is," Waldorf answered her. "Cards of a similar suit are played until a card of the same number is played, changing the suit. If an eight is played, the player may change to whichever suit he prefers."

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“A man must have invented this game,” Kat said casually as she fanned out her cards and sorted them. “Only he would devise a rule that allows him to change the rules for an arbitrary reason.”

MacLeod laughed loud enough to shake the chandelier. “Indeed, Lady Katherine. And how fortunate that a man should create a rule to expedite getting oneself out of trouble when nothing else will appear to work.”

Kat smiled at the Scotsman and played a club when it was her turn. “And I suppose it was Lord Waldorf that invited you all to the game this evening? Perhaps so that he could rearrange the rules to suit himself and take all of your money in the process?”

Waldorf pretended to smile, but his expression was much closer to a grimace. What in heaven’s name was the woman on about?

“Lord Pollock invited us, as it happens,” Blackthorne said, then played a ten of hearts to change the suit.

Kat hummed, playing a heart, then glancing across the table at Pollock. “Yes, I can see how they are of the same suit, after all.”

Waldorf glanced up from his cards, narrowing his eyes at Kat. She could not be thinking of exposing them, could she? How would she? He doubted she knew the first thing about the Badger Society.

Then again, had he not been saying all along that Kat was as keen an intellect and as clever a spy as he was?



A new, darker dread began to pool in his stomach. “Perhaps we should keep the conversation to pleasanter topics,” he said, smiling at her across the game.

“Ah, yes, pleasanter topics,” Kat said, playing another heart when the game circled back to her. “Such as engagements and marriages and the like.”

Waldorf stared hard at her, no idea what she was on about.

“It is the season when matches are made,” Gruffudd said with a smile, as if he were humoring Kat. He was stuck in the game once again and sighed as he was forced to draw several cards.

“And the season when rumors abound,” Kat went on, narrowing her eyes at Waldorf. She paused for a moment, then said, “Do you know, it occurs to me that capturing a woman in marriage is an ideal way to silence anything else she might want to say, or to undermine any other efforts she might find herself involved in.”

“Lady Katherine,” Waldorf said quickly, hoping to put out whatever fire he felt was about to blaze. “It has just occurred to me that you have not paid the ante for this game. As I am certain ladies of your fine reputation do not bring their reticules to balls such as this?—”

“I’ll pay for her to play,” MacLeod said with a broad smile. He took a bill from his pile and slapped it onto the table in front of her. “Anything to come to the aid and defense of a lady,” he added with a wink.

Kat smiled at the man in a way that made Waldorf wonder if she understood that he’d just insulted her.

In fact, he was certain she had not. It seemed increasingly apparent that the only thing Kat was currently aware of was her anger toward him, though Waldorf still had no

idea what that was about.

“Are we going to quibble about matchmaking or are we going to play on?” Blackthorne asked impatiently, fiddling with his cards. Though the entire game was mostly up to chance, the man had a light in his eyes that said he believed he could win the current round, which would win him the pot.

“We are going to play, of course,” Kat said, discarding another card from her hand, then grinning brittlely at Waldorf. “Is that not the point of the evening? To play on, hoping to defeat every opponent and thwart the causes that mean so much to them?”

“Kat,” Waldorf said her name in warning. She most definitely did not know what she was on about, he was certain.

“Perhaps we should adjourn this game and play some other time,” Pollock said, glancing desperately to Waldorf, as if searching for help of some sort.

“Oh, no,” Kat said, more bite to her words. “You have no need to end your current pursuits for me. Why, I can imagine that you went through a great deal of trouble to assemble these particular gentlemen this evening. You are all ministers in the Joint Parliament, are you not?” she asked, meeting the eyes of the others at the table.

“We are, my lady,” MacLeod said, wiggling his eyebrows as if attempting to flirt with her.

“I see,” Kat said, setting down her cards when play came around to her again. “And what grand issue of the new parliamentary season are these gentlemen attempting to influence you about?” she asked.

“I beg your pardon?” Goodall asked, blinking.

“Have you not yet figured out that you’ve been invited to play cards with a table full of spies, sir?” Kat asked with feigned innocence. “Have you not asked yourselves why such an eclectic group of men would be gathered together to play this silly game?” She gestured to the table. “Or why grown men who should know better have chosen to wear their whiskers in such an absurd manner? It is so they can identify each other without revealing their full identities, of course,” she added, eyes sparkling with wickedness.

“Kat, don’t,” Waldorf warned her.

He might as well have been warning the wind not to blow down a marquee. Pollock pulled back from the table, looking aghast at Waldorf. Blackthorne looked as though Kat had accused him of being a fool in public. Goodall’s mouth hung open as if he were just understanding what she’d revealed. Gruffudd still seemed to be puzzling over the card game, but glanced up from his hand and looked around, as if attempting to catch up.

It was MacLeod’s suddenly dark expression that worried Waldorf the most, however. MacLeod glanced from Waldorf to Pollock, his eyes widening and his face slowly turning red.

“I see it now,” MacLeod said. “I had never thought to ask before, though you’re all look like fools. I thought it was simply some southern fashion. But I see now that it is the fashion for you southerners to make the rest of us look like fools, not yourselves.”

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He slammed his cards down on the table, bending the corner of one, and pushed to stand.

“What is this all about?” he demanded. “What poisoned ideas are you attempting to slip into my ear? That women should be barristers?” He glared at Pollock. A moment later, he blinked, then turned his furious glare on Waldorf. “No! This entire ruse has been about the Mercian Plan from the start, hasn’t it.”

“Is that what this entire thing has been about?” Gruffudd asked, abandoning his cards and standing with a sour expression. “Is that why she interrupted the game?” He nodded to Kat.

“That is most certainly not our aim,” Waldorf said, frowning at Kat.

“You cannot allow these men to persuade you to stand against the only viable pathway to unity that has currently been presented,” Kat said, standing as well. “They will convince you to vote against it, when the time comes. You must remain firm in your resolve to?—”

“The Mercian Plan is a pile of shite,” MacLeod snapped so loudly that Kat jumped. He glared at Pollock, then Waldorf, then said, “If you scruffy bastards think you can trick and coerce decent men into allowing such a wicked plan to be brought forward for debate, then believe me, sirs, I will stop at nothing until every last whiskered one of you are exposed as the villains to all that is right and proper that you are. Good night.”

With that, MacLeod, Blackthorne, Gruffudd, and perhaps the last hope the Mercian

Plan had of being presented at the opening of Joint Parliament the following week, left the room.

Kat was only just beginning to grasp that the situation before her was not what she assumed it was. Her triumphant look was fading fast, and the color in her cheeks was draining.

“Lady Katherine,” Pollock said, shaking with rage. “What have you done?”

Ten

Kat’s moment of triumph was devastatingly short-lived. She had been so absolutely certain she was right, so completely convinced that Waldorf was the devil, the wolf at the door, and that he tainted everything he touched. But as Lord MacLeod had bellowed about being tricked into supporting the very cause Kat had worked so hard for, as the men had left the gaming room glaring at her, and at Waldorf as well, in disgust, a deep sense of horror began to flood Kat’s soul.

“Lady Katherine, what have you done?” Lord Pollock demanded, shaking and red-faced.

Kat pressed a hand to her stomach. “I...I am not entirely certain, my lord,” the words gusted out of her.

She glanced to Waldorf for help, but Waldorf merely gaped back at her, as if he still could not fathom what had just transpired.

“I will tell you what you have done,” Lord Pollock said, stepping closer to her. So close, in fact, that Kat was forced to take a step back to avoid the man bowling right into her. “You have destroyed the efforts of an entire season, madam,” he snapped. “You have turned an exceedingly influential Minister of Joint Parliament against the

Mercian Plan. You have more or less ensured that the bill will not be brought forward for debate once Joint Parliament is opened, very likely delaying the unification of Britannia for many years to come.”

Kat could not have felt more miserable if she had tried. “I...I did not know,” she stammered. “I was sent a note...I thought...I believed it to be....”

She glanced to Waldorf again, hoping he might at least be open to her explanation, but Waldorf had turned to the side and was rubbing his hands over his face, eyes wide, as though he were desperately puzzling out what to do next and how the situation might be salvaged.

“I am terribly sorry,” Kat whispered.

“Furthermore,” Lord Pollock went on, raising his voice and making Kat flinch, “you have very possibly just decimated a secret organization that has been working for the cause of unity for decades, centuries, even. You have more or less revealed the identities of dozens of agents, whose affiliation with the very cause that I believe you support, who have managed to keep those identities a secret for a great many years.”

“I did not realize....” Kat stammered, feeling more awful still.

“No, madam, you did not!” Lord Pollock shouted at her. Kat flinched again, but increasingly, she felt as if she deserved every twist of fear and load of guilt that was heaped upon her. “You marched into this room, into this delicate situation, on some matter of your own, intent on destruction when the rest of us were determined to build a future that would have benefitted all.”

“It was never my intention to?—”

“I cannot stand here and listen to your excuses, madam,” Lord Pollock snapped,

cutting her off and making her shrink in on herself. He glanced to Waldorf, then made a sound that was partway between a sigh and a growl. “I cannot stand this woman’s presence for another moment. I fear if I do not remove myself, I shall take actions that are truly regrettable.”

“Understood,” Waldorf said, stepping forward at last.

Lord Pollock pinched his face for a moment, as if in pain, then went on with, “I will need to report this to our superior. The matter may be taken all the way to the top.”

“You must do as you see fit,” Waldorf said, his voice hoarse and his expression wary.

Lord Pollock sent Kat one last, infuriated look before turning and marching out of the room with a disgusted sound.

That left Kat and Waldorf alone.

The sounds of the ball filtered back to the gaming room, filling it with the merry sound of music, the low hum of dozens of conversations, and the occasional punctuation of laughter. Somewhere in the house, people were still enjoying themselves, still dancing and flirting, talking and eyeing the eligible men and women in the room. Somewhere else, life continued and the world seemed filled with possibilities for the future.

Even though Kat heard all of that, it felt to her as though silence reigned in the gaming room. She kept her eyes averted from Waldorf at first as the sense of deep, dreadful hollowness inside her grew. Everything she had worked for, everything she had dedicated her life to in the past twenty years. It all hung in the balance now, all because she had made a rash assumption and acted upon it without stopping to confirm its veracity.

All because she'd been hurting.

The situation felt entirely too familiar.

Lord Pollock's question repeated in her head. What have you done?

"I sincerely hope you have a viable explanation for your actions, madam," Waldorf hissed, turning toward her as if he were ready to do battle with her at last.

"I believed you were working against me," Kat said, her voice dry and hoarse at first.

"Me? Working against you?" Waldorf stepped toward her in much the same confrontational way Lord Pollock had.

Instead of shrinking away and feeling the weight of her own guilt, Waldorf's actions ignited old instincts to stand and fight within Kat.

"I did not know what you were about this evening," she said, gaining strength, and with it, indignation. She gestured to the abandoned card table. "I did not know that you were using a silly card game to mask a greater mission."

"What do you think happens in gaming rooms at a ball?" Waldorf demanded, as if she were the silly one.

"Men play cards," Kat argued. "They gamble and win or lose great fortunes."

She still very much felt as though she were on unstable ground and that her insides



were filled with shards of broken glass, but arguing with Waldorf felt normal. It felt comfortable and familiar in a moment when everything around her seemed to be falling to pieces, so she kept at it.

“How was I supposed to know that important matters of the kingdom were being discussed and decided over Mad Eights?” she demanded, embracing her anger to keep the horror away.

“Whether you were informed or not,” Waldorf said, speaking as though the situation were as mad as the eights, “it was not any of your concern. You were not invited. You were not a part of this. You are not required to be a part of every discussion anyone has.”

“I had reason to believe you were being false with me,” Kat shouted, unable to stop her hands shaking as she did. Once again, her words felt all too familiar.

“What reason could you possibly have that would give you permission to destroy something that has been years in the making?” Waldorf growled at her.

Kat felt her body heat to the point where she might swoon at the same time as an icy chill spread across her skin. She began to sweat, and she had to stand with her leg against one of the chairs to keep herself from falling over.

“I received a missive,” she said, wishing she sounded more confident.

“A missive,” Waldorf repeated, somewhat mockingly. “A missive caused you to do this?”

“It was waiting for me when...when I returned to my rooms from Lady Thistlewhite’s supper. It was clearly a secret communication.”

“And what, pray tell, did this missive say?” Waldorf snapped.

“It said that the wolf was at the door.” Kat stood straighter and tilted her chin up. Recalling the message filled her with the certainty that she had been in the right when she chose to act. She may have proceeded without the correct amount of thought, but she still believed someone had been trying to warn her about Waldorf’s activities.

“What wolf was at which door?” Waldorf demanded, gesturing angrily toward the door of the gaming room.

One of the house’s servants stepped into the doorway at just that moment, looking as though she were there to clean up if the room was no longer in use. She reeled back as though she’d run into a solid wall, however, then quickly scurried along, eyes wide.

The momentary interruption shifted the feeling in the air just enough for Kat to take a step toward Waldorf, grasping for her courage once more.

“The message was a clear indicator that you were up to no good,” she said, narrowing her eyes. “It is code, a communication amongst my fellows that a mission is on the verge of being compromised.”

“And you immediately assumed that I was the one attempting to compromise your mission?” Waldorf demanded, still incredulous.

“Who else could it be?” Kat asked the question as though there were no other answer. In fact, deep in the back of her mind, she was beginning to ask that same question herself. She went on, gesturing to Waldorf’s facial hair, and said, “Who else looks so wolfish? Your whiskers make you look like a wolf.”

“I am no wolf, I am a badger,” Waldorf growled.

The comment was so incongruous that Kat blinked and pulled back. “A what?”

Waldorf sighed and rubbed his hands over his temples. He turned from Kat and began to pace.

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“The Badger Society is a secret group of men who have been working for the unity of Britannia since the time of Cromwell’s failed attempt at unification,” he said, as if trying to keep himself calm enough to explain. “Each of us is identifiable to the others by our facial hair.”

“That is absurd,” Kat said, grasping onto that one thing to ease her fathomless guilt. “Not only absurd, it is obvious.”

“It was not obvious until you came along and revealed the connection to several men in this room,” Waldorf huffed.

Another pinch of shame twisted in Kat’s gut, but she tried to push it away. “What difference does it make that a few men know how to identify a group of badgers?”

Waldorf clenched his jaw, as if fighting for patience. “Nearly all of the men in the Badger Society are double agents,” he said, moving closer to her again and lowering his voice. “Almost all of them are employed as spies or councilors for the leaders of recalcitrant kingdoms in the New Heptarchy. The organization is so secret that we do not know each other, not well. The obviousness of whiskers was our primary way to distinguish each other, and to prevent ourselves from being discovered by the monarchs and noblemen we ostensibly work for.”

“But that’s...that’s...”

That had been a clever idea. Kat could see it now. She could also see that she had damaged the very people whom, she now very deeply suspected, were working for the same cause she was.

“Why could you not simply tell me any of this?” she asked, her voice weak and her moral ground shaky once more.

“Why do you think?” Waldorf snapped in reply.

Kat lowered her head. It had been her own fault, all of it. She had rushed to take action because of her personal suspicions about Waldorf. Further, she had the horrible feeling that she had only been suspicious of Waldorf when she received the note because he had upset her long-held feelings about him. Her entire world had been turned on its head, and she’d been desperate to find a way to prove that she’d been right to spend the past twenty years furious with him.

“I do not know what to say,” she whispered at last.

“You could begin by saying you were in the wrong,” Waldorf snapped, still angry.

Kat could not decide if his continued anger was entirely justified, but it was not in her nature to accept defeat at Waldorf’s hands. “Are you willing to admit the same?” she asked, squaring her shoulders and trying for courage she did not feel.

Waldorf had turned away, but he snapped back to her. “What? What do you mean by that?”

“I am not the only one to act on scant information,” she said, tilting her chin up. “I am not the only one who has ruined something precious by acting before thinking.”

Waldorf stared at her incredulously for a moment.

Then the truth hit him.

“This is no time to resurrect the past,” he said, his words clipped and his eyes filling

with regret that did not match his tone. “What’s done is done.”

“Yes,” Kat said, feeling sick on top of guilty now. “I can see that it is done. Completely done.”

Waldorf stood straighter, the hurt in his expression battling with indignation. “I see,” he said.

“Perhaps you do.” Kat lowered her voice to a cool register.

She knew what she needed to do. It would never work between her and Waldorf. Too many things had passed between them. They’d hurt each other in too many ways, inflicted too many wounds. The moment in the carriage the other night had been pure illusion. There was no possible way the two of them would ever be able to reconcile the past or heal the hurt they’d done to each other.

“So, we are agreed, then?” Waldorf asked in a dire voice.

Kat nodded. “We had our chance,” she said, her voice going hoarse and her heart bleeding. “Our flame burned too brightly and charred us both.”

“We know that this does not work,” Waldorf agreed, gesturing between the two of them.

“It is best that we part ways now, accepting that we failed,” Kat said, wanting to weep.

“We will do our best to avoid each other wherever possible in future,” Waldorf agreed, stiff and gruff. “I’ve no real need to be in London, if you wish for this to be your territory.”

“And I have no excuse to travel to Wessex,” Kat agreed with a nod. “We need never see hide nor hair of each other again for the rest of our lives.”

Waldorf hesitated, then nodded. “Agreed.”

“It is for the best,” Kat said, mostly to convince herself.

“It is,” Waldorf agreed.

They stood where they were, staring at each other for several, long moments. Kat felt so battered and bruised on the inside that she was surprised it had not yet manifested in blood seeping from her pores to show how wounded she truly was.

Waldorf looked defeated as well. His shoulders sagged, and even though he was attempting to keep a brave face, Kat saw the younger, more open, wounded man beneath his aged exterior.

She would always see the young, passionate man Waldorf had been, the man she had loved like no other. There would never be another Waldorf in her life.

“Very well, then,” Waldorf said, nodding. “We part ways now. Good evening, madam.” He bowed slightly. “It has been...fascinating knowing you.”

“And you, sir.” Kat returned his nod.

Again, they stood staring at each other for several, long seconds. Waldorf did not look as though he would move, so Kat took it upon herself to take the first step. Hands clenched over her stomach, she propelled herself toward the doorway.

Waldorf followed, but before either of them could get more than halfway across the room, a tall, stately gentleman dressed completely in black, including his neckcloth, stepped into the doorway, blocking their path.

Dread instantly sizzled across Kat’s skin. She’d never seen the man before, but she



knew the look of an executioner when she saw one.

“What is the meaning of this?” Waldorf demanded, though by his hoarse tone, it was clear that he, too, knew the man could not represent anything good.

“I have been sent to fetch you,” the man said, his voice as deep as the grave.

“By whom?” Kat asked.

The man stared at her unblinkingly for a moment, then repeated, “I have been sent to fetch you.”

Kat swallowed. She glanced nervously to Waldorf as she tried to force herself to breathe and face the consequences of her actions bravely. “Please feed Napoleon for me,” she asked Waldorf in a broken voice, then stepped forward.

Waldorf nodded, but before Kat could take her second step, the black-clad man said, “I have been sent to fetch both of you.”

Kat froze, then glanced back to Waldorf. The color was swiftly draining from Waldorf’s face as he stared back at the man in black.

For a moment, Waldorf’s jaw worked, as if he were scrambling for something to say. It was as likely as not that he wished to ask the same question Kat had attempted to ask, or more along those lines. He seemed to know he would not get an answer, however.

Finally, he blew out a short breath then stepped forward, joining Kat. “Very well,” he said in a small voice. “Lead on.”

The black-clad man nodded once, then gestured to the two of them. “You will follow

me,” he said, then turned and walked out into the hallway.

Kat spared a single glance for Waldorf as she started forward. The black-clad man led them away from the ballroom and farther down the corridor until he reached a discreet, closed door. Waldorf glanced back at her, his expression telling her to be strong.

The black-clad man opened the door, but instead of it leading to another parlor, it opened into a tight, spiral staircase. The only way to go was up, so with both Waldorf and the man in black following, almost pushing her along, Kat began her journey to what felt like the end of everything.

Eleven

He would protect Kat at all costs. Even though he was so furious with her that he was nearly beyond speech. Even though she had destroyed years of work and likely set the cause of unity back by a decade. Even though it might cost him his own life in the process. He would protect Kat, because the idea of failing to stand by her side in the moment when she needed him most was an even greater crime than anything she had committed.

But he was going to make her pay for her foolishness.

That is, if they were still alive come morning.

Part of him wanted to ask where they were being taken as they walked up the cold, winding staircase tucked away in Ryman House. The stone steps were worn from what was probably generations of servants or sinners being led to their doom or away from the mischief they'd caused. The tight space was lit with only small, flickering lamps that made it seem as though ghosts were laughing at them from the uneven stone walls as they continued up.

The staircase had probably been there as part of whatever, much older building Ryman House had been built on, and it had likely seen much worse than his and Kat's walk of shame, but that didn't stop Waldorf from feeling as though everything in his life was about to come to a head.

"There's a door," Kat's tremulous voice said from just above him.

"It is where your superior awaits," the man in black said behind him.

Waldorf swore he could see Kat's throat constrict as she swallowed sickly, then said, "Should...should I knock?"

The man in black shook his head. “You are expected.”

He spoke in such a way that if Waldorf had been a lesser man, his bowels would have turned to jelly.

Kat nodded, then reached for the doorhandle. Waldorf suddenly wished he’d gone first so that he could make the gesture for her and prepare her for whatever was on the other side of the door.

Then again, Kat likely would not have appreciated him shielding her from something, and would have complained that just because she was a woman, it did not mean she was incapable of facing the executioner’s block.

That last, small thought had Waldorf’s mouth twitching with the shadow of a grin. Kat was indomitable when she wanted to be.

His fledgling smile vanished when Kat sucked in a breath, then pushed the door open.

The room at the top of the stairs was not at all what Waldorf expected. He’d expected some sort of medieval torture chamber, complete with flickering torches, instruments of pain, and a hooded executioner wielding an ax.

What he and Kat found was a well-appointed sitting room. It was, perhaps, decorated in an antique style, with tapestries hanging on the walls and a huge fireplace at the far end with a thick beam for a mantel. The chairs in the room were of a wide, medieval style as well, but the carpet covering the floor looked far more modern and as if it had been purchased from the orient. The screens that decorated the corners of the rooms

appeared eastern in design as well, and the small table that sat off to one side was set with a delicate, porcelain tea service.

The jumble of styles and eras represented around him had Waldorf feeling off-balance and confused. Adding to the confusion was the fact that the room was empty of other human inhabitants. He was not certain he knew what to do with himself or what was expected of him.

“Wait here,” the man in black said once Waldorf and Kat had made their way to the center of the room.

Waldorf glanced back over his shoulder in time to see the man disappear through the door to the stairwell, shutting it behind him. The door made a thumping sound as it closed that was so final it sent a chill straight to Waldorf’s bones.

Once again, he and Kat were alone.

They’d both glanced over their shoulders as the man in black left, and as they turned to face forward once more, they met each other’s eyes.

As desperately as Waldorf wanted to say something, he hadn’t the first idea what to say. Comforting Kat seemed wrong. Not only would she not appreciate the gesture, he did not feel particularly comforted himself. Chastising her felt wrong, too. He was in as much of a stew as she was, and it did not take much for him to imagine why. Kat was the worse transgressor between the two of them, but he had not exactly behaved perfectly where she was concerned since arriving in London either.

“What should we?—”

Kat’s whispered question was cut off by the sound of another door shutting behind one of the screens. Waldorf should have known they were there to conceal other

passages, or perhaps other people.

He did not have time to dwell on that, however. Moments after the sound of the door, none other than Queen Matilda of Mercia stepped out from behind the curtain, dressed in regal splendor, as if she had been attending the ball below.

Kat gasped in surprise. “Your Majesty,” she said, dropping into a deep curtsy and bowing her head, in contrition as well as respect.

Matilda was not Waldorf’s queen, but he thought it wise to follow Kat’s lead and to bow to her as if she was. That proved to be the correct choice.

“Give me one good reason why I should not toss the both of you out that window into the mews, breaking your necks,” the queen said, her voice sharp and commanding.

Kat sucked in another, short breath and rose. “Your Majesty, I am terribly, terribly sorry. You have no idea how much so. I behaved foolishly this evening based on the?—”

“Foolishly?” the queen cut Kat off, as if ‘foolishly’ was not a strong enough word. “You believe you behaved foolishly?”

“I was blinded by my own prejudices, Your Majesty,” Kat said, her voice shaking. “I had received a note?—”

“Your assignment for the evening was to introduce the wives of recalcitrant ministers to Lady Ryman so that she might direct them to the appropriate parties who would be able to sway their opinions,” the queen said.

Waldorf’s brow rose a bit. So that was Kat’s mission for the night? To make connections between people?

“And you.”

It took Waldorf a moment to realize that the queen was addressing him in her pointed, scolding tone. When he glanced to her to find her glaring at him, his knees felt decidedly wobbly.

“Your mission was to convince Lord MacLeod and the others in the gaming room to support the Mercian Plan, not to cross swords with this one,” the queen went on.

“Your Majesty,” Waldorf began with a bow, “I can assure you that?—”

He stopped, his mouth hanging open. Queen Matilda knew of his mission for the evening. In fact, the way she spoke made it seem as though she herself was the one who had given the order.

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Waldorf straightened, though his mouth continued to hang open, and blinked at the queen.

“Do not gawp at me as though you are a fish, Lord Waldorf,” the queen said. “Have you not wondered whose service you have been in for the last twenty years?”

“I—” Waldorf had, indeed, wondered. He’d wondered multiple times when given orders to pursue a certain course of action, or even to grow his whiskers.

It seemed as though the time for wondering was over.

“Mercia is far more powerful than any of the other kingdoms of the New Heptarchy imagine,” Queen Matilda said, standing taller and clasping her wrinkled hands with their many, shining rings in front of her. “We have been steering the course of events in Britannia for far longer than most people are aware. It was Mercians who funded the expeditions to the New World, and to the Orient. Mercians supported every past effort to unite Britannia. Mercians were even the ones who infiltrated the ranks of Bonaparte’s inner circle and passed along information that eventually led to his downfall.”

Waldorf felt as though his chest were being squeezed in a vise. He’d had no idea. Neither did anyone. The knowledge made him feel suddenly insignificant...and yet, a part of something grand and awe-inspiring at the same time.

“Mercia has stood on the brink of success in uniting Britannia as it should have been united centuries ago,” the queen went on. “And now, between the two of you, those efforts have been thwarted.”



Waldorf tamped down the urge to deny that he had anything at all to do with the night's failures, until Queen Matilda went on with, "Your unresolved emotions and misapplied flirtations have caused nothing but distraction, divisiveness, and failure in the last week."

Waldorf lowered his head. The queen was counting the debacle of Lady Thistlewhite's supper among the recent failures he and Kat were to be blamed for. Possibly the scene in Hyde Park as well.

"Your Majesty, I am so very?—"

"I have not asked for you to speak yet, Lady Katherine," the queen silenced her.

Kat let out a trembling breath and lowered her head.

"I have counted the two of you among my best spies these past twenty years," the queen went on. "You have each performed exceptionally in your own ways. I believed that part of your effectiveness was born from keeping the two of you apart and allowing you to continue your work without the complications of affection or relationship."

Waldorf snapped his head up in tandem with Kat. He gaped at the queen, then peeked sideways to see what Kat thought of the new kernel of information they'd just been handed. Had Queen Matilda deliberately kept the two of them separated and prevented them from reconciling sooner?

"I saw immediately, when the two of you were first introduced to me at Oxford, that you had the potential to either accomplish the impossible together or to destroy everything," the queen went on. She narrowed her eyes and twisted one of the rings on her finger as she said, "I am disappointed to see that it was the latter."

“Twenty years of service has not been wiped out by a single week of ill-advised behavior, your?—”

“I did not give you leave to speak either, Lord Waldorf,” the queen cut him off as he had Kat.

She adjusted her stance and spent a moment studying the two of them.

That moment seemed to stretch into eternity. Waldorf’s back itched, and of all times for it to happen, his bladder felt remarkably full, though that could simply have been nervousness.

“I sometimes wonder what might have been if I had taken the different path and paired the two of you together in the beginning, allowing you to work as a partnership,” the queen said, lowering her head a bit.

Something within Waldorf tightened with a rush of promise. Perhaps he and Kat were not dangling over the fire as much as he’d feared they were.

Queen Matilda must have seen Waldorf’s moment of relief. She glared at him again and said, “My regrets are not your salvation, Lord Waldorf.”

“No, Your Majesty,” Waldorf said, bowing his head.

“Nor is it yours, Lady Katherine.” The queen turned her ire on Kat.

“No, Your Majesty,” Kat said, curtsying a bit.

The queen stared at her. “You have obliterated not only your own efforts to assist the cause of unity, you have exposed and potentially undermined a long-standing and highly effective organization that has answered to Mercia in my time, in the time of

my mother, and in the time of my grandmother.”

“I am so sorry, your majesty.” Kat bowed her head in genuine contrition.

The queen paused before saying, “The Badger Society can be salvaged, but changes must be made.” She turned to Waldorf and said, “You will remove your whiskers at your soonest possible convenience.”

“I will, your majesty,” Waldorf said, nodding and absently stroking one sideburn.

“But you will no longer continue as a member of the Badgers.”

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Waldorf's initial burst of anger flattened into disappointment, and then grief. "Yes, Your Majesty."

She turned to Kat again. "Whether you continue in my service, both of you," she added for Waldorf, "depends greatly on what happens next."

Both Waldorf and Kat raised their eyes to the queen.

The queen took a breath and stood straighter. "Tonight's mission has failed, but there is another avenue toward seeing that the Mercian Plan is advanced."

Waldorf's heart beat faster with hope, and he noticed Kat drawing in a breath as well.

"I will give the two of you one final chance to redeem yourselves," the queen said.

"Yes, anything, Your Majesty," Kat said, swaying forward a bit.

The queen stared at her for a moment, then continued.

"Our last hope of having the Mercian Plan introduced for debate in Joint Parliament is to go straight to Lord Walsingham, the First Minister. His influence alone may be enough to see that our plan is introduced."

Waldorf frowned. As far as he knew, while Walsingham was in favor of unity, he was indifferent to the Mercians.

"Lord Walsingham is deeply partial to his wife," the queen continued, pacing before

Waldorf and Kat. “He will go to great lengths to fulfill her every wish and make her happy. If she asks that the Mercian Plan be considered for debate when Joint Parliament opens next week, then it most certainly will be introduced.”

“Forgive me, Your Majesty,” Waldorf said, “but if Lord Walsingham is so easily swayed, why has Lady Walsingham not been approached before?”

The queen stopped her pacing and turned to Waldorf, eyes wide with indignation. “You believe that Lady Walsingham has not been approached before?”

Waldorf immediately felt foolish for asking.

The queen seemed to relent somewhat as she continued her pacing. “Lady Walsingham is a peculiar woman,” she said, frowning as if she disapproved. “She becomes enamored with fanciful notions and what she considers to be science with alarming intensity. She has powerful beliefs about the benefits of the countryside, and of things such as mineral waters and tinctures of herbs.”

Waldorf furrowed his brow in confusion. He’d heard of an increase in fascination with certain pseudo-religious ideas about improved living and spiritual enlightenment. They had become particularly popular in East Anglia, where Walsingham was from, in recent years.

“Do you believe that Lady Walsingham can be influenced through these interests of hers, and as a result, influence her husband?” Kat asked.

“Possibly,” the queen said. She’d reached the end of her pacing and turned to walk back to a position in front of Waldorf and Kat. “It seems as though we have no option but to try at this point.”

Waldorf wondered how true that was. He and Pollock were not the only men who had

been tasked with changing the opinions of ministers from various kingdoms, and he was certain Kat was not the only one who had been given the task of influencing ministers' wives. The Badger Society had been compromised, but the queen had implied it would continue on, and she was correct.

He began to see a bit more of what Queen Matilda had in mind when she continued with, "Lady Walsingham is currently hosting what she refers to as a spiritual retreat at her country estate near Fakenham. The two of you will travel there on the morrow and join the retreat."

Waldorf blinked, and he let out a breath. As far as assignments went, joining an eccentric noblewoman's spiritual retreat so that he might influence her to support the Mercian Plan seemed like an easy one.

"Whatever you wish, Your Majesty," Kat said, nodding enthusiastically. "Whatever you feel will make amends for?"

"The retreat in question is for engaged and newly married couples," the queen cut Kat off.

Waldorf jolted and stared at the queen again. "For engaged and newly married couples?"

"Did I not make myself clear, my lord?" the queen asked him, one eyebrow arched.

"Perfectly, Your Majesty," Waldorf said, backtracking and bowing his head.

"There is already a rumor in London that the two of you have formed a particular attachment," Queen Matilda continued, resuming her pacing as well. "Indeed, some believe that the two of you have been secretly engaged for some time, particularly since word of Lord Gerald Godwin's efforts to marry off his sons and nephews has

become a topic of conversation.”

Damn Father and damn his meddling in everyone’s lives. Waldorf had a bad feeling he might find himself backed into a situation that would cause him to be the laughingstock of the family for years to come.

“Therefore, it will come as a surprise to no one when the two of you arrive at a retreat for couples,” the queen went on. “You will attend this event eagerly, and you will show your appreciation for Lady Walsingham’s efforts to help her chosen couples to enter into greater spiritual togetherness by participating wholeheartedly in whatever activities she chooses to have her guests engage in.”

Waldorf had a sinking suspicion that he had not escaped punishment for his wrongdoings at all. In fact, he was very much afraid Queen Matilda had discovered a punishment worse than death.

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“As you wish, Your Majesty,” he said all the same, trying not to sigh.

Kat was not as quick to accept her punishment. “You wish me to travel to East Anglia to attend a party intended for couples under the guise of being engaged to Lord Waldorf?” she asked.

“I do,” Queen Matilda said.

“And you wish me to participate in whatever activities Lady Walsingham has designed for couples? With Lord Waldorf?”

“Do you have a better idea of how you could make amends for the monumental damage you have caused this evening?” the queen asked her, eyes narrowed.

Kat drew in a breath, lowered her head, then murmured, “No, Your Majesty.”

“Then it is decided,” the queen said, smiling. “The two of you will depart at first light tomorrow morning. I will send my own personal carriage to collect you and take you on your way.”

That was likely so that neither of them backed out of their punishment, Waldorf thought.

“Once you have arrived at the Walsinghams’ estate, you will be perfect guests while also extolling the virtues of the Mercian Plan and ensuring that Lord Walsingham is influenced to introduce debate on the bill once Joint Parliament opens.”



Waldorf cleared his throat. “And if we fail, Your Majesty?”

The queen’s face grew stony. “Then, Lord Waldorf, the Curse of Godwin Castle will become the least of your worries.”

Waldorf drew in a shuddering breath and nodded. “Understood, Your Majesty.”

“And you, Lady Katherine?” the queen asked.

“Understood,” Kat said in a quiet, hoarse voice.

Waldorf peeked to the side, catching Kat’s covert gaze. She narrowed her eyes at him. Waldorf scowled right back at her. He had no idea how they would maintain their subterfuge, let alone accomplish their mission.

Twelve

Humiliation was too gentle a word for the emotions that coursed through Kat as she and Waldorf made their way to Oxwick Park, the Walsinghams’ estate in East Anglia over the next two days. Queen Matilda had made certain the two of them departed before first light the morning after the ball. She also had them both escorted directly back to their homes by guards who were just as intimidating as the man in black who had shown them up to the private room. The room where Kat felt as though her soul had been lashed out of her by the queen’s tongue.

There had been no time for Kat to return to the ball so that she might inform Minnie and Bernadette of what had transpired. She’d barely had time to apprise Regina of the situation once she was home and to give the intrepid woman instructions to contact Minnie and Bernadette so that they did not think she had kidnapped from the ball by brigands and sold to some Algerian harem.

“I will make certain your friends are alerted to your change of plans,” Regina had said as she’d helped Kat pack a small case in the early hours of the morning. “Would you like me to care for Napoleon while you are gone?” she’d also asked.

Kat had taken one look at Napoleon as he glared at her from the bureau after being ousted from his usual sleeping spot on her bed during the packing and said, “I could not possibly leave my darling alone for so long.”

She’d gone to the bureau and scooped Napoleon in her arms, cuddling the irritated creature and rubbing her face in his fur in an attempt to soothe herself. Napoleon had tolerated the action for all of three seconds before squirming out of Kat’s arms and dashing under the bed.

He was there with her now, however, curled resentfully in his basket on the seat beside Kat as the carriage jolted and rocked toward their destination. He let out yet another, blood-curdling yowl when Kat glanced in his direction, as if to remind her yet again that he did not appreciate being yanked from his comfortable home for a jaunt into another kingdom for what might be his mistress’s last opportunity to prove her worth to her queen. And perhaps to save her life.

“Can you silence that infernal creature?” Waldorf demanded from where he was hunched in the corner of the carriage, hugging himself tightly and rubbing his now smooth cheeks as he winced. “I have been trying to sleep for the last hour, but that incarnation of evil seems to know precisely when I have nearly managed to nod off. If he wakes me one more time?—”

“There is no use in sleeping when we have almost reached Oxwick Park,” Kat snapped, causing Waldorf to glower at her and Napoleon to yowl again.

“There is every need to sleep when I barely managed it last night, and the night before, and when I must be at the top of my form once we reach our destination,”

Waldorf growled in return.

Oxwick Park was just beyond a day's drive from London, so on the queen's orders, they had spent the night at an inn before traveling on. Of course, there had only been one suitable, private room available in the inn, and since Kat and Waldorf were pretending to be engaged at any rate, they had been forced to share it.

Waldorf had announced that he would leave the room to Kat and spend the night sleeping in the carriage, but the guard-cum-coachman whom the queen had arranged to take them on their mission would not hear of it.

The result was a night spent attempting not to speak to or look at each other while sharing a single, too-small bed. Sharing with Napoleon as well. To say Napoleon did not like Waldorf was an understatement.

"You can rest this afternoon," Kat told Waldorf. "Or even for the rest of the morning, since the innkeeper told me it was only another two hours' drive to Oxwick Park. I sincerely doubt that most of Lady Walsingham's guests will be awake as of yet."

"They are the lucky ones," Waldorf grumbled, crossing his arms tighter and staring out the carriage window.

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Kat tried earnestly to grasp hold of her anger at Waldorf and to clutch it tight. She tried to tell herself that it was his doing they were in their current muddle. He was the villain and he always had been.

She knew so much better now, however. She could not prevent her thoughts from flying back to the night of the ball, to her impetuosity and her foolishness. Every time she recounted her thoughts and actions at Ryman House, she discovered a new level of shame within herself.

Simply put, she had behaved as a child. She had acted without thinking, acted without confirming a single one of her suspicions. She had clung tight to those suspicions with no evidence that she was in the right simply because she was prejudiced against Waldorf for the sins of his past. And she had destroyed the hard work of a great many people because of it.

If she were honest with herself, she felt as though Queen Matilda's punishment was too lenient. She should have been tied to a stake and whipped for her willfully selfish, painfully ignorant, and shockingly destructive wrongs. She should have been banished from all of Britannia, forced to live out her life as a wanderer without a home, or worse, as an American.

She knew she was wrong, but her queen had given her a second chance. No matter how odious Waldorf was or how infuriated with her the events of the other night had left him—and he continued to be deeply furious with her—she was determined to do whatever it took to sway Lady Walsingham to the Mercian cause, and to convince the woman to convince her husband to open debate on the Mercian Plan once Joint Parliament began in just over a week's time.

“I know that this entire twist in both of our plans was my doing,” Kat said, keeping her voice and her eyes lowered, since what she truly wanted to do was shout at Waldorf to stop sulking and help her, “but we must work together to make the best of it and to successfully complete the new mission we have been given.”

“I will not be the one to ruin things this time,” Waldorf said, sitting straighter, his eyes going wider, as if she’d chastised him. “Now that I know fully whose orders I am following, I will do my utmost to complete the mission she has set me.”

Kat wanted to argue, but there was no argument in his words. They were in accord, set on the same mission, working for the same outcome.

She was so very used to challenging Waldorf that to agree with him felt deeply disturbing.

Nothing else was said until the carriage made the turn off the main road and onto the path that would take them through the grounds of Oxwick Park to the manor house. From the moment they entered the Walsinghams’ property, however, Kat could tell that something was highly out of the ordinary.

There were banners and bunting lining the way up to the house, for one. The banners were all red and pink and blazoned with hearts. As they approached the house, bushes covered with red and pink roses were interspersed with the banners. Roses were most definitely not in season, however, and when the carriage finally pulled around a magnificent fountain to the front of the house, Kat came close enough to one of the bushes to see that it was decorated with silk flowers and not real ones.

The house itself was adorned with silk flowers, colorful bunting, and other bits of frippery that made it appear rather like a sugar house. Beyond that, the footmen who came down from the house to assist them with their baggage and to help Kat step down from the carriage were dressed in shades of red, pink, and violet.

“What sort of insanity is this?” Waldorf mumbled, most likely to himself, once the two of them had alighted and stood at the base of the terrace stairs that led to the house’s red-painted front door.

Kat had no answer for him. She clasped a hand to her stomach to still the dread that fluttered there.

“Hello and welcome!” a high-pitched, soft female voice greeted them from the doorway.

Kat and Waldorf both turned from sweeping the garish face of the house with their stares to gaping at the middle-aged woman who swept out into the sunlight of the terrace.

Lady Walsingham was a tiny woman, but her presence was enough to fill the entire garden. She barely reached five feet, but her smile was as bright as the sunlight she’d just walked into. She was the sort of woman Kat generally liked, but also distrusted, at first sight because of her obvious amiability.

There were things about the woman that would, at first sight, alert anyone who did not know her as to her character, however. While there was nothing ostensibly wrong with her manner of dress—she wore the same style of high-waisted, long-sleeved gown that most every other woman in Britannia favored at the moment—it was somewhat obvious that she was not wearing stays, or any sort of forming undergarment, with her gown. The result was that her posture was more relaxed and her movements far less restricted than even Kat was used to. Beyond that, she had her greying hair loose down her back rather than caught up on her head.

“Oh, look at the two of you,” the woman said, pausing on the stairs and clasping her hands together over her heart as she gazed at Kat and Waldorf. “When I received Queen Matilda’s letter last night, stating that the two of you would be the perfect

addition to my matrimonial rites celebration, I knew you must be unique in the annals of love. But seeing the two of you together now, I cannot imagine two people more perfectly suited to advance Cupid's cause."

Kat's heart—which had been lower than she'd ever known it to be in her life since the ball—sank even lower. She glanced warily to Waldorf, finding a similar expression of dread on his face.

Had she thought Queen Matilda's punishment had not been harsh enough? She had the terrible feeling that she was about to learn an entirely new meaning of castigation.

"Lady Walsingham," Waldorf took the lead, stepping forward to greet their hostess with what he likely thought was a happy smile. To Kat, he looked as though he had eaten too many sprouts and was fighting desperately not to break wind. "How kind you are to accept us into your magnificent party at such short notice."

Not to be outdone, and more conscious of the importance of their mission being a success than ever, Kat stepped forward as well, saying, "The moment Her Majesty, the queen informed us of the important, nay, spiritual work you have undertaken here, I knew that dear Waldorf and I needed to be a part of it."

She smiled, hoping she had done a better job of it than Waldorf, and slipped her arm around Waldorf's hugging him tightly.

"Yes," Waldorf said, also, apparently, not wishing to be seen as less enthusiastic than Kat. "This, we were told, is the place for people in love, and in love we most certainly are."

He looked at Kat with teeth bared and fire in his eyes.

Kat stared back at him with a smile equally as vicious, attempting to show him that

she would outwit him and outplay him in this game Queen Matilda had set for them. If he thought she would even pretend to be some sweet, biddable, Wessex wife, he would be sorry.

From the carriage behind them, Napoleon yowled wildly as one of the footmen removed his basket from the carriage.

“Love is such a wonderful thing, is it not?” Lady Walsingham said, coming the rest of the way down the steps to greet them more intimately. “And I can see clearly that the two of you have a great passion for each other as well. Pasion is the sinew of love, and it is my sincerest wish to facilitate the two of you in coming to a deeper understanding of each other and of what it is to be united in love before my retreat has ended.”

Yet again, dread pooled in Kat’s stomach. Dear God, what had Queen Matilda committed them to?



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“I very much look forward to learning more about your fascinating theories and practices, Lady Walsingham,” Waldorf said as Lady Walsingham stepped back up onto the steps, gesturing for Kat and Waldorf, as well as the footmen who were taking their things from the carriage, to follow her.

“You have heard of my theories?” Lady Walsingham said, glancing back over her shoulder as she entered the house.

“By reputation alone,” Kat answered, still clutching Waldorf’s arm tightly. He’d tried to escape her, but she was determined to convince every last soul in the house that she and Waldorf were devoted to each other. “I am very much looking forward to learning more.”

“Alas, the first week of our retreat has already passed,” Lady Walsingham said, taking them into the large front hallway and toward the grand staircase. “We have already been through the Initiation of Trust and the Ritual of Togetherness. But I am certain the other participants would not mind assisting the two of you in reaching the level the rest of us have attained.”

“I beg your pardon?” Waldorf muttered, almost too quietly to be heard.

Not quietly enough, as it turned out.

“Do you have questions?” Lady Walsingham asked, pausing halfway up the stairs to turn to them.

Waldorf cleared his throat. “I am certain I will have a great many questions,” he said,

his strained smile back in place, “but I shall wait to ask them, as you may present us with answers soon.”

“I most certainly will,” Lady Walsingham said with a tinkling laugh, heading on.

Kat fought to keep her smile in place as they continued to the second floor, then along a wing of what she assumed were guest rooms to the very end of the hall. Everything was decorated as if it were some sort of fairy world, or perhaps a cake. Lady Walsingham smiled at everything around her, including when they passed a room from which came sounds of ardor that simply could not be mistaken.

Heat flooded Kat’s face even as wariness shot through the rest of her.

“Here we are,” Lady Walsingham said, reaching a room at the end of the corridor and turning the door’s handle. “Lord Waldorf, this will be your bedchamber for the remainder of the retreat.” She stepped down to the next door along the hall and said, “Lady Katherine, this will be your room.”

Kat was so relieved that she could have cried. She would not have to spend another night attempting to squeeze into a bed with Waldorf. And Napoleon. She would have her own room, her own solitude for when she needed it to regain her sanity. It was a bit scandalous that Lady Walsingham had her and Waldorf situated on the same hallway, since gentlemen generally stayed well apart from ladies at country house parties, but it was understandable, given the late nature of their arrival, that only a few rooms in the house would be unoccupied.

The moment Kat stepped into the room she’d been given, however, she saw how wrong every one of her assumptions were. Though large and graciously appointed, with windows on two sides that looked out into the gardens, the room had one major flaw.

“What is the meaning of this?” Waldorf asked with a slight frown, moving to stand in the open doorway that divided the room he’d been given from the one Kat had been given.

Lady Walsingham laughed and sent a knowing look between Waldorf and Kat. “I can imagine what you are thinking. Traditional wisdom and values say that a man and a woman who are merely engaged should be kept as separate from each other as possible, and that propriety must be observed.”

Kat hurried to the main door of her room to fetch Napoleon in his cage from the footman who had just carried him in. She sent Lady Walsingham a suspicious look as she did.

“My theories revolve more around nature and the natural inclinations that male and female have toward each other,” Lady Walsingham went on. “Society may not approve, but we hereat Oxwick Park believe that the greatest union of spirits should include the most satisfying union of bodies, and that there is no shame in any sort of communion that leads to the magnification of love.”

Napoleon let out a low growl as Kat moved his cage to the bed, then sat with him there.

“What an intriguing concept, Lady Walsingham,” she said, more than a little breathless, but most definitely not for any of the reasons Lady Walsingham would likely think.

Waldorf had disappeared from the adjoining doorway and appeared to be directing footmen where to place his baggage. Kat found herself strangely eager to see his reaction to Lady Walsingham’s theories.

“Well,” Lady Walsingham said, clasping her hands together. “I shall leave the two of

you to settle in. Please do join us in the west garden for introductions and so that you may partake in the Initiation of Trust before luncheon. Though if you find yourselves moved to advance to some of the deeper activities of the retreat, I will understand.”

The woman sent Kat a mischievous wink, then darted her eyes to the open doorway to Waldorf’s room, before backing out of the room.

As soon as she shut the door, leaving Kat and Napoleon alone, Kat let out a heavy breath and shook her head. What in God’s name had Queen Matilda done?

A cry from Napoleon shook her out of her thoughts. She pulled herself together and undid the clasp on his cage. Immediately, Napoleon jumped to freedom, dashing straight under the bed rather than risking whatever he might find in Waldorf’s room.

Kat could not be so reticent. As soon as she heard the footmen leaving, she stood from her bed and walked to the doorway connecting her and Waldorf’s rooms.

“This is madness,” Waldorf expressed her opinion before Kat could say a thing. “I am beginning to be highly suspicious of these theories of Lady Walsingham’s.”

“We must endure the madness if we wish to redeem ourselves,” Kat said. There was nothing else she could say, really.

Waldorf had thrown open the lid of his trunk, but he approached Kat in the doorway before taking anything out. “Whatever happens, whatever madness Lady Walsingham may try to drag us into, we must keep the mission firmly in mind.”

“Agreed,” Kat said with a nod, her body stiff. “We are here on crown business, working for the future of Britannia. We cannot balk or cringe because we may be called upon to put ourselves in uncomfortable positions.”

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A small, repeated thump from the other side of Waldorf's wall made Kat wish she'd chosen better words.

Waldorf nodded curtly, his face turning pink. "We cannot expose ourselves—er, that is, we must make every participant at this party believe that we are above suspicion in our pursuit of advancing the Mercian Plan."

"Quite right," Kat said. The thumping against Waldorf's wall was joined by a pair of quick sighs that increased in pitch and volume. "If you will excuse me," Kat said, on the verge of either laughing or screaming, "I must go in search of a footman to see if they can provide me with a box of sand for Napoleon to do his business in, since I do not think he will want to leave this room for quite some time."

"Do as you must," Waldorf said.

He turned and stepped back to his bed to resume unpacking.

Kat fled from the doorway, and from her room entirely. Once she was in the hall, she shook her head repeatedly as she retraced the path Lady Walsingham had taken them up from the front door. She had a feeling the mission she and Waldorf had been given would be the most trying of her life.

That was not the only thing that caused Kat more dread than she could fathom, however. As soon as she reached the bottom of the stairs and began to search through the house for a member of the staff who could help her, she passed a parlor where several gentlemen were playing billiards and having some sort of ribald conversation.

That fact alone would not have concerned her at all if one of the men laughing and bending over the billiards table had not been Lord Anthony Headland.

### Thirteen

The entire thing was ridiculous. Everything from the decorations in the house to the incessant sounds of debauchery that continued to burst through the wall as Waldorf unpacked his belongings was mad. He'd begun the process of unpacking himself, wishing he'd been allowed to take Bambridge with him to do the job, but he was afraid everything about Oxwick Park would give his valet the vapors to a degree that he would never recover from.

Beyond that, Waldorf had the suspicion he would not want anyone, particularly his servants, to know that he'd attended such a strange and wild party for the rest of his days. He was no prude, God only knew that, but before an entire hour had passed, Waldorf was certain he might never recover from the ordeal he was about to partake in.

His neighbors on the other side of the wall finished their adventures at nearly the same time as Waldorf completed unpacking and storing his clothing in the wardrobe, which contained a few items already that he was not certain he wanted to think about. Kat had not returned to her room in all that time, and since Waldorf had no desire to sit by himself, contemplating what sort of punishment Queen Matilda had given the two of them, he chose instead to leave his room and begin his mission.

Above all else, it was vital that he find and speak to Lord Walsingham. The mission depended not only on convincing Lady Walsingham that she should support the Mercian Plan so that she might convince her husband, but in swaying the opinions of Walsingham himself. To do that, Waldorf needed to ascertain exactly where the man stood on the issue. Walsingham had been elected as First Minister in part because everyone believed the man agreed with their positions, which came about because he

gave away very little about his own views.

The manor house of Oxwick Park was surprisingly vast, and from the moment Waldorf reached the front hallway again and set out in search of anyone else among the guests to whom he might make an introduction, he understood why Kat had not returned to her room. The irritating woman had most likely become lost in the warrens of hallways, parlors, and other rooms that made up the ground floor.

A bit more unnerving was the fact that despite knowing at least a dozen couples were already Lady Walsingham's guests for her mad party, Waldorf encountered very few people in his search.

"Where have the rest of the party gone?" he was finally able to ask a passing maid. The harried-looking young woman was dressed in shades of pink, not unlike the footmen had been, and the colors did not suit her.

"They're in the garden, my lord," the woman reported with a barely concealed sigh.

Waldorf blinked. "At this time of year? It isn't summer."

The maid gave him a forlorn look and said, "Her ladyship believes in the benefits of fresh air and nature."

Waldorf had nothing to say to that, but he gave the maid a significant look before walking on. He had the feeling he would be subjected to much more about Lady Walsingham's feelings on the benefits of nature before all else was said and done.

It was, perhaps, a blessing when Waldorf encountered Lord Walsingham as he was crossing through the chilly conservatory to the open door that led out to the garden.

"Ah, Lord Waldorf," Walsingham greeted him with a welcoming smile, even though

his posture was stiff and formal. “I was told you and your lady love had arrived.”

Waldorf was too stunned by the First Minister’s appearance for a moment to make an adequate return greeting. The august man was not dressed entirely out of the ordinary. He wore breeches, a jacket, waistcoat, and neck cloth, like every other fashionable man of the New Heptarchy. The difference was that Walsingham’s clothing appeared to be made entirely of natural, undyed fibers, which rendered his entire ensemble a light buff color. All except his neckcloth, which was a lurid shade of pink.

“I am so grateful that a place at your wife’s retreat could be found for Lady Katherine and I at such short notice,” Waldorf finally found his voice enough to reply.

Walsingham laughed ironically. “Yes, Maryella insists on hosting these events,” he said, sending Waldorf a knowing, sideways look as they continued across the conservatory and out into the garden. “She has theories about how men and women should commune with each other. She keeps threatening to write a book expounding on those theories.”

“Dear God,” Waldorf said before he could stop himself.

Fortunately, Walsingham seemed to agree with him. “I love the woman dearly, and I indulge her fancies to a degree that I probably should not, but you can rest assured that I work tirelessly to ensure that whatever happens at Oxwick Park remains a carefully kept secret.”

Waldorf wanted to shout, “Thank God!” but he had already pressed his luck with his reactions and did not want to appear rude.

Instead, he gestured for Walsingham to precede him out the door into the garden, then attempted to engage in his mission by casually asking, “Do you favor the rights of



women to do as they please as a rule, or do you?—”

He got no farther than that in his question. Moments within stepping out into the garden, Kat appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and grabbed hold of his arm.

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Waldorf's immediate reaction of impatience and aggravation disappeared as soon as he saw the wary expression Kat wore. Something had upset her, and given the nature of the party they'd just stumbled into, it could be a great many things.

"Are you quite well?" he asked, frowning in concern.

Kat did not look at all settled, but before she could tell him why, Walsingham turned back to see what had waylaid Waldorf.

"Ah, Lady Katherine," he said, smiling as he recognized Kat. "Welcome to Oxwick Park."

Kat was forced to snap her mouth shut rather than telling Waldorf what had caused her upset. She immediately put on a smile and slipped her arm more intimately into Waldorf's. The game had truly begun.

"Lord Walsingham," she said in a voice filled with false cheer. "I cannot thank you enough for inviting dear Waldorf and I to your estate for such a magnificent party."

Walsingham huffed a laugh. "It is entirely my wife's doing, I can assure you," he said. He glanced significantly at Waldorf and repeated, "I can assure you," with importance.

Kat did an admirable job of concealing what Waldorf was reasonably certain she actually felt as she laughed lightly, then hugged Waldorf's arm, bringing the two of them into almost obscene proximity. "Waldorf and I are so newly engaged that I believe we will benefit greatly from your wife's beneficence. Love is a wonderful

thing, but wisdom is an even greater one.”

She gazed adoringly at Waldorf, acting so convincingly that Waldorf almost believed her, then smiled at Walsingham.

“Indeed,” Waldorf said, grinning soppily at Kat and resting his free hand over the one of hers that gripped his arm. “While we’ve known each other for years, it is only just recently that the veils have been lifted from our eyes, showing us both what our true feelings for each other have been this entire time.”

He was acting. That was what they had been charged to do. But his words felt like they had a tiny seed of truth to them. He did not dislike Kat clinging to him or smiling affectionately at her as much as he’d thought he might.

The moment was broken by the sound of a throat clearing and footsteps walking across the grass. Waldorf glanced away from Kat, spotting the newcomer, and everything within him turned to cold, unforgiving stone.

“Lord Waldorf, what a surprise to see you here,” the bastard, Lord Headland, said. The man wore a smile as false as half the jewels worn by the ladies of the ton and had his eyes narrowed at Waldorf, giving him even more of a snakelike appearance than usual.

“Headland,” Waldorf said. The single word slipped out as a growl. Kat’s upset was suddenly understandable. The way she clung to him as if they really were deeply in love made perfect sense. It would be an easy thing to convince a bunch of strangers that the two of them were madly in love and engaged, but Headland knew the truth.

Before Waldorf could ask it, Walsingham answered the question burning within him as he said, “It seems you know my wife’s brother, Lord Anthony Headland.”

“Her brother,” Kat said, not so much as a question, but as if she’d had the information stored away somewhere in her mind and had only just recalled it.

“Yes,” Headland said. “I am quite familiar with Lord Waldorf and Lady Katherine. I’d no idea whatsoever that the two of them had entered into such an intimate understanding. In fact, I had always believed that the two of them despised each other after an argument between the two of them many years ago. They were arguing at the Thistlewhites’ supper party just last week.”

Waldorf drew in a slow breath and stood straighter, raising his chin so that he could give the appearance of looking down on Headland. “I would wager there are a great many things you do not know, Lord Headland.”

The presence and interest of Walsingham in their greeting was the only thing that prevented Waldorf from telling Headland off right then and there. If the bastard was Lady Walsingham’s brother, he and Kat would be forced to tread carefully around the man for the duration of their stay.

“Waldorf and I recently had a reconciliation,” Kat explained, speaking to Walsingham, not Headland, though she eyed Headland warily as she did. “Circumstances threw us together again after twenty years, and we were able to clear the misunderstandings of the past and renew our affection for each other.”

Not one to be outdone or to miss an opportunity to spin the perfect web of lies, Waldorf did not hesitate for a moment before continuing the story with, “Both the misunderstandings and the affection were great, but thankfully, love outweighs mistakes. Katherine and I are blissfully happy now.”

He smiled adoringly at Kat, who smiled back at him, perfectly on cue.

She then did the last thing Waldorf would have expected and leaned in, lifting a bit so

that she could touch her lips to his. Waldorf reacted without thinking, kissing her in return.

For the tiniest of moments, everything else fell away. The mission, the madness around them, and Headland all ceased to exist, and all that remained was the warmth of Kat with him and the pounding of his heart against his ribs.

That moment was shattered almost as soon as it began by Lady Walsingham's light, trilling, "Oh, delightful! You found them, James."

Kat pulled away from Waldorf and turned quickly to Lady Walsingham. "We simply could not wait to join the others in your party's activities, my lady."

"How convenient," Lady Walsingham said, slipping up to her husband's side and clinging to his arm as if he were her savior. "I was just coming to fetch you so that you might come and partake of the Initiation of Trust."

She lifted to her toes and kissed Walsingham with so much passion that Waldorf had to look away, and he would have cringed as well, if he hadn't thought it would be rude. Then again, it seemed as though normal rules of propriety had been thrown in a bag and drowned in the river.

"Anthony, you're here as well," Lady Walsingham said, breaking away from her husband and approaching Headland.

Waldorf sucked in a bracing breath and prepared to cringe in horror, but Lady Walsingham only kissed her brother's cheek, thank God.

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“My brother, Lord Anthony Headland arrived in the early hours this morning,” Lady Walsingham then informed them, taking her brother’s hand and smiling at him with sisterly affection. “It was quite the surprise, to be honest. We were not expecting him at all. Poor Anthony was recently widowed, yousee, and when last we spoke, he told me he was determined to spend the season in London.”

“Is that so?” Waldorf asked. Suspicion that ran deeper than his dislike of the man welled up within him. Kat seemed to feel it too, as she tensed by his side.

“I...found myself suddenly missing my sister,” Headland said, his excuse flimsy.

Lady Walsingham apparently did not see it. “You are too sweet, Anthony.” She glanced to Waldorf and Kat and said, “He rode all the way here, not stopping, and not even taking a carriage. If that is not devotion, I do not know what is.”

The true story formed in Waldorf’s mind immediately. It was far more likely that Headland was as dogged now in his pursuit of Kat as he had been twenty years ago, and that the moment he’d discovered Kat had departed for East Anglia with Waldorf, he’d set out in pursuit.

Kat’s upset took on a whole new feeling, and Waldorf subtly tightened the way he held her arm. He might have been blazing with anger at her, he might believe her to be a selfish fool who had destroyed everything he’d worked years for, but he would protect her from the man she clearly did not want.

“This is all incidental,” Lady Walsingham said with a sweeping gesture. “We are awaiting you in the topiary garden for the initiation. Come.”

Waldorf glanced to Kat with wide eyes and an expression that said they had more problems in front of them than they'd accounted for.

"Will you be joining us?" he asked Walsingham as they started after Lady Walsingham.

"I had thought?—"

"If you do not wish to bother the engaged couples," Headland interrupted, speaking the word 'engaged' as if he did not believe Waldorf and Kat to actually be engaged for a moment, "then perhaps the two of us could go in search of luncheon together."

"Luncheon has been provided in the topiary garden, Anthony, dear," Lady Walsingham called over her shoulder. "You are welcome to join us in dear Caroline's memory."

That seemed to decide that, though Headland did not look pleased with the prospect of being a part of an activity made up entirely of couples.

As soon as they reached the topiary garden, Waldorf decided he did not want to be party to an activity of couples as well. Roughly a dozen couples sat paired together in a circle, enjoying their meal. Rather than sitting at a table and eating with cutlery in a reasonable manner, however, the entire company was seated on small carpets and cushions. Each couple faced each other over a large platter, which contained what appeared to be a selection of fruits, cheeses, and meats. Instead of consuming the meal in the ordinary fashion, each partner in the couple was engaged in feeding the other by hand while gazing into their eyes.

"What circle of Hell is this?" Kat murmured to Waldorf, her eyes wide as she took in the scene.

Waldorf snorted with laughter before he could stop himself.

Fortunately for him and for Kat, Lady Walsingham did not hear them.

“My dear, loving brothers and sisters,” Lady Walsingham said, walking into the center of the circle, then turning as if addressing each couple personally. “As I mentioned last night, we have new additions to our retreat of love and togetherness. Lord Waldorf Godwin and Lady Katherine Balmor, who are recently engaged, have been sent to commune with us on the expressed recommendation of Queen Matilda of Mercia herself.”

Waldorf fought the urge to wince. Saying too much about how and why they were there came dangerously close to revealing their new mission and the cause they were fighting for. In present company, he was loath to reveal anything like that.

Present company included more than Headland as well, though he was chief among the people Waldorf did not want to know his business. He knew a few of the gentlemen from the other couples. Lord Keith and Lady Helen Wallington of Wessex were there, for one. Lord Keith was a close friend of Prince Cuthbert and believed Waldorf to be loyal to King Swithin. Lord and Lady Postern of Northumbria were there as well. Postern was brother to the King of Northumbria. Mr. and Mrs. Norris from London were among the guests as well. Norris was a prominent London merchant with a great deal of sway in Joint Parliament, since so many ministers did business with him.

Any one of them would likely react the same way MacLeod had at the card table if they discovered Waldorf and Kat were spies in their midst.

“Hello,” Kat greeted the other guests with a small curtsy, pretending to be far sweeter and shier than Waldorf knew her to be. “It is a pleasure to be here with you.”



“Yes, it will be a pleasure,” Lady Walsingham said with a bright smile.

Waldorf nearly choked on his tongue, remembering the sounds that had come from the other side of the wall.

“Now, if you will come forward and stand here, please,” Lady Walsingham went on, “we shall begin the Initiation of Trust.”

Waldorf’s stomach churned. He glanced to Kat, communicating once again that they were in over their head. They couldn’t back out and walk away, however. The only thing they could do was step forward and take the place in the center of the circle that Lady Walsingham indicated to them.

“Now,” Lady Walsingham said, looking delighted with the proceedings, “as we all know, the cornerstone of any successful marriage is trust. A husband and wife must trust each other implicitly, in all that they do or say.”

Waldorf’s brow went up. He actually agreed with that. Was it not a lack of trust that had run the ship of his and Kat’s previous relationship aground?

“Therefore,” Lady Walsingham went on, “you will turn and face each other, and you will each tell the other some deep secret that you have never revealed to another soul before. The rest of us will bear witness.”

Waldorf wanted to groan as he turned to face Kat. Kat’s face had pulled into an expression of absolute incredulity. Waldorf could practically hear her thinking, “You wish us to reveal secrets to a gathering of guests whom we might see again in our lives in London?” Beyond that, her eyes darted to Headland, who had taken up a position off to the side, arms crossed and a scowl on his face.

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When the silence continued for too long, Lady Walsingham cleared her throat and said, “You may begin whenever you wish.”

Waldorf nearly huffed a sigh before racking his brains, then saying, “Er, I don’t really care for eels.”

Kat had barely opened her mouth to reply when Lady Walsingham stepped in and said, “Come now, Lord Waldorf. That is hardly a deep secret. That is more of a statement of preference. Your secret must be something that touches your soul, something that has burdened you for many years. Free yourself of the burden by trusting your beloved.”

It’s not Kat I don’t trust, Waldorf thought, though he nodded to Lady Walsingham.

He supposed he could simply make something up, but before he could decide what, Kat blurted, “I left the boarding house in Cowley Place that night that we rowed.”

Waldorf blinked. He was surprised, but it made perfect sense after what had happened between them. If, as he had struggled to admit for twenty years, the maid, Mary, had been an accomplice to Headland’s crimes, Kat would have wanted to flee as quickly as possible. It didn’t seem like much of a secret, however.

Until Kat rushed on with, “I had no money, my family had rejected me, and I was too ashamed to call on my friends, so I...I lived on the street for three days.”

Waldorf caught his breath. Oxford was not as dangerous a place for a woman alone as London or Winchester, but his heart ached for Kat’s trials all the same. He had

caused her to fall farther than he'd realized.

She deserved a genuine secret in return, but all he could think of was, "I cried that night."

It was such a small, stupid thing, but for a man with as much pride as he had, it was as deep as a confession of murder.

Kat could feel it, he was certain. Her expression filled with emotion, and her eyes turned glassy with old tears. It felt as though part of the impenetrable wall between them had started to crumble.

"No, no, you misunderstand," Lady Walsingham said, interrupting the heady moment. "You must confess secrets. Secret desires, secret longings. Secrets."

Waldorf and Kat tore their eyes away from each other and looked at Lady Walsingham incredulously. Did the woman not realize?—

"I like to spank men when they are naughty," Kat said, her mouth twitching and her eyes sparkling with a different sort of light.

"Yes!" Lady Walsingham gasped, as if the sun had broken through the clouds. "That is precisely the sort of secret that breeds trust. Lord Waldorf?"

Waldorf was sorely tempted to roll his eyes. At least he knew what Lady Walsingham wanted.

"I like to be spanked," he told Kat, barely able to keep a straight face.

Kat nearly cracked as well as Lady Walsingham went on to say something silly and encouraging to them. Waldorf didn't hear it. He was too busy staring at Kat as both of

them tried not to burst into hysterics. What sort of madness had Queen Matilda thrust them into?

#### Fourteen

It was the travel. It had to be all the traveling she had done in the past two days. That was the only reason Kat could think of that could have made her so emotional when Waldorf had confessed his secret to her. Exhaustion was the only explanation for why she'd become so giddy after the Initiation of Trust. Not only had she found it nearly impossible to stop herself from laughing once their confessions were out in the open, she and Waldorf had continued to laugh as they'd sat facing each other on cushions, feeding each other bits of fruit and cheese.

Lady Walsingham was as mad as could be. Kat was convinced of it before luncheon was over, when the woman had the couples attending her party sit facing each other, holding hands, simply staring into each other's eyes for what felt like an eternity after the meal was cleared away by Oxwick Park's servants.

"Look into the eyes of your beloved," she said as she walked around the inner perimeter of the circle. "See straight into their soul. See all the things within your beloved that made you fall in love with them to begin with."

It was utterly mad. It was the most perfect punishment Queen Matilda could have advised. Everyone knew that marriages among members of the ton were not matches of love and devotion. They were political and social maneuverings, most of which were undertaken so that the woman in the couple would not be doomed to a life of spinsterhood and impoverishment.

Well, in every kingdom but Mercia. In Mercia, women could enter a trade or profession if she chose not to marry. Which was why the Mercian Plan had to succeed. Perhaps if it did, then marriages could be for love and not position. And if

that were the case, perhaps Lady Walsingham's mad theories would benefit people rather than simply embarrassing them.

"What are you thinking?" Waldorf asked. "Your thoughts have just changed."

Kat blinked, surprised Waldorf could tell as much simply by staring into her eyes.

"I was thinking that this is an exercise in futility," she said with a serious look. Waldorf huffed a humorless laugh, still holding her gaze as if they were two stars that orbited each other. "And then I was thinking that there is no point in making people fall more deeply in love with their mate, because marriages are not about love, they are about connections."

"You were once eager to marry me for love," Waldorf pointed out.

"And look how that ended," Kat said.

Waldorf's gaze slipped from hers for one, guilty moment. Then he met her eyes again with double the intensity.

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“I was thinking,” Kat continued, “that if the Mercian Plan were to succeed and women could marry for reasons other than needing a husband to survive, then perhaps more marriages would be entered into because of love. And if that were the case, perhaps Lady Walsingham’s mad philosophies would actually have merit, and parties such as this would be helpful rather than absolutely?—”

“No talking, only gazing,” Lady Walsingham said as she swept near to them on her circuit around the circle. “When beloveds learn to speak heart to heart instead of lips to lips, that is when true communion begins.”

Kat had to admit a part of her agreed with that notion. Between the spark of humor and camaraderie in Waldorf’s eyes and the odd notion that Lady Walsingham might be a visionary after all, Kat could feel her resistance to the party soften.

Until Lady Walsingham added, “The greatest communication between beloveds comes when lips converse with genitals.”

Kat snorted so hard and so suddenly that she began to cough. The fit took her by surprise and was made more difficult to overcome by the laughter that tried to bubble out at her at the same time as her throat spasmed.

“I believe I inhaled an insect,” she managed to choke out when Lady Walsingham looked at her questioningly.

“There have been quite a few insects flying about and becoming lodged in our throats since the party began,” the lady who sat a few feet behind Kat said with a particular look.

That only made Kat want to laugh harder, but she knew she could not. As much of a relief as it was to know that she was not the only one who found the party absurd, Lady Walsingham was the one she needed to befriend and influence.

Kat calmed her unfurling spirits by glancing past Waldorf, to the collection of chairs off to the side of the topiary garden, to where Lord Headland had firmly positioned himself. He was ostensibly reading a book, but Kat did not think she'd seen him turn a single page since the activity had begun.

"There," Lady Walsingham said at last. "The ritual has ended. You may now kiss your partner and thank them for revealing themselves to you."

Kat met Waldorf's eyes. She could tell that neither of them were particularly pleased by the amount of public kissing they had been asked to do since arriving. But to refuse or seem anything less than enthusiastic could lead to their exposure as not engaged and their expulsion. Since Kat was not interested in failing another mission and facing Queen Matilda's wrath a second and perhaps worse time, she leaned in and brought her lips to Waldorf's.

Which, thanks to Lady Walsingham's earlier comment, immediately brought to mind bringing her lips to other parts of him.

Kat wondered if Waldorf was experiencing the same problem of imagination when his kiss lasted far longer than she supposed it should. Then again, every other couple seemed to be kissing longer than just a peck as well.

"Now, if you will rise and follow me," Lady Walsingham said, "our next togetherness exercise has been prepared for us on the east lawn."

"God only knows what she'll demand we do next," Waldorf muttered, taking Kat's arm so he could escort her the way the other gentlemen were escorting their ladies.

“And does the woman not recognize how chilled the air is? I believe poor Mrs. Norris is chilled to the bone.”

Kat glanced ahead of them, to where some of the other couples had already jumped to follow Lord and Lady Walsingham to the east lawn. Mrs. Norris was huddled close to her husband, who seemed to be rubbing warmth back into her as they walked.

“We must play along as though we are warming each other,” she said. “It is the only way we will find ourselves close enough to our host and hostess to speak to them about the Mercian Plan.”

“Oddly,” Waldorf said, making a puzzled face as they walked on somewhere in the middle of the pack of guests, “I believe it will be easier to convince both Lord and Lady Walsingham of the merits of unity under Mercian terms than perhaps anyone has anticipated it would be.”

Kat nodded in agreement. “I do not know about Lord Walsingham’s opinions, but Lady Walsingham seems to think in quite a forward way. She certainly believes in free love.”

“I was under the impression that Mercians invented the concept of free love,” Waldorf said with a sly, sideways grin.

“Of course we did not,” Kat said, tilting her chin up and sniffing as she’d always been wont to do. “Free love has existed from time immemorial.”

She expected some sort of sharp reply from Waldorf, but instead, he merely chuckled.

Kat smiled at the sound. She was not certain whether it was their forced proximity, the importance of the mission they’d been given, or the general air of madness all around them at Oxwick Park, but she felt lighter and more determined to create a



favorable outcome to the circumstances she found herself in than she ever had before.

“Welcome, my friends, to our next activity,” Lady Walsingham said once she had led them all to what looked like the strangest mix of items Kat had ever seen strewn across the grass. “As you know, there will be many times in your married lives when you and your beloved are called upon to accomplish great things together.”

Kat grinned, then pressed her free hand to her mouth before peeking up at Waldorf. What greater thing could a pair of lost souls be asked to accomplish together besides attempting to steer the course of history by ensuring Britannia was united correctly?

“To approximate the sort of things that we are all asked to accomplish with our beloveds in life, I have devised this test of each of your ability to work together to complete a series of tasks. First, you see I have provided you all with a pall-mall mallet and ball. You must work together to hit the ball through the hoop farther along the course.”

Everyone looked to find small wickets about thirty yards distant from where they all stood.

“Beyond those hoops, you will find buckets,” Lady Walsingham continued. “Each of those buckets is filled with many wooden balls, and five each that have been painted to resemble wood. You must work together to find them.

“Easy enough,” the lord standing just opposite Waldorf said.

“This is preposterous,” Waldorf muttered, glancing to Kat.

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Kat agreed, particularly when Lady Walsingham went on with, “Once you have found the iron balls, you must race to the lemon trees yonder.” She gestured to a row of trees that had clearly been forced in a hot-house, then dragged out to the far end of the lawn. “Together, you must pick enough lemons to fill the baskets you will find there. Once those are picked, you will run back to this side of the lawn, where tables will be set up. You must not drop a single lemon on your return, because you must use them all to make a glass of lemon punch. When that is completed, the couple who drinks their punch, both sharing from the same cup, will be declared the winners.”

“Do you feel as though we are being treated as village children playing silly games?” Kat asked.

“Very much so,” Waldorf sighed.

And then, to add insult to injury, as a pink-clad footman came forward with a basket that contained something that looked like ribbons, Lady Walsingham continued with, “In order to accomplish these feats completely as one, thus underscoring the importance of working together, you will each be joined together by one ankle and one wrist.”

Kat gaped at Lady Walsingham for a moment as she directed the footman to begin handing out the ribbons, then at Waldorf, as if to ask whether she had just heard Lady Walsingham’s declaration correctly.

“This is ridiculous madness,” Waldorf grumbled, but pressed his lips tightly shut when the footman reached them and handed him two ribbons.

“I do not suppose there is a way for us to call off,” Kat whispered once he’d passed.

“You will be able to fasten your own ankles together,” Lady Walsingham said as she gazed happily at her guests, “but you will need to ask your neighbors to help with your wrists.”

Waldorf sighed and bent to tie his and Kat’s ankles together. He made the knot tight, which Kat believed would work in their favor. When he straightened and they hobbled around to face the couple nearest them, she felt herself flush with embarrassment.

She expected to find the other couple looking as mortified as she and Waldorf did, but was surprised to find them looking excited for the competition.

“You don’t stand a chance, Lord Waldorf,” the man told Waldorf with a competitive light in his eyes.

“That’s what you think, Postern,” Waldorf told the man in return as he fastened the lord and lady’s wrists together. “Lady Katherine and I will run circles around you.”

Kat’s eyes went wide, and she stared at Waldorf as Lord and Lady Postern returned the favor of tying wrists by fastening theirs for them. It was a bit alarming to see how deft they were at tying a knot together, each using one of their hands.

“Orin and I have won every competition Lady Walsingham has set so far during her retreat,” Lady Postern informed Kat in a voice that was far too smug.

“Is that so?” Kat asked with pretend politeness. “And what is the prize for winning.”

“Why, superiority, of course,” Lady Postern said with a smile.

“Please approach the line to start,” Lady Walsingham said.

Lord and Lady Postern moved into position. Waldorf started forward, bringing Kat’s leg with him by default. Kat stopped him, however.

“We have to beat them,” she whispered to Waldorf, still feeling the indignation of Lady Postern’s comment.

“We most certainly will,” Waldorf growled in return.

They took their places at the line in the grass, and as soon as Lady Walsingham waved her handkerchief, all of the couple darted forward.

A good third of them fell to the ground almost immediately as they rushed toward the pall-mall mallets and balls. Kat saw at once that they had stumbled because of their lack of cooperation. She likewise saw that Lord and Lady Postern were able to leap out to an early lead because of the way they counted “One-two, one-two” as a pair.

“Do what they’re doing,” she hissed at Waldorf after their first few, awkward, stumbling steps.

Waldorf nodded, clasped his hand together with Kat’s, then started chanting, “One-two, one-two,” as they surged forward.

It took a concentrated effort to learn what exactly was one and what was two, and then to measure their strides so that they could make progress. Kat found herself more willing to take direction from Waldorf than she would have otherwise been as it helped them to shrink the gap between them and Lord and Lady Postern.

The next challenge they faced was bending to pick up the pall-mall mallet, then working out how to stand and who should hold the mallet so that they could strike the

ball. Waldorf's dominant hand was the one that was tied to Kat's weaker hand, so they had to maneuver and stand close and try more than one method before they were able to hit the ball so that it made any progress at all.

In the end, they determined that it was more efficient to hit the ball lightly, sending it only a few feet at a time, rather than striking it hard and risking it going wildly off-course, as happened to a few of the other couples.

They made it to the wicket with three of the other couples ahead of them, including Lord and Lady Postern.

"On to the bucket," Kat said, urging Waldorf ahead once their ball was through the wicket and they'd dropped the mallet. "One-two, one-two."

They reached the bucket of small balls faster than they'd traveled from the start to the mallet and ball. It was encouraging, and as they delved their hands into the bucket filled with an impossible number of balls, the thrill of the competition beat hard in Kat's breast.

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“Shake the bucket so that the heavier balls drop to the bottom,” Kat said, pulling her hand that was fastened to Waldorf’s back out of the impossible sea of balls.

“Good thinking,” Waldorf said, then gripped the sides of the bucket to shake and jostle it for a moment. Once he put it down, he said, “Nothing was said about spilling the wooden balls, so shovel them out of the bucket if that helps reach the bottom.”

Kat nodded, and within minutes, they were able to locate all five metal balls, which looked remarkably like the wooden ones, and hand them off to one of the footmen who was refereeing the race.

From there, it was more running, but Kat and Waldorf had improved their ability to run in unison a great deal. By the time they reached the lemon trees, only two couples were ahead of them, one of which was Lord and Lady Postern.

“Hold the basket with our joined hands and pick with your free hand,” Kat instructed Waldorf as they reached for the basket.

Waldorf nodded, and they set to work. The tree was larger than it had appeared across the lawn, and once they’d picked all of the fruit on the lower branches, they had to stretch and jump to get enough to fill the bucket.

“Do you have the feeling that we are being humiliated for sport?” Waldorf asked once the bucket was nearly full. Sweat dampened his hair, and his face was red.

Kat was certain her gown bore stains from her own perspiration. She laughed ironically, then bent to pick up a few of the lemons they’d dropped. “I believe that all

of society is designed to make fools of itself for sport,” she said.

“An astute observation, Lady Katherine,” Waldorf said, his eyes dancing with mirth as she rose, added the last few lemons to the basket, then shifted to work out how to best carry the full load back to the other side of the lawn as quickly as possible.

Kat laughed...then stopped herself with a gasp. A great many things suddenly became clear to her as she and Waldorf started back across the lawn, only Lord and Lady Postern ahead of them. Lady Walsingham was a diabolical genius. Her words were all froth and fluff, and the race was as preposterous as Waldorf had said it was. But she and Waldorf were working together as they never had before. They had the same goal in mind and a matching will to be the victors.

As mad as it was to be physically fastened to each other, if they wanted to win, they had to speak to each other and announce their movements the entire time. Neither of them could keep themselves to themselves or shut the other out.

“Hurry!” Waldorf shouted when they were halfway across the lawn. “I think we can beat them.”

Kat put everything she had into matching her swift steps with Waldorf’s and in keeping all their lemons in their basket. They hadn’t lost a single one by the time they reached the table that had been set up after the race had begun. They reached it only moments after Lord and Lady Postern reached their table.

The maddest part of the race happened next, as Kat and Waldorf, and Lord and Lady Postern, reached for sharp knives that had been set out on the table to slice the lemons. Again, the fact that Waldorf’s dominant hand was tied to Kat’s made for an alarming exercise in speed and care as they both sliced open lemons and worked to squeeze the contents into a large glass in front of them.

Kat nearly dropped her knife when Lady Postern cried out in pain.

“Keep your hand steady, woman,” Lord Postern growled as a tiny bit of blood dripped from one of Lady Postern’s fingers.

Kat stilled her dominant hand while relaxing her non-dominant one so Waldorf could continue slicing and squeezing lemons. “Madam, are you injured?” she asked Lady Postern.

“I am well,” Lady Postern said breathlessly.

“Kat,” Waldorf drew Kat’s attention.

He had finished filling the cup with lemon juice to the prescribed line. Kat grabbed the jug of sugared water beside the mess they’d made and filled the glass the rest of the way. They then reached for the glass at precisely the same time...and knocked it over.

“Lord and Lady Postern are the winners!” Lady Walsingham declared a moment later.

“Why did you knock the glass over?” Kat demanded of Waldorf, frustrated beyond belief.

“You were the one who upset it,” Waldorf snapped in return. “I was doing just fine until you flailed right into me.”

“I had my hand around it already,” Kat growled, tugging at her wrist to get away from Waldorf.

A footman was on hand with a pair of scissors to clip the ribbon joining their wrists,



and when he did, Kat pulled her arm away and rubbed her wrist.

“Infernal woman,” Waldorf snapped at her, then sucked on one of his fingers, where he’d apparently nicked himself, then doused the wound in lemon juice.

“Serves you right,” Kat snapped.

She attempted to turn around and march away, but her ankle was still tied to Waldorf’s. Instead of making a powerful exit, she spilled flat to her face in the grass. The momentum of her fall was enough to take Waldorf down with her.

“And this is why it is of vital importance that we remain in accord with our beloveds at all times,” Lady Walsingham said, crouching to help the two of them, which she did most effectively by untying the ribbon joining their ankles. “Occasional squabbles will always take place between even the most devoted of couples, but they can all be resolved with a genuine determination to work out what is best for both.”

Kat was fairly certain she loathed Lady Walsingham in that moment. Almost as much as she loathed Waldorf.

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“Do not blame me for your mistakes and miscalculations,” she hissed at him, keeping her voice low, once Lady Walsingham moved on to assist the other couples that had reached the table with their lemons.

“Then stop making them,” Waldorf growled, keeping his voice low as well.

Kat made a sound of frustration as she freed her ankle and stood. Waldorf stood with her, and as more couples reached the table, they shifted to the side.

“I’ve no wish to argue,” Kat said, scowling. “Not when we have a mission to accomplish. Lord Walsingham has apparently snuck away. Why do you not go and find him and speak to him, and I will attempt to separate Lady Walsingham from her guests so that I might speak to her about you know what.”

Waldorf narrowed his eyes at her, though whether because he did not want to take orders from her or because he thought her suggestion was a good one, but resented that she’d been the one to make it, she didn’t know.

“We cannot fail at this,” Waldorf said at last as he took a step back, then turned and marched off. “We will not get another chance.”

Kat felt an emptiness open inside herself as she watched Waldorf’s retreating back. She bit her lip, sudden longing surprising her. Waldorf was right. They would not get a second chance. This was their second chance. If they failed, it would be the end forever.

Waldorf despised losing. Having grown up as the youngest in a household filled with noisy, competitive boys, he knew the consequences of falling short in any way. A part of him was able to admit that old wounds inflicted not by Kat, but by his brothers and cousins were what had caused him to lash out when their glass of lemonade had toppled. It was not truly incompetence on Kat's part. In fact, Kat had performed brilliantly when called to in the mad race.

A deeper part of him was left utterly unsettled as he watched Kat march away from the barmy race—which was not finished simply because the winner had been declared. He could not help but make the comparison in his mind to another time when he and Kat had engaged in a sort of competition together, working as one for a common goal, only to fall short at the final hurdle.

“Yes, that is what we wish to see,” Lady Walsingham cheered on the other competitors as they reached the table in dribs and drabs. “Work together to accomplish a difficult goal. Let your movements inform each other's. The true prize is gentle accord and pride in a task completed together, not victory over others.”

Though she was looking elsewhere when she said it, Waldorf had the sinking feeling Lady Walsingham was speaking to him. Or perhaps to Lord and Lady Postern, who had stepped to the side so that they might gloat over the late-arriving competitors.

When Lord Postern shot Waldorf a smug look, Waldorf had had enough. He accepted a damp towel from one of the footmen, who was fighting not to laugh at the ridiculousness of his betters, wiped his hands, and marched away from the bedlam on the lawn and back toward the house.

He hadn't the first idea where to find Lord Walsingham, but he was determined to search the man out and have words with him. Kat had been correct in her statement that, if all else failed, they needed to at least attempt to accomplish their mission. A large part of him was beginning to think Lady Walsingham was a lost cause, but she

was Kat's to deal with. Lord Walsingham might still be able to be reasoned with.

He had begun to formulate a plan of attack on his walk back to the house when a hint of movement in the corner of his eyes caught his attention. He paused several yards before one of the doors leading into the house and leaned back to see what the movement had been.

Headland stepped into view several yards off to Waldorf's left. The man looked confused but determined as he searched the area of the garden near the kitchen's extensive planting of herbs. Waldorf guessed at once that the bastard was searching for Kat. From the puzzled look in his eyes and the crease between his brows, Headland hadn't found her, but she was nearby.

Just the thought of all the trouble Headland had put Kat through and the idea that he might cause more had Waldorf's already brittle temper close to snapping. Instead of heading into the house, he changed his path and marched toward Headland.

"If you've any thoughts of finding and harassing Lady Katherine," he began before he'd even reached Headland, "you had better give them up at once and leave the woman alone." He added as much threat as he could to his final words.

Headland nearly jumped at Waldorf's approach. His confused expression expanded to one of surprise and indignation as he turned to face Waldorf head-on. "I've no idea what you are talking about, Lord Waldorf," he said, affecting disinterest.

"I think we both know that's a lie," Waldorf growled at him.

He stormed right up to Headland, intending to intimidate the man into backing off and leaving the garden entirely. Headland merely backpedaled a few steps, until he was almost pressed against a trellis twined with vines that were past their growing season.

“You cannot assault me in my sister’s house,” he said, a crack in his voice as if he thought Waldorf might employ violence against him.

“I’ve no need to assault you,” Waldorf said, narrowing his eyes and pinning Headland to the trellis with his eyes alone. “I merely need to remind you that Lady Katherine is not interested in your advances, and that any man who continues his advances on a woman after she has declined them is likely to gain a reputation that he does not want.”

He could have said something much harsher and likely should have, but halfway through his statement, he caught sight of Kat emerging cautiously from behind the corner of a toolshed at the edge of the garden. She glanced Waldorf’s way, looking as harassed and worried as a fishwife on the street, nodded carefully to Waldorf, then dashed into the house.

Headland did not see her, nor did he appear to have the first clue that anyone was in the garden besides the two of them. “You do not know that Katherine would or has refused my suit,” he said, his breathlessness and tension giving away that he was bluffing. “We have a charming rapport, and the countryside of Oxwick Park is an ideal setting to rekindle old flames.”

Waldorf’s face pinched. “She’s taken,” he said, relying on the deception Queen Matilda had put them up to as a defense.

Headland snorted. “I no more believe you and Katherine are engaged than I believe the sun is a gold pocket watch.”

“Believe it,” Waldorf said, leaning into Headland and balling one hand into a fist. “She is mine and she always has been.” Kat would flay him alive for declaring such possessiveness over her, but it was the only language men like Headland understood.

“You are lying,” Headland said, eyes narrowed. “I cannot imagine why. I’ve no idea why you would set out so suddenly the morning after a crucial ball to attend my sister’s retreat, but I can assure you, I will uncover your reasons and destroy you. Katherine should have been and still should be mine.”

“She does not want you,” Waldorf said, astounded at the man’s thickness. “She never did.”

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“She would have had you not interfered with our love,” Headland insisted.

Waldorf made a sound of disgust and disbelief and stepped back. “You’re as mad as your sister if you believe that.”

“My sister is not mad!” Headland shouted with surprising emotion. “She is a visionary. Her unconventional methods can be alarming, but she is one of the best and brightest women I have ever known. She and Katherine would get along splendidly.”

Waldorf’s brow shot up in surprise. The last thing he would have expected from a predatory snake like Headland was the sort of affection for his sister that he displayed. But then, he supposed even the darkest of villains cared for something.

“Leave Lady Katherine be,” he said turning as if to go. “She does not want you. If it is a second wife you seek, find some other woman who might actually appreciate what you have to offer.”

It was an exceedingly generous thing to say, if Waldorf did say so himself. Headland did not deserve that sort of grace. The only reason he offered it was because he, too, found himself reluctantly liking Lady Walsingham.

Neither Headland nor Lady Walsingham were important to his part of the mission in front of him, though. Lord Walsingham was. Waldorf entered the house, setting off on a search of the ground floor rooms, so that he might locate the man and say what needed to be said.

He searched for an embarrassingly long time, since the halls and rooms of the grand house were so complicated and twisting. The manor house had clearly been existent for centuries and had been built upon by succeeding generations with little continuity of design. What the house lacked in uniformity, it made up for in pure fascination. Waldorf passed rooms with medieval suits of armor and tapestries, salons with decorations that had been antique in his grandfather's time, and parlors that must have been refurbished in recent years, as they would have made even the most astute members of the tongs green with envy.

He eventually located Lord Walsingham in a small study that was part of the mid-eighteenth century part of the house. The room was cozy and secluded, and Walsingham sat beside a crackling fire with a book in one hand and a pipe in the other.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," Waldorf said, pretending to wander into the room searching for something and to notice Walsingham by accident long after he was in the room. "I seem to have lost my way." He paused, then stepped toward the small table beside the chair where Walsingham sat and asked, "Is that French brandy?"

Walsingham glanced up from his book, chuckled, and said, "You will not tell the constable, will you? I swear, I obtained the bottle legally."

Waldorf laughed along with him, beyond grateful that Walsingham seemed to be in a genial and generous mood. "Your secret is safe with me," he said, picking up the bottle to examine it. It was bold of him, but he asked, "May I?" with as sweet an expression as he could manage.

"Of course, of course," Walsingham said, setting his book and pipe aside entirely, and standing so that he could pour a glass for Waldorf. "I relish the possibility of sane company for a moment or two."



Waldorf laughed, partially because he felt as though he could do with the same. “I can imagine,” he said once Walsingham had handed him a glass of brandy. He took a seat across from Walsingham and went on with, “I never did like when my father hosted house parties at our country estate.”

“You’re from Wessex,” Walsingham said, narrowing his eyes as if recalling what he knew about Waldorf. “Godwin Castle is on the Isle of Portland, correct?”

“It is,” Waldorf said, a bit of dread in his voice, “but for reasons you may have heard gossip about, we do not reside in Godwin Castle most of the time. Father has been spending more time there of late, although he is in London at present, but no, our main family estate is near Winchester.”

As easy as it was to converse about families and estates, Waldorf was highly aware of the necessity of bringing the conversation around to something, anything, that could provide an opening to divine Walsingham’s thoughts about the Mercian Plan.

“I would stay in the country indefinitely, if I could,” Walsingham said, smiling over the glass of brandy that he’d poured for himself.

“Truly?” Waldorf asked, genuinely surprised. “Even though you are First Minister of Joint Parliament?”

“I was given that position because I was the least controversial of the candidates put up for the job,” he said with a knowing nod. “When and if unification is accomplished, I most definitely would not put myself forward as King of Britannia.”

Waldorf nearly choked on his brandy. That was precisely the opening he needed. But he was too busy swallowing and trying not to gasp for breath to take advantage of it before Walsingham continued on a different tack.

“My dear lady wife does not like London and only wishes to reside here, at Oxwick Park,” he said, smiling at nothing, like a lovesick fool. “I will do anything and everything to make her life as happy as possible, as I’m certain you’ve noticed.” He focused on Waldorf with an abashed look.

The first entry into the conversation Waldorf needed to have had passed him by, but Walsingham had just given him a second.

“I take it you favor allowing women to achieve whatever they dream of achieving?” he asked, already lining up his argument for the Mercian Plan.

“I believe in making the woman I love happy,” Walsingham said. “I know that Maryella is not everyone’s idea of what a lady of the ton should be, but she is lively and innovative, and she astounds me daily with her philosophy of love.”

“She does have a unique view of it,” Waldorf said, feeling the conversation slipping away. He attempted to wrestle it back by saying, “I am routinely amazed at how competent and thoughtful women actually are.”

“Lady Katherine certainly seems to have a mind of her own and a head on her shoulders,” Walsingham said. “How did the two of you come to be together?”

Every argument in Waldorf’s head poofed out of existence at the simple question. He opened his mouth to answer it, but was assailed by so many memories and emotions that he needed a moment to sort through them all.

“We met in Oxford,” he said, his voice taking on a distant sound. “More than twenty years ago. I was residing there on business, and Kat, that is, Lady Katherine, was in attendance at Oxford University.”

“Ah! Lady Katherine is an Oxford Society lady. I should have known.” Before

Waldorf could use that to steer the conversation back to where he intended it to go, Walsingham asked, “Did you love her at first sight, as I did my Maryella?”

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Again, Waldorf's mind took a moment to catch up to the question. His heart pounded as he remembered that first sight of Kat. She'd been in some square or another, enjoying the autumn sunshine and expounding on some point of politics with her friends. She'd been so sure of herself and so bold in her opinions. She'd taken Waldorf's breath away from the start.

"Yes," he said, surprised by his own answer. "I think I did love her at first sight. I'd never met another woman like her. She was so intelligent and unafraid to show it. Later, I learned that her confidence and forthrightness had caused her family to disown her for not following their rules and dictates. That would have broken a lesser woman, but Kat used their rejection as fuel for her fire. She never backed down from any sort of challenge presented to her."

"She sounds admirable indeed," Walsingham said with a smile. That smile turned to a small frown. "But you are only just engaged now?"

Waldorf let out a breath, his body sagging. He took a gulp of his brandy before continuing with the story.

"We had a falling out. A bad one." He glanced to Walsingham, then decided to leave Headland's part in the story out, partially to spare Lady Walsingham, and partially because the shame of allowing such a man to turn him from the best thing that had ever happened to him ran deep. "I was a damned fool, too young and impetuous to be trusted with something as precious as Kat. I believed a false report of her infidelity."

"How awful," Walsingham said, looking both disapproving and sympathetic. "How did you manage that?"

Waldorf shrugged. “The offending third party was a rival suitor. He was devilishly clever and secured the assistance of a maid that worked in Lady Katherine’s boarding house to plant false evidence against her.” He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face, which felt strange since he’d shaved off his whiskers. “I was wrong,” he said quietly, “and I let my wrongness and my pride ruin the best thing in my life.”

Walsingham hummed and nodded sagely. “But the two of you have reconciled,” he said. “That is a wonderful thing. How did you manage that?”

The question pulled at every one of his heartstrings, causing a pit of longing to open in Waldorf’s gut. It was, of course, impossible for him to admit that they had not actually reconciled and that the mistakes of the past were still there. He had to come up with some sort of story, though, so he allowed himself to dream.

“It happened completely by chance,” he said, cradling his glass of brandy and staring at its contents as he wove his fantasy. “My cousin Alden recently married Kat’s dear friend, Lady Bernadette Attleborough.”

“Oh, yes, I know the family well,” Walsingham said. “There was some recent scandal with Lord Attleborough, but I cannot remember what it was, and I do not suppose it is important for this story.”

“No,” Waldorf said with a pretend laugh. He took a breath and went on. “Kat and I were forced into each other’s company quite a bit during the wedding festivities. We were angry and combative with each other at first, snapping over every little thing.”

He remembered the conversation in the carriage, which had happened such a short time ago, and yet felt like a lifetime behind them.

“Our bickering led to truths being spoken,” he said, his heart beating harder at the memory. “The argument loosened our tongues so that we hurled accusations at each

other that had remained unspoken for twenty years. Through that, we each began to see the mistakes that had been made so long ago.”

“Yes,” Walsingham interjected softly. “Arguments are often better than tender words to clear the air, like a summer thunderstorm.”

Waldorf’s brow went up. That was an ideal comparison.

He shrugged and continued, spinning a different version of what had actually happened. “From there, we opened up and spoke to each other honestly. We listened to each other’s concerns, old and new. We formed a truer picture of what had actually transpired twenty years ago. When all that talking ended, we realized we still loved each other.”

He drew in a breath. Dear God, he still loved Kat. He’d never stopped loving her, not for one moment. Even though she aggravated him to no end. The very reasons she aggravated him were some of the reasons he loved her.

“What a wonderful thing that you were able to overcome the trials of the past to find your beloved again,” Walsingham said with a warm smile. His words were reminiscent of the way his wife spoke.

Waldorf saw more than ever that Lady Walsingham was not as mad as he’d initially thought. In fact, it was as likely as not that he and Kat were the mad ones for fighting so hard against love for so long.

“If you will excuse me, Lord Walsingham,” Waldorf said, setting his glass aside and standing, “I need to go find my beloved. I have reason to believe she might need my assistance at this time.”

“By all means, go,” Walsingham said, standing as well. “I think I might go in search

of my wife to see how her ridiculous games and exercises are proceeding.” When Waldorf glanced to him in surprise as they left the study, Walsingham laughed and said, “I adore my wife, and I believe her to be a genius on the subject of love, but she does have a habit of exposing innocent and unsuspecting couples to mad implementations of her philosophies.”

“Indeed,” Waldorf said with a laugh.

They parted ways at the end of the hall, as Walsingham headed outside and Waldorf up the stairs to see if, perhaps, Kat was hiding from Headland in her bedchamber. He’d failed to talk Walsingham around to the Mercian Plan, but he did not consider the conversation a failure. He felt as though he had a deeper understanding and rapport with Walsingham, which could, perhaps, lead to other conversations.

But more importantly, something had settled in his heart where Kat was concerned. The flame of the love he’d once had for her had never gone out, but he would need Kat in order to fan it into a full blaze again.

## Sixteen

Whatever Lady Walsingham’s intentions, for Kat, her lovers’ retreat was turning into a storm of emotions that left her feeling like a ship that had been lured by sirens, then battered against rocks. The thrill of competition had given way to old resentments and bitterness, all of which had been stirred to the surface by a few, sharp words. Or, more likely, her own disappointment in not beating Lord and Lady Postern at the frivolous game.

Kat had let herself become angry, and before she’d been fully out of sight of the continued noise and messiness of the race, regret and shame for, once again, letting her hurt feelings get the better of her welled up to take the place of any anger or thrill she had felt before. It stung to feel as though she would never truly be free from the

misunderstandings of the past until she learned to school her emotions in the present and to let go of resentments that were as false as phantoms.

Just as she had thought she might turn around and go back to apologize to Waldorf, she'd caught the barest glimpse of Lord Headland lying in wait for her at the edge of the topiary garden. It had taken a bit of quick thinking and several unladylikemovements that Napoleon would have been proud of to dodge out of the way before Lord Headland had fully seen her.

He must have seen at least a hint of her or known she was walking his way, however. He started after her as Kat made for the kitchen garden.



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“Katherine, my darling,” Lord Headland had called for her in a pseudo-whisper. “Where have you gone? I wish to speak to you, to reclaim the love we once had.”

Kat had dashed for a row of tall hedges, managing to keep just out of sight. She was grateful that her gown was a shade of greenish-yellow that helped her to blend in with the rosemary bushes and withered grape vines, but Lord Headland was nothing if not persistent.

“Dearest Katherine,” Lord Headland whispered as he stepped into the herb garden. “I do not believe for one moment that you and that odious Lord Waldorf are engaged. It cannot be, for I know you hate him after the cruelty he showed you years ago. I will never be cruel to you, my love. I will keep you as my own princess. You will never have to lift a finger for the remainder of your days. You will never have to rise from our bed, if you so choose.”

Kat made a sour face and peeked around the corner of the grape vines. As Lord Headland had his back to her in his search, she darted out from behind the bushes, leaping toward the small tool shed the garden contained and concealing herself behind it.

For a long while, there was silence. Kat dared not move from behind the shed, however. Lord Headland was still nearby, and the gap between the shed and the nearest door into the house was too wide.

But then help came from the perhaps unlikely form of Waldorf.

“If you’ve any thoughts of finding and harassing Lady Katherine, you had better give

them up at once and leave the woman alone.”

Kat jerked straight and whipped to peek around the edge of the shed when she heard Waldorf enter the kitchen garden and take Lord Headland to task. Her eyes went wide as the two of them stepped closer to each other in confrontation. They were too far away to hear what more was said, but Kat recognized the opportunity to flee.

She crept out from behind the shed, and when Waldorf met her eyes for the briefest of moments, then pretended not to see her, she dashed for the nearest open door to the house.

That door took her straight into the kitchens. The Oxwick servants were surprised to see her, but it was a fairly easy thing to claim to be there to fetch a bit of fish for Napoleon. Once that was sorted and the fish was given to her, wrapped in paper, Kat proceeded to slip up to her room, her nerves bristling with the fear that she might encounter either Lord Headland or Waldorf once more.

“Napoleon?” she called out once she was safely in her bedroom. She locked the door behind her on the off chance that Lord Headland would be mad enough to attempt to force entry, even though she had denied him. “Napoleon!”

Kat was nearly moved to tears at the beautiful sight of Napoleon stretched out on the windowsill of one of the sunny windows, looking as though he’d made himself quite at home. As soon as Kat approached him with the wrapped fish, however, he rolled to stand, stretched and arched his back, then jumped down from the window to wander over, as if mildly curious about what Kat was doing in the lovely room he’d been given.

“Oh, my darling,” Kat said, rushing to the other side of the room and crouching before her true love. “What a day it has been already.”

Napoleon pushed his face against her palm as Kat pet him, purring regally. He was more interested in the contents of the paper than being flooded with affection, however, so Kat sat on the floor and opened the paper, revealing the fish.

“I am so devilishly tired from traveling and the strain of the missions I have been set on,” she confided in Napoleon as he happily devoured the fish, giving only cursory attention to her. “It is so difficult for one to make correct decisions while deprived of sleep.”

She rubbed her eyes with the base of her hands for a moment, then sighed when the action only threatened to cause the tears she had barely been holding back to flow.

“I do not know what I think of Waldorf anymore,” she confided in Napoleon, who smacked his mouth appreciatively as he ate his meal. “He did me a great wrong and altered the course of my life, but that was so long ago, and my life has been wonderful in so many ways, that I should let that bygone be bygone. He seems to recognize that he was as much in the wrong as I was, but then he behaves as if he has never set a foot wrong in his life.”

Napoleon finished his fish and proceeded to lick the paper, raising his eyes hopefully to Kat as he did, as if there were more treats to be had.

Kat smiled at her friend and scratched his head. “He has reminded me of all the reasons I fell in love with him to begin with,” she confessed. Her instinct was to feel ashamed of herself for that, as if she’d failed some great mission yet again, but her heart beat fondly for the object of her failure. “I always knew he could be brash and boorish, that he was sometimes rude to people, and that he was stubborn in his opinions. I knew that from the beginning, but I found it easy to overlook, because I embodied those same traits.”

She sighed and gathered up the paper, crushing it into a ball, then stood and took it to

throw in the fire as Napoleon returned to his favored window for a bath.

“I had hoped that because we shared those flaws, we could overcome them together and be more congenial people towards all,” she went on, moving to sit on the windowsill beside her friend.

She attempted to pet and cuddle Napoleon, but he gave her such a vicious look of indignation, then returned to bathing himself, that she gave it up and merely confided in him instead.

“He is still the man I fell in love with,” she said, gazing out the window and wondering where Waldorf was. “Only, he is older and wiser and altogether more stable now. I can see the man he would have been, had we never had our break. I can see the kindness and instinct to protect and make the world safer within him. Why else would he have taken up the profession he has if he did not wish to make the world better? And I must confess that I find him nearly irresistibly handsome without those damnable whiskers. It is almost enough to make me glad I thwarted the Beaver Society, or whatever it was he belonged to.”

“It was the Badger Society,” Waldorf spoke from the door joining their rooms.

Kat shot to her feet, the breath knocked right out of her. The very last thing she wanted in that moment was for Waldorf to have overheard her ramblings about him. She did not want his head to swell, and she did not want him to think her silly or weak because...because she still cared for him?

That did not seem right.

Waldorf stepped farther into her room, his expression unreadable, but soft. “You destroyed a decades’ old organization that had been working toward the same cause that you love, all because you wished me to shave my whiskers? You could have

simply asked.”

“I am so sorry,” Kat said by rote, then blinked. Had Waldorf just made a joke about the horrible thing that had happened to them not three days prior?

Waldorf sighed and moved to sit on the edge of her bed. There was something exhausted about him, but with a feeling of tiredness that reached into his bones and past the misunderstandings of decades rather than simply being the exhaustion of a few days of travel. It drew Kat in and made her heart beat faster.

“I’ve just been downstairs, conversing with Lord Walsingham,” he said.

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Kat's brow lifted. "Were you able to gauge his opinion on the Mercian Plan?" she asked hurrying to sit on the bed beside him.

Waldorf laughed with a warm wistfulness that she did not understand. "Not quite," he said. "But I was able to ascertain that he loves his wife dearly and would support her in anything she does."

"Surely that will work in our favor," Kat said.

Waldorf was silent for a while more, staring at Napoleon as he continued his bath. He then said, "I was backed into a bit of a corner when Walsingham asked how we met...and how we were reunited to the point of engagement."

"Oh." Kat blinked, her heart suddenly racing.

"I should tell you so that we will be able to align our stories with each other, should Lord or Lady Walsingham ask you the same question," Waldorf said.

"Yes, indeed." Kat caught her breath, resting one hand on the bed and leaning slightly into Waldorf. "What is our story?"

Waldorf smiled at Napoleon with surprising fondness as he finished his bath, then noticed something outside and shifted to a tense position as he watched it, chirping. Waldorf was not smiling over Napoleon's antics, though. His gaze was too unfocused, and the flush that came to his cheeks was too intimate.

"I kept my story as simple as possible," he said. "I told him that we met again at

Alden and Lady Bernadette's wedding, that we were thrown together often during the festivities, and that we ended up in a vicious argument in which many things were spoken that had remained unsaid for years."

"The carriage," Kat said. Like any good liar, Waldorf had kept as close to the truth as possible. They had said things in the carriage on the way home from Lady Ryman's that had been unsaid since the afternoon they'd parted in Oxford. Those things had needed to be said, but there were so many more that should be said next.

Waldorf shifted to her, resting his hand over hers. "I should have said those things to you years ago," he confessed in a quiet voice. "I should have been wise enough not to believe Headland's lies about you."

Kat shook her head. "You had evidence in your hands, and you had only just witnessed Lord Headland kissing me near the bridge."

"I should have trusted you when you said the letters were forgeries," he said. He raised a hand and cradled the side of her face. "I should have been the one to kiss you, not him."

Without pause, he followed those words by leaning in and slanting his mouth over Kat's.

Kat drew in a breath, surprised by the intimacy and passion of his kiss, but so hungry for it after so long that she drank it in as if it were sunlight after years of storms. It was not the same sort of kiss that she had assaulted him with in the carriage. That sort of passion had been angry and hungry. It had demanded victory and refused to take prisoners.

This kiss was one of tenderness and forgiveness. It was an apology beyond words and an admission of guilt and regret. It cracked open Kat's heart and released two

decades' worth of pent up need that no handsome stranger had ever been able to satisfy, though God knew she had tried.

"I want you," Waldorf whispered against her lips. "I've wanted you for decades. You are the only woman who has captured my heart and mind and made love to me as though I were important."

Kat caught her breath at those words. She knew too well the sentiment they imparted. Satisfying the body was one thing, treating the soul was another.

"Yes," she whispered, shifting closer to him and brushing her hands up the front of his jacket until she cupped his face. "Yes for now and always."

The fire in Waldorf's eyes matched what she felt in her belly. She hadn't realized how hotly she burned for him, but in that moment, when their eyes met and each knew the other's wants, she was consumed.

Everything was a blur from that point. Waldorf stood, pulling Kat with him. The two of them worked the buttons of his jacket and waistcoat together, and when he stepped back to shrug out of his jacket, Kat reached behind her to tug frantically at the ties of her gown, cursing the restrictions of fashion as she did. Perhaps Lady Walsingham had the right idea after all for not wearing stays.

Waldorf pulled at his neckcloth and ripped his shirt off over his head, letting his clothing fall where it may. His passion was so intense that Napoleon jolted from whatever he'd been watching outside and fled through the open doorway into the other room, and likely straight under that bed, so that he might avoid whatever outburst he did not want to be a part of.

Kat was grateful. She was not certain she could look her friend in the eyes if Napoleon had been witness to everything she wished to do with and to Waldorf. As



soon as her clothing was loose, she pushed and tugged at it, wriggling free of each piece, and tossing them to the floor, as Waldorf had done with his clothing.

The mad struggle to relieve themselves of clothing turned ridiculous, and before Kat knew it, the two of them were giggling as they stripped themselves bare, then threw back the bedcovers and tumbled into Kat's bed together. Waldorf attempted to roll her to her back, but Kat had other ideas.

She managed to pin Waldorf to his back with his head against her pillows, and once he accepted that he would have to bow to her wishes, he relaxed, resting his hands on the pillow above his head. Kat kissed him once lingeringly, then shifted down his body, kissing his neck, shoulder, and chest as she did, and combing her fingers through the hair on his chest as she moved lower.

She grabbed hold of his chest hair as she lowered to his navel, then tugged just a bit, as she'd once done to tease him. Waldorf sucked in a sharp breath, then growled. His prick went harder and hotter against her. It happened that her chest was at the level of his growing cock, so with no shame whatsoever, she wriggled so that it stretched between her breasts, then squeezed her arms in a bit to trap it there and moved as best she could to encompass and stroke him.

"Dear God, woman," Waldorf growled appreciatively. "All that is needed is something slippery and I could spend myself this way alone."

"I shall make note of that," Kat said, sending him a wicked look.

She had other things in mind to tease and please her lover, however. She eased up, then slipped farther down so that she could take his glistening tip between her lips. Waldorf made a sound of bliss as she sucked and licked at him, one that grew more desperate as she drew him deeper into her mouth.

“Wicked woman,” Waldorf managed to sputter as his pleasure overcame him.

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Kat laughed with him still in her mouth, reaching to grab and squeeze his balls when he attempted to thrust deeper. He gasped and went still, allowing her to enjoy him to the fullest. Whereas many women of her acquaintance balked at the idea of pleasuring a man in such a way, Kat had always loved it. It gave her complete power over the man and made him putty in her hands. Or rather, mouth.

Her own sex tightened and pulsed with arousal. She was bathed in pleasure at just the sound of Waldorf's increasingly wild sounds, his heady scent, and his salty taste. She'd missed him in that way so desperately over the years that she had spent far more time than she should have seeking out just the right instrument to pleasure herself that matched his dimensions precisely.

She did not have to seek that out now. She had the real thing right there, attached to the real man. When she felt he was close, and when she did not wish to wait a moment longer, she climbed over him, letting the bedcovers fall back so that he could feast his eyes on the sight of her naked and aroused body, and held him so that she could bear down and draw him inside of her.

She gasped and panted, vocalizing how good it felt to have him inside her again, stretching and filling her. Waldorf growled with desire, reaching to grab her hips, but only to steady her as she took him in to the hilt, then pulled back to begin to ride him. Every sensation that filled her was a revelation of excitement and remembrance. He had loved when she'd ridden him in the past, and he seemed to love it just as much now.

"Glorious," he panted. That was the only word he was able to get out as Kat increased her speed and angled herself to get the most pleasure from him.

A thousand memories of nights in the past flooded back to her, and she grabbed her breasts to play with them, pinching her nipples and making them red and pert, because she remembered he liked that. Waldorf, in turn, slipped a hand against her sex rubbing it against her clitoris as she continued to bounce on him, because that had never failed to bring her to completion.

It did not fail now either. Her cries became more and more desperate, until at last, her body burst into bliss and she cried out his name. Wave after wave of pleasure throbbed through her, making her giddy and happier than she'd been in God only knew how long.

The moment her strength began to fade with her orgasm, Waldorf grasped hold of her and deftly flipped their positions without pulling fully out of her. As soon as Kat was on her back, feeling like a puddle of pleasure, he continued to thrust into her, balancing himself above her, until, within a minute, he spilled his seed inside her with a raw, beautiful cry of completion.

After that, the two of them collapsed together in the bed, panting and clinging to each other, as if they'd found something that had been lost for ages but had finally been reclaimed. They had found something they'd been missing for too long. As Kat snuggled against Waldorf, exhausted not just from days, but from years, the seed of hope in her heart that they could reclaim what they'd lost began to sprout and grow.

## Seventeen

Never had an afternoon been spent in such perfection. Waldorf's heart was light and his body as sated as it'd ever been as he and Kat napped after making love. The moment had been everything he'd dreamed of in his weaker hours—no, his finer hours—for the last twenty years. And after a supper that was likely as mad as the luncheon had been, Waldorf didn't really notice, he and Kat had returned to their rooms and repeated the afternoon's delights in his own bed.

He could not have asked for things to wrap themselves up so perfectly if he'd tried. Kat would be his very own again. They could resume the course they had been so wickedly blown off before and be happy together. Kat was not as old as all that, even though she was approaching forty. She might still conceive a child. He could still be a father.

As morning light peeked through the curtains of his guestroom, and whichever of the couples it was on the other side of the wall greeted the new day in their own, unique way, Waldorf smiled himself awake, content with the new chapter of his life.

He would be a better man, a good husband. For, of course, Kat would wish to marry him as soon as they were able. He would provide her with a home and whatever employment she wanted. The two of them might go into business together, combining their wiles and their wits to investigate matters of delicacy for various members of theton. They might engage in the politics of Britannia in some way, campaigning tirelessly for unity. Or they could do both together, and no one would be the wiser.

It was only as an afterthought that Waldorf considered he would avoid the Curse of Godwin Castle by marrying Kat. Let Lawrence and Dunstan fight it out amongst themselves which of them would end up saddled with the wretched place. Waldorf's money was on Dunstan becoming the unlucky owner. Dunstan already had the very worst of luck of any of them, particularly in love. His late wife had ruined him in more ways than one. Lawrence was too good and too jolly to let a curse affect him, so it would have to be Dunstan.

Waldorf smirked at the thought and turned, reaching for Kat, intent on sharing his thoughts about the family with her. But when his outstretched hand met nothing but cool sheets and he opened his eyes not to find Kat sharing his bed, but a smug-looking Napoleon, who stood as though he believed cats should still be worshiped, staring at him, unimpressed, Waldorf frowned.

“Kat?” he called out, sitting up.

His movements caused Napoleon to leap off the bed and skitter into the other room. Waldorf clutched the bedcovers to his middle, as if Napoleon were a mischievous devil who had only climbed onto the bed in the first place to see his tender bits, and perhaps to play with them as if they were balls of wool.

“Kat? Where have you gone?” he called out again, swinging his legs to the side of the bed to stand.

“I’m just in here,” Kat’s voice sounded through the open doorway, wide awake and with all of her usual, businesslike efficiency.

Waldorf frowned as he reached for the banyan someone, likely Kat, had set out on the chair beside the bed. He robed himself, then walked on bare feet across the cold floor to the doorway separating their two rooms.

Kat was already fully dressed, sitting at the vanity, finishing styling her hair. She was impeccably put together, and from the sharp way she stared at her reflection in the mirror, not a soul would have guessed how free and passionate she had been the evening before.

Waldorf was a bit hurt, if he were honest. His heart had imagined the two of them lying about in bed, kissing and touching, and perhaps repeating the performances of the day before. He’d so enjoyed having her cuddled up to him, humming with contentment. A part of him could not help but feel as though she should continue to be as sweet and affectionate to him as ever, after the new understanding they had come to.

Instead, she glanced at him through the mirror, frowned slightly, and said, “You slept so long I was beginning to think I would have to take Napoleon’s water bowl and toss

it over you to wake you.”

Waldorf’s jaw dropped, but no words left his mouth. It was silly of him to be hurt because life was returning to normal. It was selfish of him to imagine that Kat would forgo everything else simply to bask in his presence.

His head and his heart disagreed on that matter.

“It is only just past nine o’clock,” he observed, nodding to the clock on the mantelpiece of Kat’s fireplace.

“Yes, and Lady Walsingham said yesterday that breakfast begins at half-eight, and we should all be finished well before ten, when the Ordeal of Affection begins.” She sniggered a little as she spoke.

The absurdity of Lady Walsingham’s continued efforts to throw the couples under charge into increasingly ridiculous scenarios went a long way to cure Waldorf of his bruised emotions. “God only knows what that is,” he said, retreating into his bedchamber so he could wash and dress appropriately, and shave, which was not something he’d been required to think about for years.

“Today is the day we must put our all into swaying Lord and Lady Walsingham toward the Mercian Plan,” Kat called to him from her room. “The retreat ends tomorrow, everyone will return to London the day after, and Joint Parliament will open three days after that. This truly is our final chance to redeem ourselves and the cause of unity.” She appeared in the doorway in time to say, “This is our final chance, and we cannot fail this time.”

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Whether Kat meant the words in such a way or not, Waldorf felt them expand in his gut. This was the final chance for the two of them to make a go of it together as well. Things had progressed to a point he never could have dreamed of only two weeks prior, but he could not take his eyes from the prize for one moment for fear that it would all dissolve before his eyes.

And yet, even as he thought that, a part of him rebelled against the idea. Hadn't the trouble before been because he failed to trust Kat when he should? Kat had laid herself bare for him, heart and body, and tangled with him in bed twice in the last day. Their interactions in the last few hours had been nothing but those of two people who had been together for twenty years instead of apart. Why should he fool himself into thinking they were not firmly on the road to complete reconciliation?

His head warned caution. His heart longed for love and peace, but remembered what it felt like to be bruised.

"Are you coming?" Kat asked several minutes later, as Waldorf stood by his mirror, finishing with his neckcloth.

"Yes, of course," he said, then turned to her.

Kat was as beautiful as she'd ever been. Her hair was still a shade that reminded him of burnished gold in a sunset. Her skin was as creamy as ever, and the small lines around her eyes and mouth merely hinted at a life spent smiling and laughing. Her figure was as glorious as it had ever been, as he well knew, having had intimate knowledge of it again.



It was the basket looped over her arm and the black and white head poking out of it that made him frown.

“You are not bringing that creature downstairs,” he said with a scowl.

Kat’s brow flew up. “I beg your pardon?”

“It is bad enough that you brought it to East Anglia at all,” Waldorf said, approaching her as if he would remove the offending cat from her arm. “At least allow it to stay in your room.”

Kat dodged out of his way, keeping the basket out of his reach, and strode for her door, then out into the hallway. “Napoleon is not used to being shut away in one room,” she said, her chin tilted up. “He is used to having the run of the Oxford Society Club. It would be cruel to forbid him the ability to run and explore.”

“He is a dumb animal,” Waldorf said, following Kat and cat down the hall. “He won’t know one way or another if he is shut in a room for a few days.”

Kat stopped abruptly and swung back to glare at him. “You take that back,” she hissed.

“Take what back?” Waldorf shrugged.

“Napoleon is not dumb,” she said, tilting her chin up. The blasted cat had the gall to mirror the gesture, though how he did it was a mystery to Waldorf. “In fact, Napoleon has far superior intelligence than some men I know.”

She arched an eyebrow at him, then turned and continued to march down the hall.

Waldorf sighed and rubbed a hand over his face before following her. So much for

the idyllic fantasy of him and Kat being completely in accord in all things from thence forth.

He let Kat walk a bit ahead of him as they made their way downstairs to the breakfast room. Once there, they were greeted by the majority of Lady Walsingham's guests already in the breakfast room, most of them done with their meal. Lady Walsingham cooed over Napoleon, which seemed exactly fitting for her character, and even took the blasted creature out of his basket so that some of the other female guests could fawn over the beast as well.

Waldorf could not help but grin smugly when young Mrs. Hollingsworth began to sneeze violently.

"Perhaps I will take Napoleon outside," Kat said, scooping the monster out of Lady Faucett's arms. She looked as though she intended to carry the creature rather than putting it back in its basket, where it belonged, however.

"I could assist you, Lady Katherine," Headland spoke from the end of the table, where he'd been quiet thus far, thank God. He stood and pushed his chair back, then moved as if he would walk around the table to Kat's end.

"No," Waldorf said, grabbing the back of the man's collar as he tried to move. It was a lucky thing Waldorf had passed right behind the man on his way to the sideboard just as Headland spoke. "You will assist me with another matter instead," he went on, wrenching Headland to the side and marching him out of the room.

"Yes, Anthony, dear," Lady Walsingham called after them. "Please be of help to Lord Waldorf in whatever he may need."

Headland stopped struggling then and merely walked out to the hall and down to one of the free parlors deeper into the house. Waldorf had had more than enough of

Headland's games and was determined to bring an end to them once and for all.

"Have I not told you to stay away from Lady Katherine?" he demanded once they were alone. "What will it take for you to come to your senses and go sniffing elsewhere?"

"What, as Lady Katherine herself has gone sniffing?" Headland asked in reply.

Waldorf froze still, bristling with fury. His brain told him to be cautious, to see the trap before it was sprung on him, but an older, less intelligent part of him growled with jealousy, wishing to know more.

"Did you not know?" Headland said with a breathless, anxious laugh. When Waldorf remained stonily silent, he hurried on with, "Yes, your dear Lady Kat has had dozens of lovers behind your back. Or did you think she remained celibate for all these years without you?"

Still, Waldorf said nothing. His scowl deepened, and he narrowed his eyes at Headland until he was certain they were mere slits.

"She has been dreadfully indiscreet with her lovers," Headland went on. "There was Lord Henry Exmorton, for one. They were quite obvious with each other for years. Then there was that Bloomall chap, you know, the famous actor. He was reported to like both men and women, and I believe he and Lady Katherine used to share partners between them. Oh, and then there was Mr. Farnham, the blacksmith. That was a few years ago, when she was dabbling in the shallow waters beneath her. But I was told Mr. Farnham had an extraordinarily large?—"

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Waldorf launched himself at Headland, grabbing him and turning him so that he could throw Headland's back against the nearest wall. He used his forearm across the bastard's throat to cut off his air so that he couldn't say another word against Kat.

"Whether those things are true or not is nobody's business," he said. "Not yours and not mine. Lady Katherine is and always has been her own woman. She had no husband against whom she was being false, and no other lover with any claim on her."

As bitter as it tasted to say that, he was including himself in the statement. He had no ownership of Kat one way or another. If she had had lovers in the intervening years—and knowing the strength of her passions, he had always assumed she had—then it was not for him to say a word against her for it.

But it burned like acid in his belly all the same.

He would not let that selfish, irrational part of himself win again.

"Leave. Kat. Alone," he growled, pushing harder at Headland's throat before letting him go.

Headland's knees gave out once Waldorf walked away, and the last sight he had of the man was as he crumpled to a pile on the floor. Waldorf took no delight in it, though. He felt like a tiger in a cage, fighting with his jealousies and his reason over the woman he loved. He could not let the wrong parts of himself lash out this time.

The rest of the party had quit the breakfast room and left the house entirely by the

time Waldorf returned to seek out Kat. On the directions of one of Oxwick's maids, he followed them outside, catching up with the party as Lady Walsingham brought them to a small lake at one end of the property.

"What new hell is this?" he asked Kat in a voice that was far too dark and grumbling as he joined her side.

There were a dozen or so small rowboats lined up along the edge of the lake. Each one had been painted with bright colors, inside and out, including the oars. On one of the seats of each boat was a closed envelope.

"I've no idea," Kat said, still cradling her blasted cat and stroking its head. She turned to Waldorf, then frowned when she saw his expression. "What is the matter?" she asked. "What did Lord Headland do?"

Waldorf did not have time to answer. Lady Walsingham had already begun her instructions for whatever new game involved the boats.

"This is the Trial of Affection," the woman said, gesturing to the boats. "As you can see, each boat is ready to be rowed out into the center of the lake. Within each boat you will find an envelope. The envelope contains questions that you must ask each other when you are alone on the water. You may not return to shore until each of the questions has been asked and answered by both beloveds in turn."

"God only knows what's in those envelopes," Mr. Bowman grumbled near Waldorf.

Waldorf would have laughed, or at least grinned, but the petty, impatient, jealous part of him was too disturbed by Headland's accusations.

To add insult to injury, Headland had decided to join the rest of them. Waldorf caught sight of him striding across the lawn, his gaze trained on Kat. He looked as though his

nose was severely out of joint, which it would have been, considering the way Waldorf had manhandled him.

Waldorf was almost glad when Lady Walsingham said, “Now, please step forward with your beloved, choose a boat, and row as far from shore as you can for your trial.”

Whereas before, Waldorf would have rolled his eyes and perhaps attempted to feign illness or a fear of water to escape the exercise, instead, he grabbed Kat’s hand, stopping her from petting Napoleon, and said, “Put the cat down and come along.”

“I am not leaving Napoleon alone on shore,” Kat insisted, jerking out of Waldorf’s grip, but following him down to a boat that was painted a lurid blue.

“He’s a cat. Cats do not belong on the water,” Waldorf insisted.

“If I leave him on the shore with Lord Headland anywhere nearby, there is no telling what might happen to him,” Kat whispered once they’d reached the boat.

Waldorf sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of his nose. Blast it, but she had a point. “At least put him in his basket,” he said.

“The basket is in the house,” Kat told him stubbornly.

“Fine,” Waldorf snapped. “Put him in the boat, and if he stays there, he can come along. If he jumps out and runs, you cannot chase him.”

Kat narrowed her eyes at Waldorf, then sniffed. “Very well,” she said.

Waldorf should have been impressed by the fortitude the hell beast showed by remaining relatively still in his mistress’s arms as Waldorf handed her into the boat.

He should have known from the sneering look Napoleon threw at him that the cat would remain in Kat's arms as she sat on the bench with the envelope and that he would behave just to spite him.

Waldorf muttered under his breath, but he had no choice but to push the boat off the lakeside, then leap into it himself, sit, and reach for the oars. He hoped Napoleon would jump to freedom then, and he did scramble out of Kat's arms as she was distracted with the envelope, but he merely crouched, tense and panting, on the floor of the boat instead of making a break for freedom.

By then, it was too late. Waldorf grudgingly took hold of the oars and plunked them into the water, then steered the boat around to row them out into the water. At least doing so took them away from Headland, who looked very much as if he would like to tattle to Kat about the violence Waldorf had used against him, as if that would sway Kat to his side.

"I suppose you should know that I manhandled Headland just now as I warned him to stay away from you," he told Kat in a quiet voice, so as not to be overheard by nearby, floating couples. It was better to get the truth out himself than to have it used against him.

Kat was in the process of opening the envelope, and Waldorf wasn't certain she'd even heard him. That suspicion only grew when Kat pulled a card out of the envelope, read it, then said in a dreary, strained voice, "Oh, no."

### Eighteen

Kat was vexed beyond telling. Just when everything seemed to be going so right, it all teetered on the edge of going so wrong. Spending the night in Waldorf's bed had been bliss itself. Waking to find herself still using Waldorf's powerful, warm body as her pillow had been wonderful. Rising from sleep filled with confidence and a determination to complete the mission Queen Matilda had sent her on quickly and thoroughly had her looking forward to the day.

Then it had all gone wrong the moment Waldorf stepped into the doorway between their rooms. She had been able to see at once that he was sulking. She'd guessed at once his gloom was because she'd chosen her work and her mission above lying in with him. And then the blackguard had insulted Napoleon, which was akin to an unforgivable sin, as far as she was concerned.

That in itself would have been cause for Kat to be angry, but the very fact that she had slid right back into anger, after all the progress that had been made to repair the damage done to her and Waldorf's relationship, only made her more angry. It was frustrating and ridiculous circle, and it was one she did not know how to break.

And to add insult to injury, when Waldorf was otherwise engaged at breakfast, not paying the least bit of attention to her, Lord Headland had repeatedly attempted to seat himself near her, address her, and otherwise engage her in what, from the dire look in his eyes, would have been very pointed conversation. Kat had had to pretend she was serving Napoleon's needs by constantly moving farther away from the louse, which had unsettled Napoleon far more than the precious boy should have to endure.



All of that, and the continued bickering between her and Waldorf as they entered the boat and began to row to the center of the lake would have been bad enough. But then she opened the envelope to reveal the questions Lady Walsingham wished them to discuss in their Trial of Affection.

“Have you ever been false with your beloved?”

“Was there ever a time when you doubted your beloved’s word?”

“What traits does your beloved possess that you would wish to see changed?”

Kat wanted to tear the card containing the question to bits, throw the pieces in the lake, row to shore, return to the house to pack her things, and sail away to the Orient so that she could avoid not only Lady Walsingham’s impertinent questions, but the wrath she was certain Queen Matilda would rain down on her once she and Waldorf failed miserably at the impossible mission they’d been given.

“What?” Waldorf asked curtly, though his gaze was on Napoleon, who cowered under the seat. “What does it say?”

“Nothing at all,” Kat snapped, choosing then and there to abandon the mission entirely. She ripped the card in half, then in half again as she said, “This entire retreat and the mission we have been sent upon are ridiculous, irresponsible, and futile. The queen was having a laugh at our expense when she shoved us away from the vibrancy and intrigue of London and out to this bedlam.”

“What does it say?” Waldorf asked with increasing petulance. He let the oars go and attempted to steal the ripped pieces of the card from Kat’s hands.

“No!” Kat jerked back, holding the paper bits out of his reach. “The questions are stupid and moot. I will not discuss any of it with you. Lady Walsingham is attempting

to stir up trouble on purpose.”

“Dammit, woman! What do the questions say?” Waldorf growled, surging off his seat as though he would wrestle the cards from her hands.

In the process, he rocked the boat so precipitously that water sloshed in over the sides, causing Napoleon to yowl in protest and almost make a break for freedom before realizing there was no place to go.

Kat careened backwards and would have fallen off her seat had she not let go of the card pieces and gripped the edges of the boat. “Fine!” She shouted, pushing Waldorf back as soon as the boat had stabilized enough for her to shove a hand to his chest. “Would you like to know the trial Lady Walsingham has set for us? Those questions are about fidelity and doubt. They are about the things we do not like about each other. She is prompting us to argue in a place where we can do nothing about it.”

Even as Kat said that, she began to notice other raised voices around the lake. As Waldorf plunked back to his seat and she straightened herself, she was able to see more than a few of the other couples bickering. That did not diminish the frustration she felt for Waldorf.

“What utter nonsense,” Waldorf growled, grimacing as a now damp Napoleon attempted to climb up his leg to a part of the boat that was not soaked.

Whether it was watching the man she wanted to love but was still furious with attempt to push away one of the only living creatures who had loved her unconditionally, or whether things had, at last, come to a head that could not be ignored, Kat was through with clinging to the past.

“Yes!” she shouted, leaning toward Waldorf. “It is utter nonsense. All of this is nonsense. It is nonsense that you chose to believe your worst imaginings about me

twenty years ago rather than trusting me. It is nonsense that we refused to speak with each other to clear the air for twenty years. It is nonsense that we are allowing outside forces to influence our feelings for each other, and that we each continue to trust the resentments of the past more than what we see directly before us.”

Waldorf’s expression pulled into one of shock, but for a moment, all he did was blink at Kat.

So she went on with, “It is ridiculous that you should resent a feline simply because I love him. I love a great many things. I love my friends, my kingdom, and the seaside. Will you growl and grumble at them as well because they turn my attention from you?”

“I never said that?—”

“It is ridiculous that even though I know we would both be infinitely happier and more settled in life if we could burn away the hurt of everything that has passed between us that we are still angry with each other,” she went on, gripping the edge of her seat hard as she leaned toward Waldorf. “I do not wish to be as furious with you for things that are dead and gone and beyond both of our control as I still am. But anger has become like a part of me, like those ridiculous whiskers you sported for so long. I want to shave it off, throw it away, and be done with it for good, but it keeps growing back, over and over, no matter how much I want to forgive you and make things right between us again. No matter what I do, I cannot rid myself of this wretched, all-consuming anger over everything that could have been, but was destroyed.”

“Kat.”

Kat was so beside herself with emotion that she was near tears, but the suddenly tender tone in Waldorf’s voice had her heart skipping a beat as she glanced up at him.

“I’m still angry too,” Waldorf said, though his expression held everything but anger. “At you, at myself, most certainly at Headland, at so many things. I am furious that we were not granted the life we deserved. And I cannot guarantee with any surety that the anger I feel, or that you feel, will leave either of us entirely. But nothing at all will change between us if we do not work to change it.”

“But how?” Kat all but sobbed. “How does one simply forget such a grievous wrong? Twenty years of anger and resentments have cost us so much, Waldorf. What if it has cost us everything?”

“It has not,” Waldorf insisted, his voice and his expression insistent. “It cannot have ruined things beyond repair. We may not be granted an exact replica of what might have been, but with time, with effort, and with love, we can?—”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:14 am*

Several things happened at once, before Waldorf could finish his heartfelt sentiment. Firstly, he stood partially from his seat, reaching for Kat as if he would crouch before her and cradle the side of her face. Secondly, Napoleon scrambled up from the seat where he'd been hiding. Thirdly, one of the other boats slammed suddenly into their side as the angry couple shouting at each other inside made a bid to row back to shore.

Kat gasped as her and Waldorf's boat shifted to the side, and because the gentleman propelling the other boat had his back to them and was so filled with his own fury, he was slow to realize what was happening and continued to push through the water. The result was that Kat and Waldorf's boat upset entirely, spilling Kat, Waldorf, and Napoleon into the water.

The smack of cold water all around her stole Kat's breath and her thoughts in an instant. She was too stunned to do anything at all for the first few seconds. She merely felt herself sinking, being sucked into the lake as the copious layers of clothing she wore buoyed her for a moment, then dragged as it became waterlogged.

As soon as the darkness of sinking began to close in around her and her lungs began to burn, terror and energy replaced her surprise. She began to kick and thrash, attempting to swim, though the layers of her clothing fought against her. She glanced up, breath held, seeing the watery sunlight above her, but as hard as she kicked and reached for it, it did not seem to grow any closer.

A deeper sort of panic filled her from there. She knew how to swim. She had bathed in the ocean, in rivers and lakes, before, but no matter how skilled she might have been or how hard she tried, the weight of her gown and coat and the constriction they

brought with them kept her movements from being effective. The more she fought, the more she sank.

For a split second, the sure and certain knowledge that this was the end and that the final words she'd spoken to Waldorf had been words of anger rushed in on her, squeezing her lungs even more. She did not wish to die with Waldorf thinking she still hated him. She did not want to hate him at all. Everything that kept them apart seemed laughably unimportant. The only thing that mattered was that he was her heart and she was his lungs, and without each other, neither could function.

Her thoughts grew hazy after that, and the edges of her vision began to blur. That was it. That was how it all ended.

But then something latched onto her back near her shoulders, and instead of sinking down, she was yanked up. The movement hurt her mind, as she was certain the only way was down, but she did not fight the odd sensation as she was lifted up above the water. At least, her head was lifted above the water.

Kat dragged precious air into her lungs with an eerie sound that she would never forget, then proceeded to cough and gasp in panic as a clearer sense of the world rushed back at her too quickly.

"I've got you," Waldorf panted near her ear as his arm came to clamp around her middle.

As if everything were moving too quickly, Kat grasped the situation. Their boat had capsized. She'd nearly drown. Somehow, Waldorf had reached down into the water to pull her back to the surface, back to life. He held her tightly now, but he himself was treading water, barely able to keep his head above the lake. They were not out of danger yet.

“Hold fast! I’m coming for you!”

The shout would have brought nothing but relief if it hadn’t come from Lord Headland. Kat twisted as much as she could in Waldorf’s arms to find Lord Headland in one of the boats, racing toward them. He pulled fiercely on the oars, causing the craft to speed toward them. Blessedly, he reached them in short order, setting the oars aside, then leaning over the edge of the boat to reach for Kat.

“Hand her to me,” Lord Headland shouted at Waldorf. “Get her into the boat.”

Waldorf hesitated for only the briefest of moments before shifting his hold on Kat to move her closer to Lord Headland’s boat. Bit by bit, Kat’s sense and energy returned, and as soon as she was able to grab hold of the edge of the boat, she fought to help herself. It was a challenge, as Lord Headland needed to balance just so to keep the boat from tipping over and causing more of a problem, but they managed.

Only, the moment Kat was safe, though utterly waterlogged, in the bottom of Lord Headland’s boat, Lord Headland crouched near her, and instead of helping Waldorf aboard, he pushed at his hands and arms to dislodge them from the craft.

“What are you doing?” Kat gasped, pulling herself around in an attempt to stop what she could see full well Lord Headland was doing.

“Drowning,” Lord Headland growled distractedly. “No one would know. Just like Caroline. I did what I could, but the lake took him.”

“Like hell it will,” Waldorf said, his struggle to get into the boat becoming more pitched.

“She is mine,” Lord Headland insisted, no longer simply trying to push Waldorf away. He began banging his fist against Waldorf’s hands every time he gripped the

edge of the boat.

Waldorf shouted with pain but somehow managed to maintain his hold on the boat's edge. He attempted to swing one of his legs over the side as well, which rocked the boat so sharply that Kat had to throw herself back against the other side to keep it from spilling over entirely.

The result was that she could not help Waldorf in his struggle, nor could she lash out at Lord Headland to stop him from committing murder. If she tumbled into the lake again without Waldorf to save her, she would surely drown.

Someone else was able to help, however. Kat did not see how it had happened, but somehow Napoleon had managed to swim to Lord Headland's boat and to climb inside. He had crouched in partial hiding at the bow of the boat, but when he sensed the struggle between Lord Headland and Waldorf, he let out a fierce, angry cry and leapt at Lord Headland's face.

The resulting struggle was almost comical in its intensity and effectiveness. Lord Headland screamed as multiple sharp, red lines appeared across his face. He stopped his efforts to push Waldorf away from the boat in the process, which enabled Waldorf to climb aboard at last. Even then, Napoleon was either too crazed with fear or too determined to protect his mistress for Lord Headland to be able to remove him from his face.

"Get it off me, get it off me!" Lord Headland shouted as he grabbed a soaking wet Napoleon and attempted to pry him away.

As he did, Waldorf lunged for Kat, pulling her close for a moment in an awkward embrace. It was something between checking to make certain she was well and hugging her to reassure both her and himself.



The comfort lasted for only a moment before Waldorf shifted to grab the oars. Only, instead of using them to row, he employed one to smack the back of Lord Headland's knees. Lord Headland, with a still screaming, terrified, and sharp Napoleon clinging to his face, spilled backwards into the boat.

From there, Napoleon finally let go, but not before dragging his claw across Lord Headland's eye. Lord Headland screamed even louder and clutched at his eye, shouting, "He's blinded me! He's blinded me!"

Kat ignored him. It would serve Lord Headland right if Napoleon truly had taken out one of the bastard's eyes, but his other one was still whole. She left the man still screaming to lurch closer to the corner of the boat where Napoleon was, reaching for her poor, shivering, terrified friend.

Even Kat was surprised when Napoleon allowed himself to be scooped into her embrace and held tightly against her chest and her furiously pounding heart. The wretched thing shook like a leaf, but he seemed to take comfort from her embrace, as she did from clasping him close.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:14 am*

“Take us back to shore,” Kat ordered Waldorf in a rasping voice, so done with everything about the activity, the day, and all of Oxwick Park that she could not get away from the place fast enough.

Nineteen

Waldorf never would have thought he'd see the day when he would either say or think it, but as far as he was concerned, the damnable cat was the hero of the day.

“Quit whining,” he growled at Headland, who continued to bellow and writhe in the bilge filling the bottom of the boat as he rowed quickly to the lakeside. “It's only a cat scratch.”

Headland ignored him, choosing to carry on like a child. “It's taken my eye out!” he insisted. “That blasted creature will pay for this. I'll drown it myself!”

Waldorf sent a look to Kat, mostly to make certain she was still well. She had been traumatized by her brush with death, that much was certain, even though she would likely be loath to admit it. The way she huddled quietly in the back of the boat, hugging and stroking her equally traumatized familiar said more than Waldorf thought someone as brave and stalwart as his beloved Kat would want to say.

Of course, Headland did not know when to keep his mouth closed.

“This an outrage,” the bastard continued to shout, wriggling until he righted himself a bit. He faced Kat, one hand still clamped over his eye as the scratches on his face burned red in the sunshine. “You will learn your place,” he raged at her. “I swear to

God, if it is the last thing I ever do, I will silence and subdue you once and for all!”

Waldorf frowned, his rowing faltering for a moment, though he was close enough to the shore now that the water was only knee-deep. Two of the footmen had waded into the water and grabbed the boat to haul it the rest of the way to the grassy bank. Waldorf barely noted them, however. Something in Headland’s words did not sit right with him.

“Kat wants no part of you,” he told Headland, more like a statement of fact than any argument. He did not need to argue as to whom Kat would choose between the two of them, because he already had complete trust in that outcome. “Leave her alone, man.”

“I will not,” Headland shouted, beyond reason. “I will marry you one way or another,” he told Kat, “and once you are my wife, you will not set foot outside our estate. You will not travel to London, you will not keep company with your scandalous friends, and you most definitely will not continue to serve Queen Matilda and her dangerous ideas of unity.”

Waldorf’s brow shot up, as did Kat’s. He was not entirely certain, but his back itched and his heart sped up, as if Headland had just revealed something of importance that he should not have.

Kat stared at him incredulously for a moment. “You know of my employment with—” She stopped and gasped. “My God! You’re the wolf at the door!”

Waldorf was not entirely certain what that meant. Those words tickled a memory from a few days ago, but so very much had happened to him and to Kat in the last few days that whatever it was, it had become lost in the pile.

They’d been hauled all the way onto the lakeside at that point anyhow, so rather than bothering with Headland and his stubbornness, or with Kat’s cryptic realizations, he

stood and stepped over to offer Kat a hand.

Kat juggled Napoleon carefully in her arms, but as soon as the creature noticed they were close to land, he broke away from her grip and dashed out over the grass, dodging Lady Walsingham and several others who were rushing toward the boat, as if all he wanted was to get away where he could recover from the ordeal in peace.

Waldorf knew very much how the feline felt.

“Come on,” he told Kat, bending towards her in the still unstable boat to half offer his hand and half lift her to her feet entirely. “Let’s be done with this mess once and for all.”

“I am well,” Kat insisted, though she was breathless and distracted as Waldorf helped her to the grass. “We should go after Napoleon.”

Waldorf shook his head, sliding his arm around Kat’s waist once they were on solid ground. “He’ll find his way back. Stray cats always find their way back to the ones they adore, even if they are spitting mad in the interim.”

He managed a warm smile for her as he spoke, keeping her close in his arms, even though there was no reason for him to indulge in such intimate contact anymore. Kat lifted her gaze to him. The stunned confusion her eyes held softened, then vanished altogether, and she smiled.

She looked as though she would say something in reply, and it would likely have been devilishly witty, but Lady Walsingham rushed to interrupt with, “My, what an exciting turn to our exercise!”

Waldorf dragged his eyes away from Kat to stare flatly at Lady Walsingham. He wanted nothing more than to tell the woman precisely what he thought of her foolish

games, but the look of genuine concern and hope that Kat was well stopped him. As her husband had said, Lady Walsingham might have been unconventional and misunderstood, but she was a good woman with a pure heart, and Waldorf found he could not stay angry with her for long.

“Are you well, Lady Katherine? Please tell me you are well,” Lady Walsingham said, moving in to take Kat’s hands, as if the two of them had been bosom friends their entire lives. “I could not bear it if you were drowned and if I were responsible.”

“I am well now,” Kat said, smiling at the woman, then sending that smile sideways to Waldorf. “My greatest hero and champion and the love of my life has rescued me.”

“Yes, we all witnessed Lord Waldorf’s gallantry,” Lady Walsingham said.

“I believe Lady Katherine was referring to her cat, Napoleon,” Waldorf said with pretend gravity.

Lady Walsingham laughed, pressing a hand to her chest, as if she’d had a fright, but all was well now. “He is a brave cat, that is certain. But why was he attacking my poor brother in such a way?”

“Yes, I should like to know that as well,” Lord Walsingham said, stepping forward from the group crowding in around the scene.

Waldorf had not seen the man join his wife at the lakeside. He had no idea that Walsingham was participating in the morning’s activity. If he were honest, he did not like the look of bottled anger in Walsingham’s expression as he gently rested a hand on the small of his wife’s back.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:14 am*

“That blasted cat tried to kill me,” Headland shouted from where he sat in the grass, having his scratches and his eye tended to by one of the footmen. “And all because I was attempting to save Lady Katherine.”

Waldorf opened his mouth to reveal to all that Headland had, in fact, been trying to kill him, but he closed it again and chose to observe whatever happened next closely instead. Instinct told him Headland had been given enough rope, and now he was about to use it against himself.

“But Anthony, dear,” Lady Walsingham said, stepping away from her husband to crouch by her brother’s side, “why would you need to rescue Lady Katherine when her beloved had already rescued her? We all witnessed that he had pulled her from the water and was swimming for their boat.”

“She is not his beloved!” Headland shouted. “She is nobody’s beloved. She is a conniving, deceptive harlot who has only come here, with her accomplice, to pour poison into your and Lord Walsingham’s ears!”

Waldorf’s entire body went stiff, and his blood pounded with alarm so fiercely that it caused a pulse of pain to radiate through him.

“What do you mean?” Lady Walsingham asked, clearly confused.

“Yes,” Walsingham echoed his wife, staring from Headland to Kat to Waldorf. “Whatdoyou mean?”

“They are spies, you stupid man,” Headland spat. “They are spies sent by Queen

Matilda of Mercia to turn you against sense and reason and to make you support the Mercian Plan. They want you to introduce it for debate in Joint Parliament, and they would have stopped at nothing until they had convinced you of that unnatural path to unity.”

Waldorf’s insides ran hot and cold. It was the second time in less than a week that he had been exposed as a spy. Kat as well. He could deny it, but it was as likely as not that Walsingham would hear the rumors the moment he set foot in London again. He might have dismissed them as mere gossip before, but to have them corroborated, and by his wife’s brother, would be damning indeed.

Again, he was on the verge of speaking to defend himself and Kat when Lady Walsingham pipped him at the post by saying, “There is nothing unnatural or insensible about the Mercian Plan at all,” as she stood and stepped back from her brother. “James and I are quite in favor of the idea of equality between men and women, aren’t we, James.” She stepped all the way back to her husband’s side.

“Maryella, hush,” Walsingham murmured to her, gazing adoringly at her as he did. “I am the First Minister. I cannot be known to have political affiliations of any sort. It is my duty to remain completely impartial in all things.”

Waldorf was floored. This entire time, he and Kat had been exposing themselves to every manner of ridiculousness, pretending to be engaged, and making fools of themselves, and Walsingham was already in favor of the Mercian Plan?

But Waldorf’s astonishment did not match Kat’s. Kat burst into laughter that was completely at odds with the high spirits of the moment. More than that, her outburst, coupled with what was likely a great deal of exhaustion and overwhelm from her near drowning, sent her crumpling to the grass.

“Kat,” Waldorf gasped, leaping to her. He crouched beside her, gathering her into his

arms.

But Kat was not injured, and she had not swooned. She was merely laughing so hard that she could barely draw a breath. “They already support the Mercian Plan,” she laughed, leaning heavily into Waldorf and burying her face against his shoulder. “All this...we needn’t have...they already....” She was too overcome with laughter to say more.

Waldorf’s mouth twitched, and within moments, he found himself chuckling along with her. He was a bit too conscious of their flabbergasted audience to let himself go entirely, but he most definitely saw the irony of the situation.

“If you will excuse us,” he said, gathering Kat entirely into his arms and standing with her, “I believe my beloved and I are in desperate need of returning to the house and putting ourselves to rights.”

“Yes, indeed,” Walsingham said. “I am terribly sorry any of this happened. I saw the whole thing.”

The last bit was said pointedly, with a side look to Headland. Walsingham had likely seen his brother-in-law’s attempted murder. Nothing more was said about it, but Waldorf had the distinct impression from Walsingham’s expression that Headland would be dealt with.

“Maurice,” Lady Walsingham called out to one of the footmen waiting nearby, “run ahead and see to it that a bath is prepared in Lord Waldorf and Lady Katherine’s chamber.”

The footman nodded, then jogged ahead of him.

“Thank you, my lady,” Kat said from Waldorf’s arms.



Waldorf noted that Lady Walsingham had made no secret of the fact that he and Kat were, essentially, sharing a room. None of the other guests looked the least bit surprised either.

As Waldorf carried Kat away, Lady Walsingham turned to her guests, clapped her hands together, and said, “Well. That was a most interesting turn of events. But now, let us discuss the Trial of Affection and discern how we might help each other overcome the unfortunate wounds of the past.”

Waldorf rolled his eyes as he walked on. “I wonder how the two of us would ever have gotten through that ordeal,” he said.

Kat laughed. “Is that ordeal not precisely what the two of us have been enduring for the past week?”

She tapped his shoulder, signaling for Waldorf to let her down so she could walk on her own.

Waldorf did not have a chance to answer her question. One of the maids approached to ask if they needed assistance, and Kat sent the young woman on a chase after Napoleon, charging her to take the creature for a bath himself once it was caught.

From there, there was too much fuss and nonsense as they were let into the house carefully, so that their sodden clothing did not stain the carpets or ruin the floors. Once they made it up to their rooms, there was the confusion of removing their wet, clinging clothing, with the help of servants, and changing into robes to preserve their modesty while a rather large and cozy tub was brought into Waldorf’s room.

Filling the tub with adequately warm water took another eternity. It felt as though the day were half done by the time Waldorf and Kat were actually able to submerge themselves in the clean, rose-scented water, and to set to work scrubbing the muck of

the lake out of each other's hair and crevasses. By then, Napoleon had been caught and returned as well, and as far as Waldorf knew, he was curled safely under Kat's bed, sleeping off his trauma.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:14 am*

“At least someone was thoughtful enough to provide lunch for us,” Kat said as she picked a dried apricot from the platter that had been set on a stool beside the tub. “I am famished after, well, everything.”

Waldorf hummed in agreement as he slowly rubbed his fingers across Kat’s scalp, cleansing her hair. “I am famished for more than food after all we’ve been through.”

He bent to kiss her shoulder, but as lovely as scented soap smelled, it did not taste nearly as nice. He was left sputtering and spitting to get the acrid taste from his mouth when he straightened.

Kat laughed at him and reached for the cup of weak wine that sat on the tray with the food, handing it to him. “So by yoursurmising, did we succeed at our mission today or have we failed yet again?”

Waldorf found it a more interesting question than he was certain Kat intended it to be. “To be honest, I do not know,” he said. He straightened and reached for the pitcher of clear water beside the tub so that he might rinse Kat’s hair.

“Just because Lord and Lady Walsingham agree with the Mercian Plan does not mean Lord Walsingham will introduce it for debate when Joint Parliament opens,” Kat agreed wisely.

“I suppose we will not know if we have been redeemed in Queen Matilda’s eyes or if our heads will roll until the matter is brought up, or not, in a few days’ time.”

Their conversation paused then as Waldorf bade Kat to tip her head back, and as he

poured clear water over her hair to rinse it.

Once that was done, the bathwater had turned too cold and dirty to continue lounging comfortably, so they both stood and stepped out of the tub.

“And what of our engagement?” Kat asked, rubbing a towel over Waldorf’s body once she herself was reasonably dry. “Is that over as well?”

She peeked coyly up at him, and Waldorf’s heart juddered before beating harder. He took the towel from her, finishing the job in a few rubs, then dropped the towel and forgot it.

He took Kat into his arms, holding their heating bodies together, and rested a hand on the side of her face. “What do you wish?” he asked. “Is it all a farce after all? Are we too angry at each other to ever pick up where we were interrupted twenty years ago?” He stroked the side of her face, then added, “I had fully intended to propose to you that afternoon.”

“I know,” Kat said breathlessly. Her eyes sparkled with excitement and hope. But then she said, “I am still angry with you. I fear a part of me always will be. You hurt me, Waldorf.”

“I know, my darling, and I am sorry,” he said. “You hurt me as well,” he added, merely as a statement of fact.

Kat lowered her head slightly. “I know, and I, too, am sorry.” She lifted her eyes to him again and went on with, “The scars we inflicted on each other will always be there, but we do not have to pay them any mind.”

“We do not,” Waldorf agreed, smiling. “But we must speak of them from time to time to keep the wounds clean.”

“Yes,” Kat agreed. “I...I believe that if we can remain open and honest with each other, if we are always clear about what we are feeling, even if it is not pretty or nice, then we could be wonderful together.”

“And we would not need any Trials of Affection or Initiations of Trust or Illusions of Grandeur to keep us on the straight and narrow?” Waldorf teased.

Kat laughed and thumped his arm playfully. “The phrase is Delusionsof Grandeur, and no, we would not need those either.”

“We only need each other and honesty,” Waldorf said, tugging Kat closer. “Because I love you, and that is all that matters.”

“I love you, too,” Kat said in return, smiling. “I always did. I never stopped.”

He slanted his mouth over hers, kissing her with twenty years of passion. He would always regret the time they’d wasted, but they did not have to waste a single moment more. By some miracle, they had found their way back together again, and he would never let Kat go again.

“I believe we have the entire afternoon to ourselves,” he growled, then kissed Kat again.

Kat kissed him back, looping her arms over his shoulders, and making a sound of interest and approval.

That was as good as acquiescence, as far as Waldorf was concerned. He lifted Kat off her feet, then carried her straight to his bed. He did not even pause to peel back the counterpane before spreading her under him and wedging himself between her legs.

Kat accepted him heartily, opening herself to him and embracing him with her arms

and legs. She kissed him back as heatedly as he kissed her. They always had understood each other's needs and wants when they were in bed together, and this time was no exception. Waldorf understood that she needed him inside her, and if he were honest, he wanted nothing more in that moment than to feel joined to her in every way. They had spent far too long apart.

The kissing and touching that led up to their moment of union was short and, for a change, unimportant. As soon as he could, Waldorf pushed carefully inside of her, breathing heavily through the pleasure of union. It was not the thrusts or the friction between them that caused the moment to be so special and so joyful that he became as emotional as Kat looked with her eyes full of joy and lust. It was the sense that they were where they needed to be, they were with each other.

That did not mean the moment when things turned pitched and the two of them strained together, seeking release from each other, was not passionate and sweet, however. He was still a man and she was still a woman, and before long, their sighs and cries were as loud and desperate as the neighbors' on the other side of the wall had been. And when the blissful moment came when Kat tilted her head back and let out a cry as her body clenched around him, then Waldorf released himself inside her, everything in the world felt as though it had been set to right.

He would never let it go wrong again.

Twenty

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The opening session of Joint Parliament was always well-attended. Though the event was nominally nothing more than the reading of a list of issues and questions that would be discussed and debated by ministers from all of the kingdoms of the New Heptarchy for the upcoming session and otherwise very boring indeed, in actuality, it had become something of a statement of which matters were of key importance to the shaping of Britannia. If a particular topic or issue was not mentioned in the First Minister's opening remarks, that was as much of a declaration that the issue was unimportant as could be had.

"There's no way to know if we've succeeded, really," Kat explained to her friends as they stood in the public gallery of the vast, medieval building along the River Thames in Westminster. "The few days we spent at Oxwick Park were so filled with madness and frivolity that neither Waldorf nor I were able to address the Mercian Plan with Lord and Lady Walsingham at all."

"Not one bit?" Bernadette asked, wringing her hands in front of her. The action drew attention to her ever-rounder belly, which some stuffy lady of the town was bound to make a comment about soon, if they hadn't already.

At least, they would have had reason to comment about Bernadette's condition if the much greater topic of conversation of Muriel's advanced pregnancy did not captivate them instead.

"What, precisely, were you and Waldorf doing at Oxwick Park?" Muriel asked, resting her hands on her pregnant stomach, despite the way several women were glancing her way and whispering furiously. Muriel ignored them, arching an eyebrow at Kat instead and saying, "Lady Walsingham has a reputation for fancying herself an

expert on facilitating happy marriages, and I know you of all people could not?—”

“Waldorf and I are engaged,” Kat jumped in to cut her friend off, thrilled to announce the news.

“No!” Minerva gasped, her eyes going wide. She glanced to the basket looped over Kat’s arm, to Napoleon as he watched the goings on of the opening session of Joint Parliament through the top of his basket. “Is this true?” Minerva asked.

Kat laughed. It was so far beyond her usual, sober and sharp personality, but she could not help it. For good or ill, Lady Walsingham’s methods had actually had a strong effect on her and Waldorf. Not only had the permissive environment of Oxwick Park allowed them to fall into bed together and remember how much they appreciated each other that way, the seclusion they were afforded after the incident at the lake gave them ample opportunity to talk.

They’d revisited the painful memories of the past as well as the beautiful ones. They’d expressed their fears and disappointments, in themselves and each other. They’d talked about possibilities and hopes for the future. Kat rather liked Waldorf’s idea that the two of them might create some sort of investigative outfit to search into private problems that members of the public might have and to assist them in resolving them. They were both certain beyond any doubt that their careers as spies, for Queen Matilda or anyone else, were over.

When the issue of whether they should reveal the truth to Lord and Lady Walsingham, that they were not, in fact, engaged or together in any way, both Kat and Waldorf had hesitated. They’d been sitting on Waldorf’s bed, face to face, arms and legs wrapped around each other as they talked things through. Waldorf had raised the suggestion that they could continue to pretend they were together. Kat put forth that they could continue to pretend for the rest of their lives. When Waldorf added, “Of course, we do not need to pretend anymore,” the matter had been decided



directly. They would pick up where they had left off twenty years before and be wed as soon as was convenient.

“You?” Muriel asked, blinking at Kat in astonishment. “Lady Katherine Balmor? You are engaged?”

“To a man?” Minerva added, feigning shock, though her eyes glittered with joy for Kat. “To Lord Waldorf?”

Kat laughed again. It was a habit she really must break, and soon. “A great deal happened between Waldorf and I in the last fortnight,” she admitted. “Circumstances beyond our control forced us to discuss matters we had buried long ago. Because of that, so many misunderstandings and past hurts were resolved, and much to both of our surprise, we discovered that the flame of our love had not died, it had merely been stifled.”

Kat’s friends gaped at her, but Kat herself jumped when Waldorf appeared by her side, having approached stealthily when she was not paying him any mind, took her free hand, and said, “It most certainly was not.”

As Kat let out a breath and gathered wits about her again, Waldorf raised her gloved hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles, all while ardently gazing into her eyes. Kat felt not only the delicious stir of desire in her core, her heart fluttered, as light as a butterfly.

As soon as Waldorf left off from his lingering kiss, he glanced to Napoleon, who still eyed him with suspicion, despite all that had happened, and said, “I do beg your pardon, sir. I know you have the prior claim.”

“Will wonders never cease,” Lord Cedric said in awe, moving to stand by Muriel’s side and slipping a hand to the small of her back, as if to support her.

“Not where Waldorf is concerned, no,” Lord Alden laughed, looping an arm around Bernadette in a far more scandalously casual manner.

Lord Lawrence and Lord Dunstan had approached their small group as well, and after a short round of hellos and greetings, Lord Lawrence said, “We were all so startled, but so pleased, mind you, when Waldorf showed up at Godwin House yesterday and announced to us all that he and Lady Katherine were to be wed as soon as a special license could be obtained.”

“I warned him against it,” Lord Cedric said with a cheeky wink for his brother.

“Perhaps every man should be warned before entering into marriage,” Lord Dunstan murmured quietly.

Kat was not certain the man meant anyone to overhear him. She felt deeply sorry for the poor man, as she understood he had been married once and it had been a misery.

“I guess the race is down to you and me, Dunstan,” Lord Lawrence said, slapping Lord Dunstan playfully on the back.

“Which race is that?” Minerva asked curiously, eyeing Lord Lawrence with a somewhat disapproving glance, likely for the effusion of cheer that he exuded. Minerva did not like cheer at all.

“Why, the race to see who is the last to wed,” Lord Lawrence said, smiling widely. “It seems as though either Dunstan or I will be the one to inherit the cursed Godwin family castle.”

“Oh yes,” Minerva said, her cheeks pinkening a little. “The Curse of Godwin Castle. What a delightfully macabre thing for your family to have. I have always wished for a cursed?—”

Minerva was unable to finish. Their entire, happy group went suddenly silent as Queen Matilda and her entourage of guards and ladies in waiting approached from the gallery's wide doorway.

Immediately, they all shifted back into something of a line and either curtsied or bowed. Whether Matilda was their queen or not, monarchs deserved to be bowed to.

Kat was a bit alarmed, however, when the queen redirected her steps to approach her and Waldorf specifically rather than continuing on to the Monarch's Gallery at the far end of the room. Alarm was perhaps too gentle a word for Kat's feelings. She had failed her queen once, and if Lord Walsingham made no mention of the Mercian Plan as he opened Joint Parliament in a matter of minutes, she would have failed her once more.

"Lady Katherine," the queen acknowledged Kat with the barest tip of her head. "Lord Waldorf."

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“Greetings, Your Majesty,” Waldorf said, bowing low for a second time as Kat curtsied again.

Even Napoleon seemed to lower himself in his basket out of respect.

“I wish to speak to the two of you alone,” Queen Matilda said.

Rather than gesturing for Kat and Waldorf to follow her to some sequestered room, the queen sent a quick look to Kat’s friends and Waldorf’s relatives, as well as the others who had crowded in nearby in the hopes of finding a good spot from which to hear Lord Walsingham’s opening remarks.

In an instant, everyone who had gathered close rushed away. Their quick footsteps and murmurs of excitement reminded Kat of the sound of a wave crashing on the beach, then rustling the sand as it moved back into the ocean.

“We are at your mercy, Your Majesty,” Kat said quietly once a buffer of emptiness had opened around them.

“Yes, you are,” Queen Matilda said in a somewhat wry voice. She stood taller and held herself with such regal power that even her silver-white hair and wrinkled face seemed beautiful and potent. “I trust your time at Oxwick Park was well-spent?”

Kat exchanged a wary glance with Waldorf as they both straightened from their positions of obeisance to the queen, but not too much. “We...I do not know, if I am honest, Your Majesty.”

Queen Matilda narrowed her eyes slightly. “You do not know what?” she asked.

Kat swallowed, resisting the urge to look to Waldorf and pile all responsibility on his shoulders. She was not the sort of woman to hide behind a man, though. She was compelled to face her queen directly.

“Neither of us were able to speak to Lord or Lady Walsingham about the Mercian Plan,” she confessed. “The events of the party were...all-consuming.”

“We have reason to believe that Lord Walsingham is not averse to the cause,” Waldorf added, somehow, despite his usual personality, managing to sound deferential and calm. “That may count for something.”

The queen hummed, still studying the two of them. “And how did you find Lady Walsingham’s retreat?” she asked.

Something hitched within Kat, a thought, or more likely, a suspicion. “It was...different, Your Majesty.”

“Lady Walsingham has formed some rather unique and insightful opinions about relations between men and women,” Waldorf said.

“Yes, I know,” the queen said in a voice that was both flat and...teasing?

Kat blinked. “You...do? Your Majesty,” Kat added with a bow of her head as a respectful afterthought.

Queen Matilda was silent for a short while more, her mouth pulling into a sly grin that she only barely attempted to conceal. “I could have chosen any of my operatives to infiltrate Oxwick Park so that they might ease along the desired outcome of such a mission,” she said. “I may have done just that with another pair as well. But it

occurred to me that of all the people in my employ, the two of you might have been able to benefit the most from that sort of mission.”

Kat had to fight to keep from letting her mouth drop open. The queen had sent her and Waldorf into Lady Walsingham’s insightful madness on purpose?

The queen shifted, her grin expanding and making her blue eyes sparkle. “I have been told a certain special license has been applied for,” she said.

“I, er, um, yes, it has, Your Majesty,” Waldorf sputtered.

The queen looked as though she’d won a particularly profitable hand of Mad Eights. “Good,” she said. “Then the outcome is as I had hoped.”

She turned to walk on. Kat gusted out a breath, her skin prickling with awkwardness and excitement at the implication of everything the queen had just said.

Kat pivoted to speak to Waldorf, but before she could, Queen Matilda turned back and said, “By the by, you are both now ousted from my employ.” She nodded once, then marched on.

Waldorf made a strangled sound of surprise and reached for Kat’s free hand. “I do not know what to think about any of that,” he admitted to Kat in a hoarse voice.

“Neither do I,” Kat said, squeezing his hand. “Perhaps we should just be grateful that we both still have heads on our shoulders.”

Waldorf nodded. “I am eternally grateful for that.”

“What did Queen Matilda have to say to you that could not be heard by others?” Lord Cedric asked with a concerned look as their friends and relations crowded around

them once more.

“I do not believe we are at liberty to discuss such a thing,” Kat said, still stunned.

That answer did not satisfy anyone, but their impatience with the secrecy was short-lived. A moment later, King Swithin walked past on his way to the Monarch’s Gallery in the company of King Aled of Wales and both kings’ many guards and councilors. King Swithin sent Waldorf a sharp look and a nod, but that was the only acknowledgement he received.

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“Should we be worried?” Lord Lawrence asked.

“No,” Waldorf said cautiously. “I do not think there is any reason to worry at all.”

As it turned out, their chief reason to worry a great deal appeared at the far end of the room only moments later.

Lord Walsingham was dressed in his robes of state as he entered the chamber from the doors at the opposite end from the galleries. The part of the hall where he and the other ministers stood for formal announcements, such as the one that was about to take place, was on the same level as the public gallery, but a long dais ran against the wall, and a raised podium stood in the middle of that so that the First Minister could be seen and heard by all when he made pronouncements.

The entrance of the First Ministers and other ministers of the New Heptarchy was accompanied by a traditional trumpet and drum voluntary that felt deeply medieval and overly formal to Kat’s mind. Napoleon cowered in his basket at the din, not liking the sound of it at all. Kat felt a bit like her beloved friend herself, tense and bristling as they waited to see whether any part of their mission had been a success, whether the Mercian Plan would be up for debate during that session of Joint Parliament, or whether it had all been for naught and unity for Britannia would have to wait another year at least.

“This is it,” Kat whispered, grasping Waldorf’s hand and holding it tightly as Lord Walsingham took his place at the podium, then waited for the musicians to stop.

Once the last note sounded on the trumpets, the chamber was so silent that it would



have been possible for everyone to hear Napoleon yawn. Not that he was about to do that in any way. The moment was far too exciting.

“On this twenty-first day of October in the year of our Lord, eighteen hundred and sixteen, by the trust and authority invested in me by the monarchs and people of the seven kingdoms of the New Heptarchy, I officially declare the eight-hundred-and-fifty-seventh session of Joint Parliament open.”

There was a rushing sound in the chamber, like everyone assembled letting out one breath, then drawing in another as they awaited the all-important announcement of what matters would be discussed and debated in this session.

Kat glanced to her friends, glad that they were there with her and that they cared for her, come what may. She was happy for Muriel and Bernadette, who had found love and joy, despite the odds, and she hoped that Minerva would find love and happiness as well, in whatever way her odd friend defined that. She was glad to have Waldorf with her again at last and so grateful that he had a family who loved and supported him, even if there was a curse on their house. She was more relieved to be a part of their boisterous family now than she could say.

That moment of gratitude was fleeting but poignant. It returned to quivering expectation when Lord Walsingham began to speak again.

“The primary matters that will be discussed in this session will be the question of whether to grant the American colonies independence, the Mercian Plan for the unity of Britannia, improvements to the condition of the River Thames?—”

Kat heard nothing after Lord Walsingham announced that the Mercian Plan would, in fact, be one of the primary issues on the table that session. She was not the only one. Despite the fact that it was customary to restrain oneself from any outbursts about issues or policies to be discussed until the entire list was read, quite a few people,

women and men, let out triumphant cries when the Mercian Plan was mentioned.

The rest of the announcements finished in a blur. As quickly as the important moment had begun, it ended with Lord Walsingham and the rest of the ministers exiting the chamber with as much pomp and circumstance as they'd entered.

"I cannot believe it," Muriel gasped, grabbing Lord Cedric's arm. "We've actually done it!"

"We have not done it all yet," Bernadette cautioned her. "The Mercian Plan will be debated, but that does not mean it will be passed."

"But this is the first step," Minerva said, more excited than Kat had ever seen her. "This means that we have a chance not only of uniting Britannia, but of making certain women are granted the same rights as men throughout the kingdoms." She paused for only a moment before saying, "I must return home to the Kingdom of Wales as quickly as possible so that I might rally support for Mercian unity with all who would vote on it there."

"Return to the Kingdom of Wales at this time of year?" Kat asked, surprised that her friend would want to undertake such a long journey when everyone who was anyone was in London, and when the weather began to turn frosty and unpredictable."

"I must," Minerva said with a nod. "Matters of unity are not so settled in my home kingdom as they are here."

"How do you intend to get there?" Bernadette asked incredulously. "Everyone is traveling in the opposite direction these days."

"Not everyone," Lord Dunstan put in. "I am about to take Father back to Godwin Castle myself, since that is where he wishes to be. He does not care much for London

and, I must confess, neither do I.”

“Could you take Lady Minerva part of the way to Wales?” Waldorf asked.

The chamber was starting to empty around them, now that the important announcements were over, which nudged their group to head for the doorway as well. Their conversation was interrupted as they made their way out through the vast, old building and into the street.

The crowds were already cheering there, which necessitated their entire group to edge their way around the building to the small park off to one side. Once there, they were able to resume the conversation.

“I would be more than happy to accompany Lady Minerva back to the Kingdom of Wales,” Lord Lawrence said, smiling brightly at Minerva. “I would consider it to be an honor to be of service to the friends of my family.”

“You wish to escort me all the way back to Wales?” Minerva asked, eyeing Lord Lawrence suspiciously.

“If you would allow me,” Lord Lawrence said, bowing graciously to her.

Minerva made a face when his head was bowed. Kat stifled a giggle, knowing full well what Minerva’s hesitation was all about. Lord Lawrence was entirely too sunny for her disposition. Chances were that she would be subjected to every sort of optimism and happy conversation when she was much more inclined to speak of the macabre and the dismal.

However, considering it was only the beginning of the London season, Minerva had little choice.

“I suppose I accept,” she said with a sigh. “But you must not inundate me with pithy sayings about how lovely and wonderful life is. We all know that life is but a short journey in a downward direction, and that none of us have any choice but to run screaming toward its bitter end.”

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Lord Lawrence's expression brightened like the midday sun. "Lady Minerva, you have such an eloquent way with words."

Waldorf snorted by Kat's side, then slapped a hand over his mouth to keep his mirth from showing. "I would not want to be the coachman for that particular journey," he said once their small party had broken up and everyone went their separate ways.

Kat and Waldorf remained in the park. Kat was happy to have a moment alone with her beloved before what she knew would be several days of celebration and planning as she and Waldorf began their new life together.

"I only hope that whatever journey your brother and my friend are on, it does not take as long as ours," she said.

Waldorf looked around to see if they were being observed, then plucked Napoleon's basket out of her arms and set it gently on the ground. When that was done, he swept Kat into his embrace and planted a daring kiss on her lips.

"I am sorry for the delays in our journey," he said. "If I could go back and erase the misunderstandings, I would."

"I know," Kat told him with a sly, fond, teasing look. "You've already told me."

"I feel as though it needs to be said frequently and passionately," Waldorf said with a smile. "I have a lot to make up for."

"As do I," Kat said, sighing and leaning into him. "But at this moment, I am filled

with a great deal of hope. We have made astounding progress today, as a nation and as a man and a woman who love each other.”

“That we have,” Waldorf said, resting a hand on the side of her face and leaning down to kiss her. “And I feel we have much more progress still to come.”

Kat agreed heartily and kissed him in return. As far as she was concerned, the entire world was just opening up for her and Waldorf, and she intended to make the rest of their lives together wonderful.

## Epilogue

### ONE MONTH LATER...

As silly as it was to travel away from London during the height of the autumn season, Waldorf was highly aware that he had a certain new family tradition to uphold.

“Did we truly need to come all the way to the Isle of Portland in late November so that your name could be struck from a parchment?” Kat asked as they stepped down from the carriage that had brought them from the dock, then pulled Napoleon’s basket into her arms.

“You do not understand the way my father’s mind works,” Waldorf said with a grin, helping Kat with the basket until she was able to loop it over her arm. “He would be as likely as not to saddle me with the castle and the curse, despite our nuptials, just to spite me because I did not follow protocol.”

Kat sighed and rolled her eyes, but her expression was delighted and her eyes sparkled with expectation as she took his arm with her free one and allowed him to escort her into the castle.

Waldorf was proud to say that he'd seen the same lively expression of happiness and enthusiasm about life in his new wife's eyes ever since they'd come to their new understanding with each other. He liked to think it was because he had sufficiently made his case as to why Kat should forgive him and allow him to make her the happiest woman on earth.

More likely, it was because the Mercian Plan was already under debate in Joint Parliament and things were going well. The plan had a long way to go before it would be voted on, and even if such a vote should be successful, it would likely be years still before Britannia was unified. But at least things had begun.

Kat's general cheer and delight with life was also most probably because the two of them had begun their married life as equal partners. Although he would once have demanded to have his own way in dictating the terms of their marriage, Waldorf liked to think he had grown into his maturity and sense. Not only had he and Kat drawn up a contract that specified that they would be equal partners in the investigative business they hoped to launch in the spring, they had agreed that all decisions and matters of their married life would be shared equally between them as well.

That was very likely the true reason for Kat's happiness. Another that could not be discounted in any way, however, was the scene they witnessed on the docks in London, as they had boarded the modest vessel that would take them around to the Isle of Portland, thus saving the trouble of a land journey, like Lawrence and Lady Minerva had embarked upon a month ago.

As they had been waiting to board their ship, Waldorf had noticed none other than that bastard, Lord Headland, waiting in a queue of passengers about to board a ship bound for the American colonies.

"He had an awful falling out with his brother-in-law, Lord Walsingham, for some reason," a friend of Waldorf's that happened to be in the area that day had mentioned

as they had all shared a pint in a riverfront pub. “No one is precisely certain what it’s all about, only that Walsingham threatened the man with complete financial ruin if he did not leave Britannia at once.”

“And you say nothing has been said about the reasons why Headland has been banished?” Waldorf asked, feeling far too smug because he knew, or at least suspected, the answer.

“None at all,” his friend had said with a shrug. “What’s more puzzling is that even Lady Walsingham, Headland’s sister, who we all thought adored him and thought he could do no wrong, has insisted that he shove off for foreign shores as well.”

“How very puzzling,” Kat had said, lifting her pint glass to drink as half the patrons of the pub, including Waldorf’s friend, watched in horror.

Waldorf had been desperately proud of Kat for holding her own in the pub. He had been equally proud of her for catching Headland’s eye, waving to him, and making certain the man witnessed her kissing Waldorf before the two of them had boarded their own ship.

“What a magnificently atmospheric castle,” Kat commented as the housekeeper, Mrs. Weatherby, let them in.

“Thank you, my lady,” Mrs. Weatherby said with a somewhat cheeky smile. “It has been a part of my family’s legacy for years.”

Kat raised her eyes and seemed interested as Mrs. Weatherby gestured for them to follow her up a flight of stairs and down the drafty corridor to the Great Hall. “Has it really?” she asked, then turned to Waldorf to say, “I thought Godwin Castle had been in your family since its founding.”



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“It has, my lady,” Mrs. Weatherby answered. “My family have lived on the Isle of Portland for generations as well, and some of us in every generation have served the house and its masters.”

“How fascinating,” Kat said.

She caught her breath a moment later as they entered the Great Hall.

The massive room would never be as cozy or comfortable as Waldorf preferred, but his father had renovated it nicely in his younger years and made it a decidedly habitable place. Dunstan certainly thought so, as he had ensconced himself in a chair near one of the windows, a thick shawl thrown around his shoulder, while he read a book. The moment Kat put Napoleon’s basket down and opened the lid, the infernal cat leapt out and hurried over to Dunstan, as if Waldorf’s cousin had fish in his pockets, to see what he was doing.

“Let’s get this over with so we can go back to the creature comforts of London,” Waldorf muttered to Kat, taking her hand once she’d straightened from freeing Napoleon.

Kat laughed. “You do not wish to spend time in your family’s bosom?” she asked.

“No,” Waldorf said sardonically.

“Ah, Waldorf. There you are at last,” Waldorf’s father called to him from his chair by the fireplace. He, at least, looked perfectly at home in the castle. “Come forward so that we might complete the official striking off of your name from the Scroll of

Destiny.”

“Oh, God,” Waldorf said, rolling his eyes as he and Kat approached him. “He’s given it a name.”

Kat laughed, then stifled her laughter with one hand as they came to stand before Waldorf’s father.

“So,” Lord Gerald said, narrowing his eyes at Kat. “This is the woman you bring to me as your wife?”

Waldorf sighed. “Father, you were at the wedding three weeks ago.”

“But you’re only just presenting her. Hmm.” Waldorf’s father made a disapproving face.

“You and Dunstan only just arrived here last week,” Waldorf said. “And besides, debate about the Mercian Plan has begun. I...I have been instrumental in deciphering much of the debate for King Swithin.”

In fact, even though both Waldorf and Kat had been dismissed from Queen Matilda’s service, Waldorf still ostensibly worked as a spy for King Swithin. He had, however, let the king know that he intended to turn his focus to married life, so before the end of the year, he would no longer be his uncle’s spy either.

“Very well,” his father said, then raised his voice to call out, “Mrs. Weatherby, bring me the scroll!”

Waldorf had heard from both Cedric and Alden about how Lord Gerald had taken such giddy delight in the ceremony, and how Mrs. Weatherby cheekily indulged him. Indeed, Mrs. Weatherby seemed to enjoy the whole thing as much as his father as she took the scroll and a black chalk pencil from the top drawer of the desk on one side of

the room and marched it solemnly across the hall to Lord Gerald.

Dunstan glanced up from his book and from where he had been petting a decidedly happy Napoleon to watch. Though if Waldorf wasn't mistaken, his cousin's gaze was more for the surprisingly handsome and young Mrs. Weatherby instead of for the scroll or Lord Gerald.

Waldorf forgot all that in an instant as Mrs. Weatherby set the scroll on the table by his father's chair and unrolled it. The top of the scroll bore the words "Heirs of Godwin Castle" penned in foreboding, black ink with red and gold accents. Underneath was a list of the names of Waldorf, his brothers, and his cousins. Cedric's and Alden's names had already been crossed out with a thick, black line.

"How very beautiful," Kat commented solemnly, clasping her hands in front of her. Waldorf noted that she was biting her lip, likely to stop herself from laughing.

"The chalk, Mrs. Weatherby," Lord Gerald asked, holding out his hand.

Mrs. Weatherby handed the stick of chalk to him as if it were Excalibur itself.

Waldorf huffed impatiently.

His father then took the chalk and struck a definitive line through his name, saying, "So mote it be."

Kat made a squeaking sound, as if the laughter simply could not stay inside of her.

"I guess it's all down to Lawrence and Dunstan now," Waldorf said as Mrs. Weatherby took the chalk back and rolled up the scroll.

"Would you care to wager on which one of them will end up eternally cursed?" his father asked, far too delighted by the prospect.

Waldorf was not given a chance to state his pick, though it would have been Dunstan for certain. One of the castle's footmen marched into the room at speed, carrying a letter in front of him.

"My lord, a letter has just arrived, and I've been told it is urgent and of grave importance and requires immediate action," the footman said.

"Oh?" Waldorf's father asked, sitting up straighter. "Well, go ahead and read it aloud. I've no idea where my spectacles have gone to."

"Yes, my lord," the footman said, proceeding to open the envelope. He cleared his throat, then said, "It is from your son, my lord, Lord Lawrence. It says, 'Dearest Father. Forgive the shortness of this letter, but time is of the essence, and I need Mrs. Weatherby's expertise with healing herbs at once. We have been waylaid, and Lady Minerva is dying.'"