



An Inventor and An Inconvenience (Gentleman Scholars #5)

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Category: Historical

Description: Between ballrooms and classrooms, hearts defy the gears of convention

Lord Jasper Linford, a third son with meager expectations of inheritance, dreams of a mechanical revolution that will change not only the mining industry but also secure his place in his fathers heart. Jasper sets out to create technology to transform the marquess' ore-rich lands.

Faith Somerton, the daughter of an Oxford professor, thirsts for knowledge forbidden to her. While shes had access to her fathers library, her dreams of attending university have remained unfulfilled. Her deepest desire is to break down the barriers of privilege and gender and make education accessible to all, especially underprivileged children and young girls.

As Jasper and Faiths paths collide, their shared ambitions ignite a passionate partnership and an unbreakable bond. But in a society that seeks to keep them apart and in a race against time to bring their inventions to life, they must navigate the intricate dance of love, dreams, and the pursuit of a brighter future.

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As Faith Somerton reread the letter she had recently received from Adriana, her excitement mounted. She didn't know what to make of the quote, though.

In shadows deep where secrets sleep,

'Neeth moonlit sky, the roses weep.

Her hands trembled slightly as she read the letter once again. The cream-colored paper was already showing wear at its creases from multiple readings, but Faith couldn't help returning to it again and again, particularly to the curious verse that had captured her attention.

The words seemed to pulse with possibility, though Faith still didn't know quite what to make of them. She smoothed the paper across her knee, breathing in the faint trace of lavender that clung to it—Adriana's signature scent. The letter continued below the verse:

Greta found an old poem with these words and Ellis is certain he read them somewhere while he was at Oxford. I'm certain the libraries are much too extensive for you to search every book, but if you could possibly find anything really old, especially before the papal rejection, that would be spectacular.

"Spectacular indeed," Faith whispered, a grin spreading across her face despite her attempt to maintain scholarly composure. The word tasted like possibility on her tongue.

A clock chimed somewhere in the house, its deep tones reminding her that she should

be organizing these books, not poring over personal correspondence. But then, when had she ever been able to resist the siren call of potential knowledge?

Especially when it came wrapped in such an intriguing mystery.

The late afternoon sun slanted through the leaded glass windows of her father, Professor Somerton's library, casting honey-gold patterns across the worn carpet and illuminating motes of dust that danced in the air like tiny stars.

Faith sat cross-legged on the floor—hardly a ladylike position, but there was no one to see—surrounded by stacks of leather-bound books and loose papers. The familiar scents of aging vellum, leather bindings, and brass polish wrapped around her like a comfort blanket, though today they couldn't quite calm her racing heart.

The thought of proper forms of address made her chuckle quietly to herself. Adriana and Ellis were now the Earl and Countess of Beaverbrook—titles that should inspire formal deference, even in the privacy of her own thoughts. But how could she maintain such distance with someone who had become one of her dearest friends, even if their relationship existed purely through letters?

Despite the gentility of her birth, Faith wasn't really used to using what Society would consider proper forms of address.

In the environment she lived in, Professor was the highest title that could be given and was the most revered. Since she was a mere "Miss," titles really didn't apply to her. And yet, she ought to give her friend the respect she was due.

Faith laughed. It wasn't difficult to consider Adriana a close friend considering how few young women she had ever met—any females, except for servants, really. Even the servants were mostly male in this city dominated by the university and the men who attended it.

Faith sighed and glanced around the room she was in.

Her father's library was one of her favourite locations in all the world. She rolled her eyes. "In all the world?" A bit dramatic for a pragmatist such as her. It was not as though she had travelled the breadth of England, let alone beyond its borders, so her description was rather grandiose.

The scent of paper, ink, and the leather that bound the books was familiar and comforting despite her mixed feelings about the location of the room. Her father's library might not be the largest or most extensive to a scholar, but to her it was warm, inviting, and cozy, at least when her father wasn't present.

Not to say Professor Somerton ever objected to her making use of the room whether he was present or not, but Faith couldn't imagine her father approving of her current activity whether it was taking place in his library or not.

"But wouldn't you be better off perfecting your womanly charms?"

That question, oft repeated by her father whenever he realized he ought not be speaking to her about some subject or other, never failed to put her teeth on edge.

Men like her father considered education to be exclusively the right of the male of the species. She tried not to mind. Tried and failed miserably. She knew her father loved her in his own way, and she adored him as much as she could, but it had become a lonely life since her mother died.

The irony was that her father had provided her a wonderful education.

Unfortunately, it was as if it were their dreadful secret, no one must ever know. In addition, she was limited to her father's specialties or whatever books he would allow her to access. It was as though he couldn't help himself, he was a born educator, and

yet he was full of disapproval when she actually learned anything.

Of course, the fact that they lived in Oxford meant she had access to a great deal of educational material, most of which her father didn't know she had managed to get her hands on and consume.

The thing was, he was always tied up with his students or his own research, and she had a great deal of time on her hands. She had determined that what he didn't know about her educational pursuits wouldn't hurt either of them.

Faith shifted, her skirts rustling against the carpet as she reached for another stack of papers. The sound seemed overloud in the library's hushed atmosphere, making her glance guiltily at the door. But no, her father was deep in preparation for his afternoon lecture. She could hear the faint murmur of his voice from his study down the hall, practicing his delivery as he always did.

The library itself seemed to hold its breath around her, its towering shelves creating the illusion of a separate world. This room had been her sanctuary since childhood, though her relationship with it was complex. Every shelf represented both opportunity and restriction—books she could access but wasn't supposed to understand, knowledge within reach but formally denied her because of her gender.

The thought made her hands clench involuntarily, crinkling Adriana's letter. Faith smoothed it hastily, her fingers lingering over the words about Oxford's lost library. How ironic that she, forbidden from formal study, might help recover texts that had been hidden away during another time of intellectual restriction.

Faith shook off the disquieting thoughts and returned to Adriana's letter.

The Countess was asking her to find, or at least try to find, a particular book here at the University. Another young woman Adriana had become acquainted with, and

someone now involved in the search, had found an old poem that they thought might have something to do with the treasure hunt.

Some of the scholars Adriana knew thought the treasure referred to Oxford's lost library, so she could understand why they might think a poem connects the two seemingly divergent things, but Faith wasn't so sure a poem could possibly be pertinent.

Faith also didn't think it was likely that the treasure they searched for was the lost Oxford library; she was nearly certain those books were gone for good, or at least most of them. They weren't "lost," they had been discarded, destroyed. It was enough to break her heart just thinking of it.

Faith suspected she might know where a couple of those books were, but it was very difficult to hide that many books, considering how few locked rooms there were in the grand edifices of Oxford. Of course, there were plenty of locked rooms, but they all had keys—and scholarly people were determined to poke their noses into them.

She knew that well, since she had been found many times with her own nose in a book and scoffed at by the same scholarly gentlemen—or worse, by the non-scholarly so-called gentlemen who came up to Oxford as a matter of consequence rather than for a love of learning.

It never ceased to annoy her that the wealthy and noble young men of England could waste their time dallying about town, while she could never attend a single class. She would have appreciated the access to education so much more than most of them.

"Don't get angry, Faith," she reminded herself and returned her attention to her work. And Adriana's letter.

There's reason to believe that others know about the treasure. We aren't certain how

they could have found out, but the gentlemen are getting anxious. I don't want to put pressure on you, my friend. I know you're busy with trying to get support for your school. But if we could find a treasure, you wouldn't need backers.

Faith gulped over those words. "The gentlemen" Adriana referred to were not like the loose screws who came to Oxford just because they had nothing else to do. These were the sort who appreciated the education they accessed at this fine establishment.

Her father had his favourites, some of whom he stayed in touch with. Take, for example, Jasper, or rather Lord Jasper—he never ceased prattling on about the man. It tended to rile up her irritation whenever Father brought up the gentleman, just like he had two days ago when he warned her that the noble scholar was coming for a visit.

Her father was nearly giddy with excitement. Faith had lost her appetite immediately. Professor Somerton's attachment to his former student caused his daughter a wave of jealousy that was immediately followed by guilt.

She had never met the man, or rather, she had never been introduced to him, and she hadn't seen him in several years. He had been so treacherous as to go to Cambridge for a couple of years before joining his friends at the institute they had established for pursuing their scientific research without the assistance of sponsors.

Roderick Northcott's Scholarly Society.

It didn't officially have such a title, but Faith couldn't help thinking of it with capital letters. She was of two minds about it, torn between admiration and vexation.

Funny thing was, her professor father had been both appalled and impressed by Roderick Northcott's pursuit of supporting his friends' research. Faith's father was quite convinced that the traditional ways were best, that scholars ought to work

alongside sponsors and allow them to benefit from the scientist's work.

And yet he couldn't help himself from admiring when one of his students did something useful, or practical, or even lucrative—despite that being so very *déclassé*. Such as the Scholarly Institute Roderick Northcott had set up.

Faith only knew about it because those very same scholars had put Adriana in touch with her to assist with the research.

Faith laughed. What would her father think of their pursuit of treasure?

He didn't yet know Faith had any knowledge of the matter.

He would consider it a fairy tale and beneath his notice. But Faith was intrigued and was convinced that the treasure had to be of a financial sort. She knew that wasn't based necessarily on logic, but entirely upon her wish.

So, it might as well be a fairy tale, just as her father would consider it.

Faith was determined to establish a school of some sort, particularly for girls, and Adriana, the Countess of Beaverbrook, was interested in assisting her.

Faith was thrilled at how much their interests aligned, and she knew that the countess's deep pockets most likely would allow them to pursue the interest even without a treasure. But in the meantime, while her father still needed her, she would remain by his side and do her best to learn as much as she could.

And if they found a pot of gold at the end of their treasure hunt, she wouldn't say no to that either.

Faith turned her attention back to the clues Adriana had sent.

She shouldn't allow her mind to wander so desperately toward her own pursuits. She had agreed to help with the treasure hunt, such as it was.

She ought to focus; her own educational desires would wait. They had already been waiting all these years—what was a little bit longer?

Sunlight caught the brass fittings on a nearby shelf, drawing her eye to a particular volume—one of her father's oldest texts on medieval Oxford. Something niggled at the back of her mind, a half-formed connection between Adriana's letter and a passage she remembered reading in that book. Carefully, trying not to disturb the organized chaos of her father's system, Faith extracted the heavy tome.

The leather binding was smooth beneath her fingers, worn to a dull sheen by generations of scholarly hands. Faith inhaled deeply as she opened it, letting the musty-sweet scent of old paper and ink wash over her. Somewhere in these pages, she was certain, lay a clue that would help unravel the mystery of the treasure her friends sought.

A floorboard creaked in the hallway, and Faith quickly arranged some of her father's papers over the letter. Professor Somerton appeared in the doorway, his silver hair slightly dishevelled as always, his spectacles perched precariously on the end of his nose.

"Still at those books, Faith?" he asked, distraction evident in his tone. "You know, you really ought to be—"

"Perfecting my womanly charms?" The words slipped out before she could stop them, edged with more bitterness than she'd intended.

Her father's expression shifted, that familiar mix of regret and resolution that always appeared when they skirted too close to this particular topic. "Well, yes, perhaps that

would be more... appropriate."

Faith bit back her automatic response, forcing a smile instead. "I'm nearly finished here, Father. Though I did notice some interesting marginalia in your copy of—"

"Best not to trouble yourself with such things," he interrupted, though his voice held a note of something that might have been pride, quickly suppressed. "Oh, and do remember that Lord Jasper Linford will be arriving tomorrow for consultation. We'll need the small study prepared for his use."

Faith's heart gave an odd little jump at the name, though she told herself it was merely annoyance. Lord Jasper—her father's favourite student, the one he never tired of praising. She had never spent any amount of time with the man, but his shadow loomed large in her father's stories, a paragon of scholarly virtue she could never hope to match.

"Of course, Father," she said smoothly, already planning how she might position herself to overhear their discussions. "I'll see to it directly."

After he left, Faith returned to the medieval text with renewed determination. Her father's imminent visitor was all the more reason to make progress on Adriana's puzzle quickly. She had no intention of letting Lord Jasper's presence interrupt her research, no matter how much his impending arrival made her pulse quicken with a mixture of curiosity and resentment.

The smell of beeswax polish from the library's wooden panels mingled with the leather and paper scents as the afternoon light grew golden. Faith's fingers moved surely through the pages, searching for the passage she remembered. When she found it, her breath caught.

There, in her father's precise handwriting, were the same words from Adriana's poem:

In shadows deep where secrets sleep. The professor had written it in the margin of a passage describing the university's medieval architectural renovations during the 1500s, alongside a note about "possible concealed chambers" and "architectural anomalies in the old library wing."

Had her father been researching the same mysteries that now captivated Adriana and her friends? Faith's pulse quickened as she traced her finger over his familiar script, wondering what connection her scholarly father might have to this treasure hunt.

Faith's hands trembled as she compared the two texts. The connection was unmistakable, though its significance remained unclear. But one thing was certain—she had found something important, something that linked Oxford's past with the treasure her friends sought.

Setting the book carefully aside, Faith gazed around the library that had been both her heaven and her prison. The setting sun painted the spines of hundreds of books in shades of amber and gold, each one containing knowledge she wasn't supposed to pursue. Well, she had never been very good at accepting artificial limitations.

She was going to solve this puzzle, uncover this treasure, and perhaps in doing so, find a way to establish the school she dreamed of. Nothing—not societal restrictions, not her father's reservations, and certainly not the imminent arrival of Lord Jasper Linford—would stand in her way.

Faith carefully copied the relevant passage into her notebook, her mind already racing with possibilities. Tomorrow would bring its own challenges, but for now, she had a mystery to unravel and a purpose to pursue. The library's shadows lengthened around her as she worked, keeping her secrets safe in their familiar embrace.

Perhaps there was a treasure to be found in Oxford after all.

She was going to find that treasure, and she was going to establish a school. Nothing could stand in her way.

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Lord Jasper Linford watched helplessly as his device sputtered to a standstill. He still couldn't get the automation to remain functional, at least not with sufficiently heavy grinding elements at the end.

The acrid scent of scorched metal filled Jasper's workshop as his device sputtered and wheezed, its brass gears grinding together in protest. He held his breath, hands hovering uncertainly over the mechanism as it struggled to maintain momentum. The grinding elements at the end of the device—the crucial components that would make or break its success—trembled ominously before grinding to a complete standstill.

Another failure.

Frustration mounted.

Jasper exhaled slowly, forcing his fingers to unclench before they could damage the delicate machinery. Weak morning light filtered through the workshop's grimy windows, catching on floating metal particles and creating an almost ethereal atmosphere that belied his dark mood. The damp stone walls of the converted stable block seemed to close in around him, their ancient mortar carrying the musty scent of generations of noble endeavours—most more successful than his current efforts.

A thin wisp of smoke curled up from the gears, taunting him. The device that was supposed to revolutionize his father's mining operations now sat before him like an expensive paperweight, its brass fittings gleaming with false promise in the early light.

Professor Somerton had agreed to offer his opinion, and Jasper was looking forward

to seeing his old mentor once more. It had been several years since he had visited the school and his old teachers, and it felt as though it was well past due.

And yet, guilt weighed heavily upon him. He knew it was all in his own head—the Marquess didn't care that his youngest son was more emotionally attached to a professor than to his sire.

The Marquess's last words to him echoed in his mind: "Another waste of resources, I suppose?"

The dismissive tone had cut deeper than any outright criticism could have. Jasper's hands moved automatically over his failed device, checking connections he'd already verified a dozen times, searching for the flaw that kept success just out of reach.

The Marquess certainly wasn't attached to his "spare spare." Jasper rolled his eyes at the words his older brothers had often used in childhood.

The heavy wooden door creaked open, admitting a blast of cool morning air along with his brother Lucas. The elder Linford son looked comically out of place in the workshop, his immaculate London attire a stark contrast to the grease-stained workbenches and tool-lined walls.

"Are you still here?" Lucas asked with a dry chuckle that sent a familiar ripple of irritation through Jasper. "I don't know why you bother sticking around this dusty old shed, considering you have a much better setup at your institute—not to mention the disparagement of our father."

Jasper didn't look up from his work, though his fingers stilled on the brass fitting he'd been adjusting. How could he explain to his carefree brother that every dismissive word from their father only strengthened his determination? That each failure pushed him to try harder, to prove that his years of study hadn't been wasted?

The scent of machine oil and hot metal filled his nostrils as he straightened, his back protesting hours spent bent over the workbench. Scattered around him lay the physical manifestations of his dreams: technical drawings covered in marginalia, prototype components in various stages of completion, and pages of calculations that represented countless hours of effort.

“You know he’s never going to change his mind about your studies, don’t you?” Lucas asked as he fingered the mechanism his brother had been tinkering with. He lifted it, examining the smooth brass edges and intricate gear system with idle curiosity.

“He will if I can get it to work,” Jasper said with conviction.

His firm belief that his father would finally accept his calling as a scholar if he could invent something that the Marquess found useful unwavering.

“If I can find a way to make the mining faster, or easier, or more profitable, you know he’s going to appreciate that.”

He trailed off, unwilling to voice his deepest hope: that his father would finally look at him with the same pride he showed his older brothers.

Lucas picked up one of the prototype components, his manicured fingers incongruous against the working brass. “Oh, he’ll appreciate exploiting it, for certain. Doesn’t mean he’s going to appreciate the inventor.”

The truth in those words stung, but Jasper pressed on. “If I can make the mining faster, easier, more profitable—”

“Then you’ll still be the third son who wastes his time with machines instead of proper noble pursuits.” Lucas set down the component with exaggerated care.

“Sorry, old chap,” Lucas said. “I shouldn’t state the obvious quite so baldly, should I?”

Jasper shoved his dirty hand through his hair without thinking about the consequences, and then had to laugh at his brother’s expression of horror at the machine oil being left behind. It startled a laugh out of Jasper. Lucas didn’t believe in getting dirty, nor did he much care for their father’s opinion—as long as the Marquess wasn’t disapproving enough to cut off his allowance, Lucas happily spent his time carousing in London.

“You should come up for the Season, Jasper,” Lucas suggested, brushing imaginary dirt from his sleeve. “What you need is a fine heiress to set you up. Then you won’t care about Father’s disdain any longer.”

Jasper sighed again.

“It’s unlikely I’ll ever not care about Father’s disdain,” he admitted quietly, the words carrying more weight than he’d intended.

Lucas shrugged, the gesture dismissing years of complex family dynamics. “You’re obviously doing it wrong then.”

Suddenly, though, his expression shifted to a frown as he noticed the packed cases near the door. “Looks like you’re leaving us. Did you finally gain your senses then?”

Jasper laughed. “I’m going for a consultation with Professor Somerton.”

“You always were fond of that old bag of wind.” Lucas shook his head. “How is the old chap these days?”

Jasper busied himself with wrapping each component in oiled cloth, carefully

cataloguing each piece in his mind: the main drive shaft, the geared wheels, the experimental grinding head he'd developed. Each represented countless hours of work, countless failures, and yet he couldn't stop trying.

"I haven't seen him in several years," he admitted. "I've been busy."

"Busy with your tinkering, for certain." Lucas circled the workbench, examining the organized chaos with mild curiosity. "Why can't you be happy with the things that have worked? Why do you have to be so obsessed with this thing?"

Jasper adjusted a strap on his case, ensuring everything was secure. Before he could respond to his brother's questions, Thompson appeared in the doorway.

"My lord?" Thompson, his father's under-butler, stood at the workshop door, looking distinctly uncomfortable among the machinery. He held his hands carefully behind his back, as though afraid of brushing against the grease-streaked workbenches. "His Lordship requests your presence before you depart."

Jasper's hands stilled on the delicate mechanism he'd been wrapping. "Did he say why?"

"No, my lord. But..." Thompson hesitated, then added with careful neutrality. "The steward was with him, reviewing the mine accounts."

Of course. His father wouldn't be interested in the device itself, only in how much it was costing. Jasper carefully placed the wrapped component in his traveling case with exaggerated, contained movement, using the familiar motion to steady himself.

"Please, inform His Lordship I'll attend him shortly."

As Thompson left, Jasper's eyes fell on an old mechanical drawing pinned to the wall.

One of Roderick's, from their Oxford days. The intricate gear system reminded him of something he'd seen in an ancient text at Oxford during his studies, though he'd dismissed it at the time. Strange how memory worked – he hadn't thought of that in years.

He traced a finger over the faded ink, lost in thought. There had been something about that text, a peculiar phrasing about the transference of power through mechanisms, something that had niggled at him at the time but seemed irrelevant then. Could it hold the answer he was missing now?

He shook off the recollection and returned to his packing. He had more pressing concerns than the other scholars' treasure hunt fantasies. Though he had to admit, the idea of discovering something that would prove the worth of scholarly pursuit to his father held a certain appeal.

Jasper cleared his throat and returned his attention to his brother.

Why couldn't he stop obsessing over the mines? There was no way to answer that question. He had tried over and over through the years, vacillating between trying to gain his father's approval and trying to convince himself he didn't care. But he'd never succeeded at either.

Only now, faced with his imminent departure, did Jasper realize how much he'd pinned on this consultation. Professor Somerton had always seen potential in him, had encouraged his interest in mechanical innovation when others dismissed it as beneath his station. If anyone could help him perfect this device, surely it would be his old mentor.

The morning light strengthened, warming the workshop's chill air. Jasper adjusted the straps on his traveling case, ensuring each precious component was secure. Behind him, Lucas lounged against a workbench, no doubt getting coal dust on his expensive

coat.

"You never did answer my question," his brother said quietly. "Why can't you let this go? Accept that Father will never understand your scholarly pursuits?"

Jasper straightened, surveying his workshop one last time. The smell of hot metal lingered in the air, mingling with machine oil and ambition. "Because I have to believe that excellence will win out over expectation. That what we create matters more than what we're born to be."

"How very philosophical," Lucas drawled, but something in his expression had softened. "Well, good luck with your old professor. Though I still say an heiress would solve your problems more efficiently."

As Jasper finally headed toward his father's study as instructed, anticipation warred with apprehension in his chest. One more attempt to gain the approval that had always eluded him. One more chance to prove that his chosen path had value.

He only hoped Professor Somerton would see what his father couldn't—the potential not just in the device, but in the man who'd created it.

This was his last-ditch effort to gain at least his father's respect, if nothing else. If he could get this wretched device to work, surely the Marquess would have to see that his years of schooling had been worth it.

That was the rub—the Marquess felt that Eton should have been sufficient, Oxford was an indulgence, and then Jasper's couple of years at Cambridge were just ridiculous in his father's view. Thankfully, Jasper's grandmother had supported his years of schooling and hadn't stipulated that Jasper needed to quit at a certain time.

But the Marquess had never shown any interest in Jasper's studies, nor in anything he

had accomplished since. All he cared about was his estate, and that was intended for his firstborn, of course.

Jasper and Lucas had been trained in all that needed to be done on the estate, with Lucas as the spare and Jasper the extra, just in case. They both needed to know what went into running such a massive system as the Marquess's many holdings.

It would have been far easier for everyone in the family if Jasper had been a girl. It's even possible the Marquess would have taken an interest in his youngest child then.

Every nobleman needed a spare, and it was even expected that the second son be a "loose screw." Therefore, Lucas was accepted, if not completely approved of, by the hard-hearted nobleman who was their father.

But a scholar was just absolutely beyond the Marquess's field of comprehension.

Jasper winced, recalling his father's reaction to his latest academic paper just last month.

"What is this?" the Marquess had demanded, tossing the carefully bound manuscript onto his desk without even opening it. They stood in his father's study, the walls lined with portraits of Linfords past—all proper noblemen without a scholarly thought among them.

"It's my research on pressure distribution systems," Jasper had explained, fighting to keep his voice steady. "Professor Brighton believes it could revolutionize several industrial applications, including our mining operations."

The Marquess had leaned back in his chair, regarding Jasper with that familiar look of weary disappointment. "More theories, more papers, more wasted years. Tell me, Jasper, when do you intend to produce something of actual value? Something

tangible? Your brother Lucas manages the eastern properties with remarkable efficiency despite his... social proclivities. Even he understands his responsibilities."

"This will lead to tangible results, Father. If you would just—"

"Enough," the Marquess had cut him off with a dismissive wave. "I've indulged this academic fascination of yours far longer than prudence dictated. Either return with something that can actually benefit the Linford holdings, or perhaps consider that military commission your uncle has offered. At least then you'd be doing something befitting your station."

The manuscript had remained untouched on the desk between them, the culmination of months of work dismissed without a single glance.

Jasper's many years of schooling even made him understand, to at least a certain degree, why his father was the way he was. He had taken enough classes on psychology to understand that it was many years of his own father's treatment that made the Marquess the way he was.

Unfortunately, that didn't make Jasper any less determined to succeed in gaining the man's respect.

And for that, he needed Professor Somerton. He only hoped his mentor could help him find the missing bits that seemed to elude him.

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The morning light streamed through the breakfast room windows, catching the steam rising from Professor Somerton's tea cup and transforming it into ghostly shapes that danced in the air. Faith watched as her father absently buttered his toast, his attention fixed on the scientific journal propped against the teapot.

The familiar scene brought both comfort and frustration—their daily ritual of shared silence and unspoken boundaries.

The scent of the fresh bread mingled with her morning chocolate, a most decadent perfume filling the air. Faith enjoyed the sound of morning birdsong drifting in through the slightly opened window; it provided a cheerful counterpoint to the rustle of her father's journal pages.

Faith's fingers itched to reach for Adriana's letter, tucked safely in her pocket, but she forced herself to maintain the pretence of a normal breakfast.

"Fascinating," he muttered, more to himself than to her. "The implications for molecular theory..."

"What implications, Father?" The words slipped out before Faith could stop them.

To her surprise, her father's eyes lit up. "Well, you see, they've discovered—" He launched into an explanation, hands gesturing animatedly as he described the latest scientific breakthrough. Faith leaned forward, drinking in every word, her heart swelling with the rare pleasure of open discourse with him.

Then, mid-sentence, the professor seemed to catch himself. His hands dropped to his

lap, and his expression shifted from enthusiasm to discomfort.

"But never mind all that. Have you seen to the menu for next week's faculty dinner?"

Faith's throat tightened. The familiar disappointment settled in her chest like a physical weight.

"Yes, Father. Cook and I discussed it yesterday."

"Good, good." He returned to his journal, but the earlier animation was gone, replaced by a studied distance. "And the linens need pressing, no doubt."

"Already arranged." Faith pushed her eggs around her plate, appetite gone. "Though if you'd like to finish explaining about the molecular theory—"

"Faith." Her father's voice held a warning note, though she caught something else in his expression – regret, perhaps? "You know such matters aren't... appropriate."

"Because I'm a woman?" The words came out sharper than intended.

Professor Somerton lowered his journal with a sigh. "Because it is the way of things. I've already indulged your education far more than is proper."

"Indulged?" Faith set down her fork. "Is that what you call allowing me to learn in secret? Pretending not to notice when I listen at lecture hall doors? Being careful never to acknowledge anything I might have learned?"

Her father's face softened momentarily.

"My dear..." He reached across the table as if to take her hand, then seemed to think better of it. "You are my daughter, and I... I want what's best for you."

"What's best for me, or what's easiest for you?"

The moment the words left her mouth, Faith wished she could take them back. Her father's face closed off entirely.

"I believe we're finished here." He stood, gathering his journal. "Do see to those linens, won't you?"

Faith watched him leave, blinking back tears of frustration. Just before he reached the door, he paused.

"That piece you asked about," he said quietly, still facing away from her. "The implications for molecular theory. There's a more detailed explanation in my copy of Quarterly Review. Third shelf, behind Paley's Natural Theology."

Then he was gone, leaving Faith to wonder, as she so often did, whether her father was her greatest ally or her greatest obstacle in the pursuit of knowledge.

She didn't bother telling him she had already read both the Quarterly Review and the journal he had been perusing that morning. He wouldn't have appreciated it. And he would have been even less inclined to tell her his thoughts on the matter.

At least now that he'd invited her to read it, there was a better chance of the conversation going well the next time. Maybe.

Faith retreated to the garden, her pruning shears in hand. It was her favourite place for thinking. Despite her love for her father's library, she occasionally felt it was too overbearing for any of her thoughts that could be considered flightier than usual. This was one of them.

Could she really consider herself a scholar? Could she really help the scientists find

this treasure they were searching for?

She truly didn't see how the treasure could be the lost library from Oxford. She honestly believed she had personally climbed over every possible inch of building and land the university had to offer. But with these new clues, she was willing to do it all over again.

A thrill shivered through her. Surely the university would have to respect her if she was able to assist in finding a treasure. She didn't know if that respect would extend so far as allowing her to become a student—not an official one—but perhaps they would allow her to sit in on some of the classes.

That's all she asked. All she truly wanted was an education. Why should that be restricted only to the males of the species?

Faith's shears moved with precision, each cut calculated despite her tumultuous thoughts. The rose bush before her had grown wild, its branches reaching in all directions — not unlike her own quest for knowledge, she thought wryly. Sometimes growth needed guidance to achieve its full potential.

As she worked, she mentally reviewed the passage from Adriana's letter.

"In shadows deep where secrets sleep..."

The words had seemed familiar when she first read them, and now, looking at the way shadows played across the garden wall, she wondered if they might be more literal than metaphorical. Oxford had no shortage of deep shadows, especially in its oldest buildings.

She pulled Adriana's letter from her pocket, careful to keep it hidden behind the rose bush. The paper was already creased from multiple readings, but she needed to check

something. Yes—there it was. The peculiar way Adriana had underlined certain words reminded her of a pattern she'd seen in one of her father's old texts, the one about medieval architecture—

A movement at the library window made her hastily tuck the letter away.

Professor Hartford was visiting her father again, no doubt to discuss the upcoming faculty dinner. Faith smiled grimly. If they only knew that while they debated place settings, she was hunting for a treasure that could change everything.

She turned back to her pruning, but now she saw the garden differently. Every shadow, every ancient wall, every worn stone path could be hiding something. The roses weren't the only things in Oxford that needed careful tending to reveal their true nature.

Faith sighed and shook off the disquieting thought as she returned to pruning the shrub in front of her. The mundane task would surely allow her thoughts to settle into the right place. Faith wasn't sure if she would have time to further pursue the clue Adriana had sent her.

With her father's favourite student coming to visit, she was going to have to play hostess. It was surely going to addle her brain considering the animosity and jealousy she felt toward Lord Jasper Linford.

Of course, Lord Jasper didn't even know she existed, so her negative feelings toward him didn't impact him at all. That was the frustrating part about a grudge—usually the one to whom it was directed was barely even aware.

Her father knew, though. That was the hurtful part. He found it amusing and didn't even consider not asking the man to visit. Surely, he does love me, though—he's my father, Faith insisted to herself.

Faith pushed the unhelpful and unpleasant thoughts aside.

She had already planned out the meals and gone to the market, so she didn't have to give much thought to their upcoming guest. Instead, she would rather give thought to Adriana's letter and the clues she had shared.

Faith needed to write back and ask a few more questions, as well as tell Adriana what she had discovered in her father's papers. She would outline for Adriana what she would do next with the latest clue.

Faith would have to begin her search again, considering that some of the property she hadn't been to for quite some time, and certainly not looking at it from the perspective of finding any sort of treasure.

My dearest Lady Beaverbrook,

I am happy to report that your letter was helpful, and I had equally helpful information at my fingertips. Between the two pieces, I have every intention of resuming the search. Thank you for sending me the quotation. If you have any more that might be relevant, please do forward it at your earliest convenience.

On a different note, a friend of your husband is coming to visit. Lord Jasper Linford. Does he know about the search? Ought I to include him in the information or keep it in strictest confidence?

I do so wish you could come to this fine town in person. Despite how stodgy they are about women, you would be surprised at how beautiful the city is. I'm also making progress on the curriculum I'm hoping to start sharing shortly. I have already put out word that I am searching for any small girl who might be interested.

I trust you are well, and I send you all my best.

Faith wrinkled her nose as she thought of the words she wished to write to her friend.

They sounded so stilted, but she wasn't sure who might see her letter, and she feared what might happen if anyone knew what she was planning. It wasn't the best way to cultivate a relationship, but she didn't have much choice unless the lady were to come visit or Faith could go to her.

That would be decadent—a luxury her father was unlikely to afford her, considering his reliance on her housekeeping abilities.

Faith shook her head. It wasn't as though he couldn't afford to hire a housekeeper, but why should he spend his blunt when it seemed to him her only use was to keep his house? Faith took a deep breath and stilled her hands. She was clipping far too much off the plant she was pruning, and it was likely to be bald shortly if she didn't contain her roiling emotions.

She would have to go for a walk before Lord Jasper arrived, or she was likely to be unpleasant to him, considering she expected him to be just like her father. His being a scholar was unlikely to have turned him into a progressive thinker, considering much of his education was from this fine establishment.

Faith wondered if his lordship would even tell her about his studies. That might make her resentment worse. Maybe not. She would happily exchange keeping house for him if he would further her education at least a little bit.

“Faith, come in now! You're going to catch your death of cold if you stay out there in the dew!”

Faith rolled her eyes. For such a well-educated man, he really was stuck on old wives' tales. But she wasn't about to start arguing with the older man now.

Still, his interruption had forced her to confront the decision before her: how much should she risk in pursuit of this treasure?

The answer came as she gathered her gardening tools, watching the morning light play across the rose petals. Some questions were worth any risk—especially when they might lead to the kind of treasure that could change lives through education. Her father's disapproval, Lord Jasper's potential scepticism, even the university's restrictions... none of it outweighed the possibility of recovering lost knowledge.

Standing, Faith brushed dirt from her skirts and squared her shoulders. She would find a way to work with Lord Jasper if necessary, navigate her father's protective instincts, and most importantly, help Adriana uncover whatever had been hidden in Oxford's shadows all these years.

After all, she thought with a small smile, roses weren't the only things that bloomed best with careful tending and patience. Sometimes knowledge, too, needed time and nurturing to flourish in unexpected places.

Later that morning, Faith paused in her dusting as Lucy, their young housemaid, struggled to read the label on a cleaning bottle. The girl's finger traced each letter slowly, her lips moving silently. The sight strengthened Faith's resolve—here was living proof of why their quest mattered.

"Would you like help with that?" Faith asked gently.

Lucy startled, nearly dropping the bottle. "Oh no, miss. I wouldn't want to trouble you."

"It's no trouble." Faith moved closer, her voice soft. "I could show you how to sound out the words properly."

It didn't take long to help the young maid, but it left Faith deep in thought.

As she helped Lucy decipher the label, Faith's mind returned to the lost library, to Adriana's letter, to the possibilities that lay ahead. Every small step toward knowledge, whether helping a maid read or searching for lost texts, was part of the same vital mission.

After helping Lucy decipher the label, Faith found herself thinking about how many other young women might be hungry for such basic knowledge. Perhaps she didn't need to wait for some grand school—she could start small, with just one student.

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Jasper stopped abruptly at the threshold of Professor Somerton's study, his carefully rehearsed opening words dying on his lips.

The polished wood frame of the doorway caught the morning light that streamed through tall windows. The sitting room before him was a scholar's sanctuary gone slightly to seed—scientific journals stacked on side tables, a well-worn chess set in the corner, and books. Books everywhere, their leather spines gleaming.

It was a scene entirely different from what he'd expected. Instead of his mentor's familiar figure bent over a desk, he found himself facing a young woman. Despite the controlled chaos of the room around her, it was the woman herself who drew and held his attention.

"Lord Jasper Linford to see you, Miss," the footman announced with practiced formality.

She sat with perfect posture on the settee, her deep blue dress a stark contrast to the faded upholstery. Her fingers absently traced the edge of a scientific paper that lay beside her, the gesture so natural it suggested familiarity with such materials. There was something in her bearing—a sharp intelligence in her eyes that seemed at odds with the domestic setting—that made him pause.

Jasper was confused. And irritated. He had specifically asked to see Professor Somerton; why had he been shown to this woman? And what was a woman doing at Oxford with all these scientific papers at her fingertips? He had heard rumours of the professor's bluestocking daughter, but surely—

The young woman's lips curved into a smile that suggested she read every question crossing his face. There was something else in her expression too—a wariness, perhaps even a touch of hostility, though he couldn't imagine why. They had never met before, had they?

"Won't you come in?" Her voice carried the cultured tones of a gentleman's daughter, but underneath lay something harder to define, barely contained energy, like a spring wound too tight.

"I'm sorry my father isn't here to greet you himself," she continued, gesturing to a chair. "There was apparently an emergency in the laboratory."

The words 'my father' clicked everything into place. This must be Miss Somerton. Jasper's irritation faded slightly—he knew all too well about laboratory emergencies. He stepped closer and took her offered hand, momentarily uncertain whether to shake it formally or bow over it properly.

"Won't you have a seat?" she invited as she lifted the teapot to offer him a cup.

"I'm not sure how long he's going to be," she explained with an apology, "but I will do my best to help you get settled. Father mentioned you were here for a consultation."

She said it like a statement, but her voice lifted in question at the end, betraying curiosity beneath her composed exterior.

"That's right," he agreed, watching as she poured tea with practiced grace. Not a drop spilled despite the subtle tremor he noticed in her hands.

"I can empathize with the laboratory emergency," he told her with a wry twist to his face, trying to ease the strange tension in the room. "I've been having one of those

myself. I was hoping the professor could help me.”

“I’m certain he will be very happy to do so,” the young lady replied, her tone carefully neutral as she handed him a cup.

“He has barely spoken of anything else since he received your letter,” she added.

Her tone didn’t reveal much, but Jasper sensed there were some negative feelings behind it. He couldn’t imagine why since they had never met before. He would certainly have remembered her. Something in her voice made him look up sharply. There was an edge there, a hint of... what? Resentment? But before he could analyse it further, she spoke again.

“Tell me about your problem,” she invited, settling back with her own cup. The sunlight streaming through the window created a halo effect around her figure, softening her edges while somehow making her seem more present, more real.

“Oh no, you wouldn’t want to be bored with that,” Jasper said automatically, then nearly winced as emotions flickered across her face—frustration, resignation, and something that might have been hurt, quickly masked.

He felt suddenly wrong-footed, remembering too late his own irritation when others dismissed his interests without giving him a chance to explain them. Maybe the Marquess was right and he wasn't fit for company after all.

Before he could spiral into tongue-tied confusion, his hostess spoke up.

“I’ve been listening to my father since I was in the cradle,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. “I probably have heard his lectures even more than you have.”

Jasper studied her with new interest. Could that be true? Might she actually

understand the principles he was working with? It would certainly help to rehearse his explanation before meeting with the professor.

Slowly, he began to describe his device.

“My father has ore mines,” he began, watching her expression carefully for signs of boredom or confusion. “Mining ore is tedious and dangerous work. I’ve been trying to develop an automated tool that could assist. My goal is to speed up the work as well as reduce the number of injuries.”

“Well, that sounds like a worthy goal,” she commented.

Her tone remained mild, but Jasper noticed how her eyes had sharpened with interest, her fingers twitching slightly as though she wished to reach for his notes.

But she didn’t sound terribly excitable.

“What seems to be the problem with your device?” The question came in that same carefully neutral tone, but there was something underneath it—genuine curiosity, perhaps?

When Jasper sighed and shoved a frustrated hand through his hair, she leaned forward almost imperceptibly. He found himself explaining more than he’d intended.

“I don’t rightly know,” he admitted.

“I was hoping Professor Somerton could find it for me. The grinding mechanism keeps failing under pressure. I’ve tried reinforcing the gears, but,” he broke off and shrugged helplessly, clearly without an answer.

"Have you considered using a compound system?" she asked, then immediately

pressed her lips together as though regretting the question.

Jasper stared at her. "A compound system?"

"Well..." She gestured vaguely with her teacup, colour rising in her cheeks.

"If you're having trouble with direct force, perhaps distributing it through multiple smaller mechanisms..." She trailed off, clearly embarrassed by her own boldness.

Before he quite knew what he was doing, Jasper was pulling out his drawings, spreading them across the tea table with growing excitement.

"Like this?" he asked, sketching quickly in the margin.

Her eyes lit up, professional enthusiasm momentarily overwhelming social constraints.

"Exactly! But if you adjusted the angle here —" She reached for the pencil, then caught herself.

Jasper found himself holding out the pencil to her, surprising them both.

"Please," he said quietly. "Show me."

The beautiful Miss Somerton's tinkle of laughter filled the room, and suddenly Jasper found himself feeling more light-hearted than he could have thought possible that day. Her questions demonstrated her understanding of the mechanisms, and she pointed out a number of things that would actually improve the function, much to his shock.

"I can hardly believe it," he said before he could catch himself, realizing she was

unlikely to appreciate his comment, inwardly cursing himself as her expression shuttered.

“Have you been studying for long?” he asked, trying to cover up his blunder.

The bitterness that filled her lovely face told him he'd only made things worse. Rather, he had opened a larger problem than he could have even imagined. Bitterness filled her lovely face, twisting it.

“Of course not,” she said as she gathered the teacups before the footman returned to collect them. “Women are not allowed to study, don’t you know?”

“Well, I suppose,” Jasper replied carefully, “but you obviously know much on the subject.”

She lifted a shoulder in a manner that Jasper suspected was supposed to indicate she didn’t care much for the topic, but he could tell that was not the case. She obviously felt many things about the fact that she was not allowed to pursue an education.

“How do you come to know so much, if you haven’t been allowed to study the topic?” he finally asked, realizing that he couldn’t avoid the topic.

“I read a lot,” she said, with a toss of her head as though daring him to challenge her.

“And of course, Father can’t help himself but to talk about it. And I listen at doors,” she added with a laugh that sounded almost genuine.

Jasper found himself warming to her obvious determination. He knew what it was to pursue knowledge against opposition, to feel that burning need to understand despite others' disapproval. Her desire for education was perhaps not so different from his own desire for his father's approval.

“I suspect you read everything you can get your hands on, don’t you?” he asked, somehow knowing the answer before she nodded shyly.

“No one truly thinks that I could understand any of the books, so they don’t really mind that I am looking at them, for the most part,” she explained, a hint of defiance creeping into her tone.

“You’re not going to tell on me, are you?” she asked suddenly, fixing him with a fierce stare that took him aback.

“No,” he replied immediately, surprising himself with his vehemence. “Obviously, you can understand it. It would be a shame to prevent you.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to explain to people, but no one wants to listen.”

Jasper laughed, startled by how much he was enjoying their conversation.

“I don’t suppose you would allow me to attend your meeting with my father?” she began tentatively.

Jasper almost objected, but then he saw the eagerly pleading expression on her face, and he just couldn’t do it. He was a little irritated by the thought of having her present, but he couldn’t really explain why, nor could he produce a sufficiently acceptable reason not to allow it.

“I look forward to hearing what you might have to contribute to the conversation,” he finally said, laughing when she snorted in response.

“It’s unlikely I’ll be allowed to contribute anything, but I am looking forward to listening. To both sides of the conversation,” she added meaningfully.

“Perhaps later you will share your thoughts with me, if you don’t feel comfortable doing so on first hearing,” Jasper offered, surprised to realize that he genuinely wanted to hear her perspectives.

As they waited for Professor Somerton to return, Jasper found himself sneaking glances at his unexpected ally. She wasn't at all what he'd expected to find in Oxford, but perhaps that was exactly what both his device and his understanding needed—a fresh perspective, unconstrained by traditional academic thinking.

He only hoped her father would be as open to unconventional ideas as his daughter clearly was.

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Faith wasn't sure how her father would react to her presence during his discussion with Lord Jasper. She'd earned the right to serve refreshments, of course—that much was expected—but actually participating in the conversation was likely to provoke resistance from the ornery old professor.

As expected, Faith brought in the tea tray and busied herself with the service, using the familiar ritual to calm her nerves. She listened intently as the gentlemen began discussing Lord Jasper's invention, her ears practically straining for any mention that might lead naturally to the topic of the lost library and Lord Jasper's friends' search. She couldn't help but feel a thrill of anticipation even as her fingers trembled slightly against the fine China of the tea service.

Professor Somerton seemed intrigued but not particularly helpful, much to Faith's shock. Not that she had ever sat in on his meetings before, but considering how much he gushed about this particular student, Faith would have expected him to be far more supportive of the gentleman's work.

She glanced around the room, wishing she had tidied up more considering the disarray, but she knew her father wouldn't appreciate her interference with his work. Any open book was not to be touched.

She wasn't sure what he was working on at the moment, but it was obviously something important. It hadn't been this much of a mess two days ago when she was last in there, but that wasn't helpful now. His books and papers were his concern, not hers.

The study was even more chaotic than usual, with papers and books scattered

everywhere. Her father kept glancing at a particular stack of correspondence on his desk, his usual sharp focus clearly divided.

"It'll never work," Professor Somerton said distractedly, barely glancing at Jasper's device.

The words fell like stones in the quiet room.

Then, seeing the hurt on his former student's face, he seemed to catch himself. "At least, not with the current configuration. The pressure distribution needs significant refinement."

Faith frowned. What good did it do, to criticize without offering constructive suggestions?

Faith knew her father had been wrestling with the university board over funding for his own research. His latest proposal had been rejected just yesterday—perhaps that explained his uncharacteristic curtness with his usually favoured student.

"Do you have a better suggestion?" she asked her father softly, surprised by her own boldness but unable to ignore the hurt she had seen flash across Jasper's face before he could mask it.

Fear and eagerness warred within her; she knew her father wouldn't appreciate her interference, but how could he leave the poor young man without any assistance?

The fierce frown directed her way let her know that Professor Somerton was close to sending her from the room, but he didn't do so, so she remained. Faith perched herself on the edge of a chair after distributing the tea and waited to see what would happen.

"I'm certain there's a way to make it work," Lord Jasper said, his voice steady despite the tension Faith could see in his shoulders. "I know the mechanisms are too delicate for the work I want them to do, but surely there must be a way."

Both gentlemen frowned over his notes and the small prototype he had brought with him. Faith's fingers itched to reach for the drawings herself, certain she could see a solution if only she were allowed to examine them properly.

"The basic principle is sound," her father admitted, finally examining the device more closely. "But you'll need to resolve the stability issues before it's practical for mining applications. Have you considered..."

He trailed off, that distracted look returning as he glanced again at his desk. Faith saw her opportunity and seized it.

"Are you using steel?" Faith asked tentatively, when it was obvious her father had nothing else to say. "Obviously not on this small prototype, but on your actual device."

"Steel?" her father yelped. "That's as inferior a product as there ever was."

Faith didn't bother arguing with her father, but she could feel Jasper's eyes on her. She didn't meet his gaze, uncertain whether she'd find dismissal or interest there. He was probably wondering why she was still in the room, despite his having agreed to it.

Even though he had agreed she could be present, he likely thought she would keep her mouth shut, but that was too difficult for her, obviously. She almost snorted a laugh but knew that would certainly get her ejected from the room. She settled back in her chair and waited again to see what would develop.

Of course, after her father's reaction to her question, Lord Jasper didn't respond to her question about steel. She stifled her sigh and tolerated the rest of the visit.

Faith frowned at her father's unusual lack of enthusiasm. Normally he would be peppering Jasper with questions, suggesting improvements, drawing diagrams. Something was clearly weighing on his mind, though she knew better than to ask what in front of company.

"It'll never work, Jasper, my boy. You've been working on some sort of mining device ever since you came up to Oxford. Isn't it time for you to turn your brilliant mind to something else? Surely the Marquess has assured you the way they've been doing it since the beginning of time is how they're going to continue to do it."

Faith frowned over the professor's words but managed to keep her gasp silent. She watched their visitor for a reaction.

"But isn't the whole point of Oxford and higher learning to challenge the way things have always been done?" Lord Jasper asked in a quiet, almost meek voice.

Faith would have expected him to rail at the professor; her frown remained.

"Not necessarily," Professor Somerton said, distant and dismissive. "I haven't time to study this further today, Linford, you'll have to come back another day."

After Jasper had departed, Faith found her father still in his study, pouring over what appeared to be financial documents.

"I apologize if I seemed abrupt earlier," he said without looking up. "Lord Jasper's device has genuine potential, but my mind was elsewhere. Perhaps you could encourage him to return next week when I can give it proper attention?"

Faith nodded, understanding now. The university's budget cuts were affecting everyone, even her usually unflappable father.

She quietly bustled about, clearing up the remnants of the short visit while her father stared off into the middle distance.

She loved this room, but it never failed to make her uncomfortable as well.

It was her father's favourite place, where he studied, where he poured over his lesson plans for his students, and where he met with those same students. And if he was feeling generous, it was where he would teach her something—but those times were becoming increasingly rare.

Faith was becoming more secretive about her own studies, considering how the men of Oxford felt about women being educated.

Determination hardened within Faith. One day, things would be different, but for now, her pursuit of knowledge remained private. She wanted to pass what she learned to other women in the village, sparing them from exploitation and poverty that often befell uneducated women.

She wasn't truly subversive - she had no interest in marching or distributing pamphlets. She simply believed that basic education would benefit everyone. A woman who could read and calculate wouldn't be cheated at market. A woman without male protection could support herself rather than becoming a burden or falling victim to harm.

What did gentlemen fear would happen if women learned about science? Their brains wouldn't melt any more than men's had. Faith sighed, knowing neither of those scholars would appreciate these thoughts.

She wondered instead if Jasper might be involved in Adriana's treasure hunt. Should she ask him directly or wait to hear from Lady Beaverbrook?

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Faith hurried through the rain-slicked streets of Oxford, clutching her shawl tightly against the damp chill.

The afternoon had turned unexpectedly dreary, matching her mood after witnessing her father's lukewarm response to Lord Jasper's invention. With Father preoccupied by potential cuts to his funding and Lord Jasper retreating to lick his wounds, Faith found herself seeking the one person who would understand her frustration.

The library's service entrance stood slightly ajar, as Faith had hoped. She slipped inside, grateful to escape the drizzle.

Unlike the grand main doors that welcomed scholars and gentlemen, this modest entrance led to the practical workings of the library—where books were repaired, catalogued, and stored. And where, if one knew where to look, one might find a young woman determinedly earning her keep through devoted service to the written word.

"Meredith?" Faith called softly as she navigated the narrow passageway between towering shelves.

A rustling sound drew her attention to a small alcove where a slender figure stood balanced precariously on a wooden step-stool, attempting to return a heavy volume to its place on the uppermost shelf.

"For heaven's sake, take care!" Faith hurried forward as the step-stool wobbled dangerously.

Meredith Silver glanced down, her serious expression blossoming into a warm smile at the sight of her oldest friend. "Faith! I didn't expect you today."

"Clearly not, or you might have waited for assistance with that rather than risking your neck," Faith replied, steadying the stool as Meredith descended.

Once safely on solid ground, Meredith embraced Faith warmly. Though only a few months older than Faith, Meredith sometimes carried herself with the gravity of someone who had seen far more of life's hardships.

The passing of her father, Professor Silver, had left subtle marks—a certain wariness around her eyes, a determination in the set of her jaw that hadn't been there before.

"What brings you out in such weather?" Meredith asked, brushing dust from her plain brown dress. Unlike Faith's modest but well-made attire, Meredith's clothes spoke of practical economy, though they were meticulously maintained.

"I desperately needed sensible conversation," Faith admitted. "And you're the only person in Oxford who reliably provides it."

Meredith laughed softly.

"High praise indeed. Though I suspect Mr. Tennyson might take exception to being outdone by a mere library assistant." She glanced around. "I've just finished reshelving this section. Let me inform Mr. Hawkins that I'm taking my afternoon break, and we can speak privately."

While Meredith went to find the head librarian, Faith wandered among the shelves, running her fingers along the leather spines. So much knowledge contained here, yet so much of it effectively barred to her and other women.

Not officially, of course—no one would admit to such discrimination outright, not any longer—but the practical barriers were just as effective as locked doors.

"All settled," Meredith announced, returning with a small brass key in hand. "Mr. Hawkins says I may use the cataloguer's office since he's out today. We'll have privacy there."

The cataloguer's office was hardly larger than a closet, but it offered two chairs and a small window that cast watery light over the cluttered desk. Meredith lit the lamp, bringing warmth to the austere space.

"Now," she said, settling into the wooden chair opposite Faith, "tell me what's troubling you. Is it your father again?"

Faith sighed, unwinding her damp shawl. "Partly. Something strange is happening with him. He's distracted, more than usual. There's correspondence he keeps checking, and this morning he was positively dismissive of Lord Jasper Linford's invention."

"The inventor? The one you mentioned in your note last week?" Meredith leaned forward with interest. "I thought your father was eagerly anticipating this visit from his favourite student."

"That's precisely what makes it so peculiar!" Faith exclaimed. "Father has been singing Lord Jasper's praises for years. I expected him to be thoroughly engaged with the invention, offering suggestions, discussing improvements. Instead, he barely looked at it properly before declaring it wouldn't work."

"How unusual," Meredith murmured. "And what about this Lord Jasper? Was he as insufferable as you expected?"

Faith felt heat rise to her cheeks. "That's the other strange thing. He's... not at all what I anticipated."

A knowing smile spread across Meredith's face. "Oh?"

"Don't look at me like that," Faith protested. "I simply mean he actually listened when I made suggestions about his device. He didn't dismiss me outright, even asked my opinion."

"A nobleman who doesn't immediately dismiss a woman's intellect? How revolutionary," Meredith remarked dryly. "Though I admit it's more than can be said for most of the scholars who frequent this library. If I had a penny for every time a gentleman asked me to fetch a book while explaining its contents to me as though I were a child..."

"You'd have enough to fund our school twice over," Faith finished with a wry smile.

Their shared dream hung in the air between them—a school for girls, where knowledge wouldn't be doled out in carefully measured spoonfuls but offered freely to eager minds.

They'd first conceived of it as girls of twelve, solemnly pledging to create what they had both longed for. What had begun as a childhood fantasy had, over the years, transformed into a determined ambition.

"Speaking of which," Faith continued, "how goes your mother's campaign to drag you into Society?"

Meredith grimaced. "Her latest letter arrived yesterday. Apparently, her new husband's connections include a baronet with an unmarried son who might be persuaded to overlook my 'excessive education' in light of my 'not unpleasing

appearance."

Her voice took on the affected tones of her mother's new social circle. "How fortunate I am, to be considered marriageable despite my unfortunate tendency toward intellectual pursuits."

Faith reached across to squeeze her friend's hand. "She means well, I'm sure."

"Of course, she does," Meredith sighed. "She wants security for me, a future without depending on the charity of the university. She doesn't understand that I'd rather catalogue books for a pittance than exchange my mind for material comfort."

"How is the arrangement working? Is Mr. Hawkins treating you fairly?"

Meredith shrugged. "As fairly as can be expected. The room they've provided isn't much larger than this office, and the wage barely covers my other necessities, but I have access to books most women could never hope to touch. That counts for something."

Faith nodded, understanding perfectly. "When Father introduced me to Lord Jasper, I think he expected me to be thoroughly impressed and properly intimidated. Instead, I found myself desperately wanting to ask about the mechanical principles behind his invention."

"And did you?" Meredith's eyes sparkled with interest.

"I did! That's the remarkable thing. He not only answered but seemed genuinely interested in my perspective." Faith leaned closer, lowering her voice despite their privacy. "I suggested using steel for parts of his mechanism, and though Father scoffed, Lord Jasper actually seemed to consider it."



"Steel?" Meredith's eyebrows rose. "Where did you learn about steel's properties?"

"Professor Whitmore's lecture last winter. I stood outside in the snow for nearly two hours, listening through that draughty window on the north side of the physics hall."

Meredith shook her head. "Only you would risk pneumonia for a metallurgy lecture."

"Says the woman who regularly skips meals to finish cataloguing medieval manuscripts," Faith retorted good-naturedly.

They shared a laugh, the comfortable camaraderie of two women who understood each other's passions in a world that found them peculiar at best and dangerous at worst.

"So," Meredith said after a moment, "what do you make of Lord Jasper's reaction to your father's dismissal? Did he storm out in aristocratic dudgeon?"

"No, that's another surprising thing. He seemed genuinely hurt, not angry. As though he truly valued Father's opinion, not just as a scholar but as..." Faith hesitated, searching for the right words. "As though he were seeking approval beyond the academic."

Meredith tilted her head thoughtfully. "Interesting. Perhaps there's more to this nobleman than being a lord suggests."

"Perhaps," Faith agreed. "Though I suspect his interest in my suggestions was merely the novelty of a woman expressing knowledge of engineering principles. Like watching a dog walk on its hind legs—surprising not because it's done well, but because it's done at all."

"You underestimate yourself," Meredith chided gently. "Your understanding of

mechanical principles would put many university students to shame. If he recognized that, perhaps he possesses more discernment than the average nobleman."

Faith smiled at her friend's unwavering support. Since childhood, Meredith had been her strongest advocate, never questioning Faith's intellectual capabilities even when everyone else did. They had spent countless hours huddled in corners of their fathers' studies, devouring knowledge that was supposedly beyond them, challenging each other with increasingly complex problems and questions.

"Have you made any progress with Adriana's treasure hunt?" Meredith asked, changing the subject. "Any further clues from the poem?"

Faith brightened. "Actually, yes. I found a reference to the same verse in one of Father's oldest texts on medieval Oxford. It was in his handwriting in the margin. I'm almost certain it relates to the treasure hunt."

"I hope it is the lost library you seek," Meredith breathed, her eyes alight with scholarly excitement. "Just imagine what might be preserved there—texts thought destroyed centuries ago, knowledge that could change our understanding of history."

"Knowledge that could prove women were once welcomed as scholars at Oxford," Faith added meaningfully.

It was a theory they had developed together over years of researching Oxford's history—that before the papal rejection, women had been permitted to study alongside men, only to be systematically erased from historical records afterward. If they could prove it, it would strengthen their case for women's education immeasurably.

"If we could find evidence of that..." Meredith began.

"We could use it to support our school," Faith finished. "Show that we're not proposing something radical and new, but rather returning to Oxford's original inclusive principles."

Meredith sighed wistfully. "Our school. Sometimes I fear it's as mythical as the lost library itself."

"Don't say that," Faith protested. "We're closer than ever. Lady Beaverbrook is interested in supporting us. If we can find this treasure..."

"If," Meredith echoed softly. "Such a small word to carry so much hope."

A comfortable silence fell between them, filled with shared dreams and unspoken fears. Outside, the rain continued to fall, wrapping the library in a cocoon of hushed solitude.

"I should return to my duties soon," Meredith said reluctantly. "Mr. Hawkins may be lenient, but he still expects his cataloguing to be completed."

"Of course." Faith stood, gathering her shawl. "Will you join me for dinner tomorrow? Father will be out at a faculty meeting, so we needn't worry about his disapproval of your 'unsuitable employment.'"

Meredith smiled warmly. "I'd like that very much. Perhaps you can tell me more about Lord Jasper's invention then. It sounds fascinating despite your father's assessment."

"It truly is," Faith admitted. "The principles behind the distributed pressure system are quite ingenious, though I believe it could be improved with some modifications to the grinding mechanism."

"Listen to you," Meredith teased, "discussing grinding mechanisms and pressure distribution as casually as most women discuss embroidery patterns. No wonder this lord was taken aback."

Faith laughed, though a hint of shadow crossed her face. "If only such knowledge were considered as acceptable for women as needlework. Think how much further along our understanding of the natural world might be if half the population weren't discouraged from contributing to it."

"That's precisely why our school matters," Meredith said firmly, unlocking the office door. "And why we mustn't give up on it, no matter how many obstacles are placed in our way."

As they made their way back through the library's labyrinthine shelves, Faith found her spirits considerably lifted. Whatever mysteries surrounded her father's behaviour, whatever complications might arise from Lord Jasper's presence in their home, she still had Meredith—her stalwart ally in the battle for knowledge and understanding.

"One day," Faith murmured as they reached the service entrance, "we'll walk through the front doors of this library as rightful scholars, not as a professor's daughter and a cataloguer's assistant."

Meredith squeezed her hand.

"One day," she agreed, "we'll welcome girls through the front doors of our own school, and tell them they need never use the service entrance to knowledge again."

The rain had lightened to a gentle mist as Faith stepped outside, her determination renewed by her friend's unwavering faith. They would build their school. They would change minds. They would find a way to claim the education that should have been their birthright.

And perhaps, just perhaps, Lord Jasper Linford and his curious invention might play a role in that future neither of them could yet fully imagine.

She had no idea how that could possibly be, but if one were wishing, might as well reach all the way to the stars.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am*

Jasper hesitated as he hovered over his device, unpacking his tools. Professor Somerton had given him permission to set up a makeshift laboratory in a spare room in his house. It conveniently had access from the grounds as well as the Professor's house. He would be able to come and go as he pleased. He would likely spend most of his time there, whenever he wasn't pouring over research texts or conferring with other scholars. The servants had been so kind as to set up a cot in the corner.

The morning light streaming through the workshop windows caught dust motes in its beams, creating an almost magical atmosphere. Jasper rolled his eyes. His lack of sleep was turning him fanciful.

Suddenly, he sensed a presence by the other door and looked up sharply. Faith Somerton stood in the doorway. Had the professor's daughter been watching him work? Embarrassment threatened but he ignored the ridiculous sensation.

Jasper smiled in welcome and gestured her further into the room. She had asked some good questions, perhaps she could see what he was missing. Nothing else worked, why not the preposterous?

The professor hadn't been very enthusiastic about his invention, much to Jasper's disappointment. He couldn't imagine why the man had invited him to visit if he wasn't interested. But Jasper hoped that once his device was all set up and on display, the man might change his mind.

Or perhaps just being at the university would sufficiently inspire Jasper to figure out his problem.

He wasn't sure what to do about the professor's daughter. Her intelligent interest in his device was both irritating and inconvenient.

The professor hadn't appreciated his daughter's curiosity about the intricate machine, but he hadn't forbidden her from associating with Jasper either. He wasn't sure how he felt about the matter—her intelligence was inspiring, but her questions were embarrassing at times since he didn't always have an answer.

She hovered over his shoulder as he set out each piece, explaining as he went. "This one goes here and does that, and this one goes here and does this. And if we put it all together, I expect it to be able to bore into the rock in my father's mine."

"Really?" she gasped. "Is it not too small?"

She then blushed as though realizing it wasn't a sound question.

"Well, this prototype is, for certain," Jasper said with a laugh. "But it's remarkably tough for its size. It's all in the physics, don't you know?"

He wished he could bite back his words, considering the expression on her face. Of course she didn't know—she was a woman; she didn't study physics.

"Leverage is involved," he explained more gently, watching as her face cleared of irritation and she nodded her understanding.

"So what exactly is your problem?" she asked. "I know you explained it yesterday, but I wasn't perfectly clear on this. You've had it working, haven't you?"

"I have. It just doesn't want to stay working," he explained.

"Doesn't stay working?" she asked with an adorable wrinkle in her nose that Jasper

studiously ignored. “Does it break or quit?”

“It quits.”

“So it’s your propulsion, not your device,” she said slowly, much to his shock. “Whether you have tried steel or not, isn’t necessarily an issue.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

She proceeded to ask him more questions, and Jasper slowly answered. Some were for her information, and others were for his own benefit, really, considering that they helped him think differently about his work and realize certain improvements he could make.

“How do you know all of this?” he asked her with a frown.

Her hot flush made her look extremely uncomfortable, and he knew he shouldn’t have asked her quite so baldly, but he couldn’t help himself.

“I meant you no disrespect, Miss Somerton,” he said sheepishly. “It’s just that even your father didn’t ask such effective questions.”

The young lady’s laugh was a tinkle of joy that warmed Jasper all the way down to his toes.

“I live in Oxford,” she said simply. “While I’m not supposed to be receiving an education, I am able to access the most in-depth learning that exists—if I know exactly where to stand, what to read, and who to listen to. It’s a shame they don’t allow me to actually learn and be useful, but I’m still able to learn however much I can figure out between listening in door cracks and reading whatever I can get my hands on.”



Jasper laughed along with her, not at all offended at the thought of the young woman getting an education despite the accepted understanding that it was beyond her. Obviously, it wasn't, or she wouldn't be here helping him figure out where he had gone wrong with his automation. Perhaps having her involvement wouldn't be so very inconvenient after all.

“What is your favourite field of study?” he thought to ask her.

“All of them,” she replied with another laugh.

“I would love to study chemistry, but I haven't been able to figure out any way to secretly perform the reactions and experiments that are needed. I've only been able to read about the theory, but it does fascinate me. I also love mathematics and history. History is the easiest,” she said. “All you have to do is read and think.”

She paused briefly before asking. “What about you? I suppose engineering was your field of study?”

Jasper nodded.

“Do you have a sponsor?” she asked him.

“I am a member of Roderick Northcott's Scholarly Society,” he said slowly. “Have you heard of it?”

“Oh, yes,” Faith replied immediately. “I'm friends with Lady Beaverbrook.”

“Oh, I see,” Jasper said. “You're the young woman Adriana has been writing to, aren't you?”

He was surprised when she did a little dance and clapped her hands. “I was

wondering if you knew! Are you involved in the treasure hunt, or are you leaving that to your friends?”

Jasper laughed. “I’m one of the fuddy-duddies who doesn’t believe there really is a treasure to pursue.”

“Oh, I see,” Faith said. “So then you’re not feeling too inclined to help me with the latest clue, I suppose?”

Jasper frowned. “Have you found something?” he asked, torn between excitement at the idea and his own intense need to solve the problem with his invention. Was it possible he could do both? He wondered.

Faith shrugged. “Adriana wrote last week, and I think I’ve found something. It’s connected to a poem the other lady, Greta, found. Adriana thought it sounded like a quote Lord Beaverbrook was familiar with, so she asked me to look in a textbook here at the school, and I found some notes actually in my father’s library. So I wanted to dig further.”

“And you’re not sure if the doors will be closed against you, right?” Jasper asked with sympathy and dismay.

“That’s right,” she said.

He was impressed by the laughter she was able to muster, obviously used to the matter and not devastated by it.

“Why do you stay here?” he asked her. “If you love education so much and yet it’s being denied to you.”

She frowned at him. It was obviously a rude question, but he didn’t take it back.

“Where else am I supposed to go?” she asked.

“Have you no relatives?” he replied.

“None that seem inclined to take me on,” she answered with a shrug, clearly trying to indicate it didn’t matter to her. “Besides, I love the old books,” she added. “I’m not sure what I would do somewhere else.”

Jasper's chest tightened at her words. He found himself leaning forward, struck by the quiet dignity with which she spoke of her limited options, the way her attempted nonchalance couldn't quite mask the yearning in her voice. The familiar weight of his own father's disapproval seemed to press less heavily as he recognized in Faith a kindred spirit — someone else who understood what it meant to love learning while being denied its full measure.

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Faith's footsteps echoed softly against the worn stone floor as she made her way through the darkened library, candlestick held aloft. The familiar scent of leather bindings and aged paper usually brought her comfort, but tonight the shadows seemed to dance ominously between the towering shelves.

She nearly dropped her candle when a floorboard creaked behind her.

"Miss Somerton?"

Faith whirled around to find Lord Jasper emerging from between two shelves, his own candle casting a warm glow across his features. His cravat was loosened, hair slightly dishevelled – evidently he'd been at his work for hours.

"Lord Jasper! I... I didn't expect anyone else to be here at this hour." Faith fought the

urge to smooth her skirts, suddenly aware of how improper this encounter was.

"Nor did I," he said, a slight smile playing at his lips. "Though I suppose we're both guilty of burning the midnight oil."

Faith noticed several mechanical drawings tucked under his arm. "Still struggling with the propulsion system?"

"Always." He ran a hand through his already mussed hair. "Though I suspect you're not here at this hour to discuss my invention's failings."

"No," Faith admitted, then hesitated. Something about the intimate darkness made her want to confide in him. "I found another reference to the treasure. I couldn't wait until morning to investigate."

Jasper stepped closer, his voice dropping. "Show me?"

Faith led him to a reading alcove where she'd already assembled several texts. As she explained her latest theory, she was acutely aware of his presence beside her, the way he leaned in to examine the passages she indicated. His sleeve brushed against hers as he reached to turn a page.

"Brilliant," he murmured, "The way you've connected these references..." He looked up at her, their faces unexpectedly close in the candlelight. "You would have made an exceptional scholar, Miss Somerton."

"Would have?" She met his gaze. "I rather think I already am one, regardless of what the university might say."

A moment of silence stretched between them, charged with something more than their usual scholarly discourse. Then Jasper cleared his throat and shifted slightly

away.

"Indeed you are." His voice was rougher than usual. "Though I fear we're both courting scandal, being here at this hour."

"Sometimes scandal is worth risking," Faith said softly, "for the right cause."

Jasper's eyes darkened. "And what cause would that be, Miss Somerton? The treasure hunt, or..." He trailed off, leaving the question hanging in the candlelit darkness.

Before Faith could respond, a distant sound – perhaps a night watchman's footsteps – broke the spell. They quickly gathered their materials, sharing one last speaking glance of co-conspirators before slipping away in opposite directions.

Faith's heart continued to race long after she'd returned to her chamber, and she wasn't entirely sure it was from the fear of being caught.

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Faith poured another cup of tea as she and Meredith sat comfortably in the professor's parlor. The remains of Lucy's roast chicken dinner had been cleared away, and they'd moved to the more comfortable seating by the fire. The house felt different without her father's presence—lighter somehow, the air less laden with unspoken restrictions.

"So this device of his," Meredith said, leaning forward with interest, "it's meant to improve mining safety? How exactly does it work?"

Faith sketched quickly on a piece of paper. "From what I could gather, it uses a distributed pressure system—see, here—instead of concentrating force at a single point. The mechanism grinds through rock more efficiently while reducing the strain on individual components."

"And the miners themselves," Meredith observed, studying the drawing.

"Precisely." Faith nodded, pleased by her friend's quick understanding. "But what fascinated me most was how the same principles could be applied to so many other contexts. The way force distributes through a system, whether mechanical or—"

"Educational?" Meredith supplied with a knowing smile.

Faith laughed. "Am I that transparent?"

"Only to those who've known you since childhood." Meredith took the drawing, examining it more closely. "You see mechanical innovation, and immediately think of how to apply it to our school plans."

"Speaking of which," Faith said, pulling a small notebook from beside her chair, "I've been refining our curriculum ideas. I've been thinking we should focus first on adult women—especially those in service positions or trade families. They could implement the knowledge immediately, and perhaps even teach others."

Meredith's brow furrowed. "I'm not certain that's the wisest approach. Children's minds are more receptive to new ideas. If we start with girls between eight and twelve, we could build a foundation that would serve them throughout their lives."

"But adult women need this knowledge now," Faith countered. "A housemaid who understands basic chemistry can better perform her duties. A shopkeeper's wife who masters arithmetic can prevent being cheated."

"Yes, but children represent the future," Meredith leaned forward, her usual quiet demeanor giving way to passion. "Imagine girls growing up never knowing the limitations we've faced, never having to unlearn society's restrictions. Besides, parents might accept education for their daughters more readily than seeing their

servants 'above their station.'"

Faith sighed, tapping her pencil against the notebook. "You make valid points, as always. But why must we choose? Perhaps we could begin with a small group of adult women, then gradually introduce children's classes."

Meredith's expression softened. "The eternal optimist. Always believing we can have everything."

"Not everything," Faith corrected. "Just that which is rightfully ours—knowledge and the freedom to pursue it."

She gazed into the fire for a moment. "You should have seen the look on Lord Jasper's face when I asked about steel components for his device. Complete shock that a woman would understand such things."

"And yet he listened to you," Meredith pointed out. "Perhaps he's more progressive than you initially thought."

"Perhaps." Faith closed her notebook. "Or perhaps he was simply too startled to dismiss me outright. I suppose I'll discover which is true as time progresses."

"Either way," Meredith said, reaching for her friend's hand, "our plans continue. With or without noble assistance."

Faith squeezed Meredith's fingers, grateful as always for this friendship that had sustained her through years of intellectual isolation. "Together, as always."

"Though I still think we should start with the children," Meredith added with a mischievous smile.

Faith laughed. "We'll continue that debate tomorrow. For now, tell me what new treasures you've catalogued this week."

As the evening shadows lengthened, the two women continued their conversation, their shared dreams of education temporarily set aside for the simple pleasure of intellectual companionship—a treasure both had learned to value above all else.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am*

Faith stood in her father's dining room, surveying the table with a critical eye. The damask tablecloth had been meticulously pressed, the silver polished to a mirror shine, and the crystal arranged with geometric precision.

Professor Somerton's academic receptions were infrequent enough to be notable occasions, yet regular enough that Faith had developed a system for their preparation that left little to chance.

"The floral arrangements should be delivered by noon tomorrow," she murmured to herself, making a notation in the small leather-bound book she used to track household matters. "And Cook has confirmed the menu, though she's still grumbling about Professor Hartford's dietary restrictions."

A smile touched Faith's lips as she recalled Cook's colourful assessment of the professor's delicate digestion. Some of the household staff's observations about Oxford's esteemed academics would shock polite Society—and provided Faith with invaluable insights into the men who shaped the university's policies.

With the dining room arrangements settled, Faith moved to her father's study to ensure it would be suitable for the post-dinner conversation that inevitably followed these gatherings.

The room would need to be presentable without disturbing any of her father's ongoing work—a delicate balance that often required Faith to decipher which stacks of papers and books were current research and which were simply accumulating dust.

As she carefully straightened a pile of journals, her gaze fell upon a familiar leather

bookmark peeking out from beneath several scientific periodicals.

Faith's breath caught as she recognized it—a simple strip of tooled leather, worn smooth by years of handling. She had given it to her father as a gift nearly thirteen years ago, her childish hand having laboriously traced the Latin motto: *Scientia potentia est*. Knowledge is power.

The sight of it transported her instantly to her eleventh summer, when Meredith had first taught her those words. They had been tucked away in a corner of Professor Silver's study, heads bent together over a volume of Francis Bacon's works that they'd "borrowed" while their fathers were deep in academic debate over tea.

"Listen to this, Faith," Meredith had whispered, her finger tracing the Latin phrase. "This is what my father says is the most important idea in all of philosophy."

"What does it mean?" Faith had asked, still struggling with her Latin declensions despite her determined self-education.

"Knowledge is power," Meredith had translated, her eyes bright with conviction even at twelve years old. "This is why we must learn everything we can, even if they try to stop us."

Faith smiled at the memory, gently touching the bookmark.

That afternoon had been the first of countless clandestine study sessions. While their fathers discussed lofty academic matters, Faith and Meredith had created their own curriculum—an eclectic blend of whatever texts they could access when no one was watching.

Mathematics had been Meredith's favourite, while Faith had been drawn to the natural sciences.

Together, they had puzzled through geometry problems by tracing shapes in spilled tea, and conducted simple chemistry experiments using kitchen ingredients when the household staff wasn't looking. More than once, they had nearly been caught—like the time they'd attempted to recreate one of Robert Boyle's air pressure experiments and shattered a glass jar in Professor Silver's study.

The memory of their hasty cleanup, stifling giggles while frantically sweeping up glass shards before their fathers returned, still brought a smile to Faith's face. They had been partners in intellectual crime from the beginning.

Faith returned to her preparations, moving into the drawing room where the academic gentlemen would take their brandy after dinner.

As she arranged the chairs in a configuration that would encourage conversation while ensuring Professor Hartford wouldn't be too close to the fire (another of his peculiarities), her thoughts drifted to the plans she and Meredith had begun developing for their school.

Just last week, Faith had received a tentative inquiry from Mrs. Bennett, the blacksmith's widow, asking whether Faith might consider teaching her daughter to read "properly, not just shop signs and Scripture."

The letter, painfully composed with numerous crossed-out words and ink blots, had moved Faith deeply. Here was a woman who recognized the value of education for her daughter, even though she had little herself.

Faith had shown the letter to Meredith during their meeting at the library, expecting her friend to share her excitement about this potential first student for their adult women's classes. Instead, Meredith had looked thoughtful.

"Why not teach the mother as well?" Meredith had suggested. "And perhaps her son

too, if she has one."

"Her son?" Faith had been surprised. "But our school is meant to be for women and girls—to provide the education they're denied elsewhere."

Meredith had leaned forward, that familiar passionate gleam in her eyes.

"Think about it, Faith. If we teach only the girls, they'll still face a world where their brothers, husbands, and sons don't understand the value of female education. But if we educate boys alongside them—boys from families who can't afford Oxford or even grammar school—we create allies for the future."

Faith had been sceptical.

"Our resources will be limited enough as it is. Wouldn't it be better to focus them where they're most needed?"

"Education is most needed everywhere it's denied," Meredith had countered. "The daughter of a blacksmith has no more access to proper schooling than her brother does, if the family can't afford it. The difference is that Society expects him to remain ignorant due to his class, while she's expected to remain ignorant due to both her class and her sex."

Their friendly debate had continued throughout the afternoon, eventually evolving into a broader discussion about the purpose of their proposed school.

For Faith, it had always been primarily about offering women the knowledge they deserved—the same understanding of mathematics, science, literature, and philosophy that men took for granted. Her own thirst for learning drove her vision.

Meredith, on the other hand, had increasingly come to see their school as a vehicle

for broader social change.

"What good is knowledge if it doesn't improve people's lives?" she had argued. "If we teach a poor girl geometry but her family still starves because nothing in their circumstances has changed, have we truly helped her?"

Faith sighed as she adjusted the position of the brandy decanter on the sideboard.

She understood Meredith's perspective, but she couldn't help feeling that it diluted their original purpose. Women's education was already controversial enough—adding class considerations would only make their school more radical in the eyes of Oxford Society.

Yet she couldn't deny the practical wisdom in Meredith's approach.

Lady Beaverbrook, their most promising potential patron, had responded with particular interest to the portions of Faith's letter that emphasized how educated mothers would better prepare their children and manage their households—practical benefits that extended beyond the women themselves.

"Perhaps there's room for both approaches," Faith murmured to herself as she straightened a stack of sheet music on the pianoforte.

After all, their different perspectives had always strengthened their friendship rather than weakening it. Meredith's practical idealism balanced Faith's more scholarly focus, just as Faith's attention to detail complemented Meredith's broader vision.

Faith's reflections were interrupted by a knock at the front door.

Through the drawing room window, she caught sight of an unfamiliar carriage outside—not one belonging to any of Oxford's regular academics. Curious, she

moved to the hallway in time to see Lucy admitting a well-dressed gentleman's secretary bearing an envelope sealed with an impressive-looking crest.

"For Professor Somerton," the man said stiffly. "Lady Harrington requests the courtesy of a prompt reply."

Faith's heart quickened at the name.

Lady Harrington was known throughout Oxford as a woman of considerable means and progressive ideas regarding education. She had established several charitable schools for poor children in London, though she had never before shown interest in Oxford's academic community.

"I shall ensure my father receives it immediately," Faith assured the secretary, accepting the envelope with what she hoped was an appropriately dignified nod.

After the man departed, Faith turned the letter over in her hands, desperately curious about its contents. Could Lady Harrington have heard about their plans for a school? Had Adriana perhaps mentioned something to her social circle?

With considerable self-restraint, Faith placed the sealed letter on her father's desk rather than giving in to the temptation to open it herself. Professor Somerton was particular about his correspondence, even when it concerned matters that directly affected Faith's responsibilities.

Returning to her preparations, Faith found her mind buzzing with possibilities.

Between Lady Beaverbrook's tentative interest, Mrs. Bennett's inquiry about her daughter, and now potentially Lady Harrington's attention, their school was beginning to feel less like a childhood dream and more like an achievable reality.

The thought sent a shiver of excitement through her. If their school succeeded—even on the small scale they initially planned—it would mean more than just the fulfilment of a personal ambition. It would be proof that women could create institutions of learning, that they could pass knowledge to others rather than merely consuming it in secret.

And perhaps, Faith thought as she moved to check the conservatory where additional seating would be arranged for tomorrow's reception, their school might eventually reveal a truth she and Meredith had long suspected: that the limitations placed on female intellect were entirely artificial, products of custom rather than nature.

As she inspected the fern arrangements, Faith's mind returned to Lord Jasper and his mining device. She'd been impressed by his willingness to consider her suggestion about using steel, despite her father's dismissal of the idea. Perhaps there were more men like him—men who could recognize intelligence regardless of its source.

Or perhaps he was merely humouring her, as one might indulge a child showing off a precocious talent before gently guiding them back to more appropriate pursuits.

Faith frowned at the thought.

She'd endured enough condescension in her life to recognize it readily, and Lord Jasper's interest had seemed genuine. Still, experience had taught her to be cautious with such judgments. Many educated gentlemen were perfectly willing to discuss intellectual matters with women in private, only to dismiss those same women's capabilities when in the company of their peers.

"Faith?" Her father's voice called from the front hall. "Are you at home?"

"In the conservatory, Father," she responded, hastily rearranging her features into a more neutral expression.

Professor Somerton appeared in the doorway, looking distracted as usual. "Ah, there you are. How are the preparations for tomorrow's reception progressing?"

"Very well," Faith assured him. "Everything is arranged except for the flowers, which will arrive in the morning. Oh, and a letter came for you—from Lady Harrington. It's on your desk."

Her father's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Lady Harrington? How unusual."

He seemed about to say more, then noticed the arrangement of chairs Faith had been organizing. "Perhaps fewer seats in here? Professor Hartford complains that the moisture aggravates his rheumatism."

Faith nodded, making a mental note. "Of course. I'll move some of these to the drawing room."

Her father lingered, seeming uncharacteristically hesitant. "Faith, about tomorrow's reception... Lord Jasper will be attending."

"I assumed he would," Faith replied carefully, uncertain why this warranted special mention.

"Yes, well..." Professor Somerton adjusted his spectacles. "He expressed particular interest in discussing your suggestion about using steel in his device. I thought perhaps you might want to... prepare yourself for the conversation."

Faith stared at her father in astonishment. Was he actually encouraging her to engage in an intellectual discussion with one of his students?

"I merely mention it," he continued, clearly uncomfortable with her surprise, "because Lord Jasper is a valued colleague, and his work has potential significance



for mining safety. Any insights that might improve his device would be beneficial to consider."

Before Faith could formulate a response to this unprecedented acknowledgment of her potential contribution, her father turned abruptly toward his study.

"I should see what Lady Harrington wants. No doubt some charitable appeal or other."

As he disappeared down the hallway, Faith remained rooted to the spot, processing what had just occurred. Her father had actually suggested—albeit in his roundabout way—that she continue her intellectual discussion with Lord Jasper. More than that, he had implied that her insights might have value.

The thought was so unexpected that Faith almost laughed aloud. After years of being redirected toward "more suitable" feminine pursuits whenever she expressed interest in her father's work, this casual acknowledgment felt revolutionary.

Perhaps Meredith was right after all. Perhaps change could come in small increments, through individual minds opening to new possibilities rather than through grand gestures of defiance.

Faith returned to her preparations with renewed energy, mentally reviewing what she knew about steel manufacturing and its potential applications in mechanical devices. If Lord Jasper truly wished to discuss the matter, she would be thoroughly prepared.

And perhaps, just perhaps, such conversations might eventually lead to broader acceptance of women's intellectual capabilities—acceptance that could pave the way for the school she and Meredith dreamed of establishing.

As the afternoon light slanted through the conservatory windows, painting the ferns

in golden hues, Faith allowed herself a moment of pure hope. Between Adriana's treasure hunt, Lord Jasper's unexpected respect for her ideas, and the growing list of potential supporters for their school, the future suddenly seemed full of possibilities.

For now, though, there was a reception to prepare, academics to impress, and—most immediately—a new gown to consider for tomorrow evening's gathering. After all, if she was to engage in scholarly debate with Lord Jasper Linford, she might as well look her best while doing so.

Faith smiled to herself as she imagined Meredith's reaction to that particular thought.

Her practical friend would likely tease her about finding Lord Jasper's intellect suspiciously more interesting now that she'd met him in person. And perhaps there was some truth to that—though Faith would never admit it aloud.

Some things, after all, were better kept private—just like the education she and Meredith had pursued together all these years, hidden in plain sight among the hallowed halls of Oxford.

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The dining room buzzed with conversation as Oxford's finest minds gathered for the monthly faculty dinner. Faith moved carefully between the guests, her dove-grey silk gown rustling against the polished floor. She'd chosen the modest frock deliberately – elegant enough to reflect well on her father as hostess, but not so fashionable as to draw attention.

"Miss Somerton." Professor Walkerton's wife caught her arm. "Do tell us about the new window treatments. Such a lovely shade of crimson."

Faith smiled politely, though her attention strayed to the far end of the room where

Lord Jasper was engaged in what appeared to be a tense discussion with Professor Reynolds. The cantankerous professor was gesturing dismissively at what Faith presumed was Jasper's latest adaptation of his mining device.

"Your father mentioned you've been assisting with household accounts," Mrs. Walkerton continued. "Such a practical skill for a young lady. Though I dare say you needn't trouble yourself with too many figures."

"Indeed," Faith murmured, straining to hear fragments of the men's conversation. "Though I find mathematics rather essential for household management."

"Mathematics!" Mrs. Walkerton tittered. "My dear, surely you mean simple sums?"

Before Faith could respond, Professor Whitmore joined their circle. "Speaking of calculations, did you hear about Lady Harrington's proposed funding for practical education initiatives? Most controversial."

Faith's pulse quickened. Lady Harrington's letter to her father – could this be what had been distracting him?

"I understand she's interested in supporting technical training for the community," Professor Whitmore continued, oblivious to Faith's sudden interest. "Your father was consulted, I believe."

"I'm sure Miss Somerton wouldn't trouble herself with such matters," Mrs. Walkerton said smoothly.

"No indeed," Faith forced herself to say, though each word felt like a betrayal. "If you'll excuse me, I believe the second course needs attending."

She managed to slip away, making her way toward the corridor where she nearly

collided with Jasper, who appeared to have escaped his own uncomfortable conversation.

"Reynolds refuses to even consider the educational applications," he said without preamble, frustration evident in his voice. "Claims it would disrupt the proper social order to teach mechanical principles to miners."

"Is that what's caused the tension with my father as well?" Faith asked. "Lady Harrington's educational proposal?"

Jasper's expression shifted to surprise. "You know about that? The funding would support technical education alongside the mining innovations. Your father was asked to develop a curriculum framework, but Reynolds and his allies are fighting it."

"That explains the correspondence he's been so preoccupied with," Faith said, pieces falling into place. "And why he's been so distracted during your consultations about the device."

"The device itself works," Jasper said, lowering his voice as a pair of professors passed by. "But its potential goes beyond mere efficiency. If miners understood the principles behind it—"

"They could maintain it themselves," Faith finished. "Like how understanding mathematical principles makes household management more effective."

"Exactly." His eyes lit with the same passion she felt. "Knowledge shouldn't be parceled out based on social standing. It should—"

"Faith!" Her father's voice carried from the dining room. "The wine, if you please."

"Back to our proper roles," Faith said with a slight curtsy that could have been either

playful or bitter.

Jasper caught her hand before she could turn away.

"Some roles," he said softly, "are made to be rewritten. Meet me in the library tomorrow? I have something I want to show you – an adaptation of the device that might interest you."

The warmth of his touch lingered long after Faith returned to her duties, but it was the promise of their meeting that truly quickened her pulse. Whatever had been distracting her father was connected to Lady Harrington, educational initiatives, and Jasper's device – and tomorrow, she might finally understand how it all fit together.

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The morning after the faculty dinner, Faith slept later than usual but she refused to wallow in her personal knot of concerns. She had exciting work to do and she was going to get to it.

Faith spread her gathered materials across her father's desk, cross-referencing her careful notes from Adriana's letters. The two lines of poetry had initially seemed sparse, but combined with the references in the textbook she'd found in her father's library as well as some research Meredith had helped with, a pattern was emerging.

She traced her finger down a page of architectural notes: 'Beneath the Rose Window, where shadows mark the hour.'

The phrasing was similar to the poem's 'neath moonlit sky, the roses weep.' And here — in a chronicle of Oxford's renovation history — a reference to 'deep shadows where secrets sleep' in relation to a sealed chamber beneath the old library.

Three separate sources, spanning different periods, all using strikingly similar language to describe locations in the oldest parts of Oxford. It couldn't be coincidence.

Faith pulled out the rough map she'd been annotating, marking each reference point. The pattern suggested a specific section of the old buildings, one rarely accessed now. If she was right, the poem wasn't just pretty verse — it was a deliberately crafted clue, using phrases that would resonate with those familiar with Oxford's architectural history.

Her excitement mounted as she added another notation to her growing collection of

evidence. Each piece alone might mean nothing, but together they painted a compelling picture of something deliberately hidden, waiting to be found.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts.

"A letter for you, Miss," Lucy said, presenting a cream-coloured envelope bearing the now-familiar Beaverbrook seal.

Faith thanked her before eagerly breaking the seal. Adriana's elegant script filled the page:

My dear Faith,

Your last letter has caused quite a stir among our circle. Some of the scholars are disappointed to add yet another participant in our treasure hunt, but I'm glad you've included your friend Meredith. I trust, between the two of you, you'll soon be well along in the search

More exciting still, Greta has uncovered another fragment that seems to match our mysterious verse:

"Golden tears from roses fall, Where ancient waters mirror all."

Does this suggest anything to you? Perhaps something near a reflection pool or old fountain? Oxford has several such features, does it not?

We are all most eager to hear what you make of this new clue. The potential discovery of lost knowledge grows more thrilling with each passing day.

Roderick sends his regards and says to tell Jasper that the scholars eagerly await news of both the mining device and any mystery treasure discoveries you might make.

Apparently, the lost texts may contain early mechanical designs that would interest them both greatly.

Do write soon, my friend. Your insights prove invaluable to our search.

With warmest regards, Adriana

Faith read the letter twice more, her mind racing with possibilities. The mention of "ancient waters" immediately brought to mind the old reflecting pool behind the theology building. The original medieval structure had been converted to a decorative feature during renovations in the 1600s, but the foundation was far older.

She would need to investigate it—perhaps with Jasper, whose engineering knowledge might help identify structural anomalies. And she should write back to Adriana immediately, sharing her theory about the reflecting pool.

As she reached for a fresh sheet of paper, Faith couldn't help but smile. This treasure hunt was becoming far more than just a search for hidden books or even gold. It was a connection to like-minded souls beyond Oxford's walls, proof that her passion for knowledge was shared by others who understood its value.

She never would have thought she'd be corresponding with a countess nor scouring Oxford's passageways for treasures.

Faith reread the letter a third time, her fingers tracing the new verse:

Golden tears from roses fall,

Where ancient waters mirror all.

She reached for her notebook, carefully copying the lines beneath the original poem

Adriana had sent weeks ago:

In shadows deep where secrets sleep,

'Neeth moonlit sky, the roses weep.

Laying the two verses side by side, Faith felt a thrill of recognition. Both mentioned roses, both conveyed a sense of hidden knowledge. She began sketching a rough map of Oxford's oldest buildings, marking spots where the medieval architecture remained largely untouched.

"Roses," she murmured, tapping her pencil against the paper. "Literal roses in gardens? Or something symbolic?"

She recalled her father mentioning Oxford's oldest stained glass contained repeated rose motifs. And "ancient waters" — that had to refer to one of the old reflecting pools or water features. The one behind the theology building dated back to the 1500s, precisely the time when the lost library might have been hidden.

Faith added another notation to her growing map, drawing a line between the old library wing and the reflecting pool. The pieces were beginning to align, though she still couldn't see the complete picture. If these verses were truly directions to hidden knowledge, they were cleverly disguised indeed.

She would need to visit the old reference section again. And perhaps, she thought with a small smile, Lord Jasper's engineering perspective might prove useful in deciphering these architectural clues. Faith's wide grin matched her excitement when Jasper entered the room.

"What have you found?" he asked with a laugh.

“I think we might have finally found the exact reference Adriana was asking about in her most recent letter.”

“Really?” he asked, his attention obviously not quite engaged in their conversation.

Faith was torn between frustration with him and understanding of his dedication.

She couldn't help but admire his determination to find the solution to his own research problem, and the fact that she suspected his determination was somehow connected to trying to gain his father's approval only increased her admiration and sympathy for him. He hadn't said as much. Perhaps she had been reading too much Descartes. But it was fairly obvious a third son and seemingly studious scholar's obsession with a mining device had to stem from something deeper than the rocks themselves.

She knew what it was to have a father who couldn't quite be bothered.

Oh, she knew her father loved her—not that he ever said it—but he hadn't sent her away, and for that, she was grateful. Not that there was really anywhere for him to send her, but even though he made her feel like she wasn't quite as valuable as his students, it could have been worse.

She had seen how some of the other professors treated their daughters. Faith knew she was more important to her father than a servant, even if he sometimes treated her as his unpaid housekeeper.

She glanced back at the manuscript before her. She was almost completely certain it was referencing where she could find at least some of the lost books from Oxford.

Well, "from Oxford" wasn't the right way to say it if they hadn't even left the complex.

Would the community rejoice over her findings or condemn her? It had already been hundreds of years since the papacy had left England. Surely it was time to put it behind them and embrace whatever learnings had taken place beforehand.

The books weren't at fault. Faith was certain the knowledge they contained would be of value one way or another. Perhaps the lost library was the treasure they were searching for after all.

One couldn't argue with the fact that the clues panned out—or rather, if they did pan out. She would be beside herself with delight.

But would she tell anyone, though? She asked herself, suddenly gripped by the sense of injustice over the lack of education for females. She so wished to start a school for girls.

Adriana had indicated her intention to support Faith's pursuit, but how would Father react? She always came back to that question. But that was a problem for another day. She had a confused scholar standing before her, obviously needing some assistance.

She was lost in these thoughts when Jasper spoke, regaining her attention. Faith examined him with a bit of a frown. It would seem he hadn't been paying any attention when he'd spoken with her moments before.

He now seemed more engaged and ready to have a conversation with her if his watchful gaze was any indication. Faith studied him with her own brand of studious attention.

He must have come straight from his workshop — his cravat was slightly askew and there was a smudge of oil on his sleeve. Faith found herself noticing these details with surprising clarity, just as she noticed how his eyes brightened when he saw her,

though he quickly schooled his expression into something more proper.

“Miss Somerton,” he said, bowing slightly. “I hope I’m not interrupting? You seemed to have quite wandered off in your thoughts.”

“Not at all,” she replied, trying to ignore how her pulse quickened at his presence.

She gestured to the chair across from her, then immediately second-guessed whether it was proper for her to invite him to sit. But he was already moving toward it, and in the process of sitting, his hand brushed against hers where it rested on the table. They both drew back quickly, murmuring apologies, but Faith could feel the ghost of that touch lingering on her skin.

“What are you searching for?” she asked him, concern filling her as he shoved his hand through his thick hair—a gesture she had noticed he often did whenever he was feeling overwhelmed or frustrated.

The poor soul seemed to experience those emotions far too often.

“It seems to me you need a break from this particular invention. I’ve found that when I have a problem I’m trying to work out, if I stop trying to think about it, somehow a different part of my brain figures it out while I’m thinking about something else. Can you do that, do you think?”

He stared at her as though she hadn’t spoken the King’s English, and Faith had to struggle not to laugh in his face. That wasn’t likely to help them have a pleasant discourse while he remained her father’s guest.

“My apologies, my lord,” Faith finally said. “I know you have your own way of pursuing your studies, and I ought to keep my nose out of your affairs. I didn’t mean to be so bold.”

“No, no, it’s me that should apologize to you, Miss Somerton. I’m just more frustrated than I thought possible. I was so sure your father would be able to help me solve my problem.”

Faith nodded, understanding his concern and frustration, but she didn’t know if she ought to tell the poor man that she didn’t think her father had been pursuing any practical industrial research of late. Would it destroy all his youthful illusions about his favourite professor if she told him? Faith bit her lip, unsure how to proceed.

“It’s still giving you trouble, then? You haven’t found a solution to the propulsion issue? Is it that your device is too heavy for the mechanism that is supposed to drive it? Did you consider trying steel, as I suggested the other day? I know Father didn’t think there was any validity to my suggestion, but have you actually tried it before?”

Faith stopped abruptly, stemming the flow of her many questions.

“No, I haven’t. It’s still a new material, and I haven’t taken the time to investigate it.”

To Faith’s surprise, the gentleman snorted—a rather despairing sound of forced amusement.

“Some scholar I am,” he said with derision. “If I haven’t even investigated all the possible materials, how can I possibly think I know anything about engineering?”

Faith noticed how his hands clenched around the paper he held, how his shoulders carried tension she hadn’t seen before. Without thinking, she placed her hand lightly on his arm.

“You’re being far too hard on yourself.”

The moment her fingers touched his coat sleeve, something shifted in the air between

them. Jasper went very still, and Faith suddenly realized the impropriety of her gesture. She withdrew her hand quickly, her cheeks warming. But when their eyes met, the intensity in his gaze made her breath catch.

“Well, now you’re just moping,” she said with a laugh, hoping to pull them both out of the awkward moment. “You have a laboratory set up here, at least temporarily. There’s no time like the present,” she added.

His gaze sharpened as he stared at her. “What do you know about any of this?” he asked.

She shrugged. “As I’m sure you can imagine, engineering has not welcomed my presence in their classrooms. But I have read some of the materials, as well as spent time in the doorways of the studios, so I have no practical knowledge of anything,” she added with a sigh.

“Would you care to be my apprentice in that case?” he asked slowly, as though unsure if he should utter the words.

“I would be more than delighted,” Faith replied.

It took considerable effort not to jump up and down and clap her hands as she would have done as a small girl. She wasn’t sure if she should allow herself to spend any time with the noble engineer, but if a scholarly gentleman was inviting her to study something, she was never going to be in a position to say no.

She happily followed him from her father’s study as they headed toward his makeshift workshop at the back of the house.

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The library's shadows lengthened as Faith and Meredith hunched over yet another stack of medieval texts. They had commandeered a secluded corner of the cataloguing room, where Meredith's position as assistant gave them some privacy from prying eyes.

The scent of old leather and parchment wrapped around them like a familiar blanket, though today it carried an extra edge of excitement.

"Look at this," Faith whispered, carefully turning a brittle page in the volume before her. "Another reference to the 'Chamber of Wisdom' — that's the third we've found this week. And see how it mentions 'roses weeping in moonlight' again?"

Meredith leaned closer, her spectacles catching the late afternoon light.

"The phrasing is too similar to be coincidence. But what's truly fascinating is the context." She pulled out her carefully organized notes. "Every mention of these chambers appears in texts from just before the papal rejection. Almost as though..."

"As though someone was leaving breadcrumbs," Faith finished. "Creating a way for future scholars to find what they were about to hide."

The two women shared a look of understanding. They had been friends since childhood, united by their hunger for knowledge and their frustration with the artificial barriers society placed around it. Now, that shared passion might help them uncover something extraordinary.

"I need to show this to Jasper," Faith said, carefully copying the relevant passages into her notebook. "His engineering perspective might help us understand these architectural references."

"You can't take the originals," Meredith cautioned, glancing toward the main library

where Mr. Hawkins might appear at any moment. "But your notes should be sufficient."

Faith nodded, working quickly to transcribe everything they'd discovered.

Once finished, she gathered her materials and squeezed Meredith's hand. "I'll return tomorrow. Perhaps by then you'll have located that volume on medieval construction techniques?"

"If it exists in Oxford, I'll find it," Meredith promised with a determined smile.

With her precious notes secured in her satchel, Faith hurried through the university grounds toward her father's house, where Jasper had established his temporary laboratory. Her mind raced with possibilities as she walked, connecting fragments of information into potential patterns.

She had just made a breakthrough connection when she reached the converted outbuilding. Without pausing to knock, Faith burst into Jasper's makeshift laboratory, then stopped short at the sight of him bent over his work table, sleeves rolled up to reveal surprisingly muscular forearms.

"I... forgive my intrusion."

He straightened, wiping his hands on a cloth. "No forgiveness needed, Miss Somerton. You seem rather excited about something?"

"Yes, I..." She forced herself to focus on her research rather than the way his high cheekbones and mussed hair made her pulse quicken. "I've found some interesting references in these old texts about hidden chambers within Oxford's walls. Places where books might have been secretly preserved."



Jasper crossed to examine the documents she held, standing close enough that she could catch the faint scent of machine oil and leather that clung to him. His proximity was distracting, but Faith pressed on, determined to share her discoveries.

"Look at these architectural notes," she said, pointing to various markings. "They suggest there may be sealed spaces dating back to the Reformation era."

"Fascinating," Jasper murmured, though his attention seemed divided between her findings and his own unfinished work. He glanced at the mechanical drawings spread across his table. "I wish I could make similar progress with my device. The pressure distribution is still not quite right..."

Faith found herself drawn to his workbench, her scholarly excitement shifting to curiosity about his invention. "Perhaps a fresh perspective might help? Sometimes looking at old problems in new ways can lead to unexpected solutions."

The double meaning in her words hung in the air between them, adding yet another layer to their already complicated relationship. Faith clutched her documents tighter, wondering if she'd just discovered more than one kind of treasure.

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The clink of metal against metal filled the makeshift laboratory as Faith adjusted the delicate gears in Jasper's latest prototype. Her fingers were steady, despite the impropriety of her current position – alone with a gentleman, sleeves pushed up past her elbows, hands stained with oil.

"Try it now," she said, stepping back from the workbench.

Jasper leaned forward to examine her work, his shoulder brushing against hers.

"The alignment is perfect," he murmured. "How did you—?"

The door creaked open.

"Linford, I was hoping to discuss your latest—" Professor Walkerton stopped dead in the doorway, his eyes widening at the scene before him. "Good heavens."

Faith frantically tried to lower her sleeves, but the damage was done. The elderly professor's gaze swept from her oil-stained hands to the mechanical components spread across the workbench, his expression darkening with each detail he absorbed.

"Miss Somerton." His voice could have frozen the Thames. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Professor Walkerton." Jasper stepped forward, positioning himself slightly in front of Faith. "I can explain—"

"Can you indeed?" Walkerton's tone was acid.

"Explain why a young lady is engaging in mechanical work? Why Professor Somerton's daughter is alone with you in this... this workshop?" He spat the last word as though it were obscene.

"I asked for her assistance," Jasper said firmly.

"Asked for her—" Somerton sputtered. "Have you taken leave of your senses? What would your father say, Linford? What would any of the faculty say if they knew you were encouraging such... such unseemly behaviour?"

Faith found her voice at last. "There is nothing unseemly about the pursuit of knowledge, Professor."

"Knowledge?" Walkerton laughed harshly. "Is that what you call this breach of propriety? Your poor father. To think his own daughter would—"

"Would what?" Professor Somerton's quiet voice came from the doorway, making them all jump. Faith hadn't even heard him approach.

"Somerton!" Walkerton turned to her father.

"I came to speak with Lord Jasper and found... this." He gestured at Faith and the workbench. "Surely you cannot condone—"

"What I condone in my own home is hardly your concern, Thomas." Her father's tone was mild, but Faith detected an edge she'd never heard before. "Though I believe Lord Jasper was planning to share some rather interesting findings at next week's faculty meeting. Findings that, unless I'm mistaken, owe rather a lot to some fresh perspectives on old problems."

Faith barely dared breathe as her father crossed to examine the prototype she'd been adjusting.

"Fascinating alignment on these gears," he remarked, as though this were any other academic discussion. "Quite innovative."

The tension in the room shifted subtly. Professor Walkerton looked between them all, clearly struggling to reconcile his outrage with Professor Somerton's calm acceptance.

"Well," he said finally, his voice stiff. "I see I've interrupted your work. We'll speak later, Linford."

He turned to go, then paused. "I trust this matter will remain private?"

"As private as your own daughter's Greek lessons," Professor Somerton replied pleasantly. "Good day, Thomas."

After Walkerton left, silence fell. Faith stared at her father, wondering if his intervention had been meant to help her or simply to avoid scandal.

He picked up one of the gear pieces, turning it in his hands.

"I suppose," he said at last, "we should discuss the proper time and place for such... tutorials."

His eyes met Faith's. "The library might be more suitable than a workshop. Less likely to draw attention."

Faith felt tears prick her eyes as she realized what he was offering – not just protection, but permission. Of a sort.

"Thank you, Father."

He set down the gear and headed for the door. "Just... be careful, my dear. Both of you."

He glanced at Jasper. "Not everyone is ready for change, even when it's clearly time for it."

After he left, Faith let out a shaky breath. Jasper's hand found hers, squeezing gently.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded, though her heart was still racing. "I just... I never thought he'd..."

"Stand up for you?" Jasper's thumb traced circles on her palm. "Perhaps we've both been underestimating those closest to us."

Faith looked down at their joined hands, then at the prototype they'd been working on together. "Perhaps we have."

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Faith spread her research materials across the table in her father's study. Three ancient architectural texts lay open, each showing different views of Oxford's medieval structures. Beside them, her careful notes catalogued every mention of "roses" in the university's decorative history.

"The Rose Window in the south transept," she read from her notes. "Installed in 1512, then removed during renovations in 1587. Current location unknown." She marked this on her map with a small star.

The door opened, and Faith looked up to find Jasper watching her with curiosity.

"You've been at this for hours," he said, stepping into the room.

"May I?" He gestured to her scattered research.

Faith hesitated only briefly before nodding. "I'm trying to connect the verses from Adriana's letters to actual locations."

Jasper picked up the map she'd been annotating, studying her markings with an engineer's precision. "You believe these poems are actual directions?"

"I think they're clues," Faith replied, pointing to her notes. "Look here — this chronicle mentions 'golden tears' in reference to amber deposits found during excavations in 1601. And this architectural record describes the old reflecting pool as 'mirroring heaven's light upon ancient stones.'"

"Interesting coincidences," Jasper said, though his scepticism was evident.

"Not coincidences," Faith insisted. "Deliberate markers left by someone who wanted these places found again — but only by those clever enough to decode the meaning."

She pulled out the oldest text, carefully turning pages until she found the passage she sought. "This was written just after the papal rejection. Look at how the author describes hidden chambers 'where wisdom waits in patient slumber.' Doesn't that echo the 'shadows deep where secrets sleep' from our first verse?"

Jasper leaned closer, his scepticism giving way to genuine interest as he examined the text. "The phrasing is remarkably similar."

"And see these diagrams?" Faith pointed to faded architectural drawings in the margin. "They don't match any known structures — unless these additional walls were built specifically to hide something."

"Like chambers for a forbidden library," Jasper murmured, beginning to see the possibility.

He traced one of the drawings with his finger. "From an engineering perspective, these could indeed be hidden spaces. The load-bearing calculations would allow for it."

Faith felt a surge of triumph as she watched understanding dawn in his eyes. "So you don't think I'm chasing shadows anymore?"

"I think," Jasper said slowly, "that your theory deserves serious investigation. These texts suggest architectural anomalies that can't be explained by normal construction practices of the period."

He pulled his own notebook from his pocket and began sketching. "If these hidden chambers exist, they would need ventilation, subtle access points. From a structural

standpoint, they would most likely be located..."

He paused, looking up at Faith with newfound excitement. "In exactly the areas you've marked on your map."

Faith couldn't suppress her smile. "Then you'll help me search for them?"

"A systematic investigation of architectural anomalies?" Jasper's eyes gleamed with interest. "How could any proper engineer refuse?"

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Faith's fingers were coated in dust as she ran them along yet another wall, squinting in the lamplight. They'd been at this for weeks now, methodically searching the abandoned theological wing of the library section by section. Her detailed notes, compiled from hours spent in the University archives, had narrowed their search to this area, but actually finding anything was proving far more challenging.

"Another dead end?" Jasper asked, holding his lamp higher to illuminate her work.

"I know it has to be here somewhere." Faith pulled out her journal, its pages dog-eared from constant reference. "My previous notes specifically mention this section housed the theological texts before the renovation of 1523. And look—" She pointed to a water stain on the ceiling. "That matches this sketch of the markers to watch for."

They'd already searched three other wings that had seemed promising, each time meticulously checking every stone, every joining. Faith's knees were perpetually bruised from crawling along the stone floors, and her eyes strained from studying faded architectural details.

"What would it mean to you," Jasper asked as they re-examined their notes, "if we



actually found this lost library?"

Faith paused, considering her answer carefully. "It would mean vindication. Proof that knowledge was once more freely shared than it is now."

She met his gaze directly. "And practically speaking, if there's actual treasure as Adriana believes, it could fund the school I dream of establishing."

"A school?" Jasper's interest was evident.

"For girls who would otherwise never have access to education. Meredith and I have planned it since childhood." Faith's voice grew passionate. "Imagine what it would mean — mathematics, sciences, literature — all taught without restriction to minds hungry for knowledge."

Jasper studied her for a moment. "That's why this treasure hunt matters so much to you. It's not just about the discovery itself."

"It's about what the discovery could create," Faith agreed. "A future where education isn't bound by class or gender."

She looked down at her notes, suddenly self-conscious. "You probably think it's foolishly idealistic."

"No," Jasper said quietly. "I think it's precisely the kind of purpose that makes innovation meaningful."

He gathered up one of the architectural diagrams. "My mining device aims to make dangerous work safer. Your school would make knowledge accessible to those who need it most. Both change lives for the better."

Faith felt a warm glow of understanding bloom between them. For the first time, she sensed that Lord Jasper might truly comprehend what drove her — not just as an academic exercise, but as a mission worth pursuing.

"Then let's find this treasure," she said with renewed determination. "For safety and for education — innovations that matter."

Jasper nodded, his expression serious. "Two worthy causes, indeed. Though I suspect the path to either won't be without opposition."

Faith nodded along with him but turned her attention back to her materials.

She drew out the rough map she'd pieced together from building records and her mother's research. "The old inventories show this was where they kept their most valuable manuscripts. If they were hiding books during the purge, this section would have made sense—it was already set up for secure storage."

Jasper moved his lamp methodically along the wall she was examining. "What made you choose this particular wall?"

"The foundation records." Faith pulled another document from her satchel, careful not to let the ancient paper crumble.

"See these measurements? This wall is nearly twice as thick as it should be. And it lines up perfectly with that line from the poem about 'wisdom's shadow at evening's hour.'" She gestured to where the setting sun would shine through the west window. "I've been watching the light patterns for days now."

She returned to her examination, rubbing away decades of grime with her sleeve. The stone was different here—less weathered than its neighbours, as though it had been replaced or...

"Jasper!" She called him closer, heart pounding. "Bring the lamp. I think I see something."

He held the light steady as she brushed away more dust. There, barely visible in the worn stone: decorative scrollwork that wasn't quite as decorative as it appeared. The Latin letters were cunningly worked into the design, nearly invisible unless you knew to look for them.

"This is it," she breathed, double-checking the phrases against her notes. "This matches the text Mother found referenced in the old library inventory."

Faith pressed against the panel, remembering similar mechanisms she'd studied in architectural drawings. Nothing happened.

"Try moving it up first," Jasper suggested, pointing to a slight discoloration in the stone. "These old spring mechanisms often needed to be lifted before they'd slide."

Jasper held his breath as Faith pressed against a seemingly ordinary panel in the dusty wall. There was a soft click, then a grinding sound that seemed impossibly loud in the abandoned wing of the Oxford library.

"How did you know?" he whispered, unable to keep the amazement from his voice as a narrow doorway swung open before them.

"The poem mentioned 'knowledge hidden behind wisdom,'" Faith replied, a triumphant gleam in her eyes.

"This section used to house theological texts – wisdom of the ages. And look here." She pointed to barely visible marks along the edge of the door frame. "These aren't just decorative scrollwork — they're letters. Latin, I think, though very worn."

Jasper lifted his lamp higher, casting light into the darkness beyond the doorway. Years of dust lay undisturbed on the floor, and cobwebs stretched across the entrance like a warning. He found himself stepping slightly in front of Faith, an instinctive move to protect her, though from what, he wasn't sure.

Though he'd been sceptical of this treasure hunt, preferring to focus on his mining innovations, he couldn't deny the thrill of discovery.

"Shall we?" Faith's voice held equal measures of excitement and trepidation.

"We should be careful," Jasper said, testing each floorboard before putting his full weight on it.

The ancient wood creaked ominously beneath his feet.

"This section hasn't seen maintenance in who knows how long."

Faith followed close behind him, her own lamp casting dancing shadows on the walls. The chamber was smaller than Jasper had expected, perhaps fifteen feet square, but what it lacked in size it made up for in contents.

Shelves lined every wall, crammed with books and loose papers. A massive oak desk dominated the centre of the room, its surface covered in what appeared to be mechanical drawings and strange devices.

"Look at this," Faith breathed, moving toward one of the shelves.

She reached for a tome bound in cracked leather, then hesitated, glancing at Jasper. "Should we? It's possible these haven't been touched in centuries."

Jasper understood her concern. These weren't just books – they were artifacts,

preserved in this sealed chamber for generations.

"We'll be careful," he assured her. "And we'll document everything exactly as we found it."

Together, they began a methodical examination of the room. Jasper couldn't help but notice how naturally they fell into a rhythm – Faith catalogued the books while Jasper helped her document their findings. Every few minutes, one of them would call the other over to look at a particularly interesting find.

"Jasper!" Faith's excited whisper drew him to her side. "This manuscript – it's in Latin, and look at these margin notes. They're referring to other volumes, locations. I think... I think these might be records of where the books were hidden during the papal conflict."

He leaned closer, his shoulder brushing against hers as he studied the page. The familiar warmth of her presence distracted him for a moment before he focused on what she was showing him. Though engineering was his field rather than ancient languages, he could recognize the systematic way the notes were organized.

"It's like a library catalogue," he mused.

Faith's hands trembled as she examined the ancient text they'd discovered in the hidden chamber. "Jasper, look at this — it's not just religious texts they hid. There are engineering treatises, scientific documents... Original drawings of Oxford's earliest mechanical innovations."

Jasper leaned closer, his breath catching. "These could revolutionize how we teach mechanical principles. The historical context alone..."

"Exactly," Faith said excitedly. "If we could find more of these texts, we'd have proof

that technical education has always been part of Oxford's legacy. It could help legitimize our dream of teaching others."

A flutter of paper falling from between the pages interrupted them. Faith snatched it from the air before it could hit the dusty floor. Her face paled as she read what was written on it.

"What is it?" Jasper asked, that protective instinct rising again at her expression.

"It's a letter," she said slowly. "Dated just before the purge of the library. Someone was trying to preserve these books, create a way for scholars to find them again when it was safe."

She looked up at him. "This isn't just about finding a treasure, is it? It's about recovering lost knowledge."

The sound of footsteps in the corridor outside made them both freeze. Jasper instinctively moved between Faith and the door, his heart pounding. But the steps passed by without pausing, fading into the distance.

Faith let out a shaky breath. "We should go," she whispered. "It's not safe to stay here too long. Someone might notice."

Jasper nodded, helping her carefully return everything to its exact position. As he watched her meticulously document the location of each book and manuscript, he couldn't help but admire her scholarly precision. This was so different from his world of mechanical innovation, and yet he found himself drawn to her enthusiasm, her dedication to preserving knowledge.

"We need somewhere private to examine everything we've documented," Faith whispered, clutching her notebook to her chest.

Even in the dim light, he could see her cheeks were flushed with excitement. "Father's study would be too risky with his current research spread everywhere."

"My laboratory," Jasper suggested. "It's late enough that we won't be disturbed."

He hesitated, suddenly aware of how improper the suggestion might sound. "That is, if you think it would be..."

"Suitable?" Faith's quiet laugh held a note of defiance. "I think we're well past worrying about that, don't you? Besides, after Professor Walkerton's interruption the other day, everyone expects to find me there anyway."

She had a point. Their academic discussions had become something of an open secret among certain faculty members, though opinions varied widely on the appropriateness of their collaboration. Jasper found himself caring less and less what others thought, especially after seeing how her keen mind approached problems from angles he'd never considered.

In his laboratory, Faith began spreading out her notes while Jasper cleared space on his workbench, pushing aside his mining device designs to make room for her discoveries.

"Look at these references," Faith said, excitement building in her voice. "It was a time of tremendous upheaval. They must have feared these texts would be destroyed."

She paused, biting her lip. "Rather like how knowledge is restricted now, though for different reasons."

The parallel wasn't lost on him. Here was Faith, brilliant and insightful, forced to pursue her studies in secret simply because of her gender.

"There's something else," Faith said, turning back to her notes. "This passage here — it refers to a series of hidden chambers, each containing different texts. And these numbers in the margin — I think they're some kind of coordinate system using Oxford's old architectural features as reference points."

Jasper leaned closer to see where she was pointing, acutely aware of her proximity. The scent of old books clung to her hair, and he found himself fighting the urge to brush back a stray curl that had escaped her pins during their exploration.

"We'll need a proper map of the old buildings," he said, his voice rougher than he intended.

"And time to decode these references." He met her gaze. "Faith, this could be dangerous. If anyone realizes what we've found..."

"Are you suggesting we stop?" There was a challenge in her voice.

"No," he replied without hesitation. "I'm suggesting we be very, very careful. And that we trust no one with this except each other and Meredith, of course."

Faith nodded, relieved he had included her oldest friend. "Meredith's position in the library gives her access to resources we couldn't otherwise obtain. And there's no one I trust more with historical research."

"I agree," Jasper said. "Her cataloguing skills have already proven invaluable, and we'll need her expertise going forward." He paused, his expression serious. "But beyond her, we must keep this discovery to ourselves until we understand exactly what we're dealing with."

The look she gave him made his heart skip a beat.



"Then we'd better get to work," she said, reaching for a fresh sheet of paper. "We have a lot to decipher before morning."

A sound from the corridor made them both freeze. Footsteps approached, then passed by their door. Faith quickly gathered her notes.

"Tomorrow," he whispered. "We'll start planning tomorrow."

She nodded, but paused before leaving. "Jasper... thank you. For believing in this. In me."

"How could I not?" he replied softly. And in that moment, standing in his laboratory with Faith, surrounded by her historical discoveries while his own invention sat forgotten in the corner, he realized just how much his priorities had shifted since meeting her.

As she slipped away into the darkness, Jasper knew that whatever they discovered in their search for Oxford's lost knowledge, he'd already found something far more valuable than he'd ever expected.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am*

Faith needed to clear her head after their discovery in the hidden chamber. The ancient texts hinted at so much knowledge waiting to be uncovered, yet here she was, sneaking around like a thief just to access learning that should be freely available.

She found herself walking through Oxford's winding streets, barely noticing the familiar path until she emerged into the market square. The late afternoon sun caught the shop windows, including the newly cleaned glass of Mrs. Henderson's millinery shop.

Faith slowed her steps, watching as the widow worked with her young assistant. Instead of merely directing the girl's work, Mrs. Henderson stood at her side, patiently demonstrating how to measure and calculate the materials needed for a new hat. The girl's face lit with understanding as she grasped the mathematical principle involved.

Something about the scene made Faith pause. Here was education happening naturally, practical knowledge being passed on without ceremony or restriction. Mrs. Henderson caught her watching and gave a knowing smile, one that suggested she understood exactly what had caught Faith's attention.

Making a mental note to return when the shop was less busy, Faith continued her walk, mind churning with possibilities. The hidden chamber's texts proved that Oxford had once valued knowledge enough to protect it at any cost. Perhaps what was needed now wasn't just the recovery of lost books, but new ways of sharing their contents with those who hungered to learn.

The thought sustained her as she turned back toward home, where Jasper would be

waiting to continue their research. They had uncovered one chamber, but Faith suspected there were more secrets yet to discover — both in Oxford's walls and in its people.

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Faith's hands were trembling as she transcribed the Latin text by candlelight. Her father's study felt different at night — more intimate, somehow, as though the countless books surrounding her were waiting to share their secrets. She'd been at this for hours, cross-referencing the documents they'd discovered with her father's ancient texts, but her excitement hadn't dimmed.

"You're still awake."

Faith started at her father's voice. She hadn't heard him approach, too absorbed in her work. "Father! I was just... I didn't expect anyone else to be up at this hour." She hesitated, unsure how much to reveal.

Professor Somerton moved into the room, his dressing gown wrapped tightly against the night's chill. Instead of the reprimand she expected, he picked up one of her transcriptions, studying it with familiar scholarly intensity.

"These references," he said quietly, "remind me of something I saw years ago, in an old manuscript about the Oxford Preservation Society."

He looked at her carefully. "You've found something significant, haven't you?"

Faith took a deep breath.

"Yes," she admitted. "We found a hidden chamber today, Father. With books that might have been saved from the papal purge."

To her surprise, she found herself telling him about their discovery, the cataloguing system they'd found, and their growing certainty that there might be more chambers.

Her father listened without interruption, his expression thoughtful. When she finished, he was silent for a long moment.

"You know," he said finally, "your mother was the one who taught me that knowledge doesn't belong to any one group."

He smiled sadly. "She would have loved seeing you like this, pursuing truth wherever it leads you."

Faith felt tears prick at her eyes. They so rarely spoke of her mother. "Even if it leads me places a woman isn't supposed to go?"

"Perhaps especially then." He sat down heavily in his favourite chair. "I haven't always supported your curiosity as I should have, Faith. Fear of scandal, of what my colleagues would say... I let it overshadow what I knew was right."

"You've given me more freedom than most," she said softly. "At least you never sent me away when you caught me reading your books."

"No, I just pretended not to notice." He sighed, running a hand over his worn face. "Half-measures, when I should have had the courage to truly support you. But perhaps it's not too late to do better."

He leaned forward to examine her notes more closely. "Tell me about these references you're working on. The cataloguing system seems quite sophisticated for that period."

Faith blinked back her tears, grateful for his shift to scholarly discourse.

"Yes, look here," she pointed to her careful transcription. "They created a system using architectural features as reference points. Each location is marked in relation to specific buildings or rooms."

They bent their heads together over the text, father and daughter working as true colleagues for the first time. Hours slipped by as they decoded line after line, Professor Somerton's classical expertise complementing Faith's understanding of Oxford's architecture.

"It's a map," Faith breathed finally, sitting back as the pattern emerged. "Not just to physical locations, but to a whole system of hidden chambers. Each one contains different texts, preserved for future scholars."

"Sometimes," he said carefully, "knowledge itself can be dangerous — not because of what it is, but because of who might try to suppress it."

He gave her a meaningful look. "Rather like the way some try to suppress education for women."

"That's why I want to start a school," Faith found herself saying.

She hadn't meant to reveal this dream to him, but the intimacy of the moment drew the words out. "Not just for wealthy girls, but for any girl who wants to learn. To ensure knowledge isn't kept from half the population simply because of their gender."

She waited tensely for his response, but her father merely nodded thoughtfully. "And this treasure hunt — the books you're seeking — they would help fund such an endeavour?"

"If we find them," Faith admitted.

"Lady Beaverbrook has offered her support, but..." She twisted her hands in her lap. "Father, what if we're wrong? What if we're chasing shadows and putting ourselves at risk for nothing?"

"The pursuit of knowledge always involves risk," he said gently. "The question is whether you believe the potential discovery is worth it."

Faith thought of the hidden chamber, of the carefully preserved texts that had survived centuries to reach them. Most of all, she thought of all the girls like her, desperate to learn, to understand, to contribute to the world's knowledge.

"It is worth it," she said firmly. "Even if we don't find what we expect, the journey itself..."

She gestured to their shared work, to this unprecedented night of collaborative scholarship with her father.

"Some discoveries aren't about treasure at all."

Her father smiled, and for a moment she saw the passionate young scholar he must have been, the man who had fallen in love with her equally curious mother.

"Then perhaps it's time I gave you this." He stood and went to his desk, unlocking a drawer she'd never seen opened before.

Professor Somerton returned with a small leather-bound journal, its pages yellow with age.

"This was your mother's," he said softly. "She had her own theories about Oxford's hidden chambers. I always thought them fanciful, but now..."

He held the journal out to Faith. "Perhaps she understood something the rest of us didn't."

Faith's hands shook as she accepted the book. She'd seen her mother's portrait, of course, hanging in the hall upstairs, but she'd never held anything that had belonged to her before. Opening it carefully, she found pages filled with elegant handwriting, architectural sketches, and detailed notes about Oxford's oldest buildings.

"She was mapping the old passages," Faith whispered, recognition dawning as she compared her mother's drawings to their recent discoveries. "Father, look — she'd found references to some of these same chambers!"

Together, they spread her mother's journal alongside their current notes. Faith's heart raced as connections began emerging. Her mother's careful observations about the placement of certain architectural features aligned perfectly with the coded references in their newly discovered texts.

"Here," Faith said, pointing to a particular passage. "She wrote about a series of connected chambers beneath the old library wing. And look at these notations — they're measurements, dimensions of spaces that don't appear on any official plans."

Her father leaned closer, adjusting his spectacles. "Your mother always said the old buildings held more secrets than anyone suspected. She spent hours studying the architectural histories."

Faith quickly consulted an architectural reference from her father's shelf. "According to this, these passages would have been sealed during the renovations in the 1500s. But if Mother's measurements are correct..."

"The spaces would still exist behind the newer walls," her father finished. "Hidden, but preserved."

Faith barely heard him, too absorbed in her mother's notes. Each page revealed new insights, new connections. When she finally looked up, tears were streaming down her face.

"She was brilliant," Faith whispered. "All this work, all these discoveries, and no one knew."

"I knew," her father said quietly. "It was one of the reasons I fell in love with her. She saw the world differently than anyone else I'd ever met."

He smiled sadly at his daughter. "Rather like you do."

"Is that why you let me stay in your study? Why you never truly tried to stop me from learning?"

"Perhaps. Though I wasn't always as brave about it as she would have been." He touched the journal gently. "She would have wanted you to have this. To finish what she started."

After her father excused himself to prepare for his morning lecture, Faith remained in the study, carefully examining her mother's journal. The pages were filled with elegant handwriting, architectural sketches, and detailed notes about Oxford's oldest buildings.

A soft knock at the study door made her look up. Jasper stood in the doorway, his expression concerned.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," he said quietly. "I saw the light still on. I couldn't sleep—been working for hours in the laboratory, but my device continues to fail. I couldn't bear the solitude a moment longer."

He hesitated. "I thought perhaps we could review those manuscripts we found—" He stopped, noticing her reddened eyes. "Faith? What's wrong?"

She held up her mother's journal. "My father gave me this. It's... it changes everything, Jasper. Look."

Jasper moved closer, acutely aware of Professor Somerton's presence as Faith showed him her mother's notes.

A complicated mix of emotions washed over him — genuine excitement for Faith's discovery warring with a sharp pang of envy. Here was a father actually supporting his child's scholarly pursuits, even if belatedly.

Would his own father ever look at his work with such acceptance?

He pushed the bitter thoughts aside, focusing instead on the architectural drawings before them.

"These notes are remarkable," he said, genuinely impressed despite his inner turmoil. "Your mother's research, combined with what we found... Faith, we might actually be able to locate these chambers."

"But we'll need to be careful," Faith said. "If anyone realizes what we're doing..."

"Then we'll be subtle," Jasper said softly, thinking of his own secret work in the laboratory.

At least his mining device gave him a legitimate reason to be at Oxford, even if its progress remained frustratingly slow. "We'll take our time, do this properly."

"You'll need a proper cover story," Professor Somerton said, surprising them both. "A

reason to be researching old architectural plans without drawing attention."

He smiled slightly at Jasper. "Perhaps something about the structural integrity of the older buildings? That would explain why an engineering student might be consulting historical documents."

The casual way Professor Somerton included him in their plans made Jasper's chest tight.

If only his own father could show such interest in his work, such willingness to engage with his passions. Instead, the Marquess's latest letter lay unopened in his coat pocket, likely containing yet another demand to abandon his 'foolish tinkering' and return to proper noble pursuits.

As the first light of dawn began creeping through the study window, the three of them bent over their combined notes. Jasper watched Faith's face glow with excitement as she traced connections between her mother's journal and their discoveries, her father offering gentle corrections to her Latin translations.

The scene stirred a complex mixture of joy and longing in his chest — joy for Faith finding this connection with her father, and longing for what he might never have with his own.

But when Faith looked up at him with shining eyes, sharing her excitement so openly, Jasper found he couldn't hold onto his melancholy.

Whatever his father's opinions, Jasper was part of something remarkable here. And perhaps, if he could perfect his mining device while helping Faith with her search, he might finally prove himself worthy of the Linford name in a way that even the Marquess couldn't dismiss.

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Faith stretched, realizing the morning light had shifted to afternoon while she'd been absorbed in her work. Her father's study lay quiet except for the soft ticking of the clock and Lucy's careful movements as she cleared away the morning's tea things.

"Miss Faith?" Lucy's voice was barely a whisper as she stacked the cups. She glanced at the door as though afraid of being overheard. "Might I ask you something?"

Faith set aside her notes. "Of course."

"It's just..." Lucy twisted her apron between her fingers. "My friend Mary, who works in the college kitchen... she heard about how you helped me with my letters. She was wondering..."

Faith's heart leaped. "Would she like to learn as well?"

Lucy nodded eagerly. "There's a few of us, actually. We talk sometimes, about wishing we could read proper-like." She ducked her head. "Not that we're asking for anything improper, miss. Just... maybe sometimes, if you had a spare moment..."

Faith thought of the ancient texts she'd been studying, filled with knowledge that could change lives if only it were shared more freely. Here was a chance to do more than just hunt for lost books — she could help create new readers for them.

"Lucy," she said carefully, "how many girls are we talking about?"

The answer made her mind race with possibilities — and complications. She would need a proper meeting place, away from prying eyes. And suddenly, she remembered Mrs. Henderson's knowing smile. Perhaps it was time to pay the widow a visit.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am*

The pre-dawn air bit through Jasper's coat as he made final adjustments to his mining device. The past week had been a blur of divided attention — mornings in his laboratory struggling with mechanical failures, afternoons helping Faith search old building records for clues to the hidden chambers. His father's disapproving letter still lay unopened in his desk drawer.

"Is everything ready?" Faith's whispered question made him turn.

She emerged from the shadows wearing what appeared to be boy's clothing — practical trousers and a workman's shirt under a heavy coat, her hair tucked beneath a cap. The sight made his breath catch.

"Almost," he said, reluctantly covering his device.

He'd hoped to test it today, but Faith's discovery of new architectural plans couldn't wait.

"Though I still think you should let me go alone. If anyone recognizes you—"

"We've been through this." She cut him off, adjusting the satchel that held her mother's journal and their notes. "I'm coming. These are my mother's research notes, after all."

He couldn't argue with that. Faith's mother's careful documentation of Oxford's architectural oddities had proven invaluable in mapping potential locations of hidden chambers. Still, the protective instinct that had been growing stronger each day made him want to shield her from whatever dangers they might face.

"Your father knows where you are?" he asked, though they'd been over this as well.

"He thinks I'm attending an early morning lecture." Her slight smile held a touch of irony. "Which, in a way, I am. Just not quite the kind he's imagining."

Before Jasper could respond, the sound of carriage wheels on the road made them both freeze. They pressed back against the wall of his laboratory as the vehicle passed by — a handsome curricule that seemed out of place at this hour.

"Did you see who that was?" Faith whispered once it had passed.

Jasper nodded grimly. "Professor Reynolds from Cambridge. What's he doing here at this hour?"

"He's been asking questions about the old library wing. One of father's colleagues mentioned it yesterday."

Jasper swore under his breath. Of course, others would be pursuing similar clues. They'd been foolish to think they were the only ones who could decode the messages left behind.

"We need to hurry," he said, gathering their materials. "If Reynolds is investigating, others won't be far behind."

The journey to the old library wing felt interminable, though in reality it took less than thirty minutes. They avoided the main paths where they might be seen, taking rarely-used corridors Faith had discovered during her years of secret study.

"The renovations in the 1500s changed this entire section," Faith whispered, consulting her mother's journal. "But look here — the original wall thickness doesn't match the current plans. Mother thought there might be sealed passages behind the

newer construction."

Jasper studied the wall she indicated, his engineer's mind automatically calculating load-bearing requirements and structural possibilities. At least his education was useful for something, even if it wasn't the mining innovations that would finally catch his father's attention.

"If there is a space back there," he said slowly, "we'll need to be extremely careful about how we access it. One wrong move could bring down centuries of accumulated debris."

"I've been thinking about that," Faith said, pulling out a set of architectural drawings. "Mother noted several ventilation shafts that were supposedly sealed. But if we could locate their original openings—"

A noise from the corridor made them both freeze. Faith quickly tucked the papers away as footsteps approached.

"...must be here somewhere." Professor Reynolds' cultured tones were unmistakable. "These building plans show clear discrepancies."

"But sir," another voice responded, "if these chambers exist, surely they would have been found during renovations?"

"Not if someone wanted them to remain hidden. The question is, who else knows about them? I've heard rumours of a certain professor's daughter showing unusual interest in architectural history..."

Jasper felt Faith tense beside him. He squeezed her hand in the darkness, as much to keep himself from confronting Reynolds as to reassure her.

The voices and footsteps passed their hiding place without pause. Only when the sound had completely faded did Jasper dare to move.

"We should split up," Faith whispered. "I know where to look for the ventilation shaft entrance. You need to get back to your laboratory — isn't your father's steward coming to review your progress today?"

Jasper's stomach clenched. He'd almost forgotten about the appointment.

"I can't leave you here alone with Reynolds prowling about."

"I've spent years avoiding notice in these halls," Faith reminded him. "I'll be fine. Your father's approval matters, Jasper. You shouldn't risk losing it over this."

Her understanding only made it worse. Here she was, supporting his goals even while pursuing her own, while he felt torn between helping her and pursuing his invention. If he could just make the mining device work, prove to his father that his education hadn't been wasted...

"Wait," he said, an idea forming. "What about Meredith? She's working in the library today, isn't she?"

Faith brightened at the suggestion. "Yes, cataloguing in the east wing. She could join me—her presence wouldn't raise suspicions."

"I'll find her on my way out," Jasper offered, relieved to have found a compromise. "With both of you working together, you'll likely make twice the progress anyway."

"And she knows every corner of the library better than anyone," Faith added. "If Reynolds appears, she'll spot him before he sees us."

"Two hours," Jasper said, his concern easing but not disappearing entirely. "If I haven't heard from you by then, I'm coming back regardless."

Faith nodded, already consulting her mother's journal. "Good luck with the steward."

As Jasper departed, he made a quick detour through the east wing, where he found Meredith organizing a cart of recently returned volumes. After a brief explanation, she readily agreed to join Faith, her eyes lighting with scholarly excitement at the prospect of examining the hidden architectural references.

With Meredith enlisted as both research partner and lookout, Jasper finally allowed himself to leave, though his thoughts remained divided between his impending meeting and the dangerous search taking place in Oxford's oldest corridors.

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In his laboratory, Jasper couldn't focus. His hands moved mechanically over his device, making adjustments he'd tried a dozen times before, but his mind kept straying to Faith.

Was she safe? Had Reynolds found her? The mixture of concern for her and frustration with his own project made his movements clumsy.

"Lord Jasper."

He turned to find Thompson, his father's under-butler, hovering in the doorway. "I told the maid I would announce myself, she directed me to this space."

The haughty servant's view of his temporary quarters was not left to be speculated about. Jasper's amusement tempered his disappointment over the man's next words. "The steward sends his regrets. He's been delayed in London on urgent business for

the Marquess."

Relief and disappointment warred in Jasper's chest. Another chance to prove himself postponed, but at least now he could return to help Faith. Why had they even bothered to send anyone? Surely a note would have sufficed.

Frustration dogged Jasper's steps even as he searched for Faith.

He found her exactly where she said she'd be, crouched behind a stack of ancient texts in a forgotten corner of the library's oldest section. Her cap had slipped, revealing a strand of dark hair, and her cheeks were flushed with excitement.

"Jasper, look at this!" She held up a weathered document. "It's a builder's receipt from 1523. They ordered far more stone than they needed for the visible walls. Mother was right — there must be hidden chambers."

Her enthusiasm was infectious, despite his lingering worry over the delayed meeting with his father's steward. "Show me what you've found."

They spent the next hour piecing together evidence — construction records, architectural oddities, references in old letters. Faith's mind made connections he would never have seen, while his engineering knowledge helped them understand which walls might conceivably hide spaces large enough for book storage.

"The structural support would have to be substantial," he mused, examining one of Faith's mother's sketches. "Even if they reinforced it during construction, after all this time..."

"That's why finding the proper access point is crucial," Faith said. She bit her lip, glancing at him. "How did things go with the steward?"

"He didn't come." Jasper tried to keep the bitterness from his voice. "Apparently my father had more important matters for him to attend to."

Faith touched his arm gently. "I'm sorry. I know how much you wanted to show him your progress."

"Progress?" Jasper laughed harshly. "The device still isn't working properly. Perhaps Father's right — perhaps I'm wasting my time here."

"Stop that," Faith said firmly. "Your invention could save lives, make dangerous work safer. That's worth pursuing, whether your father sees it or not."

She squeezed his arm. "Just as these books are worth finding, whether Oxford ever acknowledges my part in it or not."

Her words struck home. They were both fighting different battles against Society's expectations — she to be recognized as a scholar despite her gender, he to prove that nobility and scientific pursuit weren't mutually exclusive.

Before he could respond, a shadow fell across their workspace. They looked up to find Professor Reynolds standing over them, a cold smile on his face.

"How fascinating," he said smoothly. "Lord Jasper Linford and Miss Somerton, pouring over old building records. One might wonder what a mining engineer and a professor's daughter find so interesting about medieval architecture."

Jasper felt Faith tense beside him. He shifted slightly, casually covering her mother's journal with his sleeve.

"Structural integrity studies," he said evenly. "Given my interest in mining safety, I've been researching historical building techniques. Miss Somerton has been kind enough

to assist with translations."

"Indeed?" Reynolds raised an eyebrow. "How... collaborative of you both. Though I wonder what the Marquess would think of his son spending his time on such academic pursuits."

The threat was clear — not just to their research, but to Jasper's already tenuous relationship with his father. But before the professor could continue, another voice joined the conversation.

"I imagine," Professor Somerton said, emerging from behind a bookshelf, "that he'd think much the same as I do about my daughter's interest in architecture — that the pursuit of knowledge takes many forms, and we do ourselves a disservice by trying to restrict it."

Reynolds' confident smile faltered slightly. "Ah, Professor Somerton. I wasn't aware you were... supervising this research."

"Supervising?" Professor Somerton's tone was mild, but his eyes were sharp. "Hardly necessary. Lord Jasper's engineering expertise and my daughter's facility with historical documents make them quite capable of conducting their own studies."

Faith stared at her father in amazement. Never had he so openly acknowledged her scholarly abilities.

"Of course," Reynolds said smoothly, "but surely such young researchers would benefit from more... experienced guidance. I, myself, have been studying Oxford's architectural history for many years..."

"Then you'll be pleased to know that Lady Beaverbrook has already agreed to sponsor an official architectural survey," Professor Somerton said. "All findings will be

properly documented and shared with the academic community, of course."

Reynolds' face tightened. Without noble sponsorship of his own, he could hardly protest. "How... fortunate. I look forward to reading the results." He gave a stiff bow and retreated.

Once he was gone, Faith turned to her father. "Lady Beaverbrook hasn't actually..."

"Not yet," Professor Somerton said with a slight smile. "But given your friendship with her, I suspect she'd be amenable to the idea. Particularly if you were to write to her today."

Jasper watched this exchange with a mixture of admiration and envy. Here was a father not only accepting his child's intellectual pursuits but actively helping to protect them. Would his own father ever show such support?

"Lord Jasper." Professor Somerton turned to him. "I understand my rather dramatic entrance interrupted your explanation of structural integrity studies. Perhaps you'd care to continue that discussion over dinner? I'd be quite interested in hearing how historical building techniques might inform modern mining safety."

The invitation was clear — not just to dinner, but to create a legitimate cover for their research. Jasper felt a warmth he hadn't expected. "Thank you, sir. I would be honoured."

"Excellent. Though first," Professor Somerton's eyes twinkled, "perhaps you both might care to explain why you're prowling the library so late in the afternoon? In future, I suggest keeping to more conventional hours. Less suspicious, you understand."

Faith laughed, the tension of the morning finally breaking. "Yes, Father."

As they gathered their materials, Jasper noticed Faith's mother's journal had slipped partially from its hiding place. He carefully handed it back to her, their fingers brushing. The touch sent a jolt through him that had nothing to do with their research.

"Jasper," Faith said softly. "Your appointment with the steward — could it be rescheduled?"

He nodded. "Thompson said he'd send word once they return from London."

"Good. Because I think..." She glanced at her father, who had become very interested in examining the nearest bookshelf.

"I think I may have found something that could help with your device. Not in these documents," she added quickly, "but in some of Father's engineering texts. Would you... would you let me show you?"

The earnest offer of help, coming just when he'd felt most discouraged about his invention, touched him deeply. "I would like that very much."

Professor Somerton cleared his throat. "Perhaps such consultations could wait until after supper? I believe Cook is expecting us, and one should never disappoint Cook."

As they walked back through the morning-lit corridors, Jasper felt something shift inside him. His father's approval still mattered — of course it did — but somehow it didn't feel quite so desperately important.

Here he had found something he hadn't even known he was looking for: people who understood that innovation and tradition, engineering and scholarship, could coexist. People who saw value in pushing boundaries and asking questions.

Faith walked beside him, already discussing possible applications of historical

building techniques to modern mining problems. Her enthusiasm was infectious, her insights unexpected and clever. His mining device might not be working yet, but for the first time in weeks, Jasper felt truly hopeful about its future.

"You're already late for your first class," Professor Somerton informed his daughter dryly.

Faith's eyes widened in mock horror. "How shocking. A lady, missing her embroidery lesson? Whatever shall we do?"

"Arithmetic," her father corrected. "I believe you were meant to be studying arithmetic this morning."

"Ah, but Father," Faith's eyes sparkled with mischief, "haven't I been doing just that? Calculating load-bearing ratios is mathematics, after all."

As Professor Somerton tried to hide his smile, Jasper realized he was witnessing something rare and precious: a family that valued knowledge for its own sake, that saw learning as a joy rather than a duty. His own path might be different, might still require fighting for his father's understanding, but at least now he knew such understanding was possible.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am

Faith's quill scratched quietly against parchment as she copied out basic arithmetic exercises, her candlelight casting dancing shadows across her father's study walls. The leather-bound books surrounding her seemed to stand guard over her clandestine work, silent witnesses to yet another night of secret preparation.

She paused, scanning the simple problems she'd written. Would they be too difficult for Lucy? The young housemaid had shown remarkable aptitude for numbers, but Faith was wary of overwhelming her new student. Better to start with something manageable and build confidence gradually.

"What would Mother have done?" she whispered to herself, touching the journal that now lay constantly within reach. Its pages had revealed so much—not just about the hidden chambers of Oxford, but about the woman who had shared Faith's passion for knowledge. Who had understood, even then, that education shouldn't be restricted by gender or class.

The sound of footsteps in the corridor made her freeze. Faith quickly slid the arithmetic exercises beneath a stack of her father's papers, her heart pounding until the steps faded away. Even here, in her father's study where he had finally begun to accept her scholarly pursuits, she couldn't entirely shake the feeling of transgression.

How much riskier would it be to actually teach? To gather girls like Lucy, girls hungry for knowledge but denied access to it, and give them the basic tools of learning? The thought both thrilled and terrified her.

A gentle tap at the door nearly made her knock over her inkwell. Faith quickly moved to answer. Jasper stood outside. Faith let him in, noting the familiar signs of

frustration in his rumpled appearance—the way his cravat hung loose, how his hair stood up where he'd run his hands through it countless times.

"Another difficult night with the device?" she asked softly as he climbed through.

"It still won't maintain consistent pressure under load," he admitted, slumping into a chair. "But that's not why I came. I've been thinking about what you said, about making education more accessible."

He glanced at the papers on her desk. "Are those teaching materials?"

Faith hesitated, then nodded. Something in Jasper's expression gave her courage. "Basic mathematics, to start. Nothing complicated—just the fundamental skills a woman might need to manage a household budget or ensure she isn't being cheated at market."

"Or to understand mechanical principles?" Jasper suggested, a hint of his usual enthusiasm returning. "Faith, what if there was a way to combine our goals? My invention—even in its current state—could be used to demonstrate basic scientific principles. The sort of practical knowledge that might help your students see the real-world applications of what they're learning."

Faith's mind raced with possibilities. "You would be willing to help? Even with everything else you're trying to accomplish?"

"I've been questioning lately whether my father's approval is worth pursuing at the cost of everything else that matters." He ran a hand through his already messy hair. "Besides, your students' success might help prove that women are capable of understanding complex subjects. That education shouldn't be restricted by gender."

Faith felt tears prick at her eyes. "That's precisely what Mother believed. Look at

this."

She opened her mother's journal to a passage she'd read so many times she nearly knew it by heart. "She wrote about creating a network of educated women who could pass their knowledge on to others. She believed that true change would come not from grand gestures, but from small acts of rebellion—teaching one girl at a time until the weight of evidence became impossible to ignore."

"A revolution through education," Jasper mused. "But where would you even begin? Surely not here at Oxford?"

Faith shook her head. "I've made contact with a widow in town who supports the cause. She has a small room above her shop that's rarely used. With proper precautions..."

She trailed off, suddenly aware of how outlandish it might sound to someone of Jasper's standing.

But he was nodding thoughtfully. "You'd need to be incredibly careful. Perhaps I could devise some sort of warning system? Something subtle that would alert you if anyone unexpected approached?"

Before Faith could respond, they heard the distinct sound of her father's study door opening downstairs. They froze, staring at each other in alarm.

"Quickly," Faith whispered, gathering her teaching materials. "Father sometimes checks his study before he retires."

Jasper slipped out through a window with practiced ease, but paused before leaving. "Faith? Your mother was right. Change does come from small acts of rebellion. And you won't be doing this alone."

As she watched him disappear into the pre-dawn darkness, Faith clutched her mother's journal to her chest. Perhaps this was madness—trying to establish a secret school while also helping hunt for Oxford's lost treasures. But something her mother had written kept echoing in her mind: "Knowledge, once gained, cannot be untaught. Each girl who learns to read, to calculate, to think critically, becomes a lamp lighting the way for others."

Faith carefully tucked her teaching materials into a hidden compartment she'd discovered behind one of the study's bookcases. Tomorrow, she would meet with the widow to finalize their plans. But for now, she had just enough time to make it back to her room before the household stirred.

As she slipped through the quiet halls, Faith felt a curious mixture of fear and excitement. She might not be able to change Society's views overnight, but she could follow her mother's example—one student, one small act of rebellion at a time. And now, unexpectedly, she had an ally in Jasper.

The first light of dawn was just beginning to paint the sky as Faith reached her chamber. Soon, the household would awaken, and she would return to her role as the professor's dutiful daughter. But in these quiet moments between night and day, she allowed herself to dream of a future where knowledge knew no boundaries of gender or class—a future she was determined to help create, one arithmetic lesson at a time.

She had just enough time to change her dress and prepare for her morning meeting with Mrs. Henderson, the widow who owned the millinery shop in town.

Faith met Meredith at the corner of High Street, and together they made their way through Oxford's narrow streets. Faith's reticule was heavy with teaching materials she'd prepared, while Meredith carried a carefully organized portfolio of curriculum plans they had developed over several late evenings.

"Are you nervous?" Meredith asked, her voice low despite the bustle of morning shoppers around them.

"Terrified," Faith admitted with a small smile. "But if Mrs. Henderson agrees, we'll have taken the first real step toward everything we've dreamed of since we were girls."

Meredith squeezed her arm encouragingly. "Either way, we'll find a path forward. We always have."

The millinery shop's bell tinkled softly as they entered, and Mrs. Henderson immediately ushered them into the back room, her practiced eye noting their barely contained excitement.

"My dears," the older woman said, her grey eyes sharp with concern, "I've given your proposal considerable thought."

She gestured for the girls to sit at a small table where tea had been laid out. "While I support your mission wholeheartedly, we must discuss the risks."

Faith accepted a cup of tea, noting how her hands trembled slightly. "I understand there are dangers—"

"Do you?" Mrs. Henderson leaned forward. "Your father's position at the university is precarious enough, given his occasional unconventional views. If it became known that his daughter was running a clandestine school, teaching subjects considered inappropriate for females..."

She shook her head. "The scandal could ruin him."

Faith set down her cup with perhaps more force than necessary. "And what of the

ruin that comes from keeping half the population in ignorance? These girls—"

"Are vulnerable enough without us adding to their troubles," Mrs. Henderson finished gently. "However." She smiled slightly. "I didn't say I wouldn't help."

Relief flooded through Faith. "Then the room above the shop?"

"Is yours to use, provided we take proper precautions." Mrs. Henderson pulled out a small purse. "I'm also prepared to help with supplies, and perhaps even a small stipend to help some of the poorest girls afford to take time away from their work to study."

Faith blinked back tears. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Thank me by being careful." Mrs. Henderson's expression grew serious again. "We'll need to establish strict rules. The girls must arrive separately, never in groups. They should use the back entrance. And if anyone official comes asking questions—"

"They're merely here to learn millinery," Faith finished. "I've already thought about using sewing lessons as a cover."

"Good girl." Mrs. Henderson patted her hand. "Now, show me these lessons you've prepared. If we're to risk everything, we should at least ensure we're providing the finest education possible."

As Faith and Meredith spread out their carefully copied arithmetic exercises and basic reading primers, she felt a familiar surge of determination. Yes, there were risks—to themselves, to Faith's father's position, to the girls themselves. But Faith's mother's words from the journal echoed in her mind: "Knowledge, once gained, cannot be untaught."

She would move forward carefully, build her school slowly and deliberately, and create a space where girls could discover the power of their own minds. And perhaps, with Jasper's help and Mrs. Henderson's support, she might even succeed in changing a few minds along the way.

The bell tinkled again, signalling a customer's arrival. As Mrs. Henderson hurried back to the shop front, Faith gathered her materials, already planning how to arrange the small room upstairs for her first proper class. Soon, these pages of carefully copied sums and letters would become keys, unlocking doors that Society had tried to keep firmly shut.

She straightened her shoulders, embracing both her fear and her resolve. Some dreams were worth any risk.

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Jasper unfolded his father's letter for what felt like the hundredth time, though the words hadn't changed since its arrival three days ago. The Marquess's elegant script carried its usual undertone of disappointment:

I trust you are making significant progress with your device, as the mining operation cannot sustain further delays. While your grandmother's support has afforded you considerable latitude in your pursuits, you must understand that even her patience has limits. I expect a demonstration of practical results by next month's end.

The paper crackled as Jasper's fingers tightened. He forced himself to set it aside before he could crumple it entirely, turning instead to his workbench where his latest prototype waited. Morning light streamed through the workshop windows, catching on brass fittings and steel components, transforming his countless failures into gold.

"Right then," he muttered, reaching for his notebook. "Let's see what you can do today."

The device was smaller than his previous attempts—more efficient in theory, though he'd yet to prove it in practice. He began his usual testing routine, meticulously recording every measurement and observation. The grinding mechanism engaged smoothly at first, but as he increased the pressure...

A harsh grinding sound filled the workshop, followed by an ominous crack. Jasper swore, quickly disengaging the power source. Another failure. Another day closer to his father's deadline without results.

He slumped onto his stool, running a hand through his hair in an attempt to relieve

some tension. Seven iterations, each one promising, each one failing under the very conditions it needed to withstand.

The mining operations his family had maintained for generations needed this innovation—or so he'd convinced his father. The irony wasn't lost on him: he'd spent years trying to prove the value of his education, and now his inability to make this device work only seemed to confirm his father's doubts.

"It should work," he muttered, examining the broken component.

The theory was sound; he'd verified the calculations dozens of times. The material was stronger than anything currently used in mining operations. So why did it keep failing at the crucial moment?

The morning sun climbed higher, casting longer shadows across his workbench as Jasper sketched possible modifications. He'd barely noticed the passing hours, lost in the familiar rhythm of problem and solution, theory and application.

The family's mining operations had sustained the Linford wealth for generations, but traditional methods were becoming increasingly dangerous and inefficient. If his device worked, it would not only improve productivity but potentially save lives—a fact his father acknowledged only grudgingly, if at all.

He was sketching possible modifications when a knock at his door interrupted his thoughts. "Come in," he called, expecting to see the maid with another message from his father.

Instead, Faith stood in the doorway, her eyes bright with excitement. "I hope I'm not interrupting? Only I had an idea about the pressure distribution in your grinding mechanism—"

"I'm sorry," Jasper cut her off, more sharply than he'd intended. "I really need to focus on this today."

Faith's expression fell slightly, though she recovered quickly.

"Of course. I understand." She turned to go, then paused. "It's just... I noticed in your earlier designs that the force seems to concentrate at a single point. What if you were to distribute it across multiple smaller contact points? Like a series of smaller grinding heads working in tandem?"

Jasper opened his mouth to dismiss the suggestion, then stopped. The idea had merit. In fact, it might solve several problems he'd been grappling with. He found himself reaching for a fresh sheet of paper, sketching rapidly.

"See here," Faith continued, moving closer to peer over his shoulder. "If you arranged them in a spiral pattern—"

"The force would be more evenly distributed," Jasper finished, his pencil flying across the page. "And with smaller components, the overall strain on each piece would be reduced."

He looked up at her in amazement. "How did you think of this?"

A faint blush coloured her cheeks. "I've been reading about mechanical principles. I thought perhaps understanding them might help me teach basic physics to my students."

She gestured at his sketches. "Though I suppose you have more practical applications in mind."

Jasper continued sketching, his mind suddenly alive with possibilities. The spiral

arrangement Faith suggested created a perfect distribution of force—exactly what his device needed to maintain operation under pressure.

How had he missed something so fundamental? The solution wasn't a stronger single component, but multiple smaller ones working in concert.

"This could work," he murmured, more to himself than to Faith. "The individual components would experience less strain, allowing the entire mechanism to function even under extreme conditions."

He traced a finger along the spiral pattern he'd drawn. "And we could adjust the spacing here to accommodate different types of ore..."

Reality crashed back in. Yes, he had very practical applications in mind—applications his father was counting on. Applications that would finally prove his education hadn't been wasted, that he could contribute something meaningful to the family legacy.

"Thank you for the suggestion," he said stiffly, turning back to his workbench. "But I really must focus on perfecting this design. Father expects results soon, and I can't afford any distractions."

He felt rather than saw Faith withdraw, physically and emotionally. "Of course. Good day, Lord Jasper."

The formal title stung, reminding him of everything he was trying to live up to. After she left, he stared at the sketches they'd made together, seeing how her insight had illuminated problems he'd been struggling with for weeks.

The workshop felt suddenly silent, save for the ticking of the clock on the far wall. Jasper remained staring at the sketch, frustration battling with grudging admiration.

Why was it that Faith Somerton, with no formal education in engineering, could see a solution that had eluded him through seven iterations? Perhaps it was precisely because she approached the problem without the preconceptions his training had instilled.

He picked up the broken component from his earlier test, turning it in his hands. Faith's approach would distribute the pressure in such a way that no single point would bear too much strain. The existing materials might actually suffice if the force were properly distributed.

It was elegant. Efficient. Brilliant, really.

And not at all what his father would expect from him. The Marquess valued traditional approaches, steady improvements to existing methods.

This spiral arrangement would require completely rethinking the mining operation's equipment. Would his father even consider such a radical departure from established practices?

A sharp rap at his door interrupted his brooding. This time it was Lucy, bearing another letter.

"From Lord Ashworth, my lord," the maid said, presenting the envelope with a curtsy.

Jasper's heart leaped. Ashworth was one of the most prominent investors in mining operations across England. His support could change everything.

"Thank you, Lucy," he said, taking the letter. He hesitated, then added, "Did Miss Somerton return to the main house?"

The maid nodded. "Yes, my lord. She went to the library with Professor Somerton." Her expression held a hint of curiosity, but she said nothing more.

Breaking the seal with trembling fingers, Jasper scanned the contents. Lord Ashworth had heard of his work through mutual acquaintances and expressed interest in a demonstration, should the device prove viable.

...your approach to improving mining efficiency while potentially reducing accidents has caught my attention. While I remain skeptical of radical departures from proven methods, I am not so bound by tradition that I cannot recognize genuine innovation when it presents itself...

...would be pleased to attend a demonstration at your earliest convenience, with an eye toward possible investment in further development and implementation...

Here was his chance—a real opportunity to prove himself to his father. He should feel elated. Instead, his eyes kept straying to the sketches he'd made with Faith, to the elegant solution she'd helped him discover.

Lord Ashworth was known to be forward-thinking, more concerned with results than with adhering strictly to tradition. Would he be more receptive to Faith's spiral design than the Marquess? And if so, could Ashworth's support help convince his father of the design's merit?

His father's letter lay on one side of his desk, promising consequences for failure. His collaborative sketches with Faith lay on the other, showing a path to potential success. And there in the middle sat Lord Ashworth's letter, offering hope but demanding results.

Jasper squared his shoulders and pulled the prototype closer. He would incorporate Faith's suggestion—it was too brilliant to ignore—but he would stay focused on his

goal. His father's approval depended on it. Everything depended on it.

And if a small voice in his head wondered whether that was entirely true anymore... well, he had too much work to do to listen to it.

Taking up his tools once more, Jasper began the careful process of modifying his design. He meticulously dismantled the broken mechanism, setting aside components that could be reused and making notes of what needed to be redesigned for the spiral arrangement. His hands moved with practiced precision, finding comfort in the familiar work despite the uncertainty swirling in his mind.

He now had just over a month to prove himself worthy of the Linford name. A month to turn theory into practice. A month to secure his future.

The weight of generations of expectation pressed down on his shoulders, made heavier by the knowledge that he was the third son—the spare of a spare, as his brothers had once taunted. His eldest brother would inherit the title and estates, his second brother the London properties and political connections.

Jasper had only his education and his inventions to distinguish himself.

As he worked, he found himself imagining Faith's voice offering suggestions, asking insightful questions that challenged his assumptions. It was strange how quickly he'd grown accustomed to her presence in his workshop, to her unique perspective that so often complemented his own.

He steadfastly ignored the part of him that wished he could share his excitement about Lord Ashworth's letter with Faith, just as he ignored the way her absence seemed to leave the workshop feeling considerably emptier than before.

Instead, he focused on the task at hand, carefully crafting each component of the

spiral grinding mechanism. By the time the afternoon light began to fade, he had a promising prototype taking shape on his workbench—one that might finally bridge the gap between his father's expectations and his own vision.

One that bore the unmistakable influence of a professor's daughter who saw possibilities where others saw only problems.

Tomorrow, he would test it. Tomorrow, he would see if Faith's insight might help him achieve what had eluded him for so long. And perhaps, if it worked, he would find a way to properly thank her for her contribution—one that honoured both her intelligence and the growing sense that their collaboration was becoming something he couldn't easily dismiss.

But for tonight, he would work until his candles burned low, driven by the competing forces of familial duty, professional ambition, and a new motivation he wasn't quite ready to name.

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Later that week, Faith paused at the corner of Market Street, pretending to adjust her bonnet while carefully scanning the early morning crowds. No one seemed to be paying her any particular attention, but she'd learned to be cautious. After confirming she hadn't been followed, she slipped down the narrow alley that led to Mrs. Henderson's back entrance.

The familiar scent of lavender and beeswax greeted her as she climbed the hidden staircase to the room above the shop. Already she could hear the soft murmur of voices—her students had begun to arrive, using the carefully staggered schedule she'd devised to avoid drawing attention.

A tingle of apprehension mixed with excitement ran through her veins, the same feeling she experienced each time she approached this clandestine classroom.

Every lesson was both a triumph and a risk, each student both a success and a potential danger to their collective secret. Yet the thrill of sharing knowledge, of watching minds unfold like flowers turning toward the sun, made her willing to accept that risk day after day.

She paused briefly at the top of the stairs, taking a moment to compose herself. Through the worn wooden door, Faith could hear Lucy's patient voice sounding out a difficult word. The young housemaid who had once struggled with simple letters was now teaching others. The transformation brought tears to Faith's eyes, and she blinked them away before entering.

"Good morning, Miss Faith!" Lucy whispered as Faith entered.

The young housemaid was helping Mary, a kitchen girl from one of the college's dining halls, practice her letters. Two more girls sat nearby, heads bent over simple arithmetic problems.

The room was modest but tidy, with desks fashioned from old crates and benches that Mrs. Henderson had salvaged from various sources around Oxford. What the space lacked in grandeur, it made up for in purpose.

Pride swelled in Faith's chest as she set down her satchel of materials. In just a few weeks, her small class had grown from three students to six, each one showing remarkable progress despite the constraints they faced.

She remembered their first days—how Lucy had trembled when asked to read aloud, how Mary had apologized repeatedly for her messy figures, how Annie had nearly fled when she couldn't grasp a simple addition problem. Now they worked with quiet confidence, their fear gradually giving way to determination.

"Let's see what you've accomplished," Faith said, gathering their previous day's work.

She'd stayed up late reviewing their exercises, marking corrections and planning today's lessons. The papers were precious proof of their achievements, though they had to be destroyed after review to avoid discovery. This ritual of creation and destruction pained her—each paper represented a small victory that deserved to be celebrated, not hidden away like evidence of wrongdoing.

Faith walked to the window, drawing the thin curtain aside just enough to let in the morning light without exposing them to curious eyes from the street below. The movement caught Sarah's attention, and the bookbinder's daughter looked up from her work with a questioning glance.

"Just checking the weather," Faith assured her with a smile. "It looks to be a fine

day."

Sarah nodded and returned to her calculations. Of all the students, she had taken most naturally to mathematics, displaying an intuitive understanding that sometimes left Faith breathless.

What might the girl have accomplished with proper schooling from childhood? The thought both inspired and saddened Faith.

As Faith moved among her students, checking their progress and offering guidance, she couldn't help but marvel at their determination. These girls fought daily battles just to be here—rising before dawn, inventing excuses for their employers, risking their positions and reputations for a chance at education. Their hunger for knowledge reminded Faith of her own childhood, sneaking into her father's study to read his books when he wasn't looking, listening at doors during his lessons with male students.

"Miss Faith?" Mary's voice trembled slightly.

"I've been practicing my numbers, like you showed us." She held out a carefully folded piece of paper. "I checked the butcher's sums yesterday and found he'd been overcharging us for months."

The girl's eyes shone with a mixture of pride and uncertainty, as though still not quite believing in her own abilities. Faith took the paper, examining Mary's neat columns of figures. Indeed, she had caught a pattern of small overcharges that, added together, amounted to a significant sum.

"This is excellent work, Mary," Faith said, feeling a surge of fierce pride. "Your calculations are precise and your reasoning is sound."

"I didn't tell him straightaway," Mary confessed in a hushed voice. "I was afraid he'd wonder how I knew."

"That was wise," Faith agreed. "Perhaps suggest that your employer noticed the discrepancy?"

Mary nodded eagerly. "Cook already suspects something's amiss with the accounts. She'll be pleased when I help save the household money."

Faith was about to respond when footsteps thundered up the back stairs. Mrs. Henderson burst in, her face pale, wisps of gray hair escaping her usually immaculate bun.

"Quick!" she hissed. "Lady Pembroke's housekeeper is in the shop, asking about her scullery maid!"

The familiar calm of the classroom dissolved into silent panic. The girls scrambled to hide their work, their movements practiced from previous close calls. Young Annie, the scullery maid in question, looked terrified. Her already pale complexion turned ashen, and Faith feared she might faint.

"She'll dismiss me if she finds out," Annie whispered, clutching her primer to her chest as though it were both precious and dangerous. "Or worse, tell her ladyship."

Faith's mind raced as she helped Annie tuck the incriminating book under a loose floorboard. She could see the fear in the girl's eyes—fear not just of losing her position, but of losing this precious chance to learn, to change her circumstances through education.

A familiar anger rose in Faith's chest at the injustice of it all. Why should knowledge be denied to these eager minds simply because of their gender and station?

"Mrs. Henderson, can you tell her Annie's been learning millinery?" Faith suggested, keeping her voice steady despite her racing heart. "That she hopes to advance herself to lady's maid?"

The widow nodded, her eyes showing understanding of the necessary deception. She adjusted her cap and smoothed her apron, transforming back into the respectable shopkeeper before hurrying back downstairs. Faith quickly helped the girls hide all evidence of their true studies, her hands shaking as she gathered papers and books.

Through the floorboards, they could hear Mrs. Henderson's cheerful voice: "Oh yes, such a dedicated girl! She shows real promise with ribbons..."

The conversation continued, muffled but audible. The housekeeper's stern inquiries, Mrs. Henderson's airy reassurances, a moment of doubtful silence, and then finally the sound of agreement. Faith held her breath until they heard the housekeeper leave, apparently satisfied with the explanation.

But the close call left everyone shaken.

"Perhaps we should stop," Annie whispered, tears in her eyes.

"It's too dangerous. If I lost my position, my family—" She broke off, unable to complete the thought, but Faith understood.

For girls like Annie, a position in a good household wasn't just employment—it was survival for themselves and often for family members who depended on their wages.

"No." Mary's voice was surprisingly firm. She looked up from where she'd been collecting her hidden papers, a new resolve hardening her usually gentle features. "I won't go back to not knowing if I'm being cheated. Knowledge is worth the risk."

Faith gazed at her students—these brave, determined girls who risked everything for the chance to learn. She thought of Jasper, working so diligently to create something that could make dangerous work safer. His passion for improving lives through innovation, even if it was partially motivated by seeking his father's approval, spoke to something deeper in him.

"We'll be more careful," Faith assured them. "But Mary's right. Knowledge is power, and you deserve that power just as much as any man."

She looked at each student in turn, meeting their eyes, willing them to feel the conviction that burned in her own heart. "This isn't just about reading books or doing sums. This is about claiming what should be your birthright—the right to understand the world around you, to question, to reason, to improve your circumstances through your own intelligence."

Annie wiped her tears, sitting a little straighter. "But how can we be more careful? They already suspect something."

It was a valid question. Faith had instituted precautions from the beginning—staggered arrivals, fake millinery projects as cover, destruction of written work—but these measures were proving insufficient as their group grew.

"I have some ideas," Faith said, though in truth the beginnings of a plan were only just forming in her mind. "For now, let's continue with today's lesson. The best defense we have is ensuring your progress is worth whatever risk we face."

They resumed their lessons, the routine of learning providing some comfort after the disruption. Faith introduced a new concept in basic geometry, showing how angles and measurements could be applied to practical tasks from sewing to carpentry.

The girls gradually relaxed as they became absorbed in their work, though Faith

noticed how often Annie glanced nervously at the door, how Lucy positioned herself closer to the window where she could watch the alley below.

The incident had shaken them all, forcing Faith to confront the very real dangers her students faced. This wasn't just about defying convention—it was about risking livelihoods, security, and futures. The weight of that responsibility pressed on her shoulders as she moved from student to student, correcting here, encouraging there.

As the lesson progressed, Faith found her thoughts returning to Jasper's workshop. He had shown her his latest designs just yesterday—intricate mechanisms designed to provide early warning of dangerous conditions in mines. The principles behind his work weren't limited to industrial applications. Perhaps, with some adaptation...

The morning passed quickly, and soon it was time for the girls to leave, slipping away one by one with carefully timed departures. Faith watched them go with a mixture of pride and concern.

Mary with her confident stride and growing skills with numbers. Sarah with her natural mathematical ability that might one day rival university scholars, if only she were permitted to develop it. Lucy, who had progressed from struggling student to patient teacher. Annie, still shaken but resolute in her determination to continue.

Faith lingered to help Mrs. Henderson tidy up.

"I've been thinking," she said slowly. "About ways to make this safer for everyone."

The widow looked up from gathering stray papers. "Oh?"

"There's someone—an inventor—who might be able to help. His work is focused on mining safety, but perhaps..." Faith thought of Jasper's clever mechanisms, his attention to detail. "Perhaps some of his principles could be adapted to help protect

our school."

"The young Lord Jasper?" Mrs. Henderson's eyebrows rose. "Are you sure it's wise to involve someone of his station?"

Faith understood her concern. Jasper's position in Society made him both a valuable potential ally and a dangerous confidant. Yet she'd seen how he approached problems, how he genuinely wanted his inventions to help people.

"I believe he could be trusted," she said carefully. "And after today... we need to consider every possible way to protect the girls."

Mrs. Henderson nodded slowly. "Very well. But be careful, my dear. You're risking more than just yourself."

Faith gathered her things, her mind already turning over possibilities. Jasper's latest design, with its system of distributed pressure points, had shown her how mechanical principles could be adapted for different purposes. Perhaps his innovative thinking could help them create better safeguards for the school.

As she made her way back through Oxford's bustling streets, Faith felt the weight of her responsibilities pressing down on her. Yet she also felt a surge of determination. She would find a way to protect her students, to continue their education despite the risks. And perhaps, in seeking Jasper's help, she might show him that there were more ways to make a difference in the world than just earning his father's approval.

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The sharp rap at Jasper's workshop door nearly caused him to drop the delicate gear assembly he'd been polishing. "Come in," he called, carefully setting the piece aside.

Lucy entered, bearing a sealed letter on a silver salver. "From Lord Ashworth, my lord," she said with a curtsy and an expression of curiosity.

Jasper's hands trembled slightly as he broke the seal. His eyes scanned the elegant script, his heart racing. "The gentlemen who wish to invest in my work. They want a demonstration. Next week, if I can manage it."

"That's most excellent news, my lord, isn't it?" Lucy sounded torn between excitement and sympathy.

Jasper's elation faltered. "I'm not sure, to be honest with you. I'm afraid it isn't ready yet. I want to ensure everything is perfect before they see it." He glanced at his workbench, where his mining device sat partially disassembled. "I can't afford any mistakes. Lord Ashworth wants a demonstration before the other investors see it."

After Lucy departed, Jasper returned to his work with renewed vigour. The grinding mechanism had been completely redesigned following Faith's suggestion about distributed pressure points. He had to admit, the solution was elegant—far more sophisticated than his original design.

His eyes strayed to the corner of his workshop where a smaller device sat half-hidden behind some books. He'd been tinkering with it in odd moments, scaling down his mining technology into something that could demonstrate basic mechanical principles. Something that could perhaps help a certain determined young woman

teach physics to her secret students...

"Focus," he muttered, forcing his attention back to the main device. The demonstration for Ashworth could change everything. With his backing, even his father would have to acknowledge the value of his work.

But as he reassembled the grinding head, his mind kept returning to Faith's passionate defence of education for all. He'd found himself looking at his invention differently since their conversations, seeing possibilities beyond its original purpose.

The basic principles that made it effective at breaking through rock could be adapted for other applications. The pressure distribution system could be simplified to teach concepts of force and motion. The gear mechanisms could demonstrate rotational dynamics...

A loud grinding sound snapped him back to attention. He'd almost damaged a crucial component through his distraction.

"This is exactly what Father warns about," he said aloud, though there was no one to hear. "Letting secondary concerns interfere with the primary goal."

And yet... was it really a secondary concern? The more he thought about it, the more he saw how his invention could serve multiple purposes. Yes, it could make mining safer and more efficient, earning his father's approval and securing his future. But it could also open doors of understanding for students who might never otherwise grasp these concepts.

The afternoon light was fading when he finally completed the reassembly. The main device gleamed on his workbench, ready for its final refinements before the demonstration. But instead of the pure satisfaction he'd expected to feel, he found himself drawn to the smaller educational prototype in the corner.

He lifted it carefully, appreciating how the simplified design actually highlighted the elegant mechanics of the original. In some ways, it was a purer expression of the underlying principles he'd been working with all along.

A soft knock interrupted his musings. He turned to find Faith in the doorway, her cheeks flushed as though she'd hurried there.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," she said quickly, "but I've been thinking about what you said regarding mechanical principles, and I wondered if—"

She stopped, her eyes caught by the small device in his hands. "What's that?"

Jasper looked down at the prototype, then back at Faith. He'd been planning to hide it away, to focus solely on preparing for the investor demonstration. It was the sensible thing to do. The safe thing.

But seeing her genuine curiosity, remembering how her insights had already improved his work immeasurably, he found himself holding it out instead.

"It's something I've been working on," he said slowly. "A teaching tool, perhaps. If you'd be interested in seeing how it works?"

The way her eyes lit up made something twist in his chest. "You've been developing this for teaching?"

"Among other things." He set the prototype on his workbench. "My potential investors have requested a demonstration of the main device next week. I'm hoping there might even be a member of the Royal Society in attendance."

"Jasper, that's wonderful!" Her sincere enthusiasm warmed him. "Your father will be so proud."

"He might be," Jasper agreed. "If it works perfectly. Which is why I should focus entirely on preparing for that."

He gestured at the smaller device. "This is just a distraction."

"Is it?" Faith moved closer, studying the prototype with keen interest. "Or is it an evolution? A way to extend the impact of your work beyond a single application?"

Jasper watched her examine the device, her clever mind already grasping its potential uses. He thought of his father's narrow focus on practical results, contrasting it with Faith's broader vision of how knowledge could transform lives.

"Perhaps," he said carefully, "we could discuss how it might be adapted for your students? After I've completed preparations for the demonstration, of course."

Faith's smile was answer enough. As they bent over the prototype together, Jasper felt an unfamiliar sense of rightness. Yes, the demonstration was crucial. Yes, he desperately wanted his father's approval. But perhaps those goals didn't have to come at the expense of everything else that mattered.

For now, though, he would focus on preparing for his important presentation. And if he happened to spend a few evening hours refining his educational prototype... well, even his father couldn't object to efficiency of purpose.

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Two days later, Jasper finally met Lord Ashworth in person.

The clock in Lord Ashworth's study chimed nine as Jasper prepared to take his leave. Their discussion of his mining device had gone well—better than he'd dared hope when he'd received the unexpected invitation to present his work privately before the

official investor meeting.

"Before you go, Linford," Lord Ashworth said, moving to a cabinet near the window. "Perhaps you'd join me in a brandy?"

"I'd be honoured, my lord," Jasper replied, watching as the older man poured two generous measures into crystal glasses.

Ashworth handed one to Jasper, then gestured toward two leather chairs positioned before the fireplace. "Please, sit. There's something more I wish to discuss—off the record, as it were."

Jasper took the offered seat, curiosity mingling with apprehension. Lord Ashworth's reputation as a shrewd businessman was matched only by his influence in industrial circles. His support could make or break Jasper's invention.

"Your device shows remarkable promise," Ashworth said, swirling the amber liquid in his glass. "The distributed pressure system, in particular, is quite ingenious."

"Thank you, sir."

"But what truly caught my attention," Ashworth continued, his voice dropping slightly, "was your mention of potential educational applications."

Jasper tensed. Had he overstepped by sharing those ideas? Would Ashworth now withdraw his interest?

"I noticed you censored yourself almost immediately," Ashworth said with a knowing smile. "A wise instinct in the current climate."

He leaned forward, lowering his voice further. "Between us, Linford, I've long

believed that technical education deserves broader access. My own grandfather was a mine worker who taught himself engineering principles. Had he received proper instruction earlier, who knows what he might have achieved?"

Jasper stared at the older man, scarcely believing what he was hearing.

"However," Ashworth said, his tone becoming more formal, "I must emphasize that such views are not widely shared among our industrial peers. The board of investors backing your device would expect a focus on practical, commercial applications."

"I understand, sir," Jasper said carefully.

"Do you?" Ashworth studied him intently. "Because here is the reality, Linford: to secure the funding your device deserves, you must present it in terms our colleagues can embrace. Industrial efficiency. Profit margins. Return on investment."

"While keeping the educational aspects private?" Jasper ventured.

"For now," Ashworth nodded. "I suspect you've already encountered resistance to these ideas from more traditional quarters?"

Jasper thought of his father's dismissal, the university's raised eyebrows. "Yes, sir."

"Then you understand the delicate position we find ourselves in." Ashworth set down his glass. "Your invention has the potential to save lives in mines across England. That alone justifies whatever diplomatic compromises might be necessary to ensure its implementation."

He stood, signalling the end of their conversation.

"In public forums, I will naturally emphasize the industrial applications of your

device. I would suggest you do the same. What other projects you might simultaneously pursue..." A slight smile crossed his face. "Well, that would hardly be my concern, would it?"

As Jasper rose to leave, Ashworth added, "Progress often requires patience, Linford. Sometimes one must work within existing structures to gradually transform them."

"Yes, sir," Jasper said, understanding dawning. "Thank you for your candour."

"Not at all." Lord Ashworth extended his hand. "I look forward to our official meeting later this week. I trust your presentation will focus appropriately on the commercial benefits of your device?"

"Absolutely, Lord Ashworth," Jasper replied, the weight of unspoken understanding passing between them. "I'll be sure to emphasize the practical aspects that will appeal to our investors."

As Jasper departed into the cool evening air, his mind raced with possibilities. Lord Ashworth's implicit support offered a path forward—narrow and carefully disguised, but a path nonetheless. If he could secure the mining implementation while secretly protecting the educational applications...

A plan began forming in Jasper's mind, one that might allow him to honour both his father's expectations and his deepening commitment to Faith's vision.

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*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am*

"Hold the lamp higher," Faith whispered as she and Jasper made their way through the narrow maintenance passage behind the old library's east wall. The musty scent of ancient stone surrounded them, mixed with the faint trace of machine oil that always seemed to accompany Jasper.

Dust motes danced in the lamplight as Faith consulted the aged parchment map they'd discovered at the reflecting pool. According to their calculations, the marked spot should be directly ahead, behind a section of wall that had once been part of the original library.

"The stonework changes here," Jasper observed, running his fingers along the wall where newer mortar met old. "This section was rebuilt during the renovations."

Faith examined the intersection carefully. "Look at the mortar pattern. It's different—more haphazard, as though it was done in haste."

Jasper tapped the wall lightly, his ear pressed close to the stone. "It sounds hollow beyond this point."

Faith's pulse quickened. "A hidden chamber?"

"Perhaps not a chamber, but certainly a cavity of some kind." Jasper continued his methodical testing of the wall. "Here—this stone is loose."

Together, they worked to wiggle the stone free without damaging the surrounding structure. It came away with surprising ease, revealing a small niche beyond.

Faith directed the lamp toward the opening. Inside lay a small leather-bound book and another folded parchment.

"Your hands are smaller than mine," Jasper said, stepping back to give her access.

With careful movements, Faith reached into the niche and withdrew their discoveries. The book was remarkably well-preserved, protected from dust and moisture within its stone cocoon.

"It's a register," she breathed as she opened it to the first page. "Names and dates from before the papal rejection."

Her finger traced down the list, stopping suddenly. "Jasper, look at this."

He leaned closer, his cheek nearly touching hers as he examined the entry she indicated. "Elizabeth Holloway, Scholar of Natural Philosophy, 1523," he read aloud. "A female student?"

"Not just one," Faith turned the page, revealing more women's names. "Dozens of them, studying everything from mathematics to astronomy. This is proof that women were once formally accepted as scholars at Oxford."

The implications staggered them both. This wasn't just an historical curiosity—it was evidence that could challenge the very justifications used to exclude women from education in their own time.

"And the other document?" Jasper nodded toward the folded parchment.

Faith carefully opened it, revealing an intricate drawing of a rose window with unusual mathematical annotations around its perimeter.

"It's a code of some kind," she said, studying the numbers and symbols. "Mathematical positions, perhaps? Or a key to something larger?"

A sudden noise from the main corridor made them both freeze. Footsteps approached, accompanied by voices.

"—must be somewhere in this section," a man was saying. Faith recognized Professor Reynolds' imperious tone. "The old records suggest architectural irregularities that could indicate hidden spaces."

Jasper quickly doused their lamp, plunging them into darkness. His hand found Faith's in the blackness, squeezing reassuringly as they stood motionless, hardly daring to breathe.

"If there are hidden chambers," another voice responded, "they would be valuable university property. Any artifacts found within would fall under our jurisdiction."

The footsteps paused alarmingly close to their hiding place. Faith could feel Jasper tensing beside her, ready to provide whatever protection might be necessary.

"This wall bears examination," Reynolds said, his voice just on the other side of the stonework. "Arrange for a more thorough inspection tomorrow."

"Yes, Professor."

The footsteps receded slowly, but Faith and Jasper remained still for several minutes longer, their hands still joined in the darkness.

"They're looking for the same things we are," Faith whispered finally.

"But they don't have our map or the clues we've gathered," Jasper replied softly.

"We're still ahead of them."

"For now." Faith carefully tucked the register and parchment into her satchel. "But we need to work quickly. If Reynolds finds the hidden chamber before we do..."

"He won't," Jasper said with quiet determination. "But we should replace this stone and continue our search elsewhere. The rose window drawing must be our next focus."

As they carefully restored the wall to its original appearance, Faith couldn't shake a growing sense of urgency. The treasure they sought wasn't just gold or books—it was proof that could transform the future of education at Oxford. And powerful forces were aligning to ensure such proof remained buried in the past.

Faith's fingers trembled as she traced the faded text on the ancient paper.

"This could change everything," he said softly. "Not just for your school, but for Oxford itself."

"If we can prove its authenticity." Faith carefully turned another page, her heart racing.

"These women weren't just studying domestic arts — there are records of them learning mathematics, astronomy, even engineering principles."

She looked up at Jasper, her eyes shining. "This is why these books were hidden, isn't it? Not just because of religious conflicts, but because they proved women had once been accepted as scholars."

"And someone wanted that forgotten." Jasper's expression hardened as he thought of the threatening notes Faith had received about her school. "The same way no one



wants you teaching now."

Faith was about to respond when a sound from the library above made them both freeze. Footsteps crossed the floor overhead, and dust drifted down from the ancient beams.

"Reynolds again?" Faith mouthed silently. The professor had been asking too many questions lately, about both the old library wing and Faith's activities in town.

Jasper extinguished their candle, plunging them into darkness. Faith clutched the precious volume to her chest, feeling the weight of centuries of hidden knowledge in her arms. They pressed back against the chamber's cool stone wall, barely daring to breathe as the footsteps passed directly overhead.

When the sound finally faded, Jasper relit their candle. The flame illuminated Faith's determined expression as she carefully wrapped the register in oiled cloth before turning back to search the chamber.

Faith continued carefully examining the shelves, running her fingers along the spines of books that hadn't been touched in centuries. At the far corner of the chamber, partially concealed behind a fallen beam, she noticed an ornate wooden box.

"Jasper, help me with this."

Together they moved the beam, revealing an intricately carved chest secured with a tarnished lock. The wood was scorched along one side, as though someone had tried to burn it.

Using one of his tools, Jasper carefully worked on the ancient lock until it gave way with a reluctant click. Inside, nestled among velvet that crumbled at their touch, they found a collection of small leather-bound books and an object wrapped in yellowed

silk.

Faith gently unwrapped the silk to reveal an exquisitely crafted miniature rose made of gold, its petals inlaid with what appeared to be tiny rubies.

"In shadows deep where secrets sleep, 'neath moonlit sky, the roses weep," she whispered, recalling Adriana's poem. "This must be what the clue referred to."

Jasper examined the golden rose with an inventor's precision.

"Look at this," he said, pointing to where one of the petals appeared slightly different from the others.

When he pressed it gently, the rose's centre shifted to reveal a tiny compartment containing a folded piece of parchment.

With utmost care, Faith unfolded the delicate paper. The writing was faded but still legible — a familiar verse followed by what appeared to be a coded message:

Golden tears from roses fall,

Where ancient waters mirror all.

Not in shadows but in light,

When three crowns align by night.

Below the verse was a series of symbols and numbers that made no immediate sense.

"This isn't about the library at all," Jasper said, excitement building in his voice. "The library was just where the clue was hidden. This is pointing to something else

entirely."

"An actual treasure," Faith breathed, her mind racing with possibilities. "Adriana and Ellis were right. There is something valuable hidden somewhere in Oxford."

"Or beyond," Jasper added, pointing to a partial map sketched on the back of the parchment. The landmarks weren't clearly identifiable as Oxford, suggesting the treasure itself might be elsewhere.

Faith carefully placed the golden rose and parchment back in their wrappings.

"We need to document everything in this chamber," she said, her voice steady despite her racing heart. "Not just for the treasure hunt, but for proof that women have as much right to education as men — that we always have."

"And we need to send word to Lady Beaverbrook, and the others," Jasper added. "This confirms the treasure hunt is real, even if we haven't found the final prize yet. Sidney will be thrilled."

Faith nodded, already planning the letter she would write to Adriana. They had found one treasure in these hidden books — proof of women's rightful place in education. But another treasure still awaited discovery, one that might help fund their educational dreams for years to come.

"And we need better protection for your school while we gather that proof." Jasper pulled out his notebook, sketching rapidly. "I've been thinking about adapting my mining device's warning system..."

Faith watched his quick, sure movements as he drew. "Your father won't approve of you using your invention for this."

"My father doesn't approve of most things I do," Jasper said wryly. "But this — this is worth any risk." He looked up from his sketch, meeting her eyes in the candlelight. "Both the treasure hunt and your school. They're connected, Faith. It's all part of the same fight against ignorance and artificial limitations."

Faith felt warmth bloom in her chest at his words. Here was someone who truly understood that knowledge shouldn't be bounded by gender or class — that some treasures were meant to be shared, not hoarded.

"We'll need to be careful moving these books," she said, running her hand along a shelf of leather-bound volumes. "Not just to preserve them, but to protect ourselves. If Reynolds or his allies discover what we've found..."

"Then we'll face that together too." Jasper's hand found hers in the dim light. "We've already proven that the best innovations come from challenging tradition. Why stop now?"

Faith squeezed his hand, drawing strength from his touch. Tomorrow, she would face her students with new conviction, knowing she fought for a right that women had held before and could win again. But tonight, in this hidden chamber filled with lost knowledge, she and Jasper would continue their careful documentation, building a bridge between past and future, between treasure hunt and transformation.

Some revolutions, Faith reflected as they bent together over the ancient texts, began not with battles but with books. And some treasures were worth far more than gold.

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Faith's quill scratched across parchment as she composed her latest letter to Lady Beaverbrook. Outside, rain lashed against the windows of her father's study, but inside, warm lamplight illuminated the golden rose that now sat at the centre of her

desk, its ruby petals catching the light.

My dear Adriana,

I can scarcely contain my excitement as I write these words. The clues you sent have led to a most remarkable discovery. Jasper and I have located a hidden chamber within Oxford's oldest library wing, containing not just the lost texts we sought, but proof beyond imagining that women were once accepted as scholars here.

The records we've found date from before the papal rejection. They document female students studying mathematics, natural philosophy, and even early engineering principles. These texts alone would be treasure enough, but there is more.

Within the chamber, we discovered an ornate box containing the golden rose described in your verse. The craftsmanship is exquisite—medieval, I believe, though Jasper thinks certain aspects suggest later modifications. Most intriguing of all, the rose contains a hidden compartment housing another clue:

"Golden tears from roses fall, Where ancient waters mirror all. Not in shadows but in light, When three crowns align by night."

I'm convinced this refers to the ancient reflecting pool near St. Mary's Chapel. The "three crowns" might indicate the triangular alignment of spires visible from that vantage point, though only at certain times of year.

Has Greta found any reference to crowns or alignments in her research? And what of the symbols accompanying the verse? I've enclosed a copy, though I confess they remain a mystery to me. They appear almost astronomical in nature.

Our work now proceeds along two paths—documenting the educational records for our school's historical foundation, while continuing to pursue the final treasure.

Jasper believes, as do I, that whatever we ultimately find may have been hidden to fund future educational endeavours. Of course, that might be my personal obsessions talking.

Professor Reynolds continues to lurk, seemingly suspicious of our activities. The times grow both more perilous and more promising with each passing day.

I await your insights with great anticipation. Please give my warmest regards to Ellis and all your girls.

Your friend in this grand adventure, Faith

As Faith sealed the letter, a movement at the study door caught her attention. Jasper stood there, hair tousled from the rain, his expression alight with excitement.

"I've been studying the symbols from the parchment," he said without preamble, crossing to her desk and laying down several sheets covered in calculations. "I believe they're coordinates of some kind—using Oxford's ancient buildings as reference points."

Faith examined his work, her pulse quickening. "So if we can determine the correct alignment..."

"And the precise timing indicated by 'when three crowns align by night'..."

"We might find the final treasure," Faith finished, their thoughts flowing together as they so often did now.

"I've been calculating possible dates," Jasper continued. "The alignment of the three tallest spires—what might be called 'crowns'—forms a perfect triangle when viewed from the reflecting pool, but only during certain phases of the moon in late autumn."

He pointed to a specific notation on their map. "According to these symbols, it must be during the first quarter moon, when it rises directly behind the central spire."

Faith checked her lunar calendar. "The first quarter falls on the twelfth of next month—that's barely three weeks away."

"Yes." Jasper's eyes held hers. "And whatever we find, I believe it belongs to your school as much as to Adriana's treasure seekers. It seems increasingly clear that whoever hid these clues intended the treasure to support education—particularly for those traditionally denied access to it."

Faith nodded, thinking of the register of female students they'd discovered, the carefully preserved texts that documented a more inclusive approach to learning than Oxford currently practiced.

"We should inform the others," she said. "Meredith has been researching medieval funding practices that might help us understand what form this treasure might take. And we'll need to coordinate with Adriana's circle about the timing."

Jasper nodded, moving to look out the window at the rain-soaked spires of Oxford. "It's strange to think that centuries ago, someone crafted these clues, preserved these books, created this path for us to follow. What must they have thought, imagining the future scholars who might discover their work?"

"I think," Faith said softly, joining him at the window, "they must have believed that knowledge would eventually find a way—that artificial barriers couldn't hold forever."

Their hands found each other's in the gathering dusk, their shared quest bringing them closer with each discovery.

"Whatever we find," Jasper said, "it can only strengthen what we're already building."

Faith squeezed his hand, thinking of all they had accomplished and all that still lay ahead. Whatever treasure awaited them at the reflecting pool, they had already found something precious in their journey toward it.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am

Faith had to work hard to turn her attention back to her educational endeavours after the excitement of treasure hunting. She turned Jasper's words over in her mind as she arranged simple wooden blocks and rope on the table in Mrs. Henderson's upstairs room.

"The principle of mechanical advantage," he had explained, sketching quick diagrams, "means that even a small force, properly applied, can move great weights."

The conversation had sparked something in her mind—a way to make abstract concepts tangible for her students. If they could see and touch the principles at work...

She tested the makeshift pulley system she'd constructed, satisfied with how smoothly it operated. The regular lessons in reading, writing, and arithmetic had been going well, but she'd noticed how the girls' eyes lit up whenever she incorporated practical demonstrations into her teaching.

"It's rather like you with your father's engineering texts," Jasper had said yesterday, standing close beside her as they prepared the demonstrations.

His voice had dropped lower, meant only for her ears. "That same spark of understanding, of possibilities opening up."

The memory of his nearness, of how his finger had accidentally brushed hers as they arranged the equipment, made her pulse quicken even now. She'd noticed he seemed to find more reasons for their hands to meet lately — passing tools, sharing books, pointing out particular mechanisms. Each touch, though fleeting and proper, seemed to carry more weight than the last.

Lucy caught her wool gathering and gave her a knowing smile. "Lord Jasper's coming to observe again today, isn't he, Miss Faith?"

"The demonstrations are more effective with both of us here to explain them," Faith said primly, though she couldn't quite suppress her own smile.

Lucy had arrived first, as always, her face brightening at the sight of the unusual setup. "What's all this, Miss Faith?"

"Today," Faith smiled carefully, "we're going to see how understanding simple machines can make your household duties easier."

Though she knew, and her students were beginning to understand, that these same principles governed far more than just kitchen tools.

As the other girls filtered in, Faith saw their curious glances at the equipment. Even Annie, still nervous after her close call with the housekeeper, seemed intrigued.

"Watch this," Faith said, once they were all settled. She placed a heavy book on one end of a wooden plank, then demonstrated how placing a small block underneath created a lever. "Now, who would like to try lifting this book with just one finger?"

The demonstration produced exactly the reaction she'd hoped for. The girls gathered around, exclaiming in delight as they each took turns lifting the heavy book with minimal effort. Their excitement grew as Faith showed them different arrangements, explaining how changing the position of the fulcrum affected the force needed.

"But Miss Faith," Mary asked, her brow furrowed in concentration, "how does this help us in our work?"

"Think about it," Faith encouraged. "When you're moving heavy pots in the kitchen,

or lifting loaded laundry baskets—"

"Or trying to shift those enormous flour sacks in the pantry!" Annie exclaimed. "Is that why Mr. Filbert always has us use that rolling pole thing?"

"Exactly!" Faith beamed. "That's another simple machine called a roller. And the principle is the same—"

A sharp rap at the door cut her off. Mrs. Henderson entered, her face tight with worry. "There's a gentleman asking questions in the shop. About why so many young women have been seen coming and going."

Faith's heart stuttered. They'd been so careful about staggering arrivals and departures.

"Did he say who he was?"

"No, but he's dressed like a university man." Mrs. Henderson wrung her hands. "I told him they were all here for millinery lessons, but I'm not sure he believed me."

Faith quickly helped the girls hide the evidence of their true studies, her mind racing. The scientific demonstrations, while effective, were certainly more noticeable than quiet reading lessons. Had their success made them careless?

After the girls had slipped away through the back entrance, Faith stayed to help Mrs. Henderson straighten the room. As she gathered her teaching materials, something caught her eye—a folded paper that must have fallen from one of the books.

Her hands trembled as she opened it. The message was brief, written in a careful hand that suggested disguise:

Your activities encouraging servants above their proper station have been noted. Such disruption of the natural order cannot continue without consequences to all involved parties, including those who employ these individuals.

Faith sank into a chair, the paper crumpling in her grip. All her precautions, all her careful planning, and still they'd been discovered.

"What is it, dear?" Mrs. Henderson asked, noting her distress.

Faith wordlessly handed over the note. The widow's face paled as she read it.

"Perhaps," she said carefully, "it would be wise to suspend the lessons, at least temporarily."

Faith thought of her students' faces today—their excitement as they discovered how simple machines could make their work easier, their pride in understanding scientific principles that had always seemed beyond their reach.

"I can't," she whispered. "They're learning so much, growing so confident. To stop now..."

Mrs. Henderson laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Then we must find a way to protect them better. Perhaps..." she hesitated. "Perhaps that clever young lord of yours might have some ideas about that?"

Faith's mind went to Jasper's workshop, to the innovative ways he approached problems. He'd already adapted his mining technology into teaching tools—might he also have insights about security?

But asking for his help would mean risking his reputation as well. The investor

demonstration was coming up, and he needed to focus on that. Could she really ask him to divide his attention further?

The threatening note seemed to burn in her hands. She had to make a decision: retreat to safer, less noticeable lessons, or find a way to continue pushing boundaries while better protecting her students.

As she made her way home through Oxford's twilit streets, Faith's mind worked furiously. There had to be a way to continue the lessons safely. Perhaps, like the simple machines she'd demonstrated today, it was just a matter of finding the right leverage point—the precise application of force that could overcome even the greatest resistance.

She just prayed she could find it before whoever wrote that note made good on their threat.

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"No, Lucy, look at the shape of the letter." Faith pointed to the page spread before them on the kitchen table. "See how it curves here? That's how you know it's a 'g' and not a 'y'."

The young housemaid bent closer to the book, her forehead furrowed in concentration. "Like in 'good'?"

"Exactly!" Faith beamed. "Now try the next word."

Lucy's finger moved slowly across the page. "M-mor-morning? Morning!"

"Perfect!" Faith squeezed the girl's shoulder.

These dawn reading lessons had become the highlight of her week, even if they had to conduct them in the kitchen while pretending to plan menus.

"Miss Faith?" Lucy's voice dropped to a whisper. "Is it true what Mary says? That you're helping Lord Jasper with his invention?"

Faith tensed. "Where did Mary hear that?"

"She was cleaning near the laboratory." Lucy's eyes were wide. "She said she saw you working with all sorts of complicated machinery."

Faith chose her words carefully. "Lord Jasper has been kind enough to explain some of his work to me."

"Like you explain reading to me?" Lucy smiled shyly. "Because learning shouldn't just be for certain people?"

"Lucy—" Faith started, but the sound of footsteps in the hall made them both freeze.

Quick as thought, Lucy grabbed the household accounts book and opened it over their primer. Faith picked up a pencil just as Mrs. Collins, the housekeeper, entered.

"Discussing the week's marketing, are we?" Mrs. Collins asked, her sharp eyes taking in the scene.

"Yes, Mrs. Collins," Faith said smoothly. "Lucy has such a good head for figures, I've been asking her to help me track the expenses."

The housekeeper's expression softened almost imperceptibly. "Does she indeed?"

She looked at Lucy thoughtfully. "Well, girl, if you're to help with the accounts,

you'll need to learn to write them properly. See that Miss Faith shows you how."

After Mrs. Collins left, Lucy stared at Faith with dawning comprehension. "Did she just...?"

"Give us permission to continue your lessons? In her own way, yes." Faith smiled. "You see, Lucy, change happens slowly, one person at a time. But it does happen."

"Like with you and Lord Jasper?" Lucy asked innocently. "Mary says he looks at you like you're the most fascinating thing he's ever seen, more than any of his machines."

Faith's cheeks took flame.

"The next word," she said firmly, tapping the primer. "Let's see if you can sound it out."

But as Lucy bent over the book again, Faith couldn't help wondering if the housemaid's observation might hold more truth than she'd care to admit.

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Mrs. Henderson stood at her shop window, watching Oxford's evening crowds disperse. The last rays of sunlight caught on pewter buttons and silk ribbons in her display, but her mind was elsewhere, drawn back twenty years by the letter she held in trembling hands.

"You won't believe who's inquiring about millinery apprenticeships now," she said to Faith, who sat with Meredith, cataloguing their growing list of supporters. "Lady Ashworth's sister, Mrs. Hemsworth—the very woman who dismissed me from my position as governess."

Faith looked up sharply. "The one who—"

"Found me teaching her daughters calculus and natural philosophy? Yes." Mrs. Henderson's laugh held more wry amusement than bitterness now, though it hadn't always. "She likely doesn't even remember me. I was just another unsuitable governess, sent away for having ideas above my station."

"Tell me?" Faith set aside her lists, recognizing the rare moment when her usually practical ally might share something of her past.

Mrs. Henderson touched one of the elaborate hats on display—a confection of silk and careful engineering that could support impossible feathers at precisely calculated angles.

"I was young, passionate about education. Like you and Meredith in many ways, though without family connections to offer even minimal protection."

She moved to put the kettle on, her movements precise as she measured tea leaves.

"The position seemed perfect at first. Three bright young girls, a mother who claimed to value education. I thought..." She shook her head at her younger self's naiveté. "I thought if I could show them how mathematics governed everything from music to millinery, how science explained the world around them, they might understand why learning mattered."

"What happened?"

"Their elder brother returned from university. Found them discussing planetary orbits instead of practicing their embroidery." Her voice turned bitter. "He couldn't bear the thought of his sisters understanding concepts he struggled with. Convinced their mother I was filling their heads with dangerous ideas."

"And she believed him?"

"Of course. Much easier to dismiss one governess than question an entire system of education."

Mrs. Henderson poured their tea with steady hands. "I was lucky, really. My aunt had just died and left me enough to buy this shop. Many others in my position weren't so fortunate."

Faith touched her arm gently. "Is that why you agreed to help us? To finish what you started with those girls?"

"Partly." Mrs. Henderson smiled slightly. "Though I must admit, there's a certain satisfaction in using the very skills that got me dismissed—calculations, mechanics, practical physics—to create hats that make their mothers and daughters the envy of Society."

She gestured to her workroom, where complex diagrams showed how to balance weight and tension in increasingly elaborate designs.

"Every hat is a lesson in applied mathematics and engineering. They just don't realize they're learning it."

"Speaking of learning..." Faith pulled out her notebook. "I've made progress with our network. The circulating library's new assistant is sympathetic to our cause. She's been helping direct curious young women toward certain scientific texts—nothing too obvious, just making sure they know which shelves might interest them."

Mrs. Henderson nodded approvingly. "And the printer's widow?"

"Mrs. Barnes? Even better than we hoped. She's willing to help produce educational

materials, disguised as household management guides." Faith's eyes sparkled. "You'd be amazed how much geometry and physics one can hide in discussions of proper table settings and drapery arrangements."

"Clever girl." Mrs. Henderson studied their growing list of allies.

Shopkeepers, servants, tradesman's wives—women who moved invisibly through Oxford's social circles, observing everything. "Any word from your contact at the hospital?"

"Nurse Fletcher has already identified three potential students—young women with quick minds and steady hands who could benefit from proper scientific training." Faith made another note. "She says the doctors never question a nurse's ability to calculate medicine dosages or understand human anatomy when it serves their purposes."

"No, they wouldn't." Mrs. Henderson's voice held decades of observation. "Just as Society never questions a milliner's understanding of geometry and physics as long as it produces fashionable hats."

She straightened her shoulders. "Well then, shall we review the new 'household management' curriculum?"

The three women bent their heads together over Faith's carefully coded notes, plotting how to hide advanced mathematics in discussions of household accounts, basic chemistry in laundry techniques, physics in proper furniture arrangement. Years of working within Society's constraints had taught them how to hide revolution in respectability.

"It's different this time," Faith said softly, watching Mrs. Henderson revise a lesson plan. "What we're building here—it's not just one governess teaching three girls. It's

becoming something larger."

"Yes." Mrs. Henderson thought of Faith's passionate vision, of all the women who'd passed through her shop seeking more than just fashionable hats. "Though we must be careful. Change comes slowly, through small victories and careful preparation."

"Like establishing a respectable millinery shop that just happens to teach young women how to calculate complex angles and force distributions?" Meredith's eyes twinkled.

"Precisely." Mrs. Henderson allowed herself a small smile. "After all, what could be more proper than a shopkeeper teaching practical skills to improve her customers' appearances? If those skills happen to improve their minds as well..."

She gave a nonchalant shrug.

Later that evening, after Faith and Meredith had gone, Mrs. Henderson stood again at her window. She watched a young maid hurry past, mathematics primer carefully hidden in her market basket. A shopkeeper's daughter paused to admire the window display, her eyes catching on the geometric patterns that had first taught her to understand angles and proportions.

Twenty years ago, she'd lost everything for daring to teach three girls that their minds were capable of more than Society allowed.

Now, she was helping build a network that could open doors of knowledge for hundreds. It wasn't the life she'd imagined as a young governess, but perhaps it was something better—a chance to change not just individual lives, but the very fabric of what was possible.

She turned back to her workroom, where tomorrow's students would learn to

calculate complex ratios while pretending to study fashion. Sometimes, she reflected, the most effective revolutions wore entirely respectable disguises.

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Annie stood in Lady Fanbroke's study, trying to keep her voice steady as she explained the problem with the new heating system.

"You see, my lady, the pressure distribution is uneven. That's why some rooms are too hot while others stay cold." She pulled out a small diagram she'd drawn, similar to the ones used in Faith's lessons. "If we adjust these valves according to basic fluid dynamics principles..."

She trailed off, suddenly aware of how far she'd overstepped. A scullery maid shouldn't know about fluid dynamics, shouldn't dare instruct her employer about household systems. Any moment now, she'd be dismissed—

"Fascinating." Lady Fanbroke leaned closer to examine Annie's calculations. "You understand how all this works?"

"Yes, my lady. I've been studying at Mrs. Henderson's... household management classes." Annie held her breath, waiting for the condemnation.

Instead, Lady Fanbroke smiled.

"I've heard about those classes. Very practical approach to domestic science, I understand." She tapped Annie's diagram thoughtfully. "Tell me, could you teach our other staff to monitor these systems? Perhaps prevent expensive repairs in the future?"

Annie's eyes widened. "I... yes, my lady. If you'd permit it?"

"Permit it? My dear, I insist upon it." Lady Fanbroke's eyes twinkled. "Though we'll call it 'advanced household maintenance training' rather than physics lessons, shall we?"

That evening, Annie practically flew to Faith's classroom, bursting to share her news. She found several other students already there, including Mary from the college kitchens, who had her own triumph to report.

"The head cook actually asked me to explain the new temperature control system to him!" Mary exclaimed. "Said he'd never understood how it worked until I showed him using Miss Faith's principles of thermodynamics."

Annie smiled, remembering her own fear when she'd first started classes. Now here they were, not just learning but teaching others, their knowledge spreading through Oxford's households like ripples in a pond.

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Meredith looked up from her library desk to find a young woman hovering nervously nearby. "Can I help you find something?"

"I hope so." The girl glanced around before lowering her voice. "I'm Sarah—I work at the printer's shop? Mrs. Barnes said you might... that is, I've seen some of the books you've been helping publish. The ones about household management that have all those fascinating calculations in them."

Ah. Another potential student. Meredith had been wondering when Mrs. Barnes's coded messages in the practical guides they printed would attract notice.

"You're interested in household calculations?" she asked carefully.

"The mathematics of it, really." Sarah's words tumbled out in a rush. "I've been doing the shop's accounts, you see, and I noticed some of the formulas in those books could help with our inventory management and price calculations. But I don't quite understand all of it yet, and Mrs. Barnes mentioned there might be... classes?"

Meredith smiled, already adding Sarah's name to her mental list. "Why don't you come by Mrs. Henderson's shop tomorrow morning? I believe she's offering a special tutorial on 'practical business mathematics' that might interest you."

Later that week, Meredith watched Sarah join their growing circle of students. The printer's apprentice sat between Elizabeth, a bookbinder's daughter Meredith had noticed lingering over scientific texts in the library, and Jane, a seamstress whose clever mechanical improvements to sewing techniques had caught Faith's attention.

They were an eclectic group—servants and shopkeepers' daughters, maids and apprentices. Each had found their way to the school through different paths: Lucy's careful notes left in strategic places, Annie's growing reputation for understanding household machinery, Mrs. Barnes's coded messages in practical guides, Meredith's library connections.

"The next generation of teachers," Faith murmured, coming to stand beside Meredith as they watched the students work. "Each one will reach others we might never have found."

Meredith nodded, thinking of all the young women like herself who haunted Oxford's libraries and shops, hungry for knowledge they weren't supposed to want. "It's like you always say—knowledge, once gained, cannot be untaught. It can only spread."

They watched as Lucy helped Sarah understand a particularly complex calculation, while Annie demonstrated a mechanical principle to Elizabeth using one of Jasper's teaching models. The quiet revolution they'd started was taking on a life of its own,

passed from student to student, each one teaching others in turn.

"Look," Faith whispered, pointing to where Mary was explaining basic chemistry to Jane using examples from cooking and fabric dying. "They're not just learning the principles we teach them—they're finding new ways to apply them, new connections we never thought of."

Meredith smiled, remembering her own early days of clandestine study with Faith. "That's how it should be. Each generation building on what came before, finding their own paths to understanding."

The afternoon light slanted through Mrs. Henderson's windows, illuminating the scene: women teaching women, knowledge flowing freely between them, each one lifting others up as they climbed. This, Meredith thought, was what real change looked like—not dramatic gestures, but quiet moments of shared understanding, multiplying day by day until the world could not help but transform.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am

The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the courtyard of St. Mary's Chapel as Faith and Jasper carefully examined the ancient stonework. They had spent the morning securing Mrs. Henderson's shop, but Faith had insisted they use the remaining daylight to investigate the first location on their treasure map.

"The verse mentioned 'ancient waters mirror all,'" Faith said, kneeling to inspect the weathered rim of the reflecting pool. "This is the oldest water feature still existing at Oxford."

Jasper ran his hand along the stone edge, his fingers searching for irregularities. "The craftsmanship is remarkable for its age." He paused, his expression sharpening. "Faith, look at this."

She moved to his side, their shoulders touching as they both bent to examine the spot he indicated. There, nearly invisible unless one knew to look for it, was a small carving—a rose with five petals, its centre slightly deeper than it should be.

"It matches the description in your mother's journal," Jasper said quietly.

Faith's heart quickened. She reached into her pocket for the brass stylus she'd brought specifically for this purpose. With practiced care, she inserted it into the centre of the carved rose.

A soft click rewarded her efforts.

"A mechanism," Jasper breathed, his engineer's mind immediately grasping the implications. "After all these centuries, it still functions."

Glancing around to ensure they remained unobserved, Faith carefully slid aside the small section of stone that had loosened. The cavity revealed was shallow, but not empty. A small leather pouch rested within.

With trembling fingers, Faith withdrew it. Inside was not treasure as they might have hoped, but a folded parchment, its edges crumbling with age.

"Another clue," she whispered, carefully unfolding it.

The faded ink revealed not words but a drawing—a floor plan of what appeared to be part of the old library wing, with a particular section marked by a cross.

"It's a map," Jasper said, studying it over her shoulder. "Showing exactly where to look next."

Faith carefully compared it to their own map of Oxford. "This section doesn't match the current layout." She traced the differences with her finger. "The renovation in 1587 must have altered it significantly."

"But the foundation stones would remain the same," Jasper pointed out. "If we can find the original corner points, we can calculate where this marked spot would be in the current building."

Faith carefully refolded the parchment, her mind racing with possibilities. "We're on the right path, Jasper. These aren't just random clues—this is a deliberately laid trail."

"Leading to what, though?" he mused. "And who would have gone to such elaborate lengths to create it?"

"Someone who believed the knowledge they were hiding would someday need to be found again," Faith replied softly. "Someone who trusted future scholars to follow the

intellectual breadcrumbs they left behind."

As they walked back toward the university buildings, Faith couldn't help but feel a kinship with those long-ago academics who had valued knowledge enough to preserve it against all odds.

"We'll need to measure the old foundations," Jasper said, already planning their next steps. "I have tools in my workshop that could help us calculate the exact position."

Faith nodded, grateful once again for his practical approach to their increasingly complex treasure hunt. "And I'll see if my father's archives contain any pre-renovation drawings of that wing."

Their shared sense of purpose warmed her more than the afternoon sun. Whatever they might ultimately find, the search itself was becoming a treasure of its own kind.

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Jasper sat at his workbench, surrounded by the familiar chaos of his workshop, but his attention wasn't on the mining device for once. Instead, he found himself sketching a new design—a simplified version of his grinding mechanism that could clearly demonstrate the principles of rotational force.

He'd overheard Faith explaining basic physics to Lucy yesterday, using an old broom handle to show how leverage worked. The memory of her enthusiasm, the way she'd made complex concepts accessible, had stayed with him.

"What would Father say," he muttered, adding detail to his sketch, "if he knew I was spending my time on teaching tools rather than mining innovations?"

And yet, as he reviewed his latest performance data, he couldn't help but notice how

his work had improved since he'd started considering these broader applications. Explaining the mechanisms to Faith and adapting them for her students had forced him to understand them more deeply himself.

The main device sat partially disassembled on his workbench, its brass and steel components gleaming in the morning light. Beside it lay his notebook, filled with calculations and observations. The numbers were promising—better than he'd initially hoped. The distributed pressure system that Faith had inspired was proving remarkably effective.

He reached for a gear assembly, turning it over in his hands. The same principles that made it efficient at grinding ore could, with some modifications, demonstrate basic mechanical advantages to students who'd never had access to scientific education.

The sound of footsteps in the corridor made him hastily set aside his educational sketches. But instead of Lucy with another message from his father, it was Professor Somerton who appeared in the doorway.

"Hard at work, I see," the professor said, eyeing the various components spread across the workbench. His gaze lingered on the partially hidden sketches of teaching tools. "Though perhaps not entirely on mining applications?"

Jasper felt heat rise in his face. "Sir, I—"

"No need to explain." Professor Somerton picked up one of the simplified models. "You know, when I first began teaching, I discovered something curious. The process of making complex ideas accessible to others often led to deeper insights into the principles themselves."

He set the model down carefully. "I've noticed my daughter seems quite interested in your mechanical demonstrations."

Jasper's heart jumped at the mention of Faith. "She has a remarkable gift for seeing applications I hadn't considered," he admitted.

"Indeed." The professor's expression was unreadable. "And these adaptations you're working on—they're purely theoretical, I assume?"

The question carried weight beyond its surface meaning. Jasper chose his words carefully. "I believe that understanding mechanical principles could benefit anyone, regardless of their... circumstances."

Professor Somerton nodded slowly. "A rather progressive view for a nobleman's son." He paused. "Your father might not approve."

"As the third son, I must make my own way regardless," Jasper said with a wry smile. "At least this way, my work might serve multiple purposes. If I cannot inherit, perhaps I can still contribute something of value."

He picked up his latest educational model—a system of interconnected gears that demonstrated how force could be redirected and amplified. It was elegant in its simplicity, though it had taken several attempts to achieve that simplicity.

"You know," Professor Somerton said thoughtfully, "I've often found that the most valuable discoveries come from pursuing questions beyond our original scope. Sometimes what we think is a distraction turns out to be the key to everything."

With that cryptic comment, he bade Jasper good day and departed, leaving Jasper to contemplate his words.

Turning back to his workbench, Jasper spread out his notes and sketches. The investor demonstration was approaching rapidly, and he needed to focus on perfecting the mining device. But as he reviewed his recent modifications, he realized

that many of the improvements had come from thinking about the mechanism in new ways.

His father wanted practical results—something that would benefit the family's mining operations. But what if the true practical value of his work lay in its versatility? The ability to adapt complex mechanisms for different purposes, to make sophisticated principles accessible to those who'd never had the opportunity to learn them...

Jasper reached for a fresh sheet of paper and began to sketch again, this time combining elements from both his mining device and his teaching tools. Perhaps he didn't have to choose between his father's expectations and these new possibilities. Perhaps, like the gears in his latest model, different purposes could work together, each making the other more effective.

A soft knock drew his attention to the door, where Faith stood with an oddly troubled expression.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," she said, "but I wondered if you had a moment to discuss something rather important?"

Jasper looked at his workbench—at the mining device waiting to be reassembled, at the educational models he'd been developing in secret, at all the evidence of his divided attention.

"Actually," he said, gathering his newest sketches, "there's something I'd like to show you as well."

He might not be able to solve all the tensions in his life, but at least he could share this one achievement with someone who would understand both its practical value and its potential for something more.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am*

Faith arrived at Mrs. Henderson's shop early the next morning, cradling Jasper's latest teaching device carefully in her arms. The mechanical model was deceptively simple in appearance—a series of interconnected gears housed in a brass casing—but Faith had seen the hours of careful thought that had gone into its design.

"He didn't have to do this," she murmured, setting up the device on the worn wooden table. Yet he had, spending precious time away from his mining invention to create something purely for her students' benefit. The thought brought warmth to her cheeks even in the cool morning air.

Mrs. Henderson appeared with her usual pot of tea.

"Another of Lord Jasper's clever contraptions?" She eyed the device with a mixture of curiosity and concern. "Though perhaps we should be more discrete about using such... noticeable teaching aids."

"The girls learn so much better when they can see and touch the principles we're discussing," Faith said, though she understood the widow's worry. Their discreet training sessions had grown again, from six young women to ten in recent weeks, drawn by whispered word of the practical instruction in household management and industrial applications.

Lucy arrived first, as always, followed closely by Mary. Both girls' eyes widened at the sight of the brass device.

"What does it do, Miss Faith?" Lucy asked, moving closer to examine it.

"It demonstrates how force can be multiplied and redirected," Faith explained, her heart warming at their obvious curiosity. "Here, let me show you..."

As more students arrived, Faith guided them through the basic principles of mechanical advantage. Jasper had designed the device brilliantly—each gear could be manipulated independently or in conjunction with others, showing how small movements could create larger effects.

"It's like the kitchen winch!" Annie exclaimed suddenly. "The one we use to lift heavy pots of water. Is that why it doesn't feel as heavy as it should?"

"Exactly!" Faith beamed. "The gears distribute the force, just like—"

A sharp knock at the door made them all freeze. Mrs. Henderson hurried to answer it, returning moments later with a troubled expression.

"Miss Jameson from the bakery," she reported. "Asking if I've noticed an unusual number of serving girls in the neighbourhood lately. Says there's talk about improper gatherings."

Faith's stomach clenched. They'd been so careful about appearances, but perhaps the excitement over the lessons had made them careless. She quickly helped the girls pack away their materials, making sure Jasper's device was well hidden.

After the students had departed, Faith found another note tucked under the doorframe. Her hands shook as she unfolded it:

Your persistence in defying proper social order cannot be tolerated. These unnatural gatherings must cease immediately, or we will be forced to inform the university authorities of your activities. Consider how this scandal would affect your father's position.

The threat to her father struck deeper than any concern for herself. How could she justify risking his reputation? And yet, looking at the careful notes her students had taken, seeing their growing confidence and understanding...

She thought of Jasper, how he'd recognized that his work could serve multiple purposes. He could have focused solely on impressing his father and the investors, but instead he'd seen the potential to help others learn.

A memory surfaced—Jasper bent over his workbench, explaining how he'd simplified the mining mechanism into something that could teach basic principles. "Sometimes," he'd said, "making something more accessible actually improves the original design."

Faith smoothed the threatening note, her mind working rapidly. Perhaps, like Jasper's gear system, there was a way to redirect the force being applied against them. If they could make their activities appear more conventional while maintaining the substance of their lessons...

"Mrs. Henderson," she called softly. "I believe it's time we expanded your millinery business."

The widow looked up from where she'd been pretending to arrange ribbons. "Oh?"

"Yes." Faith's voice grew stronger as the idea took shape. "After all, a proper lady's maid should understand the principles of physics—for maintaining delicate machinery like curling tongs. And arithmetic is essential for managing household accounts."

Mrs. Henderson's eyes brightened with understanding. "A completely respectable endeavour, teaching young women the skills they need to advance their positions in service."



"Exactly." Faith gathered her teaching materials, including Jasper's device. "We'll need to be more careful about appearances, but we won't stop. These girls deserve every chance to learn, even if we have to disguise it as something more... acceptable to Society."

As she made her way home through the bustling streets, Faith barely noticed as her mind was full of plans. She would need to adapt their lessons, perhaps create some sort of display of conventional women's work to maintain appearances. And she would need Jasper's help to design more teaching tools that could pass as standard household implements.

Her heart quickened at the thought of seeking his assistance again. She couldn't deny that their collaborations had become the highlight of her days, that his genuine interest in helping her students meant more to her than she cared to admit.

Another memory surfaced—the way his eyes had lit up when she'd grasped a mechanical principle he was explaining, how his hand had brushed hers as they sketched improvements to his designs. She pushed the thoughts away firmly. She couldn't afford such distractions, not with so much at stake.

And yet, as she clutched his teaching device closer, she couldn't help but wonder if perhaps, like his clever gears, their separate paths might somehow work together to create something greater than either could achieve alone.

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The bell above the shop door chimed early one morning, bringing Mrs. Henderson from her workroom. She found Faith and Meredith engaged in intense whispered conversation with a well-dressed woman they recognized as one of Oxford's more progressive hostesses.

"Mrs. Henderson!" Faith's eyes shone with suppressed excitement, while Meredith's usually composed features betrayed similar anticipation. "Lady Fanbroke has the most fascinating idea about expanding our... millinery training program."

"Indeed?" Mrs. Henderson raised an eyebrow at their visitor.

"My dear Mrs. Henderson." Lady Fanbroke glanced around before lowering her voice. "I understand you've had remarkable success teaching young women certain... practical skills. I wondered if you might consider offering similar instruction to some of my senior household staff?"

Mrs. Henderson exchanged looks with Faith and Meredith, the latter's librarian's eye already calculating the additional resources such an expansion might require.

"What sort of practical skills did you have in mind, my lady?" Mrs. Henderson asked.

"Oh, household management, of course. Nothing improper." Lady Fanbroke's smile held surprising mischief. "Though I understand your methods of calculating household accounts are particularly thorough. And your approach to understanding mechanical principles in domestic machinery is quite... innovative."

Understanding dawned on all three women. Another ally, and an influential one.

Meredith leaned forward slightly, her normally reserved demeanor giving way to cautious optimism. "My lady, might I ask what prompted your interest in our... training methods?"

"Several of my friends have noticed how efficiently your... students manage their households. How quickly they solve practical problems that would once have required calling in expensive specialists." She set down her cup. "We've also noticed how many of these young women seem to understand principles that were considered

quite beyond them before receiving your instruction."

"Proper training in household management requires understanding the principles behind daily tasks," Mrs. Henderson said carefully.

"Exactly!" Lady Fanbroke leaned forward. "Which is why I'm proposing we establish a formal Household Management Training Institute. With proper patronage, of course. Something entirely respectable that couldn't possibly raise eyebrows."

Faith's eyes widened. "You mean—"

"I mean that several of us are prepared to offer financial support and social protection to expand your program. All in the name of improving domestic service standards, naturally."

Lady Fanbroke's expression turned serious. "Some of us remember our own governesses, Mrs. Henderson. Remember being told that certain subjects were beyond our understanding, certain questions improper for young ladies to ask."

Mrs. Henderson felt her throat tighten. "I see."

"Do you? Good."

Lady Fanbroke pulled out a list of names—women of influence who had already pledged their support. "We can't change everything at once. But we can create space for knowledge to grow, protected by the very social conventions meant to contain it."

After she left, Faith, Meredith, and Mrs. Henderson stared at each other in stunned silence.

"Did that really just happen?" Faith whispered.

"It seems," Mrs. Henderson said slowly, "that we're not the only ones who've learned to hide revolution in respectability."

She picked up Lady Fanbroke's list, recognizing several names as former students of governesses like herself—women who had been denied knowledge in their youth now working to make it available to others.

"We'll need to be careful," Faith said. "Balance the advanced instruction with enough traditional content to maintain our cover."

"Yes." Mrs. Henderson smiled, remembering the young governess she'd once been, trying to slip calculus lessons between music practice and embroidery. "But we've had rather a lot of practice at that, haven't we?"

They spent the rest of the morning planning how to expand their network while maintaining its carefully respectable facade. Every new ally brought them closer to their goal of making knowledge accessible to all who sought it, regardless of gender or class.

It wasn't the dramatic revolution Mrs. Henderson had once dreamed of as a passionate young governess. But perhaps this quiet transformation, spreading through Oxford's social fabric like water through soil, would ultimately grow something even more remarkable—a garden of learning that could flourish in the most unexpected places.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am

The medieval section of Oxford's architectural library was deserted at this late hour, save for Faith and Meredith bent over ancient manuscripts spread across the broad oak table. Jasper stood nearby, making rapid calculations based on the rose window drawing they'd discovered.

"If these numbers represent coordinates rather than decorative elements," he mused, "they could indicate precise locations throughout the university grounds."

"Look at this," Meredith said suddenly, pushing forward an aged architectural diagram. "The rose window that once adorned the south chapel. It was removed during renovations, but according to this record, parts of it were incorporated into other structures."

Faith compared the drawing to their coded parchment. "The patterns match perfectly. And see these markings around the perimeter? They correspond to specific buildings on the old campus map."

"Creating a network of connected points," Jasper concluded, tracing the pattern with his finger. "Ingenious. Unless you had both the window design and understood its mathematical significance, these would appear to be mere decorative elements."

Faith felt a surge of admiration for the medieval scholars who had created such an elaborate system. "They weren't just hiding knowledge—they were ensuring it could be found again by those who valued learning enough to follow the clues."

Meredith nodded, her expression serious. "And now we have Reynolds and his allies actively searching. Did you notice the books he requested from the restricted

collection yesterday? All relating to medieval architectural renovations."

"We need to move faster," Faith said, gathering their notes. "The coded coordinates seem to converge here." She pointed to a section of the old library wing on their map. "Behind what's now the theology section."

Jasper studied the location. "That area has unusually thick walls according to these plans. From an engineering perspective, they're over-built for the structural requirements."

"Perfect for concealing a hidden chamber," Meredith concluded.

Faith carefully rolled up their maps and diagrams. "We should examine it tonight. The library will be empty, and Reynolds won't begin his formal inspection until tomorrow."

"Tonight?" Jasper looked concerned. "That's risky, Faith. If we're caught..."

"If Reynolds finds the chamber first, everything we've discovered could be suppressed," Faith countered. "Our school, the evidence about women scholars—it could all be dismissed as fabrication."

"Faith's right," Meredith said quietly. "I've heard whispers among the library staff. Reynolds has been meeting with board members, discussing the 'proper interpretation' of historical findings. Whatever we discover will be controlled by whoever finds it first."

Decision made, they carefully gathered their research materials. As they prepared to leave, Faith noticed a small book that had fallen from one of the shelves during their investigation. Picking it up, she found it was a collection of medieval verses.

Almost by instinct, she turned to the index, searching for references to roses or hidden knowledge. There, listed among the ancient poems, was a line that made her breath catch:

"Golden tears from roses fall, Where ancient waters mirror all, Not in shadows but in light, When three crowns align by night."

"Jasper, Meredith—look at this," she called softly. "The complete verse."

They crowded around, reading over her shoulder.

"When three crowns align by night," Jasper read thoughtfully. "The three spires visible from the old library window?"

"They align perfectly during certain phases of the moon," Meredith noted. "My father once wrote about this astronomical feature in his own research."

Faith quickly checked the lunar calendar posted on the library wall. "Tonight is the first quarter moon!" she exclaimed, then looked up with widening eyes. "According to these calculations, there's a partial alignment tonight—not the perfect alignment we'll see in three weeks, but perhaps enough to glimpse whatever is hidden."

"A preliminary alignment," Jasper said, excitement building in his voice. "The perfect alignment happens on the twelfth of next month, but tonight's position might give us valuable insights—or even reveal the entrance we're seeking."

"Reynolds and his allies won't expect us to try tonight," Faith added. "They'll be watching for activity during the perfect alignment. This might be our best chance to explore undisturbed."

The three exchanged determined looks. What had begun as an intellectual puzzle had

become a race against time and powerful opposition. Tonight's unexpected opportunity might be their best chance to uncover Oxford's secrets before their rivals.

"Let's meet at the old library wing at midnight," Faith said, her voice steady despite the danger ahead. "Bring only what's essential—and tell no one where you're going."

As they parted ways to prepare, Faith couldn't shake the feeling that they stood on the threshold of a discovery that might change everything—not just for their treasure hunt, but for the future of education itself.

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The midnight bells of Oxford had just finished tolling when Faith reached the shadowed entrance of the old library wing. The stone was cold beneath her fingers as she carefully tested the door—unlocked, just as they'd arranged through bribing one of the night porters. She slipped inside, the familiar scent of aged paper and leather bindings now mingled with dust and secrets in the darkness.

"Faith?" Jasper's whisper came from the shadows near the eastern alcove.

His face emerged into a shaft of moonlight as he approached, the silver beam catching on something metallic in his hand—a small brass compass modified with additional dials of his own design.

"Did Meredith make it?" Faith asked, keeping her voice low despite the emptiness of the building.

"I'm here." Meredith stepped from behind a tall bookcase, a rolled parchment tucked under one arm and a shielded lantern in her other hand. "I've brought the original architectural plans. If tonight's alignment reveals anything, we'll need these to make sense of it."



Faith nodded, pulling her mother's journal from her satchel. "According to these notes, we need to position ourselves where the three spires are visible through the rose window in the south transept."

"This way," Jasper murmured, leading them through the labyrinthine stacks.

The rose window loomed above them when they reached the transept, its intricate stonework creating a lacework pattern against the night sky. Through its center, Faith could just make out the three tallest spires of Oxford, their silhouettes ghostly in the moonlight.

"Look," Meredith breathed, pointing upward. "They're beginning to align."

The first quarter moon hung in the sky behind the spires, its light creating a particular angle that illuminated certain sections of the ancient stonework. As they watched, a beam of moonlight slid across the floor, highlighting a particular flagstone that seemed subtly different from those surrounding it.

Jasper knelt, running his fingers along the edges of the stone.

"There's a seam here that doesn't match the others. And look—" he pointed to nearly invisible markings etched into the stone's surface. "These match the symbols from the poem."

Faith's heart raced as she joined him, her fingers tracing the worn markings.

"Golden tears from roses fall," she whispered, glancing up at the rose window where the moonlight filtered through, creating tear-like patterns on the floor. "This has to be it."

Together, they pressed against different sections of the flagstone until they heard a

soft click. The stone shifted slightly, revealing a narrow opening and the first few steps of a hidden stairway descending into darkness.

"It won't be fully revealed until the perfect alignment three weeks from now," Jasper observed, shining his lantern into the narrow gap. "But this is enough to begin our exploration."

Faith exchanged determined looks with her companions before taking the first step downward. The air grew cooler as they descended, carrying the unmistakable scent of old parchment and leather. At the bottom of the stairway, a small chamber opened before them, its walls lined with carefully constructed niches—most empty, but a few still holding leather-bound volumes.

"These must be some of the books hidden during the papal rejection," Faith whispered, her voice trembling with excitement as she carefully lifted one from its resting place.

The leather binding was cracked with age but still intact, protecting pages that hadn't seen light in centuries.

"Medieval theological texts," Meredith confirmed, examining another volume. "Look at these marginalia—these weren't merely religious works, they were scholarly debates."

"But there are so few," Jasper observed, counting the remaining books. "If this was Oxford's lost library..."

"It's only a fragment," Faith agreed, disappointment evident in her voice. "Most of the niches are empty."

As she moved her lantern to examine the empty spaces, something caught the light at

the back of one niche—a small metallic object half-hidden in a crevice. Using her handkerchief to protect the delicate artifact, Faith carefully extracted it.

"It's a key," she breathed, holding up an ornate bronze key with an unusual geometric pattern on its head. "And look—there's something engraved on it."

Jasper held his lantern closer as they all leaned in to examine the tiny script etched along the key's shaft: "Quaerite et invenietis."

"Seek and ye shall find," Meredith translated. "From the Gospel of Matthew."

"But this isn't just a religious reference," Faith said slowly, excitement building in her voice as she traced the geometric pattern on the key's head. "These angles match the alignment of buildings on the old university map. I think this is telling us that what we're seeking—the true treasure— isn't here at all."

"It's somewhere else entirely," Jasper finished, eyes wide with realization. "These books were just the first breadcrumb on a much longer trail."

"A trail leading to what?" Meredith wondered.

Faith carefully wrapped the key in her handkerchief, her mind racing with possibilities.

"I don't know," she admitted. "But I suspect it's something far more valuable than a few rescued books—something worth creating an elaborate puzzle spanning centuries to protect."

A sound from above—footsteps crossing the main library floor—made them all freeze.

"Someone's coming," Jasper whispered. "We need to go. Now."

They quickly gathered the books they'd found and the mysterious key, returning the stone to its place before retreating through the shadowy stacks. As they slipped away into the night, Faith clutched their discoveries close to her chest, knowing they'd found something precious—not just fragments of Oxford's lost library, but the first clue to an even greater mystery waiting to be solved.

Wait until Adriana finds out! Faith nearly squealed with her excitement.

But there were other things they needed to focus on first, she reminded herself even as she followed her friends through the shadows.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am*

Jasper was making final adjustments to his device when Lord Ashworth slipped quietly into the preparation room. The investor meeting was set to begin in less than an hour, and Jasper's hands trembled slightly as he polished the brass fittings one last time.

"Linford," Ashworth said softly, closing the door behind him. "A moment, if you please."

Jasper straightened immediately. "Lord Ashworth. I wasn't expecting you until the presentation."

"Hence my discretion." Ashworth glanced toward the door, then lowered his voice. "I've just come from a rather troubling conversation with your father and several board members."

Something in the older man's tone made Jasper's stomach tighten. "What sort of conversation?"

"The sort that leaves me concerned for your position." Ashworth moved closer, examining the mining device with apparent casualness. "It seems Professor Reynolds has been quite vocal about certain 'inappropriate educational activities' he believes you've been supporting."

Jasper felt the blood drain from his face. "I see."

"Indeed." Ashworth's eyes met his directly. "The Marquess was particularly disturbed by these reports. He's made it quite clear that your continued association with Miss

Somerton and the rumours of her school could jeopardize not only the investment but your standing within your family."

"My father has never approved of my pursuits," Jasper said stiffly.

"This goes beyond mere disapproval, Linford." Ashworth's voice was gentle but firm. "The board is prepared to withdraw support entirely if they perceive any risk of social controversy. Your father seemed willing to support such a decision."

Jasper's hands clenched at his sides. "So I'm to choose between my invention and Faith's school? Between saving lives in the mines and expanding access to education?"

"That appears to be their intention," Ashworth agreed.

He hesitated, then added more quietly, "Though perhaps there might be another way."

Jasper looked up sharply. "What do you mean?"

"The contracts for implementation have already been drafted," Ashworth said carefully. "The language regarding training programs is, shall we say, deliberately broad."

He pulled a folded document from his pocket and handed it to Jasper. "You might wish to review this particular clause before your presentation. Note the phrasing about 'appropriate technical training' and 'household management skills relevant to mining communities.'"

Jasper scanned the paragraph, understanding dawning as he recognized the cleverly ambiguous wording. "This would protect the educational programs."

"If interpreted appropriately," Ashworth nodded. "Once signed, these provisions would be legally binding, regardless of any... public statements that might be necessary to secure those signatures."

Jasper stared at the contract, mind racing. "They would require me to publicly distance myself from Faith's work."

"To satisfy your father and the more conservative investors, yes." Ashworth's expression was grim. "It's an imperfect solution, I grant you."

"Faith would think I'd betrayed everything we've built together," Jasper said, his voice hollow.

"Temporarily, perhaps." Ashworth took back the contract, returning it to his pocket. "The question you must answer, Linford, is whether protecting the work itself is worth that temporary misunderstanding."

The door opened again, and Thompson appeared. "Five minutes until the presentation begins, my lord."

"Thank you," Ashworth replied, then turned back to Jasper. "I must take my place with the board. Whatever you decide, I will respect your choice."

He paused at the door. "For what it's worth, young man, I believe both your causes worthy. Saving lives in the mines and expanding education deserve every effort to preserve them—even if the methods are imperfect."

After Ashworth departed, Jasper stood motionless, the weight of the choice before him nearly unbearable. To publicly deny his connection to Faith's school would wound her deeply, perhaps irreparably. But to refuse would mean the death of both his invention and her school.

Unless...

Jasper pulled out a sheet of paper and began writing hurriedly. If he had to make this impossible choice, he would at least ensure Faith understood the truth eventually. He would find a way to save both dreams, even at the cost of her trust in the interim.

The clock struck the hour. It was time.

Jasper stood before the assembled investors in Oxford's grandest meeting room, acutely aware of how his cravat seemed determined to strangle him. The morning light streaming through tall windows caught the brass fittings of his invention, making them gleam impressively, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

Lord Ashworth sat at the centre of the long table, his expression as unreadable as a granite cliff face. On either side of him, various mining investors and industry representatives maintained similarly stern countenances. These were men who dealt in practical matters—profit margins and production quotas.

"Gentlemen," Jasper began, launching into his carefully rehearsed presentation. "The future of mining lies not in demanding more from our workers, but in providing them with better tools."

As he demonstrated the device's grinding mechanism, he found himself thinking of Annie's face when she'd understood how mechanical advantage worked—how the same principles he was showing these wealthy men could make life easier for a simple scullery maid.

"The distributed pressure system," he continued, "allows for more efficient ore extraction while reducing the physical strain on the operators."



Lord Ashworth leaned forward slightly. "And you've tested this extensively?"

"Yes, my lord. Though on a smaller scale than would be used in actual mining operations." Jasper's mind flickered to Faith's students, using miniature versions of these same mechanisms to understand basic physics. "The principles remain consistent regardless of scale."

"Fascinating," one of the younger investors commented. "Though I wonder about the cost of implementation versus simply hiring more workers?"

Jasper felt a flash of irritation he would never have permitted himself to show a few months ago. "The point isn't just about efficiency," he said, more forcefully than he'd intended. "It's about making dangerous work safer, about using our understanding of mechanical principles to improve lives, not just profits."

A heavy silence fell over the room. Lord Ashworth's eyebrows rose slightly.

"A noble sentiment," he said carefully. "Though perhaps more suited to a university lecture than a business proposition?"

Jasper forced himself back to his prepared points about cost savings and production increases. But his heart wasn't in it. All he could think about was how this technology could be used to teach, to illuminate, to open minds to new possibilities.

"The initial investment would be offset by reduced labour costs within the first year," he heard himself saying, the words feeling hollow in his mouth. Was this really all his work was meant for? Reducing human beings to entries in a ledger?

"And maintenance costs?" another investor asked. "Training requirements?"

"Minimal, as the design emphasizes simplicity and durability." Like the teaching

models he'd created for Faith's students, though he couldn't mention those. "The basic principles are easily grasped once demonstrated."

The questions continued, each one forcing Jasper to reduce his invention to its coldest, most practical applications. Yes, it would increase profits. Yes, it would streamline operations. No, they needn't worry about workers becoming too educated about the principles involved.

After the investors had departed, Jasper sat alone in the meeting room, staring at his invention. He'd spent so long trying to prove himself worthy of his father's approval, trying to compensate for not being the heir, that he'd almost missed the larger possibilities of his work.

Faith had seen it though. She'd looked at his mining device and seen a teaching tool, a way to spread knowledge and understanding. She'd helped him make it better by making it more accessible.

The strange thing was, he no longer cared as much about the investors' decision as he would have a few months ago. Oh, he still wanted the project to succeed—but not just for his father's approval or his own financial security. He wanted it to succeed so he could continue exploring these new possibilities, continue working with Faith to find ways to make knowledge more accessible to those who needed it most.

But where did that leave him? His father's expectations hadn't changed. The pressure to prove himself hadn't diminished. And yet...

Jasper carefully packed away his invention, his mind already working on modifications that could serve both practical and educational purposes. Perhaps, like his gear systems, these different aspects of his life didn't have to work against each other. Perhaps they could actually work together, each making the other more effective.

He just had to figure out how to make his father see that—assuming he even could.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am*

Faith's fingers trembled as she smoothed out the rough draft of her response letter for the tenth time. The words still didn't feel right:

Your threats do not frighten those who seek only to improve themselves through knowledge...

She crumpled the paper with a frustrated sigh. How could she explain the importance of education to someone who saw it as a threat to proper social order?

The sound of footsteps in the college gardens made her look up. Jasper approached through the early evening shadows, his expression concerned. She'd asked him to meet her here, in this secluded corner behind the old library where ancient oak trees provided both shade and privacy.

"Faith?" He stopped a proper distance away, though his eyes searched her face. "Your message seemed urgent."

"It is." She gestured to the stone bench beside her. "Please, sit. I..." She swallowed hard. "I need your help."

He settled beside her, close enough that she could catch the familiar scent of machine oil and leather that always clung to him, but not so close as to be improper. "What's wrong?"

Instead of answering immediately, Faith withdrew the threatening letters from her reticule. Her hands shook slightly as she passed them to him. "These arrived at Mrs. Henderson's shop."

Jasper's expression darkened as he read them. "How long has this been happening?"

"The first came last week. The second arrived yesterday." Faith twisted her hands in her lap. "I've been trying to draft a response, but..."

"No." Jasper's voice was sharp. "Don't respond. It would only confirm their suspicions and give them something to use against you." He studied the letters more carefully. "The handwriting is deliberately disguised, but the paper quality suggests someone of means. Perhaps someone connected to the university?"

Faith nodded miserably. "That's what I feared. If they inform the authorities..."

"Your father's position could be compromised," Jasper finished. He ran a hand through his hair, a gesture she'd come to recognize as indicating deep thought. "Have you told him about the threats?"

"How can I? He's only recently begun to accept my intellectual pursuits. If he knew I was actually teaching others..."

She broke off, fighting back tears.

"I can't risk his career, but I can't abandon my students either. You should see them, Jasper. They're learning so much, growing so confident. Yesterday, Annie used your gear demonstration to explain to her employer why the kitchen winch needed repair. She not only kept her position but earned extra wages for saving them the cost of a mechanic."

Jasper's expression softened. "Your work is making a real difference."

"But at what cost?" Faith stood, pacing in the small space between the bench and the library wall. "I've been trying to find a way to make the lessons appear more

conventional, to disguise them as training for domestic service. But with more students coming..." She stopped, turning to face him. "I don't know what to do."

Jasper was quiet for a long moment, studying the letters. "These threats suggest they don't have proof yet. Just suspicions." He looked up at her. "What if we could make it harder for them to gather evidence? Some sort of... early warning system?"

Faith's heart leaped. "Like your mining safety mechanisms?"

"Similar principles, yes." He pulled out his notebook, sketching rapidly. "We could adapt some of my designs... perhaps something that would alert you to approaching visitors before they could observe anything improper."

"You would do that?" Faith hadn't meant to sound so surprised, but the idea that he would use his precious invention—the key to his father's approval—to help her cause...

Jasper met her eyes. "Of course I would. What you're doing matters, Faith. These girls deserve a chance to learn, to understand the world around them." His voice softened. "And you deserve to teach them without living in fear."

Something in his tone made Faith's breath catch. She sank back onto the bench beside him, closer than before. "But your investors... your father... I know how important their approval is to you."

"It is," he admitted. "But perhaps not as important as I once thought." He showed her his sketch—a clever system of bells and wires that could be disguised as ordinary household implements. "Besides, as Lord Ashworth pointed out, having multiple applications for my work might actually make it more valuable, not less."

Faith studied the design, her mind already seeing how it could be implemented at

Mrs. Henderson's shop. "This could work," she breathed. "Though we'll have to be careful about installation..."

"We?" Jasper's voice held a note she hadn't heard before.

Faith felt heat rise in her cheeks. "I mean... if you're willing to help..."

"I am." He turned slightly to face her, his expression serious. "Faith, what you're doing—it's not just about education. It's about seeing possibilities that others ignore, about finding ways to make the world better despite opposition. I want to help, not just with protection, but with teaching tools, with demonstrations, with whatever you need."

Tears pricked at Faith's eyes. She hadn't realized until this moment how lonely it had been, carrying this burden alone. "Thank you," she whispered.

They sat in companionable silence for a moment, shoulders nearly touching as they bent over his notebook, adding details to the design. The threat of discovery still loomed, but somehow it felt less overwhelming with Jasper beside her, his clever mind already working on solutions.

As the evening bell tolled in the distance, Faith reluctantly gathered her things. But before she could rise, Jasper caught her hand.

"We'll find a way to protect them," he promised softly. "Your students, your father's position, all of it. Trust me?"

Faith looked at their joined hands, then up at his earnest face. "I do," she realized. "I trust you completely."

The weight of that admission hung in the air between them as they parted ways in the

gathering dusk. Faith clutched his sketches close as she hurried home, her mind full of plans and possibilities—and the memory of his hand holding hers, steady and sure in the face of uncertainty.



*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am*

Jasper's candle burned low as he hunched over his workbench, surrounded by scattered drawings and half-assembled mechanisms. The mining device sat neglected in the corner, while his newest invention—a system of carefully calibrated bells and triggers—consumed his attention.

"It has to be silent until needed," he muttered, adjusting a delicate spring mechanism. "Completely unnoticeable..."

The basic principle was simple enough—a series of pressure plates connected to hidden bells that would warn of approaching footsteps. But making it discrete enough to avoid detection while remaining reliable? That was proving considerably more challenging.

His latest letter from his father lay unopened on the desk, its seal gleaming accusingly in the candlelight. There would be questions about his progress with the mining device, demands for updates on the investor meetings. How could he explain that he'd found something more urgent, more meaningful?

The prototype clicked softly as he tested the pressure plate. Too loud—it would draw attention. He needed something quieter, perhaps using the same distributed force principle that had worked so well in his mining device...

"Of course," he breathed, reaching for a fresh sheet of paper. If he adapted the pressure distribution system, spreading the weight across multiple smaller triggers instead of one large plate...

His pencil flew across the page as the design took shape. This wasn't so different

from his mining work, really. Both required careful consideration of force and movement, both aimed to make dangerous situations safer. The only difference was the scale—and the motivation.

A memory surfaced: Faith's face as she described her students' progress, the way her eyes lit up when discussing their achievements. How could he focus on anything else when she and her girls were in danger?

The clock struck midnight, startling him from his work. He'd been at it for hours, missing dinner entirely. Lucy had tried to remind him earlier, but he'd waved the maid away, too absorbed in solving this puzzle.

Jasper stretched, his back protesting the long hours bent over his workbench. The prototype was coming along well, though it still needed refinement. He'd adapted one of his gear assemblies to create an almost silent warning system, using counterweights to maintain perfect balance until disturbed.

His eyes fell on the mining device again. Lord Ashworth would be expecting progress before releasing any funds. His father would be demanding results soon. Everything he'd worked for, everything he'd promised to achieve as the third son determined to prove his worth...

And yet, when he thought of Faith's students—girls like Lucy and Annie, fighting so hard just for the chance to learn—his father's approval seemed less crucial somehow. What good was winning the Marquess's respect if it meant turning his back on those who needed help?

A soft knock interrupted his thoughts. A servant entered, bearing a fresh candle and a concerned expression.

"My lord, a message arrived from your father's steward. He'll be here tomorrow to

review your progress with the mining device."

Jasper's stomach clenched. "Tomorrow?"

"Yes, my lord. He specifically mentioned the importance of having substantial improvements to show, given the investment opportunity with Lord Ashworth."

After the servant withdrew, Jasper stared at his workbench—at the warning system he'd spent days developing instead of refining his mining device. The practical choice would be to set aside Faith's project, to focus on what his father and the investors expected.

Instead, he found himself reaching for his tools again, determined to complete the prototype before morning. He could work on the mining device after, find some way to satisfy his father's demands. But this—protecting Faith's school, supporting her mission—this couldn't wait.

His hands moved surely now, assembling the delicate components with practiced care. Each piece had to be perfect, had to work flawlessly. Faith was trusting him with not just her safety, but the safety of her students, the future of her dream.

As dawn began to paint the sky outside his workshop windows, Jasper held up the completed prototype. It looked innocent enough—just a decorative brass fixture that could be mounted near a door or window. But inside lay an intricate system of triggers and silent alarms, ready to warn of approaching danger.

He began carefully packing it away, intent on showing it to Faith as soon as possible. The steward's impending visit loomed in his mind, along with all the expectations and pressures that came with being the third son of a Marquess. But for the first time in his life, Jasper found himself caring more about something else—someone else—than his father's approval.

The morning sun caught the brass fittings of his mining device, still waiting for crucial improvements. Jasper paused in his packing, the weight of his choices pressing down on him. Everything he'd worked for, everything he'd promised his father...

And yet, as he secured the warning system in its case, he felt more certain of his path than ever before. Some things were worth risking everything for.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am*

Faith's hands trembled slightly as she installed the last of Jasper's warning devices near the shop's back entrance. The brass fixture looked perfectly ordinary—just another piece of Victorian decorative metalwork—but she knew the intricate system of triggers and silent alarms it contained could mean the difference between safety and disaster for her students.

"A little higher on the left side," Jasper suggested softly, reaching past her to adjust the mounting. His presence behind her sent an unexpected shiver down her spine, though she told herself it was merely concern for the task at hand.

The early morning light filtered through Mrs. Henderson's shop windows, casting long shadows across the wooden floors. They'd arrived before dawn to install the devices, wanting everything in place before the day's lessons began. Faith couldn't help but notice the dark circles under Jasper's eyes, evidence of the long nights he'd spent perfecting this system instead of working on his mining device.

"You've risked so much for us," she murmured, testing the pressure plate one final time. The silent signal worked perfectly—a tiny bell in Mrs. Henderson's back room would alert them to any approaching visitors long before they reached the shop.

"Some things are worth the risk." His voice was quiet but firm. "Besides, the principles involved aren't so different from my mining work. It's all about making dangerous situations safer."

Faith turned to face him, struck by the earnestness in his expression. Here was a nobleman's son, someone who could have easily dismissed her efforts as inappropriate or beneath his notice. Instead, he'd spent countless hours adapting his

inventions to protect her students' chance at education.

The sound of footsteps in the alley made them both freeze. A moment later, the warning bell chimed softly in the back room—just as Jasper had designed it to do. Faith felt a surge of relief mixed with triumph. It worked. They would have warning now, precious minutes to hide their true activities if needed.

"Miss Faith?" Lucy's voice called softly from the back door. "Is it safe to come in?"

"Yes, come in quickly." Faith watched as her students began arriving one by one, each triggering the silent alarm system exactly as intended. Their faces lit up at the sight of the day's lesson materials spread across the table—simple mechanical demonstrations Jasper had designed alongside basic arithmetic and reading primers.

As the girls settled into their lessons, Faith found herself watching Jasper. He stood slightly apart, observing how the students interacted with his teaching tools. The pride in his expression when Annie correctly explained a mechanical principle to Mary made Faith's heart twist in her chest.

"You should go," she said reluctantly, aware of how much time he'd already spent here instead of in his workshop. "Your father's steward will be waiting."

Something flickered across his face—concern, perhaps, or resignation. "Yes, I suppose he will be." But he made no move to leave, instead watching as Lucy helped Sarah understand a particularly challenging concept.

"Jasper." Faith touched his arm lightly. "I can't thank you enough for all of this, but I don't want you to sacrifice your own dreams for our sake."

He turned to her then, his expression intense. "What if these aren't separate dreams anymore? What if making knowledge accessible to those who need it most is as

important as any mining innovation?"

The weight of his words hung between them, heavy with implications neither of them quite dared to voice. Faith withdrew her hand, suddenly aware of how improper their closeness might appear.

"You should still go," she said softly. "We'll be safe now, thanks to your invention. You need to focus on your presentation to your father and his steward."

He nodded slowly, gathering his tools. But at the door, he paused. "Faith... whatever happens with the steward today, with my father's expectations... I want you to know that helping with your school has taught me more about what truly matters than all my years of formal education."

After he left, Faith found herself unable to concentrate on the lessons. Her mind kept returning to the choice that lay before her. She could protect Jasper by maintaining a purely professional distance, allowing him to focus on securing his future without the complications of her cause. Or she could acknowledge the growing connection between them, the way their separate paths seemed to be weaving together into something new and unexpected.

That evening, she sat at her desk, a blank piece of paper before her. She had intended to write a simple thank-you note, something appropriately formal and distant. Instead, her pen traced words that came straight from her heart:

My dear friend,

What you have given us is more than just protection—it is hope. Hope that knowledge need not remain locked away from those who thirst for it. Hope that innovation can serve not just profit but understanding. Hope that some dreams are worth any risk...

She stared at the words, understanding finally flooding through her. This was more than gratitude. More than professional admiration. More than friendship.

The question was: what would she do about it?

Faith folded the letter carefully, sealing it with trembling fingers. The choice she made now would affect not just her own heart, but the future of her school, Jasper's standing with his family, and perhaps even the larger cause of women's education that she held so dear.

She held the letter up to her candle flame, watching as the corner began to blacken. One quick motion and she could burn it, maintain the safe distance of formal acquaintance. Protect them both from the complications of deeper involvement.

Instead, she blew out the flame.

Some risks, she decided, were worth taking.



*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am*

The Marquess of Thornfield's arrival at Oxford was heralded not by trumpets or ceremony, but by the sound of expensive boots striking the cobblestones with military precision. Jasper heard his father's footsteps long before Thompson opened the workshop door to announce him, each sharp click making his shoulders tense further.

"Father." Jasper straightened from his workbench, desperately aware of the educational prototypes he'd hastily hidden beneath a cloth moments before. "I wasn't expecting you until—"

"Clearly." The Marquess's sharp gaze swept the workshop, taking in the partially assembled mining device, the scattered papers, the general air of divided attention. "I decided to accompany the steward personally, given the importance of Lord Ashworth's potential investment."

Jasper fought the urge to run a hand through his already dishevelled hair. He hadn't slept properly in days, splitting his time between refining his mining device and creating protection systems for Faith's school. Neither project was as complete as it should be, despite his already installing the device at Mrs. Henderson's.

"The device is showing remarkable progress," he began, moving toward his main workbench. "The distributed pressure system has significantly improved its efficiency—"

"So I see." His father picked up a gear assembly, examining it with critical eyes. "It looks much modified from any previous versions you've shown me."

Jasper's heart stuttered. Had he left one of the educational adaptations mixed in with the main components?

"I didn't think you'd noticed them sufficiently in the past to realize there was any change now. I've been exploring multiple applications," he said carefully. "Lord Ashworth himself suggested that versatility might increase the invention's commercial value."

"Did he?" The Marquess set down the gear with deliberate precision. "And these other applications—they wouldn't happen to involve certain... irregular activities I've heard whispers about? A professor's daughter with unconventional ideas about education?"

Ice slid down Jasper's spine. "Father—"

"You are a nobleman's son," the Marquess cut him off.

"Third son or not, you have obligations to this family. I have indulged your scientific pursuits because you showed genuine talent, and because the mining innovations could benefit our estates. But this..." He gestured dismissively at the workshop. "This dilution of focus is unacceptable."

"The principles are the same," Jasper argued, surprising himself with his vehemence. "Whether used for mining or teaching, it's all about making complex systems more accessible, more—"

"Teaching?" His father's voice could have frozen the Thames. "So the rumours are true. You're not just associating with this girl, you're actively supporting her inappropriate crusade."

"There's nothing inappropriate about wanting to share knowledge."

"There is when it threatens the proper social order." The Marquess moved closer, his presence filling the small workshop. "Do you think I haven't heard about these clandestine gatherings? These attempts to educate serving girls above their station? It's precisely the sort of scandal that could ruin not just your prospects, but our family's reputation."

Jasper thought of Faith's students—their eager minds, their determination to learn despite every obstacle. He thought of Faith herself, brilliant and passionate, fighting for something she believed in despite the risks.

"Perhaps," he said quietly, "some things are worth risking reputation for."

His father went very still. "I had hoped it wouldn't come to this." He withdrew a letter from his coat. "Lord Ashworth is prepared to make a substantial investment in your mining device. Enough to secure your future independently of the family estates. But he requires absolute focus on the commercial applications. No distractions. No... side projects."

Jasper stared at the letter—at the future it promised, the approval he'd sought for so long. All he had to do was walk away from Faith's cause. Pretend he hadn't seen how education could transform lives. Ignore the way his heart lifted every time she looked at him with pride or understanding.

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you will have demonstrated conclusively that you cannot be trusted with serious endeavours." The Marquess's voice was cold. "The choice is yours, but consider carefully. Everything you've worked for hangs in the balance."

After his father left, Jasper stood motionless in his workshop. The letter sat on his workbench like a challenge. Beside it, partially visible beneath the cloth he'd hastily

thrown over them, lay the educational prototypes he'd created for Faith's students.

Moving slowly, he uncovered them. Each piece represented hours of careful thought, not just about mechanical principles, but about how to make knowledge accessible to eager minds that had been denied it. He picked up the latest warning device, designed to protect not just property or profits, but dreams.

His father was right about one thing—everything he'd worked for did hang in the balance. But standing there among his inventions, both commercial and educational, Jasper finally understood that what he'd been working for had changed. The approval he truly valued now came not from investors or even family, but from seeing understanding dawn in a student's eyes. From Faith's smile when he solved a problem in an unexpected way. From knowing his work could make the world better, not just more profitable.

The choice before him was stark: security and social approval on one side, uncertainty and possible scandal on the other. But as Jasper carefully gathered his educational prototypes, he realized it wasn't really a choice at all. His path had been set the moment he'd seen Faith's passion for sharing knowledge, for fighting against artificial constraints on human potential.

He pulled out a fresh sheet of paper and began to write two letters. The first, to Lord Ashworth, respectfully declining his offer as currently structured. The second, to Faith, containing words he'd been too cautious to express before.

Some dreams, he was learning, were worth any sacrifice.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am*

For the third time that week, Faith found herself staring at an empty workshop where Jasper should have been. His tools lay scattered across the workbench as though hastily abandoned, and the mining device sat partially disassembled, exactly as it had been days ago.

Something was wrong. She'd felt it in his increasingly distracted manner, seen it in the way he'd begun avoiding their usual discussions. Even his absence from her morning lessons spoke volumes—he'd never missed observing the students' progress with his teaching tools before.

Faith traced her fingers along the edge of his workbench, noting the layer of dust gathering on some of his educational prototypes. A half-finished warning device lay abandoned beside detailed drawings of improvements they'd planned together. The sight made her chest ache in a way she wasn't quite ready to examine.

"Lord Jasper is otherwise occupied," Lucy had told her when she'd asked after his whereabouts. "He didn't tell me what he was up to, I'm sorry, Miss. But he asked me to ensure the laboratory remained available for your use."

Available, yes, but without Jasper's presence, the workshop felt hollow. Faith had grown accustomed to their easy collaboration, the way his mind worked alongside hers, finding solutions she might never have considered alone. When had his involvement become so essential to her plans? When had he become so essential to her?

The sound of footsteps in the corridor made her heart leap, but it was only a servant passing by. Faith squared her shoulders, making a decision. She couldn't let this

uncertainty continue. Whatever was troubling Jasper, whatever had caused this sudden withdrawal, they needed to address it directly.

She penned a quick note:

Meet me in the college gardens at sunset. Please. We need to talk.

After ensuring it was visible but not too noticeable, leaving it on his workbench, Faith spent the afternoon in a haze of worry and anticipation. She taught her lessons mechanically, grateful that her students were too absorbed in their studies to notice her distraction.

The garden was empty when she arrived, its hedges casting long shadows in the fading light. Faith paced the gravel path, rehearsing what she would say. How did one demand explanations from a nobleman? How could she express her concern without revealing too much of her heart?

"Faith."

She turned to find Jasper standing at the garden's entrance, looking more dishevelled than she'd ever seen him. Dark circles shadowed his eyes, and his cravat was hopelessly crooked.

"You've been avoiding me," she said simply.

He flinched slightly. "I've been... preoccupied."

"Clearly." She gestured to the stone bench beside the hedge. "Will you tell me why?"

Jasper sat heavily, running a hand through his already disordered hair. "My father visited."

Two words, but they carried worlds of meaning. Faith's heart sank. "He disapproves of your involvement with the school."

"Among other things." Jasper's laugh held no humour. "He has offered a significant investment opportunity. One that could secure my future independently of the family estates."

"That's wonderful!" Faith started to smile, then caught his expression. "Isn't it?"

"It comes with conditions." Jasper wouldn't meet her eyes. "Complete focus on commercial applications. No... distractions."

"I see." Faith was grateful for the gathering darkness that hid her face. "And is that what we are? A distraction?"

"Faith, no—" He reached for her hand, then seemed to think better of it. "You have to understand, my father's approval, the family's reputation—"

"I understand perfectly." She was proud of how steady her voice remained. "You need to focus on your future. The school will manage somehow."

"Will it?" Now he did look at her, his expression tormented. "After everything we've built together, can you really go back to teaching in secret, always watching for danger?"

"I managed before."

"But you shouldn't have to!" The intensity in his voice startled them both. "What you're doing matters, Faith. These girls deserve a chance to learn, to understand the world around them. To rise above the limitations Society places on them."

"And you?" She forced herself to ask the question that had been haunting her. "What do you deserve?"

Jasper stood abruptly, pacing the small garden. "I've spent my whole life trying to prove myself worthy of my family name. Everything I've done, every invention, every improvement—it was all to show that the third son could still contribute something of value."

"Your work has value beyond your father's approval," Faith said softly. "I've seen how it changes lives, opens minds, makes the world better in ways that can't be measured in profit."

He stopped pacing, staring at her with an expression that made her breath catch. "That's what I've been thinking about, these past few days. About what truly matters. About what I'm willing to risk for something I believe in."

Faith's heart thundered in her chest. "And what conclusions have you reached?"

"None yet." He smiled sadly. "Though your note demanding explanations certainly clarified some things."

"I didn't demand—" Faith started to protest, then caught the teasing glint in his eye. "Well, perhaps a little."

They shared a moment of fragile humour before reality pressed in again. Faith stood, smoothing her skirts. "You don't have to decide anything now. I understand that family obligations are complicated—"

"Do you?" Jasper stepped closer, close enough that she could see the flecks of gold in his eyes even in the fading light. "Because I'm beginning to think that some obligations might be worth breaking. Some risks worth taking."



Faith's breath hitched. "Jasper—"

"Let me figure this out," he said softly. "Give me time to find a way to make this work. Please."

She nodded, not trusting her voice. As she turned to leave, his hand caught hers.

"Faith?" His touch sent sparks along her skin. "Thank you. For demanding explanations. For making me face what I've been avoiding."

She squeezed his hand once before withdrawing. "Just don't avoid me again. Whatever you decide... we face it together."

Walking back through the darkening college grounds, Faith felt oddly lighter despite the uncertainty ahead. She hadn't realized how much Jasper's withdrawal had hurt until he'd explained it. Now, at least, she understood the battle he was fighting—not just with his father, but with himself.

And if her heart beat faster remembering the way he'd looked at her, the way his hand had felt holding hers... well, that was another complication they'd have to face together.

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Jasper stared at the letter that had just arrived by special courier, the heavy parchment bearing his father's seal seeming to grow heavier in his hands with each word he read.

... cannot continue to support endeavours that bring the family name into question... Lord Ashworth and the other investors have expressed grave concerns... actively undermining proper social distinctions through this so-called "educational initiative"...

The Marquess's elegant script grew more pointed toward the end:

You have until the investor meeting next week to publicly distance yourself from Miss Somerton's radical notions. Your invention shows genuine promise, Jasper, but these distractions have made the investors question your judgment and commitment. Lord Ashworth has made it quite clear—your future prospects depend entirely on demonstrating that you understand the proper order of things.

Make no mistake: this is your final opportunity to secure the position we have discussed. Failure to comply will result not only in the withdrawal of investment but in my personal disavowal of your endeavours entirely.

Jasper set the letter down carefully, though what he truly wanted was to crumple it in his fist. His father had threatened disapproval before, but never so explicitly. This was not merely about the invention now, but about his entire future.

A knock at his laboratory door made him hastily tuck the letter into his coat pocket. Lucy entered, her face full of curiosity.

"A Lord Ashworth's secretary has delivered this, my lord," she said, presenting another sealed letter on a silver tray. "He emphasized that it requires immediate attention."

Alone again, Jasper broke the seal with unsteady hands. Lord Ashworth's message was brief but left no room for misinterpretation:

The board meets at Oxford Hall next Wednesday evening to finalize investment decisions. Your presence is required to address concerns about the practical applications of your invention. I have defended your work most vigorously, but I cannot continue to do so unless you demonstrate that your focus remains on industrial innovation rather than social experimentation.

The mining industry needs your invention, Lord Jasper. Thousands of lives could be made safer by your work. I trust you will make the right choice.

The reference to safety—to actual lives that could be protected—struck him deeply. Wasn't that what had driven him from the beginning? The desire to create something that mattered, that made a tangible difference?

Jasper moved to the window, gazing out at Oxford's spires. Faith would be at the school now, teaching her eager students, opening minds that Society had tried to keep closed. The thought of betraying that work, of betraying her, made his stomach clench.

But if he lost this investment opportunity, his invention might never reach the mines at all. What good were principles if they prevented him from actually implementing the changes he sought?

He wished there was some way to go along with Lord Ashworth's plan without leaving Faith feeling so terribly betrayed. But what good would he be to her without his work?

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:47 am

The library's shadows lengthened as Faith and Meredith hunched over yet another stack of medieval texts. They had commandeered a secluded corner of the cataloguing room, where Meredith's position as assistant gave them some privacy from prying eyes.

The scent of old leather and parchment wrapped around them like a familiar blanket, though today it carried an extra edge of excitement.

"Look at this," Faith whispered, carefully turning a brittle page in the volume before her. "Another reference to the 'Chamber of Wisdom' — that's the third we've found this week. And see how it mentions 'roses weeping in moonlight' again?"

Meredith leaned closer, her spectacles catching the late afternoon light.

"The phrasing is too similar to be coincidence. But what's truly fascinating is the context." She pulled out her carefully organized notes. "Every mention of these chambers appears in texts from just before the papal rejection. Almost as though..."

"As though someone was leaving breadcrumbs," Faith finished. "Creating a way for future scholars to find what they were about to hide."

The two women shared a look of understanding. They had been friends since childhood, united by their hunger for knowledge and their frustration with the artificial barriers Society placed around it. Now, that shared passion might help them uncover something extraordinary.

"Here's what I don't understand," Meredith said, pushing a stray lock of dark hair

behind her ear. "Why hide these texts in the first place? The papal rejection was primarily about religious doctrine, not secular learning."

Faith sat back, considering. "Unless... unless these texts contained something more dangerous than religious disagreement. Something that challenged the very foundations of how knowledge was controlled."

Meredith's eyes widened. "Like evidence that women were once accepted as scholars?"

"Exactly." Faith pulled out her mother's journal, its pages worn from constant reference. "Look at what Mother wrote here about the university's earliest days. She found references to female students in the original charter documents, but those passages were later struck through or removed entirely."

"That would explain why the texts were hidden rather than destroyed," Meredith mused. "Someone wanted to preserve the truth for a time when it might be accepted again."

Faith nodded eagerly. "And not just about women scholars. Look at these margin notes — they mention 'wisdom seekers of all stations.' Mother thought it meant Oxford once accepted students regardless of class or gender."

"Which would completely undermine the current system of restricted access to education." Meredith's voice held a mixture of excitement and concern. "No wonder someone wants these texts to stay hidden. Have you had any more threatening notes?"

"Not since Jasper helped install the warning systems," Faith said. "Though Professor Reynolds still watches the old library wing like a hawk."

Meredith began organizing their findings into neat categories — a habit from her cataloguing work that had proved invaluable in their research. "We need to be systematic about this. If we're right about what these texts contain, we can't risk missing anything important."

She drew out a fresh sheet of paper, creating columns with her precise handwriting.

"Let's map every reference we've found. Physical locations mentioned, symbolic language used, dates of documents..." Her quill moved swiftly. "And most importantly, any mention of previous female scholars or common students."

Faith watched her friend work, grateful once again for Meredith's methodical mind. Where Faith tended to follow intuitive leaps, Meredith could organize scattered evidence into clear patterns. Together, they made a formidable research team.

"There's something else," Faith said slowly, pulling out Adriana's latest letter. "Lady Beaverbrook mentioned hearing rumours about similar hidden chambers at Cambridge. What if this wasn't just about Oxford? What if there was a broader network of scholars trying to preserve knowledge during times of restriction?"

Meredith's quill paused.

"That would explain some of these cross-references. See here?" She pointed to a notation in one of the older texts. "It mentions 'sister repositories of wisdom' at multiple locations. I assumed it was metaphorical, but if there really was a network..."

"Then what we're uncovering isn't just about Oxford's past," Faith finished. "It's about proving that education was once more inclusive throughout England. That the current restrictions are innovations, not traditions."

"Which makes our discoveries even more dangerous to those who benefit from

keeping knowledge restricted." Meredith's expression grew serious. "Faith, if we're right about this, we need to be incredibly careful about how we proceed. It's not just about finding hidden books anymore."

Faith nodded, understanding the weight of what they were undertaking. "We need to document everything meticulously. Create multiple copies of our findings, store them in different locations. And most importantly..."

"Find a way to use this knowledge to effect real change," Meredith finished. "Not just prove that women were once allowed to study, but demonstrate why they should be allowed again."

They worked in comfortable silence for a while, recording their discoveries and cross-referencing different texts. The library's shadows deepened around them, but neither woman noticed the passing time, too absorbed in their task.

"Look at this," Meredith said suddenly. "A passage about teaching methods used for common students. It describes using practical demonstrations to explain complex concepts — almost exactly like what you're doing with Jasper's mechanical models."

Faith leaned over to examine the text. "You're right! And see how they emphasize connecting theoretical knowledge to practical applications? That's precisely what we're trying to do with the technical training program."

"It's as though we're recreating something that was lost," Meredith mused. "Finding our way back to educational principles that were once considered natural before artificial barriers were erected."

A sound from the main library made them both freeze. Footsteps approached their secluded corner, and Meredith quickly covered their most revealing documents with more mundane cataloguing work.

Professor Hawkins appeared between the shelves, his sharp eyes taking in their studious postures. "Still at your cataloguing, Miss Silver? Though I don't recall requesting assistance from Miss Somerton."

"I'm helping with some translations," Faith said smoothly. "Father mentioned that the library needed help with some older texts."

Hawkins' gaze lingered on their carefully arranged papers. "Indeed. How... dedicated of you. Though surely such work could wait for more suitable hours? The light is failing."

"We were just finishing, sir," Meredith said, rising with perfect professional composure. "I'll have the cataloguing completed by tomorrow."

After Hawkins departed, Faith and Meredith shared a speaking look.

"He suspects something," Faith whispered.

"Of course he does," Meredith replied calmly. "Men like Reynolds always suspect when women show too much interest in scholarly matters. But suspicion isn't proof, and we're being careful."

They gathered their materials, each taking a different set of notes to preserve in separate locations. As they prepared to part ways, Meredith caught Faith's arm.

"What we're discovering," she said softly, "it's not just about the past. Every text we find that proves women were once accepted as scholars, every document that shows education was once more inclusive — it's ammunition for changing things now."

Faith squeezed her friend's hand. "We'll find a way to use it. The technical training program is already pushing boundaries. If we can prove that Oxford itself once

supported broader access to education..."

"Then we're not advocating for revolution," Meredith finished. "Just a return to the university's true principles."

They parted ways in the gathering dusk, each carrying precious documents and even more precious hope. The treasure they sought wasn't just gold or books — it was proof that knowledge didn't have to be bound by class or gender, that learning could be a light for all minds to follow.

Later that evening, Faith added their latest findings to her carefully coded research journal. Each discovery felt like another piece of a vast puzzle, slowly revealing a picture of what education could be — what it had been before artificial barriers were erected.

She thought of her students at the technical training academy, of how eagerly they absorbed knowledge once considered beyond their station. Perhaps they weren't so different from the common scholars mentioned in these ancient texts, seeking understanding despite Society's restrictions.

The candle burned low as Faith wrote, recording not just their discoveries but her hopes for how they might use them. Somewhere in Oxford's walls, hidden chambers still waited to be found. And in those chambers lay not just books, but proof that education could be different — that it had been different before.

Faith smiled as she wrote the final lines in her journal. They would find those chambers, recover those texts, and use them to light the way forward. After all, some treasures were worth any risk — especially when they could help unlock minds long kept in darkness.

But first, they needed to decode more of those ancient clues. Tomorrow, she and

Meredith would return to their research, piecing together the breadcrumbs left by long-ago scholars who had faced similar battles. Together, they would uncover not just hidden knowledge, but hidden hope for a future where learning knew no bounds.

The candle guttered out, leaving Faith in darkness. But she didn't mind. Sometimes the best discoveries were made in shadows, and she and Meredith had become quite adept at finding light in unexpected places.

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Faith stared at the latest threatening note, recognition finally dawning. "The handwriting — it's disguised, but look at how the 'F's are formed. I've seen this before. I recognize it not just from the school threats, but from the warnings we received when we started investigating the old library wing."

Jasper leaned closer. "In Professor Reynolds' criticism of my presentation?"

"Exactly."

Faith pulled out the earlier notes from her desk – those threatening her school and those warning them away from the treasure hunt.

"He's been trying to stop both our endeavours from the beginning — the questions about the old library wing, the sudden interest in servant gatherings. Look at how the same phrases appear in both sets of notes – 'disruption of the natural order, 'proper social distinctions'..."

"Because he knew if we found the hidden texts, if we proved that Oxford once encouraged learning regardless of status..." Jasper's eyes hardened. "It would undermine everything he stands for. The lost texts could prove Oxford once embraced broader learning, while your school demonstrates that understanding isn't

limited by class or gender."

When they confronted Reynolds in his office the next morning, he merely raised an eyebrow at their evidence. "Anonymous threatening notes? Really, Miss Somerton. A rather dramatic accusation without proof."

"The handwriting analysis is quite conclusive," Faith said, laying out her careful comparison. " But more interesting is how you chose to threaten us differently depending on which secret you were trying to protect. For the school, you focused on social propriety. For the treasure hunt..."

She pulled out the other set of notes. "You warned about 'dangerous historical irregularities' that should remain buried."

Reynolds' fingers drummed against his desk. "Even if I did write these perfectly reasonable warnings, what exactly do you hope to achieve by confronting me?"

"We thought you might be interested in this." Jasper pulled out two items: the medieval text they'd discovered about spreading knowledge beyond traditional boundaries, and a register showing women had once studied at Oxford. "Historical proof that the university's true tradition was one of inclusion, not exclusion."

"You don't understand what you're meddling with," he said finally, his voice dropping. "Some truths are buried for good reason."

"What reason could possibly justify threatening young women who just want to learn?" Faith demanded.

Reynolds stood abruptly, moving to look out his window at the college grounds below. For a moment, he seemed to be seeing something entirely different.

"My grandmother was brilliant," he said unexpectedly, his voice distant.

"She taught herself mathematics, astronomy, three languages... all while managing her husband's household. She applied to study here under a male pseudonym. When they discovered she was a woman, they didn't just reject her — they publicly humiliated her."

He turned back to face them, something raw in his expression. "The scandal destroyed her family. My grandfather abandoned them. She spent the rest of her life in poverty and obscurity, her mind wasted on mending and cooking."

"And that's why you're trying to stop us?" Faith asked, bewildered. "Because of what happened to your grandmother?"

"Because nothing has changed!" Reynolds slammed his hand on the desk. "Oxford isn't ready to acknowledge women as scholars. Society isn't ready. Your little school, these books you've found — they're dangerous illusions. They'll give these girls hope, make them reach for something Society will never let them have. And when they're inevitably rejected, they'll face the same humiliation, the same destruction my grandmother did."

"Or they'll be the ones who finally change things," Jasper said quietly.

Reynolds laughed bitterly.

"Do you think you're the first idealists to try? There have been others before you. My grandmother wasn't the only one. Their stories were buried, their efforts forgotten."

He gestured at the ancient text. "These hidden chambers you've found — they're proof of previous failures, not encouragement for future attempts."

Faith stepped forward, meeting his gaze directly.

"No. They're proof that the truth can survive even when people try to bury it. Your grandmother's story didn't end with her rejection — it continues through you, through what you know about her."

"What good did knowledge do her?" Reynolds demanded.

"What good would ignorance have done?" Faith countered. "Would she have been happier never knowing what her mind was capable of? Never experiencing the joy of learning, even if it was later denied her?"

Reynolds stared at her, something shifting in his expression.

"You remind me of her," he said finally. "The same stubborn determination. She used to say knowledge was worth any price."

"It is," Faith said softly. "But it shouldn't have to come at such a cost. That's what we're trying to change."

"Those are still irrelevant artifacts," Reynolds said dismissively, though his eyes fixed hungrily on the ancient volumes, his expression flickering between scholarly interest and what appeared to be genuine fear. "Remnants of a disordered time best forgotten. Hardly relevant to modern educational standards."

"On the contrary." Lord Ashworth's voice made them all turn. He stood in the doorway, several distinguished board members behind him. "I believe this proves Oxford has a long tradition of educational innovation. One we intend to continue supporting."

The colour drained from Reynolds' face. "My lords, I was merely trying to maintain

proper—"

"Proper what?" Lord Ashworth cut in mildly. "Proper suppression of knowledge? Proper intimidation of those seeking to learn?" He gestured to the text in Jasper's hands. "Your own predecessors argued against such artificial limitations. Rather effectively, I might add."

"We're not here to demand punishment," Faith said quietly. "Only to show you that what we're doing – both the school and recovering these texts — isn't a threat to Oxford's traditions. It's a return to them."

Reynolds stared at the medieval register showing women scholars for a long moment, his expression conflicted. Finally, he seemed to deflate slightly. "The university board appears to have already made its decision regarding both matters," he said stiffly. "I suppose I must... adapt to changing times."

"Change can be difficult," Lord Ashworth agreed. "But fighting against the spread of knowledge has rarely proven a winning strategy in the long run."

As they left Reynolds' office, Faith felt lighter, as though a shadow had lifted. One more obstacle overcome, one more proof that knowledge, once revealed, couldn't easily be hidden again. The threats to both her school and their historical discoveries had come from the same source – and now that source had been neutralized.

"Rather convenient timing," Jasper murmured to Lord Ashworth, "your arrival with the board members."

"Yes, wasn't it?" Ashworth's eyes twinkled. "Almost as if someone had suggested they might find this morning's meeting particularly illuminating."

Faith squeezed Jasper's hand, grateful once again for their growing network of allies.

The path forward wouldn't be entirely smooth, but they'd faced down one of their strongest opponents and emerged stronger for it.

More importantly, they'd proven that their two quests – recovering Oxford's lost knowledge and creating new opportunities for learning – were really one and the same.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:48 am*

The Oxford library lay quiet in the early morning hours, dust motes dancing in the pale sunlight that filtered through tall windows. Jasper paced between the towering shelves, his father's ultimatum weighing heavily on his mind. The leather-bound volumes surrounding him seemed to watch with silent judgment, much like the portraits of his ancestors at home.

He'd asked Faith to meet him here, in this secluded corner where ancient texts on mechanical engineering shared space with theological treatises. It seemed fitting somehow—their two worlds colliding in this quiet space of learning.

The soft rustle of skirts announced her arrival before he saw her. Faith appeared at the end of the row, her face composed but her eyes betraying concern.

"I was surprised by your note," she said softly, moving closer. "After our conversation in the garden, I thought—"

"I can't do this anymore." The words burst from him with unexpected force. "I can't keep pretending that I'm not being torn in two directions."

Faith's expression softened. "Tell me."

Jasper gestured helplessly at the space around them—the books, the quiet sanctuary of knowledge they'd shared. "My father is insisting on certain behaviour. He will only extend his approval if I toe his specified line. He wants me to completely distance myself from anything that might threaten the family's reputation."

"Including my school." It wasn't a question.



"Including anything that challenges the established order." Jasper ran a hand through his hair, not caring how it must look. "He's arranged everything—connections with other mining operations, a position that would give me independence from the family estates, he's even offered to invest himself. Everything I've worked for, everything I thought I wanted..."

"But?" Faith prompted gently.

"But I can't stop thinking about your students. About how excited they get when they understand a new concept. About how something I created could help them learn, could make their lives better." He met her eyes. "About how watching you teach them has shown me what truly matters."

Faith's breath caught audibly. "Jasper..."

"I know it's selfish of me to burden you with this." He turned away, studying the book spines without seeing them. "You have enough to worry about with the threats to your school, the pressure to conform to Society's expectations. You don't need my family complications added to that."

"Look at me." Faith's voice was firm. When he turned, she had moved closer, close enough that he could see the gold flecks in her brown eyes. "Do you really think I don't understand what it means to be torn between duty and desire? Between what Society expects and what your heart knows is right?"

"That's just it," Jasper said softly. "Being around you, seeing how you fight for what you believe in despite every obstacle... it's changed how I see everything. Including myself."

"And is that such a terrible thing?"

"It is when it means disappointing everyone who's ever believed in me. My father, Lord Ashworth, the investors—they all have such clear expectations. Support the family interests. Focus on practical innovations. Maintain proper social distinctions."

"And what do you want?" Faith asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Jasper stared at her, suddenly acutely aware of how close they were standing, how the morning light caught the copper highlights in her hair. "I want to create things that matter. Not just for profit or family pride, but to make the world better. I want to see understanding light up someone's eyes when they grasp a new concept. I want..." He swallowed hard. "I want to be worthy of your belief in me."

Faith's eyes widened. "You already are."

The simple conviction in her voice shook him to his core. Before he could respond, footsteps echoed from the next row of shelves. They stepped apart hastily as a college servant passed by with an armload of books.

When they were alone again, Faith spoke quietly. "Whatever you decide, know that I understand the cost. I won't think less of you if you choose your family's path."

"Wouldn't you?" Jasper asked, hearing the bitterness in his own voice. "I would."

"This isn't just about the school anymore, is it?" Faith's insight, as always, cut straight to the heart of things.

"No," he admitted. "It's about who I want to be. Who I am when I'm with you."

The weight of everything unspoken hung between them. Faith's hands twisted in her skirts, betraying her own turmoil. "I should go. My students will be waiting."

"Faith." Jasper caught her hand before she could turn away. "I need you to know... whatever I decide about the investment, about my father's expectations... my feelings for you won't change."

She stared at their joined hands, then up at his face. The pain in her eyes nearly undid him. "Sometimes feelings aren't enough," she said softly. "Sometimes we have to choose between what we want and what duty demands."

"And if I'm tired of letting duty decide everything?"

"Then that would be your choice to make." She squeezed his hand once before withdrawing. "But make it because it's what you truly want, not because of... not because of me."

Jasper watched her disappear between the shelves, her words echoing in his mind. The morning sun had risen higher, illuminating the dust motes that swirled in her wake like scattered possibilities.

He pulled his father's letter from his pocket, reading the ultimatum one more time. The path of duty lay clear before him—wealth, respect, his father's approval at last. Everything he'd worked for.

But as he stared at the carefully penned words, all he could see was Faith's face when she watched her students learn. All he could feel was the warmth of her hand in his, the way she believed in him not for his family name or his potential wealth, but for who he was and what they could accomplish together.

For the first time in his life, Jasper understood that sometimes the bravest choice wasn't following the path others had laid out, but forging a new one entirely.

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After following a tidy little maidservant, the Marquess found Professor Somerton in his study one evening, surrounded by the usual chaos of papers and books. He hesitated at the threshold, remembering how often he'd dispatched messengers rather than making such calls in person. But some conversations required a more personal touch.

"Professor." He waited for the older man to look up from his work. "I wonder if I might have a word?"

Somerton's eyebrows rose slightly, but he gestured to a chair. "Of course, my lord. Though I confess, I'm surprised to see you here."

"Yes, well." The Marquess settled stiffly into the offered seat, noting how the leather was worn smooth from years of scholarly visitors. "It's about our children."

"Ah." Somerton set aside his papers, giving the Marquess his full attention. "I assume you're concerned about their association."

"Among other things." The Marquess fought the urge to pace, to release some of the tension coiling inside him. "How do you do it, Professor? How do you watch your child pursue such unconventional paths without..." He gestured vaguely, unable to fully articulate his fears.

"Without trying to force them onto safer roads?" Somerton smiled slightly. "It hasn't been easy. There were many years when I tried to redirect Faith's interests, to protect her from disappointment and scandal."

His expression grew distant. "Her mother would have known better, of course. Catherine always said our daughter's mind was a gift, not a burden to be managed."

"But surely you worry about her future? About how Society will view her pursuits?"

"Every day." Somerton's voice held a quiet certainty that made the Marquess pay closer attention. "But I worry more about what would happen to her spirit if I continued trying to contain it. You've seen her teach, haven't you? The way she comes alive when sharing knowledge?"

"I... no. I haven't."

"Perhaps you should." Somerton's eyes met his directly. "It might help you understand what Jasper sees in her. In their shared vision."

The Marquess shifted uncomfortably. "My son has responsibilities. Expectations. The family name—"

"Will be honoured or disgraced by his character, not his choice of pursuit." Somerton's voice was gentle but firm. "Look at what they've already accomplished together. Not just the mining innovations, but this new way of approaching education and industry as interconnected forces."

"It's not traditional," the Marquess protested, though he could hear the weakness in his own argument.

"Neither was the first steam engine. Neither was Oxford itself, once upon a time." Somerton stood, moving to a shelf lined with ancient texts. "Every tradition we now hold sacred was once a revolutionary idea that someone dared to pursue despite opposition."

He turned back to the Marquess. "The question is: do we want to be remembered as the ones who stood in the way of progress, or the ones who helped guide it?"

The Marquess sat in silence for a long moment, turning those words over in his mind.

Finally, he stood. "You've given me much to consider, Professor."

"That's all any teacher can hope to do." Somerton smiled. "Though if you're truly interested in understanding their vision, I might suggest visiting the school for yourself. Discreetly, of course."

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:48 am

Faith had been staring at the same page of Engineering Principles for nearly an hour when the idea finally struck her. She sat up so suddenly that she nearly knocked over her father's perfectly organized stack of scientific journals.

"Of course," she whispered, quickly gathering fresh paper and a pencil. "It's not about choosing between mining and education—it's about showing how they're connected!"

Her father's study lay quiet in the pre-dawn light, the familiar scent of leather bindings and lamp oil wrapping around her like a comfort. She'd spent countless hours here, secretly absorbing knowledge that Society said she shouldn't want. Now those years of clandestine study might actually help her save everything she cared about.

Faith's pencil flew across the paper as she sketched out her ideas. Jasper's mining device already demonstrated fundamental mechanical principles—force distribution, mechanical advantage, energy transfer. With some adaptations, it could become not just a practical mining tool, but a teaching device that would revolutionize technical education.

"What if," she muttered, adding notes in her precise hand, "the same mechanism that makes mining safer could make learning more accessible?"

She thought of Lord Ashworth's investment offer, of Jasper's father's insistence on practical applications. What could be more practical than a device that both improved industrial efficiency and trained the next generation of engineers and mechanics?

The sound of movement in the hall made her freeze momentarily, but it was only her

father passing by. Through the partially open door, she caught his slight smile as he noticed her working. He'd been different lately—more supportive of her intellectual pursuits, though still cautious about her teaching activities.

Faith returned to her work with renewed vigour. She pulled out Jasper's original drawings, comparing them to educational diagrams from her father's engineering texts. The parallels were striking once you knew to look for them.

"Faith?"

She looked up to find Jasper in the doorway, his expression uncertain. After their conversation in the library yesterday, she wasn't sure he would come when she'd sent her urgent note.

"Come see this." She gestured him over to her father's desk, where she'd laid out her sketches and notes. "I think I've found a way."

Jasper moved closer, his shoulder brushing hers as he bent to examine her work. The familiar scent that always clung to him, along with his nearness, made her heart skip, but she forced herself to focus.

"Look here." She pointed to her adaptations of his design. "Your distributed pressure system—it's perfect for demonstrating mechanical principles to beginners. And these gears?" She flipped to another page. "They could be modified to show different ratios, making abstract mathematical concepts tangible."

"Faith..." Jasper's voice held a note of wonder as he studied her drawings. "This is brilliant. But my father—"

"Would be investing in both industrial innovation and educational advancement." Faith pulled out the proposal she'd drafted. "Think about it: a device that not only

improves mining efficiency but also trains the workers who will use it. Every mining operation that adopts your invention could implement standardized technical education programs. It's not just practical—it's revolutionary."

She watched his face as he read through her proposal, hardly daring to breathe. Everything hinged on this moment, on whether he could see the possibility of merging their separate dreams into something greater.

"The investors would need convincing," he said slowly. "And my father..."

"Is a Marques above all else," Faith finished. "Show him the commercial advantages of workers who truly understand the principles behind the machinery they're using. Show him how this could set your invention apart from every other mining innovation being developed."

Jasper set down the proposal, turning to face her fully. "You did all this for me?"

"For us," Faith corrected softly. "For what we could accomplish together."

The look he gave her made her breath catch. "Faith, I—"

A knock at the study door interrupted whatever he'd been about to say. They stepped apart hastily as Lucy appeared.

"A message from the Marquess, my lord." The maid's expression was nervous and grave as she handed Jasper a sealed letter. "He requests an immediate response."

Faith watched Jasper break the seal, her heart pounding. His face remained carefully neutral as he read, but she could see the tension in his shoulders.

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Faith was growing more and more concerned over Jasper's absence. While they had no mention of an understanding between them, she never would have thought he would disappear without a word to her. He hadn't shown up in the gardens when she had requested that he meet her. She tried to tell herself her heart didn't mind.

Faith had grown accustomed to their easy collaboration, the way his mind worked alongside hers, finding solutions she might never have considered alone.

When had his involvement become so essential to her plans? When had he become so essential to her?

She picked up one of his sketches—a clever adaptation of the mining device for teaching purposes. They had been so excited about it just days ago, finishing each other's thoughts as they refined the design. Now the page felt cold, like a relic of something already past.

The sound of voices from the corridor made her pause. One was definitely Jasper's, and the other—her stomach tightened—sounded like Professor Reynolds.

"—completely understand your position," Reynolds was saying. "These associations can be quite damaging to one's professional standing."

"I've been preoccupied with the practical applications," Jasper replied, his voice carrying that formal tone he used in university settings. "The mining innovations require my full attention at present."

"Very wise," Reynolds approved. "Lord Ashworth will be pleased to hear you're focusing on proper industrial applications rather than... extracurricular activities."

Faith's hand trembled as she set down the sketch.

Extracurricular activities? Was that what he now considered their work together?

"The investors expect a certain level of commitment," Jasper continued, his voice growing clearer as they approached the laboratory door. "One must consider priorities carefully."

Faith moved quickly to the back of the workshop, pretending to examine one of the mechanical models. She couldn't bear to face him while her thoughts were in such turmoil.

The door opened, and Jasper entered with Reynolds. They both stopped short at the sight of her.

"Miss Somerton," Reynolds recovered first, his smile not reaching his eyes. "How unexpected to find you here. I was just discussing with Lord Jasper the importance of maintaining appropriate academic focus during this critical investment period."

Faith forced herself to meet Jasper's eyes, searching for some sign of the man who had worked alongside her with such passion. But his face was carefully composed, any emotion hidden behind a mask of aristocratic reserve.

"I was just leaving," she said quietly. "I wouldn't want to interfere with Lord Jasper's priorities."

Something flickered in Jasper's expression—pain, perhaps, or regret—but he made no move to stop her as she gathered her notes.

"The university community appreciates your understanding, Miss Somerton," Reynolds said smoothly. "These industrial innovations are of the utmost importance to Society."

"Indeed," Faith replied, her voice steady despite the ache in her chest. "Far more important than teaching a few servants to read, I'm sure," she whispered under her breath with sarcasm evident for her own amusement.

She swept past them, head held high, refusing to let Jasper see how deeply the apparent betrayal cut her. But as she closed the door behind her, she caught a glimpse of Jasper's face—and the conflict written there only confused her more.

Why wouldn't he simply tell her what was happening? What pressure had been brought to bear that would make him retreat from everything they'd built together?

As she made her way back into the house, Faith tried to convince herself that there must be an explanation. Jasper wouldn't abandon their cause without reason. He wouldn't betray her trust without purpose.

But as the days passed with no word from him, as whispers reached her about his upcoming presentation to the investors where he would focus exclusively on "practical applications," her certainty began to waver.

Perhaps she had been naïve to believe that a nobleman's son would truly risk his position for the education of serving girls. Perhaps, in the end, tradition and expectation would always prove stronger than the bonds they had formed.

Yet even as doubt crept in, Faith couldn't quite extinguish the hope that there was more to the story than what she could see. The man who had worked beside her, who had designed teaching tools with such care, who had looked at her with such tenderness—he couldn't have been merely an illusion.

Could he?

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The Marquess wasn't entirely sure what had driven him to follow Somerton's suggestion. Yet here he stood in the shadows of Mrs. Henderson's shop, watching through a partially open door as his son's invention was used to teach basic mechanical principles to a group of eager students.

The scene before him defied his expectations. These weren't radical revolutionaries or unruly servants overstepping their bounds.

They were simply young women learning to understand the machinery they worked with every day. A housemaid demonstrated how different gear ratios affected mechanical advantage. A cook's assistant calculated precise measurements for adapting recipes to different scales.

And at the centre of it all stood Faith Somerton, moving between workbenches with quiet authority. She praised correct answers and guided struggling students with equal patience, her explanations clear and practical.

"You see," she was saying, "understanding why the mechanism works this way means you'll know how to maintain it properly. That saves your employers money on repairs and prevents dangerous accidents."

The Marquess watched as understanding dawned on a young woman's face. She adjusted the demonstration model with new confidence, explaining the principle to her neighbour in terms of their daily work.

It was orderly.

Practical.

Thoroughly respectable, despite its unconventional nature. And underlying it all was a sense of purpose that reminded him uncomfortably of his own youth, when he'd

first understood how proper estate management could improve tenants' lives.

He left before anyone noticed his presence, but the scene stayed with him, challenging his assumptions about what education should look like and who deserved access to it.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:48 am

The grand hall of Oxford's Scientific Society buzzed with anticipation.

Faith stood at the very back, partially hidden behind a column, her presence technically allowed but certainly not expected. Most of the gathered audience consisted of university men and potential investors, with only a handful of ladies present—all of them attached to important gentlemen, there to observe rather than participate.

Faith had debated whether to attend at all.

Nearly a week had passed since her uncomfortable encounter with Jasper and Reynolds, and in that time, Jasper had made no attempt to explain his sudden withdrawal from their work together. Rumours had reached her through Meredith's library connections that today's presentation would focus exclusively on the industrial applications of Jasper's invention, distancing it from any "socially controversial" elements.

Still, she had to see for herself what was happening. She had to know if Jasper truly intended to publicly disavow everything they had built together.

Lord Ashworth stood at the front of the room, introducing the afternoon's proceedings.

"Gentlemen, we are gathered today to witness a significant advancement in mining technology—one that promises not only increased efficiency but enhanced safety for operations across England."

Faith felt a flicker of pride despite herself. Safety had always been at the core of Jasper's vision, even before they had begun working together.

"Lord Jasper Linford's invention represents the future of mineral extraction," Ashworth continued, "and we are pleased to announce that the investment consortium has reached a favourable decision regarding full implementation, pending today's demonstration."

The crowd murmured approvingly as Jasper stepped forward.

He looked every inch the nobleman today—perfectly tailored coat, immaculate cravat, his usual dishevelled inventor's appearance replaced by aristocratic precision. Even his voice, when he spoke, carried a formal cadence that Faith barely recognized.

"My lords, gentlemen," he began, "I appreciate your presence and your consideration of my work. The device before you represents years of development, focusing on practical applications for our nation's most important industry."

Faith found herself holding her breath as he unveiled the mining device.

It was the same mechanism she had helped refine, the same system of distributed pressure and carefully calibrated gears they had worked on together. But as Jasper began his explanation, he spoke only of industrial efficiency, of profit margins, and production quotas.

Gone were any references to the educational models they had developed. Gone was any mention of how the same principles could open minds as well as mine shafts. In their place stood cold calculations of investment returns and implementation timelines.

"The primary benefit, gentlemen," Jasper was saying, "is the significant increase in

ore extraction with minimal additional labour costs."

A hand rose from the audience. "Lord Jasper, there have been rumours connecting this device to certain, shall we say, unconventional educational activities. Could you address these concerns?"

Faith's heart pounded as Jasper paused, his expression unreadable.

"I am aware of the rumours," he said finally. "And I wish to make my position entirely clear. This invention was developed for industrial application, and industrial application alone. While mechanical principles can, of course, be demonstrated in various contexts, my focus remains exclusively on practical implementation within established mining operations."

"So you disavow any connection to these unauthorized teaching initiatives?" the questioner pressed.

Faith felt as though the floor were tilting beneath her. She gripped the column for support, waiting for Jasper to defend their work, to acknowledge the value of what they had created together.

Instead, he straightened his shoulders and spoke with devastating clarity:

"Gentlemen, I am an engineer, not an educator. My concern is with improving industrial efficiency and safety, not with disrupting established social conventions. I believe we all understand the proper order of things, and the proper application of scientific advancement."

A murmur of approval rippled through the audience. Faith saw Lord Ashworth nodding in satisfaction, while Professor Reynolds wore a smug smile of vindication.

She had heard enough. Slipping quietly from her position, Faith made her way out of the hall, her vision blurred by tears she refused to shed in public.

How could she have been so wrong about him? How could the man who had held her hand and spoken so passionately about knowledge for all now stand before Oxford's elite and effectively declare that education should remain the privilege of the few?

Outside, the late afternoon sun cast long shadows across Oxford's ancient stones. Faith walked blindly, barely noticing her direction until she found herself at Mrs. Henderson's shop. The classroom upstairs stood empty today—she had cancelled lessons, unwilling to face her students while uncertainty clouded her own future.

Mrs. Henderson took one look at her face and quietly ushered her up to the empty classroom, pressing a cup of tea into her hands before withdrawing to give her privacy.

Faith stood by the window, looking out at the city that had simultaneously nurtured and constrained her all her life.

The spires of the university reached skyward, beautiful and forbidden. She had thought, perhaps, that Jasper understood what it meant to love something you weren't supposed to want—to see possibilities others denied. She had thought they were building something together that transcended those constraints.

How foolish she had been, to believe that a nobleman's son would risk his position for serving girls learning to read. How naïve to think that their shared vision could withstand the pressure of tradition and expectation.

The mining device would be implemented. Lives would be saved, efficiency improved. That was good, necessary work—she couldn't deny it. But the other half of their dream, the educational components, the belief that knowledge shouldn't be

bounded by class or gender... that, apparently, had been expendable.

Faith set down her untouched tea and moved to the workbench where her students practiced with Jasper's teaching models. She ran her fingers across the brass fittings, remembering how his hands had looked crafting each piece with such care. Had it all been an act? A temporary intellectual diversion before returning to his proper place?

No. She couldn't believe that everything between them had been false.

The sudden realization struck her with unexpected force—she had fallen in love with him. When had that happened?

The man who had looked at her with such open admiration for her mind, who had worked alongside her with such genuine passion—that man had been real.

And somewhere along the way, between heated discussions of mechanical principles and shared dreams of education, her feelings had deepened into something she hadn't dared name until now.

But that just made his betrayal all the more incomprehensible. And all the more painful.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. She turned, expecting Mrs. Henderson, but found her father instead.

"I heard," Professor Somerton said simply, crossing the room to stand beside her at the window. "I was there."

"Then you heard him disavow everything we've worked for," Faith said, her voice remarkably steady despite the storm inside her. "Everything we believed in."

"I did," her father agreed. "Though I confess, I found it rather unexpected, given what I know of the young man."

Faith turned to look at him. "What do you mean?"

Professor Somerton studied her face for a moment before responding.

"Only that Lord Jasper has never struck me as someone who would abandon his convictions so easily. One wonders what pressures might have been brought to bear."

"That doesn't excuse betrayal," Faith said, the word tasting bitter on her tongue.

"No," her father agreed. "But it might explain it."

He paused, choosing his words carefully. "Your mother once told me that when people act contrary to their nature, it's usually because they believe they have no choice."

Faith shook her head. "There's always a choice."

"Is there?" Her father's gaze was gentle but penetrating. "If you had to choose between the school and saving lives in the mines, what would you do?"

The question struck her like a physical blow. "That's not fair."

"Perhaps not. But life rarely presents us with simple choices, my dear." Professor Somerton touched her shoulder lightly. "I'm not saying you should forgive what you perceive as betrayal. Only that you might consider whether there's more to the story than what you witnessed today."

He turned to leave, pausing at the door. "He came to see me yesterday, you know. He

seemed... troubled. Said there were things he couldn't explain yet, decisions that might seem incomprehensible."

"And what did you tell him?" Faith asked, her voice barely audible.

"I told him that true partnerships can withstand even the most difficult tests, provided there is honesty between them in the end." Professor Somerton smiled sadly. "Your mother taught me that, though it took me far too long to understand."

After he left, Faith remained at the window, watching as Oxford's shadows lengthened across the cobblestones. Her father's words echoed in her mind, along with the memory of Jasper's face during the presentation—controlled, formal, yet somehow strained around the eyes.

Had there been something she missed? Some explanation beyond simple capitulation to his father's demands and Society's expectations?

She didn't know. And without Jasper breaking his silence, she couldn't know. The uncertainty was almost worse than the betrayal itself—this lingering hope that somehow, there might be a reason that would make sense of everything.

But hope was a dangerous thing when built on such fragile foundations. And Faith had a school to run, students who depended on her, a mission that existed independently of Jasper Linford's involvement.

If he had chosen his path, then she would continue on hers—with or without him.

The thought made her chest ache anew.

She had grown so accustomed to working alongside him, to the particular rhythm they had established together. How strange to think she would need to learn to work

alone again, to think of him only as Lord Jasper, the inventor, rather than her partner in building something extraordinary.

As darkness fell over Oxford, Faith gathered her materials and prepared to leave. Tomorrow, lessons would resume. Life would continue. The work mattered too much to abandon, even with a broken heart.

She paused at the door, looking back at the classroom they had built together. Whatever came next, she would face it with the same determination that had carried her through years of secret study and forbidden learning.

That, at least, was something Jasper Linford could never take from her.

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The silence that followed Jasper's declaration seemed to stretch forever. The weight of what he had just done—publicly disavowing the educational work he and Faith had built together—settled on his shoulders like a physical burden.

Then Lord Ashworth began to laugh.

"My dear boy," he said, rising to his feet, "you've finally shown the good sense we expected of you. The mining industry has no business entangling itself with these questionable educational experiments."

He turned to address the room. "Gentlemen, I believe we can now proceed with confidence that Lord Jasper understands the proper application of his talents."

The investors nodded approvingly, their expressions clearing as they realized the potential social controversy had been neatly averted. The Marquess remained rigid, but Jasper could see the slight relaxation in his father's shoulders—the first sign of approval he'd shown in years.

"If I may?" Professor Reynolds stepped forward, his voice carrying that smug tone Jasper had come to despise. "I think we can all appreciate Lord Jasper's return to reason. The university community is pleased to see proper focus restored to this promising industrial innovation."

Jasper's hand clenched at his side, the phantom warmth of Faith's fingers still lingering on his skin. He forced himself to nod graciously as Lord Ashworth moved to examine the mining device more closely.

"The engineering principles are sound," Ashworth mused, testing the mechanism. "And the practical applications for industrial efficiency are most promising. I propose we move forward with implementation immediately."

The wave of discussion that followed was enthusiastically positive, but Jasper barely heard it over the pounding in his head.

He searched the back of the room, hoping against hope to catch a glimpse of Faith, but she was gone. Of course she was gone. He had betrayed everything they stood for, everything they had built together.

His father approached, actually placing a hand on Jasper's shoulder—a gesture so rare that Jasper nearly flinched in surprise.

"You made the right choice," the Marquess said, his voice low. "Some dreams must be sacrificed for the greater good. The device will save lives, improve our operations. That's what truly matters."

"Yes, Father," Jasper replied automatically, the words tasting like ash in his mouth.

As the investors gathered around to discuss implementation plans, Jasper felt utterly alone despite the crowd. His arm ached with the absence of Faith beside him, the space where she should have been standing glaringly empty.

I've done it, he thought bitterly. I've finally won my father's approval, secured the future of my invention.

But the victory felt hollow, meaningless without Faith's brilliance beside him, without her vision expanding his own.

Throughout the rest of the presentation, Jasper moved mechanically, demonstrating

components with practiced precision while his mind reeled with what he had sacrificed. Each time he reached to adjust the mechanism, he half-expected Faith's hand to meet his, only to feel the cold emptiness where her touch should have been.

Earlier, he had caught Professor Somerton's eye across the room. The older man's gaze held not anger but something worse—disappointment, and perhaps pity. Jasper had looked away quickly, unable to face the silent judgment from the father of the woman he had betrayed. Now, Professor Somerton no longer appeared to be present. Where had he gone?

The inventors and investors continued their excited discussion around him, but Jasper had never felt more isolated. He had saved his invention, but at what cost? The thought of Faith's face when she heard his public denial of their work made his stomach twist with shame.

"You've made the practical choice," he told himself, echoing his father's words.

But for the first time in his life, Jasper wondered if practicality was worth the price of his soul.

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Faith sorted through the stack of lesson materials with mechanical precision, her mind elsewhere despite her best efforts to focus.

A week had passed since Jasper's presentation, and she had heard nothing from him. The Mining Society had announced full implementation of his invention, with Lord Ashworth personally overseeing the installation at the first operation in Yorkshire.

It should have been a moment of celebration. Instead, it felt like the final confirmation of Jasper's choice.

Mrs. Henderson appeared at the classroom door, her expression uneasy.

"There's someone here to see you," she said. "I told him you were busy, but he insisted it was a matter of utmost importance."

Faith's heart leaped before she could control it. "Did he give a name?"

"Thompson, he said. Lord Jasper's man."

Not Jasper himself, then. Faith's momentary hope faded. "Send him up, please."

The butler appeared moments later, his usual formal demeanour slightly strained.

"Miss Somerton," he bowed. "I have been instructed to deliver this to you personally."

He handed her a small wooden box and an envelope bearing Jasper's seal.

"Lord Jasper emphasized that the contents are for your eyes only," Thompson added.

"And he requested—" the butler hesitated, seeming to choose his words carefully, "that you might read it before passing judgment."

Faith took the items, her hands steady despite the storm of emotions within. "Thank you, Thompson. Is there anything else?"

"Only that his lordship wishes you to know he departed for the Yorkshire mines this morning. The implementation begins tomorrow." Thompson paused. "He seemed... most concerned that you receive this message."

After Thompson left, Faith sat motionless, staring at the sealed letter and the

mysterious box. Part of her wanted to cast them both aside unread.

What explanation could possibly justify his public betrayal? What words could heal the breach of trust?

And yet, her father's voice echoed in her mind: When people act contrary to their nature, it's usually because they believe they have no choice.

With careful movements, Faith broke the seal and unfolded the letter.

My dearest Faith,

By the time you receive this, I will be on my way to Yorkshire. The choice I have made will seem incomprehensible to you—a betrayal of everything we built together. I cannot ask for your forgiveness until you know the full truth, though I fear even then, the damage may be irreparable.

The Marquess and Lord Ashworth presented me with an ultimatum: publicly distance myself from our educational work or lose not only the investment but any chance of my invention ever being implemented. The choice seemed impossible—our shared dreams on one side, and the lives that could be saved by the mining device on the other.

I chose lives. I chose implementation. I betrayed our vision to ensure that the safety measures would reach the men who need them most .

But I did not, could not, abandon our work entirely.

The box contains proof of what I have actually done. With Ashworth's help, the investment contracts include a provision that a portion of all profits must be directed toward "appropriate technical training" for mining operations. The language is

deliberately vague—the majority of the investors believe it means basic operational instruction, but the legal definition encompasses everything we planned for our school.

I have secured funding that no one can revoke, protection that no one can challenge. The educational components are officially part of the implementation, though disguised in language that satisfied the investors' need for "proper social conventions."

It was the only way to save both dreams—the safety measures and the education. But the cost was terrible. I had to stand before them all and deny what matters most to me. I had to hurt you, to make you believe I had abandoned our vision.

I do not ask for your understanding, nor dare I hope for forgiveness. I ask only that you examine the contracts, that you see what has been secured for the school's future. Whatever happens between us, the work will continue. The revolution we began will not be stopped, even if I must watch it unfold from a distance.

With deepest regret and unchanging devotion,

Jasper

Faith's hands trembled as she opened the wooden box. Inside lay a stack of legal documents—the implementation contracts for the mining device. She scanned them quickly, looking for the provision Jasper had mentioned.

There it was, nestled among clauses about production quotas and safety requirements:

"A minimum of fifteen percent of all proceeds shall be directed toward appropriate technical training for mining personnel and their dependents, ensuring proper understanding of operational principles and household management skills relevant to

mining communities."

The language was careful, deliberately couched in terms that would not alarm traditional investors.

But Faith recognized immediately what it meant. "Household management skills" had been their code all along for teaching women. "Dependents" included wives, daughters, sisters. "Technical training" encompassed everything from basic reading to advanced mechanics.

Jasper hadn't betrayed their vision—he had embedded it directly into the legal framework of the implementation, ensuring it would continue regardless of social opposition or changing attitudes.

He had secured their dream at the cost of making her believe he had abandoned it.

Faith sat back, emotions warring within her. Relief that their work would continue. Anger that he hadn't trusted her enough to share his plan. Heartache at the pain they had both endured unnecessarily. And beneath it all, a growing understanding of the impossible choice he had faced.

Lives in the mines versus their shared vision. Immediate safety versus long-term education. The choice had seemed binary, impossible—until Jasper and Lord Ashworth had found a third path, hidden in careful legal language and strategic compromise.

She reread the letter, seeing now the anguish between the lines. How much it must have cost him to stand before Oxford's elite and deny the work they had built together. How deeply it must have hurt to let her believe he had betrayed her.

Faith moved to the window, looking out at Oxford's spires gilded by the setting sun.

Somewhere in Yorkshire, Jasper was preparing to install his invention, to begin saving lives immediately. And embedded in that same work was the seed of their educational vision, protected by contracts that even the most traditional investors could not revoke.

It was not a perfect solution. The deception had caused real pain, created a breach of trust that would not easily heal. But it was not the betrayal she had believed, either.

The question now was whether understanding could lead to forgiveness. Whether they could rebuild what had been damaged in the process of trying to save everything else.

Faith took a deep breath and began to write her response. Whatever happened next, they would face it with open eyes and honest hearts—the only foundation on which any true partnership could stand.

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The urgent message reached the Marquess at his London club: accident at the northern mine, machinery failure, production halted.

He departed immediately, his mood darkening with each mile of the journey to Yorkshire. This was precisely the sort of practical disaster he'd feared Jasper's innovations might cause—theoretical knowledge failing when confronted with the realities of industry.

The Linford mining operation had been the backbone of the family's wealth for generations.

His father and grandfather had managed it with traditional methods—practical experience passed down, workers knowing their place, engineers focused on results

rather than fancy principles. And now his third son's "improvements" had apparently brought everything to a halt.

He arrived to find chaos and recrimination, workers arguing with supervisors about where the fault lay.

"It's the new grinding mechanism, my lord," the site manager reported grimly. "Complete failure in the main shaft. We'll have to shut down operations until it can be repaired."

The Marquess felt his jaw tighten. He should have known this would happen

"How long?"

"That's just it, my lord." The manager shifted uncomfortably. "One of the workers claims she can fix it. Says she understands how it works because..."

He coughed. "Because she attended some sort of training program. But surely we should wait for a proper engineer—"

"Where is this worker?"

"That would be Annie, my lord. She came highly recommended by Lady Fanbroke and joined us just last month. She's over there."

They found her already at the machinery, tools laid out with precise care as she examined the failed mechanism. The Marquess recognized her as one of the young women he'd seen at Faith's school.

"My lord." She curtsied quickly, then turned back to the mechanism. "It's the pressure distribution system. See how this gear assembly has worked loose? It's causing

uneven force application through the whole system."

The Marquess watched in astonishment as she explained exactly what had gone wrong. The technical explanation, delivered with such matter-of-fact confidence, momentarily stunned him into silence. These were terms and concepts he'd heard from Jasper's presentations—ideas he'd dismissed as unnecessarily complicated theoretical nonsense.

"And how exactly does a—" he hesitated, searching for an appropriate term.

"Mining laundress, my lord," she supplied helpfully. "I do washing for the single men's quarters."

"—a laundress," he continued, his tone sharpening, "come to understand complex mechanical engineering?"

Rather than cowering, the young woman's face brightened. "The Henderson Technical Academy, my lord. Miss Faith and Lord Jasper have been teaching us about mechanical principles. They showed us how understanding the science behind the machinery helps us work more safely and efficiently."

The Marquess felt as though the ground had shifted beneath him. This was the school his son had been supporting—the "inappropriate" teaching that he'd warned would upset the proper social order. And yet here was its practical result: a potentially devastating breakdown resolved without costly delays or outside experts.

"Show me," he heard himself say.

She led him through a detailed explanation of the problem and her solution, using a small demonstration model that he recognized as one of Jasper's designs. As she spoke, other workers gathered around, adding their own observations about how the

training had helped them identify potential issues before they became critical failures.

"Last month, Jim here noticed a pressure buildup in the secondary pumping system," Annie explained. "Before the training, we would have just reported it and waited for an engineer. But Jim understood the principles involved and knew it needed immediate attention."

"Saved us flooding the lower galleries," the burly miner confirmed. "All because Miss Faith showed us how fluid dynamics work with a tea kettle and some glass tubes."

The Marquess found himself touring the operation, seeing it through entirely new eyes.

Everywhere he looked, he found evidence of his son's influence—not just in the machinery itself, but in how the workers understood and interacted with it. They weren't just following orders; they were applying knowledge, making informed decisions, taking initiative when necessary.

In the manager's office afterward, Grenville showed him the production figures for the past quarter.

"Output is up seventeen percent, my lord. Accidents are down by nearly a third. And repair costs have decreased significantly since the workers can identify problems earlier and fix many issues themselves."

The Marquess stared at the numbers, his worldview crumbling silently around him. All his life, he'd believed in rigid hierarchies—engineers designed, managers directed, workers laboured. Education was for the upper classes, practical skills for the lower. The system had worked for generations.

Or had it?

He remembered his own father standing in this same office, proudly declaring that miners didn't need to understand the why of their work, just the how.

"Too much thinking makes for restless workers," he'd pronounced.

The Marquess had never questioned this wisdom, had passed it down to his own sons as gospel truth.

But Jasper had questioned it. Had seen possibilities where the Marquess saw only established tradition.

Later that evening, he stood alone in his study at the mine complex, nursing a glass of brandy as he thought about the day's developments. Somewhere in his buildings, workers were applying knowledge his son had helped them acquire—knowledge the Marquess had dismissed as unsuitable for their station.

His eyes fell on a small technical drawing on his desk—one of Jasper's early designs.

He'd barely glanced at it when his son had proudly presented it years ago, seeing only an impractical dream rather than a vision of the future. How much had he missed by refusing to look beyond tradition?

He thought of the young woman, Annie, and suddenly realized why she'd seemed familiar.

She reminded him of Faith Somerton—not in appearance, but in that same quiet confidence, that certainty that knowledge belonged to her just as much as to anyone else. He'd viewed Faith as a disruptive influence, encouraging his son toward inappropriate social experiments rather than proper commercial ventures.

But what if they were right? What if education truly could benefit everyone, regardless of class or gender?

The evidence was right before him—in increased productivity, reduced accidents, problems solved without costly delays.

The Marquess set down his glass with a decisive click.

His entire life had been dedicated to preserving the Linford legacy, ensuring the family's continued prosperity and standing. He'd assumed this meant maintaining traditions, following established patterns. Perhaps true stewardship meant something else entirely—recognizing when change was necessary, when old assumptions needed to be questioned.

Jasper had seen it. Faith had seen it. And now, finally, he was beginning to see it too.

Lord Ashworth found the Marquess alone in the mine office, staring contemplatively at a glass of brandy. The incident with the repaired machinery had clearly shaken him, though his aristocratic bearing revealed little to the casual observer.

"A remarkable demonstration today," Ashworth said by way of greeting. "I don't believe I've ever seen a laundress explain mechanical dynamics quite so effectively."

The Marquess looked up, his expression guarded. "Ashworth. I didn't realize you were still here."

"I thought it worth staying to observe the first implementation." Ashworth poured himself a measure from the decanter on the desk. "Your son's device is performing admirably."

"Yes." The Marquess's tone was measured. "Though I confess, I find myself...

reconsidering certain assumptions about its operation."

"About the device, or about those operating it?" Ashworth asked mildly.

The Marquess gave him a sharp look. "You knew about this, didn't you? These workers, their unusual level of education..."

"I was aware of the training program, yes." Ashworth took the seat opposite the Marquess. "In fact, I helped ensure it was protected in the implementation contracts."

"Protected?" The Marquess set down his glass. "You mean you deliberately—"

"Secured a provision that will improve mining safety, efficiency, and profitability?" Ashworth interrupted smoothly. "Indeed I did."

He leaned forward. "Look at what happened today, Linford. A potential disaster averted not by waiting days for an engineer from London, but by a worker who understood the machinery she worked alongside. How can that possibly be viewed as anything but beneficial?"

The Marquess was silent for a long moment. "It challenges everything I was taught about proper social order," he said finally.

"As did the first steam engine. As did the railroad." Ashworth shrugged. "Progress rarely conforms to our comfortable assumptions."

"My son lied to me," the Marquess said, an edge creeping into his voice. "He publicly disavowed any connection to these educational programs, then embedded them directly in the contracts."

"He found a way to save lives immediately while ensuring long-term improvement."

Ashworth's tone was even. "Isn't that precisely the kind of strategic thinking the Linford legacy requires?"

The Marquess stared at him. "You helped him do this."

"I recognized a brilliant synthesis when I saw one." Ashworth met his gaze directly. "Just as I recognize a father who raised a son capable of such vision, even if he hasn't always understood that son's path."

He rose, setting down his untouched drink. "The board is impressed with the early results, by the way. Worker efficiency up, accidents down, repair costs decreased. What they don't yet understand is why."

"And you won't enlighten them?" The Marquess raised an eyebrow.

"Not until they're ready to hear it." Ashworth smiled slightly. "Just as I waited until you were ready."

"Ready?"

"To see with your own eyes the value of what your son and Miss Somerton have created." Ashworth moved toward the door. "Change comes slowly to men like us, Linford. But I believe we're both capable of recognizing when our assumptions have been proven wrong."

He paused, hand on the doorknob. "Your son loves Miss Somerton, you know. Not just for her intelligence, though that is considerable, but for her courage in fighting for what she believes is right. They make a formidable partnership."

The Marquess looked down at the papers on his desk—production figures that spoke undeniably of the improvements already taking place. "Yes," he said quietly. "I'm

beginning to see that."

"Then perhaps you might consider telling him so." Ashworth opened the door. "Good evening, Linford. I look forward to our next board meeting."

After he departed, the Marquess remained at his desk, staring at the production figures but seeing instead the face of the young laundress as she confidently explained complex mechanical principles. He saw his son's innovation in action, benefiting not just profit margins but actual lives.

Slowly, he pulled a sheet of paper toward him and began to write.

I owe you an apology. I've been so focused on preserving tradition that I failed to see the value of innovation...

His pen moved steadily across the paper, each word a step away from the certainties of his past and toward a future he was only now beginning to envision—one where knowledge flowed more freely, where artificial barriers gave way to practical results, where his son's unconventional vision might actually strengthen rather than threaten the Linford legacy.

It wouldn't be easy. Society didn't change its expectations overnight, and many of his peers would question his judgment. But for the first time in his life, the Marquess found himself more interested in what might be possible than in what had always been done.

Perhaps, he thought with a slight smile, he might have more in common with his third son than either of them had realized.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:48 am

The Yorkshire countryside rolled past the carriage window, a patchwork of greens and browns beneath a steel-grey sky that matched Faith's turbulent emotions. She clutched Jasper's letter in one hand, the creases already worn from countless readings during the journey north.

The mining town appeared on the horizon, a cluster of stone buildings and smoking chimneys nestled in the valley. Faith's heart quickened. Somewhere among those structures, Jasper was overseeing the implementation of his device—the invention they had refined together, now forever altered by the choices they had both made.

She had not sent word ahead. After reading his letter, after understanding the impossible choice he had faced, Faith knew she could not respond with mere words on paper. Some conversations required presence—the ability to see truth in another's eyes, to hear it in the timbre of their voice.

The carriage drew to a halt outside the mining company's offices. Rain had begun to fall, soft and persistent, as Faith stepped down onto the muddy street. She paid the driver, then stood for a moment, gathering her courage as the carriage pulled away.

A passing miner tipped his cap to her. "Looking for someone, miss?"

"Lord Jasper Linford," Faith replied, her voice steadier than she felt. "I believe he's overseeing the installation of new machinery."

"The inventor?" The man's weathered face brightened with recognition. "He's at the north shaft. Been there since dawn, miss, checking every component himself."

He gestured toward a large structure at the far end of the compound. "Though I don't think they're expecting visitors today."

"Thank you," Faith said, already moving in the direction he had indicated.

The rain intensified, but she barely noticed the dampness seeping through her traveling cloak. Her mind was too full of the words she had rehearsed throughout the long journey, words that seemed inadequate now that the moment approached.

The north shaft loomed before her, its wooden framework stark against the misty hillside. Workers moved purposefully around the entrance, carrying tools and components. Faith caught fragments of conversation as she approached—excited voices discussing pressure systems and distribution mechanisms.

Then she saw him.

Jasper stood just inside the shaft entrance, bent over a set of diagrams spread across a makeshift table. His shirtsleeves were rolled up despite the chill, his hair dishevelled in that familiar way that meant he'd been running his hands through it in concentration. Even from a distance, Faith could see the tension in his shoulders, the careful precision in his movements as he explained something to the miners gathered around him.

He looked up, scanning the yard for someone or something, and his gaze fell on her. For a heartbeat, the world seemed to still.

Faith watched as shock, disbelief, and something like hope crossed his face in rapid succession. He straightened, saying something quickly to the worker beside him, then moved toward her with hesitant steps that quickened as he drew closer.

"Faith?" His voice held wonder and wariness in equal measure. "What are you doing

here?"

She held up his letter, the paper damp from the rain. "I read this."

"And you came all this way to..." He couldn't seem to finish the thought, as though afraid to assume her purpose.

Faith glanced at the workers watching them with undisguised curiosity. "Is there somewhere we might speak privately?"

Jasper nodded, gesturing toward a small office building. "Of course."

They walked in silence, close but not touching, the weight of everything unsaid hovering between them like the mist that clung to the hillsides. Inside the cramped manager's office, a small fire burned in the grate, casting flickering shadows across the wood-panelled walls. Jasper closed the door, then turned to face her, his expression guarded.

"I had to see you," Faith said simply. "I had to understand."

"My letter explained—"

"Words on paper aren't enough, Jasper." Faith set the letter on the desk between them.

"I needed to see your face when I asked why you couldn't trust me with the truth."

Pain flashed in his eyes. "I wanted to. Goodness knows I wanted to."

"Then why didn't you?" Her voice wavered despite her best efforts. "Did you think I wouldn't understand the impossible choice you faced? That I wouldn't support you doing what was necessary to save lives?"

"No." He took a half-step forward, then stopped himself. "I knew you would understand. That was precisely the problem."

Faith stared at him, confusion competing with the hurt that still lingered beneath her surface composure. "Now I don't understand."

"If you had known," Jasper said, his voice low and strained, "you would have been forced to either lie alongside me or risk exposing everything. The investors were watching us both closely. Reynolds had spies everywhere. If they had seen even a hint of collusion between us..."

He ran a hand through his already dishevelled hair. "The funding would have been withdrawn. The device would never have been implemented. Both our dreams would have died there in that moment."

"So you made the choice alone." The words held no accusation, only the weight of recognition.

"Yes." His gaze met hers, unflinching despite the remorse evident in every line of his face. "I chose to hurt you temporarily rather than lose everything we'd worked for permanently. I chose to carry the burden of betrayal alone rather than ask you to compromise your integrity."

"And you embedded our educational program in the contracts where no one could remove it," Faith said softly, "ensuring it would continue even if I never forgave you."

"I had to protect what mattered most," Jasper replied, his voice barely audible. "The lives that would be saved by the mining device. The minds that would be opened by our school. And yes, the future we might build together—even if that future no longer included me."

Faith moved around the desk slowly, every step deliberate. "Did you really believe I wouldn't forgive you?"

"I hoped you might, eventually. When you understood everything." His eyes searched hers. "But I had no right to expect it. Trust, once broken..."

"Is not easily mended," Faith finished. "No matter how noble the reason."

She stood before him now, close enough to see the faint shadow of stubble on his jaw, the weariness etched around his eyes. This close, she could feel the warmth radiating from him, could smell the familiar scent of machine oil and sandalwood that she had come to associate with their best collaborations.

"I understand why you did it," Faith said quietly. "I might even have made the same choice, faced with the same impossible situation."

Relief flickered across his features, but Faith raised a hand, stopping him before he could speak.

"Understanding isn't the same as forgetting, Jasper. You hurt me deeply. Not just with the public denial, but with your lack of faith in me—in us. You should have found a way to tell me."

"You're right." No excuses, no justifications. Just simple acknowledgment. "I was wrong to exclude you from the decision. Wrong to break the trust between us, no matter my intentions."

"Yes, you were." Faith felt tears threatening and blinked them back. "And the worst part is that we'll never know if there might have been another way—one we might have found together."

Jasper's shoulders slumped slightly, but he nodded. "What happens now?"

It was the question Faith had asked herself throughout the long journey north. What did happen when you discovered the person who had hurt you most deeply had done so to protect everything you both believed in? When the betrayal and the sacrifice were two sides of the same coin?

"Now," she said slowly, "we begin again. Not as we were before—that's not possible. But perhaps as something new. Something that acknowledges what's been broken but chooses to build anyway."

She extended her hand, the gesture deliberate and formal. "Will you work with me to rebuild what was damaged, Lord Jasper? Not just our school, but the trust between us?"

The formality of her address made him wince, but he recognized it for what it was—a necessary step back to safer ground, a place from which they might carefully advance once more.

He took her offered hand, his touch gentle but firm. "I will, Miss Somerton. For as long as it takes."

Faith felt something shift inside her at his touch—not forgiveness yet, not completely, but the first tentative step toward it. The wound was still raw, the hurt still real, but so was the recognition of the impossible choice he had faced. So was the knowledge that he had found a way to protect both their dreams, even at the cost of her trust.

"I should return to the implementation," Jasper said, reluctantly releasing her hand. "There are final adjustments to the pressure distribution system after what happened with the first iteration. Have you heard how Annie saved the day?"

"Yes, of course." Faith stepped back, smoothing her damp skirts, not jumping to his attempt at changing the topic. "I should find lodging in the village. My return coach isn't scheduled until tomorrow."

"Stay." The word seemed to surprise him as much as it did her. "That is... we could use your expertise. Some of the miners have questions about the mechanical principles that I'm not explaining as clearly as you might."

Faith raised an eyebrow. "Are you offering me a professional consultation, Lord Jasper?"

A flicker of the old warmth appeared in his eyes. "I suppose I am, Miss Somerton. The contracts do specify 'appropriate technical training,' after all."

"So they do." Faith felt the ghost of a smile touch her lips. "Very well. I accept your professional invitation."

As they walked back toward the mine shaft side by side, not touching but no longer quite so distant, Faith felt neither the resolution she had hoped for nor the continued anger she had feared. Instead, there was something more complex—a cautious beginning, a careful navigation of damaged terrain.

Trust, once broken, was not easily mended. But perhaps, with time and effort and honest communication, it could be rebuilt into something stronger than before—like a bone that heals more resilient at the point of fracture.

The rain had softened to a gentle mist, and as they approached the shaft, Faith saw miners watching them with curious expressions. Whatever they had expected from the inventor's partnership with the professor's daughter, it clearly wasn't this tentative, formal dance.

But then, Faith reflected, true partnerships were rarely as simple as they appeared from the outside. They were built on shared vision and mutual respect, yes—but also on forgiveness, on the willingness to begin again after failure, on the courage to rebuild what had been damaged.

The work would be difficult. The reconciliation would be gradual. But as she watched Jasper unroll the diagrams again, as she stepped forward to clarify a principle to an eager young miner, Faith felt the first small spark of hope that they might find their way back to each other.

Not as they had been before, but as something new—something tempered by difficulty and strengthened by choice.

Two weeks later:

The transformation of Mrs. Henderson's shop from clandestine classroom to official academy had progressed with remarkable speed once the contracts were signed. With Lord Ashworth's discrete backing and Lady Fanbroke's social influence, the little room above the millinery shop had acquired a proper name, proper furniture, and—most importantly—proper protection.

What had begun in secrecy and fear now continued in the open, though carefully disguised as vocational training rather than academic education. The deception was now a formality understood by all parties involved, a polite fiction that allowed revolution to wear respectable clothing.

The Henderson Technical Training Academy was quiet in the early morning light, dust motes dancing in the sunbeams that streamed through freshly cleaned windows. Faith moved among the workbenches, arranging teaching materials for the day's first official class, her movements precise and methodical despite the nervous energy humming through her.

Two weeks had passed since her journey to Yorkshire, since that rain-soaked confrontation that had begun the slow, painstaking process of rebuilding what had been broken. Two weeks of careful correspondence, of professional collaboration conducted through letters and telegrams, each word measured, each suggestion framed with formal politeness.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs made her pause, her pulse quickening. Jasper had returned to Oxford yesterday, his work at the mine complete for now. This would be

their first face-to-face meeting since Yorkshire.

"Good morning, Miss Somerton." His voice was carefully neutral as he appeared in the doorway, a leather portfolio tucked under one arm.

"Lord Jasper." Faith acknowledged him with a small nod. "I trust your journey was comfortable?"

"Quite, thank you." He remained at the threshold, as though uncertain of his welcome. "I've brought the implementation reports you requested. The miners' progress with the technical training has been remarkable."

"I'm glad to hear it." Faith gestured to the table where she had been working. "Would you care to review them with me? The first class doesn't begin for another hour."

A flicker of something—relief, perhaps—crossed his face. "Of course."

He moved to the table, setting down his portfolio and removing several neatly organized documents. As he began explaining the training protocols they had established at the mine, Faith found herself watching his hands—the way they moved across the papers, the careful precision in his gestures. She had always admired his hands, their blend of aristocratic elegance and engineer's practicality.

"The distribution of knowledge seems to follow the same principles as the pressure distribution in your device," Faith observed, focusing her attention on the reports. "The initial instruction spreads outward, with each student becoming a point of further dissemination."

"Yes, I noticed that as well." Jasper's voice warmed slightly, professional interest temporarily eclipsing personal awkwardness. "Annie was particularly effective. She's been leading informal sessions after hours, helping the other workers understand the

mechanical principles."

"Annie?" Faith looked up in surprise. "She's at the mine now?"

"My father hired her specifically to help implement the training program," Jasper explained. "Apparently, she made quite an impression during an incident with the machinery."

Faith felt a small smile touch her lips. "I'm glad. She has a natural gift for teaching."

Their eyes met briefly, shared pride in their student creating a moment of genuine connection. Then both looked away, the fragile moment dissolving back into careful formality.

They continued reviewing the reports, maintaining a professional distance that felt both necessary and painful. Occasionally their hands would brush as they exchanged documents, and each time Faith felt that same confusing mixture of warmth and wariness, of lingering hurt and stubborn hope.

"I've been thinking about the curriculum for the advanced mechanics course," Jasper said as they neared the end of their review. "Your suggestion about beginning with practical demonstrations before introducing theoretical concepts seems particularly effective with the miners."

"It provides context for the abstractions," Faith agreed. "Theory means little without understanding its application."

"Rather like trust," Jasper said softly, the words clearly escaping before he could reconsider them.

Faith stilled, her hand hovering over the papers between them. "Meaning?"

Jasper met her eyes directly, abandoning the safety of professional discussion. "Meaning that I understand now that trust, like theoretical knowledge, requires practical demonstration. Words alone aren't enough."

"No," Faith said quietly. "They aren't."

"I've been trying to show you, these past two weeks," he continued, his voice low and intent. "With every report, every implementation detail—trying to demonstrate that I can be trusted with our work, even if I haven't yet earned back your personal trust."

Faith studied his face—the earnestness in his expression, the carefully restrained hope in his eyes. She thought of their correspondence these past weeks, how scrupulously he had documented every decision, every adjustment to the implementation plans. How transparently he had shared both successes and setbacks.

"I've noticed," she admitted. "And I appreciate the effort, truly."

"But?" he prompted gently, hearing the unspoken qualification in her tone.

"But professional transparency, while necessary, isn't the same as the trust we once shared." Faith looked down at her hands, then back to his face. "That kind of trust develops slowly, built from countless small moments of honesty and vulnerability. It can't be rushed, Jasper, no matter how much we might wish it."

He nodded, accepting this truth without protest. "Then I will continue to build, one small moment at a time."

The simple statement, offered without expectation or demand, touched Faith more deeply than any elaborate pledge might have. Here was the man she had come to love—patient, determined, willing to work steadily toward a goal without guarantee of success.

"I brought something else," Jasper said after a moment, reaching into his coat pocket. "Something I've been developing during the evenings at the mine."

He placed a small brass object on the table between them—a miniature version of his mining device, but with significant modifications. Faith recognized it immediately as a teaching model, designed to demonstrate mechanical principles in a clear, accessible way.

"It's beautiful," she said, picking it up carefully to examine the intricate gears and levers. "The craftsmanship is exquisite."

"It's for the school," Jasper explained. "The first of several, if you approve. I thought... even if things remain difficult between us personally, our work should continue. The students deserve that much."

Faith turned the model in her hands, feeling its perfect balance, the smooth precision of its movements. She thought of the hours he must have spent crafting it, late at night after long days overseeing the implementation.

"Thank you," she said, her voice not quite steady. "It's precisely what we need for the advanced mechanics course."

Jasper nodded, clearly relieved by her acceptance of the gift. "I should let you prepare for your class. Unless there's anything else you need from me?"

Faith hesitated, then spoke with careful deliberation. "Actually, there is. I'm planning to demonstrate basic gear ratios today. Perhaps... perhaps you might stay? Your expertise would be valuable."

It was a small offering—not forgiveness, not yet, but a tentative step toward collaboration again. Jasper recognized it for what it was, his expression lightening

subtly.

"I'd be honoured," he said simply.

As they began arranging the teaching models together, moving around each other with the cautious awareness of dancers relearning a familiar pattern, Faith felt something ease within her. The hurt was still there, the breach of trust still raw in places, but alongside it grew something new—a careful rebuilding, a deliberate choice to move forward despite the pain.

When Lucy arrived thirty minutes later, she found them bent over a mechanical demonstration, heads close together as they discussed the best way to explain a complex principle. Their body language still held a certain reserve, a carefulness that hadn't been present before, but the antagonism of recent weeks had softened into something more hopeful.

"Miss Faith?" Lucy's voice held a note of pleased surprise as she took in the scene. "Lord Jasper? Is everything...?"

"Good morning, Lucy," Faith said, straightening. "Lord Jasper has kindly agreed to assist with today's mechanics lesson. Would you help distribute these materials to the workbenches?"

As Lucy busied herself with the preparations, Jasper caught Faith's eye across the classroom. "Thank you," he said quietly.

Faith knew he wasn't thanking her for the invitation to stay, but for something more profound—for the willingness to begin again, to build something new from the fragments of what had been broken.

"One step at a time," she replied softly.

And for the first time in weeks, the smile that curved Jasper's lips reached his eyes, warming them with a hope that Faith found herself cautiously beginning to share.

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The morning sun streamed through Professor Somerton's study windows, catching dust motes that danced above the scattered papers covering every surface. Faith sat at her father's desk, carefully copying out implementation plans for the mining education program, while Jasper paced nearby, his excitement making him too restless to sit.

"If we establish training centres at each major operation," he said, gesturing with barely contained enthusiasm, "we can standardize the basic instruction while allowing for local adaptations."

Faith smiled, watching how animated he became when discussing their shared vision. His cravat had come slightly askew, and she had to resist the urge to straighten it.

"We'll need to consider the specific needs of each location," she said instead, forcing her attention back to her notes. "The Cornwall operations will require different emphasis than the Yorkshire mines."

"Precisely!" Jasper moved to lean over her shoulder, pointing to a particular passage in her careful writing. The scent of his sandalwood soap mingled with machine oil, a combination Faith had come to associate with their best collaborations. "See here — we can adapt the basic mechanical principles to whatever machinery they're using locally."

Faith was acutely aware of his proximity, of how his sleeve brushed her shoulder as he reached past her to adjust a paper. Such casual touches would have been scandalous just months ago, but her father had grown surprisingly lenient about their

working relationship — though he still insisted on maintaining proper appearances when anyone else was present.

As if summoned by her thoughts, Professor Somerton appeared in the doorway. Rather than stepping apart hastily, as they once would have, Jasper simply straightened while Faith continued writing. Her father's lips twitched in what might have been a smile.

"I trust the planning progresses well?" he asked, moving to examine their work. "Lord Ashworth's secretary sent word that the next mining operation is eager to begin implementation."

"We're nearly ready with the initial curriculum," Faith replied, watching her father's face carefully. These moments still felt precious — his genuine interest in her work, his willingness to treat her as a colleague rather than just a daughter.

"Though we're still debating how to structure the advanced mathematics courses," Jasper added. "I favour a practical approach, demonstrating each principle through mechanical applications."

"While I think we need a stronger theoretical foundation first," Faith countered, a familiar argument between them. "The students must understand why the principles work, not just how to apply them."

Professor Somerton picked up one of their draft syllabi, adjusting his spectacles. "Why not both? Begin with practical demonstrations to spark interest, then lead them to theoretical understanding through their own observations?" His eyes took on a distant look. "Your mother always said the best teaching engages both hands and mind."

Faith's breath caught. Her father rarely spoke of her mother, especially in connection

with education. But lately, as their implementation plans had progressed, he'd begun sharing more memories — small glimpses of the woman who had first taught Faith to love learning.

"That... that's actually brilliant," Jasper said, breaking the momentary silence. "We could design a progression of lessons that starts with simple machines they already know, then builds to more complex understanding."

He grabbed a fresh sheet of paper, sketching quickly. Faith rose to look over his shoulder, their heads bent together over the drawing. Her father watched them with an expression she couldn't quite interpret — something between satisfaction and wistfulness.

"You know," Professor Somerton said carefully, "your mother would have adored seeing this. Not just the educational program, but..." he gestured vaguely at them, at their easy collaboration. "She always said true partnerships were built on shared passion for knowledge."

Faith felt her cheeks warm, but before she could respond, a knock at the study door announced Lucy's arrival with tea. The maid had become remarkably adept at appearing just when conversations threatened to become too emotional.

As they took their tea, the discussion turned to practical matters — supply costs, instructor training, the delicate politics of introducing education into traditional mining communities. But Faith's mind kept returning to her father's words about partnership.

She watched Jasper gesture animatedly as he explained his latest ideas for adapting the teaching devices, his natural enthusiasm tempered now by genuine consideration for how best to serve their students. How far they'd both come from their first meeting, when she'd resented him as her father's favourite student and he'd seen her

as a surprising anomaly.

"What about the female relatives of the miners?" she asked suddenly, interrupting Jasper's explanation of gear ratios. "Wives, daughters — surely they could benefit from understanding basic mechanical principles too? For household management, if nothing else," she added quickly, seeing her father's slight frown.

But it was Jasper who responded first. "Why not? The principles are the same whether applied to mining equipment or household machinery. And having the whole family understand safety procedures could only benefit the mining communities."

The look he gave her held such perfect understanding that Faith had to glance away, her heart thundering. Here was a man who not only accepted her intelligence but actively sought ways to extend educational opportunities to others like her.

"We would need to be careful about how we present it," Professor Somerton mused, surprising them both. "Frame it as practical household education rather than academic instruction. But..." He smiled slightly. "I suppose if some higher understanding should naturally develop through such instruction, who are we to prevent it?"

Faith stared at her father, wondering when exactly he had become so subtly subversive. But of course — he had married her mother, hadn't he? Had supported Faith's own education, even if quietly. Perhaps he had always understood more than she'd given him credit for.

The afternoon passed in productive discussion, their implementation plans growing more detailed with each hour. As the light began to fade, Lucy appeared to light the lamps, reminding them that they had been working straight through dinner.

"Good heavens," Professor Somerton said, looking at the clock. "I'm meant to be at the faculty meeting in ten minutes." He gathered some papers hastily. "Don't let me



interrupt your work, though perhaps..." he gave them a meaningful look, "you might consider leaving the door open while I'm gone?"

After he left, Faith and Jasper shared a moment of amused understanding. Even progressive fathers had their limits.

"He's right about the time," Faith said reluctantly, beginning to gather their papers. "Mrs. Henderson is expecting me to review the new training materials tomorrow morning."

"Wait." Jasper caught her hand as she reached for another document. "There's something I've been meaning to discuss with you. About the future of the program."

Faith's heart skipped at his tone, though she kept her voice steady. "Oh?"

"I've been thinking..." He ran his thumb across her knuckles in a way that made it difficult to concentrate. "The program will need ongoing supervision. Someone to oversee curriculum development, coordinate between locations, ensure consistent standards..."

"Yes?" Faith barely dared breathe.

"It would really need two people," he continued. "Someone with technical expertise and someone with teaching experience. Working together. Perhaps..." His voice softened. "Perhaps sharing more than just professional responsibilities?"

Faith felt warmth bloom in her chest. "Are you proposing a position or a partnership, Lord Jasper?"

"Both." His eyes held hers with an intensity that made her pulse race. "Though I confess, the professional aspect is merely a convenient excuse for what my heart has

wanted for quite some time."

"How very practical of you," Faith managed, though her voice trembled slightly. "Combining business and pleasure."

"I thought you'd appreciate the efficiency." His smile held both humour and nervousness. "Though I should probably court you properly before making any formal declarations. Your father may support our educational innovations, but I suspect he still has certain expectations about traditional societal partnerships."

Faith laughed softly, squeezing his hand. "Then court me while we plan. Show me how theory and practice can work together in all things."

"Gladly." He lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles that sent shivers down her spine. "Though I warn you, I intend to be very thorough in my research."

"I would expect nothing less," Faith replied, her smile matching his. "We are scientists, after all."

The lamp light caught the brass fittings of his latest teaching device, making them glow warmly. Faith thought about how far they'd come — from reluctant allies to essential partners, from simple mining innovation to educational revolution. And now, perhaps, to something even more remarkable.

"We should finish these implementation plans," he said reluctantly, though neither made any move to release their joined hands.

"We should," Faith agreed.

Jasper interjected. "Though perhaps we could continue our discussion over dinner

tomorrow? I know a small restaurant near the college..."

"I'd like that." Faith finally withdrew her hand, though the warmth of his touch lingered. "For now, let's focus on convincing the mining operations that educated workers are worth the investment."

They bent together over the plans once more, their shoulders touching slightly as they worked. Outside, Oxford's spires caught the last rays of sunset, while inside, two people who had once thought themselves bound by Society's expectations continued plotting their quiet revolution.

Some innovations, Faith reflected as she watched Jasper sketch another training diagram, changed more than just mechanical systems. Some changed hearts, minds, and futures in ways that no one could have predicted.

But then, the best discoveries often came from unexpected combinations — like mining and education, like theory and practice, like a nobleman's son and a professor's daughter who dared to imagine something new.

"What if we started each location with simple demonstrations?" Jasper suggested, adding notes to their outline. "Let them see the immediate benefits before introducing more complex concepts?"

"Perfect," Faith agreed, their minds working in familiar harmony. "Show them how understanding leads to efficiency, safety, improvement..."

"Rather like us," Jasper said softly.

Faith looked up to find him watching her with an expression that made her heart flutter. "Like us?"

"Learning each other slowly. Building understanding. Discovering how much better we are together than apart."

"Very scientific observation, my lord," Faith managed, though her voice was not quite steady.

"I find that thorough research yields the best results," he replied, his smile warming her straight through.

They returned to their work, but something had shifted subtly between them — like the perfect meshing of gears in one of Jasper's devices, each movement enhancing the other's effectiveness. Together, they would build something extraordinary — in their work, in their lives, and in their hearts.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:48 am*

Jasper took the shop's narrow stairs two at a time, his father's latest letter burning a hole in his pocket. He found Faith by the window, and for a moment he forgot entirely what he'd come to tell her.

He paused in the doorway, struck by the sight of Faith in the morning light. She stood by the window, sunlight turning her dark hair to burnished copper, her fingers absently tracing patterns on the worn windowsill. The simple grace of her movements made his heart catch.

She turned at his approach, and the smile that lit her face was like sunrise breaking over Oxford's spires. He again forgot entirely why he'd come, lost in the way joy transformed her already lovely features.

"The mining company directors have approved the full implementation," he said when he could finally speak. "Not just the device itself, but the practical training program. They want to establish vocational centres at every major operation — though they're careful to call it 'domestic and industrial skills development' rather than education."

Faith's eyes lit up. "Really? All of them?"

"Lord Ashworth was very persuasive." Jasper moved closer, unable to resist the pull of her excitement. "Though I suspect it was your demonstration that truly convinced them. The way you showed how understanding mechanical principles could improve both safety and efficiency..."

"Our demonstration," she corrected softly. "We did it together."

"Yes." He took her hand, marvelling at how natural it felt now. "We seem to do a lot of things better together."

Faith's breath caught at his tone. "Jasper..."

"My father wrote to me," he said quickly, before he lost his nerve. He pulled out the letter with his free hand. "He's still coming to terms with the educational aspects, but he's agreed to support the venture. And..." He swallowed hard. "He's given his blessing for me to pursue my own path. Including any... personal attachments I might form along the way."

Faith stared at him. "Personal attachments?"

"He said, and I quote, 'If you insist on overturning traditional expectations, you might as well be thorough about it.'" Jasper couldn't help smiling at his father's grudging acceptance. "I think that's as close as he'll ever come to approving of us."

"Us?" Faith's voice was barely a whisper.

"I love you," Jasper said, his voice rough with emotion. "I think I have since you first started questioning my designs, showing me how they could be more than just mining tools. Even then, watching you challenge every assumption with that brilliant mind of yours, I was already falling."

His hand tightened around hers. "You made me see that innovation isn't just about mechanical improvements—it's about improving lives, opening minds, making the world better in whatever way we can."

Faith's eyes shone with unshed tears as she met his gaze. The morning light caught the gold flecks in her dark eyes, and Jasper felt his breath catch once again at her beauty — not just her features, but the passionate intelligence that animated them.

"I love you too," she said. "Even when you were driving me mad with jealousy over Father's attention. Even when I thought you had chosen your family's expectations over what we could build together."

"Never." He drew her closer. "Some things are worth defying tradition for."

The sound of footsteps on the stairs made them step apart, but not before Jasper saw Mrs. Henderson's knowing smile as she bustled past with an armload of teaching materials.

"Miss Faith!" Lucy's voice called up the stairs. "The new books have arrived!"

Faith squeezed his hand once before releasing it. "Duty calls."

"Go," he said softly. "I'll see you tonight."

As he watched her hurry down to help with the delivery, Jasper thought about all the paths that had led them here. His drive to prove himself, her passion for education, their shared vision of what could be possible if they dared to challenge tradition.

Sometimes the best innovations came not from following established patterns, but from having the courage to forge entirely new ones. And sometimes the greatest discoveries weren't mechanical at all, but the connections that formed between two people who dared to dream of something better.

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Lucy's hands trembled as she held the book, but her voice grew stronger with each word. "The principles of mechanical advantage state that force applied at a distance from the fulcrum..."

She paused, looking up at the younger girl beside her—a new kitchen maid who had arrived at Professor Somerton's household last week.

"See? Just like with the laundry mangle. The longer the handle, the easier it is to turn."

Faith, observing from the doorway of the servant's hall, felt her heart swell with pride. How far Lucy had come from the days when she'd struggled to read labels on cleaning bottles. Now she was teaching others, translating complex concepts into practical examples they could understand.

"Miss Faith?" Lucy had noticed her presence. "I was just explaining to Mary about leverage, like you showed us. I thought it might help her with the new washing equipment."

"You're doing wonderfully," Faith said softly. "Though I particularly enjoy how you've been leaving those little notes around the house—mathematical reminders hidden in the daily work schedules."

Lucy blushed. "I didn't think you'd noticed those."

"Remember to calculate the proper ratio of soap to water," Faith quoted, smiling. "Force equals mass times acceleration—mind the heavy trays.' Very clever way to help the others practice their reading and scientific principles."

"Well," Lucy ducked her head modestly, "you always say knowledge should be part of everyday life, not just something we study in lessons."

Faith watched as Lucy turned back to her eager student, demonstrating a calculation with the same patience Faith had once shown her. From struggling student to confident teacher—this was exactly what they'd hoped their school could achieve.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:48 am

The Henderson Technical Training Academy buzzed with activity as Faith surveyed her newly expanded classroom. A month had passed since their presentation to the investors, and already the changes exceeded her wildest dreams.

Select young women filled the benches—carefully chosen housemaids learning to maintain household machinery alongside a few trusted shopkeepers' daughters studying practical calculations for inventory and accounts. Each student had been vouched for by their employer or father, each training program carefully justified by its practical applications to their current duties.

But they were united in their hunger for knowledge.

"Miss Faith!" Mary called from her workbench, where she was demonstrating gear ratios to a group of newcomers. "Look what happens when we adjust the pressure distribution!"

Faith smiled, remembering how recently Annie had been terrified of being discovered learning anything beyond her station. Now the young woman taught introductory mechanics with confidence, her natural talent finally finding its proper outlet.

The soft whir of machinery filled the air as students experimented with the educational models Jasper had designed. Each device represented a perfect marriage of practical application and theoretical understanding—just like their creators' partnership.

A knock at the classroom door drew Faith's attention. Her father stood there, his expression holding a pride she'd once despaired of ever seeing.

"The latest inquiries have arrived," Professor Somerton said, holding up a thick stack of papers. "It seems news of our training program has spread through industrial circles. We have interest from manufacturers in Manchester, Birmingham, even Edinburgh."

"And no interference from the university authorities?" Faith asked carefully.

"They seem content to ignore us as long as we maintain the fiction that we're merely teaching household management and practical skills," her father replied with a knowing smile. "Though several of my colleagues have privately expressed interest in how well our 'vocational students' understand mechanical principles."

Faith nodded, understanding the delicate balance they maintained. They couldn't change centuries of tradition overnight, but they could work within its constraints to create something new. "Small steps," she said softly.

"Small steps that lead to greater ones," her father agreed. "Your mother used to say that change comes not from storming walls, but from finding doors others hadn't noticed."

"They can call it whatever they like," Faith said, echoing her earlier words to Mrs. Henderson. "As long as we can continue teaching."

"Indeed." Her father's eyes softened as he watched Lucy guide another student through a complex calculation. "Your mother would have been so proud, my dear. She always said knowledge shouldn't be bound by convention."

Faith felt tears prick at her eyes. They spoke of her mother more freely now, sharing memories instead of hiding them away like painful secrets.

"Speaking of unconventional approaches," Professor Somerton continued with

studied casualness, "Lord Jasper came to see me this morning."

Faith's heart skipped. "Did he?"

"Hmm. Most proper. Very formal. Something about requesting permission to pay his addresses?" Her father's attempt at innocence was betrayed by the twinkle in his eyes. "I told him that anyone who could make my daughter's educational dreams a reality while revolutionizing industrial safety practices had already proven his worth."

"Father..." Faith started, but footsteps on the stairs interrupted her.

Jasper appeared in the doorway, looking uncharacteristically nervous despite his perfectly arranged cravat. Faith noticed he carried a small brass object wrapped in cloth.

"I'll leave you to it," Professor Somerton said, managing to usher all the students from the room with remarkable efficiency. "I believe Mrs. Henderson mentioned something about tea being ready downstairs."

When they were alone, Jasper crossed to Faith's workbench. "I have something for you."

He set the wrapped object down carefully. "A new teaching tool, of sorts."

Faith unwrapped the cloth to reveal an exquisite brass model of his original mining device, but with significant modifications. Instead of the industrial grinding head, this version contained a series of interconnected gears and levers, each carefully calibrated to demonstrate multiple mechanical principles.

"It's beautiful," she breathed, admiring the craftsmanship. "But why..."

Her voice trailed off as she noticed something odd about the central gear assembly. There, nestled in the heart of the mechanism, was a delicate gold ring.

"Because some innovations," Jasper said softly, "require a lifetime of refinement and study. Some partnerships..."

He took her hand. "Some partnerships work so perfectly together that separating them would be not just impractical, but impossible."

Faith felt her heart soar as Jasper went down on one knee beside her workbench. All around them, the fruits of their shared dreams whirled and clicked—their school, their inventions, their vision of a world where knowledge knew no boundaries.

"Faith Somerton," Jasper said, his voice steady despite the emotion in his eyes, "will you do me the honour of becoming my wife? Partner in all things, personal and professional?"

"Yes," Faith said immediately, then laughed at her own eagerness. "I mean, what a thoroughly practical proposal. Very scientific."

"I thought you'd appreciate that." Jasper stood, slipping the ring onto her finger. "Though I should warn you, my father's acceptance came with conditions. He insists that any grandchildren must be thoroughly educated in both classical studies and modern engineering principles."

"How shocking," Faith murmured, stepping into his embrace. "What will Society think?"

"Society," Jasper said, "will have to adapt. Just as we've proven they can."

As his lips met hers, Faith thought about all the paths that had led them here. Her

secret studies, his drive to prove himself, their shared vision of what could be possible when tradition met innovation. Together, they'd found a way to honour the past while building something new—a bridge between worlds that would help others forge their own paths to knowledge and understanding.

Some risks, Faith decided as she kissed her future husband, were worth taking.

As they drew apart, Jasper kept hold of her hands, his thumbs tracing gentle patterns across her knuckles. His eyes held hers with an intensity that made her heart race.

“You know,” he said softly, “for all my mechanical expertise, I never truly understood the concept of perfect alignment until this moment.”

Faith’s cheeks warmed.

“A rather technical way of expressing romance, my lord,” she teased, though her voice trembled slightly.

“Perhaps,” he agreed, lifting one hand to gently cup her cheek. “But then, we've always understood each other best through science, haven't we? Like complementary gears, moving in perfect synchronization.”

“Creating something greater than either could achieve alone,” Faith finished, leaning slightly into his touch.

The look he gave her then held such profound tenderness that Faith felt tears prick at her eyes. Here was a man who saw her completely — her intelligence, her passion, her dreams — and loved her not in spite of these things but because of them.

“My brilliant Faith,” he murmured, and somehow those three words held more romance than any flowery declaration could have achieved.

Some innovations changed not just the world around them, but the very hearts of those who dared to dream them into being.

Faith smiled as Jasper's fingers entwined with hers, their hands fitting together as perfectly as the gears in his inventions. Together, they would build something extraordinary — in their work, in their lives, and in their love.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 7:48 am

The afternoon light slanted through the library windows as Meredith Silver carefully returned the last of the ancient manuscripts to their proper places. The university cataloguing room had grown comfortably familiar over the years, its towering shelves and dust-laden corners as much a home to her as her small rented room above the bookbinder's shop.

A letter lay open on her desk—Faith's distinctive handwriting flowing across the cream-colored paper, the slight ink smudges betraying her friend's characteristic excitement. Meredith smiled as she picked it up to read it once more.

My dearest Meredith,

Life at Linford Park continues to astonish me daily. You would scarcely believe the transformation in the Marquess—he has allocated almost an entire wing for what he now calls "the innovation laboratory," where Jasper has begun installing demonstration models for visiting industrialists. Yesterday I caught him explaining pressure distribution principles to his hunting companions with surprising enthusiasm!

The wedding plans progress, though in truth, I find myself more excited about the educational possibilities than the ceremony itself. (Don't tell Jasper, though his knowing smile suggests he already suspects as much.) We've invited several promising young women from the mining communities to serve as lady's maids during the festivities—a perfect opportunity for further training while maintaining all appearances of propriety.

Adriana writes that she and Ellis will arrive a week early, bringing with them several

of the treasure-hunting scholars. Roderick is particularly eager to examine that coded parchment we found in the chamber beneath the rose window. He believes the alignment of the three crowns might refer not to Oxford at all, but to specific architectural features in Dorset or Wiltshire! The unfinished hunt continues, it seems.

But Meredith, I must insist—you CANNOT refuse this invitation. I understand your commitment to the children of Oxford's back alleys (and applaud it wholeheartedly), but surely they can spare their teacher for a fortnight? I need my oldest friend beside me as I embark on this new chapter. Besides, the Linford library contains volumes unseen for generations—medieval texts that would make even your disciplined cataloguer's heart beat faster. Consider it research, if that makes your acceptance easier.

The world is changing, dearest friend. Slowly, perhaps, but changing nonetheless. Come and be part of it.

With deepest affection,

Faith

P.S. Mrs. Henderson sent me her regards. She has designed the most remarkable hat for the occasion—something about geometric principles and load distribution that I confess I didn't entirely follow. You must see it for yourself.

Meredith shook her head, folding the letter carefully and tucking it into her pocket. Faith always had possessed the uncanny ability to present irresistible arguments.

She glanced at the stack of primers she had prepared for tomorrow's lesson in the abandoned chandler's shop—ten eager faces would be waiting for her, children who had never held a book before she found them. The thought of leaving them, even temporarily, caused her chest to tighten.

But Faith was right. The world was changing, and perhaps it was time Meredith herself embraced some of that change. Besides, she had trained young Mary and Sasha remarkably well—the girls could certainly manage the basic lessons during her absence.

"Alignment of three crowns," she murmured, her mind already turning to the treasure hunt that had started them on this path. "Not at Oxford at all..."

The library clock chimed, startling her from her reverie. Mr. Hawkins would be returning soon, and she still needed to complete today's cataloguing. But as she reached for her pen, Meredith found herself already composing her reply.

My dearest Faith,

Reserve the blue guest chamber by the morning sun. I shall arrive a week before the ceremony—not for the Linford library, as tempting as you make it sound, but because I suspect you'll need at least that long to tell me every detail of this remarkable new life you've created.

The children will survive without me. The treasure hunt, however, absolutely cannot proceed without my organizational skills. Meredith laughed as she wrote that. She didn't really believe there was a treasure beyond the books they'd found, but it wouldn't hurt to support her friends' delusions.

Some discoveries, after all, are best made together.

Your devoted friend,

Meredith

She would post it on her way to the evening's lessons, Meredith decided. After all, the urchins of Oxford had taught her as much as she had taught them—that knowledge

flourished best when shared among friends, and that sometimes the greatest treasures weren't those hidden behind stone walls, but the ones found in unexpected connections that changed lives.

Faith had found her path forward. Perhaps it was time for Meredith to explore new possibilities as well.

The End