



Ash and the Butterfly

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Category: Historical

Description: When scientist Luke Ashburton arrives to open the Earl of Bexleys new museum, the last thing he expects to find is the building on fire.

Luke is tasked with overseeing its salvage, but needs the late earls journals all of which are written in code. Luckily, a brilliant mathematician can help. Unfortunately, she is Grace Chetwood, a beautiful whirlwind Luke encountered at a ball years ago. The night began with attraction and ended with a slap to the face.

Cracking the cipher is a welcome reprieve from Graces messy life in London but means working with Luke, a man she ardently wishes to hurl into the sea. Also stressful? The fact that she cannot stop thinking about him.

Over a week of long days and sleepless nights, Grace and Luke discover an uncommon ability to infuriate one another. But as hotter passions emerge, their connection grows deeper and more complicated than either could ever have imagined.

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Bexley Estate

April 27, 1822

3 weeks to the opening

When Luke Ashburton arrived at the Bexley Estate for the opening of its new museum, the last thing he expected to see was the building on fire.

He dropped the case he was carrying—dimly, he registered the sound of glass specimen jars breaking—and ran toward the blaze.

As he approached, he saw with relief that a line of servants was passing buckets of water up to the building, where footmen, gardeners, and stable hands were working fast to snuff out the fire. At the same time, smoldering artifacts, specimens, and books were being smothered in horse blankets and hurried away from the danger.

Luke looked around, trying to figure out where he would be of most use. That's when he spotted Philip Denton.

Denton was standing on the steps. Too close to the fire. Staring at it with a startling vacancy in his eyes. His jacket and the knees of his trousers were sooty, as was his face and fair hair. He did not seem to notice servants running past.

Luke went to him. Noting his pallor, the tremble in his hands—one of which was burned and blistering. "Denton," Luke said, sharply. When the man did not answer, Luke clapped him hard on the shoulder. "Are you sensible? Let's step away, shall

we?”

For a moment, Denton did not respond. Then he blinked, as though hearing Luke from a great distance away. “Come with me,” Luke said. “Before a spark catches.”

Denton slowly nodded. Luke put a hand on his shoulder, and began to walk with the man toward Bexley Hall. Denton was wracked with a coughing fit, spit out something black, but kept moving.

“How badly are you injured?”

Denton shook his head, indicating that he was the least of their worries. “At least a quarter of the exhibit is lost,” he muttered, his throat raw from smoke inhalation.

“How did it begin?”

Denton ran a hand over his face, which only served to smear it with more soot. “Bexley. Knocked over a lamp, I think.”

He meant Charles Calthorpe, Earl of Bexley. The museum was Bexley’s brainchild, and he’d spent the past seven of his forty-six years designing and overseeing the construction of an edifice dedicated to his passion for the life sciences. The museum was to be a library, a repository for rare specimens, and a grand exhibition hall for displays open to the public.

Luke had accompanied Bexley on several scientific expeditions over the years. They were recently home from India, their second journey there, an adventure that saw them collect over a dozen new insect species and some very interesting snakes.

They also both collected the same wretched illness, spending several days aboard their docked ship, feverish and violently casting their accounts. Luke recovered inside

a week, but Bexley took longer, and in truth had never since shown his typical level of contagious energy. He'd seemed ... older.

Perhaps that was why Luke was overcome by a feeling of dread.

Knocked over a lamp, I think.

Luke did not want to ask. But had to. "Is he ... "

Philip Denton's face told Luke everything.

Later, Luke would learn that Denton had dragged Bexley from the building, shouting for help, whereupon Bexley revived and pleaded with him to save his field journals. Denton had plunged back into the building and secured the box from the smoke-filled anteroom of Bexley's office, obtaining a nasty burn in the process. When he'd returned to the lawn, the earl was dead.

According to the doctor who arrived later, the earl showed every common sign that his heart had seized. "As deaths go, it is one of the more merciful. Often, it is over very quickly."

In this moment, Luke only knew shock at the profound unfairness of it. They at last stood at the eve of the grand opening of the museum that represented Bexley's deepest passion and life's work. An institution that would serve to awe and educate the visiting public with the earl's decades of work in the natural world.

And he had not lived to see it.

Denton, an investor in the museum and sometime shipmate, dealt with the tragedy the best way he knew how: by becoming exceedingly drunk and staying that way for the better part of the next week.

Luke was sorely tempted to join him, but several scientists had arrived from Oxford to help mount the inaugural exhibition. Luke was determined to rally them to work around the clock to salvage what they could. To try .

There were four of them, professors of the life sciences. Professor Fitz was a soft-spoken , spectacled man in his late thirties. Professors Mangrove and Wallace had been Luke's lecturers at Oxford—the former rotund and enthusiastic, the latter a short-statured , snobbish perfectionist. The final, Lord Spencer-Beckett , was a school friend of Denton's, six and thirty, raven-haired , pale, skinny, prone to overindulgence—famous in their circles for delivering word-perfect talks on the anatomy of Squamata while visibly typhooned.

The scientists had begun taking stock mere hours after the fire was extinguished. The exhibition was theoretically set to open in only three weeks, with a staggering list of aristocrats, scholars and luminaries planning to attend.

The only question was a painfully simple one: was the opening still possible?

Damage was worst in Bexley's office, which was now held up by scaffolding as the charred remains were gutted and replaced.

The exhibition hall suffered serious damage to one wall, but the required repair was manageable.

Most relieving, the library wing was entirely spared.

Less fortunately, most of the crates from their most recent voyage had been stored in and around Bexley's office. Specimens were preserved in alcohol, which spread the fire with nasty, ravenous speed.

Many specimens were obliterated. Others, beyond salvage.

But some—perhaps, perhaps enough to pull some version of an exhibition together—had been pulled from the building intact, if wet, jostled, and sticky with soot. Under the hand of an expert, they might to be set to rights.

Of course, to exhibit them, one needed the Latin and common name of each creature. Where it was discovered, details of its observed traits and life cycle. Bexley had developed a system of simple numbered tags upon each specimen, corresponding to a detailed entry in his journal.

As for those journals, Denton had saved them. In so doing, saving the exhibition.

Or one might think. There was one small issue. They were written entirely in code.

This was not a surprise to anyone involved. Not Bexley's brother John Calthorpe, now Earl of Bexley; not Denton, who considered the man's penchant for ending letters with encoded postscripts to be among the most irritating aspects of their friendship; and not Luke, who, as a boy of fourteen, shadowing Bexley around his butterfly vivarium, was often handed a sheet of foolscap covered in absolute hieroglyphs.

Although Luke was familiar with Bexley's ciphers, he'd never had to break one. Denton confirmed in no uncertain terms that he, too, would not know where to begin.

The opening of the Bexley Museum and Library had been a momentous occasion. Now, it felt yet more momentous, but crushingly grave. All agreed that the opening must occur as planned, to honor the late earl. Luke and the professors were hard at work salvaging specimens. The new earl was overseeing reconstruction. Denton helped manage workflow and communication with the public, and boosted morale via filthy jokes.

But someone needed to decode the journals.

This troubling fact hung over the party at a somber dinner a few days later. They'd all tried their hand at the cipher. They'd applied every key they could find among the late earl's papers. They'd worked their way through a book in the library called Common Ciphers, and one called The Art of the Epistolary Secret.

They had made no progress.

They'd reached out to a professor of mathematics at Oxford, only to discover he was on sabbatical in the mountains of Germany. Another was ill. A third could not be located, and a fourth had not responded. They were running out of time, and considering such options as bringing in a horde of mathematics students, paying them extravagantly, filling them with strong tea, and locking them in the library.

But then Denton, perhaps because he'd chosen that day to pause in his drinking for the first time since the fire, realized that he had a better answer. The answer.

The dinner had progressed in near-silence. The new earl finally said what they were all thinking. "I fear the exhibit will need to be postponed. Regardless of whom we bring in, we cannot predict whether they can solve the problem swiftly. The mind that kept those journals was as singular as it was brilliant."

Luke saw an expression pass over Denton's face. The closest he'd seen to a smile since Denton had discovered his friend on the museum floor.

"I cannot believe I did not make the connection immediately. But I know the mathematician with the best possible chance of getting us our solution quickly." All eyes turned to Denton. "Did you know, Ashburton," he said to Luke, "that Bexley had a favorite young friend? Yet younger and favorite-er than thee?" With a wink, Denton chose that moment to pour himself a glass of wine with a flourish—evidently, feeling abruptly celebratory. "With whom he corresponded for well over a decade, entirely in those blasted codes? In that respect, no one on earth knows his mind

better.”

Everyone sat up straighter. Luke leaned in. “Tell me who he is and I’ll fetch him at once.”

“ He is a dear friend of my cousin Arabella, Duchess of Blackflint. His name is Miss Grace Chetwood.” Denton smiled in earnest now, enjoying the table’s reaction.

L uke realized he was staring at Denton, and hoped he only seemed like a man dubious of the intellect of the fairer sex.

And not what he was. A man who knew that women were easily as smart as men, and quite often far smarter.

But that Grace Chetwood was vapid, distractible, spoiled, self-indulgent , and infuriating.

If she can work at the level we need, I’ll eat both my shoes.

Denton eyed Luke with interest. “Are you and Miss Chetwood acquainted?”

“In passing,” Luke said, hoping he sounded casual.

“Ah. For a moment, it looked as though you had a negative opinion of her.”

“Not at all. We have spoken but a few words to one another, and it was perfectly pleasant.”

Until it wasn’t. And she slapped me in the face.

“Well then. I shall write to her father at once.”

“I have heard,” Luke said, carefully, “That the lady is very newly betrothed.” He’d only yesterday read it in a long, busy letter from his sister, crammed with ton gossip. It is all anyone is talking about.

“We only need her for a few days—surely the wedding is not to occur so immediately.” Denton was too polite to add the unless. Unless they required a special license. For some reason. Related to indiscretion.

Luke suspected that indiscretion was the entire reason for it. “Surely not,” he agreed.

“Miss Chetwood’s father was friendly with Bexley, and given the tragedy, and the urgency, I hold hope he will be amenable to lending us his daughter.” Denton raised his glass, and the whole table followed suit. “To the possibility of divine intervention,” he said, and drank the entirety in one go.

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May 10, 1822

7 days to the opening

Grace Chetwood had always been good at mathematics. So she knew: putting off a problem was not the same as solving it. Nevertheless, her body felt weightless with relief as the carriage pulled away from her family's Mayfair home and onto the road to Bexley Hall.

It was not a happy trip, certainly. Receiving the news that her friend was dead had shocked Grace to her core. She'd sobbed nearly to the point of hyperventilation. She could not believe he was gone.

She'd received correspondence from Charles Calthorpe, Earl of Bexley—Charlie, to her, in his letters—only last month. He told her of his plan to open his museum upon his return to England. You must attend the opening, dear Grace. It will be the proudest day of my life.

The letter had been encoded using an Atbash Cipher—it took her some time to realize it, because the cipher was so simple that she'd skipped right past it in favor of more complex solutions. All one had to do to make the key was to write the alphabet down the page, then write it again, backward, from Z to A, in a second column. As a child, Atbash had been one of her favorites—it amused her to play with a cipher so old it was utilized in the Bible. Perhaps he'd revisited it out of nostalgia. Difficult not to see a certain tender, tragic prescience in that.

Charlie's letters were a glimmering highlight of Grace's youth. Strangely-marked

envelopes, stuffed full of exotic trinkets and enciphered correspondence. They would arrive with a linen bag not much bigger than a shilling, holding a tiny scroll containing some clue. A hint that pointed her toward a substitution pattern, or to one inspired by, say, the rhyme scheme of a sonnet, or the length of a lunar cycle, or to the enervating realization that the cipher was simple, but the ensuing letter would then need to be translated from the Portuguese.

Thinking of Charlie now, his endless energy, his off-color wit, his fascination with the most delightfully eclectic range of subjects—insects, stones, Greek mythology, the oeuvre of Johann Sebastian Bach, foreign alphabets read from right to left or north to south—brought tears into her eyes, for the ten thousandth time in the past two days.

Grace cried easily enough that she treated tears as a minor inconvenience. Emotion was like that—a wave that seemed to swallow everything, but passed quickly enough if only you let yourself feel it. And Grace did, as a personal philosophy, prefer to feel everything. Still, her companion for this journey, her widowed aunt Mrs. Amelia Wilmington, very much resembled Grace's mother in that she had a low tolerance for dramatics of any kind. So Grace turned her head away, pretending to gaze out the window as she dashed the tears away with her gloves.

Aunt Amelia huffed as she turned the page in the book she was reading. The Philosophy of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Within their family, the cultivation of knowledge in members of the fairer sex was expected, though always with the caveat that one must never show off about it.

Despite her aptitudes, Grace was by and large regarded by her family as its least serious member. Her bubbly enthusiasm, equally bestowed on matters erudite and frivolous, cast her as less than discerning. Grace's father found it charming, but her mother met her "promiscuous joie de vivre" with pointed tolerance. And certainly, Aunt Amelia made no mystery of her disdain for Grace's love of the latest fashion,

and gossip, and novels, and sweet desserts. And for her overemotional demeanor.

It was fortunate, then, that Aunt Amelia admired dear Charlie, and had read all of his books. So she was willing to accompany her niece as chaperone during her time among the entirely male coterie working on the museum.

“A pity, the timing of this trip,” Aunt Amelia murmured, and Grace looked over to see that the small woman was now regarding her with sharp blue eyes. “On the heels of your betrothal. It is fortunate that Lord St. George was so understanding.”

“Well. It’s done, after all, and the wedding will take place well after I return.”

Amelia was unaware that Grace had begged her father to allow her to go. She’d pressed his every compassionate vulnerability. Because the truth was, there had been discussion of obtaining a special license immediately.

And then, the very next day, word came of Bexley’s death and the urgent need of Grace’s expertise.

“Papa. Please ,” Grace had implored him. “I will never forgive myself if the earl’s work is destroyed because I was not able to give some small assistance for just a few days. It can wait.”

“It cannot,” he said, quietly.

“It can, it’s really very simple,” she said, making her voice cheerful and persuasive. She had two brothers and three sisters, and she was, she knew, her father’s favorite. He was generally inclined to indulge her. “As you know, I am two things. A fine mathematician and a terrible gossip. I am the very first to peer at a calendar when a new marriage produces happy news. If, when I return in one tiny week, the necessity of haste remains, it won’t have been so long that tongues would wag later if... if .”

He winced. She could not blame him. But she forged on. “I assure you, we will be safely within the bounds.”

Well, close enough. If her monthly courses did not arrive by midweek, they would officially be late. But what did fudging this fact by four or five days matter, in the grand scheme?

Grace’s father considered it. He was, she could see, disappointed in her. He loved her enough that the crux of it was less her scandalous behavior—though he wasn’t strictly thrilled by what she’d done—and more that, despite the fact that St. George would one day be Viscount of Penray, he was not the husband Mr. Chetwood envisioned for his daughter. He’d wanted someone as wealthy, as noble. . . but just a bit more of an intellectual.

“The instant I am able to solve the problem, I shall hurl myself into a carriage and make them gallop me all the way home.”

“No hurling,” her father said, mock-stern, much affection in his eyes. “No galloping.” She kissed her father’s cheeks in gratitude, until he told her to stop crying on him.

Her dispensation to go to the Bexley estate had not come without challenges, of course. Aunt Amelia had never cared for Grace. Now, she wrinkled her nose as she discussed the impropriety of Grace leaving so soon on the heels of her betrothal. “I still think we must get you home as quickly as possible. Your handsome fiancé is in London, surrounded by ambitious and unscrupulous females.”

“Oh, I trust him entirely,” Grace said. And sent up a brief prayer for the most unscrupulous females ever born to flock around Randolph St. George and tempt him to behave with scandalous dishonor before all the ton.

Barring that, for some chit to kidnap him, tie him to a chair, and force him to marry her instead.

But never mind that. First, Charlie. She was looking forward to his cipher. She'd always loved finding the little twist that broke them open. And these journals represented the last puzzle left by her friend. The occasion was mournful. But she would delight, at least, in getting to play with him one last time.

The weather in the countryside was warm and it seemed that every flower across the expansive Bexley estate had bloomed at once in tribute to the late earl. The setting sun was pinkening the sky as they approached Bexley Hall.

Grace was eighteen the last time she'd visited, for a grand ball. Her parents and aunt had been there, as had her friend Arabella, and Arabella's dashing cousin Philip Denton, then two and thirty, arm in arm with his wife Catherine. Grace had always lived in comfort, but the opulence of the event had taken her breath away. As had the uniqueness of everything around her—statues of gods from faraway lands; framed tortoise shells where more conventional decor might feature a landscape; silk tapestries; sparkling geodes; whimsical taxidermy; powerful telescopes aimed at the sky in no fewer than three windows.

Grace always felt so much at home around the earl. She felt as though no amount of enthusiasm or emotion could ever be too much for him. She felt downright ordinary in contrast to the exotic sights of Charlie's life.

It wasn't that Grace's appearance was so odd—she stood at an average height, and had the correct amounts of every appendage. But her very red hair, exceedingly ample curves, and the embarrassing abundance of freckles over her cheeks, her arms, her already-attention -subverting décolletage, made her feel slightly freakish in almost any gathering.

Her mother insisted she was perfectly pretty, and Arabella liked to say that her unusual features made her more lovely than the typical English roses surrounding her.

But Grace tended to think of herself as a walking caricature. A little too. Too voluptuous, too giggly, too spotted, too quick to speak, to cry, to gasp. Even more troubling to contemplate, the Grace she presented in public was, in fact, a slightly muffled iteration of her true self. If she weren't aware that it could be perceived as grating, she'd laugh harder, quicker, more. She'd let herself shed tears whenever she heard a sad tale or beautiful music. She'd speak up when she knew the answer, rather than hold her tongue and allow another to speak first.

Nearly always a man, that other. She'd long ago discovered that her giggle might cause a few souls some irritation. But the quickness of her mind would make a great many men downright furious.

Luckily, Grace found it effortless to present herself as having naught between her ears. Something about large, soft breasts and round, excitable hazel-green eyes tended to do the trick. And the giggle, of course.

But Charlie. Charlie had seen straight through her girlishness and into her mind, recognizing a kindred spirit. And perhaps for him it had been trivial to send that loud little redheaded girl all those puzzles. But to her, it was confirmation that at least one powerful man in the wide world knew that she was special. And that her hair was the least of what made her so.

Philip Denton greeted Grace and Aunt Amelia, helping them down from the carriage.

"Mrs. Wilmington, striking as ever," he said smoothly, bowing over Aunt Amelia's hand. Despite herself, she smiled.

He turned to Grace with the same sly, avuncular smile he'd given since she was a

rambunctious child of five. “And you. A vision. Have you been in touch with my cousin?”

“Arabella and her duke are well,” Grace assured him. “Her last letter was replete with hints that their family might soon expand.”

That drew a genuine, fond smile from the man. How long had it been since Grace saw Philip? Two years—Arabella’s betrothal dinner. He’d lost weight, Grace noticed, and, though clean and presentable, smelled just a bit of whiskey. One hand was bandaged from the fire; she wondered if it caused him pain.

“We’ll see you and your aunt settled in your rooms, and then I fear I must whisk you off to the library straightaway. Time is of the essence. The place is crawling with esteemed men of science, and every one of them is baffled.”

Grace nodded. Determined not to be intimidated.

“One is acquainted with you, by the way. So you’ll have a friendly face. Mr. Luke Ashburton,” Philip said. “You do know Ash, correct?”

Hell and damnation.

Grace’s serene smile took inordinate energy. It required everything she had to conceal how deeply she hated Luke Ashburton.

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Upon entering Bexley Hall, Grace and Aunt Amelia were greeted by Charlie's brother John Calthorpe. The new earl was a neat, personable gentleman in his early forties, eyes pleasantly crinkled, only truly interested in animals that could be ridden, hunted, or fished, though he'd always admired his brother's devotion to the study of the "boring tiny ones." Though the man was understandably somber now, Grace recollected Calthorpe as warm, devoted to his wife and their three boisterous young sons. Lady Agnes and the children were away visiting her mother, to Calthorpe's subdued relief. "It's chaotic enough, here," he'd muttered.

Grace was seen to a room decorated in hues of rose, with framed pressed flowers on the walls and a view of the garden that featured bright plants arranged to follow a spiraling design of small stones. Atop the room's dresser perched a taxidermied ferret wearing an Elizabethan ruff and tiny crown, posed in an eternal chivalrous bow. Books lined the table by the bed. She peered at the spines and realized they were all authored by Charlie.

Suddenly, she was crying again, and hugging the books to her chest. A strange aspect of death—feeling the loss yet not being able to believe it. The truth that Charlie's life had ended seemed impossible, antithetical to everything about the man's vibrance.

Grace felt a shot of fear. What if she was never again treated the way Charlie treated her? Fundamentally, he saw her as someone smart and interesting, with an inner life worth investigating. So, so soon, Grace would become The Honorable Mrs. Randolph St. George. And she had little hope that her future husband would ever see her at all.

This short time in Charlie's home was more than one goodbye. It was a farewell to he

r friend ... and to a time in her life when anyone cared at all what lived between her ears.

Even with its charred, boarded-up corner, the Bexley Museum and Library was one of the most beautiful buildings Grace had ever seen. It stood alone in the landscape, surrounded by ancient groves and rolling hills, a brisk fifteen-minute walk from Bexley Hall. One moment, all Grace could see was trees. The next, around a bend in the path, the building came into view, massive and solid, its cream stone walls almost luminous. Charlie had commissioned it in a harmonious Classical Greek style, but incorporated nods to the architecture and materials of an Indian palace.

Upon stepping into the lofty entrance hall, Grace was greeted by a taxidermied tiger and a real orange tree growing out of the floor. She spun, staring at all the beauty.

Philip led her and Aunt Amelia to the library. The walls of the large, hexagonal room held floor-to-ceiling bookcases. There was a long wooden table, and two leather chairs before a cavernous fireplace. The ceiling was domed, painted with a gilded spiral containing scenes of gods bestowing wisdom upon mortal men. Through a door, Grace glimpsed a solarium with green plants.

Amelia settled by the fireplace with her book, while Philip led Grace to the table. It bore marginally organized piles of paper scrawled with sums and scratched-out keys—evidence of the scientists' failures. In the center of the table were four large linen-bound notebooks, as well as a smaller one with a weathered leather cover.

Philip waved to the journals. "Here, Bexley's entire vision lives and dies. Not to put too fine a point upon your task. We—you—have less than a week. Tea? Coffee? Strong spirits?"

"A bit of each, to start, followed by opium whenever you can manage it."

Philip chuckled. “Deadening your brain aside, we are prepared to provide you with any assistance you need. We can rotate in a professor to help test keys, and we can bring someone in full-time ... ”

“Thank you. It doesn’t take long to know whether a key works. And I may find something important, auditioning solutions. For now, I’d prefer to work alone. I understand the urgency, I assure you.”

He nodded, grateful. “Sweet Grace. Thank the holy infant in his manger for your brilliance.”

“I’m not sure I—”

“Bexley was sure.” He rose. “Well. I shall be in the exhibition hall, attempting to bring order to chaos. Drop in if—”

A voice in the doorway interrupted him. “Denton, you’re needed in the—”

The voice stopped abruptly. When she looked up, she saw why.

Luke Ashburton stood in the doorway that led to the exhibition hall, arms full of empty shadowboxes. He was looking at her with an expression of disdain so potent it almost seemed to surprise him more than her.

Like Philip, Ashburton had changed since Grace last saw him. He seemed broader-shouldered, his cheeks a bit hollower, skin tanned from all the out-of-doors physical effort of his travels. His abundant head of unruly, curling brown hair, however, was unchanged. As was his slightly crooked nose, and the white scar that bisected his eyebrow, creating a small gap in its line. As well as his uncommon, lean height—the doorway seemed suddenly lower with him standing in it.

Also the same: his arrogant affect. Everything from the cant of his brow to the set of his mouth spoke of a man as convinced of his own brilliance as he was of the ordinariness of most everyone else, including Grace.

Grace, most of all.

Now, facing Luke Ashburton for the first time in two years, Grace's right palm grew hot. The memory of contact with his cheek when she ended their final encounter by slapping him.

I would rather die than touch a man like you.

Pity, as it's all you were born for.

"The cavalry has arrived," Philip said, before relieving Ashburton of half his burden of frames. "Don't be rude, Ash, thank the lady for saving every hide in this lofty establishment."

"I haven't saved anything yet," Grace murmured.

And at that moment, the beast said exactly the same thing : "She hasn't saved anything yet."

She felt her face catch flame. She knew violent color must even now be spreading down her neck, across her décolletage, and she cursed her inability to hide her feelings.

Meanwhile, Ashburton at least had the manners to look embarrassed that he'd spoken the thought aloud. "We are most grateful for your help, Miss Chetwood," he now amended, stiffly, and gave an abbreviated bow, awkwardly keeping his armload in place.

“It is my honor,” she said. “I wish nothing more than to see the earl’s museum open exactly as he’d dreamed it.”

“Well,” Ashburton said. She expected him to follow with some easy sentiment. Well, we have every faith in you. Well, all you can do is try your best. Well, let me know if I can be of assistance.

But he couldn’t seem to make the words come. So allergic was he to saying the slightest kind thing to her.

“Well,” she replied, allowing her voice to go a little sharp.

“Come along, Ash, let’s allow the lady to work in peace.”

Ashburton regarded her for a last moment. She felt rather like a flea under that gaze. Then, with an allegedly respectful tip of his head, he turned on his heel and exited. Philip followed.

Never mind the arrogant, curly-haired demon. Grace had work to do.

Though the fifth journal was smaller, it seemed to employ the same cipher as the larger ones. Grace carefully studied them, and began to make a mental list of approaches she would try.

Being but a room away from her least favorite person added strain to her concentration. She found she had to rise frequently to pace, shake out her limbs, regain her focus.

It was absolutely ridiculous. She’d spoken to Luke Ashburton twice in her blessed life before this day. Inexcusable to be distracted by a snide, superior man she’d spoken to twice. Especially when the first of those two encounters dramatically

misrepresented his character.

Luke Ashburton had seemed kind , the first night they met.

That was the true jape of it, how wrong Grace had been.

In her defense, she had heard of him before she saw him, and everything she'd heard had flattered the man. Third son of a baron, devoted to a life of the mind. Ambitious explorer. Wrote a book about moths with such gripping prose that it became fashionable for members of the ton to be seen promenading with a copy tucked under an arm. Discovered a new species of snake right here in England. Despite having no title and no significant wealth—rumor held that he lived in a four-room townhome flat near but not in Mayfair—he was, owing to his growing notoriety in academic circles and the truism that brilliant gentlemen who travel the world tend to accumulate riches eventually, considered an intriguing and passably viable prospect.

It helped that Ashburton was attractive, in a bookish, aloof way. “Appealingly asymmetrical,” she'd heard a woman call him, referring to the crookedness of his aquiline nose, which brought a hint of the pugilist to his otherwise refined features. His angular height only added to the compelling effect. As did the unsmiling, thoughtful expression his face tended to fall into as he watched.

He always watched, Grace would come to understand.

They'd first met at the Marwells' ball, early in the season. Grace and her friend Clara Abernathy had approached a circle of acquaintances at the periphery of the ballroom. Among them was a curly-haired man she'd never encountered, taller, slimmer, somehow more serious than the rest. Grace watched his gaze move over the crowd, thorough, inquisitive, and she was seized with the desire to be the focus of it.

It triggered butterflies in her stomach, which, as ever, made her giggle, and it was her

giggle that made him look her way.

She could have sworn the sound of her laugh amused him—that is to say, that he liked it. Later he would call it out as one of her worst traits. But in that moment, he looked intrigued. And when he looked at her, something in the way his eyes traveled over her form and to her face stopped her in her tracks.

She was used to men's gazes fixating on her hips, her breasts, her soft arms. The shape of her body seemed to negate curiosity beyond its particulars. If a man bothered to meet her eyes, there was something lascivious in his, as though the lushness of her form told him something wicked about her character.

Not so with Ashburton. He took in her form briefly, with a shimmer of frank appreciation, but when his gaze landed on her face, it held extraordinary self-awareness . As if to say that he knew . He knew what her appearance must make people—men—think of her. And he would not disappoint her by jumping to the same conclusions.

And then, he read what was in her eyes. A comprehension that there was something different about him. Curiosity.

Something was happening, in the blink of an eye. Two strangers, conversing without words, agreeing via twin slight smirks that they were meeting under ridiculous circumstances. But nevertheless, intrigued by one another.

Philip had been there with his wife Catherine, and introduced Ashburton as a colleague, with whom he and the Earl of Bexley had gone on a recent “scientific adventure.” Ashburton had teased Philip, pointing out that the man had never in his life read a scientific text. “I prefer to learn in the field,” Philip said, unruffled. “Reading sends me to sleep.” He winked at Grace and Clara. Grace, to her consternation, giggled again.

And then, a pause, one waiting for Grace to fill it. But in that moment, Ashburton's presence tied her tongue. She was noticing that his eyes were more gray than blue and wondering if it plagued him that his curly hair refused to stay in place.

Then Clara said something charming that Grace did not mark at all. Ashburton turned his full attention to her.

Grace would later wonder if things might have ended less harshly had she declared herself when she could, when he was open to considering her a person with interests and depth, and not merely a vapid social climber. What if she had mentioned that she read voraciously, philosophy and scandal sheets alike, or that her particular passions included not only fashion but also the geometric interpretation of imaginary numbers?

But she'd gone mute, because she found the light in his eyes so sharp and unusual. She didn't yet know that the light was merely extreme self-regard .

She did go soft in the head, so in a way, she deserved it. That he came to regard her as an idiot.

He'd filled the silence with a dry remark, and Clara had parried it with one of her own.

Grace had stood there and giggled.

Grace worked into the night, sometimes at the table, sometimes leaning against a bookcase, enjoying the soft support of leather spines, sometimes wandering, making her mental list.

The only positive aspect of her work was that eventually, it so consumed her thoughts that she was able to push away vitriolic musings about the arrogant varlet in the

exhibition hall. By the time Aunt Amelia came to collect Grace for bed, Grace hadn't thought of him once in at least five minutes.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:33 am

May 11, 1822

6 days to the opening

Had the late earl been alive to oversee the inaugural exhibition, Luke would have functioned as his assistant. He'd have spent this time working at a far more leisurely pace, preparing specimens—his specialty, owing to his patience and the precision of his hands.

Now, everyone looked to Luke with questions, and expected him to make final decisions. No one had precisely decided that the exhibition was now his to oversee. But logic dictated that the task move into his hands. Bexley had discussed every detail of his vision with Luke. Luke was his right hand. Of course it all must fall to Luke.

It felt like trying to assemble a puzzle missing half its pieces, in the dark, at a funeral.

Luke set up stations around the grand, echoing exhibition hall, away from the wall being reconstructed by a noisy team of builders. He assigned tasks to the professors: assessing and sorting, cleaning and restoration, preparing for presentation, and drafting the detailed display cards that would accompany each specimen. Capturing Bexley's particular interaction with the insect on the pin felt central to the endeavor.

Unfortunately, the information Luke supplied from memory did not adequately convey the earl's spirit. They needed those journals.

Meanwhile, all worked somberly, against the cacophonous backdrop of structural

repair.

There was one reliable source of brief delight: pulling a jar, intact, out of packing material, and beholding some outrageously gorgeous creature. Beetles of such intense iridescence, they seemed more jewel than animal. Spiders with comically fearsome mandibles. Gray moths with wings so thin they looked like they'd evaporate under a strong gaze.

And then it was back to work.

All his life, Luke had lost track of time when he worked. He'd only realize he'd been bent over his task for hours because a muscle would cramp or his bladder would report an urgent need to pass water. During the final stretch of writing his first book, he'd learned to rise slowly from his chair after several instances of nearly fainting from ignored hunger.

But because he was in charge, and thus would slow down the work if he collapsed, Luke resolved to rise and stretch every hour or so, and to stuff something down whenever his stomach groaned. If he found himself staring into space, he'd take that as an indication he needed to shake feeling back into his limbs, go gather a lungful of fresh air.

His legs were stiff as he walked through the echoing library. The last several times he'd passed, Miss Chetwood had not been seated at her table. This did not surprise him. She did not seem capable of sitting still, on account of her high susceptibility to being dazzled by whatever shiny object intruded upon the periphery of her vision. Luke was puzzled as to why Denton and the others didn't seem more concerned that she simply was not up to the task before her.

He'd spy her at a bookcase, upper body angled sideways as she read titles on a low shelf. Or drifting about, munching an apple, neck craning as she looked at the painted

scenes on the ceiling. Or leaning against a wall of books, eyes closed, antsy fingers tapping the spines to either side of her hips.

Of course, the Oxford men seized any excuse to talk to her. They were polite, but their eyes were sharp and interested, and, when she wasn't looking, rather hungry. Lord Spencer-Beckett was too miserable from last night's drink to expend energy on anything but his job, but the rest all made so many excuses to visit the library that Denton caught on and pulled each to the side to scold them for the transparency of their fascination.

Even so, Miss Chetwood never lacked hot tea, a biscuit, or fresh fruit—whenever one ducked out, they returned with some little golden fleece. She accepted it all with a benign smile.

Of course she did. Men tripped over their tongues wherever she went. The scientists' attentions must have struck her as mild, even sweet in comparison to the maneuvers of the ton's rakes and sophisticates.

Still, it all put Luke into rather a dark mood.

This time, as he passed through the library, Miss Chetwood was, for a change, sitting at the table. Her chin rested on an ungloved hand; the other, he saw, was lightly spattered with ink. Her casual posture belied the action of her quill—flying across the page, her writing light and shockingly neat, considering the velocity of her nib. Pausing to dip her quill seemed, each time, annoying to her, and that explained the spatters—she plinked the tip into the inkwell without looking, impatient to get back to writing.

Her focus, he had to admit, reminded him of his colleagues. And of himself.

What was singular, though, was her speed. He and the others had labored at the

bloody cipher for days. Their work had been halting, painfully slow, replete with frustrated sighs—at one point, the famously mild Professor Fitz had hurled his pencil across the room—and long pauses to do arithmetic on scratch paper.

She was doing all of it in her head.

Her expression was pure focus. She was sucking her bottom lip in concentration, her eyes so lit with enthusiasm that they reminded him of fireflies.

He did n't know how long he stood there, watching. A strange unease rising in him. A mix of annoyance and fascination that would not harmonize, but clashed, oil and water.

Her aunt was reading by the fire, and now coughed and stretched. The sound caused Grace to look up, blinking, with an expression deeply familiar to Luke—she'd lost all track of time.

Immediately, her eyes went to the man standing there.

Her eyebrows flew up. She blushed, straightening.

“Do you require something, Mr. Ashburton?” Her voice had a guarded quality. She spotted the ink on her hand. Embarrassed, she worked to rub it out with her thumb.

What he wanted was to step closer. He felt it like a rope tied to his ribs, pulling him forward. A speck of ink had managed to land on her clavicle. He wanted to look at it more closely. He wanted to lick his thumb and wipe it from her skin.

No, he wanted to punch himself in the face. Weak. You're weak. Don't act as though you've never seen an alluring woman. You have work to do.

“No,” he said, and he was relieved that the word sounded cold.

Her eyes narrowed. “Gladdens me to hear it,” she said tartly, and returned to work.

Unaccountably embarrassed, Luke resumed walking through the space. His footsteps echoing. The sound of her nib, scratching fast across the page, taunting him.

Observation was a power Luke had cultivated all his life. He could determine if a beehive’s queen was unwell based on the behavior of her workers. He could identify beasts in the forest by tracks or by scat. He was rather famous in his social circle for his ability to discern, with one deep glance, whether a horse was inclined to kick or a dog to bite.

This, in the end, was what bothered him most about Grace Chetwood. She made him doubt his own power of observation.

Standing over an emerald *Heterorhina elegans* in the exhibit hall, Luke was doing his best to concentrate. But his mind kept returning to the woman in the next room.

Judging by the pace of her work, he might have been slightly extreme in his assumption that she was too unserious for her task. But something tight and righteous inside him resisted adjusting his opinion of the woman.

One thing Luke knew for certain was that no instinct was to be trusted, because he was a member of a pathetically weak species: the human male. Their flaw being, of course, that the brute demands of their bodies tended to override the wisdom of their brains. Luke did his best to organize his life in a manner that tended responsibly to physical needs: exercise, light meals, long walks, visits to the whorehouse when handling himself did not adequately dispatch carnal urges. And yet . . . his body liked to intrude upon his peace anyway.

That's what this was. Grace Chetwood, intruding. His doltish body responded to her in the way it always had. No information about the woman's mind or character made a whit of difference to Luke's anatomy.

Wasn't that all it had ever been? From the first moment he saw her? His flailing mind, attempting to ascribe some noble facet to lust?

Wasn't that why after their brief encounter at the Marwells' ball, Luke had found himself, only three days later, excited to be attending another? Luke had never cared for balls. Stuffy seas of preening idiots. But he had a mission: approach Grace Chetwood. Have a conversation. Discover who she was.

So he made the error of visiting the next ball she'd be likely to attend.

By the time he had spotted her, in a sparkling gown the color of a Madagascar citrine, her dance card was full. So, he danced with other women. Still, she was the one he watched.

On paper, Miss Chetwood should not have been so compelling. That high, crystalline giggle could well become irritating. The red hair caused her to clash with many environments simply by existing in them. Her body was insistently voluptuous, and she gleefully opted for the latest style, uncaring of whether it framed her figure outrageously. The woman was bracingly unapologetic, if not constitutionally defiant.

Luke had, up to that point, largely been compelled by women who were quiet, introspective, unmoved by gossip, immune to silly fads. Ethereal, dark-haired ladies with dreamy, distant eyes.

And yet, when he saw Miss Chetwood, dancing or laughing or merely standing, taking in the whirl around her, enjoying, no, delighting in the chaos ... Luke could not take his bloody eyes off her.

She was lovely. But ... Luke had a strange, almost painful instinct that there was more to this woman than he could hope to discern simply by watching in a ballroom. That in some way, the lushness of her form was engineered to mislead the easily distracted from the truth of her. And that as a result, very few people—if any— did know who she was. What she was.

That was the spark that lit in his gut. Not so different from the one that drove him to the library or into the forest or onto a ship to the Americas. A spark that was a whisper: there is so much more here for you to discover. Things you do not even have a name for yet. Look deeper, and you will be rewarded.

By late that evening, it had become clear that Miss Chetwood was particularly charmed by a black-haired lord of perhaps five and twenty. Elegant, handsome, the future marquess of something or other.

Miss Chetwood and the gentleman danced two dances, and by the second, Luke's curiosity had abruptly given way to a sharp, unpleasant desire to distract himself by any means necessary.

So he'd left the room. To the garden—too cold—then back inside. When, walking down a hall, he heard that familiar little bell, her laugh, coming from an alcove.

Luke had stepped into an unoccupied parlor. Through the crack in the door—was he honestly spying through a crack in the bloody door?—he could see into the alcove.

Where Miss Chetwood was allowing the black-haired gentleman to lean very close indeed.

The intimacy of it was apparent, and Luke knew he should look away. His next, indignant thought was that this was what he did : observe creatures in their natural habitats.

He could not hear what the man was saying, but Miss Chetwood listened with sparkling eyes. He felt a pang of longing.

The man had leaned in to place a kiss upon her mouth. A long kiss. Long enough for her to laugh, and stop laughing, and for him to drag her closer.

She broke their contact. And giggled—nervously, it seemed to Luke—with a gloved hand over her mouth. Her eyes were wide.

The man stepped to her again, taking her off guard with his second kiss—aggressive, now, and Luke knew an urge to race over and pull the brute off her.

But then, Luke saw her melt into it. She made a small, breathy noise that, to his mortification, shot straight to his loins.

And then a trio of ladies had swept down the hall, and Miss Chetwood ducked back to hide.

“We should return,” she told the gentleman once the others were gone.

“Not yet,” he said, and reached for her waist.

She swatted his hand with a smile, then pulled him with her toward the dance floor.

Luke had lingered, contemplating his certainty that the lord was an inadequate suitor for Miss Chetwood. Any man was, whose wooing technique included pushing past a lady’s resistance. Such behavior betrayed a belief that the carnal was a treasure to seize, rather than a voyage to take. Miss Chetwood, Luke had observed, moved through the world at a high, energetic velocity. She needed a man who would take his time. Ride out her initial burst of excitement, pull her into something deeper.

If I kissed her, I would move to her slowly. I would take my time with those lips. Until she grabbed my hair and demanded more.

But quickly, Luke had shaken that notion off. What a useless train of thought . He was no handsome future marquess, after all. He was a soft-spoken , odd-looking , unnecessarily tall third son who spent his days staring at insects and his nights writing about them.

Silly of him to come here tonight imagining that a conversation with her could ever have amounted to anything. In a certain way, the clarity of it was soothing.

Perhaps, he thought then, we are meant to have a friendship instead.

Recalling it now, Luke was stunned by his own inanity. A friendship.

Torture, to be in close quarters with the woman now. Every time he looked at her, he was reminded of his worst moments.

Luke realized that his hand, holding a fragile moth, was trembling.

He stepped back and blew out an exhale. Christ. This was unacceptable.

He knew a real moment of hate for Grace Chetwood then. For turning him into this.

You did this to yourself, you imbecile.

Somehow, that did not lessen his agitation. But he had work to do. And he needed steady hands for it.

He closed his eyes, imagined taking all the unwelcome chaos and stuffing it into a small iron box in his chest. Slamming the box closed. Locking it. And throwing the

key into a volcano.

Luke got back to work.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:33 am

May 12, 1822

5 days to the opening

Grace dreamed of the orange tree in the entrance hall. Birds on every branch chirped in a code she could not decipher. The more frantically she tried, the taller the tree grew, till it burst through the ceiling, destroying the building.

She awoke sore and ill-rested . And, truth be told, worried.

No. Too soon to fret.

Out of respect for Charlie, Grace had endeavored to pack her least exuberant frocks—though even those were eye-catching . This morning she was glad she'd brought her grass-green day dress. It felt optimistic. And she needed a bit of optimism as she headed down to breakfast.

The professors were already at the table, discussing the day's work. Grace was beginning to understand that this was how grief worked, especially under pressured circumstances such as the impending opening: everyone went about their business, eating, chatting, fretting over details, even joking. The rhythms of normalcy gave surprising solace. Occasionally, a shadow would pass over someone's eyes, as they remembered the reason they were in this situation at all. But those moments passed quickly and without comment. As soon as possible, that person rejoined the conversation, the bustle of the group. There was a job to be done. And to do it, they needed to carry on.

Philip and Lord Spencer-Beckett both looked a bit green this morning as they attempted to counteract last night's drink with a measure of solid nutrition. Spencer-Beckett winced at the sharp sound of Aunt Amelia's voice as she debated with Professor Wallace about which play was Shakespeare's worst.

Luke Ashburton was at the buffet table, selecting his breakfast.

Grace wished she'd realized that the monster would be here. But what would knowing in advance have done for her? She had no suit of armor to pack, nor a vial of poison to sprinkle over his kippers. There was no rehearsing for this sort of unpleasantness, and no trick to get around it. One simply had to continue with one's day, whilst hating one's nemesis so intensely it was a wonder one's thoughts hadn't set his curly hair afire.

Grace picked up a plate and approached with a serene gait. She felt him stiffen as she moved to stand beside him, and that, at least, gave her a scintilla of satisfaction.

"Good morning, Mr. Ashburton," she said, keeping her tone bright.

He assessed her. His eyes moved from her hair to her dress, and though it all took no longer than a breath, he somehow managed to make her feel foolish.

"Good morning, Miss Chetwood," he said, sounding bored. "One can always rely on you to wear something festive."

Snob . "You may not be aware: one is allowed to dress in colors beyond gray. Or is this," she let her eyes skate down, with a faux-sympathetic look, "your way of retaining a constant position of penance for all those little crawling things you murder?"

"Little crawling things," he repeated, in a tone that could be the centerpiece of a

symposium on condescension. “Yes, I suppose that is how you’d think of them.”

“ I will admit I prefer the company of higher species, but then, I am humble enough to imagine I might learn something i n conversing with others. Whereas you know everything .”

“Far from it, but I’ll allow I did know you enjoy a variety of company.”

His tone had a lightness, but she knew exactly what he was implying. Her face went scarlet. He walked away without so much as a final glance her way.

Face still glowing with ire, Grace approached the table ... and saw that the only available chair forced her to sit opposite Ashburton.

So far, Grace’s day seemed resistant to the idea of being tolerable.

Mercifully, the unendingly polite Professor Fitz turned to her, and she focused on him instead as he said, “Your aunt let us know felicitations are in order.”

For a moment, Grace had no idea what he was talking about. Then, realized he must be referring to her betrothal. “Ah, how kind.”

“Miss Chetwood has been beating back suitors for years,” Philip said. “I hope Lord St. George appreciates his profound good luck.”

Something was happening to Luke Ashburton’s face. Grace resisted the urge to stare. But she could feel some suppressed expression ben eath the surface as he stirred his coffee. “All the talk, I hear,” he said, drolly. “St. George’s luck.”

That the others at the table failed to hear the taunt in his voice boggled Grace’s mind. “Oh, we’re both up in the boughs,” Grace said, with all the gaiety she could muster.

“Mmm. And here I was certain he would not wed for some time.”

“Nothing will change a man’s plans more quickly than true love.” She did her utmost to beam.

Ashburton nodded, while his eyes said he did not believe it.

“I hear tell that our good wishes must soon extend also to Ash,” Professor Mangrove said, adding a ridiculous amount of sugar to his tea. Professor Wallace made a vaguely positive harumph.

Grace saw Ashburton startle. “Oh dear,” he said dryly. “The scandal sheets strike again.”

Philip gave a laugh. “Do I have the right of it, or shall I flog my spies for bad information? I’ve heard that to the disappointment of all others, you’ve been courting one Miss Cora Kendall Worthing?” He pronounced each syllable with relish. “Furthermore, that you are perilously close to clinching the deal?”

“Who is Cora Kendall Worthing and how did she seduce Ash into the foul bogs of matrimony?” Spencer-Beckett asked, brushing lank hair from his eyes.

“A diamond,” Philip said, and winked at Ashburton.

“Is that a reference to her beauty, or family coffers?” Spencer-Beckett asked.

Aunt Amelia clucked her tongue. “Manners do mist away in the morning air.”

“Men and their japes, Mrs. Wilmington,” Ashburton said, calm as ever. “No harm in it.”

“Ah,” Philip said, elbowing Spencer-Beckett . “So she’s very rich.”

The men at the table laughed, and Amelia pointedly directed her attention to the window.

Across the table, Ashburton met Grace’s eyes. His were stone blue, and told her nothing.

But ... did that not tell her something ? That he’d made a match—a good one, evidently—and was perilously close to proposing, yet reluctant to speak of it? There must be an Achilles heel in it somewhere.

“If Mr. Ashburton is pursuing marriage, he is hopeless deep in love.” All eyes turned to Grace. Ashburton, to her satisfaction, looked wary. “Mr. Ashburton holds in low regard those who seek to climb socially via marriage.”

“Isn’t that everyone?” Spencer-Beckett asked, fighting a yawn. “We are each of us above or below, are we not?”

“Unless you marry your own sister,” Philip said blandly, and Amelia cleared her throat.

“Nevertheless, Mr. Ashburton has strong feelings in this,” Grace said sweetly. “So one must conclude that Miss Worthing has stolen his heart.”

“Well, so long as she’s an intelligent thief, I am thrilled for him,” Philip said. “For the mediocre man, a stupid wife is necessary, to maintain his illusion of intellectual prowess. But a genuine thinker does best with a partner of the mind. To keep him sharp, keep him striving.”

Amelia made a short, positive noise, and the others murmured agreement—save

Spencer-Beckett , who snorted that smart women weren't worth the effort.

Suddenly, Grace was no longer hungry.

The sky threatened rain as Grace walked alone toward the library. Wishing she could put the phrase out of her head. A partner of the mind.

St. George and she would not, she suspected, have precisely that sort of partnership.

The day St. George proposed—could it really have been only days ago?—they sat together on a stone bench in the garden, and he fixed her with that outrageously winning smile.

“First, I ought to apologize for ... for my impropriety.” Grace managed to suppress a laugh at calling it mere “impropriety” to send a carriage to the back of her father's property in the middle of the night so that she might slip away to be, as he'd whispered on the dance floor, kissed senseless. His eyes at that moment had very intriguingly added, and et cetera.

St. George's tone now was awkward, halting. “And, of course, apologies for my brother. I had no idea he was in the house. One would think he could be trusted to keep a confidence, but he—” He'd begun to sound angry, realized it, and stopped speaking.

That had not been a lovely moment for Grace, lying on the floor of the parlor, feeling exposed and a bit sticky between the thighs, listening to her interrupted lover begging his brother not to reveal the indiscretion.

But it was all for the best. Or ... they could make it so. She could make it so.

“Perhaps it would be best if we spoke frankly,” Grace said.

He nodded, cautiously.

“In considering a future as your wife,” Grace continued, brightly, “I shall be pleased to devote myself to making a charming home, raising well-mannered children, and ensuring that we are the envy of all my husband’s friends.”

He seemed to like it—positioning them as co-conspirators . She risked a more probing look at him. “And I look forward to knowing better how to ...”

She didn’t know how to say it, but it seemed important to acknowledge that their brief lovemaking hadn’t blossomed from the bud. That he’d handled her so hurriedly that she’d rather lost the narrative thread. He’d behaved like a man with a pressing mental checklist. See breasts. Touch nipples. Call her “plump little angel.” Lave spittle over quim before shoving thin, pointy cock inside, then moan puzzlingly non sequitur endearments for the seven thrusts required to spill seed ... instants before being discovered by jealous and vindictive brother.

It had not, in other words, matched Grace’s expectation, much less her imagination.

She’d agreed to the rendezvous largely because after seasons of finding suitor after suitor inadequate and unexciting—perhaps because in playing the marriage market, the game itself had often held more fascination than its theoretical result—she and St. George seemed to be barreling toward betrothal. So she felt it only reasonable to test their compatibility. The thing itself had been bafflingly unexciting, and they’d scrambled apart before Grace had the chance to ascertain whether he could be improved with gentle direction. This was deeply concerning to her.

Well, she could do a bit of it now—make sure he was amenable to doing things more slowly the next time, with at least the amount of erotic build-up she offered herself in the bathtub.

“We were interrupted,” Grace said. “But please know that, in ... sensual matters, my intention is to learn how to ... ”

“Oh, no,” he said, cutting her off with a surprised, uncomfortable smile.

“But surely, with one’s wife—”

“How you were was perfect for a wife,” he said in an oddly cheerful tone.

“You need not spare my feelings, as I know I did not have quite the experience to—”

“You have no need of experience. You have beauty.”

“Yes, but ... that does fade. And—”

“You are perfect,” he said, to end the discussion. “These matters are beneath you. The point is the offspring, anyway.”

Oh God. He truly did not care if it ever got better than that .

Lovemaking isn’t everything, she reminded herself. We are to share our full lives.

“Tell me, what brings you joy?” He looked puzzled by the question. “My father reads widely within the sciences, for example. And my mother is a student of ancient languages. And you, are you interested in—in languages, or ... ”

She realized he was trying to summon a subject for which he felt a level of passion. “I enjoy horses,” he finally said.

“A h! Lovely!” She sounded shrill to her own ears.

“I do well at wagering. I’ve an eye,” he said, warming up to the subject. “And I enjoy making money. Never boring, that.”

“No, I imagine one must be very creative in business.”

He seemed bewildered by her choice of words. “One hires the right people.”

She hoped he might elaborate, but he only smiled, tightly.

“I myself have a great love of mathematics,” she said.

He blinked. “Well. That is handy. Though obviously I have a man for bookkeeping.”

“Oh, that is well, as I prefer the differential calculus.”

He seemed to be trying to formulate a question, but couldn’t come up with one.

“I find it soothing to work at problems,” Grace continued, when the awful silence began to stretch. “Some women draw, embroider ... I fuss about with numbers.”

“Well. We shall make sure you are provided with all the best ones.”

They both laughed at that. “Oh, I receive those from friends with whom I correspond.”

His brow cocked. “I had no idea so many females were enamored of maths.”

“I’m not certain many are. My correspondents are, in part, male.” They were in whole male, but that suddenly felt unwise to admit. “A professor in Italy whose work centers on—”

“My wife correspondi ng with an Italian professor?” He coughed. “Any professor—any man. That will come to an imm ediate close. I’m surprised your father saw fit to allow it.”

My father treats the women in the family as though we each have a brain.

St. George, eager to change the subject, launched into a detailed description of his family’s homes, and the balls and dinners they might host at each.

Grace liked balls, and dinners. But she suddenly understood that frivolous evenings could not satisfy her in the absence of other interactions—deeper ones. She loved her life because it was a balanced whole. The modiste and mathematics. Scandal sheets and Shakespeare. Turning heads at a ball, and writing letters to professors who had no idea what she looked like.

What would her life be without that crucial other half? Would her brain rot like an apple on the ground, or like cheese, softening and oozing from her nostrils?

“Miss Chetwood,” St. George said, clearing his throat. “It wasn’t ideal, how this came to be. But no one need know. We can make a fine marriage. So. Shall we?”

Grace had always wondered if there would be a moment when she felt herself a mature woman like her mother and aunt. As it turned out, there was. This moment. Maturity was nothing more nor less than resignation.

“We must,” she said. “So ... we shall.”

Philip had brought a plush settee into the solarium so Aunt Amelia could read in the sunlight. Though the woman wasn’t terribly far away, Grace preferred having the library to herself. She worked steadily. She tried an Atbash Cipher, various Caesar Cipher iterations. She used the scrawled list of cities on the inside cover of the first

journal to generate Vigenère and Porta keys.

When Philip approached her, she realized she hadn't moved in two hours.

Philip scanned her pile of work, took in the expression on her face, and understood that it would be best not to ask her how the work was progressing.

"I had a thought," Philip said, sitting. "Forgive me, as it may sound a touch crude to your ears. But it occurs to me that in solving this, you should not overlook the sensuous."

For one cheek-scalding moment, Grace believed that he was telling her to go experience the sensuous, and before her mind had quite processed what that could mean, her imagination had traveled to the exhibition hall, to the curly-haired , arrogant-browed man bowed over some tiny specimen.

"Bexley was bawdy, if we're truthful," Philip continued. "He did enjoy a joke. You should have heard the way he talked about his orchids. They're extremely anatomical, in a certain light. I mention it in case that could in some way be a clue."

It could be—Charlie had once sent her a book of Mozart's collected letters, and when she wrote to express surprise that the musical genius had a gleefully raunchy sense of humor, Charlie was delighted. Yes, that's the whole point. All the best people are wicked.

"Thank you, I will think upon it," she told Philip. He left her to her work.

Unfortunately, what her mind wanted to think upon first was that instantaneous leap it had made, in the direction of Luke bloody Ashburton.

Yes, she found his appearance—the height, the disobedient curls, the

eyes—appealing. Or would , if he were not the spawn of a goat. As it was, she'd obviously prefer to lie on a bed of sharpened spikes than be in a room with the man.

As though specifically to argue with her, Luke walked through the library at that moment, stride long, one curl falling to his brow, carrying an armload of reference books.

And, of course, her heart tripped over its own feet and then stumbled into a trot.

Curse him.

“Good day, Miss Chetwood,” he said. Rather as though she was impertinent to cost him even this much precious energy.

“Good da y,” she said, with a sweetness calibrated to ring false.

His pace sped up as he exited.

You see? Nothing sensuous in it whatsoever, unless you consider my reasonable desire to see him drawn and quartered sensuous.

Whoever she was arguing with—Charlie, Philip, Ashburton himself—she knew how she sounded.

She sounded like she was trying to convince herself.

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Distracting, to think of Grace Chetwood there now, in the next room, hating him so very loudly. So Luke decided to take a quick walk around the grounds, to clear his head.

“Ashburton!” A voice called, and Luke saw that Philip Denton was hurrying to catch up with him. “Come with me to the greenhouse, won’t you?”

Denton was ostensibly checking on the plants, but his primary focus was drinking. He pulled a decanter of bourbon from behind a tree, then a cut-crystal glass from the pocket of his jacket, and poured.

Denton handed Luke the glass with his bandaged hand. “Sorry, only brought the one.”

Denton moved between rows of plants, inspecting. Luke could see that he was immensely tired, and carrying a bone-deep sadness.

Luke was never sure how to do it—ask after a man’s emotions. They all spent so much of their lives pretending not to have them. But observation bore out that men were, if anything, more full of feeling than women. The excess doubtless came from the decades of repressing. Luke had long since learned to see past men’s stoical exteriors to the turmoil beneath. They certainly weren’t any more difficult to read than horses or dogs.

For a long moment, they stood passing the glass back and forth, looking at the plants, hearing the chatter of the small birds nesting inside the greenhouse.

“Did I embarrass you?” Denton asked. “Regarding Miss Worthing? Not my intent.”

“Not at all. I’ve written to her father, who is amenable to the match.”

“Ah. Will she come to the opening?” Luke nodded. “What a perfect backdrop against which to ask for your beloved’s hand. Deeply romantic. I think I might be jealous.”

Denton and his wife Catherine were childhood friends. Luke had no idea if they’d ever felt love in a passionate sense. “Do you believe it crucial in life? Romance and so forth?”

Denton swallowed a sip. “We need many things. Food, society, whiskey. It could be argued that we need gifted scientists, so it would be wrong not to marry a woman whose father’s patronage would enable their work to continue.” Denton could see that Luke was taken aback by his blunt assessment, and shrugged. “I hardly think it a crime to put that first. In fact, I think it might be your responsibility to the world.” He gave a chuckle. “As I have no particular genius, my considerations were simpler. More bourbon?”

Luke accepted the glass, drank, and watched Denton’s expression grow somber. “Bexley would bellow that we’re both wrong. ‘Passion or nothing.’” He shook his head, wistful. “And so, for him, nothing. Which seems yet sadder to me now.” He snapped a yellowing leaf off an orchid. “Love more or less pressed him into solitude, in my view. There was someone, at a point. Did you know? But—already married.”

“He never spoke of it,” Luke said.

Denton took the glass. “Love ought to make one’s life ... more. Not less.”

Luke thought of Miss Worthing, the last time he’d seen her. They’d walked together. The talk flowed easily. She caught his eye, then looked away, sweetly shy under his

gaze.

He'd felt nothing.

It was so baffling that he'd wondered if he might be unwell. Why didn't he want to kiss her?

Thinking of it now made Luke uneasy. Cora Worthing was perfect. In fact, given her family's fortune and his lack of a title, she'd have been far above his reach, had her father not been a man who attended scientific symposia and moved in precisely the circles most likely to laud Luke's books. And Denton had it right—she was the key to continuing his ambitious expeditions now that the earl was gone.

"I ought to get back to it," Luke said.

Denton raised his glass in ironic salute. "You grew up a decent man, Ash. Bit touchy, when you were a boy. The level of self-seriousness was rather off-putting in one so young."

"Well. I'm not planning to enter politics, so I don't need everyone to like me."

"Tragic news, I think you grew into someone people do like. Well, mostly." He sipped with an expression of amusement. "It's a puzzle to me. Our dear Grace finds something to love in everyone. Except, I've come to learn, you. Did you do something rash?"

Yes.

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Yet you are as irritated by her as she is by you."

“We ... began on the wrong foot.”

“Wasn’t that an awfully long time ago? You’ve been traveling for what—the better part of two years?”

Luke shrugged. “Sometimes, character does not mesh with character.”

Denton raised a brow. “Well. I must admit, it’s entertaining to see two such reasonable people long so very badly to throw one another in the sea.”

He could see that? After all the work Luke was doing to try to remain neutral?

“I do hope your bile doesn’t distract her from her work. She seems very cheery, I know. But she’s suffered a loss, just as we have.”

“Of course, you’re right.”

“Then why do you look as though I’ve told you to go eat a live shark?”

“Because I have that sort of face.”

Denton held up his glass. “To your face. Wait—” Denton picked up a pink orchid in a clay pot and placed it in Luke’s hands. “Please deliver this to Miss Chetwood, would you?”

Grace Chetwood was engrossed in her work when Luke returned, bearing the orchid. He had the thought that if he walked quietly enough, he could set it down and walk past without her notice.

But as soon as he walked into the library, she looked up. Her eyes narrowed as he approached. She eyed the orchid in his hands with deep suspicion.

What exactly did she think he would do? Poison the thing? Craft a tiny explosive device that could be hidden in the bloom? It was a bloody flower.

He arranged his face into mildness, as though he were viewing a leaf under a magnifying lens. He walked up to the table, and set down the pot. By then, her cheeks held two hot red spots of color, and she looked vastly irritated with how long it was taking him to open his mouth and explain.

“A gift,” he said, after indulging in one last pause. “From Denton.”

She pulled the pot closer, peered at the pink bloom. He could see the precise moment her eyes lit up. And then, she put her hand to her mouth, just in time to catch the giggle that escaped her.

Luke wanted very badly to know what had put that sort of sparkle in her eyes. Was there a way to ask such a question that wouldn’t immediately cause them to fight?

She was looking at him now, impatient. “Something else, Mr. Ashburton?”

And, it was already too late. He felt unaccountably deflated.

“No,” he said. Then felt the need to soften it. “How go the wars?” He asked, nodding to the page, and hoping his tone sounded less cold. Especially since, as Denton had pointed out, his face was probably not helping matters.

“Swimmingly, thank you.” She returned to her work, done speaking with him.

Feeling suddenly, searingly awkward, he walked away.

Grace watched Luke go. She had many feelings in the man’s presence, all unpleasant. But right now, her overwhelming concern was that things were not, by any stretch,

going swimmingly. The only impressive thing she'd done was generate a long list of things the cipher was not.

Grace felt certain that a singular key fit this lock. Something clever that spoke to Charlie's taste, perhaps his sense of humor. Something ... orchid-ish ?

Grace needed a shift in perspective. So she slid out of her chair and down to the floor under the table. If her aunt spotted her here, she'd surely scold her. But right now, Grace could not afford to be a lady. She needed her blasted mind to work.

Funny, how they don't really finish the bottom of a table, no matter how fancy the top. It was the same with the table in her father's library at home—massive, polished, but underneath, the wood was raw, even a bit splintery. She'd discovered that the same way, lying under it in frustration because she couldn't figure out a letter Charlie had sent, until . . .

Oh.

Well, this might be something.

That letter had been particularly difficult to unwind. She'd gone into her father's study because there was more room to pace. The scroll Charlie had sent bore only the word Whitehead. She'd been to a Whitehead Manor, but could recall nothing helpful. There was a place called Whitehead in Ireland, but a map yielded no insight.

Then Grace turned her head, and because she was on the ground, noticed a pile of books beneath her father's desk. Christmas gifts, from Charlie.

One was written by a Theophilus Whitehead.

It was a treatise on the connection between algebra and God, and contained a section

with mathematics problems. On page 86 ... the page number was very lightly circled in pencil.

The problem on that page was annoyingly elaborate. But she saw immediately that it would give her what she needed. She was solving for “A.”

When she finally got it, she used the number to create a Caesar key.

Dearest Grace,

You truly are the cleverest girl in the realm. Do not let yourself fall into evil hands. Weather here abominable. Food passable. Drink necessary. I caught a butterfly the exact colors of the sunset. If it turns out to be a new species, I shall name it for you, on account of all the red.

Yrs,

Charlie

Now, in the library, Grace sat up slowly so she would not hit her head on the table. She knew what she needed.

By the time Grace entered the exhibition hall, she was vibrating with frustration. She’d scoured the spines of hundreds—no, thousands of books.

The hall was empty but for deuced Luke Ashburton, leaning over a tray, using a magnifying glass, swab and tweezers to clean a moth’s furred body and align its paper-thin wings. He looked up, blinked, and registered the frustration on her face.

He said nothing. She’d have wagered every fiber of clothing on her body that he was doing it to vex her.

“Where,” she asked, slowly, so as to make it clear that she was not in the mood for nonsense, “is the bloody maths section?”

His brow raised at the curse. “You seem tense.”

“I cannot see how that is in even the slightest way your business.”

“Well. We labor over the same bloody project, Miss Chetwood,” he pointed out. “I might be forgiven for friendly concern over your state of mind.”

She inhaled deeply. It was that or slap his face clear to the Americas. “Don’t trouble yourself. I simply need every book of mathematics belonging to the late earl.”

“Every one?” He echoed, as though the request was excessive.

“Allow me to congratulate you on your sharp hearing, sir.”

“I have them,” he said.

“Every one?” she asked, mimicking his tone.

He shrugged. “I had the thought, a few days past, that perhaps there was something in them that might apply to the cipher.”

“I suspect you are correct.”

That gave him pause, as he tried to determine whether she had delivered some form of insult.

“Well? Where are they? The books?”

“In my room.”

A beat, as he looked at her.

Mary Mother of Christ. “Get them,” she finally said, tightly.

He nodded to his hands, still holding a moth wing with forceps. As if to point out that any idiot should be able to discern that he was occupied.

She dropped into the nearest chair. “At your leisure. I’m given to understand there is little comparative urgency to my work.”

He threw her a look that told her he was immune to her pressure, and resumed his careful work. He did not rush. His fingers moved with infinite delicacy.

For some reason, she felt it in her belly. She looked away.

“There are thirty-seven,” he murmured as he worked. “Books.”

“I’d say you could help me look through them, but as laying a single moth wing requires decades, I wouldn’t dare drag you away.”

He set down the forceps with an implacable patience engineered to irk her. “Would you like to wait for me here or accompany me?”

“To get the books?” He nodded. “In your room?” He shrugged. She gave him a look that she hoped clearly communicated the depth of his madness. “As I am disinterested in following a man into his room, unaccompanied, I believe I shall wait here.”

“Of course,” he said, silkily. “I’d hate to impugn the purity with which you entered your recent betrothal.”

Demon.

She leaned toward him in her seat. “While you’re fetching the books, Mr. Ashburton, do please consider going directly to the devil.”

That, to her surprise, quirked the corners of his mouth into a smile. He fought them down. “As you wish. I’ll return as quickly as I’m able. Very much depends on how thoroughly he defiles me while I’m down there, I suppose.”

“If the punishment fits the crime, you’ll be kept busy for some time. Godspeed.”

A flash of a grin, and he swiftly exited. Leaving Grace to sit there, confused by the turn in their conversation. And deeply irritated by how much she enjoyed it.

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Aunt Amelia was sitting at the table with Grace when Luke Ashburton returned with a crate full of books. Grace could see his relief that the older woman was there—someone he could exchange simple pleasantries with.

As he and Amelia spoke, she stole the opportunity to observe him up close. His sea-gray eyes were slightly bloodshot, with bluish circles beneath, and his hair had gotten less obedient as the day progressed.

He was, she knew, captaining the ship in the other room. Had been, since before her arrival—since the moment they'd put out the fire. Lord mercy, the man must be exhausted.

He glanced her way as he spoke—but then his gaze caught. Surprised by what he saw there.

She looked down at her work, feeling a blush spread. What was so terrible about Luke Ashburton seeing her as she was? She was a kind person, and open—too, perhaps—and people interested her, and in those rare moments when he wasn't being a pigheaded monster, he interested her—

No. No he did not.

She only realized that Ashburton had said goodbye when she heard his footsteps walking away. She looked up—to find Aunt Amelia peering at her disapprovingly.

“I know you're hard at work, dear, but try to stay enough on the earth that you're less shockingly rude,” her aunt said. “Come, let us change for dinner. In the spirit of

pretending to be civilized.”

Grace wasn't hungry in the least. Numbly, she followed her aunt.

The professors had planned to return to the exhibition hall after dinner, but it grew clear to Luke that they were too exhausted to be of much use. He suggested everyone turn in early, and attack the work, refreshed, in the morning.

Luke heard Mrs. Wilmington encouraging her niece to follow suit. “We all need rest, dear,” she said, and Luke marveled at how the woman could make a word like dear sound so forceful and disapproving.

Luke knew he should sleep, too, but did not fool himself that it would come. And so he bid all goodnight, and headed back to the exhibition hall.

Luke wasn't sure how long he'd been working—two hours? Three?—when he became dimly aware of slamming noises in the library. He rose from his work and headed there.

To find Miss Chetwood sitting on the table, legs dangling off the edge, three or four books of mathematics on the floor. Some a good distance away, fallen open. As though thrown. Forcefully.

Adding to that impression was the fact that she had another book in hand, and was in the process of raising it over her head to hurl it as hard as she could.

“What did they do to offend you?” he drawled, and she gasped and twisted where she sat, to see him in the doorway.

“Lord mercy,” she hissed. “Do you always terrify the soul out of people?”

“Only when they’re abusing innocent books.”

“I’m sorting them.” She snapped. “Those don’t have the answer. Any one of the other thirty thousand might yield the clue that wins the day.”

“Night,” he corrected. “I thought you were asleep.”

“I thought you were asleep,” she shot back. “I went upstairs so my aunt would relent. Then I slipped away.”

“You’re good at that.”

He hadn’t meant it, but as soon as he said the words, he knew she would hear a cut about her past behavior with men.

She seemed to freeze. The knuckles of her hand, gripping the book, were white.

“I only meant you succeeded in doing it all very quietly,” he said, “up to the moment you began terrorizing the reading material.”

She gave him a hard, piercing look. “Of course. Though you could just as easily have meant all the many, many times you saw me in an alcove.”

“Miss Chetwood—”

“Mr. Ashburton,” she interrupted, “can it really give you so much pleasure? To so continually remind me what you think of me?” Her eyes were furious. She’d been angry before he entered the room, and he’d certainly only escalated matters.

“You misunderstand me,” he said. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Hurt me? Yes, you did. I enjoy doing it to you, so I recognize the impulse.”

He wasn't sure how to answer without sounding insincere, or worse, mocking. But here, now, in the empty, late-night dim of the library, so tired he could taste the fatigue in his mouth, he wasn't particularly proud of the way he and this woman continued to interact. The thoroughness with which he seemed to bungle even the smallest attempt at civility.

“Miss Chetwood, surely we can aspire to a single conversation from which neither of us emerge bloody, limping, or missing several teeth.”

“Can we?” She gave a derisive laugh.

Suddenly there was no anger in him anywhere. Just heaviness. “You are a lady, and betrothed, and—”

“Don't do that,” she interjected, harsh. “‘You are a lady, and betrothed.’ And as soon as I believe you speak in good faith ... casually, you will add, ‘Pity, all those nasty rumors about why he's marrying you’—”

“I wouldn't—”

“Of course you would.” He heard her voice fray. “It's what you are thinking right now. That I trapped St. George.” She leaned forward. “Would you like to hear a secret? That is precisely what I did.”

Luke was enough taken aback that he found himself staring at her. “Do feel free to tell everyone you know,” she said. “If the ton turned on me as one, I would rather feel I'd earned it.”

She was livid, that was clear. But underneath that, there was no satisfaction, no

pleasure in her confession.

“I won’t repeat it,” he said quietly.

She shrugged. “As it suits you.”

“I can’t help but observe that you don’t seem happy about it. This so-called trapping.”

“I’m to be a viscountess. I can hardly contain my ecstasy.”

“You did not mean for it to happen,” he countered.

She sighed, pinched the bridge of her nose as if to impatiently banish an ache. “Mr. Ashburton, I am no victim. I am exactly the worst things you think of me . And I am tired of fighting with you.” Her voice cracked again. “I don’t think I can spare the energy.”

The sentiment resonated so deeply in Luke that for one mad moment, he wanted to laugh. Or punch a wall.

“We could call a truce,” he said. “I am as tired as you are.”

Her brow shot up, and she seemed to be considering it.

“No,” she finally said. “Because I would abide by it. I do not trust that you would. Do you not have work to do?” She slid off the table, and returned to her seat. “I shall refrain from further violence, so as not to disturb you.”

“Appreciated,” he said. And went back to his work. Feeling as though their entire conversation had been a test, and he’d failed it.

I am exactly the worst things you think of me.

Luke did not know what to make of Grace Chetwood claiming this, even as everything in her demeanor screamed that she had not compromised herself in order to secure a viscount.

Notably, she had all but confirmed that the compromising itself had happened. Randolph St. George was charming enough, but not, certainly, the sharpest blade in the butcher shop. Luke found it difficult to imagine her falling so in love with the mediocre fop that she'd risk ruination to lay with him. Not if they'd had a single conversation not screamed over aggressive chamber music in a crowded room.

Come to think of it, they very well may not have had any such conversation.

On the other hand, Luke had witnessed firsthand Miss Chetwood's capacity to focus on blunt and titles to the exclusion of all other information. To, in fact, gleefully declare a prospective suitor's personality entirely irrelevant to the enterprise of marriage.

Discovering this about her was exactly what had led to the slap.

The ball at Dawnridge House, where said slap occurred, had been the largest event of that season. A fortune in flowers, oversweet drinks, terrible music, all the ton in its ugliest fashionable attire. Luke had come with friends. He wasn't looking for Miss Chetwood. Why would he? One week before, he'd spied her kissing the black-haired gentleman in that alcove. Surely, she was off the market, or close to it.

She was in attendance, and it was impossible to miss her, thanks to that giggle and a frothy, translucent pink confusion of a gown. She was dancing with a gentleman he knew slightly, a wealthy heir and so-called poet whose main interest in the arts was in affecting depth for the purpose of seducing ladies.

Luke had imagined Miss Chetwood's dark-haired lord would appear and claim her for a waltz. That man did appear, but she seemed to have no interest in spending time with him. In fact, she disappeared from the dance floor.

Luke knew he should be focused on his own enjoyment of the ball. Or at the least ... he should stop watching Grace Chetwood.

But he could not resist listening in, just for a moment, when he found himself standing behind her and her friend Clara Abernathy near a refreshments table.

He heard snippets. Fifty thousand and inheritance and some debate comparing two heirs. And then, with evident delight, Miss Chetwood pointed to a number of men in rapid turn, rattling off precisely what each was worth, including the names of every property they were set to inherit. Her friend was impressed. As was Luke—it was a genuine mnemonic feat.

It also gave him a dark, acid feeling in his gut. Particularly when Miss Abernathy pointed out that one gentleman was, in short, “the most boring man alive,” and Miss Chetwood shrugged, repeated the financial figures, and giggled that it rendered all else beside the point.

As a beautiful young woman from a respected family, that she would marry well was unquestionable. But he'd imagined her driven as strongly by curiosity, and emotion, and a desire to find a man with depths to match her own.

Now, Miss Abernathy was assessing a gentleman almost eerily like Luke in circumstance: an introspective younger son, neither hideous nor extraordinarily dashing, who moved in rarefied circles but did not himself live lavishly, and who had dedicated himself—admirably, Luke thought—to the pursuit of social reform.

“He is unusually passionate in his work,” Miss Abernathy mused. “Which could

mean he would be so in courtship.”

“Leading to what, exactly? Living in a little flat, boiling your own tea? Sewing his loose buttons back on? Lord mercy, can you imagine?”

“I could if it were a love match.”

“If you’re going to insist on falling in love, Clara, I think it is your duty to do your very best to fall in love with a duke.”

“Every duke I’ve met this season has sixty years, at a minimum.”

“Well, put a bit of effort into it,” Miss Chetwood said, and they both dissolved into giggles.

Why did it bother Luke to see her acting the callous marriage market assessor? He was no contender for her hand. The conversation he’d overheard made that triply clear. So why allow it to grate upon him?

And why did it pain him to consider that those depths he thought he spied in Grace Chetwood might not actually exist?

Luke told himself that he left the ballroom to view the house out of architectural curiosity, and not because he’d seen Miss Chetwood slip away with the alleged poet.

He wasn’t following them; it was coincidence that he saw them slip into the library.

He wasn’t peering through a crack in the door. Merely walking past. And happening to spy Miss Chetwood melting into a kiss with the poet.

Luke walked away, fast.

He had no moral objection to kissing. Yet it made him feel foolish to see her do it with a second man, affecting that giggling, curious, innocent-yet -game demeanor.

You let yourself be extremely stupid about that woman . He had walked away with one thing in mind: a strong drink, to wipe the slate clean of his fascination with Grace Chetwood once and for all.

Standing over a checklist in the exhibition hall, distracted by the silence emanating from the library, Luke marveled that two years had passed, and yet the woman elicited precisely the same uncomfortable mix of reactions in him. He wanted a stiff drink. He wanted to step closer to her. He wanted to call her out for calculated provocation. He wanted to study her closely enough that he discovered the precise root of his powerful, unrelenting fascination with her. And then he wanted to use that information to excise said fascination once and for all. Surgically, if necessary. He was grateful that the timeline for finishing the exhibition was so tight. He would keep his head down, working. He would throw any unmanageable surfeit of feeling into the iron box. And then it would be over, and Grace Chetwood would leave.

It was sometime past midnight when Grace sat up to stretch her cramped neck, and saw that Ashburton was leaning in the doorway. His hair was even more askew. He'd been working in his shirtsleeves, rolled up to the elbow.

Immediately, he held his hands out in a gesture meant to convey harmlessness. "I was stretching my legs. I only just got here. I hadn't been looking in your direction long enough for it to qualify as a stare." She looked at him without speaking. "I didn't expect to see you still here. In all seriousness, you might consider sleeping."

She shrugged a shoulder. "I shall work through the night. You're still here, so I assumed you might be of similar temperament."

He nodded slowly, and ran his hand through his hair, which pushed it into an only

marginally more presentable shape. “I wish sometimes that my keel were more even, when it comes to my work. But I prefer to gather force, push hard, expend myself completely, and collapse once I’m entirely spent.”

He hadn’t meant it provocatively, she knew. But they both heard it. It hung in the air.

She gave a little laugh. Then regretted it. Stupid giggle.

“Well. Back to work, then,” she said.

“I’m a fair hand at algebra,” he said. “If you want help.”

She shook her head. “If we set every person at Bexley Hall to it day and night, we won’t have done all the problems in these books in time. My task isn’t truly the mathematics so much as to figure out what I am looking for .”

She saw his expression as he took that in. Understanding that there was no clear path from where she sat to the answer. Only work, and patience, and tolerance of the absolute unpredictability of it all. “Oh, don’t fret, Mr. Ashburton. This is what the earl put me through in every letter I received from him since age twelve. It is only ... more difficult, with far higher stakes. I shall muddle through, and I do have faith that if the clue is there to be found, I will not miss it.”

He looked at her, then, in a way that was so ... not unfriendly ... that it confused her. “You rather remind me of the men I work with in the field,” he said, thoughtfully. “Much of the work is often, simply ... to refuse to be overwhelmed.”

She shrugged. “Perhaps I ought to have been a man.”

Now his expression became almost sympathetic . “Perhaps you should have.”

This is a trap . He's pretending to understand. He's luring you into a false sense of security.

“Well. Let me know if you find some way I can help,” he said. The simple sincerity if it concerned her. No— alarmed her. She felt as though she were losing the capacity to understand when he was insulting her.

Erring on the side of presuming malice seemed the only way to inure herself. “A fascination, how you employ that kindly tone, as though you were not the sort of man who takes pleasure in cruelty—”

“I don't.”

“Oh?” She let her voice rise into its most falsely-sweet register. “And what would you call lapping up salacious, third-hand rumors like a thirsty dog, then brandishing them in the cause of humiliating women you hardly know?”

His mouth tightened.

Immediately, she felt a stomach-twisting mix of feelings—a sharp burst of pleasure; an uninvited hum of guilt; braced worry that he would now strike back, and harder.

A long moment. He said nothing. Now, she couldn't read his expression at all.

He took a step toward her, observing her calmly. “Murder me where I stand if you must, but my assertion of earlier today stands. You're tense, Chetwood. And it won't help your work.”

He'd adopted a gruffer tone, as though addressing a male colleague.

She shrugged tightly. “I don't precisely have a choice, Ashburton.”

“Don’t be daft.”

She heard herself emit a sound of annoyance she’d never made before. It was very nearly a growl.

“You see? If you’re going to work like one of us ... work like one of us.”

“And what, pray tell, do you mean by that?”

He crossed his arms, a loaded smile curving up his mouth. “Go. And relieve it.”

“Relieve ... ” he could not be saying what she thought he was saying.

But then he said it so bluntly, it brought instant, scalding heat to her cheeks. “Please tell me you know how to give yourself release, Chetwood.”

Her mouth had fallen open. No . She would not give him the satisfaction of gaping—this was naught but a new tactic to gain the upper hand. She straightened her spine. Dignity. She would meet his insidious plot to steal her equilibrium with dignity .

“While I can’t imagine a situation that could make it any of your business,” she replied, voice friendly, “I know very well how to pleasure myself. Until I’m quite gasping for breath.”

She caught it—the flare in his eyes that he covered as quickly as he could.

And so she continued, enjoying the increasing effort it took for him to appear unmoved. “It so flushes me with heat that I find it best to be entirely naked for it. The cool air on my nipples only enhances the experience.” She did not miss his breath catching. “One would think a bed the most comfortable place to indulge, but I find I

often crave a hard floor under my back. I confess I do forget myself, and tend to make quite a lot of noise. Sometimes I have to bite my own hand to keep quiet. The ... other hand, obviously.”

Now his mouth was slightly open. He looked entirely taken aback. Stunned , in fact.

Grace didn't know where the words were coming from—she'd never spoken sentences like those in her life . But given the effect she was having—given that she was winning —she felt inspired to say more. “The issue I have with your kind suggestion is this: I don't wish to waste too much precious time, and I find it so difficult to stop at one release. The second tends to be so much deeper. Don't you find? Or perhaps it's easier to stroke myself properly, because I'm so very, very wet from the first one.”

She'd officially scandalized herself. She was surprised she hadn't sunk into the earth. Her cheeks were going to burn off her skull from the sheer embarrassment—no, the sheer thrill of saying all of that out loud .

He swallowed hard. He wanted to parry, she could see. But she'd robbed him of the capacity.

His eyes dipped from her face to the exposed skin of her décolletage. She could only assume she was as deeply flushed there as on her face.

She could discern that his mouth had gone dry. His pupils had dilated. The front of his trousers could not hide the swell inside them.

I've made him hard with just my words, she marveled.

She raised her gaze to his. “Perhaps it is you who are tense, Ashburton.”

“Perhaps it is,” he said quietly.

He took a few steps closer. Until he was standing over her, arms still crossed. Not looming, precisely—there was nothing threatening in it. It was more that everything became very sharp, clear. She could hear him breathing. See the emerging shadow of his beard. He smelled like coffee and Indian sandalwood—the same soap Charlie had sent her once, that she never used, just held to her nose sometimes and breathed in the clean, slightly masculine scent. How did it smell so much better, emanating from this man’s skin? She knew a strong urge to lean closer, breathe him in more deeply.

His gaze lingered over her mouth. No part of him was touching any part of her, and yet she felt it everywhere. She felt lightheaded.

“Were you volunteering to assist me with it?”

Oh, how she wanted to say yes. For a moment, she thought she had said it.

Luckily and alas, she’d managed to keep her tongue.

It was time to bring this to a close. Before she lost control of it completely.

She stood. Now, it was her turn to step close enough to discombo bulate him. “You may speak to me like I am one of the men, Mr. Ashburton. I rather enjoy it,” she murmured. “But do your best not to allow my charms to entirely distract you from the most basic behavior of a gentleman.”

A snap of anger in his eyes—she’d called him out, and he knew it.

But then, he seemed to consider what she was saying more thoughtfully.

He took a step back. “You’re right. The hour is late. I forgot myself.”

A strange mix of emotion flooded her. Surprise, that he'd own up to it with sincerity. And a dash of disappointment that he'd moved away.

"Understandable. My apologies for provoking you."

He smiled then, seemingly in spite of himself. "Don't apologize."

"But—"

"I liked it."

With a polite tilt of the head, he walked away.

Grace stood there, acutely aware that he'd been right in the first place.

She was excruciatingly tense.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:33 am

May 13, 1822

4 days to the opening

Luke had a feeling Grace Chetwood was avoiding him. She'd been on her way out of the breakfast room by the time he arrived. She'd worked all morning, but somehow, she was never in the library when he walked through it. Perhaps it was a coincidence. Or perhaps the woman was simply wise enough to avoid distraction.

In the exhibition hall, they'd been making excellent progress. Mid-afternoon, Luke set about inventorying a stack of crates that had not been touched by the fire—but had been removed from the building hastily enough that it was possible every jar within was smashed.

He'd just crowbarred open a crate to discover everything within it intact. He felt almost giddy as he took stock of the contents. The final jar he unwrapped contained a small, bright yellow and black-striped snake. *Bungarus fasciatus* —a banded krait. As he was due a break, he decided to take it outside with him, to examine it in the sunlight.

Grace Chetwood was in the entrance hall reaching for an orange on the tree. A pile of paper sat nearby, on the floor near the taxidermied tiger. So this was where she'd been working.

Her slippers were sliding off her heels as she strained on tiptoe. The bodice of her dress stretched tight, cutting into the flesh of her décolletage. He could make out the seams of her stays against the fabric as she inhaled, the roundness of her lower belly.

He could have predicted his body would respond—he was alive , after all. But he wasn't prepared for the intensity of it. For how much it hurt , the sudden constriction of breath, the rush of blood to his cock. Rather like being bitten, and feeling venom flood into one's system.

God , he irritated himself. There was nothing revolutionary about a voluptuous woman reaching for an orange. Most of Western art was voluptuous bloody women reaching for fruit. He was a very ordinary, boring man for responding to such a reliably sensual image.

The force of it, though, felt like his body punishing his mind. You started it last night, with all that talk of touching herself.

A sound of frustration escaped her as she gave a hop, trying to reach the orange.

“May I offer assistance?” he asked, startling her.

Her eyes went wary. Which irked, as he was trying to be nice.

Don't say a word. Just get the bloody orange and leave.

She took a step back as Luke plucked the orange from the branch—he was tall enough that he did not have to stretch. He held it out to her, and she took it from his palm without touching him.

“My gratitude,” she said, in a voice clearly communicating that she would like their interaction to come to an immediate close.

He nodded—politely, he hoped—and turned to go.

“Lord mercy,” she blurted out, on a surprised inhale.

When he turned back, he saw that she was staring at the jar in his hand. She immediately colored; she had not meant to say it out loud. “It’s only ... what a shockingly bold little snake,” she explained, the blush deepening. “It’s rather lovely, isn’t it?”

It was lovely, he supposed. “Lovelier than kind,” he said. “It did try to kill me.”

Her eyes widened. “It bit you?”

He nodded. “It is potently venomous. As the most vibrantly-colored creatures of the animal kingdom so often are,” he could not resist adding, allowing his eyes to very briefly land upon her hair.

“Well then, they do play fair, don’t they,” she said evenly. “They broadcast the danger. It’s hardly their fault if you are unwise enough to provoke them regardless.”

He laughed in spite of himself. “A strong point. Two points. One for each entendre.”

She looked a bit taken aback. “Are you quite well? I’m sure I’ve never heard you concede a single one. ”

He shrugged. “You have the right of it. I was devastatingly unwise. In my encounter with the snake.” Her eyes narrowed, waiting for him to twist it into an insult. But her distrustful look wavered as he continued, “I felt wildly embarrassed about it all when I was confined to bed, in agony, panting like a cur, hallucinating that Christ himself stood listening as I prayed that the paralysis of my limbs was temporary.” He smirked at the memory. “He was wearing a sailor’s hat with the robes and whatnot.”

She gave a shocked laugh. Turned the orange around and around in her hands. “Were you ... afraid?”

“Terrified.” It seemed funny now, as brushes with death from which one emerges relatively unscathed tend to. “Hadn’t accomplished nearly enough in life to be sanguine about it ending because I was, once, clumsy in the protocol of my approach.”

“Well then, now you must do every single thing you felt regret that you hadn’t,” she said, with a sun-bright smile.

Abruptly, her unexpected, genuine warmth wiped his mind entirely clean of a response.

He always had a response. She inspired one, effortlessly. Just the sight of her, glaring at him, would bring an insult to his lips.

But she wasn’t glaring now. Her gaze was perceptive, and open, and waiting with interest to hear what he might say next.

He seemed not to have words at all. It lasted the length of three breaths.

A blasted eternity, though, three inhales, three exhales. He schooled his eyes to keep from moving to her still-smiling lips five separate times. They were suddenly all he could think about, and they’d rendered his mind utterly useless.

And then he was angry at her. For doing this to him.

“What is on your list? Besides collecting more crawling things, I mean.” She was teasing him now, not unfriendly, and he was starting to feel alarm racing through all his limbs.

“You’d find it boring.” The cool words felt as though they were coming from somewhere outside of him. “No shopping, reading scandal sheets, or indiscriminate

flirting.”

Her gaze slammed shut like a door.

“Yes. I am bored just standing here,” she said, acid-sweet . “I believe you were headed outside? Enjoy your stroll, Mr. Ashburton, and do look out for snakes, I’d hate for some little inconsequential thing to fell you again.”

She walked away, back erect, shoulders tense, before he had a chance to respond.

Christ, what is wrong with you, Ashburton?

Suddenly, he imagined Bexley, seeing him now. The disappointment the man would feel at witnessing Luke—for reasons entirely to do with the stupidity of the human male—continually revert to treating Grace Chetwood as his nemesis rather than a partner in the effort to save this museum. Watching him take low swipes at the same gifted mathematician Bexley had befriended as a girl of twelve. That’s what Bexley had done with his energy, while lesser men were distracted by things like lust and fury: see overlooked potential, and gently mentor it.

He’d done it for Luke, come to think of it.

For the love of Coleoptera, Bexley would say, unsmiling, because he would have seen Luke’s failing as a serious one. Remind your pride and your prick that you’re a scientist, and do better, Ash.

But if Luke was honest, he was not certain how to rise above his weakness.

He recalled the night before, when she met his taunt— please tell me you know how to give yourself release —with that wicked glint in her eye. Easily besting him simply by answering his question in casual, devastating detail.

Sometimes I have to bite my own hand to keep quiet.

Even recalling the words sent the blood to his cock.

And he remembered what happened next: her gaze moving over him, dipping south. When she swept her eyes across the arousal he could not hide, the color darkened in her cheeks, and her breath caught, and the triumph on her face mixed with surprise and curiosity and—did he imagine it?— want .

It did give him some miniscule solace. To consider that Grace Chetwood might desire him with even a tenth of the wretched intensity he felt for her. At least he wasn't alone in suffering the ridiculous incongruity of furiously wanting to rid himself of the same person he badly wished to press bodily against the wall, to kiss until their mouths were bruised .

For a shimmering moment, he allowed himself to imagine it. Touching her. Running his mouth over every freckle of her clavicle. Her guardedness melting away. Never mind the human mind, that overwrought, tail-chasing thing. The human body was, by blessed contrast, simple and direct, focused on the present.

Their bodies, Luke thought dryly, stood a far better chance of brokering a peace treaty than he and Grace did.

Pity she was more inclined to rip out his throat than offer hers. And rightly so.

As Grace sat by the fireplace, eating her orange and ruminating on the cipher, she admitted to herself that she was not sure who was winning the war, she or Luke Ashburton.

She was not even sure what victory was meant to look like. When he'd insulted her, she'd wanted to feel the familiar surge of fury. But she felt mostly disappointment. A

tinge of hurt.

And before that ... it had been strange, that little stretch in which they conversed in earnest. It had been ... extremely pleasant. And that felt risky.

If he hadn't said something harsh and asinine, she very well might have.

Would calling a truce be so bad?

Don't be naïve. Do not forget what he called you when he did not know you were listening.

That rude awakening at Dawnridge House still tightened her throat. She wished she'd never gone to that wretched ball.

Earlier that night—the night of the slap—she'd slipped away to kiss a poet. The kiss was passable, but his words were trite and unoriginal. It smothered Grace's interest immediately, and she had returned to the ballroom.

She had seen Luke Ashburton at three separate events now, including when she arrived tonight. Now, she scanned the crowd for him. It was time, she decided, for the two of them to finally converse.

Despite their lack of interaction, Grace had begun to form a picture of the scientist. Thoughtful. Slow to smile, but when he did, it was genuine. Unfailingly polite, if bad at concealing boredom. Well-liked by the men of the ton, but the women seemed intimidated by him—understandable, given the aloofness of his mien. Every item of clothing he wore was gray. Tedious, but it did bring out the unusual tones in his eyes. His whimsical hair plagued him—many times, he'd smooth an errant curl, only to have it wander back onto his forehead.

No, she thought. She wouldn't change a thing about him. He was trying to be naught but what he was. She liked that.

It struck her then that he lived a comparatively modest lifestyle. Perhaps he had not sought her out because he believed she would not entertain him as a prospect.

But what harm in setting aside prospects, for the duration of a conversation? She was curious to talk to Luke Ashburton, and she suspected he wanted to talk to her. But where was he? Not on the dance floor.

Dawnridge Hall was renowned for its library, and Grace imagined bookish Ashburton might have slipped away to tour it. She followed the corridor, passing an ajar door. Male voices inside, the clink of glasses.

She did not stop to eavesdrop. Truly. Her right slipper had been bothering her, and this was her first private moment to bend and refasten it.

A very droll man was saying, "At this rate, she'll be living in a palace by fall."

"It's like this every year," a milder voice said. "Some siren entrances the lot of us, only to leave us slain by disappointment."

"I was a fool," another said, with a chuckle. "I thought she had eyes for me."

"Poor, poor Freddie," the droll one said. "Heart crushed once again by a red-haired Delilah."

Oh dear. There were other redheaded ladies in attendance, but the hair on the nape of her neck had already begun to rise before the mild one added, "If it's any consolation, you are far from the first man whose hopes were dashed on the rocks of Miss Grace Chetwood."

The sensible part of Grace issued stern instruction to walk away. They sounded lubricated enough to say something she would not enjoy hearing. Yes. She would go.

But then, a voice she recognized. Quieter, cooler than the rest. “Poor Freddie ought to send up his thanks in church this Sunday. He was spared.”

Grace peeked through the ajar door, to see that every man in the circle—there were perhaps eight of them—was leaning in to listen to Luke Ashburton.

The one called Freddie— short-statured , ruddy-faced —punched Ashburton on the shoulder. Grace realized she had danced with this Freddie, but could not now recall his full name. Or much about the encounter. “You needn’t protect my tender heart, Ash.”

“You stood no chance,” Ashburton informed him. “Because despite your deep pockets, you will inherit no title. Or had you not noticed the lady moving up the ranks so methodically, one could draw up an official chart of the peerage from her dance card?”

Grace felt bewildered. She certainly hasn’t been methodical. Only ... popular, and with the ability to pick any dance partner, why would she not select the most eligible?

The droll one—soft around the middle, beautiful clothes, terrible posture—shook his head as he sipped bourbon. “If I had a kingdom, I’d give it to tear that gown off her body.”

“I’d give it just to see the top half,” a man who could be his blonder twin chimed in.

Her face burned, and a hopeless sort of frustration filled her. The others were trying to top one another now, describing what they’d give in exchange for a tour of the mysteries of her body.

“Is it so mysterious?” Ashburton asked, and again, everyone got quiet. “Do you mean to imply that she dresses to conceal?”

Ashburton had turned to share a smirk with the droll one, and now Grace could see his face better. There was an intensity to his expression that took her aback. He spoke as though the topic bored him. But his eyes were so sharp. “Observation tells us all, gentlemen.”

“Enlighten us, Professor,” the mild one said, and brought a decanter to Ashburton to top up his glass.

Ashburton made a faux-humble gesture, as if to say his observations were nothing special. “Grace Chetwood,” he said, “would make any man’s life a waking nightmare. She is a provocateur in the guise of an innocent princess—one need look no further than her extravagant gowns—”

“Oh, I need look further,” someone joked lasciviously.

“Yes, she embellishes herself cannily to ensure you look nowhere else. Much like the plumage of brightly-colored birds desperate to mate.”

“I am a simple man. I like a bird with nice, fat feathers,” the blond one said.

Ashburton ticked a shoulder. “There is a point beyond which, vulgarity. But to each his own.”

“The bigger the better,” the droll one said. “I want a soft place to rest my head.”

“Visit a brothel, then, paperskull, and keep your kingdom for a wife who won’t drive you insane with the sound of her giggle,” Ashburton said, and they all laughed harder.

Grace did not laugh. She was of a mind never to laugh again. Her body felt filled with sand. She somehow managed to propel herself away.

To think. She'd gone to find Luke Ashburton. Because she had imagined she liked him.

She had promised a dance to ... she could not recall. But suddenly, she could not bear the thought of a crowd. And so, instead, Grace ducked through the heavy, carved door of the library. It was warm, cozily lit, and blessedly empty.

She didn't realize she was crying until she looked down and saw dark spots on her gown.

Sitting by the fire now in the library, her work in her lap, Grace realized she was tearing up again, recalling the night. Frustrated, she reminded herself that she was not sad about Ashburton. She was angry.

Rage was energizing. And she needed energy to crack this blasted cipher.

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Grace only realized she'd worked late into the night when she looked up from the table and her neck stiffly protested. Gingerly, she craned to peer through the ajar door of the solarium, across the library. She could just see Aunt Amelia's peacefully sleeping form, curled on the plush settee.

She stood, stretched. She needed a change in perspective, she decided.

This time, she lay on top of the table. Staring at the ceiling. Mentally naming each god she recognized. Apollo, Athena, Hermes. Should she try their names to key a Vigenère? Was the ceiling a clue?

She'd been lying there for a few minutes when she heard a throat clearing. She turned her head to the doorway, as Luke Ashburton entered. His face seemed serious, even ... apologetic.

He walked to her and set something down near her head. Another orange.

"Are you here to lure me into complacency, then strike, Mr. Ashburton? Disparage my behavior at balls? You never did critique my dancing."

He shook his head. "You're an excellent dancer."

"How kind of you to say," she said, her tone exactly sarcastic enough.

"Is the table comfortable, or shall I fetch you a pillow?"

She threw him a glare. "I'm not lazing about."

“Did not think you were.”

“This a technique. Mathematicians do their best work while horizontal.”

“Do they,” he said, tone mildly wry.

Grace rolled her eyes. “Oh, contain yourself.”

“I’m not fool enough to question your methods,” Ashburton said. Now, he sounded sincere. “I could not manage in a year the maths you can do before breakfast. I understand why Bexley corresponded with you all those years. He must have been exceedingly charmed by all that ability in such a tiny package.”

“Pity it grew so large as to be vulgar,” she replied.

He tilted his head, regarding her. His brow knit.

“Miss Chetwood, I came to apologize for that remark. All my remarks that evening. They were low. As was what I said earlier today in the entrance hall.”

Grace sat up, surprised. She moved off the table, to sit in her chair. “Are you ill with fever, sir? Apologizing is not generally in your arsenal.”

“I have been far from my best self with you,” he said quietly. “Repeatedly.”

“You’ve been an ideal gentleman. Take the time you called me a waking nightmare. A ... was it ‘provocateur aping a princess?’ Or ‘desperate to mate?’”

He refused to match her tone. “Inexcusable of me,” he said. “And I regret it.” She did not know what to say to that. When she did not respond, he continued. “The things you overheard were cruel. Engineered to be so. I was peevish. Moderately foxed. And

showing off for a roomful of brutes. Worst of all, I was not even accurate. There's nothing vulgar about you."

She weighed her options. Administer a cutting joke. A dismissive shrug. Press home some verbal knife, then twist it.

But suddenly, all those possibilities exhausted her. "Yes, ironically, you were the vulgar one. Let's leave it there. We have work to do, each of us."

"As you like." He held her gaze, frank, searching. She felt he was trying to be sure she had heard him, that some part of her believed he was contrite.

He did sound sincere. It was all she had to go on, given that her skills did not extend to reading a man's thoughts. His head tilted—watching her, trying to understand her, to gauge her reaction.

And then, the moment went on a beat too long. And now there was something else between them. Something subtle that made her body tingle.

Disconcerted, Grace looked away. Allowing the feeling to dissipate.

But when she looked back, she discovered it was still there. If anything, stronger now.

She was not sure if he felt it too, but he did exhale softly and move his gaze from hers. Then said, quieter, "It was very badly done. I wish I had been a better man."

It made her queasy, to hear him owning up to it. It wasn't as though she'd stood there silently, the night of the slap. Hard to hang on to the portrait of herself as the better person, recalling the cruel relish with which she'd responded to his cuts, lacerating him deeper. "I ... also said things I wish I had not, that night," Grace admitted. "I

apologize for those.”

He looked surprised. “Unnecessary.”

“And ... striking you was not my finest moment.”

“Oh, I very much earned that. Don’t dream of apologizing for it.”

She felt a giggle bubble up, but there was a tightness in her chest that kept it trapped. She could not look at him anymore.

But when she looked down, she was confronted with pages and pages of numerical flailing on the table before her. Suddenly, it seemed there was nowhere to rest her eyes that was not engineered to overwhelm her. Her head was beginning to ache. She closed her eyes, pinched the bridge of her nose and huffed out a frustrated breath. “Let’s leave it there, shall we? I forgive you, Mr. Ashburton. Truly. Trouble yourself no further.” She moved her fingers to her temple, attempting to massage away the brewing pain.

“Chetwood.” His voice had gone gruff again. “You ought to get some sleep.”

She kept her eyes shut. “Two more hours, perhaps. I have it in me. Don’t fret.”

She heard his footsteps come around the table. Heard him pull out the chair beside hers, and sit in it.

“How far es the head?” His voice much softer now, beside her.

“Splendidly,” she gritted. “As fares the neck. As fares my level of frustration with this whole accursed trickster box. I am utterly sanguine. Thank you for inquiring.”

His voice was so close to her ear that it startled her when he spoke again. “You know, Chetwood. That tension, at least, is something I could help with.”

Her eyes flew open. Surely, he didn’t mean—

But he was looking at her with a forthright expression . “If you are determined to soldier on, at least allow me to be of some small service.”

“Are you suggesting—”

“I would make it clearer with a hand upon your thigh, but I would not dream of touching you without permission, preferably in writing. You slap above your weight.”

She was suddenly, searingly aware that his legs under the table were very close to hers. His hand was resting on his knee. Mere inches from her skirts.

She realized her breathing had gone shallow. Her eyes drifted again to the ajar door of the solarium. Aunt Amelia fast asleep, beyond.

He was leaning close now, voice barely above a whisper. “Of course, you’d need to be quiet. And I’m given to understand that is not your usual way.”

She giggled in spite of herself.

“Sssh,” he scolded.

She shot him a dark look. “Don’t tell me how to behave, Ashburton.”

“I would never,” he murmured. “But I do feel honor-bound to point out that you are now even tenser than you were a moment ago.”

“Then you’re failing to help, aren’t you?” she shot back on a whisper.

“Say the word and I’ll correct that immediately.”

“And I’m to believe this is yet another area of your special expertise?”

“I’ve a good deal less practice than you might assume, actually.”

That took her off guard. She regarded him doubtfully. But he merely shrugged a shoulder. “I’ve been busy with my vocation. My experience with the fairer sex is, on balance, rather perfunctory.” He had a twinkle in his eye as he elaborated. “I’ve mostly spent time with women whose primary concern was that I hurry. Annoying them with my interest in the subtleties of their anatomy cost extra. As for their pleasure, well, I could never be certain it was legitimate. A poor university, the brothel.”

She felt herself blush at the confession. “Interesting,” was all she managed to say. She found the honestly strangely refreshing.

“Don’t worry yourself, Chetwood. I assure you, I’m up to the task. I don’t need to have brought a thousand women to bliss to know how to do it to you.”

Never mind refreshing. God, the arrogance of the man. She fixed him with her most dubious look.

But he only smiled. “Oh, I’m sure I’d encounter a few ciphers to untangle. I would need to pay extremely close attention. And let your body teach me what I need to know.”

She was blushing furiously now. “Ah. The scientific method. Applied to my—”

“Quim,” he finished, helpfully. “Precisely.” He really was enjoying this. “I have theories. They require testing. As I am prepared to adjust conditions as radically as necessary, it’s an experiment I have every confidence in.”

Somehow, in this context, that self-assured tone did not irk her as thoroughly as it usually did. In fact, it was beginning to speed her pulse.

“Think of it this way, Grace.” She gave him a sharp look at the use of her name. He only smirked, unapologetic. “Place yourself in my hands for the span of ... call it ten minutes? A purely therapeutic exercise, that you might continue the work more comfortably. And once my assistance is complete ... I’d humbly suggest we agree that it never happened at all.”

She could see that he knew it was an outrageous transgression to propose it, and beyond the pale for a lady, a betrothed lady, to allow even the speaking of it. But in this singular situation, his look seemed to say, her immediate needs took precedence.

“And, of course, I’ll go right back to calling you Chetwood.” He moved his mouth as close to her ear as he could without touching it with his lips. “I vow it.” A low chuckle. “Grace.” He said her name like a secret. Lingering over the soft “s,” letting it dissolve on his tongue.

Grace reminded herself that she did not care for Luke Ashburton. If he were drowning and she had a rope to throw him, she liked to think she would donate the rope to the poor.

To her dismay ... none of that mattered in the least. She wanted him to touch her. Now.

She wanted it as badly as she’d ever wanted anything.

Under the table, she grasped a handful of her skirts in each hand. The sounds of rustling fabric seemed very loud in the quiet library.

He went still.

Telling herself that if she were smart, she'd stop at once, she reeled the fabric up her legs.

He shifted his chair back from the table, to face hers. Carefully lifting the wooden legs so they would not scrape noisily along the floor.

Now he sat facing her armrest. Her body within reach of his hand. His lips near enough to her ear that he could speak very quietly.

“Tell me how you like to be touched,” he breathed.

Were they actually going to do this?

If she did agree to this madness—she could not possibly, but if she did —the first order of business would be to compel him to put that hand on her as quickly as possible.

“Too theoretical, telling you,” she said. “It’s best you seek the information in the field.”

The grin that broke over his face was pure wicked delight.

Before her courage—or madness—fled, she took his hand and placed it on her thigh, on the bare skin above her stocking.

He inhaled sharply. Like she'd burned him.

“Are you quite well, Ashburton?” she asked, amused.

“You’re ... soft,” he said. A new tightness in his voice.

She liked it. The effect she was having. “Even softer higher up,” she whispered. “Do let me know if you disagree.”

He wasted no time. Skating those fingertips up her leg, caressing the plump flesh of her inner thigh, giving it a little squeeze. His breath was coming faster now.

She felt his other arm come around the back of her chair as he leaned in. “It defies logic and biology. This skin. It can only be witchcraft,” he murmured. “I knew you weren’t to be trusted.”

She fought a giggle. “Ashburton,” she whispered, in a lightly scolding tone.

“Grace?”

“Get on with it or I’ll transform you to a pig. And now you know I can.”

He chuckled, tipped his head in deference. And now, dragged his fingers to the very top of her thigh, to the crease where it met her body. So close to the center of her, he must be able to feel the heat emanating from her sex.

She fought the urge to grab his hand and press it there.

“Ashburton,” she whispered, more sharply. Do it.

“Luke,” he suggested, his voice low in her ear, and she felt it all through her body. “For ten minutes. Call me Luke.”

“Luke.” Strange to call him that, and the most natural thing in the world. “I agreed to allow you to service me, Luke, not taunt me to the depths of madness.”

He seemed in no rush to correct his path. “By your breathing, it arouses you. This.” He drew his index finger slowly along that infinitely sensitive line.

“It makes me impatient.”

“Does it make you wet? I’ve been told you come apart that much more deeply when you’re very, very wet.”

“Touch me there,” she whispered, “and see for yourself.”

He made a small sound. Desire, she thought.

But he took his infuriating, delicious time. Now his fingers moved over her mound. Taking in the texture of the hair there. His breath caressed her neck like a touch, and an exhalation shuddered through her.

She turned her head to meet his eyes. He was watching her. The clarity, the presence of his gaze took her breath away.

He smiled.

The smile did something to her. Sent tiny bubbles through her blood. But before she could contemplate that, he finally, finally moved his fingers down to her sex, and every part of her attention shifted to his hand.

She heard her own intake of breath. Deep, a bit shaky.

He glided over her. Discovering her terrain. “ Very wet,” he hummed, approvingly.

“You needed this.”

She gave a breathy laugh. Gripped the armrests, leaned back into the chair. “That’s right,” he said. “Sit back. Let me take care of it.”

He slid over her, finding her clitoris, placing the pad of his middle finger over it. “I’ve noted,” he murmured, “that this can be a deceptively complex little region.” He drew his fingertip across it, watching her face. “The smallest change in angle of approach ... ” Delicately shifting his touch, he brushed just the side of the bud, and watched her body jerk as though she’d been touched by fire. “Ah, see, that spot. Very sensitive. Too?”

He moved along the other side, observing her breath hitch—catching the very moment her body moved of its own accord to chase his finger. “ There,” he said, pleased, and drew his finger along that tiny spot in a long, lush stroke. “Right there .”

He stroked her again, and again, with that exquisitely attuned fingertip. That hand that could brush a single mote of ash from a butterfly wing without disturbing its beauty. He gave her a slow, luxuriant rhythm. As if he had infinite time for only this.

At some point, she’d started sitting up straighter, leaning toward him, and she was gripping the arms of the chair so hard her hands hurt—something she only realized when he placed his other hand atop her white knuckles, coaxing them to relax. “Grace. I’ll bring it to you. Let me. Close your eyes.”

She could feel him watching her as she leaned back and let her eyes fall closed. Let her body melt into the sensations he was drawing out.

For a long moment, there was no sound but the subtle rustle of her skirt over his hand, and her uneven breathing. “Good,” he murmured, half to himself. “But ... not quite enough, I think. I think ... you need a firmer touch.” Testing, he gave it to her.

He was right. Everything inside her seemed to speed up. Burn brighter. The knot pulling tighter. She let her chair take the weight of her head, kept her eyes shut, and her whole universe became the movement of his hand under her pushed-up skirts.

“And ... this?” He moved lower to trace a finger around her opening. He dipped an inch inside, and her body was beyond shame. Her hips moved reflexively to his hand, seeking more.

She heard him make a little sound of discovery, and he slid the finger fully inside her.

It flooded her with sensation. Nearly overwhelmed her. It was perfect .

He moved that finger in, out, in , and she threw her forearm across her eyes, giving over completely to the sensation. Unable to stop the movement of her hips, rocking with his hand. She bit her lip to keep from moaning.

“Oh, Grace,” he breathed. “That ... is lovely to watch.”

She was deeply flushed already, or his tone would have caused it.

He dragged his fingers back up to her clitoris, circling now, steady, firm. He sped up, slightly, experimentally, till he found the pace that made her press her cunt to his hand and hold there, suspended by the tightening inside her.

“I see. Just like this,” he murmured, voice taut.

All she could manage was a nod, wincing against the sharp sweetness of it. “Luke ...”

“I know. I won’t stop.” He plunged his finger inside her again, deeply, and pressed his other hand over her mouth just in time to stifle the noise that tore out of her.

“Sssh,” he reminded her, and this time she did not feel the urge to argue.

He kept his left hand over her mouth as under the table his right worked her clitoris in tight circles. She kept her eyes squeezed shut so tightly she saw lightning.

“Sssh,” he warned again, and slid his hand from her mouth, around the back of her head, and gently pulled her down to his shoulder. Encouraging her to bury her face in his shirt, moan into it, as everything inside her moved, rapidly now, toward a dizzying peak. She opened her mouth against him, feeling the heat of his skin through the fabric, the hardness of the muscle beneath.

She felt his face press into her hair. “Beautiful. Let go,” he whispered.

And then her vision went white and she pushed her mouth hard into him, biting down on his shoulder to muffle a cry as her body ignited, convulsing in powerful, deep release.

He kept his fingers moving over her as she came, then let his touch slow, lighten, and finally, gently, lift from her throbbing center.

She felt like a thoroughly rung-out cloth. Her muscles loose, melted into the chair. Her breathing deep. Small after-tremors moving through her limbs.

And then, she opened her eyes.

Luke—she’d always think of him as Luke now, she suspected—had moved his chair slightly away from hers. He sat back, watching her return to ordinary time.

She knew she should feel ashamed. Likely she would, come morning. But somehow—perhaps it was the late hour, or her lack of sleep, or the fact that this was the least tense, the most delicious she’d felt since long before arriving to Bexley’s

estate—she could not find it in herself to feel anything but satisfied. Even ... delighted.

She smoothed her skirts down, sat up, and met his gaze.

She'd expected awkwardness. Embarrassment. For him to close off immediately behind that ever-ready arrogant countenance. But what moved between them felt light. Warm. Their guarded, wounded edges somehow smoother now, less obtrusive.

A moment spun out between them. Neither saying anything.

Luke pulled out a white handkerchief. He used it to carefully wipe her moisture from his fingers. Then tucked it into his pocket.

He rose, and picked up her quill. Then came behind her chair and gently pushed it closer to the table. Put the quill in her hand, and then leaned down to her. "I hope the work goes a bit easier, now, Chetwood. Don't hesitate to call upon me if you require further assistance."

And with that, he walked away.

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May 14, 1822

3 days to the opening

Despite having fallen asleep at the table, then been awakened none too gently by Aunt Amelia and ushered out of the library, Grace felt better the next morning. Her head was clear. Her neck no longer ached. She managed nearly six hours' sleep once she crawled into her bed.

Everyone, it seemed, had gotten a much-needed bit of rest, judging by the brighter eyes in the breakfast room. Grace, hovering in the doorway, watched the scientists chatting as they served themselves eggs, toast, and kippers at the buffet table. I wonder if someone reached between their legs to relieve the tension. The idea of it made her giggle out loud.

“Did I miss a joke?” Luke, fresh shaven, curly hair damp, arrived beside her in the doorway. She was assaulted by the clean morning scent of him, and it made her wish to bury her nose in his neck.

As casually as she could, she took a small step away.

She saw how things could take a terrible turn now. She could allow what had happened to soften her ... and that would put her in his power. He could be kind or cruel.

“I need no reason to giggle—surely you’ve learned that by now. It’s a vastly irritating tic of mine, the laugh,” she said.

His brow raised. “Did all my good credit evaporate in the night, Chetwood?”

She gave him a puzzled look, as though she had no notion at all to what he referred, and glided away, to the buffet table.

Grace sat with her plate beside her aunt. Luke, she knew, would sit at the other end of the table, with the earl.

He instead took the empty seat at Grace’s other side, with a respectful nod to her aunt.

“I won’t trouble you, Miss Chetwood, as I know you wish to eat quickly and go to your work—”

“Very true,” she murmured lightly.

“—but I felt it would be wrong of me not to ask: how fares the head this morning?”
He was smiling a friendly, impersonal smile.

“Very well, thank you,” Grace replied, and, seeing her aunt’s curious expression, told her, “Poor Mr. Ashburton was subject to my complaints last evening. I’d been staring too long at the numbers, and my head began to pain me.”

“But you awoke today refreshed?” he inquired politely, neatly cracking the top off a soft-boiled egg.

“Wonderfully so,” she said. So convincing was her nonchalant delivery that Amelia lost interest, and turned her attention toward the conversation on the other end of the table.

Luke dipped a point of toast into his egg, crunched a bite, washed it down with a sip

of coffee.

You silly dandelion. Stop watching him , Grace scolded herself.

“The neck as well? Better?” Luke asked, his attention on his food.

“Worlds better, yes.”

He examined a bit of kipper on his fork. “And the tension?”

Don’t play with him. You both agreed it never happened.

But another impulse fought that one. She had a genuine curiosity about him, after the events of last night.

The curiosity won. “Funny you should ask. My improved temperament—and I do feel much improved—has caused me some concern.”

He raised a brow in question.

“For you, Mr. Ashburton. It occurred to me, in considering how effervescent I feel this morning, that you might not be able to say the same.” She fixed him with a sympathetic look. “I imagine that the tasks to which you applied yourself might have increased your own stress.”

Was he fighting a smile? “Oh, they did. Enormously.”

“I am sorry to hear you found the work so provoking.”

“Kind of you. But once I left the library, I was able to relax. I am well-practiced in relieving the tensions of a life dedicated to scientific inquiry.” He nodded to a

footman to top up his coffee, continuing, “I found myself unusually inspired by my work last night. Recalling it later, in detail, brought me no small measure of satisfaction.”

Grace giggled, then barely managed to turn in time as Amelia looked their way at the sound. She pretended to busy herself with her tea; she could only assume that her cheeks were so alarmingly red that they might raise her aunt’s suspicions. Thankfully, the older woman quickly turned away to continue conversing with the scientists.

Luke met Grace’s eyes, and she could discern humor sparkling in his. “I am pleased to hear you were satisfied, Mr. Ashburton,” Grace said, all politeness.

“I feel as though I ought to thank you,” he said, leaning back in his chair, draping one arm over the brocade-upholstered back. “For helping me achieve it.”

“Oh, any aid I provided was indirect at best—”

“You’re wrong,” he said, nonchalant. “You helped quite directly.”

He opened the hand draped over the chair, allowing what was held inside it to dangle by one corner. A white handkerchief.

Grace blushed so furiously, she imagined she might immolate.

Luke folded the kerchief, unhurried. As he moved to tuck it back into his pocket, he met her gaze, deadpan. Noted her blush, and seemed pleased that he’d manage to tie her tongue.

Then, polite as ever, he turned to speak with the others at the table.

Grace had, once the impulse to throw them across the room passed, organized the

mathematics volumes methodically, stopping anywhere Charlie had written a note in a margin, dog-eared a page, or any time a problem looked particularly tricky or elegant. She'd fallen into a rhythm of creating keys based on each potential clue, and was able to churn them out faster and faster.

To keep the blood moving through her body, she moved her work every hour or two, from the table to the fireplace to her favorite spot on the floor under the orange tree in the entrance hall, book in her lap, trunk against her back, the taxidermied tiger a calm, solid presence.

She'd encountered a promising page, and was moving through the equation in her head with her eyes closed. But then, she got the sense she was being watched, so she opened her eyes.

It was Lord Spencer-Beckett, skinny and angular in his black jacket, eyes bloodshot as usual. He was holding a cup of tea, watching her curiously.

"Pardon me," she said, straightening. "I was resting my eyes a moment."

She expected him to say something sardonic. Her sense was that he lived in a state of a low-grade irritation, soothed only by drink, which made him doubly irritable the following morning.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" he asked. "Fresh made."

Of all the Oxford men, he was the one she'd spoken with least. He'd certainly never brought her anything before.

"How kind," she said.

He bent to hand it to her. "You know, I've never met a female mathematician. I do

know many males, largely because they're terrible miscreants after dark." He grinned at her giggle. "None of them dress nearly as alluringly as you do, of that I can assure you."

She accepted the compliment with a nod, took a sip of the tea—and was startled to discover it tasted of whiskey.

He laughed. "I admit I made the cup for myself. But when I saw you there, I thought you might need it more."

She took another sip. "Not terrible."

"You really are a mathematician."

Now they were both laughing. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen the man laugh before. Unexpectedly, it lifted her spirits.

In that moment, Grace realized a man was crossing the entrance hall, behind her. She looked over her shoulder to see Luke, carrying a stack of biology texts.

He was watching her with Spencer-Beckett, and he wore a look she hadn't seen since the night she slapped him.

A look that said he knew what she was about, and he found it disappointing, but he could not say that he was surprised.

A swell rose fast inside Grace. Fury. She wanted very badly to follow Luke so that she could throw the cup of tea directly into his superior face.

She took a sip to buy herself a moment to calm down. Then gave Spencer-Beckett a grateful smile. "Thank you for cheering me on. And for the tea, though I ought to

stop drinking it.” She rose as gracefully as she could manage. “I should return to my work.”

But back in the library, Grace couldn’t concentrate. Livid, she forced herself to focus on the page in front of her.

To hell with Luke Ashburton’s judgment. Devil take his arrogant face.

In the exhibition hall, work seemed to have gotten taxing, fussy, and difficult for everyone. Certainly, Luke was struggling. He mounted a rare beetle for display ... and pressed slightly too hard, causing it to crumble in his hands.

For a moment, he couldn’t believe it. What the devil is wrong with you?

It wasn’t much of a mystery. His mind was under that orange tree. It was on the look on Spencer-Beckett’s face as he conversed with Grace. Interested. Bordering upon rapt.

And then there was the look on Grace’s face, when she caught Luke watching them. The instantaneous wariness. The bitterness. She expected him to judge her. She expected that despite their small steps toward reconciliation—never mind what happened last night, under that table—they would fall right back into the worst moments of their worst night.

Her eyes said that she believed that night was the truth. That the man she’d seen when she’d overheard him speaking of her with vile relish was the truth. The slap was the truth.

The night of the Dawnridge ball, standing in that parlor, surrounded by an audience of posh, ape-drunk idiots, Luke had felt a certain dark pleasure in tearing Grace Chetwood down. But as they all continued to discuss her with brute delight,

nauseated guilt began to turn his stomach.

He'd felt puzzled and a bit alarmed by his own behavior. He'd gone too far, in criticizing her attire, her appearance, her laugh—he liked all those things about her. Until he'd seen what he'd seen of her with those men. Incredible, how neatly jealousy had turned him vicious.

In the end, everything he'd said had only made him feel worse than before he opened his bloody mouth.

The library was at the end of the hall, and he'd gone there to collect himself. He entered quietly ... and stopped. There was a woman with red hair standing at the fireplace.

Before he could leave, she turned and saw him. “Miss Chetwood,” he'd said quickly. “Good evening. That is—pardon me. I did not mean to intrude.”

“I don't own the library.” She touched her hair, her cheeks, making sure all was in order. “I ought to get back.”

At that moment, Luke had realized that ironically, this was precisely the chance he'd wanted all this time, at all these wretched balls. To speak with her.

“Of course, as ought I,” Luke replied. “Though—I must confess, since you are here ...” She was watching him, unsmiling—wary, he thought. So he took a step back, to communicate that he had no improper intent. “I've longed to converse with you since the night we met.” His voice sounded calm, friendly, even causal to his own ears. Which surprised him, because the sentiment felt oddly vulnerable.

“Have you?” She sounded dubious.

This was certainly not the tack she took with lords in alcoves. She hadn't giggled once since he entered the room. "Perhaps," he said, slowly, "I was alone in that wish."

"No. I very much wished to talk with you." Her tone was slightly at odds with the words—there was an edge he didn't understand. "I hoped you might find me at the Marwells', or at the next ball. Or at this one. I had thought you might approach me."

"I was remiss in not making a stronger effort to do so."

"Perhaps." She was holding his gaze, and there was something sad in hers. He wanted to ask, but could not think how to formulate the question. What's the matter? Seemed unforgivably blunt.

"On the other hand," she continued, voice sweet, "perhaps you were spared."

A subtle cold swept him then, at the odd coincidence of her choice of words.

"I cannot imagine that," he said. "I'm delighted to be speaking with you now—"

"You ought to run, Mr. Ashburton." Her tone was positively dripping honey, now. "Before I dash you on my rocks."

She'd heard. Somehow, she'd heard everything.

She did laugh now, high, airy. She stepped closer—close enough that he could see the tiny glass beads sewn across the top of her bodice to catch the light. See each freckle on her cheeks, on her arms above her pink satin gloves. The scent of her assailed him, sweet flowers, warmth, a faint note of something luscious and tart.

He took a step back. The intensity of his body's reaction unnerving him. And what he

should be doing at that moment was apologizing.

“Whatever is the matter, Mr. Ashburton? Repulsed by my vulgarity?”

“Miss Chetwood—”

She didn’t give him time. “You know, there are things you were right about.”

“I—”

“Please. Do not apologize for having the insight that a lady at a ball attended by all the ton would have interest in seeking to a man able to provide a bare minimum of comfort.”

She let her eyes drop to take in his mouth, the set of his shoulders, his clothing, his body, indicating that she was impressed with none of it. “Obviously,” she said, lilting, “I could never seriously entertain a man like you. Your funds wouldn’t keep me in slippers. You’re very observant, surely you’ve observed that in a room of genuinely eligible gentlemen, you aren’t near up to snuff—”

“Oh, I observed,” he said, and that his tone was unrushed and cool was not a choice, but a sort of automatic result of the twist in his gut, strangling his previous contrition. “I’m not certain I saw you with every peer of the realm you’ve kissed of late, but enough to consider the emerging pattern.”

She flushed scarlet. “Pattern,” she echoed, her voice laced with stunned fury.

“Yes, you only kiss, and et cetera, men set to inherit particularly impressive titles. Took me quite out of the queue. Or do I have it wrong?”

Her eyes were full of more contempt than he’d ever seen in a woman’s gaze. “You

have it insultingly wrong, in calling it a queue, and yet stunningly right, in that I would rather die than touch a man like you.”

The darkest part of him hissed how dare she. “A pity,” he said coldly. “As it’s all you were born for.”

It was simply the worst thing he could think to say, the thing that would upset her the most. If he’d paused for even a second, he might have had the sense to keep his mouth closed. But he’d said it.

Her eyes had grown huge.

And she’d slapped him across the face.

He’d never been slapped before. She was good at it. It hurt quite a bit.

“Mr. Ashburton,” she said, her voice cracked and tight. “You sad, slight approximation of a man. Do go to hell.”

She turned and walked out of the room.

As soon as she moved away—taking her rage and her scent with her—Luke saw the scene with horrible lucidity.

He sunk into a chair. His cheek smarted. He’d never liked himself less than at that moment.

Luke continued not to like himself very much as he labored over specimens, trying not to destroy anything else.

The exhibition hall was almost eerily silent, everyone’s head down as they worked.

They were all working through a crate that had been very badly damaged, and so their work this afternoon brought mostly disappointment and frustration.

The earl chose that moment to visit. He made a slow tour of the workstations, and the empty display cases and tables now arranged throughout the room, awaiting their specimens.

When he told Luke that he sensed a troubling dip in morale, Luke assured the earl that what he sensed was focus, perhaps mixed with the grief that pervaded the endeavor.

The earl understood, and would handle it exactly as his brother would have. “He would see to it that dinner was particularly sumptuous, and the wine would pour aggressively.” Sensing Luke’s hesitation, he added, “Your work is immaculate, and Miss Chetwood is working so quickly in the library, watching her makes me dizzy. I choose to feel every confidence we will meet our goal. My brother would insist we pause to drink his favorite wine.”

And so dinner was exceptional, course after course of fresh, succulent food, and more wine than was strictly wise. Denton was in fine form, relaxed, garrulous, regaling the table with fond, mildly inappropriate memories of Bexley. Soon, even Mrs. Wilmington was laughing so hard she had to wipe away a tear.

Grace was smiling too, and she’d handily won a dessert-course debate with the moderately inebriated Professors Mangrove and Wallace by casually referencing Immanuel Kant’s doctrine of transcendental idealism. He’d seen a glimmer of engagement in her while the points and counterpoints were flying, but she seemed relieved when her aunt took up her side of the argument, allowing her to retreat into her mind.

Luke could see the tension in her then. The distraction. She barely sipped from her

glass. And she would not look at him.

Luke decided to control what he could: his mood, via dulling its deeps and edges with copious drink. His head might bother him come morning, but at least soaking it in wine would temporarily stop its obsessing over about the mash he'd once again made of things with Grace.

Grace was glad to hear so much laughter at the dinner table. But could not find her way into the spirit of it. The success of their endeavor depended on her, and she was no closer to an answer.

And then there was Luke Ashburton, all the way at the other end of the table. Watching the proceedings with an expression that belonged indexed in an official reference textbook on aloofness .

When the earl invited the party to join him in the blue parlor for after-dinner drinks, Philip and Aunt Amelia were deep in conversation. Grace let her aunt know she was retiring early, and encouraged her to enjoy her evening.

As she rose from the table, Grace could feel Luke watching her, unsmiling.

She did go up to her room. She even looked at the bed. She should sleep.

Then she took her wool shawl from the chair, wrapped it around her shoulders, and exited the house.

The museum felt bigger in the dark. More isolated. Profoundly quiet, but for the whisper of breeze in the trees. Bexley Hall and its inhabitants felt miles and miles away. Grace liked this. Liked the feeling of entering her own little world, seen and heard and glared at by absolutely no one. She carried a lamp with her through the entrance hall, the tree casting lacy shadows on the wall. She entered the library,

placed the lamp on the table, and resumed her work.

There was one good aspect to all of this. She never felt more at home than when sitting in a library, working, her only company the fire crackling low and thousands and thousands of books.

The very opposite of men, books. Men wanted things from you, then judged you instead of themselves for it. All books desired was to freely provide all that they held. They didn't care if you'd kissed two or eight or twenty-six different men at balls, or if you smiled at a pale, skinny scientist who offered you tea with whiskey, or if rumor held that a future viscount was only marrying you because you'd lain with him.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been working when she heard footsteps.

She knew exactly who had walked most of a mile in the dark to find her here. Her stomach tightened.

What she did not expect was that he'd be carrying his jacket in one hand, uncaring that he was crushing it, or that his gait would be loose and slightly wandering. His hair was in a more pronounced than usual state of disarray.

He walked to her. And stood there, saying nothing.

She took him in, then returned to her work. "Go away."

He did not go away. He stood there, thinking at her.

She resolutely continued writing.

Finally, he spoke. "I have a question."

She flicked him an irritated look. “Ask when you’re sober enough to grasp my meaning.”

“I am not as drunk as I appear,” he said. Then admitted, “But the wine was very good, tonight. I noticed you did not indulge.”

“I have work to do.”

“This question is simple enough. And then I will leave you alone.”

She hissed a sigh and set her quill down. “Be quick.”

“Of course.” And then he asked it. “Will you always hate me?”

She blinked. Unsure how to even begin answering.

“Is it the mean to which our equation must always return? You look at me as though you crave my head on a pike in the town square.”

“That does sound a pleasant sight,” she allowed.

“I thought we were getting along.”

“We were, and then you ruined it.”

“I ruined it—in what way did I —”

“By burning me alive with your judgment, Ashburton.”

“I haven’t—”

All in a rush, she was so angry that she pushed her chair back from the table, just to get more distance from him. “You saw me chatting with Lord Spencer-Beckett , and you immediately proved me a fool for imagining you were anyone but the man I slapped that night at Dawnridge.”

“I—you thought I was judging you?”

“You were. God, what is the point of arguing about it? Your looks had the intended effect, I assure you—”

“And what effect was that?”

“To make me ashamed. To make me feel like a woman born for nothing more than base appeal to men. And to make me regret that I had softened in my opinion of you, that I’d thought for an instant that we could be friends.”

He was regarding her, his eyes thoughtful. “For a brilliant mathematical mind, you’re a bit of an idiot.”

She wanted to retort, but could only sputter.

“I wasn’t judging you, Chetwood. You’re quite right that I’ve done it in the past, obviously,” he said. “I was only ... angry.”

“Because you are always angry with me, because you do not like how I look, or how I dress, or how I talk, or laugh, never mind how I behave. You do not like me , and you never have.” When she’d started, she’d felt the power in calling him out for it. But by the end, her voice cracked.

He stared at her. He ran a hand through his hair, which only enhanced its shambolic state.

“That’s ridiculous. I enjoy at least three-quarters of the things you listed. And I don’t know where you got the notion I never liked you, when I—” He cut himself off, frustrated. He gave her a look that seemed to beg her to make this just a little easier for him. “I was angry with him . I’m angry with anyone who looks at you but does not see you.”

“What, pray, is that supposed to mean?”

“It means they are lucky to be near your mind, and they are too stupid about your nearness to know it. Alluring . That was the best the sapskull could do, while you sat under that tree with a volume of Leonhard Reuler he could not comprehend for all the gold in the Vatican?” He gave a derisive laugh. “I can’t blame them for wanting you, but not to try to understand anything under the surface is lazy and stupid and a waste of what is absolutely the most gorgeous part of all.” He seemed to have said more than he meant to. He shook his head, as if to reel the words back in. “Christ, you’re right, I drank too much. Christ.”

Her pulse was pounding, and she was confused, and didn’t trust anything he’d said or anything she felt.

“Never mind,” he said, seeming to regain control of his tone. “No, don’t, damn it, I meant it—” he sighed, frustrated. “Listen, Grace—”

“ Do not call me that,” she snapped, rising from her chair.

She’d had enough. It was too difficult to retain good sense when he ricocheted between insults and praise, when he seemed one moment to see her as an adversary and the next a colleague and the next a woman—a woman he’d pleased in this room. “Your ten minutes passed a long time ago.”

Mentioning the ten minutes was a mistake. Because it arrested him, mid-thought .

And then his eyes moved to her mouth, and then lower, and lower still. As though he could see right through her dress. Exactly where he had touched her.

That gaze was so alarmingly direct that Grace sat back in the chair, and folded her hands in her lap.

“Please go now, Ashburton, this museum will never open on time if I murder you tonight.”

“I will go,” he said. “But first, I’d like to show you something. It will help your work. It’s quick.” She shot him a dark look. “Are you not the least curious?”

Damn him. Of course she was.

“Leave the lamp,” he said over his shoulder.

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The moon was nearly full, pouring soft, milky light over the solarium. It traced the edges of trees beyond the glass. Their only witnesses. Luke walked past the settee, to an empty spot on the rug. He sat on the floor, and patted the space beside him.

Grace hesitated, then sat. Not too close.

He arranged his jacket to form a pillow, placed it where she might use it, and lowered himself to lie on his back. “Do you ever find that you think better with a change in view?”

She felt a bit as though he’d reached into her mind. But she said nothing.

He was peering up to the ceiling—since it was glass, through it. A private smile, now.

She tipped her head up, and saw: the sky was perfectly clear tonight, and thick with stars.

“Do you know the constellations?” he asked. “Lovely night to spot them.”

Curiosity won, and Grace lay on the ground. She rested her head on his jacket. “This is what you wanted to show me?”

“Yes. Just a few moments. Trust me.” He pointed. “Orion, there. And that cluster, do you see how it looks a like a rose?”

She followed his finger. “It’s the center of Persephone’s crown.” He traced it. “Follow ... there,” he moved his arm in an arc, to another line of stars. “The River

Styx. Her beloved Hades, of course, waits on the other side.”

“I didn’t know there was a river up there. And Hades was her kidnapper.”

“Oh, he thoroughly won her over, in the end. Took effort, given the seriousness of his crimes against her. But sincerity of purpose can be a potent aphrodisiac.”

She gave a snort.

And then they were quiet. Staring up at it all.

The longer Grace looked, the smaller she felt. A bit like a mote of dust, in a not-unpleasant way. Funny, then, how important things felt to her. Their work this week. Their quarrel, two years ago. Her embarrassment and anger. Her pride.

“Uncommonly bright, tonight,” she murmured.

“I made arrangements to add a few extra stars. Needed it spectacular enough to distract from your vexations.”

She giggled in spite of herself. “Costly, I imagine.”

“Oh, the universe and I are old friends. She doesn’t mind putting up a show for me as a favor.”

Grace glanced at him. A soft curve to his lips as he looked up. Who was this Luke, who could lie on the floor, so contented? Was it the drink, or was this who he was, outside of work and war? “The universe is a she?”

“Too beautiful to be anything else. Now,” he said, without looking at her. “Tell me why you hate me, Chetwood. Is it that you cannot forgive me for the things I’ve said?”

That's within your rights."

"Wounding with words is hardly a hanging offense."

"Then perhaps, at bedrock, it is you who have never liked me . Go on," he encouraged. "Tell me precisely how you view me. Decapitate me."

"You knew very well when you took me here that I'd be so awed by it, I'd lose interest in bathing in your blood."

"Not at all. I fully expect you to come round to doing me in. I merely wanted to share my passion for astronomy before I died."

She gave a laugh. He said nothing. Waiting for her to speak.

So, finally, she did. "Fine. You do vex me. Because the first time I laid eyes upon you, I thought you ... it doesn't matter."

"No," he agreed, watching the sky. "It doesn't matter." Then, he added, "Still, you could tell me."

She found that if she did not look at him, she could keep talking. "I was taken with you. I believed you were taken with me. So, first, that."

He didn't say anything. But she felt a shift in the way he was listening.

"It was not a shocking epiphany—that I was not your sort. For all that men turn foolish around me, I am not to most tastes."

"You believe that?"

“The night sky is black. Your hair is curly. I am too much.” He made a noise like he disagreed, but she ignored it. “But I have never so severely misread someone as I did you. I hadn’t the slightest grasp of your true opinion of me. I thought ... well. Suffice to say I did not understand how deeply you disdained me.”

He took a breath, like he wanted to speak, so she waited. “No,” he said softly. “Finish.”

She’d never imagined saying any of this to him, much less all of it. “Well. And so when we did come to blows, I was mortified. Because I should have known better. A woman does not reach one and twenty, in this sort of physical form, without a basic sense of how to sidestep men whose regard for her is dangerously low. But with you, I walked directly into the jaws of the trap. And I keep walking into them.”

A pause. “Why do you suppose that is?”

“I see something in you. That draws me. And then it all happens again. That’s the irony, Ashburton. I deserve it when you hurt me. One’s opponent can only land the strike if one drops one’s guard.”

She heard him turn his head. Knew he was looking at her now. “Chetwood.” His voice was gruff. “No one here wants to hurt you. Not really.”

“Oh, I know,” she said, though she didn’t—she simply couldn’t stand the vulnerability of talking about it anymore. “Don’t trouble yourself. You made it up to me when you hung all these stars.”

He chuckled, and she felt him turn his head away. “Dubious of that. But would it help to know you trouble me in much the same way I trouble you?” Now she had the sense he couldn’t look at her either. “I don’t mind sparring—it’s dancing of sorts, when one’s partner is as sharp as you are. You challenge me. I like it.” His voice had

dropped low, and she felt this last in her belly. I like it. “ But I don’t want a war with you. I want— always wanted ... ” He gave a frustrated laugh. “It is absurd, it’s commedia bloody dell’arte, to imagine I was not hopelessly fascinated the second I first saw you.”

It made everything go still, hearing that.

“Then what happened?” she whispered.

“I bungled it,” he said, simply. “And now it’s too late.”

He exhaled. She said nothing. A burr inside her chest.

“So,” he said, forcing his tone lighter as he changed the subject. “Shall I quiz you? King of the Underworld, so forth?”

“No,” she murmured. She didn’t want the conversation to move toward an end. She wanted to lie here as though time had entirely forgotten this solarium. She wanted to listen to his voice. “I’d prefer you show me a few more.”

He moved closer, to point to a constellation above her head. “That’s Diana, and her hound there, wearing a diamond necklace. And that, five stars and the arc of three, Puer Virgo Tristis. If you tilt your head, it becomes quite clear that’s his poor neglected little member in hand, see?”

“The Sad ... Virgin Boy?”

“You remember your Latin. Easy to spot the Puer because he’s near Venus, which is of course the center of the Illuminated Arse.”

She coughed a laugh. “Did you make all of them up?”

He threw her a dry glance. “Insulting of you to doubt me. The constellations are an area of special interest for me.”

“Clearly.”

“I’ll prove it,” he said. And reached for her arm, letting his hand hover, not yet touching it. Goosebumps rose on her skin. “May I? For demonstration purposes only.”

She nodded, feeling herself flush.

He lifted her arm by the wrist, held it so that they could regard the pale, moonlit flesh of her inner arm.

“These,” he said, and drew the tip of his finger across her skin, tracing her freckles. “These constellations fascinate me. I want to connect all of them, and read their mythology in one sweeping epic.”

“That would take you quite a while,” she said, the husky sound of her own voice surprising her.

“I want it to take me quite a while.” He brushed the finger across her skin, slowly. “I want it to take all night.”

“We haven’t got that sort of time, Ashburton,” she breathed.

“Luke,” he said, and brought her arm down to his mouth, to kiss her wrist.

Her breath caught, as he dragged his lips up her forearm.

It felt like he’d tapped some tiny root, some channel that webbed out over her entire

body. The feather sensation of his lips darted all through her, to her farthest reaches.

What had they been saying?

“Luke,” she said. “When you do that, I am in danger of getting quite ... carried away.”

He gently lifted her arm away from his mouth, and brought it down to rest on his chest. Exhaled, as though it had been a feat of discipline. Then threw her a glance. “I’ve paused. To allow you to collect yourself, and consider how you’d like me to proceed.”

She rolled onto her side, up on an elbow, withdrawing her arm from him. And took a head-clearing breath.

He was regarding her with eyes that were serious, curious, a bit warm from the wine.

It occurred to her then that, strange as it was, she’d never touched him.

They’d never danced at a ball. They’d never held hands. Last night in the library, she’d gripped the chair as he’d worked magic under her skirts with one hand—even then, the ways their bodies met were strictly limited. They’d never kissed.

She reached out, and as he had, let her fingers hover.

His eyes widened. He nodded.

She touched his cheek, where it went hollow, below the bone. Warm. Scratchy where his beard was coming in.

She traced his lower lip with her thumb, that firm, aloof line. Surprisingly plush.

Then, one fingertip over his nose, following the slightly wrong angle of it, feeling the bump in the bridge, the break that healed imperfectly. Then to the raised white C bisecting his eyebrow, tracing the cursive, as if to say this scar goes with that break, does it not? A taxonomy of the life collected on his face.

“Fell out of a tree,” he said. “I was seven. Chasing a butterfly.”

Of course he was. “Did you catch it?”

“I only wanted to look more closely.” So much soft mirth in his gaze as he held hers. “Got smashed to bits. Arm, too.”

“And you learned precisely nothing from it, evidently.”

“Nothing,” he agreed.

She’d never seen his eyes like that—sparkling, open, like some blockade had lifted and she could see straight into the depths.

Suddenly, the singularity of him overwhelmed her. Yes, yes, he was handsome, in his lean, reserved, irregular way. But this was more. This was the whole night sky.

He swallowed hard. And then, abruptly, turned his face away.

She understood. She felt an urge to shake out her fingers, to lessen the intensity of what had built there in the contact between them.

She saw him take a deep, steadying breath before turning back to face her.

She wanted to move away, fast, while she still had any measure of control. And she wanted to abdicate it all to him.

He seemed to read it in her face. “Do you wish me to go?” he asked. “I will go.” His voice was gentle. No game in it, no tease.

It would be best if he went.

“Yes,” she said. “Go.”

And then, before she lost her nerve, “in ... ten minutes.”

His brow raised.

“You’ve caused severe tension,” she said. It happened to be true, for all that she was bold, mad, wicked to be saying it. “I must insist you see to it before you go.”

His smile turned positively wolfish. He was sitting up in a blink.

“Sincerest apologies,” he said. “I shall do my best to correct it at once.” His hands were on the hem of her skirts, pushing them up, up over her legs.

His eyes moved over her body, and he drew a hand down the white length of her stocking to her slipper. He eased the shoe off, then held her foot in both hands, his thumbs finding her arch, pressing in.

Remarkable. A breathy oh slipped from her at the sensation.

“You see?” he murmured. “If I had sufficient time, there’s not an inch of you I wouldn’t investigate until I knew how to pull pleasure from it. I’d find every lock, and then its key.”

He planted a kiss on the top of her foot, then let it go, and moved to sit between her legs. “But I can try to be efficient, princess.”

She raised a brow, amused. “Not provocateur?”

He shrugged. “As it happens, I had it backward.” He moved his hand to her thigh, let it rest there. “And so.” His eyes, their gray almost silver in the moonlight, dared her. “Tell me what you want.” He smiled—rakishly, she thought. “As I plan to give it to you exactly, I’d recommend you be specific.”

She blushed to think of saying the words—but it also thrilled her to think of saying the words. “All right ... then ... I want you to make me come.”

He looked sharply pleased. He slid his hand up, under her skirt, to cup her cunt. “Let us see what I can manage,” he said softly.

He moved over her, till their faces were close. She thought he would kiss her, but he moved to murmur in her ear. “I confess, there is something I want too.” He smelled faintly of wine, and woody spice, linen, skin. “Pairs well with your request, I think. Should not be too much of a trial.” He was moving his hand now, letting his palm press deliberately over her clitoris, causing a burst of concentrated sensation. “Let me taste you,” he said, voice hoarse, and pushed one finger into her. God. Her back arched. “Tell me to put my mouth on you. So I can stop bloody thinking about it every second of the day.”

Oh.

“Luke?” she breathed.

“Yes .. .”

“Your tongue. Make a bit of haste.”

He chuckled. And wasted no time, sliding down her body, shoving her skirts out of

the way, pressing his hands to her bare thighs, pushing them apart.

He was staring at her cunt, studying it, and the feeling was uneasy and thrilling at once. An unruly lock of hair had fallen over his brow. He looked hungry, devilish. He inhaled, and his lids fell closed, taking in the scent of her.

He looked to her, up her body. She was impatient now, but before she could speak, he did. “Oh, I know,” he said silkily. “ ‘Luke. Make haste. ’”

He slid his fingers over her, to part her, expose her clitoris, her entrance, clenching over emptiness now. Her hips began to squirm, and he pressed his other hand firmly down on her lower belly, holding her in place. And then he licked her, one slow taste from her opening to her clitoris. He groaned with something like relief. And then groaned again, emphatic.

Pleasure curled through her as his tongue charted her. She let her head tip back, her eyes fall closed. He licked her again, unhurried, savoring. Dipped inside, making her gasp. And then, a spiral over her pearl, where he stayed, drawing his tongue over her.

He was as focused with his mouth as he’d been with his fingers. But less measured. Greedier. He was not only giving—he was taking for himself, too. He moved one hand to her hip, clutched her hard as he worked over her with his tongue, fingers digging into her flesh, telling her how she affected him, how he wanted more. He used the fingers of his other hand to hold her open for his mouth. She realized she was saying his name, over and over. Luke. Luke. Yes. God, yes, like that.

He lifted his mouth from her. “Grace,” he whispered. “Look up.”

She opened her eyes and the entire sky met her through the glass, endless black punctured by stars, as he returned his mouth to her sex, took her clitoris between his lips and lightly, experimentally sucked.

Bright lightning cleaved through her, tore a shocked noise from her throat, and he made a sound of revelation, of victory . He slid his hands under her hips. Sucking harder as he lashed her with his tongue. Her cries grew desperate. She pushed her fingers into his hair, soft, springy, and grabbed it in her fists, pulling his head harder to her, and the rough demand of it made him moan into her cunt.

It was coming for her like a comet, hot, blinding, pinning her flat to the floor, Luke's head buried between her legs, feasting on her as, above her, the whole universe watched.

And then, all at once, she broke, shattered, and she came on his tongue with a cry, her hands clutching his hair, her heartbeat roaring in her ears.

Until, finally, the climax released her, panting, limbs loose, every part of her warm and heavy. She let her eyes slip closed over the great black peace of it.

He pressed his hand over her wet, swollen cunt, feeling the last of the tremors. She felt his body shift, and when she opened her eyes, saw that he was sitting up. Watching her.

He shook his head ruefully. "In the spirit of complete honesty," he said, drawing the back of his hand over his glistening mouth, "I could do that again right now. Say the word."

"I'm still in pieces," she murmured. "I'm more liquid than flesh."

He was stroking her thighs. A satisfied smile playing over his lips. "Still, I've found my calling. You go, do your calculus. And I shall remain under the table, servicing you at regular intervals."

With effort, she rose up on her elbows. Surveyed him. His hair was a disaster. There

was a restless sharpness to his eyes, at odds with his light tone. Tension in his face, the set of his shoulders.

She sat up, to see him better, and he seemed to sway a little away from her, as though she might burn him. And she realized—of course—he remained very, very aroused. She hadn't touched him, and he hadn't touched himself.

She realized she had several curiosities she badly wished to satisfy. What he looked like under those clothes—his chest, his navel, his thighs, his cock. How did he like to be touched? What would it take to make him cede that calm, controlled demeanor entirely?

She leaned closer. "I think first, you must let me do something for you."

He smiled, wistful. Smoothed an errant strand of hair away from her face, and she realized she must look as disheveled as he. "Sweet of you, princess. But I require nothing from you."

"I have difficulty believing that. And I want to give it to you."

He was looking at her with such fondness, she almost did not notice that the barricades were back. That she couldn't see into him at all anymore.

"Luke." On impulse, she moved a hand up his leg, to find him, and yes, he was straining hard through his trousers.

He put his hand over hers, and gently pulled it from him.

"No," he said.

She wanted to protest. Damn the pleasure still addling her—her capacity to be

properly indignant had been compromised. “Why not?” she managed, and her voice sounded plaintive.

He rose to his feet now, calm. Could he really mean to go, now, with her body still half-melted on the floor and his vibrating with need?

“That . . . was bliss,” he said. And walked out of the solarium, leaving her there.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:33 am

May 15, 1822

2 days to the opening

Luke slept fitfully. He woke before dawn, every bit as tense as he expected.

He wasn't certain why it felt so deeply unwise to allow Grace to touch him. To do to him the things he'd done to her. She wanted to—her curiosity glinted like high sun off a ruby. It drove him nearly mad to think of all that enthusiasm, that quickness, applied to his body for the purposes of pleasure.

But it felt dangerous. Under the scratchy, insistent need. Under the burning interest in what those soft hands, that mouth, would feel like around his cock. Christ . . .

He'd brought himself to release twice just to get to sleep, and now he found himself doing it again before getting out of bed this morning. It was necessary, and it wasn't going to help nearly enough.

It wasn't the transgression of it stopping him. Yes, he would ask Miss Worthing for her hand in a matter of days. But evidently, he was deeply amoral, because no part of him felt guilt, or shame, or anything but the urgency of it, the beauty and power of it, when he put his tongue in Grace's rosy cunt. It would have felt wrong, bizarre, not to bring her to ecstasy.

His resistance to it, to her, felt deeper. Felt existential. The need was a snake in his gut, but the fear was in his ribs, and it was delicate as wings.

The opening was two days away. He would need to work for the next fourteen hours to have any hope of staying on schedule. And if Grace did not provide the translated journals, none of his work was going to make a damned spit of sense to the viewing public.

He could not distract her from her task.

And so he rose, threw on clothes and a coat, and walked across the misty, dark grounds of the estate toward the butterfly vivarium. Bexley had gone there every morning to write in his personal journal. It felt good to Luke to take up the practice, to greet the sunrise with a quill in hand and butterflies in the air all around him. He'd been doing it since the day after the fire. The combination of sitting in the vivarium's tropical heat and making an attempt to organize his thoughts on paper had proved therapeutic. He tended to emerge more centered, with a jotted list of the day's tasks.

It was why Luke managed to enter the breakfast room calm. And meet Grace's eyes, calm. She was sitting at an untouched plate, looking thoughtful and distant, as she did when she sat in the library, doing mathematics in her head. When she saw him, she smiled uncertainly. He gave a nod, trying to reassure her that he was not here to vex her, nor to tempt her—nor to deny that it had happened, or what it meant to him.

She cannot read all of that in a look. Some sentiments require actual language, you coward.

He filled his plate. He was ravenous.

He sat between Fitz and the earl. He commented dryly on their conversation without really tracking it. He ate food without tasting it. Denton knew of his morning visits to the vivarium, and when he asked a question about the Lepidoptera, whatever Luke answered was witty enough that the whole table laughed. He smiled, sipped his coffee. Pretended he was fine. Pretended the winged thing didn't stir every time she

looked at him.

He needed this over. One way or another. He needed the museum to open or not, open properly or disastrously. He needed to be finished with Grace Chetwood.

In the meantime, he pictured the iron box in his chest. He tossed in as much as he could. And locked it.

Sexual climax, Grace mused, was a marvel.

Her thoughts, of course, were a din of worry over the cipher and distraction over the man whose mouth had been quite between her legs not twelve hours earlier.

But her body felt refreshed despite its abbreviated sleep, and her mind, for all its tumult, felt razor sharp and ready.

They should advertise it as medicine, she thought.

Well. She would put her dose to good use. She would have a breakthrough, or perish in the attempt.

She watched Luke through lowered lashes. He lifted his cup to his mouth—Mother Mary, that mouth— with convincing placidity. There was no evidence of the agitation with which he'd left last night.

He must have taken care of it , she thought with a smirk.

He glanced her way, stopped, taking in her expression.

She let her eyes glide over him, making it clear that she was making a study of his calm demeanor.

He ticked a shoulder, as if to say did what I had to.

A giggle burst from Grace, and she covered her mouth, and set down her tea before she spilled it.

“Something amusing?” asked Professor Mangrove.

“Oh, everything, in the end,” Grace said.

Philip gave a snort, not looking up from the letter he was reading as he ate, one that detailed what looked like a long list of expenses.

Philip looked rough. He’d drunk even more than usual last night, Grace knew. And the week was wearing on him in ways he managed to disguise when he was the sparkling center of a conversation. But once no one was looking at him ... Lord mercy, the man looked drained.

What Grace saw then was so subtle, she would have missed it had she not been surreptitiously studying Philip at that precise moment. And she was only doing that because she was working so hard not to look at Luke.

Philip flipped to the back of the page. As he did, he seemed to be seized with a pain in his hand—the unbandaged one. He grimaced, and shook the hand out, massaging it, obviously trying to erase any sign of discomfort from his expression. He was blinking, trying not to make a sound, though he looked to be suffering considerably. And briefly, his face winced in a way that seemed more than just a pained expression. It seemed like an odd involuntary spasm.

Philip covered smoothly, picking up his fork. Grace had looked away quickly enough that he had not caught her. As far as she could tell, no one else had seen it.

Something is wrong with him.

Philip Denton was her friend Arabella's favorite cousin. He'd been kind to Grace all her life. He was as strong as he was charming. He moved through the world as if nothing could hurt him.

Dread, deep in her belly. She couldn't eat a bite, now.

Philip looked to Grace, and smiled. That smile was so familiar to her. It told her nothing was wrong.

The gray parlor was mostly used during house parties, for games and smoking. But during the push to complete the museum, Philip had adopted it as his office, a place to sit with the ledgers and keep up with correspondence.

He'd been occupied all day. He would not like an intrusion from Grace, and he certainly would not like it if she intruded into his space in order to intrude upon his privacy.

But, after laboring in the library for several hours, she could not shake the foreboding in her gut. Finally, despite the urgency of her work, she found herself unable to continue.

The door was slightly ajar, but Grace knocked, waited. When no one answered, she assumed he must have left the house, but she pushed the door open to be sure.

Philip was on the floor. His face was very red. He was propped up on his arms, straining. His legs were stretched on the ground in front of him, and it seemed they were dead weight. Immovable.

"Philip—" She ran to him.

Philip scowled. "I'm fine. Leave me— Grace , leave me be."

The vehemence of his tone stopped her. She realized he was deeply embarrassed, and near panic at the thought of someone walking by and seeing him like this. She hurriedly closed and locked the door before kneeling beside him.

"Did you fall?" She kept her voice low. "Did you hurt your leg?"

Philip gave a deep sigh. "Grace ... "

"Let me help you. Tell me what's happened."

He looked resigned, now. He was still flushed, and appeared to be in discomfort. But he managed to wave to the desk in a nonchalant way. "Fetch me the glass?"

Bourbon. Grace brought it to Philip, who had dragged himself to lean against the sofa. "Medicine," he said. And drank. Then, he blew out a long breath. "I'm all right, darling. It's passing. It will pass."

"Then why are you still on the floor?" She was fighting tears, because she was scared, and also because she did not want to upset him by crying, which was making it that much harder not to cry.

"My legs decided to stop working for a moment. They'll remember their job soon enough, don't fret."

"But ... why?"

Philip shrugged. "Because I'm dying."

"What?" The tears were flowing now, and there was nothing Grace could do about it

but let them, and try not to dissolve into sobbing.

“Forgive me, I put that rather too dramatically. Indulging in moments of self-pity is one of my small solaces with it. I’m not dying today, or even this year. Just, perhaps, a bit sooner than you will.”

“What is it , Philip?”

“First, promise me it stays in this room.”

Grace thought of Arabella. How badly she would want to know that her cousin was unwell. How angry she would be if she discovered Grace had kept the information from her.

“Including Arabella,” Philip added.

Grace winced. But nodded. “You may rely upon me.”

Philip patted her cheek, an affectionate gesture he’d made since she was a little girl. Now, his palm was clammy.

He made a dismissive wave, as if he were about to tell her something boring and unimportant. “It does not have a name, strictly speaking. Or rather it has many, some to do with humors, hyper-reaction to this and that, a thickness or thinness of the blood, et cetera, ad infinitum. It manifests in various ways. Tremors, pains, the disobedience of my limbs. It is not, strictly speaking, the finest thing that has ever happened to me.”

“And what is the cure?”

He just looked at her.

“No,” she snapped. “Surely there’s something—”

“Grace. Be an adult. Of course there is not, or I’d have done it, and you wouldn’t have found me moaning on the bloody floor.”

“How long—”

“Three years now. That’s the good of it: it progresses slowly. But it does progress. Eventually I won’t be able to hide it.” He fixed her with a pointed look. “But I would very much like to hide it until I absolutely can’t.”

“Who knows?”

“My father. My doctor. Catherine, but ... I’ve told her it is a temporary affliction. I cannot abide forcing her to contemplate the truth.”

“Is it painful?”

“The attacks are. The rest of the time, the agony is purely spiritual.”

“Can I do anything to help you?”

“You can translate his deuced journals. You can help me open the museum, so I feel like one thing in my life hasn’t fallen completely apart in my hands. Please stop crying,” he added. “I promise I shall be absolutely fine in a moment. You’re making me feel deeply guilty.”

“It’s only salt water. It doesn’t mean anything,” she said, wiping her face with her wrist.

“Here’s what you might keep in mind, darling,” he told her, gentler. “Even as I’ve

been moping about, contemplating the tragedy, all the people I will leave behind, utterly bereft, rending their clothes and hair in grief of me, one would hope ... ”

Grace giggled through her tears. He smiled at the sound, but when he continued, he was somber. “Even then, Bexley walked into that building and simply dropped dead.” He met Grace’s eyes. “We do not know. Almost anything, really. But certainly, how long we have. I may well outlive all of you.”

“Well. Ideally, we shall all live a very long time,” she said. “But I do receive your meaning.”

They sat on the floor, Philip sipping his drink. Eventually, he began to flex his feet and bend his knees—it seemed that the episode had passed. Finally, he rose without assistance and moved to the sofa, assuring her that after a bit more rest, he’d be right as nails. He encouraged her to return to her work. But before she went, she might be a dear and top up his glass.

Grace took the decanter from the desk, and as she did, she noticed a small object sitting atop a pile of papers. It was a linen bag. Identical to the kind Bexley used to send with clues.

“Philip ... ” She turned, showed him the bag. “Is this from Bexley?”

He shrugged an affirmative, and she stared, flabbergasted. “Then why didn’t you give it to me?”

“Look for yourself.”

She opened the bag. There was no scroll inside. Instead, there was a small pine cone, a nautilus shell, and a dried, flaking stalk of green fern. She stared at the items, puzzled.

“He used to scoop things up from the ground when he walked,” Philip explained.
“Trinkets, he called them. His drive as a collector was fairly constant.”

“Where was this bag?”

“In the box, with the journals. Only a souvenir, alas.”

Grace nodded, disappointed. She examined the objects. They were each, in their way, lovely. The elegant way the fern curled upon itself. The spiked pattern of the pine cone. She flipped the shell in her hand, and saw that it had been bisected to show its inner chambers.

And in a flash, she knew.

Grace felt weightless as she crossed the room to hand Philip his glass. “I’ll check in on you soon,” she said.

“No hurry, please. You have work to do.”

She nodded, as though she hadn’t just solved the cipher.

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Grace raced into the library, where Aunt Amelia sat at the table, discussing something logistical with Luke, who stood with an opalescent pink snake in a jar tucked under his arm.

They both looked up, startled—Grace was moving so quickly, and the look on her face must have been alarming. They both immediately looked concerned. Which made her giggle.

By the time she got to the table, she was laughing so hard she could barely breathe. Tears welled up and ran from the corners of her eyes.

Amelia watched, nonplussed. Luke looked intrigued. “Dear?” Amelia said. “Sit.”

“I’ve ... ” Grace dashed away the tears. She most certainly could not sit, yet. “I shall contain myself. I cannot believe I didn’t think of it, Auntie. Look at his estate. Look at this room .” She gestured to the elegant spiral of illuminated painting on the ceiling. “I knew this ceiling was trying to tell me something. Everything Bexley did was about it.”

Grace emptied the little sack on the table. And waited to see if they understood.

Luke clearly did not, but he was watching her with unconcealed fascination.

“He spoke of beauty, all the time. Did he not?” Grace directed the question to Luke, who nodded. “And what did he say to you about it?”

“Many things. That it was an integral component of the whole, in all of nature.”

“Look.” Grace flipped the shell, to expose the chambers.

“A nautilus,” Luke said, still not comprehending her excitement.

“No—yes—but I mean the mathematics,” Grace managed, barely, because the tears were welling over again and excitement had bound her chest, aggressive as too-tight stays.

Amelia shot her niece a quizzical look. “Do you mean Fibonacci, dear?”

“Yes. *Spira mirabilis*.” She looked to Luke. “It’s an equation, very simple, elegant—”

His eyes lit with understanding. “*Liber Abaci*, published 1202, I’m not a complete illiterate, Miss Chetwood. Do you mean to say—”

“It will give us our key. At least, I believe—hope so. All of these—the curl of the fern, the pine cone’s spikes, the chambers of the nautilus—logarithmic spirals, all in the golden ratio, which somehow always has the effect of rendering things exquisite to the eye. And it’s everywhere in nature, and on this ceiling, and in the garden outside Bexley Hall, and—we need fresh foolscap and ink at once ...”

Amelia, looking genuinely impressed, rose to her feet and, muttering that she’d had the supplies moved to a newly-rebuilt closet, left the room to gather what Grace needed.

Grace stood there, flushed and damp and giddy. And at the same time, intolerably anxious. “I think if I am wrong, I might crumble to dust,” she whispered.

“Chetwood,” he said in a lightly scolding tone. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, old chum.”

She felt herself smile, charmed by his ridiculous man-to-man tone.

And then she was abruptly lightheaded, and sat in the nearest chair as quickly as possible.

“Grace,” Luke said, sharply, and rounded the table.

“I’m all right.” She wasn’t. The room was tilting like a drunkard. She hadn’t slept enough in days. Hadn’t eaten since—was it sometime yesterday? And then there was ... everything. The cipher. Philip’s illness. Trying not to recall what Luke’s hand had done to her under this very table ... his mouth, in the solarium ...

Panic rose in her throat. It felt rather as though everything solid was turning to water and cascading down the walls.

Luke was kneeling in front of her chair, now. “Look at me.”

She couldn’t. She couldn’t even take a proper breath.

Charlie. Philip. Luke. Luke. Luke.

“Grace,” he said, quietly. “Breathe with me a moment, won’t you?”

“Can’t,” she whispered. Tears, again. Lord mercy, she was a mess.

“Of course you can.” He took her hands in his. “You can save a museum, I am confident you can take a breath.”

He leaned closer till his forehead was touching hers. And inhaled slowly, inviting her to do the same.

Her body locked against it. She couldn't. She couldn't.

He stayed as he was. Breathing. He moved his hands to her face, holding it, running his thumbs over her wet cheekbones. Slowly. Steadily.

Feeling it, the warmth of his breath, the pressure of his forehead against hers, the glide of his thumbs, everything began to slow, just slightly, just enough.

She inhaled shakily, and managed to fill her lungs.

"Knew you had it in you, Chetwood," he murmured. "Again, if you would?"

She nodded. The room seemed to be steadying around her.

He stroked a strand of hair from her face. "I'm not sure you realize how hard you've pushed yourself."

She felt a flare of indignation. "Precisely hard enough," she pointed out, but her voice was unsteady, small. "I—for Charlie ... " The rawness of it stole her breath. "Oh, God. I cannot fail him. After all he did for me, I cannot —"

"Breathe." He lifted his head from hers, to meet her eyes. "He would be proud of you."

"Stop, we do not even ... know if ... it will work—"

"He would be moved that you tried until you fell bloody over. I'm taking you to bed, Grace," he said, then heard himself. "Not in that way."

"No— no, I need to try the—"

“For God’s sake,” he snapped. “Two quantities exist in the golden ratio if their ratio is equal to the ratio of their sum to the larger of the two quantities. A is to B as A add B is to A. I may not be as quick as you, princess, but I paid attention in school. Can you walk to your room or will I carry you?”

Aunt Amelia had gasped when she returned to find her niece half in Luke Ashburton’s arms, but recovered when she realized the swoon was constitutional rather than sensual in nature. She reprimanded Grace for failing to look after herself as Luke walked them to Bexley Hall, Grace’s arm in his, steadying her.

As they arrived to Grace’s room, she explained three ways of using the ratio to create a key, then all but pushed Luke out the door to get to work. “Send word at once if I am wrong,” she pleaded. He promised, and left, with a last look that she felt like a caress on her cheek.

Amelia briskly saw to Grace—had the kitchen send up a plate, brought brandy and a stack of books from the earl’s collection. “Something to occupy you as you rest.”

“I wish to return to the library once I’ve—”

“You will return in the morning,” her aunt told her. “Mr. Ashburton has it in hand. You will eat. The maid will prepare a bath. And you will sleep.”

Grace would have argued, but her brain felt heavy and spent. She felt her eyes water. “I wanted to be there to see it work.”

“But it will work, and that will have to do.”

Grace looked to her aunt, surprised. “You sound certain.”

Amelia shrugged imperiously. “All females of our family are exceptionally keen of

mind. Despite your frivolity, you are no exception. Now rest,” Amelia concluded. “And do for once try to limit your weeping and hysterics.”

Grace felt far more herself after she’d eaten. The exhaustion hit her then, but she could not imagine sleeping before she heard word about the cipher. So, instead, she’d have that bath. She looked through the books Amelia had brought, and discovered *On Winged Species*. Written by Luke Ashburton.

She brought it with her to the bathroom.

In the field, we seek the rare and elusive. As with any endeavor that might transform us, patience is everything.

Was that the core of the man? Some preternatural patience that Grace did not possess? Was that what enabled him to stand and walk away from a woman eager to give him pleasure, even with her taste still in his mouth?

Stop. Luke Ashburton is not a cipher. You are not here to solve him.

But she could not stop herself from seeking clues to the man in the writing. She’d been reading for perhaps ten minutes when she heard Aunt Amelia scratch at the door.

“Yes, Auntie, I’m in the tub,” she called.

“Denton sent me, Chetwood.” Luke. Gruffly formal, solicitous. “He wanted you to know all proceeds apace.”

Her heart lifted as though it suddenly weighed nothing. “It—is working, then?”

“Perfectly. Your aunt is even now transcribing it all in her lovely penmanship for the

displays. We have it.”

She felt the relief all through her. She slid down into the tub on a laugh of victory, letting the water splash around her.

“You sound better.” His voice was quiet, close against the door. She could hear him shift, and imagined him leaning against the doorframe. And then, even softer, “You had me worried.”

Why did hearing him say that make her throat sting? “It was only ... an overwhelming moment. I must thank you for ... ” For brushing my hair from my face. For pressing your forehead to mine. For looking at me the way you looked at me. “For your kind attention.”

“It was easy to provide.”

He sounded so offhanded about it. As though guiding a vertiginous, sleep-deprived , grieving woman away from panic really were the most natural thing in the world. “You are a bit of a marvel, you know,” she told him. “You have worked days longer than I, just as intensely, with less rest. And yet you’ve maintained a startling equilibrium.”

“I am not always so calm as I appear, I assure you,” he said. She heard him clear his throat. “I don’t wish to set your mind to racing, but I ought to tell you, one mystery remains.”

“Oh?”

“The four journals yielded easily. The small one, however ... still gibberish. All the information needed for the exhibit seems to be in the others. The last is some other project, or perhaps a personal diary.”

Grace couldn't help feeling intrigued. "Would you mind bringing it to me? My aunt is very insistent I not return to the library tonight."

A small pause. "I have it here."

Oh.

She should not. Under no circumstances should she invite him to open the door to hand her the book.

"Slide it under the door," she said.

Another pause. "It's too thick."

Images assailed Grace's mind. Luke in the open door, his angular figure against the doorframe. One fingertip gliding absently across the woodgrain. Those gray-blue eyes, on her, here, now, in the water.

Don't be softheaded.

"I'll leave it here by the door for you."

But ... why not transgress, exactly? They were alone in the house. She was already quite nude. And she wished to. "Wait. Luke—"

"Miss Chetwood." He cut her off before she could ask it. "I ought to go."

"Is it ... because of Miss Cora Kendall Worthing?" She'd meant to make it teasing. But the words emerged with a sharpness.

"Yes. There's also St. George."

She gave a laugh. “The way you say his name. You do not much care for him.”

“I despise him.”

“Then why trouble yourself? Besides, I believe this is about fairn ess. Twice, you’ve—”

“Helped with the work,” he finished. “You owe me nothing. You saved the exhibition. I remain entirely indebted to you.”

“Are you afraid of me? Is that it?”

That earned a thoughtful pause. “It’s not fear.”

“Then—would it be so very traumatic to—”

“It would be what I’ve thought of every night and every morning.” His voice was level, but she could detect an edge. “It would be what I’ve wanted since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

“Ashburton ... forgive me, but you sound tense.”

He blew out an exhale. “You cannot imagine.”

“I could help. A bit more directly than by dint of some memory, or—kerchief.”

He gave a low chuckle. “You know, it’s shocking to consider how frequently I’ve had to see to myself this week. The sheer distraction of you. You live in my mind ... very vividly.”

Her belly tightened, hearing it. “When you say those things, it makes me ... ”

She did not realize she'd trailed off until, quietly, he echoed, "Makes you ... ?"

"Makes me long to watch you do it. You are not the only one who enjoys observing." She expected he might chuckle again, but no sound came. She thought he must be listening intently. "I'd like to see you in your pleasure. I find myself wondering what you look like, sound like when you give yourself over to it. It's ... I imagine there would come a point when I would need to touch myself. Seeing you like that."

On the other side of the door, he hissed out an exhale. And then there was a long silence.

It only then occurred to Grace that she was not blushing. Perhaps because he could not see her. Or perhaps, something deeper had changed, and she simply felt no embarrassment speaking the words. They were the truth.

"Grace." His voice was low, now. Thicker. "No one has ever made me feel like this."

"Then let me help."

He sighed. "I cannot."

"A few moments of—"

"It won't be a few moments. I won't be able to stop."

Should she say she'd stop? She wasn't sure she could either.

"You are not some simple thing one has their fill of in an hour or a day. It would not feel finished. It would not be finished. Believe me, it is far easier if we simply do not begin."

Grace hated hearing it. And, it made sense.

“Miss Worthing will attend the opening. The following day, I will propose. I won’t pretend I haven’t behaved abominably in a thousand ways. I can’t even pretend I regret any of it. I will think of you, under the stars ... for a long, long time. But I don’t want to harm either of us any further.”

“I wish ... ” she sighed. “I wish you were slightly more villainous than you are.”

“As do I.”

A moment between them. Listening to each other breathe on either side of the door.

“I shall leave the journal. I bid you goodnight.” Then, softer, “Rest, Grace. Sweet dreams.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:29 pm

May 17, 1822

Day of the opening

Grace woke before sunrise. She sat up in the dark and thought of how in not much longer than twenty-four hours, she would be in a carriage bound for home. Not long after that, she would be a bride.

Grace wondered when she would see Luke again. She imagined some ball or dinner, some symposium or future gala at the museum. Luke and his lovely wife. Grace and her charming husband. They'd exchange the sort of talk people did in such a circumstance. Polite. Friendly. About nothing.

Grace imagined Luke now, asleep in his bed. Then amended it; he would not be able to sleep either. And then she recalled chatter at the breakfast table. Philip asking about the butterfly vivarium, because Luke visited it each day at dawn.

It was still dark when Grace walked across the grass toward the vivarium, pulling her pelisse tight against the chill, her hem and half-boots soaking in dew.

The vivarium was a glass box filled with green, sitting beside the greenhouse like its tiny, whimsical sister. She entered the door to the antechamber designed to keep winged denizens from escaping when human visitors entered the space. She pulled it shut quietly, then moved to the second door—glass, fogged at the bottom with heat condensation. Through it, she could see into the room. A sea of plants, some overflowing the large pots on the floor, some on tables.

Luke sat on the floor, a small lamp nearby, surrounded by the green. His back straight, legs crossed, a journal balanced on his knee, writing. He radiated an introspective calm. The air around him was alive with tiny flits of color. Easily a dozen butterflies had landed on him, knees, shoulders, chest, flexing wings in the damp curls of his hair. When he paused to think, one alighted on the tip of his quill.

The vivarium was kept hot and humid, so it was not strange that he wore only trousers. His boots stood beside him in a neat pair, jacket and shirt folded atop them. He was sheened with sweat. Beads of it glistened on his upper lip. A drop rolled down his bare chest, into its scattering of dark hair.

Charlie had written to Grace that butterflies liked sweat, for its nutrition. A perfect symbiosis. They feed my spirit, I feed their flesh. He never shied away from talking about the human body. We are intelligent animals, true, and we like to embarrass ourselves with our corporeality. But we cannot make sense to ourselves without acknowledging that salt water emanates from us, that our bellies want food, that our hearts yearn in much the way a lost wolf howls for its pack.

Sitting there, writing, sweating, providing a perch for so many winged things, Luke looked like exactly what he was: man, animal, both at once.

Under clothing, his form seemed rangy and spare, even gaunt from certain angles. Now, his body was revealed to be perfectly built to purpose. Skin that glowed from sun over precisely-etched muscle over the elegant architecture of his chest. Broad shoulders radiated capability, ease. Well-honed strength, and nothing extra.

The partial nudity revealed clues of past adventures. A faded, stitched line on his forearm—battle scar from the tree at seven years old, perhaps. Scattering of pocks across one shoulder—souvenirs of stinging insects. A raised, knotty X on his ankle—slashed to bleed out venom from the yellow banded krait bite.

And she saw other secrets that had been hidden under his clothes. A thin, oxidized silver chain hung to his solar plexus, dangling a few tiny objects. A pointillist black symbol that looked to have originated far from England was tattooed into the skin half-exposed at his hip above the line of his trousers.

She gripped the door handle and, before she lost her nerve, pushed it open.

He heard, and looked up.

His gaze was calm when it met hers. But grew guarded as she walked to him. She stopped when she reached him—not too close.

He set down his journal. His voice was even. “You ought not to be here, Miss Chetwood.”

“Oh, I’m already ruined,” she said, but saw immediately that he did not care for the joke. “Don’t fret, everyone is fast asleep,” she said. “But I could not.” She gazed around the vivarium. “Hot as I remember it.” Impatiently, she pulled off her pelisse, and he registered that she was wearing only her night rail.

“Grace,” he said, a warning.

She knelt beside him, and butterflies scattered.

She reached a hand toward his chest, and he flinched.

“Luke,” she said. “I am well aware that you do not wish me to touch you, and I will not.”

Instead, she lifted the chain, to examine the objects hanging from it. A small, clear glass bead holding flecks of every color. A silver tube, filigreed, containing some

scrap of paper, a blessing, perhaps, or a prayer. A curvy bit of brass that, up close, she saw was in the form of a woman. A tiny goddess.

“Talismans?” she asked. She could see his breath moving his damp belly, a little quick, troubled.

“Gifts,” he said. “Things collected along the way.”

She nodded. “That aligns better with my sense of you. I don’t imagine you superstitious.”

“Well. I wore them and survived. So perhaps I’m wrong.”

“I think I’m a bit jealous,” she admitted, tracing the brass with her thumb. “All the worlds you’ve seen. And will see.”

Gently, he pulled the chain, lifting it out of her hand, and let it drop to his chest. “Why are you here?” Again, that note of warning. And a plea in it. Don’t make this difficult.

“I happened to walk past.” He gave her a chiding look. She shrugged a half-apology . Then, she answered. “I think it unlikely we will speak again, after today.”

He looked like he wished to argue, but couldn’t. He knew what she meant— truly speak.

“I could hardly tell you when it happened,” she mused. “When, in the spaces between swinging battle-axes , you and I began to converse. As friends do.”

His expression was wry. “No one was more surprised than I.”

“I shall miss it.”

“Yes,” he said, quietly.

“I wanted to seize our last opportunity, I suppose.” She watched him snatch up his shirt. “Oh, please don’t bother, it’s boiling in here. I’ll go in less than a moment.”

Seeming to accept that, he instead used the shirt to wipe the sweat from his face, then dropped it beside his boots.

As he did, a small yellow butterfly alighted on the hem of Grace’s rail. “Papillio brigitta,” Luke murmured. “Common grass yellow.”

She felt a rush of pleasure. “Oh! The earl wrote to me about it. So this is what it looks like. Do you suppose he was sitting where you are as he penned the letter?”

Luke nodded. “I saw him here many times. Including the day I made his acquaintance. Did not expect to meet an earl in shirtsleeves on the ground, perspiring and covered in Lepidoptera. But in retrospect, quite mundane for him.”

“How old were you?”

“Eleven.”

Grace tried to imagine it. The idea of Luke small was almost unbearably charming.

“I’d read all of his books,” Luke said. “I was exhilarated to meet the man. Packed my things a full month in advance. Giddy.” He paused a moment, seeming to weigh whether to continue. When he did, he was quieter. “And, the week before I traveled, my younger brother John drowned in the lake. So I came to Bexley quite lost.”

“Oh,” she said, taken aback. “I am very sorry to hear it.”

He glanced down to see that a large butterfly, velvet black with cream spots, had landed on the joint of his thumb. Very slowly, he brought the hand up, so that they both could admire the creature. “Checkered swallowtail. Beautiful ambassador of the species, this fellow. Uncommon wing span.”

He turned his hand, so she could better see it. “Coming here, at that moment, set the course of my life,” Luke said, eyes on the swallowtail. “One is exhorted to lean on God, in grief. But it felt empty. Like being told to pray to a door that may lead to an empty room. No one could open it, show me any evidence. Believe me, I asked.”

“You were already thinking as a scientist thinks.”

“Largely, I was angry for my mother. Criminal to hand platitudes to a woman whose child has died. So I was not a particularly pleasant lad when I was handed up to Bexley. In a full-blown rage, really.” One corner of his mouth lifted, rueful. “He did not try to make me feel better. He simply put me on a boat with him, and we went into the field.”

Grace’s eyes welled. Seeing it, Luke tilted his head in gentle question. “Only imagining it,” she said. “You, so young, trying to understand, and no one helping you.”

“Oh, but Bexley did. He gave me exactly what I needed.” His expression did not change, but somehow, his eyes did. Lit from within. “In nature, the door will open, if one observes patiently.”

There he was.

Luke .

No barricades. The shift was so subtle, but everywhere she once saw reserve, she now saw only wonder.

Luke gently waved his hand, and the swallowtail lifted from him and flew away. He watched it go. “We don’t curse God when a bird eats a fish, after all. We see the circle of it. That’s what the world is. Each thing affects the next. I feel ... ” he exhaled, and his voice was reverent. “I feel I understand what we are when I allow myself to be part of the natural world. And I can see John’s death, not inexplicable, or fated, or even tragic, but an intrinsic part of the whole.”

“That is ... remarkable.” She did not know what else to say, to touch the depth of it.

But he did seem to hear in her tone that she understood. Something in his face twitched, then resolved. A certain yearning. Then he was level again. “Far too vast, of course, for creatures of our feeble stature to see all at once. Impossible even to try.”

“And yet you devote your life to defining it, bit by bit.”

“I think it’s useful,” he said, simply.

She wanted to touch him so badly, then. A rivulet of sweat was working its way from his forehead, over his cheek, and she wanted to catch it in her palm, and hold it. One drop of him.

But listening to him now, it was also very clear why she wouldn’t. Why she shouldn’t.

“In my opinion, you really must marry Cora Worthing,” Grace said.

He raised his brow, surprised.

“It will allow your work to continue?”

He nodded.

“So you must. Things are as they are. You must marry her. I must marry St. George.”

He made a disgusted sound. “St. George does not deserve you.”

“But he did ruin me. And that is the pertinent consideration.”

He fixed her with a thoughtful, sympathetic look. “Are you ... ”

“With child?” She shrugged. “There is the possibility.”

He blew out air, shook his head. “Does not deserve you,” he repeated.

“My only point was to say ... Marry her, and go on defining the world, wing by wing. Because that is meaningful to the whole.” She almost left it there. But why not say it all? “And never mind the whole, Luke, the work makes you happy. And ... I would see you happy. I will feel less ... I shall be gladder, to know that you are.”

He looked taken aback, almost bewildered. He dragged his hand through his hair. “I want you to know,” he said, “that I am certain I will still be dreaming of kissing you on my deathbed.”

The regret of it was a spike in her chest. Her lungs were doing their best to breathe around it. How was he so contemplative, so measured about it all?

Because it is different for him . He felt the pull between them and knew it was nature, knew they were animals drawn by biological impulses beyond rational control.

She felt it and only knew she was falling in love with him.

And so, when she said what she said next, there was a certain small malice in it. She wanted to make it just a bit harder for him. Because it was so hard for her.

“I do think you ought to let me kiss you once,” she said. “To supply you with something upon which to base the fever dreams.”

He stiffened. “Grace ... ”

“You can trust me. One. And I will go. Before either of us gets carried away.”

He looked conflicted. His eyes went to her mouth, and then he caught himself, looked back to her eyes. Something pleading in gaze, now. “One,” he said, as though he knew he should say no, but could not bring himself to do it.

She came up on her knees, moved toward him. He was holding himself motionless, watching her approach the way he might observe a particularly lovely, venomous snake.

She stopped in front of him. Her night rail brushing his crossed legs. She placed her hands on his bare, damp shoulders.

He did not move. His hands remained resting on his knees.

She leaned closer, and was assaulted by the scent of him—warm sweat and clean, spicy sandalwood, and the scent of his skin, of his hair. Every part of her wanted to leap toward it.

But she was determined to be deliberate.

One .

She regarded his mouth. Considering how to begin. She would take her time. Just a brush, at first. Soft, languid, then deep.

He waited. Motionless, his breathing hesitant, half-held . Anticipating.

She tilted her head, preparing to close the distance.

Suddenly, he grabbed a fistful of her hair, and, with a hiss of broken self-control , pulled her mouth hard onto his. Shattering her well-laid plan.

His mouth opened, hot, and his tongue parted her lips. He gripped her by the waist and yanked her into his lap, and now she was full against him. Straddling him.

They'd skipped over all sweetness, plunged directly into the need. His tongue twining with hers, wet and silken, *spira mirabilis* , sending sensation through her in glowing, swelling rivers. His hand slid to her arse and pulled her tighter against his body, so that she could feel his hard length pressing into her through the fabric of his trousers.

And she realized her hands were everywhere, his back, his chest, his neck. And she was moving against him now, grinding into him—surely, she was hurting him, but he only dug his fingers into her flesh, demanding she continue, demanding harder, more .

Dimly, she was aware that her rail was sticking to her skin, wet with his sweat and now hers, abrading her nipples, clinging to her belly. His hand found the neck of the garment and pushed it down over one shoulder, slipped inside, and when he felt her breast he made a sound in his throat, as though it was more than he could endure. He took the kiss deeper as he cupped her, held the weight. He rolled the nipple between thumb and forefinger, and she moaned.

She wanted to devour him. She wanted him to swallow her. She wanted to press into him so hard they merged. One .

He dragged his mouth from hers, gasping. “Grace ... ” And then with an urgent groan he was kissing her again, making her whimper, moving under her hips, more, this, more . “Grace,” he growled, desperate. “Christ. I can’t—” His hand was under her rail, roughly palming her cunt, and all the glowing rivers were overflowing their banks. “ Tell me to stop, ” he begged on a whisper, plunging two fingers inside her. “Right now. Tell me to stop or tell me to take you.”

It was all she wanted. Right now , on this floor, in a haze of heat and butterflies. All of him burning and rough and wet and greedy. Yes.

She’d promised— one— but stopping was out of the question. They needed this. It was their final chance. Why would they stop?

Because she’d told him trust me.

She pulled in a harsh breath and tore away from him.

Clumsily, she dragged herself from his lap, moved several lengths away, to sit on the floor.

She was panting. She smoothed down her night rail with shaking hands. Her womb was liquid. Her blood was a forest fire. Her mind was almost terrifyingly blank—nothing but him . Him. Go back to him. Go home to him.

“Jesus Christ .” He sounded stunned. He sounded like a man who’d narrowly escaped falling off a cliff.

Finally, she met his eyes. They were burning. Every muscle of his chest and arms was

tensed. He forced a slow exhale. Demanding his body calm itself.

“That may have been a bad idea,” Grace said.

“Oh, it was.” He still hadn’t moved. Seated on the floor, almost exactly as he was when she first walked into the room. He was looking at her so intently that she imagined he could see through her rail, through her skin, to the heart skittering recklessly, the incandescent, needy bones.

“Grace,” he said, gentle even as his eyes locked on hers in a sharp warning. “You need to go.”

With effort, she reached for her pelisse. Got to her feet, by some miracle.

He never took his eyes from her. He never moved.

“I...” Anything she could say seemed abjectly ridiculous.

“I shall see you back at Bexley Hall,” he said. His voice remarkably level, even kind. As if he was saying it’s all right. All will be well. All is well.

But his eyes were unchanged. Ravenous.

She nodded dumbly. And left.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:29 pm

Grace washed and dressed in time for breakfast. She tried to imagine chatting with Luke now. It felt impossible. Still, somehow polite convention tended to kick in and pull one through.

So she would go to the breakfast room. She would eat enough to ensure she would not mortify herself by swooning in front of the majority of England's aristocracy. She would respond when spoken to. She would smile at Luke.

At the last moment, she lost her bravery. She approached the door to the room, the Oxford scientists munching toast, excited for the opening, chatting with Aunt Amelia, and, right there, washed, fresh shaven, smartly dressed, hair beginning to curl in rebellion against the neat combing he'd subjected it to, Luke. Sipping coffee. Eyes a thousand miles away.

Grace kept walking.

When she passed the open door to the gray parlor, she slowed, realizing Philip was inside, at the desk.

She saw that his head was in his hands. She saw pain on his face, and feared he was having another attack.

"Philip." She stepped in, closing the door behind her.

He lifted his eyes, and she realized his countenance was not the same as when in the throes of his affliction. He was somber, and pale, and his eyes were glistening and very deep. His expression showed some fleeing tenderness.

Seeing her approach, he straightened, inhaled, and rubbed his face. When he spoke, he was Philip as she'd always known him. Charming, light. "Little Grace. Did I give you a fright? Only daydreaming. Shall we to breakfast?"

He rose from the desk, looked at her more closely. "My, but your eyes are bright this morning."

"I went to the greenhouse. It was lovely." She'd almost said vivarium, but Philip knew Luke's morning schedule, so it seemed wiser not to.

"Ah." He smiled, a little sadly. "Charlie would have loved that."

Philip offered his arm, and together they walked out of the room.

It was the second time Grace had been struck by lightning, standing in the same spot. The second time she'd realized how to solve a cipher.

As with the first time, she would not let Philip know. Not yet.

Because if she was correct, then what she had realized was very tricky indeed.

Grace ate breakfast quickly with eyes on her plate, swallowed a few gulps of tea, and smiled her goodbyes as she left the table.

She'd have preferred not to look at Luke, who was sitting at the other end of the table, but she couldn't help brushing her eyes over him. He was watching her, troubled, curious in spite of himself. He knew something was buzzing inside her.

When her eyes caught on his, he smiled. As if to say all else aside, it's nice to look at you.

Her heart was going to emerge from this week a pile of ash or else so resilient, she could drop it from a mountaintop and find it worked perfectly when she plopped it back in. She wasn't sure which.

Grace excused herself from the table and went to crack the final cipher.

Philip Theodore Walters Denton .

It was lucky indeed that Grace recalled that long ago conversation with Arabella, in which her friend mentioned that each male member of the Denton family carried a second middle name.

Even luckier that Grace happened to recall both of Philip's.

Grace now knew what was wrong with the key—why it would not unlock the small, leather notebook. It was because particular letters in this journal had their own, separate key.

The letters of Philip's name.

Standing with him in the Gray Room, Grace had known two things at once: how to decode the journal, and the reason for its unusual cipher.

First, she caught a glimpse of what Philip had been looking at when she walked into the room. A miniature in a frame fashioned to close like a book. Philip had closed it before he stood, so she would not see it. But she'd already seen it, the last time they were together in the gray parlor, when she went to fetch him his glass of bourbon.

It was a painting of the late earl. A good likeness, capturing the spark of his eyes, the mischievous tilt of his chin, the noble good looks that weathered with age but did not fade.

She wouldn't have thought anything of it. Everyone in the house was grieving the earl. She would have assumed that Philip felt the sadness of losing a close friend.

But then he called the earl Charlie.

In answer to your question, I hope you will never cease to call me Charlie, Dear Grace, he'd written, in one of his final letters. It is a diminutive I have rarely heard since my youth. My family stopped using it long ago. The only other person who calls me Charlie now is as special to me as you are, though in another way. If the world were very different, my life would be entwined with theirs. But the world is as it is, and instead of giving all of my heart to one, I give pieces of it to many. I save the best bits for those who call me Charlie.

Just after breakfast, Grace began decoding the journal. She employed the Golden Ratio key, but for the letters of Philip's name, she tried the Atbash Cipher. And, as if to reward her for the hundreds of useless, wrong keys she'd generated this week, she was right on the first try.

When she looked up, she had completed a stack of pages, and it was late afternoon. She could hear the sounds of staff preparing for this evening's events, of the Oxford men returning to their rooms to change into formal attire.

She'd been crying, on and off, for hours. Laughing, too, of course. Their relationship, at its best, was a joy to read about. Charlie loved to challenge Philip to try new things. Foods, drink, strange brews that made one hallucinate. They would engage in elaborate pranks at the expense of others in their traveling party. They had a long-standing tradition of giving one another birthday gifts only on days that were not their birthday.

And then there was all the carnal adventuring. A professor friend had gifted Charlie with an illustrated erotic text translated from the French; Philip jokingly suggested

they work their way through every position, and Charlie responded by declaring it his birthday wish that they do so in serious.

The museum was Charlie's idea, but the secret passage built into a bookshelf in a corner of the library was Philip's. Philip had suggested the titles of Charlie's last three books. He'd even insisted on packing a special steamer trunk for Charlie's last journey, because he would not be there and he was concerned that Charlie would fall into despair if he ran out of exactly the paper, quills, ink, and bourbon he preferred.

They fought a lot. Small things seemed large, because their time together was limited and because so much of how they behaved with one another in public was a lie.

He infuriates me, Charlie wrote. What some mistake for friendliness is a mildly malevolent irony. Everything is a joke to him. What is of utmost importance to me, he sees as a flight of fancy.

Later in the same entry, Charlie admitted, I cannot stop thinking about him. I want to press his body against the wall, bury my face in his neck. Breathe him in until he is as much a part of my body as my own skin, my spine, my imbecilic beating heart.

That took Grace's breath away. My imbecilic beating heart. She wanted so badly to take his hand, to look into his sweet eyes.

Please don't be so hard on yourself. My heart is an imbecile, too, Charlie.

Other times, Charlie was more philosophical. Grateful that Philip had married, that he and his wife shared a warm relationship. At least I know he's looked after. He deserves a family, children, the public life he wants, the sort we cannot have.

He did not let himself lament his own solitude for long. I have the work. I have the whole world. He sounded a bit as though he were trying to convince himself,

sometimes. And other times, he truly seemed at peace with it. Eternal happiness only exists in tales. The once-calm sea will swallow one whole. All is well in the field until something venomous bites an exposed ankle. The weather grows too hot, or too cold, or the day is perfect but it ends.

Charlie realized Philip was ill before Philip did. He wrote that he was determined to find a cure. If he lets me, I will take him to China. The medicines there are very powerful. He stayed with Philip when pain kept him up all night. Once, when Philip could not walk for two days, Charlie bathed and clothed him.

Charlie detailed their worst arguments and most intense nights of passion. He brainstormed lists of gifts. He fantasized about a time when they would be together always, even though he knew it could only ever be a dream written in code in his diary.

Still, I cannot agree with Philip that I would be happier with another family than with none. I prefer to feel my pain simply and clearly. I prefer to be alone, and to miss him. I prefer to have no one if the alternative is anyone else.

I prefer empty space in the shape of him.

Tomorrow, Grace was returning to a life that did not offer her that option. But it was what she would have preferred, too.

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Luke did not understand how beautiful the Bexley Museum and Library was until the evening of the opening. It was the first time he'd seen it fully illuminated. The long walk from Bexley Hall was lit by torches all along the path. Flickering lanterns hung from the orange tree in the entrance hall. Inside, massive chandeliers were ablaze with candles for the first time.

The night was a blur once people started arriving. Thank goodness for Denton, buzzing from guest to guest, splitting host duties with the earl and his wife, who'd returned for the event. Luke felt as though he met the entirety of Europe's aristocracy. Several dukes. At least two princes. Every entitled, titled Brit he'd ever sat beside in a lecture hall.

He knew they'd made the exhibition gasp-worthy. He'd followed Bexley's plans as closely as possible. Lepidoptera and Coleoptera displayed all along the walls, Arachnida and Hymenoptera under glass on display tables, where one could lean over and peer closely at their mandibles and stingers. And in the center of the hall, a sort of obelisk reaching to the ceiling, entirely comprised of jars containing preserved snakes of every size and color.

Accompanying each specimen, in Mrs. Wilmington's precise, flowing hand, a display card in the late earl's own words, describing his encounter with the creature and details he observed. His prose was lush, poetic, wry. The effect was stunning in its scope and surprisingly personal. It truly did feel like the launch of an institution that could grow and flourish. And a memorial to a great man whose work had ended.

Luke stood in the corner, watching guests make their rounds, murmuring to each other, their eyes sparkling. He knew it was all a grand success. Though he felt as

though he were watching from a thousand miles away.

Mr. Worthing, dapper, fastidious, arrived with his daughter Cora. She wore sky blue. It offset her pale skin and dark hair beautifully. Her cheeks were pink—she looked pleased to see Luke, and a bit nervous.

It always helped Luke to know his job. And his job in this moment was to set the lady at ease. He showed her and her father around, stopping to tell stories—the yellow banded krait won a simultaneous hiss of alarm from father and daughter—and to explain the quirks of various species. When their eyes met, he gave Cora a small, knowing smile, as if to say she had nothing to fret over.

As Luke walked with them to the library, Cora confirmed that she and her father had taken the opportunity to visit friends who lived an hour down the road from the Bexley estate, and would be staying with them for several days.

“Would you be amenable to my paying you a call while you are there, Miss Worthing?”

She looked away to hide her smile. “I would like that,” she said, with a glance to her father, who nodded, pleased.

The museum obviously impressed the man, who had been peppering Luke with questions about future travel. Bexley had been planning a voyage to the Americas, and Luke was hoping to see the trip through. Mr. Worthing asked the sort of questions a prospective sponsor would.

Luke thought he would feel excitement to know that the work could continue apace. But he did not feel much, beyond relief of the sort one felt when one feared failing a test, and saw signs that one might have just scraped through.

Luke noticed that when Cora's father discussed science, a certain pleasant smile fixed to her face. If he had to guess, she was not particularly interested in the natural sciences. That was fine. They'd discussed, the day he visited her, that the idea of long travel did not appeal to her.

Reasonable, he'd thought at the time. One did not bring one's wife to catch snakes in foreign lands. What wife would wish it?

I think I'm a bit jealous of the things you've seen, Grace had said, her eyes wistful. And will see.

Somehow, he could very clearly imagine Grace on a ship, excited for all of it.

Then he was irritated with himself. If you want to imagine her, be realistic. Imagine a ball. Imagine jewels and beaded silk slippers. Imagine her on the arm of that moron. Imagine bowing and calling her Viscountess.

Best not to think of her at all.

When he finally caught sight of Grace, she was in the solarium with her aunt and a duke and duchess, chatting animatedly. She wore a dress the color of malachite, comprised of translucent layers of silk. Lemon-yellow gloves. Tiny jewels sparkling in her upswept hair. She was giggling.

Luke pictured the iron box. He imagined shoveling into it all the ambivalence and desire and regret he felt when he looked at Grace Chetwood.

Tricky, because those emotions were not quite separate from others he'd have liked to hold onto. Pride, for accomplishing what they had with this opening. All the small joys of the work this past week.

And the wonder. The wonder of placing a hand on her skin. Of feeling a tremor run through her. The wonder of her face when she found the answer. It's an equation, very simple, elegant ... The wonder of seeing her see him. And you learned precisely nothing, she'd said when he told her about falling out of the tree, and every part of him could feel that she understood what his work meant to him. That she understood him.

All of these feelings were hitched to everything that troubled him, a chain, a web. If he didn't want to feel the worst, he couldn't feel any of it.

So be it.

He was glad he was watching it all from behind impenetrable glass when, at that moment, Grace spotted them and made her way over.

Luke turned to Cora. "Here is the heroine of our story—the mathematician who broke Bexley's cipher."

Cora was intrigued by Grace—Luke had forgotten that the woman hardly looked like one's mental image of a mathematician, her red hair full of stars, her low-cut gown, her eyes wide and enthusiastic as a girl's.

Grace and Cora made conversation. Luke found it impossible to focus on the words. They seemed to like each other. And then, graciously, with eyes that said she approved of Cora, Grace took her leave and moved on.

As the event began to wind down, Luke saw Cora and Mr. Worthing to their carriage. Cora's father seemed more impressed with him than ever. And Cora shyly said she very much looked forward to seeing him when he came to call. Tomorrow, perhaps?

Tomorrow.

He should think of the right words. Rehearse them ahead. He wanted to propose artfully, in a way that pleased Cora. Conveyed his respect for her.

Well. Insomuch as it was possible to respect a lady while simultaneously trying not to recall lifting another's soft hips in both hands to bring her sweet cunt to his mouth.

It would have to do, he decided ruefully. Blessedly, wives could not see inside their husband's heads.

The hour was late. The guests who remained—Bexley's friends and close associates—made their way down the path from the museum and gathered in the blue parlor of Bexley Hall. A wake of sorts had begun. Drink flowed, memories were shared, everyone fond and sentimental and on their way to foxed. Even Mrs. Wilmington was misty and friendly, standing with the earl and his wife.

When Luke entered, they cheered, and a round of toasts was made to him. Unflagging. Relentlessly composed. Preternatural focus. Not a bad bloke, if one overlooks the snooty face.

Then, Denton was making a speech about Bexley, and everyone was drinking and laughing and wiping their eyes.

Grace stood behind the others, watching Denton with a faraway, conflicted look.

God, but Luke wanted to go to her.

Throwing that urge in the iron box left him so numb, he felt rather like a ghost.

He stood for a few minutes, watching the group. The sense of distance was so strong that it took him a moment to realize Grace was now standing beside him.

“Ashburton,” she smiled, stepping back as two guests walked past. Then she leaned toward him and murmured, “I’ve made a discovery. It’s to do with the late earl, and I cannot help but think he would want me to show you.” She gazed at the crowd as she spoke. “I shall bid all a good evening. You could join me at the museum, although I understand if you’d prefer to leave me to it, of course. I don’t believe it will require much time, nor for us to stand all that near one another. Goodnight.”

And with that, she went to Denton and her aunt, to let them know she was heading to bed.

The museum stood empty as Luke approached. Candles in the sconces burned low. Grace was waiting under the orange tree, holding a lamp. She stepped forward immediately when she saw him.

“Good,” she said, and was in the act of turning to lead him inside when something caused her to pause and look at him again.

He met her gaze. One positive effect of having one’s entire heart locked away was that this was possible. Meeting the gaze of the woman who would otherwise be holding the thing in her hand.

Her eyes probed him, growing uncertain. “Are you ... are you well?”

“Quite,” he said, easily enough.

She hesitated, but seemed not to know what to say. So she turned and walked into the building. He followed.

She was walking fast through the empty library, almost running. She paused in the center of the room, squinting up at the domed ceiling, seeming to look for something.

She found whatever mark she was looking for—her eyes on a figure of Apollo, his index finger pointing down. Now her eyes moved in the direction he indicated—to a certain book case. She hurried to it, then bent to scan the titles on the spines.

“Are you going to tell me what you’re doing, Chetwood, or—”

“Sssh,” she said.

And then she found the one she was searching for. She tipped the spine, to pull it out— and with a click, the edge of the bookcase pulled away. Revealing itself to be a door.

She gave a squeal of delight, and turned to him. “Can you even imagine that the earl would build a library and not make a secret passage? Come.”

She pulled the door open, revealing a hallway—just wide enough to accommodate the span of Luke’s shoulders. “Close it behind you,” she told him, and started down the hall.

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At the end of the secret passage was a door, elaborately carved, with a brass knob in the shape of a hand.

“How did you know?” Luke asked Grace, voice low, because it felt like one ought to whisper.

“I solved the cipher,” she told him, taking the lamp. “The final book was his diary.”

She swung the door open, and walked in.

They were greeted by a sitting room with a writing desk, a bookshelf, and a seating area that tipped beyond comfortable into decadent. Piles of velvet pillows heaped on and around a lofty daybed flanked by sculptures of long-legged cranes. On a low table, an open box of smoking accoutrements— tobacco-burning pipes and strange, long-handled implements. The walls were hung with shadow boxes of insects that perfectly mimicked leaves, or flowers, or the eyes of owls. Alabaster statues of goddesses—Greek, Roman—lived in every corner. The ceiling was tasseled silk, like an exotic tent.

Grace was taking it all in with wide eyes. “My word,” she said, twirling slowly where she stood, her eyes falling on treasures everywhere her lamp illuminated. “All of Bexley Estate is Charlie. And yet ... this is the most Charlie place of all. To think of the conversations he would have had here, with those lucky few,” she murmured. “But he never got the chance.”

It was terrible. Luke felt grateful that it, too, was in the box.

Luke noticed an ornate archway behind the seating area. Another room lay beyond, in darkness. He walked through, and Grace joined him with the lamp.

This room was smaller. The walls here were hung with layer upon layer of silk tapestry in deeply saturated colors. The effect was intensely luxurious, like swimming inside a pot of gems.

The centerpiece of the room was a four-poster bed covered in a wine silk counterpane. In one corner, a life-sized statue of a god wearing an ornate crown held a naked goddess in his lap, her legs around his hips, full breasts against him, head thrown back in ecstasy. Luke saw Grace take it in, then look away.

Grace set the lamp down, stooped to a metal chest, opened it, and peered in. She gave a surprised laugh, and shut it quickly. She was covering her mouth when she turned to face Luke. “I don’t know what all of those ... objects ... are, but I think they’re meant—I think they’re all for pleasure.”

Luke raised a brow. “Well. It is a secret bedroom after all.”

It was interesting to watch Grace grow flustered, and try to cover it. To watch her glance at him, then away, a certain heat now in her gaze.

And why wouldn’t she want to fall back onto what looked like the softest counterpane ever woven? Why wouldn’t she want Luke to give her pleasure here, in her last moments before she went home to marry that absolute waste of skin? That man who might legitimately be moronic enough to do anything with his nights besides lick every inch of her body till she was arched as a bow and begging for release?

All that vitality, potential, intelligence. All that capacity. They both knew it would go unmet, once she left this room.

Now, she picked the lamp up. “Well. I think we ought not to linger,” she said dryly.

And then, the light made something glint on the ceiling, and she raised the lamp higher and looked up. And gasped.

The ceiling was painted black, and decorated with innumerable tiny gold-leaf stars, clustered in the constellations of the night sky.

He could see the emotion move across her face. “Oh my,” she breathed. “I feel as though his ghost has been eavesdropping on us.” She looked at Luke, her eyes soft. “You know, he had a lover, in secret.”

Luke nodded. He recalled the day he realized it, years ago. On the ship. They had not revealed themselves, nor had he stumbled upon them in an embrace. He’d simply seen them standing side by side, not touching, peering at a map. And the care they had for one another was as obvious as the sun in the sky.

“Denton,” he said. She looked surprised. “To be clear, they were remarkably deft at keeping it private. So far as I’m aware, no one ever knew.”

“But you knew.”

He shrugged. “I saw it, between them.”

“Well, of course you did,” she said with an odd little smile. “You are ... you.”

The way she said it. Her voice glowing. Now, that was dangerous. To be delighted in by Grace Chetwood stirred something, like seeing a flash of light on the other side of a deep woods.

“I did my best not to let on that I knew,” he said, distracting himself with the carved

vines on the bed poster. Best to keep the conversation moving. “It was not the sort of affair one conducts without caution. But in my observation ... the little things ... they were deeply in love.”

Grace exhaled. Nodded. “He spent all his time missing Philip, even when they were together, because he knew time would pass too quickly. When I read it ... I thought about you.”

He felt a peculiar weightlessness. Let the comment pass. Keep moving.

But ... hell. He badly wanted to know. “In what way?”

“When you said that we should not begin. As it would not be enough.”

He’d never been more certain he was correct. “Yes, I said it. I meant it.”

A smile played on her lips. “Yet this morning, you grabbed me by the hair to pull me atop you.”

What could he do but laugh? “There is theory, and there is reality.”

She nodded. Then, cautiously, she asked, “And now?”

Crucial to keep a boot on the lid of the box.

At the same time, the impulse to sate the desire he saw in her—to take care of it—flared strongly. And, in fact, it felt safer to place all his attention on her, to give to her, to serve her, than it did to stay here under her too-searching eyes. He could make those eyes slip shut. He could turn all her curiosity inward.

And he could leave her satisfied. He liked the idea of this. A proper goodbye. But one

that could allow him to walk away intact. With another scented kerchief in pocket, perhaps, he thought, amused now. Yes. It was a good plan.

“Here’s what I’m contemplating, princess.” She startled at the word. In a pleased way, he thought. “We can leave now, while our wits are about us. Or, you can come here,” he let his voice drop low, “and ask me to make you come one more time. One last time.”

Her eyes widened. She hesitated.

He took in the responses as he would in the field. The way she swallowed hard. The way she inhaled, wet her lip with the tip of her tongue. Nervous, aroused.

Now, she closed the distance. But it seemed she did it to peer more closely at him. “Luke ... you seem ... ” She sounded uncertain. “I cannot read it. I cannot read you .”

He reached out, to her hair. And pulled out a sparkling pin. “Is my behavior confusing?”

“No. But ... ” She seemed to be struggling with how to put it.

He pulled out the next pin, and the next, and the next, and in another moment, all that copper tumbled free. And then he buried his fingers in it, fingertips massaging her scalp. She narrowed her eyes, fighting the pleasure of it.

Then, she gave in. Leaned in to kiss him.

Too much risk in that. And so, he slipped around her, behind her, and pulled her back against his chest. His mouth found the side of her neck, his hands reeling her skirts up with an efficiency that made her gasp.

He brushed her ear with his lips, and she made a little sound in her throat, like a kitten. His hand reached her cunt. He dragged two fingers along her sex, opening her, discovering her silky and hot and already wet. “Oh, you poor, lovely thing,” he teased. “Does it ache?”

Her laugh was tight, a hitch. “Badly. For you.”

Hearing that caused a rush of sensation directly to his cock. “Not to worry,” he hummed, dipping those two fingers inside her, eliciting a moan. “I’ll take care of it. I know precisely how you like to be serviced.”

“Outrageously overconfident,” she scolded on a breathy laugh.

“Only a man who pays attention.” He drew a finger over her clitoris, and she shuddered.

“I want .. .” She swallowed. “I want you to disrobe, lie down on that bed, and let me touch you.”

“I am occupied,” he murmured, rubbing her more firmly, now.

She bit back another moan. And then, with a growl of effort, pulled herself away from him. “You are distracting me. I won’t have it.” She smoothed down her skirt with unsteady hands. “You misapprehend what would satisfy me.”

He raised a brow. “I recollect you melting into the floor last time I followed my instinct.”

“Oh, thoroughly. But can you, a man who pleaded to put his tongue inside me, not imagine I would have a desire to place mine upon you? Yet I have been given no opportunity.”

He did not wish to have this debate. Instead of replying, he kept her gaze, raised to his lips the glistening fingers that had been inside her, and sucked them into his mouth.

The taste made him want to get on his knees. He knew she could read it in his expression.

“L uke ... ” Her voice was husky. “Tell me how in God’s name I am meant to be reasonable when I watch you do that?”

“You need not be. Go lie on the bed. Or the floor, if you prefer.”

“Are we at war, then, over who lies down?” She shook her head. “I know what you’re about.”

He raised a brow. “Did not think I had made a secret of it.”

Her eyes flicked to his breeches, and back. “You’re hard.”

“Of course.”

“Let me take care of it.”

“It’ll keep.”

Now, her frustration was sharper. “No.” She stepped back. “I’m not certain why you won’t let me, or why you...why you do that .” She took a breath, searching for words to express it. “Coax me out of myself, but put up a—a barricade, to keep me from doing the same to you. If you cannot trust me enough to put yourself in my hands, I am profoundly disinterested in anything else.”

Luke's first impulse was to say something cutting, to pull her away from the line of inquiry. But that would be a shameful way to end. And so, he was left with saying nothing at all.

"Luke ... " she hissed a sigh. "I would know you. I would learn you. Not for fairness, though it would be only fair, but because that is what I want. Real knowledge, something beyond the fact that you're awfully good at locking a great deal of yourself away."

He was practically stone, now. He had to be.

"Do you suppose Charlie should never have touched Philip, because they could not be together always? Would it be better not to have given one another what they could?"

"What's between us is not the same," he said calmly. Was that true? He had no idea. But he did know it was time to release her from the hope that she could convince him. "They were in love for years. We've known each other only a short time, and spent most of it in battle. It's only passion, Grace."

She looked surprised, then furious. "That is idiotic. I think the truth is that you would hang from a cliff to catch a viper, but you are afraid of me."

He tried for a look that said she was being ridiculous. But it was difficult to lie.

"I hate that I must go." A painful sharpness to her tone, now. "That I did not do it all differently two years ago. I hate that you did not do it differently. It should have been you."

Despite all his work to keep some emotional distance, her words caused a deep, clear ache. He could practically see it—a crack, down the center of the box.

No .

“It would never have been me, princess.” Now, the term wasn’t an endearment.

“You sound terribly certain—”

“I was there . You were pretty, and spoiled, and wealthy lords found you easy to convince.” Good God , that had come out harshly. Her eyes snapped wide, like she’d been struck. He felt immediate regret.

And in the next instant, he knew this was for the best. Puncturing the fantasy. Slapping her hand away, hard enough that they—he—could escape in one piece. “Do you imagine you’d have gone to your father, to your gossip-mongering friends, and declared that you wished to be courted by an author whose funds would not keep you in slippers?”

“Don’t,” she whispered.

“You romanticize what we could have been. Bexley’s heart stopping out of the cloudless blue forced you near a man you never stooped to dance a single dance with, for long enough to understand what it is to be treated as more than an ornament. But do not fool yourself, you would have chosen to be some posh imbecile’s trophy, every time. That was the game you were playing, and I could not possibly compete. I could have kissed you in every alcove in London, I could have proven a hundred ways that I see every depth of you, and even so our story would have ended with Randolph St. George owning you.”

The look on her face was pure, stunned injury.

For the best, Luke thought, ignoring the queasy feeling blooming in his stomach.

“Perhaps,” she finally said. “You’ve taken such impressive care to wound me, and that feels— that hurts. But the words don’t hurt, Luke. I know I was spoiled and frivolous and giddy on all the attention. I know I treated the season as a silly game. But unlike you, I am capable of learning. For instance, I have learned that we do not dwell in a fair world.” She shook her head, angry now. “God, the arrogance of you. None of us is guaranteed a whit of happiness in life. When it floats into our hand for a breath, we ought to let ourselves feel it. For whatever time it lasts.”

Disappointment was etched on her face. She turned to go.

But then, she had a thought that made her grimace, and turned back to add, “I could say the same of you, you know. I could prove a thousand ways that I see you, and you would never let me inside those rarefied walls. You only gave me any glimpse at all because I am already betrothed, and you knew I would leave as soon as the museum was open.” Her eyes were wet, but her voice was level. “I do not doubt that all sorts of people will love you from afar throughout your life, Luke. I only wonder if you will ever allow yourself to feel it, or if you will always be a coward. Take the lamp on your way out, if you would. It’s very dark.”

And she turned and left the room.

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It was for the best.

Luke picked up the lamp and moved to exit the bedroom.

As he approached the arched doorway, he noticed something in the periphery of his vision. A blue glint on the arch.

Luke looked up at it, and froze in surprise.

In the center of the arch, hanging by a short string, was a round, flat piece of glass holding concentric circles of blue, the size of his palm. An amulet to ward away the evil eye.

Luke recognized it because he had given it to the earl. He'd bought it outside a ruin in Greece when he was fifteen years old. It required the last of his pocket money, but after weeks as Bexley's shadow, he felt he must give the man some token of appreciation for his generosity.

"A magical amulet," Bexley had said, in an amused tone that let Luke know he found the concept ridiculous. They were on the ship, and Bexley was at his desk, writing.

Luke had shrugged. He didn't believe in nonsense, either. "Thought you'd like the color."

Bexley had smiled then. He did favor cobalt blue. "Thank you. I shall treasure it."

Luke could not imagine that he would. People gave the earl magnificent gifts all the

time, and he bought heaps of souvenirs in every port. He'd chuck it in a chest, or lose it, or give it away. Regardless, it was the giving that mattered.

Luke was leaving when the man said, "Ash. Would you like to hear my one spiritual belief?"

Luke had turned. Bexley was running his thumb over the evil eye. "There's no God, of course. Or angels, or objects that shield from evil. None of those will keep a man safe. And I have a ridiculous amount of money so I don't mind telling you, hoarding that won't keep you safe, either." He fixed Luke with a look that was serious and amused at once—the way he always looked when he said something important. "The only thing with that sort of power is connection with another. Friendship. We keep our eye on each other. That is real." He smiled. "And so this bit of glass is more powerful than you thought."

Then he waved Luke away and resumed writing.

Thirteen years later, it turned out that Bexley had held onto the bit of glass. And he'd placed it in the center of the secret heart of the building that was his life's work.

It took Luke a moment to realize he was shaking. He'd been focused on his breath, keeping it regular, and flexing his hands, which had begun to tingle. His heart was pounding.

Someone had to keep going after the fire. Denton was drunk, the new earl was grieving. Someone had to be calm. Someone had to be able to think. There was so much to do.

Then Grace came, and it was a relief to feel contempt, anger, mortification—none of those even brushed up against any emotion with the power to fell him. And when things changed between them, that was its own welcome distraction.

But the museum was open. The job was done. It was all ... over.

His last moments with Grace were over—and he'd made a vicious, pitiable mash of them.

Bexley was dead.

His mentor. Teacher. His friend.

Gone.

Grace's voice carried from the sitting room. "Are you coming?"

Luke shut his eyes. "Go on ahead."

"It is pitch dark," she snapped, and then she was walking toward him, and he only just managed to turn away before she saw his face. "What are you peering at?"

"Nothing of import." Collecting himself, he turned toward her, because he had to in order to get through the door.

But when she saw his face, she stood in his way. A probing look in her eyes. "Luke ..."

He needed to say something offhanded. Or amusing. Or cutting. But his mind was occupied in keeping his features placid, his breathing regular.

"You look as though—" she stopped herself, realizing what she'd been about to say.

Bloody hell. He affected a raised brow. "As though someone's just died?" he finished for her, blandly. "Did not mean to linger. We can go."

Evidently, his dismissive demeanor was unconvincing. She hovered where she was, uncertain, but unwilling to step aside. “I’d like nothing more than to leave you be, believe me. But ... you look very pale.”

“I’m well.”

“No, you are not.” Whatever she saw, it had caused all her anger to temporarily evaporate, leaving only worry. “Ashburton. Do I need to advise you to breathe?”

He should laugh. He should make a joke. He should pull his spent, maudlin self together.

“It is nothing,” he said, and was horrified to hear his voice trembling. He cleared his throat. “Forgive me. That ... trinket up there. I gave it to Bex—”

His throat closed. His eyes filling with tears. Damn it.

Gently, she lifted the lamp out of his hands, set it down. “Luke. It’s all right.”

He shook his head. It was anything but all right. It was iron, cracking. He could not bear it.

She stepped closer. “We can hack off one another’s remaining limbs shortly,” she murmured. “For a moment ... let us call a truce.”

“Please ... ” Please go. But he could not finish it.

She laid a hand on his forearm, and he realized his arms were crossed over his chest. “How exhausted you must be,” she said, and her voice was so gentle it drew a choked sound from him. “Seeing to everything, from the moment he died.”

If he contemplated what she was saying, he would disintegrate. He needed to say something to push it all away. But all he could do was keep his arms tight around himself.

She did not move her hand. “Day and night, in the very building where we lost him, repairing the destruction, making it as he would have wanted. All the rest of us falling apart and letting you pin us back together. Even in the solarium ... I’m sure it wasn’t too much a burden, but if we’re honest, you were doing it to help me go on.”

If he had his wits about him, there were a hundred quips he could make. A hundred protestations that his interest in her pleasure would be identical with or without a museum to open.

But all he could do was stand there. Bloody trembling .

“Is this the first you’ve really felt it?” She asked, softly. “Luke ... you ought to let yourself feel it.”

She was sliding that hand to his shoulder, and he could not have this—he could not—if she put her arms around him, he would fall to pieces—“Grace—don’t—”

But then her arms were encircling him. Guiding his head down to her shoulder. God , the warmth of her, the smell of her, the strength, the aliveness. It surrounded him. Filled him. Without thinking, his arms moved to embrace her, pull her tight against his chest.

And then the box shattered and he was sobbing.

She held him as it shook him. She stroked his hair, his back, and he could not recall the last time he’d been touched so gently, with such care. Sometime in the ancient past, before his brother died, perhaps, when his mother could bear to be tender. Not

since.

“You know, Charlie would think you very silly to try to hold back the biology of it,” she murmured. “It’s only salt water.” And then, “Let go, love. I have you.”

The grief was a gale. Stopping every voice in his head. Stopping time. It broke him to pieces too small to see with the eye. Boiled him to vapor.

And yet.

Her. In the center of it. With him. Crying with him, and whispering to him. Let it pass through you. It never takes as long as you’d think. A little laugh through her tears. I cry ten times a day. Her mouth, pressed to his temple. I have you. The solidity of her, anchoring him to the earth. I have you. The wisdom in her hands, stroking his back. I have you, love. The sweetness. God, the sweetness. He’d never known anything like it. His body full against a body that only wanted to comfort him. Ride through the dark of the wave with him.

“I do understand,” she whispered, as it began to loosen his grip on him, to ebb. “His loss is unbearable.”

He sighed into her hair. “His ... is not the only loss I grieve.”

He felt her tighten. Her hands clenched fistfuls of his jacket.

He blew out a long exhale. Steadier, now. And lifted his face to meet her eyes. She smoothed her hand over his cheeks, to wipe away his tears. He wiped away hers with a thumb. And then they both gave a little laugh, at the strange, tender symmetry of it.

So this was the other side of the storm. This peace. Lightness.

She laid her cheek against his shoulder. Staying in the embrace. Lingerin

He wanted to thank her. But he didn't want to disturb this silence. So they stood there, in each other's arms.

And then, slowly, something began to shift.

Neither had moved. Yet, one moment, she was comfort. And the next ... she was a woman. Her body against his, the flower garden of her hair. Miles of soft skin under a gown he was fairly confident he could unbutton in under thirty seconds.

She felt the shift, he knew; he heard it in her breathing. And her stillness—no longer repose. Now she was holding herself.

She lifted her head to meet his eyes. "Are you ... " Her voice cracked, and she swallowed, tried again. "Are you well?"

"No," he said, and it was clear she knew exactly what he meant.

She studied him. Thoughtful. She seemed to be mulling a decision.

Finally, she spoke. "Luke ... I will walk with you out of this room. And we will part friends."

He tilted his head, as though mildly dubious. "Will we?"

"If we can keep our deuced mouths shut and resist lashing out for the time it takes to walk back to Bexley Hall, I believe it is genuinely possible."

"You must know why I do it," he said softly. "Despite holding you in the highest possible regard. It's all because you terrify me."

She looked surprised, and her brow shot up at the word terrify. “Afraid I’ll say something so emasculating you’ll turn to stone where you stand?”

He resisted an urge to match her sardonic tone. “No. It’s what I feel when I’m near you. The vulnerability is bloody agonizing. It’s ... walking off a cliff into the sheer air. So I get it wrong. And I hurt you. Because I’m terrified of your power to do it to me. I’m not sure why you’d comfort me, Grace. You’re more generous than I deserve.”

She blinked, taken aback. “Don’t make me out to be a saint. I’ve said horrible things.”

He ticked a shoulder. “As I’ve said, often, when you’re scathing, I rather want to kiss you. And other times,” he continued, “the wounding is transcendently brutal, because you’ve put some ugly truth I thought no one could see onto the tip of your bayonet.”

“Now you are too generous. Sometimes it’s less truth and more whatever I know will cut deepest. Because ...I’m the air, too.”

A moment, as they contemplated it. The energy between them sharp and uncertain.

“So. You suggest we part friends,” he said.

“Yes.”

Another moment. Neither moving.

“Was there an ‘or’?”

She nodded slowly. “Or I will kiss you.”

Weightless, glimmering, that idea. A butterfly, flitting between them. “I see.”

“But if I do it ... I want everything. And tomorrow will hurt like the devil.”

“Yes,” he said. “I don’t imagine I would recover.”

She nodded, like this was what she expected him to say.

She began to move away—but he held her where she was.

“Kiss me,” he said.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:29 pm

Grace was seven when she first learned the concept of infinity.

She had been given an hour to complete a page of problems before her tutor arrived. Because the problems were insultingly easy, she decided to amuse herself by taking all the answers and combining them to see how big the number would be. Then, because the number was not very impressive, she squared it, and then, because she felt a tingle of interest, she squared that number. Six more times.

“A question, Papa,” she’d said, entering the library, where he sat at his desk. She handed him her page. He pulled her into his lap and examined it. “What would happen if I kept doing this all day and night for an entire week, and never once slept?”

“The number would grow bigger and bigger.”

“Do numbers have a roof?”

“Do you mean to ask if a largest number exists?” She nodded. “Numbers go on forever, sweetheart.”

Grace was struck silent.

“Are you trying to imagine it?” her father asked. “Most minds cannot quite think infinitely.”

This raised a new question, one that made her even more curious. “How do we know something if we cannot think it?”

He gave her a tender smile. "I suppose we feel it."

Kneeling on the bed, caressing the warm, candlelit skin of Luke Ashburton's naked body, Grace felt infinity.

She could go on touching him forever and never feel her fingers were repeating themselves, because everywhere she touched, she changed him. Drew goosebumps, or unsteadied his breath, or brought heat to the surface, or caused his cock to jump where it rested, hard and flushed, against the nest of curly hair that trailed up to his lower belly.

And so he was constantly new, and her need to investigate, re-investigate, only grew as he lay there, hands tucked behind his head, watching her with a hungry look but honoring their agreement not to touch her in return until she gave leave.

His cock was a matter of no small fascination. Very different from the only other she'd encountered. Longer, which made intuitive sense when one considered Luke must have five inches of height over St. George. And, while extremely hard at the moment, she would not characterize Luke's member as pointy. Rather, it had a blunt heft to it, a heaviness in hand, with a head that flared and an unexpected, pleasing curve to the shaft.

She wrapped her hand around it now, exploring the way the skin moved over the organ, and Luke hissed, the muscles of his stomach tensing. His slim hips briefly bucked before he got himself under control.

"Is that a good sort of squirm?" she asked, moving down between his legs to consider the whole apparatus more closely.

Luke threw her a sardonic look. "If your presence had not required me to find release several times a day for the past week, I'd already have spilled in your hand."

She giggled. “I wouldn’t mind. I’m rather interested in seeing that.”

“I have other plans,” he murmured, and his tone made a blush race across her skin. He saw it—he’d lit candles around the room, at some point between unbuttoning her dress with shocking speed and impatiently yanking his own clothes from his body. Technically, she still wore a chemise, though it was falling off both shoulders, and she was fairly certain he could see straight down it from his angle. “Does that heat in your cheeks mean you’re ready to let me touch you now?”

She shook her head, enjoying his flash of frustration. “Patience, love,” she said, and did not miss the surprise and longing that twitched his features when she used the word.

She ducked her head, and kissed the tip of his penis. His breath seemed to drop lower in his body. A drop of clear fluid had emerged, and she tested its texture with a fingertip, smoothing it over the head, and he clenched his jaw.

She gave the head an experimental lick. Silken skin, heat, sea salt. She took it into her mouth, a little thrill passing through her. And now he could not help it, he gave a short thrust, pushing farther in, and she gripped his hipbones, holding him in place so she could lick down his length.

“Christ,” he muttered. “So this is how I die.”

She hummed amusement, but did not release him from her ministrations. Spiraling her tongue, then taking him in her mouth as deeply as she could.

His hands were in her hair now, and she flicked him a scolding look, but his expression was unapologetic as he tugged, urging her to release his cock and slide up his body.

“Sorry, princess, that’s absolutely all I can handle of your mouth for the moment.”

“I wasn’t finished,” she protested.

“Oh, neither of us are.” He put his arms around her to roll over, so that they lay side by side, facing each other on the pillows. “I’ve promised you everything, after all.”

Releasing the tidal wave of grief seemed to have propped some door open inside Luke, and when he had said kiss me , when he had started this, his eyes were like a lake so crystal clear one could see all the way to the bottom.

But she hadn’t imagined it would last this long. Sometime in all the undressing and murmured words and hands all over each other, she assumed he’d quietly withdraw, as always.

Instead, she was lying here with Luke. All of Luke. Entirely naked, the whole long stretch of him, and within that gray-sky gaze, entirely available. A wonder.

His hand skated between her thighs to her sex. He watched her. Intense, that gaze. Catching everything.

“Are you going to write it down?” she teased. “All your observations?”

“I don’t think I could do justice to what I’m watching.” His voice dipped lower. “I want to watch you come.” The flush spread over her whole body now. “I want to watch it while I’m inside you. So I can feel it.” His fingers were working lightly over her, now, and she was so wet, so ready.

“Well then. Make a bit of haste.”

He chuckled, and sat up, holding out both hands to pull her up with him. Then he

hooked her chemise with his hands and pulled it over her head.

When he looked down at her body, there was a briskness to his expression; after all, he had pressing business at hand. But he stilled. Arrested by what he saw.

It made her tingle everywhere. His gaze. Finally, he exhaled. “Good God. Every thought fell out of my head.” He pulled her to him now, lowering her onto the bed, moving over her, braced up on his elbows. All that bare skin against her own took her breath away.

She wasn’t sure who started the kiss, but within moments it was deep, hungry, and she was wrapping her legs around his hips, feeling the hot, heavy contour of his cock against her. He shifted to glide along her wetness. And then the head of his cock found her opening, and in one smooth movement, he was inside her.

She heard herself whimper. The motion awakening places she’d never felt before.

Luke paused. His eyes searched her face. When he’d assured himself that he’d caused no pain, that she was well— very well—he caught her gaze and held it.

And then he began to move. She saw sharp pleasure on his face, saw him struggle to endure it. “Grace ... you feel ... I—” he shook his head, apologetic. “This might be over quickly.”

He’d been so focused on her each time he touched her, ignoring his need. She rather liked that now, he could not ignore it. She smiled slyly. “Well. There’s been a bit of build-up between us.” And she laughed, and he gave a laugh, and how strange it was, to be laughing with his cock inside her, and how lovely, to feel the joy move through his body.

And then he was kissing her, and they were moving together, finding their rhythm,

discovering what had always existed between them, waiting to be freed.

He pulled all the way out, thrust in hard. The concentrated sensation made him curse, made her moan. “ Yes . Like that.” He obliged her, his movements growing rougher, less controlled. The breath rasped out of him, his eyes slipping shut, entirely inside the sensations.

That suited Grace perfectly, because it afforded her the opportunity to watch him, his features taut, curls fallen over his brow, breath rough. Beautiful . She pressed her hand to his cheek, and he turned his face into it and kissed her palm, and then opened his eyes—and his hips stilled. “Oh, Grace, with your eyes on me like that ... ” He sucked in a breath, shook his head ruefully.

“Don’t stop,” she whispered. “Do not hold yourself back.”

He gave a hoarse laugh. “Just long enough to make you—”

“I’ll keep,” she said, tilting her hips, eliciting a tortured sound. “I want to feel you come apart.”

The words made him moan. “Say it again,” he breathed, thrusting faster, and now his whole body quivered on the precipice.

She arched up to meet his lips. “Luke ... come inside me.”

A sharp inhale, a held breath, and then he was shuddering over her, into her, and she was holding him, feeling the storm of pleasure overwhelm him completely.

His body stilled gradually, heavily, and he rolled off her.

He let out a long, contented sigh. Then shook his head. “Grace,” he said, chiding.

“That did not go to plan.”

“Your plan, love,” she said, unapologetic.

He took that in, expression serious. “Is it a thing you say to people?”

“What—love? Are you asking if it is my common endearment for the men in my bed?” His expression turned mortified, and she added, “I know that isn’t what you meant.”

She rolled onto her back, and was greeted by the night sky, flickering in the candlelight. “Now I know I had hardly experienced anything, before you. Not for want of trying. I was curious. A problem, my curiosity.”

He rolled to his back beside her. Pulled her head onto his shoulder. “I would call it a gift.”

“In your vocation, perhaps. In a lady trying to discover what goes on between men and women, less so.” She sighed, thinking of it now. “I was too naive for one behaving so wickedly. The silliest mistakes can set the course of one’s life, have you noted?”

“Is that what it was?” She knew he meant St. George. His voice was very soft—trying, she thought, to make it clear his question held no judgment.

“I’d heard he was on the verge of proposing. Very charming, St. George, and not terribly bad at kissing—” she tilted her head up to shoot him a dry look. “You know, those kisses you witnessed, my reasoning was that one cannot possibly know if a kiss is good without another to compare it to.”

He hummed understanding. “Shameful of me to fault you for the adhering to the most

basic tenets of scientific inquiry.”

“Indeed,” she said. “And in my defense, this was all before I discovered the truth that when one is kissed properly, there is absolutely no question of it.”

“Yes, I made the same discovery only this morning.”

She giggled. “If you’d slowed to visit my lips before diving between my thighs in the solarium, we could have known sooner.”

“That you’d even mention it proves you don’t comprehend how desperately I needed to taste you.”

That sent a warm gush all through her. “Well. And so we establish the many facets of my ignorance,” Then, softer, “I do understand why you thought my behavior scheming, at those balls. I cannot deny an aspect of the game. But it was secondary to my desire to simply ... understand.”

He was stroking her hair, now, and his hand was firm, familiar—the hand of a man who had touched her everywhere. “You need not explain a thing.”

“But I want to. I haven’t been able to tell anyone. Can you imagine people’s faces, if I admitted that I slipped into St. George’s house because I’d rashly concluded I ought to give things a test before I promised my whole lifetime?”

“It has the ring of logic.”

“It’s absolutely scandalous.”

“Well, society is in no small part built on nonsense.”

“True, but it was reckless to think I could skirt it. We were meant to be alone, but his brother returned. You ought to have seen the look on that vindictive little monster’s face when he caught us. Second only to the look upon St. George’s, when he realized he was trapped with a woman he’d only ever wanted that from.”

Luke made an angry sound in his throat. “I’m sorry.”

She shrugged. “As I said. I was an idiot.”

“Grace. You weren’t. Do not call yourself—”

“Unwise,” she amended, dryly. “And what was interrupted . . . well. That’s the irony. If we hadn’t been discovered, that certainly would have been the end of that.”

He pulled her tighter against his body. She felt his frustration. His sympathy.

“I did not mean to sadden you,” she said. “I shall be perfectly fine. I plan to make a glorious life with the man, with or without his assistance.”

Luke shook his head. “Astonishing. The good fortune wasted on that daft sack of hair.”

She giggled at that. And then they lay there, eyes on the flickering stars, his fingers lazily stroking her hair.

“It is not,” she murmured.

“Mmm?”

“A thing I say to people.”

His fingers went still.

And then he was pulling her onto him, his hands cupping her face, and he was kissing her so softly, so thoroughly, as if to make sure he did not miss any fraction of her mouth, the corners, the cupid's bow, lower lip sucked gently between his, tongue coaxed into a slow dance, until she felt breathless and opiated. She could feel him hardening again, but he did not rush, did not move his attention from the kiss.

Finally, she broke it, to meet his eyes.

Still there—all of him, all of Luke, gazing up at her.

She encircled his cock with her hand. And gave him a pointed look.

The corners of his mouth hitched up. He reached down, wrapped his hand around hers, and together they guided his cock to her entrance, and inside.

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It was a look Luke had never seen before on Grace Chetwood's face: the particular hot intensity radiating from her when he slid inside her.

Of all her expressions, this was now his favorite.

He'd come too quickly, the first time. Even lasting as long as he had took the sort of effort he associated with scaling actual mountains. He'd left her unsatisfied.

That would not be happening again.

He slid up into her slowly, holding her hips in his hands. She was perfectly slick with his release and her need, and it felt like sinking into silk. He felt a shiver run through her. Pulled out just as languorously, watching the sensations register on her face.

Admittedly, it was hard to focus. Making love to Grace felt like the culmination of all his training, all the years in the field in every challenging condition. Everything he'd ever endured had existed so he could keep his attention on the nuances of her even as he died of pleasure.

"You don't make it easy," he murmured. "All this wet, gorgeous heat." He pulled her down onto his cock, and a little noise escaped her.

He needed to kiss her, that exposed throat as she tipped her head back, and he needed to taste the skin, and he needed to graze it with his teeth and feel a moan vibrate through her. And coax her to move over him, find the pace that pleased her. She flushed when he called her beautiful and when he cursed her maddening tightness and when he told her to take him. Take him deeper. Take more.

Now, he pulled her by the waist as he sat up. Wrapping her thighs around him, so she sat in his lap. Some wry part of his mind noted that they mirrored the statue in the corner now, her legs around his hips, his hands holding her at the base of her spine, their bodies joined. And that this was what he had wanted in the butterfly vivarium. Exactly this.

“Now,” he said, brushing strands of hair from her face, “Let us see to the lady.”

He lifted his fingers to her lips, encouraging her to wet them with her tongue, then reached between their bodies. He was watching her, gathering the information he needed in this new position. When he increased the pressure of his fingertips, he felt her clench around his shaft, and that pulled his eyes down to where they were joined, and he was arrested by the sight of his cock buried in her, of her flesh stretched around his.

She saw him look, and, with a wicked glint, leaned back on her hands, to improve his view. His engorged length, flushed and slippery. Her swollen petals dragging along his flesh as she tipped back a little farther. His fingers, glistening wet with their mingled fluids, skating tight strokes over the most sensitive inch of her body. He felt hypnotized by it, entirely liquid.

When he raised his gaze to hers, the look on her face was so aroused that it alone sped his pulse. Was it possible to come apart from a woman looking at you?

“Luke, I need ... ”

“I know,” he whispered. “Let me give it to you.” He’d gotten the hang of the angle now, and moved his fingers with more precision as she eddied over his cock in small undulations. “Is it good?” he asked, in a tone that let her know he already knew the answer. Her response was a laugh that ended in a cracked moan. “Take your pleasure, princess. It’s what my body is for.” He’d meant it teasingly, but he felt it deeper. It

was simply true. Her gaze flared, hearing the raw edge in his voice. “Made for you,” he said, drawing one of her hands to his lips. He brushed the inside of her wrist. “My fingers. My mouth.” He nipped the tender skin. “My cock. For you.”

Her eyes glittered at his words—but quickly, the tide of sensation stole her attention. Gathering force, now, the movement of her pelvis growing jagged, hitched. He circled her clitoris faster, leading her toward it, and she was moaning, voice breaking on his name and yes, yes, please, and he was rocking into her, his cock pressing against her walls in a way that made him feel vicious, made him want to throw her down and fuck her so hard he couldn’t breathe.

“Take it from me,” he urged, their hips moving together now in a tight rhythm as she rode him in his lap, his fingers coaxing and relentless. She leaned into him, clutching his shoulders, so close—he could see the desperation in her eyes. “All of it. All of me. Take it.”

She came sharp and sudden, on an agonized gasp, and he held her through the convulsion, her sweat-sheened skin against his, her cunt tightening around him.

She melted into him as the tremors subsided. All of her limp, sated.

She pressed her face into his neck. Breathed there a moment.

Then raised her head to look at him, eyes sparkling. “For a man who claims paltry previous experience with a woman’s pleasure, you’re suspiciously adept.”

He shrugged. “I think it helps that giving it to you is the thing I most desire in the world.”

“Evidently.” She moved, and they both recalled, on twin intakes of breath, that he was still inside her, very hard. “Oh,” she breathed. “I believe there’s more to do

here.”

By way of agreeing, he pulled out of her to lay her down onto the bed, and she grinned, reaching out pull him atop. He cocked a brow to tell her he had other ideas, and coaxed her to roll onto her stomach.

“ Oh,” she said again, now with curiosity, as he climbed over her and pressed in from behind. And one more time, “Oh ... ” the utterance now tautly threaded with new sensation.

He stroked into her, winding her hair around his hand to pull it aside, exposing the back of her neck, and then he kissed her there, tasting her sweat, running his lips over the rise of her vertebra, as his other hand slid to cup her breast, tease the nipple.

“ God ,” she moaned. “Luke. That is . . .”

“Yes,” he muttered into her neck. “Too good. Too rich. Too sweet.” She tipped her head back to offer her mouth, and he kissed her deeply, tongue moving into her as his cock did. Everything flushed and expanding and heavy, their movement creating more and more of it, till they were swimming in it together.

And then she was arching into him with an urgent hiss. “Luke ... ” her voice tight, surprised. “I’m going to—don’t stop—”

He heard himself growl, and Jesus Christ, the discipline it took not to lose all control, to keep his deep, steady rhythm so she could ride it to another peak, his whole body shaking with the effort, his mouth against her ear. Come for me, Grace. Let me feel it. Come around me.

“Don’t stop ... ” she was panting, her hands fisting the counterpane. “Don’t stop ... ” And then, “Come with me ... ”

The words sent light all through him, tensed every muscle, his belly, his cock, and then, as he felt her clench around him, he spun off the cliff with her, so intense that for a fraction of a moment, there was only hot blackness and the sharp, ragged cry of her climax.

The sun was threading its first red across the horizon as they walked back to Bexley Hall. They did not speak. Grace could feel her throat, abraded from the sounds she'd been making for the last several hours. Her body felt sated and heavy. She suspected there would be marks, his fingerprints bruised into her hips, and that when he undressed, he would discover red scrapes on his shoulder from her teeth. It made her smile.

It hadn't been enough, but she couldn't imagine it ever could be.

As they approached the house, Grace spotted a wisp of smoke around the side, and saw that a man was sitting on a bench in the garden, in the center of the stone spiral, his back toward them, watching the sunrise. Philip.

Grace squeezed Luke's hand, nodded in Philip's direction, a warning to stay quiet.

He nodded. He seemed relaxed, and deep in thought.

When they got close, he pulled her behind a tree, cupped her face in his hands, and slowly brushed his mouth over hers.

Their last kiss.

When he released her, he tilted his head to the house. Telling her to enter first, alone. "Safe travels, Grace," he said, softly.

She brushed a curl off his forehead. His gaze was steady, knowing. Clear all the way

to the bottom.

“And to you,” she said.

And then, she walked away from Luke.

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Grace washed, changed into travel attire, and put up her hair before she joined Philip on the bench in the now sun-illuminated garden. He hadn't moved. He was watching the birds, wearing last night's clothes, and looked to be on his fourth cheroot.

He gave her a smile as she sat beside him, but when he saw the journal and stack of pages in her hand, his expression moved from curiosity through recognition to somber understanding.

"Diary, was it?" Philip asked. He was trying for nonchalance.

She nodded. "The key, in the end, was your name."

That took him aback. A moment of pure longing. Grief.

"I am so sorry, Philip," she said, placing her hand over his where it rested on the bench. "You have been suffering in ways no one understood."

For a moment, it seemed too much for him. His attempt to smile was a failure. "I think that is life. The occasional lovely night punctuating an endless ocean of ..." He made a gesture with the burn-scabbed hand holding the cheroot. It lost its energy halfway through, falling back into his lap.

Grace had never quite heard him like this before. "I think you may need to spend a bit more time in the field," she ventured, gently. "I've read that one cannot remain long in a state of despair when fully immersed in nature."

Denton snorted. "Charlie wrote that sort of thing to convince himself."

“Mr. Ashburton wrote it. I think he believes it.”

Denton threw her a sidelong glance. “Odd to hear you evoke him without sounding as though you wish to crush his neck beneath a carriage wheel.”

She shrugged. She did not want to let the conversation stray too far. She smoothed a hand over the leather cover. “The key is on the first page. I do apologize for working through so much of it. Once I realized what it was, I really ought to have stopped. But I couldn’t.”

“Fascinated by the perversion of it all?” he asked, dryly.

“Well, that night in the palace sounded a bit extreme, with all the cantharides and whips and so forth. But in all other respects...he sounds like my father speaking of my mother. Or Arabella, about her duke.” She held Philip’s hand now. “That’s why I couldn’t stop reading it. I wanted to know what it was like. To love and be loved so deeply.”

That softened him. He regarded her with a thoughtful look. “No reason to think you won’t experience it for yourself.”

There was plenty of reason to think it, but Grace did not wish to discuss that. Instead, she squeezed his hand. “He loved you completely. You were the most important thing in his life.”

Philip took a slow puff of his cheroot, then cleared his throat. “I know. I knew. But one always wants to hear it.” He glanced over, and saw the look on her face. “Oh good God, don’t pity me. I’ve money and good looks and a lovely life back home. I’m not even a cripple yet. Let’s not turn maudlin.”

“I do not like to think of you enduring it all alone.”

“Kind of you to say,” he said. Then slanted her a look. “If it helps, I’m not as alone as one might assume. Catherine’s known me since birth. Years before we wed, she caught me in a barn with two strapping stable hands. She had her own reasons for marrying me, and we are friends to one another.”

“I’m happy to hear it.” Friendship also seemed like a more reasonable thing to aspire to in her own marriage than to be loved completely. “I hope I can cultivate a similar warmth with my husband.”

He turned to look at her directly. “Did you fall pregnant? Forgive the bluntness,” he added quickly, “but based on what I’ve heard about Randolph St. George, I cannot fathom another reason you’d consent to marry him.”

“He’s a charming future viscount with obscene wealth,” she said mildly.

“So are at least four other men who live at a slightly higher level of intellectual curiosity, which would seem fairly important to a person like you.”

“Oh, he’s intelligent enough,” she said.

“Good to hear. I’d encountered a troubling rumor that the man was a—what was it?—waste of hair.”

She laughed. “Ah. So you heard about him from Luke.”

Philip’s brow ticked at the use of Luke’s Christian name. Grace felt herself blush.

He let a long moment pass in silence. The mistake was no different from the one he’d made with Charlie’s name, and she wasn’t terribly surprised she’d made it, given that Philip was dangerously easy to talk to and she’d had no sleep at all.

Grace cleared her throat. "It is not widely known, thankfully, but my betrothal did follow a ... lapse in judgment. It all occurred very shortly before you wrote to me." And as of midweek, she was past the day her courses were to arrive. And there was no sign of them. "I think ... I'm certain our families will insist upon a special license the moment I arrive home." She smiled, trying to make it all sound perfectly fine with her. "You know, St. George is overwhelmingly considered the catch of the season."

"I see. Luke," he said, meaningfully, "said a disdainful thing or two about his mental prowess, but his more serious concern was that that the man might take exception to your epistolary friendships. Charlie told me about those," Philip explained, when her brows rose in surprise, "and when I mentioned them in passing to Ash, he was immediately concerned that your husband might not allow them to continue. The idea of you going without deep exploration of mathematics distressed him with an intensity I admit took me aback."

She swallowed over a sudden thickness in her throat. Not only because St. George's evidently predictable stance on the Italian professor was something she was still coming to terms with. But because Luke had realized how it would affect her. Immediately.

"It will all be well. I'm sure St. George won't mind," Grace said.

Philip gave her a glance that said he would let it go, but wasn't sure he believed her. Then turned to watch the birds in the garden.

"You know," he said, after a moment, lifting the cheroot to his mouth, "I worked as hard as I reasonably could without making it so obvious that your aunt noted it."

Grace looked at him, confused. "Worked at ... "

"Well, there was placing the settee in the solarium to move her a bit farther away.

Getting her foxed at that dinner whilst spouting wrong opinions of Gottfried Leibniz, so she might be too absorbed in educating me to check if you'd gone up to bed. Also, pleading with her to apply her lovely penmanship to the displays once you'd cracked the cipher, so I could send him to visit you after you swooned. Directly into his arms, I am given to understand," Philip added, deadpan.

"Are you implying that ... " she could not finish the sentence without speaking aloud what had happened between Luke and herself. So she closed her mouth.

Philip's smile had taken on a certain self-satisfaction. "And, of course, the orchid, and the many instances I intercepted a professor on his way to the library, so that the two of you might have more time to quarrel. And making sure you knew of the butterfly vivarium—please tell me that's where you went when you said 'greenhouse.' You're staring, by the way."

Grace was so overwhelmed it took a moment to get any words out at all. "But why?"

"Because you deserved it, and so did he."

"Deserved ... "

"A bit of fun, in all the misery. You cannot honestly think I missed how badly you wanted to bed the man."

She flushed even darker. "I, myself ... entirely missed it —"

"I saw it the instant he walked in, the day you arrived. Please hear this with deepest respect: watching you struggle against your desire to know whether Ash's length and girth matched his height was the one shining brightness in this entire hellacious week."

Grace was so searingly mortified that she was seized with a coughing fit, which Philip watched with a look of serene enjoyment.

“I did not realize I was so transparent,” she managed.

“You are clear glass. Ash, however, has always been eerily placid and impossible to draw out. So, the fact that I could read him at all made it clear that he was outrageously drawn to you and likely quite desperately at your mercy. Please tell me you had it.”

“Had ... ”

“The fun, Grace,” he said blandly.

Once she went home, she would never speak of it again. So, despite her embarrassment, she found that she did wish to speak of it now, while she could. “I had a good deal of it,” she admitted. Before Philip could speak, she added, “I shan’t tell you a thing about his member. Please do not ask.”

Philip grinned. “Who could have envisioned this? Little Grace Chetwood. Going on and on about members.” She gave him an irritated look, which he accepted with glee. “It simply makes me happy. Despite your cruel withholding of necessary details. To know that you enjoyed yourself.”

“I also fell somewhat in love, unfortunately.” It consoled her more than she expected, to admit it to someone who looked at her with such an empathetic, knowing gaze.

“I’m not surprised,” Philip said, more gently. “Who among us has not fallen a little bit in love with Luke Ashburton, once we saw what was under the air of self-seriousness .”

She giggled. “He does come off a touch aloof, doesn’t he?”

“Oh, it’s infuriating. But then one discovers what a deeply considerate person he is, and how terribly alone he’s been all his life, and one rather wants to adopt him like an orphan puppy.” He shook his head fondly. “I was focused on facilitating wickedness, but I had hope it might lead to something.”

Lead to something. It had ... and it could not. Grace found herself again fighting emotion.

Philip went on, philosophically, tapping ash from his cheroot. “You suit. You’re not alike, but there are so many resonances. And you were Charlie’s favorite people.” His voice had gone somber. A hint of regret. “I was unaware that your betrothal was a necessity. Ash’s situation felt more flexible, but that may have been wishful thinking. His work requires the resources of a Cora Worthing, and you have seventeen sisters, so I can’t imagine you’d be bringing that into a union. I suppose I simply wanted it. I think you could understand one another.”

Grace glanced toward the house. “He’s gone,” Philip said. “Left half an hour ago. To pay Miss Worthing a call, by my understanding.”

Grace nodded. Of course. As he should. Nevertheless, her eyes filled with tears.

Philip said nothing. Smoked, and sat with her as she felt it.

Finally, she took a breath, and put the journal and pages in his lap. “Happy birthday,” she said softly.

His eyes widened at that. A sad smile. “Thank you.” He cast her a sidelong glance, then. “As a man acquainted with yearning,” he said, passing the cheroot, “I can tell you that having Charlie for the time I did was not merely better than nothing. It was

everything.”

Grace considered this. But could not get her mind around it. “I don’t understand how you could call it that, when there was so much you could not have.”

“He changed me,” Philip said. For an instant, his eyes fixed on something private and luminous, a world only he could see. “I am an entirely different person.”

Grace took that in. It comforted her to know Philip had found a sort of peace with the unfairness of it. But she was dubious that what he was saying could apply to the extremely short time she had with Luke.

“One can be transformed in a night. If it’s the right sort of night.” Philip said, as though he’d read her thoughts. He patted her cheek. “I shall miss you. I dearly hope you will be happy in your new life.”

“Oh, I will,” she assured him. “I can generally find a way.”

It was true: generally, she could.

And her chat with Philip had given her a few new ideas as to how to go about it.

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London

May 19, 1822

The day after Grace returned home, she awoke to a sensation she'd been half-anticipating : nausea.

She spent the morning casting her accounts. Her stomach settled by afternoon, but she decided to stay in bed. She wanted time alone to get used to the idea of being with child.

As she lay there, her mind picked over the events of the past week. As though sorting pages into chapters. With the hope that this would make it feel easier to close the book.

Then her mother burst in, confirmed that her daughter had spent the morning revisiting her breakfast, and calmly declared that a special license would be obtained the following day, so that a wedding might occur within the week.

Grace was not surprised.

She rose from bed, washed her face, pulled her hair back, put on the only gray dress she owned, and went to speak with her father.

She expected to find him at his desk, but he was on the floor of his study, sorting stacks of books. He looked up as she entered, and she saw a quick evolution of feeling across his face. Her mother had informed him of her condition, clearly.

“May I join you?” He nodded for her to take the settee, but she sat on the floor with him.

“I’ve run out of room,” he explained, gesturing to his over-full bookshelves. “I must part with some. Else I shall have to stop buying new ones. Pull out any you think poorly written and chuck them on that chair.”

Grace appreciated having something to do with her hands. They made light chatter, her father inviting her to recount the steps she took to unlock the earl’s cipher.

“Why do you suppose Bexley did it?” he asked. “Terrific amount of work, putting all of one’s notes into a code. Was there something that required discretion?”

There was, of course, in his diary, but nothing unusual in any of the logs of field notes. “I think he simply enjoyed it. He liked to challenge himself.”

“I suppose, with a certain type of mind, one must keep it occupied so it cannot wander into the wrong territory. Your mother has a mind like that.” He cast her a glance. “As do you.”

It was as good a segue as any. “You’re right. And so I must ask you for something. I do not anticipate that you will like it.” Now, he looked braced. May as well dive in. “I have been thinking about Arabella’s betrothal.”

Grace’s parents had been present at the betrothal dinner, so her father was aware that Arabella had fled before the dessert course, into a storm, to escape her wedding.

“Which piece of it will we be discussing?” her father asked. “The one in which she escaped into the night, or in which ultimately, they did marry, and are happy together?”

“Are you aware of her reasons for fleeing?” Her father shrugged, inviting her to tell him. “It was mostly down to being an artist. She thought if she married him, she’d need to give it up.”

“Well, having seen her art, I’m not surprised. Bit risqué,” her father said, mildly.

“Yes, original, isn’t it? She had been studying painting in secret. Slipping away at night to a studio.”

This was news to her father. “Clever of her to manage that.”

“She had an accomplice.”

He waited for Grace to say more, but she only looked at him. Until he realized what she meant. “Ah,” he said, with a shake of the head, as if to say, you do manage to get yourself mixed up in things. “Well, you’ve always been a loyal friend. Though it must be said, you did take a risk for her.”

“Yes. Because I knew Arabella would wilt and die if she wasn’t able to follow her heart.”

Her father blew out a conflicted breath. “Grace ... there are things I can do for you. What I can, I do with delight. But allowing you to end your engagement, while you carry the man’s—”

“I am not asking for that. I will not ask it.”

“It sounds as though you’re threatening to run away.”

“Well. I do think I could pull it off.” She patted his hand, to reassure him she would not. “But doing something so rash would affect others.” It would harm the prospects

of her sisters, she knew, if she caused a scandal of that magnitude. “No. I shall be married, soon as we can manage it.”

“Good,” he said, and picked up a few books. He gazed at their spines, then set them back down, one by one. He was obviously wrestling with a thought.

Finally, he turned to her, concern on his face. “Now explain why you do not wish to marry St. George. You have me worried he’s some sort of menace.”

She felt a surge of affection for her father. “Oh, don’t worry yourself. He’s a gentleman. Well,” she amended dryly, “more or less. I mean to say ... he is not a worrisome sort. It is only that he is ... not quite my sort.”

Her father nodded. “I had that thought, when he came to ask for your hand. We spoke at length, he and I.” He gave her a look of real sadness, then. “My daughters deserve titles. And to live in the style to which I’ve made them accustomed. And , they deserve a man who is a match.”

“Well.” She could not put a positive spin on St. George’s limitations. But hearing her father speak this way did give her hope that he would not balk at what she was about to ask. “You’ve brought us to the reason for this conversation. I need you to help me engage in subterfuge.”

“I see. Are we to become highwaymen together, at last?”

She smiled, but her answer quickly diffused all the mirth. “He wants me to stop writing to the mathematicians. They are men and it is not becoming.”

Her father clearly did not expect this turn. “That seems an overreaction. I shall speak with him—”

“He thinks you mad for allowing it, so I do not imagine it a good use of breath. He is, perhaps, old-fashioned . Certainly, he has strong feelings regarding a wife—how she ought to be, in every area of life.” Grace had tried to keep the summation general, but she could see that her father got the gist. He seemed to take it seriously; he’d gone pensive.

“What I would like to suggest,” she said, brighter, “is that you correspond on my behalf, and send me the content of their letters inside your own. I know it will be very annoying to wade through it all, but I cannot do without it, Papa. I don’t mean to sound dramatic. I simply won’t ... feel myself. So I must ask you to allow me to be in your debt.”

For a long moment, he said nothing. He seemed to be weighing several possibilities.

But then he smiled and told her that of course, he would send the letters on in his own hand. “I’ll resist solving the maths for you,” he joked. They both knew it was beyond him.

He seemed to want to say more. But instead, he waved at the sea of books. “I must be a sentimental man. I cannot part with any of these. I shall build new shelves.”

“I approve,” Grace said. “Thank you for understanding, Papa. I am lucky to have you.”

He gave her an odd look, then. “You came back from Bexley so calm.”

“Oh, I’m sure it will pass.” She leaned in to kiss her father’s cheek before leaving.

His eyes narrowed. “You’re quite warm. Go to bed. I’ll have something sent up.”

She assured him she felt fine, thanked him again, and exited.

It wasn't until she started up the staircase that she realized she did feel genuinely wretched. She sent an ironic thank you in St. George's direction for indisposing her so unpleasantly, and headed to her rooms.

Grace had offered no resistance to a quick wedding, but her body seemed to have its own stance. By evening, she was too weak to lift her head as she violently retched into a pan on the floor. The edges of her vision sparkled; her ears rang. Her fever climbed so high that a doctor was called.

When the doctor arrived, he was wearing a sailor's cap, robe and sandals, and that is how she realized she was quite floridly hallucinating.

The fever pressed her into the bed, unable to move, as the ceiling above her gave way to the night sky, vibrating with stars. She heard Luke beside her on the bed, murmuring names of constellations, too softly for her to make out. She wanted to turn to him, but she couldn't.

And then, the black swallowed her.

Grace's fever broke late the following day. She felt thirsty and groggy but managed to sit up. Her mother sat by the bed, mug of broth at the ready. The slight, auburn-and-silver-haired woman was brisk as she tended to Grace—when was her mother not brisk?—but obviously relieved.

“Did you go dancing in the ice-cold rain at Bexley's?” Mrs. Chetwood asked, tart. She wasn't all that different from her sister Amelia, when it came to judging Grace's silliness. “You managed to make yourself exceedingly unwell.”

Grace took the mug. The salty broth hit her tongue and she gulped it down hungrily, to her mother's reserved approval. “There was pressure to get it done,” Grace admitted, clearing her cracked throat. “I did not sleep or eat quite properly.”

“You did not think to take very good care of yourself, as you were increasing?”

Grace was not thinking of much beyond the cipher and Luke Ashburton, but she would not say that. “I apologize for worrying you, Mama.”

Her mother nodded. She said nothing. It took Grace a moment to realize what the expression on her face was.

She was angry.

“I had a conversation with your father,” she finally said. “He was distressed about your wedding. He seems to believe you will be miserable.”

“I won’t be,” Grace said quickly. “And I’m feeling better. I think we could still have a wedding this week.”

“Lovely,” her mother said, unsmiling. “I wonder if you’ve noticed that your monthlies arrived last night, while you were feverish.”

Grace was stunned. She looked down, and realized her night rail and the linens had all been changed while she was sleeping.

“Your father feels the situation is different, with no child.” Her mother sighed. “I am not convinced. St. George compromised you. It is his duty. If you were to sever the engagement, harm to your reputation and future prospects would be unavoidable. And to be frank, it all rather confuses me, as only weeks ago you were speaking giddily of the man. You wished to marry him, and the two of you were quickly headed in that direction.”

“We were.”

“What changed?”

“I got to know him better.”

Mrs. Chetwood contemplated her daughter. Then sighed a bone-weary sigh. “Have I ever mentioned that I very nearly married a duke?”

Grace felt her brows shoot up in surprise.

“Charming as a summer’s day, drowning in money—not terribly unlike St. George. My friends were murderously envious.” She allowed herself a small smile. “And then I met your father. No title, no name, only beginning in business, living with his grandparents. And yet.”

“I did not know,” Grace said.

“I have never regretted it. My mother, however, regretted it until the day she died. She never forgave me.” She fixed Grace with a look that held both disappointment and understanding. “But we cannot always please our mothers.”

“No. Try as we might.”

“Was there another man, Grace?”

Grace coughed in surprise.

Her mother awaited a response, mouth a horizontal line.

Grace considered hedging her answer. But found she could not abide the idea of lying about the best and worst thing that had ever happened to her. “Yes, there was.”

“Oh good lord ,” her mother blurted. But then, she took a breath, and continued with less judgment in her tone. “Is his name Luke?”

Grace felt herself color. “Yes. How did—”

“You spoke when you were feverish. At Bexley?” Grace nodded. “And who is Ashburton?”

“Ashburton is ... Luke.”

“They are one person ?” Unexpectedly, her mother laughed aloud. “The one you told to go directly to the devil is the same man you told you would always love?”

Grace slid down into the covers. “Oh, God.”

“When on earth did you find time to break a cipher?” Her mother’s expression shifted rapidly between amusement and consternation. “So, what is he, this Ashburton?” she asked. “Is he a street sweeper? Barkeep? Stable hand?”

“He is a scientist. You’ve probably read his book about moths.”

Her mother thought for a moment. And then her eyes abruptly lit. “Luke Ashburton— On Winged Species ?” Grace nodded. Her mother looked taken aback. “I did read it. It was beautiful.” She slanted a thoughtful look to Grace. “Now, that is an unusually intelligent man.”

“Indeed.”

“Isn’t his father some sort of—”

“Baron, yes.”

“First son?”

“Third.”

“Still. Far better than terminating your engagement and simply thrusting you back into society—the ton would eat you alive—so we ought to discuss—”

“Luke Ashburton is betrothed to another woman.”

Grace’s mother did not tend toward large outward reactions, so Grace knew she’d reached her limit when she heavily sat back into the chair, staring at her daughter.

The silence stretched.

Grace finally broke it. “I would nonetheless like to sever my engagement to St. George.”

“Is there a third man? Someone available?” Her mother asked, only partly joking.

“There is no one. Nevertheless, I would like to do it, and face whatever consequences come.” Her mother said nothing. Grace added, quieter, “If I’m honest, I’m less disturbed by those than I am by disappointing you. I know it is not what you wish for me.”

That seemed to frustrate her mother. “I did not think it was what you wished for yourself —”

“I’ve changed,” Grace said. And because her mother’s face betrayed oceans of disappointment, she added, “I’m sorry.”

“As am I. I have spent your lifetime sorry, Grace.” The words were harsh, but her

mother's tone was loving. "Sorry that you are so spirited and curious and odd. One wants to protect one's children. I cannot, with you. I rarely could when you were small, and now ... hopeless. You are not built for a conventional life. I find it excruciating. Any mother would."

"If nothing else," Grace said, gently, "we could apply logic. if I am built for the unconventional, might it not follow that I shall be happy in it?"

"It might follow. It might not. One may hope." Her mother rose, brisk. The conversation had, as far as she was concerned, run its frustrating course.

Then, the woman hesitated. All at once, her expression was tender. "The way you were speaking to him, in your fever ... I am sorry it cannot be."

Grace expected for tears to well up and spill. But the sadness was deeper, more still. A permanent crack in her bedrock.

Her mother left to go speak with her father.

June 27, 1822

The Earl of Bexley was delighted by the idea of Grace returning. We would be honored to play host for as long as you might allow it. She accepted the invitation to stay for a month. But in her mind, the campaign to render herself so necessary that they asked her to stay another would begin immediately, and she would keep it up through Christmas. She had offered to help at the museum—the earl was seeking full-time two assistants, and she'd joked that surely, she could do the job of one and a half.

He was also on the hunt for an entomologist to fill the position of curator. Evidently, he'd offered the job to Luke, who was sorry to turn it down but busy organizing an expedition to the Americas. She was happy for Luke. She could not quite be happy for Cora Worthing. Best to move on to other thoughts.

Among them: Philip Denton had returned to London, to attend a lecture at The Royal Institution on Albemarle Street, at which one of Charlie's final papers would be presented. He sent a note to Grace asking if she would like to accompany him. And so, Grace was making her first public foray as a disgraced woman.

Grace's parents had met with St. George's, and all had agreed that the end of the engagement would be framed as amicably mutual, so that neither party would suffer a smudge. They had agreed to coordinate a first appearance at a public event, so that all the ton could witness their friendliness and see that there was naught to pick apart with gossip.

But two nights ago, St. George disregarded their agreement by showing up alone to a

ball at Dawnridge—a detail Grace found somehow ironic—where he danced repeatedly with a poised, slender, evidently smitten blonde from an influential family. That would have been plenty, if his goal was to frame Grace as the rejected party. But St. George proceeded to allow endless questioning regarding his aborted betrothal, responding with vague but loaded statements such as, “unfortunately, I had to do it.” He refrained from correcting even the most pejorative rumors about Grace’s temperament, fidelity, state of mind. By morning, her name was in shreds.

Grace’s mother was furious to be proven right. And Grace felt a sharp sense of embarrassment at being spoken ill of with such voracious enthusiasm. She’d never imagined she’d end up disgraced, much less on the shelf. She did not like either term.

But she was determined to proceed into her future, whatever it might be, with curiosity.

She did not wish to be courted, anyway. Except by one man, who was not a possibility. And so she wished to be alone, and to feel everything simply and clearly.

Charlie would have understood.

Though she’d be cut to ribbons if she showed up at a ton event, Grace saw no reason not to attend a mid-afternoon scientific symposium. St. George would never in a hundred years be in attendance. Philip would rescue her from any conversation that threatened to poke at her defenses. And he had even been thoughtful enough to mention that their mutual friend Mr. Ashburton was at Oxford and would not attend.

The day was hot and bright. Philip met Grace an hour early, at the park across from the lecture hall. They strolled for a few minutes, then sat on a bench under a tree, away from the crowds. Occasionally, wind would steal a man’s hat, and they’d enjoy watching him scramble after it.

Grace had, in her note to Philip, revealed in confidence the end of her engagement. Now, he asked her how she was feeling. “Relieved,” she said, handling the ice he’d purchased her from a vendor’s cart as delicately as she could—she’d worn all shades of cream and rose, and would hate to get a spot. “But not as relieved as St. George. If you’d seen the look on his face when I set him free. He all but danced a reel.”

Philip laughed, and declared it good riddance. Then, asked about her plans. She spoke of working on more ambitious mathematics, of helping at the museum. He looked proud of her.

Philip, in turn, assured Grace that his health was holding and his spirits were, by and large, high. “I find I do best when I have a little scheme,” he told her.

“Ah. And what are you concocting at present?”

“After the lecture, I shall let you in on it,” he promised.

From there, the conversation glided to more frivolous subjects. And then, they eased into a companionable silence that stretched for several long, lovely minutes.

“How fares your heart?” Grace finally asked, gently.

“Oh, it’s in pieces,” Philip said, offhanded. “Bound together with twine. But I’m used to it. It’s even comforting. The pain is sort of ... him, still with me. And your heart?” he asked. “How has it fared?”

“What’s that myth, the man on the rock, and each day a bird comes and devours his liver?”

“Oh, is that actually a parable about how it feels to fall tragically in love with Luke Ashburton? I’d always suspected.”

Grace laughed. “Do you know what I find helps with the sadness of it?”

“Taking all sorts of other handsome men into your bed?”

“Oh, exactly that. Heaps of men, all quite nude and erect.”

She was rewarded with a guffaw from Philip. Then, she gave a more serious answer. “I find it calms me to know that he is doing what he is meant to. My feelings do all sorts of things over the course of a day, but wanting him to pursue his vocation—that, I have discovered, is constant.”

“You’ve a generous spirit,” he murmured, and turned to watch people strolling in the park. “I’m more ambivalent, as I strongly wish for you to have what you want, as well. Ah,” he said. “Speak of the curly-haired devil.”

He’d said it so casually, it took a moment for Grace to realize what he meant.

She turned in the direction of his gaze. And there was Luke.

He was dressed for the lecture, in a gray jacket and waistcoat that highlighted his rangy figure. He was carrying a dark gray hat, perhaps because the breeze had tried to steal it from his head. He was looking around, scanning the park, as the wind argued with his hair.

And then he spotted them. He did not quite manage to suppress the jolt that moved through him when he saw Grace. But he composed himself quickly, and walked toward them.

Philip rose, greeted Luke warmly. And then, it was time for Luke and Grace to say hello, and so he turned to her, and their eyes met, and a universe passed between them, and it was clear that he would not be able to speak, and neither would she.

But then, somehow, he was saying good day, and she was saying the same to him, and he was calling her Miss Chetwood, and complimenting her bonnet, and she was calling him Mr. Ashburton, and making a quip about how unusual it was to see him dressed in gray, and he was smiling as though they were having an ordinary conversation in a park in London in the afternoon.

Philip cleared his throat. "If you'll excuse me, I must go."

Grace looked to him sharply. "Where are you going?"

"Oh, somewhere. Please don't make me come up with a whole epic tale." And with that, Philip walked away.

Leaving Grace sitting on the bench, staring up at Luke Ashburton.

"Do sit," it finally occurred to her to say. She set down her melting ice.

He hesitated, then sat on the bench.

"Were you aware I'd be here?" she asked. Luke nodded. "Ah. You have the advantage, then."

Luke's brow raised. "Denton didn't tell you?"

"He is a self-confessed schemer. But I must admit I'm not sure why he'd want to do this."

"He mentioned that you had ... happy news. But it was not his place to share it."

Oh. Grace felt it was all too awkward. Luke was betrothed and preparing to climb onto a boat. What did it matter if he knew she had ended it with St. George?

He was watching her struggle with what to say. Finally, he quietly asked, “Would it be appropriate for me to offer you my sincerest congratulations?”

Well, yes, in a manner of speaking—but then she realized what he meant. “Oh. No. I am ... that is, there is no ... ” she felt her cheeks go red. “Child,” she finished.

His brow raised. He continued to take in her evident discomfort with curiosity.

It was too much. She looked to the path, where a governess was dragging a pair of four-year -olds away from the ice cart. “There is no father, either,” she said. “Husband, I mean. There was no wedding. You’ll hear all about it soon enough. I cannot promise the gossip will flatter me.” She flashed him an amused look. “Pity St. George did not know the truth of my behavior in libraries of late—far more shocking than any rumor he’s encouraged.” She gave a laugh, but Luke did not. He was listening with an intensity that made it difficult to look at him.

Because he said nothing, she continued. “I don’t much care what the ton think. I am planning to escape London. When I finally return, I expect no one will remember who I am.”

He said nothing for such a long time that eventually, she was forced to look at him, just to see what had so distracted his attention.

But he was still looking at her.

“I’m afraid you’re wrong,” he said. “I don’t think it’s possible to forget you.”

The way he said it made goosebumps rise on her arms. “Damn my ridiculously loud hair, I suppose,” she said.

“Yes.” His tone was conversational. “Damn your hair. And your eyes. Your mouth.

Skin. Damn every single part of you.”

If her cheeks were warm before, now they were burning. She had no idea what to say, and the energy between them was growing heady, and it was affecting her heart rate.

Thankfully, he turned his attention to the park. “I am glad you did not marry him. He was wrong for you.”

“Oh, without a doubt. And that’s enough chatter about me, don’t you think? When do you travel?”

Half to himself, he muttered, “I understand now why Denton was so pushy.” He cast a look in her direction. “I’d told him I was busy at Oxford, and he all but murdered me by post. I was fixated on the expedition, you see.”

“Of course.” And now, she forced herself to ask. “Will Miss Worthing travel with you?”

Luke fought an odd smile. “No.”

“But you will wed before you depart.”

“Perhaps I will,” he said, and now, he looked perfectly serious, even pensive. “It very much depends on what happens in the next few minutes.”

Grace was lost. “Pardon?”

Luke turned to her. Met her eyes. “Bloody Denton didn’t tell you. Just as he did not tell me about your excellent decision to pitch St. George into a volcano.”

“Tell me ... what?”

“That I haven’t the foggiest of when I may travel. I must raise the funds. I had a patron in Mr. Worthing, but he rescinded his support when I failed to ask his daughter to marry me.”

It took Grace a moment to find her way back to the English language. “Why ... did you not ... ”

“You cannot seriously be asking that question.”

His tone made her skin tingle. But she was still struggling to understand. “But ... you believed I was married. You did not think there was any chance at all of—of us.”

“True. I simply could not do it. Propose to a perfectly lovely woman while thinking day and night of someone else.”

Grace blinked. It felt like parts of her brain were trying to catch up with other parts, and all were impeded by the thunderous pounding of her pulse.

“You know ... ” Now, he sounded amused. “I wondered if I might be addled. If what I took for love was biology, and with distance from you, my head would clear.”

“And ... did it?”

“It did. And I discovered, in my clarity, that I am painfully, thoroughly in love with you.” He watched her face. What he saw there made his voice grow softer. “Do you remember when you told me that you are—I think the words were— too much? I never agreed, but once I was apart from you, it became hideously obvious that everyone else was too little. I’ve never been lonelier in my life.” The rawness in his voice made her breath hitch in her chest. He saw it. His voice grew even quieter. “Marrying anyone else would have felt like sacrilege.”

“But—” Her head was rather spinning. “Your work—”

“I’m hardly the first man facing the task of scraping together an expedition from scratch. It may take time, but I will find another way.”

“I fear it will require you to speak to a good many people you find dull and stupid.”

He shrugged. “For science, I’ll do it.”

A feeling was coming over Grace, very slowly, like honey pouring into her. “If I may offer a thought?” He raised a brow. “Your odds of success might improve if you enlisted the help of someone who smiled, and enjoyed all sorts of people, and happened to be shockingly good with numbers.”

A tender look crossed his face. But then, he fixed her with a more reserved, thoughtful expression. “We ought to speak frankly.”

“Have we not been?”

“You were raised in luxury.”

“Are you calling me spoiled yet again?”

“I am saying that your frock closet must be larger than my flat.”

“Possibly,” Grace agreed. “I would need to downsize my collection.”

He did not match her levity. “I am saying ... I cannot give you everything you deserve.”

“Yes, you can.” He was ready to disagree. So she said it again. Emphasizing each

word. “Luke? Yes. You can .” His expression remained dubious, but she thought she discerned something surfacing in his eyes. Hope. “I do enjoy a great many things, including visits to my modiste. But then there are those few things that I care about. That I love, and do not wish to do without. Frippery and cavernous rooms don’t rise to the list.”

“What does?”

“My family. My mother found out about you, by the way. Oh, it’s a story,” she said in response to his surprised look. “Suffice to say you have her very grudging approval.”

“My favorite sort.” His face had gone deeply thoughtful. “That’s all? Your family?”

“And my dear friends. Mathematics, obviously. Good books. Stimulating conversation. You.” Her voice cracked, but she continued. “You left a hole I’m aware of all the time.” He seemed unable to respond. She saw that it had touched something, deep in him. “Also, is it mad of me to say that living in close quarters with you does not precisely sound like a punishment?”

He gave a sharp laugh. “Yes, it’s mad. You forget how frequently we spar.”

She shrugged. “You remarked more than once that you like it. Perhaps I like it, too.”

The way she said it sounded like a challenge. It hung in the air. A moment unfurled between them. Neither speaking. Neither looking away. Realizing .

“Me?” he asked, softly. His eyes clear all the way to the bottom.

“Yes. You.”

He took it in slowly, fully. And then, leaned closer. “Here’s what I’m thinking, princess.”

She felt her cheeks flood with heat. He smirked. “Yes?” she managed.

“I am going to kiss you. On this bench. In broad daylight. Before all these people.”

“That would be scandalous,” she said, suddenly breathless.

“Absolutely. And I am going to do it. Now,” he continued, “there are circumstances under which such a kiss would be slightly less apocalyptically ruinous.”

“Such as?”

“If you and I were betrothed to be married.”

“Hmmm,” she said.

“Hmmm?” he repeated, teasing.

“An intriguing notion,” she said. “Is it theoretical?”

“I don’t like to dwell in theory. As you may be aware, I do best in the field.” He cleared his throat. “And so. Miss Chetwood, if I may trouble you with a question ... ” But then, his sardonic smile faded, and, abruptly, he was perfectly serious. “I wonder if you might consider doing me the great honor of ... ” He paused, surprised by a surge of emotion. He swallowed, shook his head, blew out air.

And tried again, simpler. “Will you marry me, Grace?”

“Of course,” she replied. “That went perfectly.”

His face lit with fierce feeling. And it was so ardent and so sweet and so exactly everything she wished for ... that it made her giggle.

She covered her mouth with her hand. But she could not stop. She shook her head helplessly.

Luke leaned forward, moved her hand from her mouth, and replaced it with his lips.

That stopped the laughter.

She kissed him back. Intense, and familiar, and new, and promising everything.

When he broke the kiss, his eyes were hot and restless and impatient. Dimly, Grace was aware that they'd attracted a look or two from passersby. She could not bring herself to care.

"I'd wager Denton won't even save us seats at the lecture," he murmured.

"I feel we ought forgo it, and visit this fabled very small flat of yours."

"Ah," he said. "So that you can assess, and rescind the yes, if necessary?"

"For a more pressing reason." She fixed him with a pointed look. "You've rendered me unforgivably tense. I really must insist you take care of it with all possible haste."

"I see." The look he gave her was pure, hot promise. "Let us see what I can manage."

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Grace Chetwood had done a great many things in her life out of curiosity.

She'd climbed onto the roof of an Irish castle. Swum in the ocean. Allowed herself to be stung by a bee. Had her fortune told by an old woman in a red velvet shawl standing outside a gambling hell. She'd befriended an actress. Stolen a cheroot from her father and smoked it in the stable. Worn a gown in three shades of pink, entirely because Aunt Amelia told her that a girl with red hair should never wear the color. She'd kissed a man—more than one man, because how could one know if a kiss was good without having had another for comparison? When she'd visited Paris to see her friend Arabella, she'd gotten lost on purpose just to see what she would discover.

Tonight, for the sheer curiosity of it, Grace was going to divest herself of her virginity.

Beyond her appetite for knowledge, she also fancied the gentleman who would be obliging her. Lord Randolph St. George, Georgie to his friends, was a handsome, fair-haired future viscount with a small pile of other titles also awaiting him, four and twenty, well dressed, eyes that went from courteous to sly in a blink. Grace suspected he knew his way around a bed.

St. George had brought up the idea at a dinner party the previous evening. They'd managed to slip briefly away from the parlor, where the lady of the house was playing Mozart almost passably, to take the air in the garden, find a patch of shadow, and kiss.

It was their first kiss. It was hurried, but, in Grace's opinion, promising. Granted, the small handful of other kisses she'd experienced were also somewhat hamstrung by their furtiveness, also the products of slipping away during an event for just long enough to allow herself to be very slightly ravished.

St. George's mouth was warm and soft, and smiled against hers. But then they heard other party guests coming, and broke apart.

"A pity," she'd murmured, on a giggle. She had wanted a longer kiss. She was given to understand tongues were involved in certain types of kissing, and she could not decide if that would be disgusting or delicious.

"Come to me tomorrow night, Miss Chetwood," he'd whispered in her ear. "And I will kiss you senseless."

"I could not possibly," she said, her tone a light scold, as they walked back to the house.

"You could if I sent a carriage to the back of your father's property, and you slipped away to my home, where I shall be quite, quite alone."

He shrugged, as though he'd only presented the idea as a lark. But there was a heat in his eyes, and his voice dipped low when he continued. "I think of little else but you, Miss Chetwood. I have a great deal of curiosity about you that I would very much like the chance to satisfy for myself."

She liked that he'd used that word. Curiosity. She too was curious.

"He will offer for your hand by the end of the month," Grace's friend Clara Abernathy had told her. "He is smitten. You will be a viscountess, Grace." Clara was a serious person, reluctant to get caught up in frivolity. So Grace considered her opinion unusually sound.

Once they were married, intercourse would be a matter of, well, course.

What harm in beginning the fun just a tiny bit early?

And — if such a large part of marriage hinged upon two people's ability to join and make offspring, should they not give it a quick test, to be sure they were fully compatible?

Grace enjoyed gossip so much that most people didn't realize that she was also very, very good at keeping secrets.

She liked the idea of this secret.

She agreed to meet St. George the following night.

*

Grace had read about coitus in medical textbooks in her father's library, where she had also located a book of bawdy drawings that gestured toward the wide variety of moods and positions one might experience. Penises, it seemed, could go not just in a woman's sex but also her mouth, and there seemed some upside for the man in a woman grasping his length firmly in hand. Men, for their part, kissed a woman all sorts of places, and when they got it right, her eyes rolled, she tipped her head back and cried out to the heavens.

Grace looked forward to that part. The part where he sent her into an aria of bliss. She'd given herself pleasure in the bathtub, but that seemed perfunctory in comparison to the fireworks a man might provide. Or why would men and women go to such lengths to be together?

He met her carriage in the dark, in front of his family's large manor home, and slipped her past a sleeping footman to his father's library, mumbling something about

the creaky stairs up to his bedroom.

The library was big, cold, and smelled of old tobacco. He pulled pillows off the chairs and arranged them on the rug. Then invited her to come sit beside him. He kissed her, and immediately started work on the buttons of her gown. Though they now had all the time they could want, St. George nevertheless seemed to be in quite a hurry.

And here, the giddy bubble in Grace's chest began to deflate.

He seemed to have a checklist in his head. He wished to see her breasts, bare. He wished to hold them in his hands, and he wished to pinch each nipple. He did not look to her face during these procedures. It did not seem to occur to him to see what the result of touching her nipple might be, or what might happen if he continued to touch the nipple, with, say, variation in pressure. He did it to have done it, and then he moved to the next item on the list.

The addition of tongues to kissing was not unpleasant, but it did not rouse her. It felt a bit like brushing up against someone while swimming in a lake. Friendly, but not something that took one closer to heaven.

He was breathing hard, and saying poetic things to her, about her beauty, her desirability, the way her body had enslaved his imagination. "You were made for me," he said at one point, stripping off her stockings, and that did give her a little shiver up her spine. To think of perfect compatibility between two people, a fit like two halves making a whole.

But was she made for him? He trailed a hand up her leg, to find her sex, then withdrew the hand to spit on it and lave the moisture over her. He seemed to believe this a supremely chivalrous act. Grace had by this point lost the narrative thread. She felt more baffled than aroused.

And then his hips were between her legs, prodding her with his thin, hard penis, and

it was only as he added another swipe of spittle to the proceedings that it occurred to her that she might request that he slow down, or, even better, stop.

Just as she had the thought, he shoved inside her with an impassioned grunt. It pinched.

He was saying something romantic, and his voice was unsteady, and she found she could not pay attention. She was so distracted by the wave of disappointment that crashed through her as he began to move.

Good God. Was this it? She was certain that once the novelty ebbed, this activity would be boring. Why had her married friends told her it was special? Was it all a conspiracy to make her feel like a fool?

“St. George,” she said, and he didn’t hear her over his own groans. “Georgie,” she said, louder, and he slowed.

“My plump little angel,” he said huskily.

Now, she eased out from under him. She simply needed a short moment to herself. To adjust, to discuss this endeavor and see if they couldn’t make it a bit . . . what was another word for “better” that was less likely to hurt a man’s feelings?

“You can’t stop in the middle like that,” he panted. “Come here, darling.” And he crawled to her, kissing his way from her neck to her mouth.

She did like that, the feeling of lips feathering over her collarbone, up her throat. “More of that, please,” she said, and she felt very glad indeed to have found something to work with.

But she’d found it too late, because at that moment, the door of the library swung open.