



Diamond in the Rough (The Carmichael Saga #1)

Author: *Christi Caldwell*

Category: Historical

Description: Lady Diamond Glain Carmichael, paragon of propriety, is horrified when she discovers her headstrong younger sister at the Royal Colonnade Library reading books that would enrage their ducal father. Worse, this disaster-in-the-making has been abetted by an outspoken, opinionated librarian named Mr. Abaddon Grimoire.

Abaddon clawed his way free of a life of poverty and crime thanks to the refuge he found at the Royal Colonnade Library, and hes determined to help other people find their escapes as well—in the pages of the librarys books! He issues Glain a challenge: Spend a fortnight exploring the volumes on the librarys shelves; if after two weeks, she still wants to prevent her sister from visiting, he wont interfere.

Abaddon soon realizes that beneath Glains icy veneer beats the heart of a loyal, loving, and passionate woman, and Glain comes to see that Abaddons devotion to books is a respect for truth and learning. A former guttersnipe and a dukes daughter arent the stuff of matches made in Mayfair, but perhaps happily ever afters arent just for fairy tales!

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In a world where women were largely powerless, one might expect the daughter of a duke and goddaughter of the King and Queen of England had some power. At the very least, power over her own life.

The world, however, would be wrong. As the Duke of Devonshire's daughter, Lady Diamond Glain Carmichael knew that very well. From the subjects taught by her governesses. The pastimes she must learn and adopt as hers. The food she ate. Even the books she read. Certain topics and studies and authors were deemed appropriate.

Most were not.

Glain had learned early on and long ago the expectations had for her. The Duke of Devonshire and the long line of stern, soulless governesses he'd employed had drummed into Glain, precisely what fate and future awaited her as a duke's daughter, and also the way he, along with Polite Society expected her to behave.

Unfortunately, her younger sister, Opal, had proven a far less apt study.

Seated upon the striped Hepplewhite sofa that overlooked the quiet London streets below, Glain added another diamond stitch to her whitework embroidery. The winter season brought with it a welcome peace. This time of year, when the ton retreated to

their country estates, always brought a reprieve from the inanity of it all.

Or, at least it usually did.

“You are being ridiculous,” Opal whispered, stomping her foot in a noiseless way upon the rose-pastel carpet.

That attempt at silence proved Opal may have gathered more than Glain had credited.

It didn’t change anything.

“No,” Glain said calmly, threading the tip of her needle through the monochrome background in her frame. She paused to assess her needlework, angling the fine muslin. “I am being rational. That is entirely different and eminently better.”

“I shan’t ever become you, Glain. Never, ever.” With every reiteration of that word, her sister stamped her foot for emphasis. “ Ever !”

Alas, her sister would. At fourteen, however, she’d just not realized it.

Unlike Glain whose earliest remembrances were as a small child when her father had entered the nursery and discovered her writing her own fairytale stories upon the empty pages her kindly governess had provided.

The duke had stormed the room, grabbed the sheets, and into the hearth they’d gone.

The governess whom she’d loved, a woman who’d encouraged Glain, even at that young age, to think bigger, to dream of more, had been sacked, only to be replaced by a new sterner, colder, pinch-mouthed woman, who’d been unafraid to wield a switch to Glain’s knuckles when she’d deemed Glain’s work inappropriate.

Eventually her sister who loved both art and books with the same intensity Glain once had, would realize the limitations placed upon them both. Opal had simply managed to escape the certainty of her future until now.

She'd discover what Glain had, and what all women ultimately did—their voices weren't their own. Neither were their interests and passions. In the end, first their fathers, and then their husbands dictated who a woman must be.

To resist was futile.

A small hand waggled before Glain's face, and Glain went briefly cross-eyed as she concentrated on those paint-stained fingers.

"Hullo? You're not even listening to me. Have you heard any of what I said?"

"On the contrary." Glain angled her frame and resumed her sewing. "I've heard everything . It's why I'm now ignoring—"

Opal yanked the wood frame from her sister's fingers, hid it behind her own back, and glared. "I don't know why you always insisted on being called Glain. Diamond suits you far better. They're cold and icy. You are incapable of feeling anything."

It was because of their mother. Her mother had been the one who'd chosen the name Glain...the duke had insisted his daughter be a 'Diamond' in every way. As such, Opal's charge struck in a place deep within her heart, the pain making a liar of her sister.

"I am capable of making safe decisions," she said calmly, keeping her features perfectly even.

"Safe," Opal's face pulled. "Bah, how dull and how very boring."

“Dull and boring essentially mean the same.”

“It is a circulating library,” Opal entreated. “A circulating library. Why can’t I go?”

“Because there is no board of directors who oversee the type of books offered. The library is largely sponsored by the Duke of Strathearn.” A duke whose reputation preceded him.

“Well, if a duke is a sponsor, that should be good enough for Father.”

One would think .

“It would be, if the establishment was more selective in who it allows memberships to.”

Her sister stared confusedly back. “And who is that?”

“Anyone and everyone, regardless of station or...reputation.” Prostitutes. Notorious mistresses. Self-made men.

Opal wrinkled her nose. “That’s snobbish.”

“I don’t disagree, but my opinion doesn’t matter.” In a tyrannical world, no woman’s did.

Fury poured from her sister’s eyes. “I hate him.”

There was an area they could come to a consensus on.

“Opal,” Glain tried again. “You have books here. Ones—”

“Ones hand-picked by father, and boring and dull.”

“Which both still mean the same thing.”

Opal clasped her hands against her small chest, and her eyes took on a faraway, romantic glimmer. “But not all books are the same. These books, Glain, they are...magical.” She whispered that latter word with an awed reverence one might bestow upon a newly discovered land or rare gemstone.

“Magic doesn’t exist, Opal,” Glain spoke gently, but as firmly as she could. She cast a watchful look at the doorway. “And certainly not in the gothic stories you read,” she whispered.

Opal dropped her arms to her side and glared. “They are magnificent, and clever, but of course, you would judge them.”

“Father will. And when he does, gone they go. Spare yourself that hurt. You are better off not indulging in them.”

“Reading is not an indulgence.”

Opal scrambled onto the sofa and went up on her knees next to Glain. She gripped her with desperate hands. “Look at me and tell me there’s nothing that’s ever brought you joy the way my books do! Because I don’t believe it.”

Glain held her sister’s eyes. “Opal, I was years younger than you when I,” learned , “Accepted how my life would proceed. You would do well to remember that pastimes like reading or painting, or whatever it is...they aren’t worth,” Losing loved ones over. “Angering the duke.”

Opal sank back on her haunches. “It is no wonder you find yourself Princesse de

Glace,” she murmured.

Had her sister shouted, glowered, and stomped, it would have been easier than this, quiet acceptance.

Ice Princess.

Yes, the world—Glain’s own sister —believed Glain to be stoical, distant, and so conceited that she, even after two Seasons, hadn’t found a single gentleman in all of England, worthy enough to be her husband.

The world hadn’t so much as an inkling as to how lonely Glain in fact, truly was. Everyone could go rot. She could care less about society’s opinion.

But Opal wasn’t just ‘someone’ or ‘everyone’. The fact Glain’s sister didn’t know the truth? That would never not hurt.

Glain, however, had discovered something altogether more agonizing—having people ripped from her life. Her late mother who’d been banished by their father for daring to encourage Glain’s inquisitiveness and only permitted a handful of visits with her children. The governess who’d been dismissed for daring to encourage Glain’s inquisitiveness.

“Did you hear me?” Opal demanded. “I said you are the Ice Princess. Don’t you even care I’m calling you names?”

“There are certainly worse things than being referred to as a princess, Opal.”

Glain’s was a bald-faced lie. That title cast upon her, whether spoken in the King’s English or French form, stung.

Sadness filled Opal's light-blue eyes. "You are unbearable, Diamond , and I will never, ever , become you."

Somehow the somberness with which the younger girl spoke sent an even greater spiral of hurt through Glain.

She made herself speak. "Never, ever, ever."

Opal cocked her head.

"You forgot one of your 'evers', Opal."

Her sister's eyes bulged.

With a piercing shriek, Opal tossed her arms up.

Secretly relieved by that familiar show of spirit from the younger girl, Glain still managed to keep her features even.

"Opal," she spoke calmly. "There are rules of decorum that we, as the daughters of a duke are required to follow. I have committed myself to being flawless in all the ways ladies are expected to be."

Having delivered that short, but important lecture, Glain gave her sister a firm look. "Now, I'd advise you to heed my advice and quickly, Opal."

"Why?" her sister asked with an unexpected and sudden calm.

In a reversal of roles, Glain tipped her head in an accidental mimicry of her sister's early befuddlement. "I don't...?"

“Why are you so determined to be the flawless lady?”

It was a question never before put to her. Glain found her voice once more. “Because it is the way we are expected to conduct ourselves.”

Fire blazed within her sister’s eyes. “Well, it is a stupid way.”

In Opal’s expressive gaze, Glain saw herself of long, long ago. Back when she’d believed she’d always be as effervescent as her. But then, Glain had been a small child when she’d transformed herself into someone she despised.

Opal, on the other hand? She’d retained hold of her merrymaking ways far longer. Odd Glain should find herself both resenting and envying the girl.

Giving up her seat, Glain joined her sister.

She tried again.

“As I said, you and I must conduct ourselves in a manner that is above reproach, Opal.” She rested a hand on her sister’s shoulder and squeezed lightly, willing her to understand. “You’d be wise to learn that now. Otherwise, you’ll learn what fate awaits those who don’t conform to Father’s expectations.”

“It is only a book,” her sister entreated.

This forlorn side of Opal, one who was so desperate for her books, threatened to wear Glain down.

“You know he’ll not countenance it, Opal.”

The books in question were gothic stories, ones about dangerous men and innocent

ladies and angry ghosts.

“Bah. He’s a curmudgeon. Either way, he barely knows we’re alive.”

That was only true in part. “Barely or not, he knows, and when he finds out—”

“ If,” Opal shot back.

“ When . The duke discovers all. And when he does, he will burn your books and fire your governess, Mrs. Fernsby for daring to encourage your reading such works.”

And she’d not have that for her sister.

Opal’s cheeks went a pale shade of white.

Good .

At last, Glain had managed to penetrate her sister’s pertinacity and seemingly unflagging determination to visit the circulating library.

Mrs. Fernsby genuinely cared about Opal and nurtured the girl’s soul. The sole reason Glain and Opal’s tyrannical father hadn’t removed the woman from her post was because Glain had taken care to shield the governess and her charge from the duke’s scrutiny. She couldn’t protect Opal forever, and eventually His Grace would snatch that slight happiness enjoyed by his youngest daughter.

Opal found her voice. “If he burns my books, Glain, then at least I’ll have had the joy of reading them and will carry the memories of what I read for all of time.”

With that, her sister did something Glain never recalled the younger girl doing—she turned ever so quietly and made a slow, silent march from the parlor. She closed the

door not with a bang, but a small, nearly indecipherable click.

As specks of ice lightly pinged against the frosted windows, Glain stared after Opal a long moment, wavering between calling her back or running after her.

In the end, she shook her head and picked up her embroidery.

Nothing she said would make her sister happy. Nothing Glain shared would undo the unwanted truths about their circumstances—both as ladies, and more specifically as the Duke of Devonshire's daughters.

As she worked, however, guilt and regret all swirled in her breast. Guilt that she'd been the bearer of bad truths for her younger, still hopeful, sister. Regret that their father—that the world, on the whole—was not a better, more tolerant place for women. And frustration...there was that, too.

Restless, her embroidery in hand, Glain pushed to her feet and headed over to the floor-to-ceiling length windows covered with a light frost.

She pressed one of her palms against the chilled glass, warming it enough so that she wiped away the residual of ice there. She pressed her forehead against the slight view she'd provided herself of the quiet Mayfair streets below.

Glain knew when her sister looked at her, what she saw and believed. And not only because Opal didn't spare anything when it came to telling Glain precisely what she thought of her.

Her sister hadn't discovered the truths yet. But she would.

In a world where men were free to be whom they wished to be, traveling the Continent or world if they so wished, or studying the subjects they wanted—or as this

case would have it—even reading the books they wanted, women of their station found themselves relegated to the role of ornamental objects, voiceless. Powerless .

“You want to go play?”

Glain gasped, and whipped around, finding her other beloved, troublesome, sibling.

Her twelve-year-old brother, Flint, stared hopefully at her.

At Glain’s silence, he joined her, walking with measured steps better suited to a grown man.

Whereas the duke largely ignored his daughters, his son received all his attentions and energies. And for all the ways in which Glain lamented the unfairness that came in being born a female in a man’s world, she also found herself pitying Flint for the pressure and attention the duke gave him—no, suffocated him with.

“Do you?” her brother pressed. “Want to play? You’re looking out the window the way I do when I’m in the middle of my lessons.” He gestured to the lead panes behind her. “I wanted to play with Opal.”

Glain lightly ruffled the top of his blond curls. “And any sister will do?”

“Yes,” he said with all the honesty only a child was capable of. He swatted her hand.

“No,” she said. “I,” can’t , “don’t want to play. I was just...” thinking of how life was and regretting so much of it “...watching the snow fall.” She settled for that easier, simpler answer. “Are you and Opal quarreling?”

Her brother shook his head and similar to the way Glain had moments ago, he cleared himself a spot upon the frosted glass and pressed his nose against the pane. “I can’t

find her.”

“Opal is upset,” she explained.

“Why?”

Guilt reared its head once more. “She wanted to go somewhere, and I thought it better we not.”

“The circulating library?”

She bit the inside of her cheek. Even her brother knew that. Which meant it was only a matter of time before the duke did.

Flint puffed out his small chest. “When I’m duke, I won’t care what books my sisters read. I’ll let them buy whatever ones they want, and they shall read them whenever and wherever they wish. Why, if you want to read one of those gory books Opal loves in the middle of Sunday sermons, I shan’t say a thing. Why...why... I’ll see them installed in the pews in place of the boring missals there.”

So much love for him filled her breast. Glain settled her hands upon Flint’s shoulders and gave him a light squeeze. “You are a wonderful brother and will make the best duke,” she said softly. “But until that day, His Grace expects us to conduct ourselves in a manner befitting a nobleman’s children.”

Not unlike Opal of a short while ago, fire lit his eyes. “That’s another thing. When I’m duke, I’m not going to require anyone call me His Grace or duke. Not the way he does. I’m going to order everyone to call me Flint.”

A small smile twitched at the corners of her lips. “What if you don’t order anyone about, and instead, allow them to call you by your given name?”

He scrunched up his heavily freckled nose, a product of his love for the summer sun that left him with those long-lasting remnants through the subsequent seasons. “Very well. I shall invite them to call me Flint. The staff and my friends and everyone. But if they call me His Grace, I shan’t like it.”

Suddenly the boy’s eyes brightened, and his entire face lit up. “Ooh! It is snowing,” he exclaimed, scrambling closer to the window so he could stare out, and shifting the topic as only a child could.

While Flint stared wide-eyed out the window, Glain made no attempt to hide a sad smile.

Alas, her brother would inevitably change. He’d develop a similar expectation of how he’d be treated, and how others referred to him. It was only a matter of time. Right now, the duke ceded nearly all control of Flint’s schooling and life to the tutors whom he’d personally interviewed. But that wouldn’t be forever. One day soon, he’d take Flint under his wing completely, so that he might shape him in his image.

Her brother yanked on her hand. “Why do you look sad of a sudden?” he asked worriedly, sounding very much like the boy who’d gotten into the inkwells in their father’s office, painted the walls with that same ink, only to find Glain and the tutor he’d escaped from upon him. “You can’t be sad. Look!” He lifted his small, slender arms in a way that framed the tiny flakes falling rapidly outside. “It is snow .”

“I’m not sad,” she promised, lying. “I was merely thinking.”

“Thinking about sad things.”

Even at his tender age, he proved entirely too astute, and far more in tune with her or her sister’s feelings than the man who’d sired them.

Leaning down, she placed a kiss on her youngest sibling's smooth cheek.

Flint instantly blushed a bright red. "Go on now," he muttered.

Frantic footfalls echoed from out in the corridor.

Just like that, all the color leached from his freckled face.

Warning bells went off. "Flint, what have you done?" she demanded on a whisper as the steps drew nearer.

"I...may not have finished my lessons completely," he muttered grudgingly, scuffing the tip of his buckled shoe along the floor.

She briefly closed her eyes, and instantly springing into action, she gripped her brother by the shoulders and steered him down behind the sofa just as a light knock fell on the door.

"Enter," she called out in the crisp, aloof tones she'd become well-noted for amongst both Polite Society and the duke's household.

The panel instantly opened, and a small, wiry fellow with wire-rimmed spectacles and a prematurely balding pate stepped inside.

His small mouth was pinched like he'd been born sucking upon a lemon and hadn't stopped in the thirty and however many so years he'd been on this earth. "I am looking for his lordship," Mr. Crowley said in a no-nonsense tone, one that had become more obsequious and curter the longer his tenure with the duke. "He has escaped his lessons."

"I am afraid he is not here," she said coolly.

The tutor flattened his lips. “This will not do, at all. The boy has responsibilities, and yet his flights of fancy and his flights in general interfere with his edification. I’ve no choice other than to report his latest escapade to the duke.” Spinning on his shiny black, buckled shoes, Mr. Crowley turned to go.

Glain glanced down to where her brother knelt at her feet still. Dread creased Flint’s high, noble brow and glittered in his panicked eyes.

She whipped her gaze up to the entryway.

“I would advise against that,” Glain said in tones steeped in frost and disdain as only she had managed to perfect these years.

The tutor turned back with a frown.

When he spoke, he did so with all the disdainful arrogance afforded him as the duke’s personal hire for his heir. “My lady?”

Well, Glain could do disdainful arrogance with the best of them. “Do you truly believe His Grace will take well to an incompetent tutor who cannot properly watch after the future duke?”

Mr. Crowley blanched.

Glain continued hammering her point. “I assure you, he won’t,” she said warningly. “You will be the one viewed as responsible for the marquess’s show of rebellion, and it will be you, in return, who finds yourself suddenly unemployed.”

The spindly-looking fellow yanked at his elaborately folded white cravat. “Perhaps...His Lordship can enjoy just a small reprieve,” he said, his voice squeaking. “After all, he proved extraordinarily focused and on-task prior to his

es—uh...”

She narrowed her eyes into thin slits. “Break?” she supplied.

“Y-Yes. Th-that. His permitted break. In fact, if I’m being completely honest, I was the one who s-suggested we have a reprieve. Why, he’s likely even now headed back to the schoolrooms.”

At her feet, Flint giggled, and Glain cleared her throat loudly, covering the damning giveaway. “Good day, Mr. Crowley.” With her words, expression, and attitude, she imbued all the ice, befitting the moniker Opal had hurled Glain’s way.

The tutor dropped a deep bow and then, backing out of the room, he drew the door shut behind him. Frantic footfalls, these ones departing, filled the quiet of the room, ultimately fading all together.

“Brava!” her brother cheered entirely too loudly and clapped his hands as he did.

“Shh!” She stole a frantic look at the doorway, more than half-expecting that she and Flint had stepped into one of many traps set by the duke to test his children.

“You did it.” He hopped to his feet. “You kept me safe from mean Mr. Crowley.”

He gazed upon her with far more adoration than she deserved.

“I cannot do that forever,” she said. “Soon, you’ll need to begin conducting yourself in a way the duke will approve of.” And then he’d be forever changed.

Flint’s blue eyes flashed. “He can go han—”

She clamped a hand over his mouth, muffling the remainder of that curse upon the

duke. “Have a care. He can,” and would , “make your life a misery.”

Her brother shrugged. “Donff care,” he said around her palm.

And she believed it. She believed him . Glain closed her eyes once more. Not unlike Opal, Flint still possessed a backbone that hadn’t been broken, but it would be.

“You will care,” she warned. Because ultimately, the duke determined what a person cared about, and used that to bend their will, and shape people into moldable objects he approved of.

Flint shook his head. “No, I—”

The door exploded open.

Her brother dove to the floor.

Her heart racing, Glain looked to the front of the room.

Only it wasn’t an enraged duke there to take Flint away and twist him into his image. Relief filled her breast.

“Sally,” she greeted her maid.

Relief that lasted only as long as her maid’s next words. “She’s gone,” the young woman whispered, her voice breathless and her cheeks flushed, like she’d run a great race.

She puzzled her brow. “Who—”

“Lady Opal,” the maid rasped.

“She is not.” A master at hiding, Opal often took to sneaking about and remaining hidden until she decided it was time to come out. “I’m certain she’s just—”

“One of the stableboys saw her sneaking outside.”

“Then she’s in the stables,” Glain said calmly, with an ease she didn’t feel.

“Already had one of the footmen look there.” Sally twisted the fabric of her immaculate white apron. “She’s gone.”

“Gone,” Glain repeated dumbly. Where would the girl go? And didn’t she know the wrath she risked if the duke suddenly recalled he had another daughter? One at that who was still unyielding and an even greater handful than Glain had ever been.

“I don’t know, my lady,” Sally whispered. “We have to inform His Grace.”

Oh god. No. This would be the thing that crushed Opal. The duke would never tolerate—

“Don’t!” Flint exclaimed. “She is fine.”

Glain and the maid switched their attention to the boy.

He instantly dropped his gaze to the ivory floral Aubusson carpet.

Glain narrowed her eyes. Presently, Flint shuffled back and forth on that handwoven carpet, putting Glain in mind of a penguin she’d once observed on an outing to the Royal Menagerie with her late mother.

“Flint,” she said warningly.

“She is fine,” he repeated.

Glain looked to Sally.

The girl instantly took that signal, dipped a curtsy, and hastily ducked out of the room.

The moment she’d gone, Glain found herself alone with Flint. “Out with it.”

“The circulating library. You wouldn’t go with her, and I wanted to go, but she said I really needed to help provide a distraction.”

She should have expected something was suspicious when he’d sought out her to play with instead of Opal. Glain pressed her palms over her face. “You are going to be the death of me.” Letting her arms drop, she headed for the door.

“Where are we going?” he asked, following close at her heels.

“Where do you think I’m going, Flint?” Not we. “You have your lessons.”

“Well, if you think I’m staying,” he charged, “then I’m going to tell Father.”

“Let’s go.” Glain grated out those two syllables. She didn’t believe for a moment he would, and yet neither was it safer to leave him here alone in possession of that information about their middle sibling.

Her brother flashed a triumphant grin.

If it was the last thing she did, Glain was going to fetch her sister back before the duke discovered her gone and tamped out the younger girl’s fire once and for all.

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He was the unlikeliest librarian.

That was what had been said, anyway, about Mr. Abaddon Grimoire.

Nor were the people who'd said as much been wrong, either.

Born of the roughest streets of East London to a common street whore and sold into a child gang belonging to the notorious William Wilson, Abaddon would never be what a person conjured when they imagined the keeper of a circulating room.

But then, as a young man of fourteen who'd been determined to escape oppression and live free of the influence of men who'd have him murder and steal for their pleasure, he'd also known they would find him if he didn't lose himself the last place those kings of the underworld would look—a circulating library.

As an illiterate boy who neither read nor owned a book, Abaddon's greatest skill had been gladiatorial in nature. He'd been used for fights the way cruel men might a dog or cock. He'd also been clever enough to realize the last place they'd ever look for him, would be among the aisles of musty volumes, filled with inked words none of them could make sense of.

That day Abaddon found shelter in the Chetham's Subscription Library, he'd believed the only value to be found there came from the cover it had provided. He'd spent days, hiding among the shelves.

Until the proprietor, an older fellow with white hair and big spectacles and even bigger cheeks, and without any family, took Abaddon in as his own. He'd taught him

to read and write and understand all that went into overseeing the library. And when he'd died, he'd ensured care of it remained in Abaddon's hands.

But Abaddon had never forgotten what it was to hide.

A person never did fully shake free of the chains that bound them. For a man or woman born in the Dials, those chains were mighty and strong. Even if one was fortunate to escape—as Abaddon had done—the ugly remembrances lived on. The memories were forever there, reminding him of how miserable life had been...and how very easily it could go back to the worst ways.

Yes, Abaddon knew what it was to hide. And why he recognized it so easily in others.

As this particular case would have it, a small someone other, with her voluminous, black, curls tucked under a too-big-for-her-head cap.

The breeches and coarse wool jacket she wore were better suited to a stableboy but were of higher quality to mark her different from someone who'd just escaped the grasp of London's greatest gang leaders.

She wasn't a street thief, either.

Or at least, she'd not made an attempt to stuff any of the small leather volumes she'd been perusing into the leather sack flung over her small shoulder.

If she was a common street thief, she was bloody bad at her line of work.

A thief's first job was to blend in with their surroundings, attract no notice, and be discreet in every movement.

This girl, however, periodically stole long, obvious glances about as if she were searching for someone before returning her focus to the book in her hands.

Unlike Abaddon who'd also hidden behind a book long ago, holding it upside down because he'd not known the damned difference, this child held it the proper way, and close to her nose—as if she were reading, and then recalling she was hiding, before being drawn back to the words on those pages.

From where he stood at the end of her aisle, he folded his arms. “That’s a good one,” he remarked.

The small patron gasped. She lost her grip on the book.

It hit the floor with a quiet thump.

She eyed him nervously. “Sir?”

Abaddon nudged his chin at the small volume beside her feet. “That one.”

She glanced down. “I’ve not read it yet. Have you?”

“Aye. Read most of them, I have.” Strolling over, he dropped to a knee and rescued the book lying indignantly upon its spine. “And I’m not a sir. Just a regular mister. Mr. Grimoire.” He held the book out, and she took it with eager fingers.

Interest sparked her eyes. “Even the horror ones, you’ve read?”

“Especially those.”

“Then your name suits you.” She giggled. “Mr. Grim.”

“Grimoire.”

“I like grim better. I wish I had a gothic-story-type name.”

Not only did he possess a gothic-story-type name, but a dark, dangerous path to go along with it.

“What name do you have?” he asked.

She eyed him warily. “Opal.”

It didn’t escape his notice that she deliberately withheld her last name.

He felt the girl’s gaze on him as he examined the small stack of books she’d sorted into three piles at her feet.

“What have we here?”

“Those are my keeper ones,” she said of the largest pile. “And those are my maybes.” She gestured to the slightly smaller stack of volumes alongside it.

Abaddon looked at the third and also the smallest pile. “The ‘no’ pile?”

She shook her head. “I don’t have any ‘no’s’. I like all books, but some more than others. Just some are at the bottom of my reading list.”

“And you have the space for all these books?”

She hesitated. “No?”

There was the slight uptilt of a question, one that hinted at the lie.

Opal No-Last-Name brightened. “But a person can always find space for books.” She considered her selections for a long while. “I can purchase these from you,” she offered.

Reaching inside her jacket, she withdrew a small lace reticule, made of silver satin and adorned in pearls, it was as fine an item as he’d ever himself stolen during his thieving days.

She wagged that extravagant bag at him. “See, I have the money.” Opal gave her bag a little shake, setting the coins a’jingle.

Her precise tones, that money, and the quality of that article bespoke a child who came from wealth.

He gently pushed the bag back towards her. “If I sold you these books then other readers won’t have the joy of exploring them.”

Opal troubled at her lower lip. “I...I hadn’t thought of that. I forgot for a moment I was in a lending library.” she said, her elfin-like features crestfallen, as she reconsidered the large stacks at their feet. “I was lost amongst all the books.”

“Well, given you can’t read them all at the same moment, seems you don’t have to worry about not taking them all up today.”

“Yes, but what if someone else comes in here,” she asked, frantically, jabbing at the largest of the piles. “What if they want the same books I want, and they don’t return them and then I never get to read them, Mr. Grim?”

“Ah, so that is the reason for that larger pile.”

She nodded. “My you-might-lose-them-and-will-I-ever-be-the-same-if-I-cannot-find-

a-copy-again pile?” Her pixie-like features grew solemn, and she slowly shook her head. “And I honestly cannot say that I will be, be able to find them again, Mr. Grim.”

“We can’t have that.”

“No, we can’t.” She added her consensus to his.

Dropping his hands to his knees, Abaddon leaned forward so he could meet the little girl’s big, blue eyes. “Sometimes, we just have to trust that people are capable of good.”

At the front of the shop, the tinny bell jingled, announcing Abaddon’s latest patrons. The bell had been the first recommendation he’d made when Mr. Baughan took him in, as a way of noting people coming and going.

Abaddon spared a brief glance over his shoulder, before returning his attention to the small girl.

He knew everyone who stepped foot inside this circulating library, along with details about them, where they sat, the manner of books they read, how often they came. “You don’t have a membership,” he remarked.

“No,” Opal fished around the reticule. “But I can. Only...” She stared forlornly at the coins in her hand. “Are you certain you will not sell me the books because...” She paused. “I don’t know if I’ll be allowed to come back,” she finished on a forlorn whisper.

As Opal dropped her sad-eyed stare to the leather volumes on the floor, Abaddon felt tension whip through him.

So, there was someone who had the girl under their thumb. Having been oppressed himself, he easily recognized the look of someone suffering that same fate.

Abaddon continued to observe her. All the while, the latest patrons who'd entered moved through the library: a pair of footfalls, one light, the other lighter. A mother and a child. His time spent in East London had provided him all number of necessary skills to survive, one being the identification of a person's footsteps—how close they were, how heavy they were, and which ones were to be avoided.

When it became apparent Opal didn't intend to volunteer anything more on the people barring her from visiting and reading, he posed the question. "Who is preventing you from—?"

"Opal," a woman cried.

Stiffening Abaddon looked up to find a picturesque beauty striding over.

Nay, gliding. The tall, willowy woman didn't stride—she floated, her graceful movements leant a shimmer to the silver satin cloak.

Gazing at the ethereal vision before him, Abaddon at last understood the ancient Greeks' portrayal of those goddesses as women of height. With the lady's golden curls intricately twisted about her head like a coronet and tucked in place by diamond studded pins, she may as well have been Helen of Troy come to life.

Brushing past him, the woman gripped the younger girl by her shoulders. "Opal," she repeated, more than half-breathless.

With relief? Fear? Both?

A young boy joined the pair of ladies.

Then, as if realizing the girl was in fact, fine, his latest patron stiffened, her enormous hazel eyes, flecked with specks of greens and golds and browns, hardened. “Whatever were you thinking ? You know you were explicitly forbidden from coming here.”

Abaddon tensed.

The lady might be a golden Aphrodite in the flesh, but as she spoke to the girl, the brusque beauty was as cold as the marble statues erected to honor that deity.

There it was, then. Verification of just who had been barring the young girl from visiting the circulating room.

And there could be no doubting the woman before him was anything but a lady. Far too young to be a mother and far too high in the brow to be a governess, she’d some connection to the girl she continued to harangue.

He slid his assessing stare over her slim face, the bold, sharp slashes of her cheekbones. The only hint of softness to the lady was a set of lush, full, red lips. Lips that would make even an honorable man think of sinning.

And he was no honorable man.

Suddenly, the boy, largely forgotten until now at the lady’s shoulder shoved an elbow into her back.

The young woman grunted. “Flint, what—” She followed the boy’s not-at-all discreet gesturing to Abaddon.

The lady’s attention flew his way, and she inched her gaze slowly, ever more slowly up his person. She quickly released Opal’s shoulders and straightened.

Only, no words were immediately forthcoming. Rather, she lowered sinfully long golden lashes and looked him over.

During his life, he'd been reminded at every turn of his standing in the world. But he'd never given a shite what people thought and didn't let some toff or lady shame him. Certainly not the ones who entered his business.

He stared back boldly, unapologetically.

Color flooded the high planes of her cheeks as if she were offended he, a mere mortal, should dare that affront.

She flattened her mouth, turning those lovely lips down at the corners. "Who are you and what are you doing with my sister, sir?"

Ah, the sister, then.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:35 pm

G lain's voice came, somehow, steady.

Under ordinary circumstances that would not be an abnormal feat.

She'd perfected the art of cool, clipped, refined speech. One she'd mastered as a girl then refined as a young woman who'd been declared a Diamond by the queen and suddenly found herself sought after by marriage-minded men.

This, however, was certainly not an ordinary circumstance.

Just as this was not a prim, polished, proper gentleman, the kind she'd become all too adept at repelling.

None of those men had dared stare so baldly, so unapologetically.

And certainly, none of them had looked like him .

At least four or so inches taller than her almost six feet, he was a broad, powerful man, heavily muscled, as if he'd been cut from a swath of stone and then stuffed into mildly respectable black wool garments.

Her gaze crept up to his face. He possessed an iron jaw and a slightly bent, hawkish nose. Hooked as it was, it hinted at a man who'd had the appendage broken—mayhap several times.

Her brother pushed an elbow into her side. "It's rude to stare," he scolded in an outrageously loud whisper that sent the stranger's lips tipping up and heat exploding

to her cheeks.

“Hush,” she mouthed.

Alas, there was to be no mercy this day, for Flint did what he was being groomed by his tutors to do—he dug in, determined to have his words acknowledged. “What? You are, and it’s rude.”

“They always do this,” Opal explained matter-of-factly to their audience of one.

“Ah,” the man murmured, lifting his head in acknowledgement. The queue at the nape of his muscular neck slid over his shoulder.

Glain found her footing with him. “I asked you a question,” she said. Taking a step closer, she gripped her sister lightly by the wrist and pulled her away.

Or attempted to. Opal dug in.

“What are you doing with my sister?” Glain demanded.

“Two,” he said, suddenly, unexpectedly, and she tipped her head in confusion.

He lifted two fingers. “You asked two questions: Who am I and what am I doing with your sister?”

At that less than subtle shade of mockery, Glain drew back. The heat in her cheeks blazed several degrees warmer.

“You have to forgive her,” Opal said. “She’s not used to people challenging her.”

The man flicked a stare up and down her person. “That I can believe.” The look he

gave Glain was one that indicated he found her wanting.

Fury and annoyance tightened in her belly at being called out, and yet at the same time, dismissed.

“I’ll not ask—”

“This is Mr. Grimoire,” Opal interrupted, and it didn’t escape Glain’s notice that her sister did so because Mr . Grimoire had no intention of supplying an answer to either of her questions. “He operates the circulating library.”

Glain recoiled for entirely different reasons. “ You are the librarian?” she asked incredulously.

This six foot-four-inch specimen of heavy muscle and chiseled features? With his coal-black hair, overly long and drawn haphazardly into a que at his nape, he’d more the look of one of those long-ago gladiators she’d read of than a keeper of books.

“Expect somethin’ else, darling?”

His speech contained of roughness to it, slightly over-emphasized enough to make her think he exaggerated the coarse edge.

Did he do so to scare her, shock her, or both? Either way, he did all three of those. But not because of his tone. Rather his blunt speech and the intensity of his gaze left Glain breathlessly aware of him as a man.

No one looked at her the way he did, direct, and without apology. In fact, no one met her eyes with theirs. People went out of their way to dip their stares deferentially when she passed.

She'd long hated it, yearning for someone to just see her. Only to have this man look squarely at her and find herself unnerved to the point of wishing him to move his focus to anything and anyone except her.

"Cats got your tongue, darling?" he drawled.

Her brother and sister giggled.

Glain glared in their direction.

Only Opal attempted to hide that hint of mirth behind her fingers.

As for Mr. Grimoire, he glanced at Glain's siblings and winked.

There was something so gentle and warm in that flutter of his lashes. Something inside grated that he should respond so to her sister, while treating Glain like she was the dung upon his badly scuffed boot.

And here you had your heart all a'flutter for him.

"We are going," she said tersely, grabbing each of her siblings by a hand. "Now."

"Hey," Opal cried out in protest, grinding them to a stop once more. "I'm not finished here."

Glain cast a warning look her sister's way. "You most certainly are," she gritted out.

"You've got a problem with my circulating library?" That low growl better suited a primal beast than a man.

But then, mayhap that was what the unlikeliest of circulating library owners in fact,

was.

“She does,” Opal answered for her.

“Opal,” she bit out.

“She does not like books,” Flint piped in, and at the look Glain shot his way, he lifted his shoulders in a half-shrug. “What? You don’t .”

She felt Mr. Grimoire’s stare upon her once more. “I like books just fine,” she said between her teeth, not sure why she felt the sudden need to defend herself to a man who clearly found her wanting.

“Oh?” he drawled. “Which ones?”

God, he was insolent and audacious and infuriating.

“Respectable ones,” she shot back, glancing pointedly at the stacks of books at the floor between them.

“Boring ones,” Opal added.

Their brother spoke in tones pitched high to mimic a lady. “Ones about manners and peers and how to conduct oneself.”

“And do not forget.” Opal wagged a finger at Flint. “All the skills a lady must master in order to catch herself a husband.” With that, brother and sister stepped into one another’s arms and proceeded to perform the scandalous steps of a waltz all the way down the narrow aisle. As the two imps danced about, they knocked into the piles of books and bumped into shelves.

Glain briefly closed her eyes.

Lord, give me patience.

Drat if she didn't possess two outrageously disloyal siblings.

She caught Mr. Abaddon's grin.

He looked at her siblings. "I'd be remiss if I didn't mention circulating library etiquette."

Opal and Flint immediately stopped waltzing. Why, they listened to this big stranger better than they'd ever listened to her.

"May I have a moment?" he asked the young pair, and the two hurried off.

The moment they'd gone, Glain gritted her teeth. "I don't need you to go ordering my sister and brother about."

"What?" he asked lazily. "You want that honor all for yourself?"

Glain gasped, a hand flying reflexively to her breast. "How...dare you!" she stammered—stammered when she never did so. "How—?"

"Dare I?" he supplied in cool, mocking tones.

She jabbed a finger at him, several times. "You...you..."

He inclined his head. "Mr. Grimoire is the name you are looking for."

"Are crass and rude and boorish and mocking and perturbing and...and..."

He lifted a dark eyebrow. “And?”

“Rude!” she repeated, because it really bore repeating.

“I’m the boorish one.”—That slight emphasis sent heat from her neck up to her face, and by god, if this man wasn’t going to paint her red forever.—“This from the lady who entered my library, ordered my patron about, and—”

Dropping her hands to her hips, Glain swept closer. “She is my sister.”

He didn’t miss a beat. “Your sister who is also my patron.”

“She is no such thing!” she shouted, her voice pitching to the rafters. “She is a young lady. A proper, respectable young lady.”

Her brother and sister ducked around the corner. They stared at Glain with wide, disbelieving eyes.

As they should.

Because Glain didn’t shout...she didn’t even raise her voice. She kept it careful and measured and modulated. What was it about this man that drove her to this show of temper?

Glain forced a serene smile she did not feel, and waved a hand, urging them to leave.

Thankfully, this time, they did as she bade, though knowing the imps as she did, they also no doubt hid behind the column and listened in on Glain’s exchange with the infuriating shop owner.

When she looked back at Mr. Grimoire, she drew in a slow, calming breath. “My

sister is not patronizing your circulating library,” not taking her gaze from his unswerving one even as the piercing intensity of his gaze left her quavering inside, “and she will not be taking these books out.”

From somewhere over Mr. Grimoire’s shoulder, she caught her sister’s quiet cry and Flint’s shushing sounds.

Regret: it cleaved away at her breast, but Glain forced aside that weakening.

“This is for the best,” she said. For him? For Opal? Or herself? Mayhap it was really all three she sought to convince.

Giving her skirts a snap, she made to step around him.

“The best for whom?” he jeered, stopping her in her tracks with that echo of her very thoughts.

“All involved, Mr. Grimoire,” she said icily.

He chuckled, that low, rumble, devoid of real humor, and a perfect expression of mockery.

Do not ask. You don’t care. It doesn’t matter.

“What?” she asked impatiently, stunned even as that question tumbled unchecked from her always careful lips.

“It’s just I find it amusing, is all.” He leaned forward and then swept out a hand, nearly brushing her with his gloveless, ink-stained fingertips.

“I don’t see anything amusing about this. You are challenging your patrons.”

“You aren’t my patron,” he said coolly. “My patrons read real books. Not some lessons on how to catch yourself the most powerful husband, and how to mold yourself into a colorless, vapid, unfeeling, princess .”

Glain recoiled.

She didn’t know him beyond a handful of moments, and he knew her not at all, and yet...how very strange that his words—those specific ones, at that—should hurt so, that they should leave her hot with shame and regret and also fill her with the sudden, overwhelming urge to cry.

Colorless. Vapid. Unfeeling.

“What do you care what the girl reads? Are you afraid she’ll become different than you?”

All his words struck Glain in the chest, somewhere very near her heart, and overcome, she turned swiftly, and presented him with her back.

Opal was different, and in all the best ways. She’d retained the ability to smile freely, and think even more freely, and did so without any inclination of how precarious her existence was, at how quickly it could all just go...away.

Bloody fucking hell.

She was going to cry.

And he didn’t deal well with tears.

Hell, he didn’t deal with them at all.

In fairness, he hadn't had to deal with them.

The people he'd grown up amongst hadn't shed those drops, those marks of weakness, when a person living on the streets of London couldn't afford to be anything but hard.

He'd only spoken the truth. That's what had brought her—them—to this moment.

Strangely the thought didn't make him feel any better.

He swiped a hand over his face. "Stop."

She came to a sudden, jarring halt but remained with her back to him. Her narrow shoulders were proudly erect, her spine as straight as if a rod had been inserted within it.

"I was only speaking the truth," he said tightly.

"Is that your idea of an apology, Mr. Grimoire?"

"I don't apologize for telling the truth."

If possible, her back came up even more. "Good day, Mr. Grimoire," she said stiffly.

Despite himself, a slight smile twitched at his lips. That ice princess with her perfect manners.

"Darling—"

She whipped around. "I'm not your darling, and it's rude to call a woman with whom you are not familiar— or for that matter, to call any woman 'darling'."

“I don’t have your name.”

For a moment he thought she intended not to give it.

“Lady Diamond—” She grimaced. “ Glain Carmichael.”

Glain.

Welsh-sounding and slightly lyrical for the way it lingered and then rolled from the tongue, it was far softer and slipped from her lips more smoothly than that first she’d shared.

“You called me vapid, Mr. Grimoire. And I’m not. Do you know what I am?”

He opened his mouth to tell her, but she beat him to it.

“I’m reliable. Calculable. I’m not someone given to flights of fancy.”

“Why?” he asked.

She drew back. Her golden eyebrows snapped together into a single, baffled line that accentuated the fascinating birthmark between her brows. “I don’t know what you are—?”

“Why are you so determined to crush the girl?”

This time he may as well have struck her for the way she blanched and hunched into herself. And damned if he didn’t feel like the worst of the bullies he himself had encountered in the streets of London.

Abaddon tried again. This time he gentled his tone.

“You really think flights of fancy are such a bad thing?”

The lady’s jaw worked, and for a moment, he thought she wouldn’t answer, that she’d back down. He should have known better and expected more from a bold princess.

“They are if one is determined to protect oneself from being hurt.”

She spoke of suffering? He scoffed. “What do you know about pain?”

The lady narrowed her eyes. “You mean, because I’m a lady?” Gathering her skirts, she swept over. “Because what could a lady born of the peerage possibly know about that real emotion, or anything ?” Hers was a rhetorical question, and damned if he didn’t feel small under her condescending stare and sharp words. “And tell me, Mr. Grimoire. Do you think you somehow know more about everything? Pain and how and why a woman should or does conduct herself all because you are born outside the peerage? That your world experience gives you an understanding about how everyone lives?”

A muscle ticked irritatingly at the corner of his eye. “You don’t know nothin’ about me,” he growled slipping into his roughed speech. The insolent princess.

“No, I don’t,” she said, instantly, too readily. “I know you have a slightly rough accent you worked at concealing and that you dress well enough, but not as fine as a nobleman.” She hurled those truths at him. “I didn’t presume to know anything about you because of it. You on the other hand felt more than comfortable sizing me up because of my birthright. Making assumptions that fit whatever narrow opinion you may have of people from my station. Now, I bid you good day, Mr. Grimoire.” She collected her skirts for a third time, spun on her heel, and made to take her leave.

Abaddon stared after her proud, retreating figure.

The lady wasn't wrong. He had formed his own assumptions based on her icy veneer and intent to drag her sister off. After all, what other opinion could he have been expected to reach?

And yet, it also left him wondering at the words she'd spoken. And about the lady herself.

"It's not because of your birthright, you know."

She stopped again.

This time, he marched over, sliding himself in her path, lest she leave. For he knew, if she did, she'd be gone forever.

"I don't have a problem with ladies," he said. "Not all of them."

She pursed her lips. "Just me, then. I am honored."

He'd ruffled her feathers.

Abaddon flashed a half-smile, the one he'd used to disarm people through the years.

Lady Glain, however, proved unflappable—singularly unaffected, her features a smooth, frosty, detached mask.

"In fact, I respect the ones who come in my library. They aren't the judgmental sort." Like her. "They know what they like to read and aren't afraid to borrow it, regardless of opinion."

Pain flickered in her eyes. "Yes, well, not all ladies have that same luxury," she said softly, and he sharpened his gaze upon her expressive face.

It wasn't the first she'd spoken of pain or a harsher existence than the one he imagined she knew.

"You do know something of it, don't you?" he murmured.

Her expression instantly shuttered. "I don't know what you are talking about," she said stiffly.

"I think you do. I think you're pretending you don't so you don't have to reveal anything more than you already have."

Her eyes grew wary, but she said nothing.

"Well, that's fine, princess. I won't press you for your secrets. I won't ask you to share anything you don't want to share with me."

What accounted for his sudden yearning to know those details about this woman, ice on the exterior but with revealing eyes that glimmered with hurt.

"A-And why should I want to share anything with you?" She tipped her chin up. "I don't know you. Nor do I intend to ever again step foot inside your library."

Aye, he expected she believed that. But he also knew he didn't intend to allow her to disappear as she wished. "It's not all bad here," he murmured. "In fact, you might discover your sister isn't wrong about this place and the books you can find here."

The lady flattened her mouth into a firm line. "I highly doubt that, Mr. Grimoire."

She was a prickly one. That should be a great killer of desire for the hoity-toity woman. And yet her disdain and indifference had an altogether different effect on him. The lady posed a challenge.

Abaddon caressed a finger along the side of her tense lips, and that lush, slightly pouty flesh trembled slightly.

In desire? Horror? Perhaps a mix of both?

“Wh-what are you d-doing?” she whispered, not pulling away.

He’d bedded enough women of her station to know he could make even the loftiest lady cry out with passion when she wanted a bit of the rough. He also knew they equally were repelled by his station and thrilled at the prospect of slumming with him.

“Like satin you are,” he murmured. His hunger for her made him careless with the speech he’d long ago practiced and perfected with the man who’d adopted him. The lady’s plump pillow-like lips went soft and a whispery exhalation slipped past them.

He leaned nearer. “I’ve got a proposition for you, Glain.”

The lady froze. And then as if she’d been dunked in the icy Thames, she gasped loudly and jumped back a step. “How dare you?” she whispered furiously, slapping a hand to her breast, drawing his gaze briefly to the fabric pulled more tightly against her shapely form.

Abaddon flashed a lazy smile. “Not that kind of proposition.”

She stilled and a pretty pink blush filled her cheeks. “Oh.”

Did he imagine the disappointment there? He rather thought he didn’t. In fact, he’d wager his circulating library on it.

“W-Well, that is good,” she said. “But neither should you touch me or use my name.”

“Are those equal affronts in your world?”

“They are. A man does not just go about calling a woman by her given name or touching her. It bespeaks a level of intimacy that is scandalous and would see a lady ruined.”

“And that would be the last thing you’d want?” he jeered, not sure why her disdain should chafe. He was well accustomed to it, but something about this woman, and that sentiment coming from her, rankled. “Being ruined by a tough from the streets.”

“I’m not looking to be ruined by anyone, Mr. Grimoire,” she said coolly, with entirely too much ease for him to ever doubt her sincerity.

And yet...

“I expect if I had a fancy title attached to mine name, it’d be a different story, then.” He flashed another cold smile.

“There you’d be wrong. Again .”

Again . The audacity of this one.

Abaddon folded his arms at his chest. “You expect me to believe a lady who reads books on catching husbands wouldn’t be all warmth and smiles were it a duke or marquess taking such liberties?”

“I don’t read those books.”

“You said—”

“I said I read books befitting a lady, Mr. Grimoire,” she said impatiently. “My

siblings were the one who assumed those books were about marriage.”

He caught his chin between his thumb and forefinger and made a show of studying her, doing so deliberately to pique her curiosity. “Hmm.”

“Hmm, what ?” She wrinkled a surprisingly lightly freckled nose, an appendage that had been dusted from its time in the sun, hinting she had a far freer spirit than he’d previously credited her with.

“It seems you and I have gotten off on the wrong foot. Both of us have made assumptions about one another.”

“I haven’t made any assumptions about you, Mr. Grimoire. That honor belongs entirely to you .”

“You’ve got a problem with my library, do you not?”

“I’m sure it’s fine enough—”

“But not fine enough for your sister.”

“Not safe enough for my sister,” she corrected.

“Because I’m here.”

“Because—” The lady stopped herself abruptly.

His ears perked up, and he waited for her to finish that thought and give him the reason she was so adamantly opposed to her sister shopping here. Once more, however, she remained tight-lipped.

“I’ll strike a deal with you, princess.”

A brighter color bloomed red on her cheeks. “My name is not ‘princess.’”

“Fine. Glain, then,” he said.

She gasped. “I most certainly was not suggesting—”

“You spend a week here. One week,” he went on, continuing over whatever unwanted lesson on propriety she intended to dole out. “An hour each day. You read my books. Different ones than whatever nonsense you’ve been occupying yourself with over the years. And if at the end of the week, you don’t find yourself head over toes for the new books you read—”

“When I don’t.”

“And you still don’t want your sister here, I won’t interfere.”

The lady didn’t reject his proposal outright. He’d more than half expected she would.

He touched a hand to his heart. “You have my word, Glain.”

She chewed at her lower lip, studying him warily. “You expect me to trust your word, and yet, I do not know you at all,” she spoke haltingly, as though engaged in a battle with herself.

From the corner of his eye, he spied Lady Glain’s siblings as they ducked their heads from around a tall bookshelf.

With their eyes, elder sister and younger sister engaged in a silent exchange. The younger girl fairly pleaded with her gaze.

“Please,” Opal silently mouthed from across the way.

Lady Glain closed her eyes tightly, and when she opened them, she sighed. “Very well, Mr. Grimoire. You have one week. An hour each day, and not more than that. And at the end of our time together, I expect you will honor your promise and cease interfering in my relationship with my sister.”

From that nearby aisle, a happy squeal went up followed immediately by the boy shushing her to silence, muffling that tell-tale happiness with what Abaddon suspected was his hand.

His mouth twitched even as Glain firmed her lips. No wonder they existed in a perpetual pout. Not that he minded. They were perfectly plump and lush and put a man in mind of forbidden, wicked imaginings.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, Mr. Grimoire.”

He touched the brim of his brow. “Glain,” he said, and this time, as she swept off, he made no attempt to stop her.

Suddenly, Abaddon smiled, very eager for tomorrow, and the challenge before him.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:35 pm

S ometime between yesterday's meeting with Mr. Grimoire and this very moment, Glain had lost her mind. There was no other way of explaining it.

Pure madness was all that could account for the agreement she'd made with the fiercely handsome librarian, at a circulating library so scandalous for the people it catered to, and the shocking selection offered.

Standing across the street from the modest establishment, Glain peered at the cheerful front window, adorned with a ring of garland and a bright crimson bow at the center. When was the last the halls of her family's household had been decked so for the holiday season?

Her eyes slid shut, as a buried memory from many winters past slipped in: Glain and her mother, hanging garland, and as they did, singing Christ Was Born on Christmas Day so very loudly they'd not heard the duke. Until they had. Until his shouts had drown out their revelry.

"Decorating? As if you are bloody servants! And we do not celebrate as the plebians do? Is that—?"

" Ahem ."

Glain came whirring quickly back to the present.

Kenneth, her family's driver, stared at her with a concerned gaze. "Do you... require anything, my lady?"

She gave her head a slight shake, clearing the cobwebs of unwanted memories. “No. Nothing, Kenneth. Thank you. I’ll be along shortly.”

With that, Glain gathered the hem of her cloak and dress, and continued the rest of the way to Mr. Grimoire’s library. The sooner she got this over, the better she’d be.

Only, as she found herself on the stoop, staring at a wreath entirely too big for the door, she braced for the expected rush of horror or panic that came from being here. But it didn’t come. Instead, there was a stirring of excitement inside.

It had been so long—longer than she could remember—since she’d done anything she wasn’t supposed to. She’d been unfailingly prim and proper and conducted herself at all times above reproach. Until now.

Now, she’d set out on her own, without even the benefit of a maid all so Glain might read whatever unsanctioned books it was she pulled from Chetham’s Subscription Library shelf, where anyone could come.

Or is it the prospect of seeing him? Is it really that you have never met a man so bold, so insolent, and so dangerously handsome?

Her breathing increased. The warmth of it stirred a little cloud of white in the winter air and she pressed a gloved palm to her chest in a bid to slow her suddenly pounding heart.

Stop. He is just a man, and these are just ridiculous, silly books he’d have you read, and there is absolutely nothing at all seductive about him or this forbidden visit. At all.

A pair of nearly obsidian eyes met hers through the circle made by the wreath, and she shrieked. Glain buried the remainder of that startlement in her gloved fingers.

As if to put the final nails upon the coffin of her flighty musings, the proprietor lifted his watch fob, and pointed to the timepiece. “You’re late,” he mouthed perfectly. Slightly mocking, and more than slightly condescending, and also absolutely the perfect killer to whatever nonsense had previously been filling her head.

And here you were, waxing on romantic, forbidden thoughts.

Grateful for the cold that would no doubt conceal her blush, she clasped the handle, and let herself inside.

“As we failed to determine a specific time,” she said, pushing the hood of her cloak all the way down. “I’ll have you know, I’m not late.”

He lounged a lean hip against a nearby display table and Glain’s heart did a double-time beat. How could a man in such a casual repose.

“There’s a difference between arriving and sitting outside for the whole of the agreed upon hour,” he said. “Either way, given your aversion to this place, I’ll attribute the delay to you working up the courage to be here.” He straightened and held out a heavily callused, ink-stained palm.

Glain unfastened the silver fastenings of her cloak.

“I’ll have you know,” she repeated, placing the velvet-lined garment in his waiting hands. “I am quite punctual, always...except when circumstances require a delayed entrance. This, however, was not one of those times.”

“What are?”

Confused, she stared at him.

“What circumstances require you to disregard a person’s time?”

“I’m not someone who disregards a person’s time, Mr. Grimoire,” she said.

For some reason, for reasons she didn’t know or understand, it just seemed important he didn’t believe her one of those superior beings who that he didn’t think she was the manner of person who didn’t value another’s time. “There are expectations, however, when attending certain events that one arrives fashionably late.”

He snorted. “Likely so some self-important people can be sure there are more eyes on them. Sounds a touch self-important. Doesn’t it?”

Glain made a show of removing her gloves, refusing to let herself be bothered at how easily he judged her.

Let Mr. Grimoire have his unfavorable opinion of her. It was better this way. The last thing she either needed or wanted was to have some manner of friendship with him.

“Despite your opinion, my adherence to that way of thinking—” She’d always quite despised it. Suddenly, for reasons she didn’t understand, it seemed very important this man who continued to judge her know that. “Is one insisted upon by my father, Mr. Grimoire.”

Her father would not have it any other way. He had insisted she be on display for the crowded ballrooms so that she could attract the notice of all.

“I take it he’s a powerful, self-important man.”

She waited for him to tack on: who raised a self-important daughter. This time, however, that insult did not come. “He is a very powerful, self-important man.” She hesitated, withholding that final detail that would at last cement this man’s respect.

As all people were summarily impressed and awed by that title. “He is a duke.”

“Ahh,” he said, stretching out that singular syllable in a way befitting the discovery that her father was in fact a step away from royalty.

She braced for the change.

This moment where he treated her differently because of that discovery.

Glain stared at him.

He stared pointedly back.

She bowed her head slightly.

He matched that movement. “What?” he asked, confusion wreathing his voice. “What is it?”

And then it hit her—he didn’t care. He didn’t reveal the slightest hint of awe or reverence. He didn’t treat her at all differently, rather, he treated her precisely as he had since they’d crossed paths yesterday. “Nothing,” she said, feeling a lightness inside. “I...it is just people behave a certain way towards me when they discover that detail.”

“I’m not most people, darling...”

“No, you aren’t, Mr. Grimoire,” she murmured, hopeless to stop herself from trailing her gaze over those sharp, angular planes of his face, nicked and marred with small scars she’d failed to note before now. They only leant an air of raw realness to his otherwise perfectly beautiful face.

He flashed a half-grin. “I’m sorry, Glain ,” he corrected, and this time, she didn’t correct him. This time, she also felt more than a trace of regret at his dropping that familiar endearment of ‘darling’.

“You still intend to use my Christian name.”

His smile widened. “Absolutely and every time.”

“Very well,” she said, tipping her chin up a fraction. “What is it?”

“What is what ?”

“Given you intend to address me so informally, it is only fair I return that familiarity.”

His dark eyebrows went shooting up.

She couldn’t tamp down a triumphant smile. He’d thought her too lofty to ever dare such a boldness. Good. It felt wondrous, unnerving a person—that was, for different reasons than the icy demeanor she’d adopted.

He grunted. “Abaddon.”

That dark angel of the abyss.

“Abaddon, then,” she murmured, tasting and testing the feel of it upon her lips.

It was a sinister name, perfectly suited to a man who called for her to challenge everything she knew.

“Let’s get on with it,” he said, pulling her from her musings.

“Yes.” The sooner they did this, the faster the time went, and the sooner she’d be free to leave, return home, and forget him and this outrageous arrangement.

He stared at her.

“What is it, Mr.... Abaddon?” she asked impatiently.

“Start looking.”

Glain did just that, glancing around. “What exactly is it, I’m looking for?”

Abaddon gave her an incredulous look. “You’re jesting?”

“I assure you, I do not ‘kid’ or make jests,” she said impatiently.

The unlikeliest of circulating library owners snorted. “Now, that I can believe.”

She bristled. He’s just trying to get you riled up. You’ve perfected being unaffected. You’ve come to embody a cool ice princess with everyone. This man was...or should be no different. “Why, don’t you just tell me what the problem—”

“The problem is, you’re in a library. You look. You read some of the pages. You determine what stories you like to read.”

He wanted her to peruse the shelves, then. Very well. This she could do.

Glain inclined her head. “If you might point me to the copies on elocution and—”

“The hell I will.”

Heat exploded on her cheeks. “Cursing as you do, and in front of a lady, you’d do

well to not only have a section, but to read those books yourself.”

Abaddon dropped a broad, powerful shoulder against the end of the shelf. “Oh, I have those books. Smallest section I’ve got, and actually the least read by my patrons.”

Annoyance ran through her. “And yet you won’t direct me to them?” She fought the urge to stamp her feet, and instead made herself take a deep, steadying, and more importantly, calming breath. Always be in control. Always be coldly indifferent and polite to the point of impolite. “Very well, sir. Is that to be my test for the day? You shall find yourself disappointed as I can find the section well enough on my own.”

He slid into her path. “That’s not your test.”

Which implied there was a different one he was putting to her.

“Well?” she snapped, drawing back as soon as that curt one-word syllable exploded from her usually-always-controlled lips.

“You’re going to peruse the shelves, looking at different books than those stuffy ones you usually read, darling.”

Darling.

Despite herself, a thrill of warmth invaded her chest and seeped out to every other corner of her being. It shouldn’t. His was just a flippant endearment, and yet, she was hopeless to control the way her belly danced inside.

As if to highlight just how unaffected he was by her, in return, Abaddon removed his fob and let the gold chain dangle in front of her nose.

Glain instantly went cross-eyed as she attempted to bring those close numbers into

focus.

The gleaming gold cylinder twisted and turned before her face, too quickly for her to either make sense of the item carved upon the back or make out the numbers there, and she found herself intrigued about the object of clear value and how he'd come by it. It looked old, but well taken care of and she wondered what it meant to him.

And worse, why she should care. She didn't. She drew back. She was just curious about this odd, gruff, lightly coarse-speaking fellow who challenged her at every turn. That was it, and certainly nothing m—

“Time's a' wasting, darling,” he said, pocketing that item once more, and the spell was broken.

Grateful for the reprieve and welcoming the opportunity of putting some much needed distance between the, Glain found her legs and turned dismissively in the opposite direction. She continued a quick march to the end of the aisle and without pausing looped around the next row of shelving so that she was away from Abaddon Grimoire.

Closing her eyes briefly, she pressed her head against the row of musty-smelling books. He is just a man. A rude, condescending man. Whatever interest you have in him is solely and strictly that.

Glain took several more moments to repeat that mantra before opening her eyes once more and giving her head a hard, clearing shake. “Let's get on with it,” she muttered under her breath, and grabbed the closest volume.

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The lady fascinated him. And Abaddon wasn't fascinated by any ladies of the peerage.

There'd certainly been enough of them coming through the doors of his circulating library. Many had come here slumming, eager to land themselves a spot in the bed of the notorious East Londoner who operated this establishment.

Not a single one of them had been like Glain.

She exuded an air that warned a mere mortal from daring to look at or touch her, and damned if that wasn't a greater lure than the apple Satan had put before Adam.

The young lady was an interesting conundrum—flawless and perfectly in control one minute, and then the next, there'd be a break in composure as she grew visibly impatient, her motions quick as she muttered to herself, before quick as that lapse came, regaining complete control of her temperament, so that where Abaddon watched the lady, wondered if he'd merely imagined that reaction.

"Ridiculous," she whispered under her breath, and his lips twitched up at the corners.

No, he'd not imagined any of it. "What's the problem, darling?"

The lady shrieked as the book went flying up and out from her grip before sailing quickly to the floor.

Thwack.

Muttering to himself, Abaddon rushed to retrieve the forlorn copy, all the while glaring at her. “Have a care. Books are precious,” he said, inspecting the leather volume for injury.

“Then you would be well-advised to not go spying on a lady and sneaking up on her when she is perusing titles.”

She’d a point there. He’d sooner turn the keys of his business over to a stranger and return to his days as a thief in the streets than admit as much.

Wordlessly, he handed the book over to now-gloveless fingers.

She snatched the volume and drew it close to her chest.

Abaddon’s stare however, lingered upon her fingers.

In his years in the streets and in this establishment, he’d learned to tell a lot about a person by their hands.

Hers were soft. Lily white.

That display of her privilege should disgust him.

Strangely, it had the opposite effect.

As if she’d been unnerved, the lady dampened her mouth. “Was there something else you wanted?”

He should let her get back on with her search. For some reason, not wanting to leave her just yet.

“What’s so ridiculous?” he asked.

She puzzled her brow.

“You said—”

“I know what I said,” she said, a familiar blush filling her cheeks. “I barely whispered it.”

“Yea, well, I hear all.” His words were not mocking nor teasing. Rather, he spoke God’s truth. A person who lived on the streets either developed heightened senses or perished.

She gave a toss of her head. “If you must know,”—Strangely, he must.—“I was merely thinking about the fact that the only way to determine if a book is one wishes to read is by—”

“Reading it?” he interrupted, dryly.

Glain nodded. “Precisely. But in a case, such as this,” she held her book up and motioned to the area around them. “When one is surrounded by hundreds—”

“Thousands,” he corrected. He was proud of his collection and didn’t want her downplaying its true size.

“Even better, thousands,” she continued. “How is one to ever determine in a timely manner whether a book simply by looking at its title is in fact what a person wishes to read? It seems like a waste of valuable time.”

Her and her peculiar view on time. “That’s the point of it.” He slid closer. “And that’s also the beauty of a circulating library, Glain,” he murmured, reaching a hand out so

close to her heart-shaped face he felt the quick inhale and exhale of her breath, a soft, warm sigh upon his skin.

Forcing himself to focus on the lesson at hand and not this keen awareness of the beauty before him, Abaddon fetched a random volume and drew it out. "You can collect any number of books, fill your arms with them and set a stack down on a table...and you can forget time, Glain," he murmured. Close as he was, he appreciated the bold slashes of her high cheekbones. Her dainty, slightly pointed chin that added an air of interestingness to a face. Her face was a perfect model of those ancient Greek sculptors to have immortalized in stone. "You can just lose yourself."

Hopeless to help himself, he dusted a finger along that prominent cheekbone, and her long, blonde lashes fluttered wildly. "You can just lose yourself in..." He forced his arm back to his side, and the lady's eyes flew wide. "Whatever books you've discovered. And you can also know that when you're done, there's thousands more waiting for you. You can return time and time again."

And he imagined the tableau he spoke of: her visiting this place, and sitting herself down in one of the cosy, well-used, chairs, and burying herself in whatever books she'd collected. He smiled wistfully. All the while she'd be muttering to herself and whispering quietly about her selection, and whatever it was she read on those pages.

"I thank you." Glain glanced down briefly at the book in her hands. "But some of us don't have that luxury, Mr. Grimoire."

She used his surname when she was cross.

"Ah, yes, forgive me. That's right," he said, not bothering to keep the slight mockery from his voice. "You're entirely too busy to idle away inside my morally decayed library."

Color exploded on her cheeks. “How dare you?”

“Quite easily. I gather, you’re far too busy seeing to important matters like—let me take a guess? Stitching flowers on some needlepoint.” By the way her blush deepened, he was on the mark. “I bet you’re flawless on a pianoforte.”

Her lips went brittle. “And that is a bad thing?”

So, she was.

He smirked. “I’d wager you also sketch and paint a solid bowl of fruit or country landscape.”

Her color deepened, and if possible, her lips went even harder.

“Yes, those endeavors are far more important for you as a proper lady, aren’t they? Tasks that don’t require you to think or challenge you. Where you read all the books hand-picked by your fine governess about topics that don’t really matt—”

“How dare you?” she cried, her chest heaving, taking him aback with the force of the emotion bleeding from her eyes. “At every turn, you continue to judge me. And yet, you know nothing about me. I sketch and paint, but I hate it. I mastered Latin and French and use it only when I talk to myself in my head, because I don’t have the luxury of traveling the world as you, and all men, do.” She took an angry step closer. “And I don’t visit circulating libraries and sit down reading books for hours upon hours about,” she slashed a hand behind her, “books about happily-ever-afters, and love and romance or magic, and do you know why?” Glain didn’t allow him a word edgewise. “Because there is no place for it. There is no magic in this world.”

She was right. As someone who’d both witnessed and committed any number of sins, he could attest firsthand for those truths she spit out. He passed his gaze over her

face, touching his stare upon each plane of her spasming features. “I never knew...”

“That a lady could feel oppressed and miserable?” she asked bitterly. “I assure you, we can. For as impossible as your existence likely was, in ways you still have freedom of yourself and your decisions, and in how you carry yourself that is afforded to no women.” She thumped a fist against her breast. “We, on the other hand, are at the mercy of first our fathers, and then, if we’re lucky, our husbands ,” she spat those words in the clearest indication of just what she thought of the wedded state.

Her every word shamed Abaddon as he rightly deserved, but she wasn’t done, and he deserved that, too.

“You’ve identified me as a self-centered, self-absorbed heiress, no doubt? The killjoy of her livelier sister’s happiness.” Grabbing her skirts, she stalked the handful of steps between them, tilted her chin, and glared fiercely up.

God, she was breathtaking in her fury.

“I am protecting my sister, and my brother, in the only ways I’m able. So don’t you dare presume to judge me when you know absolutely nothing of our circumstances.” With that blistering set-down, she turned on a furious huff.

He caught her lightly, gently, by the wrist. “Please,” he said quietly. “Don’t go.”

Glain should go.

He’d given her every reason to leave.

He’d been rude and condescending. Yet, as coldly mocking as he’d been, hurling all the assumptions he’d made about her, at her, how tender and warm his voice was the

next instant.

His baritone, a shade too deep, and slightly gravelly, coarse with street-roughened tones, had gone soft in a way she'd not expected this man to ever be soft.

And yet, she remained equally entranced by his hold upon her, impossibly tender and soft from a man whose fingertips and palms proved so large and callused.

She stood there, stiffly, warring with herself. Reluctantly, Glain nodded.

He released her, and she went cold in the place where he'd touched her.

"We'll begin again, tomorrow," he said quietly.

And why did it feel as though they spoke of something entirely different? Why did her heart race and her breath hitch, and her mind think only of new beginnings with this man who loved books and operated his own establishment.

Incapable of anything more than a nod, Glain remained mute.

He, however, may as well have been wholly oblivious to her and her fascination with him and this moment.

Rather, Abaddon perused the shelving beside them, using a finger to skim the titles as he looked. Dropping to his haunches, he stopped his search on one.

He tugged out a volume, and then straightened. "Try this one."

Fighting the magnetic pull of that penetrating stare, Glain made herself look at the book he'd given her. "I'm not interested in romantic t..." Her words trailed off. "A Vindication of the Rights of Women ." This is what he'd selected for her? She

glanced up.

He nudged his chin. “I think you’ll enjoy that, and...probably agree with her on much.”

Returning her attention to the small bound copy, she fanned the pages, pausing as she went.

“My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone...”

Glain continued skimming the volume.

“Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman’s scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.”

Glain’s breath caught for a second time that morn, but for entirely different reasons than the feel of Abaddon’s touch, or the heat of his eyes upon her. But no less entrancing or seductive.

Hopelessly captivated, Glain read and the world ceased to exist beyond anything but the inked black words upon the pages of this seductive text given her by Abaddon Grimoire.

She wanted to keep reading of these philosophies, forever. She—

Glain stopped on a page.

“I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists of. I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and

to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings are only the objects of pity, and that kind of love which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.”

She snapped it shut and reflexively Glain took several much-needed steps away from him. “I...I can’t read this,” she said, her voice weak and breathless to her own ears. She held the book out toward him in both a plea and demand for him to take it.

“Sure, you can,” he said in that rough murmur. “That’s the beauty of a library and books, themselves. You can read anything you want, and you can feel any way you wish to feel reading them.” He took a step closer, and then another, effectively erasing all distance that she’d previously built between them.

She could feel as she wished, and yet...

In her mind, she replayed those damning words, over and over again.

“...I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings are only the objects of pity, and that kind of love which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt...”

Her throat worked, and she squeezed her eyes shut, in a bid to fend off the great swell of emotion threatening to drag her under.

“It’s rubbish,” she said, her voice tight and brittle to her own ears, and she knew her words were a lie, but God help her, she wanted a fight with him. “You’ve given me rubbish to read.”

He placed his lips close to her ear, and her breath caught for a different reason. “You know I haven’t, darling,” he whispered against that sensitive shell. Delicious little shivers raced down her neck and all the way down her spine, leaving her giddy with a giggle she sought to suppress. “You know you read those words, and saw the value in them, and you know you want more.”

He was right. She wanted...more.

Something in the air shifted, growing somehow more charged, more electric.

She should fight the pull. She should move away from him, and this moment, and yet, she angled her head ever closer towards him.

He edged slowly towards her, in that same way.

Two dissimilar people, moving in a like way, drawn towards one another like those magnets her brother played with. An irresistible pull between them.

Even as Abaddon shifted, lowering his mouth to hers, Glain leaned up, and touched her lips to his.

With a guttural growl better suiting a primal beast, he kissed her. His harsh, beautiful lips were a brand upon hers, as though with each slant he sought to learn the feel and taste of her flesh, imprint upon her, and then memorialize this moment for all time.

Sighing, Glain crept her arms about his thickly muscled neck and turned herself over to this. Nay, to the powerful, completely masculine Abaddon Grimoire.

Somehow, this was safer than their previous heated exchange. This man, and this kiss, safer than that bluntly expressed, so very accurate criticism of all that Glain was—of all that she’d let herself, nay made herself, become.

And there, amidst the bookshelves of a circulating library a stranger might enter at any moment, she gave herself over to the passion of this, her first kiss.

Nay, this wasn't a kiss.

This was an embrace. An all-consuming, passion-filled embrace.

Abaddon folded her in his powerful arms, and she pressed against him so close, she felt every defined contour and muscle of sinewy strength.

She felt the growl rumble in his chest, but that low-approving sound never made it past his lips, and it was as though even in passion, he possessed a mastery of restraint.

Suddenly, he shifted his lips away from hers and she whimpered at the loss.

He touched a finger warningly against her swollen mouth, silently reminding her of where they were, and what they did, and how imminent discovery was.

That should have been enough.

Enough for her to come to her senses, slap him, and then race from this moment, this library, and this man.

Only, God help her. She did not. She could not.

Instead, as he leaned closer, tempting her with the promise of another kiss, she lifted into it and him.

"Shh," he breathed against her ear, and she managed nothing more than a jerky nod, acquiescing to his warning and the continuation of his embrace.

He placed a kiss against her lips, and unlike the kiss before, he didn't devour her. He didn't kiss of her and taste of her, like a man who wished to consume, but rather, he explored like the most patient explorer, delving into uncharted territories to which he now staked a powerful claim.

He continued his quest, lightly nipping at her slightly fuller lower lip, and then licking at the corners of her mouth.

She clamped her legs together in a bid to alleviate the sudden pressure that had built there.

Her efforts proved in vain.

A liquid heat pooled at her center, and reflexively she moved her hips against him. That slight thrusting brought her flush with the hard ridge of flesh prodding against her belly.

He chuckled, the sound a low, triumphant, all-pleased masculine rumble.

It didn't grate.

Rather, as he continued to trail his lips down the curve of her neck, lightly nipping and sucking of that flesh, it fueled a heady sense of power that came from his appreciation of her body.

She wasn't a woman who men desired.

That was, not a woman anyone desired beyond the size of her dowry and her lofty connection to London's most powerful duke.

But even those lures had never been incentives enough for men to see past the barrier

she'd built to keep herself safe and unmarried.

Nay, they all avoided her gaze and her altogether.

Unlike this man.

Abaddon.

He was not repelled by her. Nay, he devoured her, and she went even several shades hotter inside at the realization of the power she had over him. This strong, primal, masculine man wanted her .

Abaddon filled a strong, powerful hand with her right buttock, and pressed her even closer to him.

She whimpered and rubbed like the kitchen cat in heat she'd observed two years earlier, and he swallowed that telltale sound of her yearning with his kiss.

He stroked his tongue against hers—a bold, angry lash—and she matched each glide in a dance more forbidden than the waltz.

Glain didn't want this moment to end.

She wanted to feel his hands on her. She ached to know what came after the kiss. She wanted—

The tinny bell at the front of the library jingled.

Abaddon yanked his mouth from hers, and it was all she could do to keep from crying out. As she slumped against the shelves, finding support and purchase as her knees trembled, she should be horrified at the prospect of discovery. Instead, an

overwhelming urge to weep at the interruption filled her.

His embrace—nay, their embrace—had been the single most beautiful, special, magical moment of her entire existence.

Abaddon—

Her gaze went to him. A completely cool, collected, and wholly unfazed Abaddon Grimoire, who consulted his timepiece.

“Time’s up, darling.” He dropped the chain back into his pocket. “You’re free to go.”

That was what he’d say.

She felt a blush burn up her cheeks.

What in heavens had she done? She was hardly a woman given to lapses in judgement, She’d never, in the whole of her life, lost control of her senses. And in this moment, with this man, she’d done precisely that.

It was a mistake she’d not make again.

With all the aplomb she could muster, Glain straightened on still unsteady legs. “I thank you for your assistance this morning, Mr. Grimoire,” she said loudly for the benefit of whichever patron now wandered the circulating room.

He bowed his head. “My pleasure.” His heated gaze bore into hers. “It was all my pleasure.”

Her heart thumped wildly. Surely, she wasn’t merely imagining the double meaning behind that statement?

Slowly, he shifted closer, and her body of its own volition swayed nearer to him. She didn't care about the other patron present. Or the imminent discovery. She should. The threat of ruin should itself be enough to send her fleeing.

Only, she was powerless against this steely man's pull over her.

Abaddon reached out, and with a fluttering in her chest, Glain lifted her mouth to his.

He held a book out.

A book?

The world came crashing, screeching, and sliding to a jarring halt.

He winked, and that wildly beating organ in her chest increased to a frantic double-time.

"If you'll excuse me, I've other patrons to help."

With that, he turned on his heel, stalked off, and left her there fighting to regain control of her wits.

From somewhere in the room, his voice carried over to her. Whatever words he now spoke to his latest patron were muffled, but matter of fact.

As if not even moments ago, he'd been making love to her mouth, and she'd been rubbing herself against the hard, contoured muscles of his powerful body.

Because it clearly hadn't meant anything to him. She'd do well to remember that for the next time she saw him.

Even so, the memory of that kiss remained with her as she quit the library and made the journey back to her family's Mayfair townhouse. As she sailed up the steps a short while later, a dreamy smile played on her lips when the doors were drawn open by the duke's always dutiful servants.

"Where in blazes have you been?"

That cold, icy greeting brought her whirring, crashing back to reality, as only that frosty welcome could.

Her heartbeat slowed to a sickeningly slow halt. "Your Grace," she greeted. The duke had insisted he was always to be 'the duke' or 'Your Grace'. Never: Father. Never: Papa.

In fairness, six feet tall, with a hawkish nose, a harsh mouth, and possessed of a close crop of icy white, meticulously clipped hair, he didn't have the look of any beloved, doting Papa. He exuded power and influence, and in this instance annoyance.

"I've been looking for you, Diamond."

Diamond.

God, how she despised that name. She always had. She'd just not known how very much until Abaddon had laid claim to her given name of Glain.

The duke never sought her out unless he was displeased or unless he required something. Never in her adult life, however, had she given him reason to be disappointed.

Glain gave her maid, a desperate look.

The young woman hastened over.

“I was out,” Glain said, quickly entrusting that book Abaddon had chosen for her, to the loyal servant’s care. “I—”

The duke’s gaze snagged on the title.

Go. Flee. Run. Before he notes—

Only—

The duke frowned, extending a hand that commanded as effective as any words.

Glain’s maid hesitated, and then with an apologetic look for her mistress, handed the damning title over to Glain’s father.

He methodically flipped through the volume. With every page he assessed, his white eyebrows drew closer and closer together until they formed a harsh, angry line.

Through his agonizing scrutiny, Glain stood stiffly at the center of the marble foyer and took care to keep her gaze concentrated beyond her silent father’s shoulder. All the while, mortification spread through her. At having her selected book read. At having it done in this public way, by her father, and with her family servants there to witness.

The duke picked his head up. “What nonsense is this?” He didn’t allow her a word edgewise. “What are you reading?”

Her tongue went heavy in her mouth. Her face burned hot. Oh god. This was so much worse than she could have ever imagined. “I stumbled upon it—”

“Stumbled upon it where ?” he demanded.

And from the point where her gaze remained, just above his shoulder, Glain caught her sister at the top of the stairwell that overlooked the foyer. Opal gripped the railing and pleaded silently with her eyes.

“I...Lady Westmorland.” The lie slipped out easily, and she discreetly crossed her fingers.

The Duke of Wellington’s favored niece and notorious for her political judgment, the lady was afforded the respect of the peerage because of her connections and head for political affairs.

“Lady Westmorland,” he muttered. “I should have expected as much.”

Just as Glain expected, he’d not challenge the powerful peeress.

“Perhaps this is why you’re unwed after two Seasons,” he snapped, waving one of the copies at her.

Glain kept motionless, her gaze forward. She knew precisely why she was unwed after two Seasons. Because she’d wished it that way and done everything in her power to fashion herself as an icy princess too cold to touch or approach.

Her father gave a look to a nearby footman.

The young, crimson-clad servant hastened over. “Dispose of this,” the duke said in clipped, steely tones.

Glain bit the inside of her cheek to keep from crying out.

The footman collected the book chosen for her by Abaddon, and as he rushed off, she felt the overwhelming urge to weep.

She, however, didn't cry.

And she certainly didn't show those signs of weakness the duke so despised in his presence.

Her sister caught her eyes. "I'm so sorry," she mouthed.

Glain managed a small smile.

When the servant had gone, the duke returned his full focus to Glain. "I was looking for you and this is what you were doing? How you occupy your time?" Fury flashed in his eyes. "Do not let it happen again. You have more important matters to see to."

She flexed her fingertips at her side, and drew them into slight, tight balls attempting to drive the tension from them, fighting for composure, fighting for an icy calm to rival his. "What matters would you have me see to, Your Grace."

"I want invitations sent for a private dinner with the Prince of Chernihiv."

"I'll see to it." That loftiest of men, still present in London despite the winter, would be one of the few guests the duke would entertain.

Without another word of acknowledgment, the duke stalked off.

Glain remained there, her arms empty of her books, and more miserable than she'd ever been before at the prospect of planning an intimate dinner party for a royal and wishing she could return to a time just twenty minutes earlier with Abaddon Grimoire.

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So he was back. Sneaking about, and doing so as poorly as she'd done the first time he'd caught her in his circulating library.

It was a clear violation of the promise he'd made the lady's sister, and yet, breach of agreement or not, the last thing he'd ever do was send away a patron.

Not as a matter of business—though he was known as being a shrewd businessman—but because he knew firsthand what it was to be denied books. As the illiterate boy from the streets taken in by the empathetic, altruistic former owner, Abaddon had resolved to see that anyone and everyone who wished to consume those books could and would.

He'd not cared whether his patrons were men, women, or children, and he'd certainly not cared what station they belonged to.

It was why, the moment he'd been stacking shelves at the back and caught sight of her hurrying inside, he'd not ordered her gone, reminding her she wasn't allowed to be here without her elder sister's appreciation.

Her elder sister. Lady Glain, who'd kissed with an abandon and heat he'd never expected of her.

And the memory of her fire and passion, filled him with a familiar rush of desire. She may be ice on the outside, but had proven to be all honeyed warmth on the inside.

“Aren't you going to ask me what I'm doing here?”

That perturbed child's voice slashed across those wicked remembering's, bringing Abaddon back to the moment.

Clad in trousers as she'd been the first time she'd stepped foot inside the library, the girl had her hands on her hips, and scowled impressively up at him.

The better question was why she was here when he expected her sister. Her sister who'd not showed for their latest appointment. After he'd kissed her—that embrace, a fiery conflagration that would leave the lady burned and likely never to return—he'd thought it doubtful she'd find her way back. Even so, there was a wealth of disappointment.

“Did you hear me, Mr. Grim? I was speaking to you?”

Forcing his head out of the clouds, he grinned. “Ah, you want to be seen this time.”

“Yes,” she said with the direct honesty only an innocent child was capable of. “And it has taken you long enough to notice me.”

Oh, he'd noticed her.

He'd simply not addressed her.

“You know your sister doesn't want you here.”

“Yes.” She gave a wave of her hand. “That doesn't matter.”

“The lure of the books is a powerful one.”

“I'm not here about your books,” she said, no-nonsense. “Not this time.” She returned the book she'd been reading to the shelf. “I'm here about my sister...about Glain.”

He hooded his eyes. Glain who'd reneged on their agreement. "Oh?"

"She wanted to be here."

Abaddon snorted and resumed tucking the books in his arm onto their proper place on the shelves. "That I highly doubt."

"She did," the girl insisted, with an adamancy fueled by the conviction in those two words. "You must believe me." Opal touched a hand to his arm, staying his efforts. "She wanted to come here, and I never thought she would, because my sister is really, really, really proper."

When it came to the flawless princess who'd entered his library two days ago, that might be one hundred 'proper's' short of accurate.

"And I always judge her for it, Mr. Grim," Opal went on in a quiet whisper. "But I saw when she returned home...she was holding a book close, the way only someone who loves a book does. She wanted to read it."

Why did it not surprise him in the least that the girl had both overheard his arrangement with Glain and discovered Glain had shown up as promised for their first meeting? The king's army would be better served if it had people like Opal among their ranks.

Opal's eyes grew even more solemn. "She wanted to come back. She did."

"But she didn't," he said as gently as he was able. Offering smooth reassurances wasn't something that came natural to him, that deficit a product left over from his days on the streets.

"I know. But there is a reason for it, and I know she will keep her end of your

arrangement. It's just she's ever so busy..."

Abaddon stared at her, waiting for her to continue, to explain what it was that kept her elder sister away.

"My sister is planning a dinner party for a prince."

And there it was. The lady was too busy planning a formal affair, for royalty. Royalty hobnobbing with royalty.

"Ah, plans for the lady to wed a prince?"

"I expect that is it, exactly," Opal answered. "He's very important."

As the girl went on with a lengthy list about the gentleman in question, Abaddon shook his head. It was to be expected. In fact, it fit with everything he'd have thought about a lofty one like Glain Carmichael.

Glain was the last manner of woman he should want, and the world she belonged to, even farther from where he had any wish to be. Far from it. Why, then, did the idea of the fiery beauty who'd come undone in his arms wed to some pencil-mustached prince make him want to gnash his teeth?

Because that fire had given him a glimpse of who she could have been had she been any other woman, born to any other station but the one she belonged to.

Hers was a world he wanted no part of.

Not that there was really a question of whether he would or could be part of that world. That was, beyond the services he offered and provided to the ladies and gentlemen unafraid to enlighten their minds.

Opal tugged on his sleeve, calling his attention away from his thoughts and back to her.

“It’s not her fault,” she repeated, her enormous eyes rounded and filled with sadness.

The girl desperately wished to see more in her sister. She wanted her to be more than she was. And perhaps that was why he managed to release his annoyance and anger.

“I kept your stack for when you came back,” he shared, and in an instant, the sadness vanished, replaced instead with a dazzling joy.

“Indeed?”

She sprung into step beside him as he guided her away from the wide front window where she’d be on display and over to the safer, secluded spot tucked in the corner of the room. A place where she could read and do so without prying eyes or the criticism of people who’d unfairly judge her for the simple sin of reading.

Nay, the station of lords and ladies was one he’d never understand, and one he didn’t want to bother trying.

Let them have their princes and fancy dinners.

Unbidden, however, came an unwanted image of a strikingly beautiful Glain with some high-in-the-instep prince from a far-flung land.

“Here,” he said, pulling out the chair for Glain’s younger sister, picking up the choice he’d made with her in mind. “Have you read this one?” He turned it over.

“The Mysteries of Udolpho,” Opal moved her lips silently. She lifted eager eyes to his once more. “Have you?”

“Want to know the truth?”

Wide-eyed, she nodded.

“I’ve read nearly every book inside this library.”

She howled with laughter. “Go on with you.”

Abaddon pressed a hand to his heart and made a cross there. “I would never jest about books,” he said with enough solemnity to that vow, he managed to quiet her boisterous explosion of mirth.

“Come on, now,” Opal whispered, this time more reverently.

“How else could I help patrons know where to find the books they are seeking? Or whether it would suit their interests?”

“Why not let them find them, themselves?” she asked curiously.

“Sometimes,” he explained, leaning in, “people are so used to being told what to read that they don’t explore anything beyond those types of books. Those people need help opening their eyes to the truth that there’s more out there.”

“Like my sister,” she said. Reaching inside the sack slung over her right shoulder, she fished out a small, familiar copy.

He skimmed the title. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* .

“I saved this,” Opal said.

Saved it. His jaw hardened. “Did you?” He should have expected—

“My father discovered her with it,” the girl explained, so suddenly, so unexpectedly, Abaddon’s head came flying up with a force to wrench the muscles along his neck. “I told you she wanted to read it. I know because when the duke berated her for reading such books, and took it away, Glain looked like she was going to weep.”

With every word of the tragic scene she painted, a vise squeezed at his chest, until it was near impossible to get a pain-free breath in through his constricted lungs. It was somehow easier when he’d despised Glain for being a lofty sort who thought herself too good for the books here, than in knowing the truth—that she was in fact a woman who wished to read but was caught like some tragic butterfly tucked under a glass, her movements restricted, her flight stifled by the barriers wrapped around her.

“Do you know what I’ve learned, Mr. Grim?” Opal asked through the tumult of his thoughts.

He could only manage to shake his head.

“I’ve learned that the covers of books are quite unimpressive. Some are marbled leather. Some are speckled. Some old. Many have gold lettering. But they’re all the same, and yet...” She fanned the pages of the copy of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. “It would be deuced unfair, and tragic even if one assumed all the contents within those pages were the same when there’s so very much more to them...if one just looks.”

There’s so very much more to them...if one just looks.

He smiled wistfully. “How did you get so wise?”

A slow, impish smile dimpled both her plump cheeks. “I read.”

He chuckled. “Clever girl.”

She beamed under that slight praise, and with all she'd imparted, the window she'd opened to her and her sister's world, he wondered how sparse words of approval and affection had been conferred. He'd wager not at all. That glimpse Opal had given had also revealed precisely how and why Lady Glain Carmichael had become the woman she had.

"Will you read?" he invited, motioning to the book she held in her fingers.

Her smile widened. "I would be happy to, Mr. Grim."

With that, Opal proceeded to read the book he'd provided her. How comfortable she was with it. How happy the reading of a simple story made her. And he wondered what Glain had been like before she'd been so shaped and molded by the heartless, cruel duke Opal had described. More, he wondered who she would be if she managed to break free of him and those constraints built by the gilded cage of Polite Society.

And dangerously, inexplicably, he had an urge to be the one who helped her.

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When Opal's governess reported her charge missing again, Glain knew precisely where to locate her sister.

After the day and a half of planning a tedious dinner party for the duke's latest, most important guest, Glain welcomed the opportunity of escape. And if she were being honest with herself, she relished coming to the Chetham's Subscription Library again.

And seeing him... A voice taunted at the back of her mind.

For yes, she could be honest with herself in that. She'd wanted to see him . She...liked Mr. Abaddon Grimoire.

It wouldn't make sense to most, but it made all the sense in the world to her.

She liked how he didn't treat her with deference and unfailing politeness for the simple reason of her birthright as a duke's daughter.

She liked that he challenged her, both in the form of his questioning and in the books he'd helped select for Glain that would expand her mind and view of the world.

She appreciated that he was honest when even the smiles of the people in the world she'd been born to were false.

Nothing, however, could have prepared her for the sight of Abaddon as he was now, laughing and conversing with her sister.

Every other word of her enthusiastic sister's chatter drifted over...

“...and Emily is always crying...but I don’t dislike her for it...because...”

On the other hand, Abaddon’s deep baritone was so low as to be hushed and largely lost to Glain so that she only heard the occasional question posed. “...how does the author use...?”

“Oh, well, I think it is very clear,” Opal said matter-of-factly. “Everything about the setting is ominous. The buildings are soaring. The passageways dark and mysterious and...”

Abaddon leaned in towards Glain’s sister, and Glain found herself leaning forward, too, in a bid to hear whatever he’d say next.

Only, she couldn’t, and she mourned the loss of all the words he spoke.

For she also knew he didn’t speak with the same judgment and condescension Glain’s own father had shown about the books he’d found her with. And she knew for the simple reasons that Abaddon posed questions about the book they discussed, and her sister answered with ease and relaxedness. Nay, this was no condescending lecture.

He sat there so comfortably at a tiny round oak table entirely too small for his six feet, four-inch physique, chatting comfortably with a young girl about books that fascinated her. Nor did Abaddon judge Opal for her interests or seek to steer her to books that were safer topics and considered more suitable for a young lady. Rather, they conversed freely, animatedly, over a handful of leather volumes, and whatever questions he posed had Opal chattering like a magpie. Her cheeks bright. Her eyes sparkling as they’d never been at home.

And God help Glain, in that moment she fell more than a little in love with Abaddon Grimoire.

In a world, where noblemen—fathers, older brothers, and husbands—didn't have the time or inclination to bother with their daughters, sisters, and wives, Abaddon saw them.

Not just women, a young girl.

Her eyes slid shut under the powerful wave of emotion that crested within her breast.

As a child, Glain herself had been even more invisible than she was now. Her father certainly hadn't a use for her. She'd not even minded so much. She'd simply thought that was the way of the world and had instead relished every moment spent with her free-spirited, loving mother. Then her mother had died giving birth to Flint, and Glain had become a solitary, lonely child, grateful for the brother and sister.

Two children whom the duke also hadn't given a jot about beyond the fact he'd at last had an heir.

Glain opened her eyes, once more taking in the sight of Abaddon and Opal.

Her sister's lips moved a mile a moment. Her cheeks were flushed with happy color.

Glain's throat worked under the force of emotion.

She fell in love with him for being a man who not only didn't seek to restrict a girl's or woman's growth, but who treated them as equals in every way.

She fell in love with him for not thinking himself too important to bother with a girl.

It hardly mattered that he'd proven harsh and unforgiving in his opinion of Glain herself. After all, he wasn't wrong. He saw what the world saw and made the assumption she'd wanted the world to make—that she was some duke's privileged,

pampered daughter. And not interested in being more than that.

Oh, how she wished though that he saw...her.

He'd given her those books.

He'd read her and rightly deduced that she both needed and wanted books that would challenge her and more, ones that would make her challenge the existing order.

"Glain!" Opal's happy shout filtered around the room.

Glain cringed at having been caught watching them.

Abaddon slid an inscrutable look her way, and she tried to make something out of that piercing gaze.

Wood scraped loudly upon wood, as Opal shoved back her chair, hopped to her feet, and raced over to join Glain. "I am ever so happy you came, after all!" She threw herself at Glain and nearly knocked them both off balance with that hug.

Some great shift had occurred between her and her sister. What had changed?

Stiffening, Glain awkwardly returned that half-embrace, feeling Abaddon's eyes upon them still.

"You can't keep rushing off without an escort, poppet," she gently chided, stroking the top of her sister's head in the same manner her mother had Glain's. Her sister, however, had never known their mother. "It's not safe."

"Mr. Grim will ensure no harm befalls me."

“Yes, I believe that.” Glain lifted her gaze from her sister and looked to Abaddon. His opaque gaze revealed nothing of his inner thoughts. Unnerved by the unswerving intensity of those cobalt irises, she glanced down at Opal once more. “However, anything could happen to you on your way to and from the library.”

“It won’t,” Opal said in an instant, with all the confidence only a child who’d remained untouched by the pain and suffering of life knew. And this, here, was alternately Glain’s greatest accomplishment and her greatest failing.

Glain met Abaddon’s gaze once more. “Wait for me in the carriage, Opal,” she quietly directed.

And surprise of greatest surprises, Opal gathered up her books, held them to her chest, and with her head down, headed for the door.

The tinny belly jingled and Glain’s maid waiting there escorted the recalcitrant girl from the library, closing the door behind them with a quiet click, leaving Glain and Abaddon alone.

She tensed, bracing for the barrage of insults and a verbal affront from him.

“Nothing to say?” she asked, angling her chin up a fraction.

“You came back.”

“To claim my sister.” And because she’d wanted to come.

“You wanted to come,” he predicted, his slightly graveled murmuring entrancing for the coarseness of it—tones that made him very real, in ways she’d never known men could be real, and it unsteadied her.

Glain fought her way through the dazed sensation in her head. She glanced down at the open book, and to give her shaking fingers a purpose, she picked up the small volume, turned it over to read the title. “And I see you have my sister reading more of these horror stories .” I want to read them...I want to read these stories, too ... a voice in her head silently wept.

“We had an agreement,” she said sharply, setting the copy down hard and quickly. It hit the tabletop with a soft thump. “Do you always fail to honor your pledges, Abaddon?” She wanted a fight. Spoiled for one.

Only he didn’t comply.

Rather, his powerful gaze remained vague, impossible to make anything out of.

“The way I see it, your failure to honor the terms we’d set allowed me some greater freedoms on my end,” he said quietly.

Glain bit the inside of her cheek. Where was Abaddon’s vitriol? Why wasn’t he coldly mocking or jeering this time?

The fight went out of her. “Thank you for being patient with her,” she said. Unable to meet his eyes, Glain trained her gaze just beyond his shoulder. And me...thank you for being patient with me . Those, however, were the words she couldn’t bring herself to speak, deserved though, they may be.

Abaddon inclined his head. “You don’t need to thank me for that. She’s a clever girl, with a head for learning, and a strength of character that will serve her well in life.”

And it was certainly just one of Glain’s many failings that she found herself envying her sister for the praise heaped upon her by this man.

“She is,” she murmured, and there was a small amount of self-pride there, too. For all the ways in which Glain was a shadow of a person, she’d managed to protect her sister far longer than anyone had protected her.

“She’s like you,” Abaddon said, yanking her back from her musings, and a laugh exploded from her lips before she registered the somber set to his harsh, angular features.

Glain peered at his face. “You’re serious.” Surely not. Only, she didn’t take him as one who jested freely.

“Deadly so,” he said. “You’ve not been afraid to go toe-to-toe with me.”

She dampened her mouth. “I wanted to return,” she found herself confiding, knowing she should be horrified. “I just...had other obligations I was required to see to.”

“I know.”

He knew? Warmth spiraled through her whole being. Why was he being so nice?

“Here.” He reached behind him and then slid closer, and her breath hitched as he extended a hand.

Cold leather penetrated her palms that in her haste she’d failed to cover with gloves.

She read the title, and relief so palpable, so beautiful and lifelike and strong slammed into her. The force of those emotions rolling together weighted her eyes shut.

Her father had burned them.

“You have another copy,” she said, her voice clogged and thick with something that

felt very much like tears. Which was of course, impossible. She didn't cry. And certainly not with relief, and certainly not over books.

"No," he murmured, grazing a finger down the curve of her cheek, the callused pad of his two middle fingers a seductive caress that obliterated all possibility of rational thought, as she felt only that ragged little brush. It brought her eyes weighted shut, and muddled her thoughts and her senses, so that she could only feel...and think of the kiss she'd known in this very room. "That's the one I gave you."

It took a moment for that handful of murmured words to penetrate the haze his quixotic touch had wrought, and then it did.

...That's the one I gave you...

As in the copy. As in...

"Your sister rescued it," he confirmed.

Rescued it. Which meant...

Glain's entire body tensed, and her eyes came flying open, and she at last registered the look in his. The glimmer she'd taken as desire, she now saw for what it really was.

Oh, God.

Pity. It radiated from his eyes, searing her in a different way, and she recoiled, retreating from that sentiment, and for her startling lapse in composure and control of her senses. "I don't need your pity, sir," she hissed, swatting the hand reaching towards her once more.

“I don’t pity you.”

“ Liar .

“I understand you more, Glain,” he murmured, striding over, and she realized she’d backed away from him, and he slowly edged out that space. Not threatening, but also direct.

“I’m not some complex puzzle, Mr. Grimoire,” she said tightly, between clenched teeth. “I’m not a scientific study for you to try and make sense of.”

“I’ve never been one for puzzles,” he murmured. “But I somehow seem to make all number of exceptions where you’re concerned, darling.”

Darling.

That endearment rolled together with his words knocked loose the remainder of the argument on her lips, and it flew from her head.

She was just a woman. But no one had seen that. Not before him. And likely never again, after.

Her lips trembled. “Here, now,” he murmured, tracing the pad of his thumb along that quivering flesh.

Glain’s breath caught. The earth stopped spinning, and yet she found herself dizzy like she’d spun in a thousand fast-moving circles, dazed by that soft, mesmerizing touch.

He let his arm fall, and she silently, secretly cried out for the loss.

Only, he did not retreat.

His gaze lingered on the flesh he'd so gently stroked with his finger.

He was so close, his mouth so near hers, all she need do was stretch up on tiptoe and their lips would meet.

She trailed the tip of her tongue over that flesh which prickled with the memory of the feel of that first...and last...kiss.

Abaddon leaned down slowly, allowing her to move, to flee, to retreat, but God help her she couldn't. Nor did she wish to. Her lids grew heavy, as she stretched up, towards him, towards the kiss she craved.

And then their lips touched. Her breathy moan mingled with his low, guttural groan. That sound rumbled within his chest, and moved through her and once again, she surrendered herself to this man's embrace.

He slanted his mouth over hers with an ardency of one who wished to devour her, and she matched him hunger for hunger.

Gripping the front of his soft wool jacket to keep herself steady, she pulled him nearer.

With the pad of the same thumb that first kindled the flames of her desire, he pressed along the curve of her jaw, delicately prodding, wordlessly urging her to open for him, and Glain did. She let her lips part and let him inside, and whimpered the instant his tongue touched hers.

He tasted faintly of mint and honey—an unexpectedly sweet taste for a man so hard and powerful—and it liquefied her. She lashed her tongue against his, swirling her

flesh around his, in a bid to consume him and that sweetness.

Abaddon sank his fingers into her hips, kneading the flesh, then slipped his palms under her buttocks, cupping her.

The life drained from her limbs and she went weak in the knees, but he simply caught her, and edged her back, guiding her to rest on the edge of the small oak table.

Of their own volition, her legs slipped open, the fabric of her dress crunching in a shamefully hedonistic rustle that should have recalled where she was and stopped her. Instead, she found the ache between her legs throbbed all the more, and she was incapable of centering herself on anything other than that ache that was both terrible and wonderful all at the same time.

Abaddon gently nipped at her tongue. He was a primitive beast marking her, and she returned that light bite in kind.

He growled his approval, and Glain thrilled at it—and in this, a powerful awareness of her femininity. She reveled in her desire and in this glorious man's hunger for her. In a world where people disdained her, looking upon her as the aloof, frosty figure she'd deliberately fashioned herself into, Abaddon saw a woman capable of passion and desire.

He palmed her breasts, and a low moan spilled from her lips that sound lost to his kiss, before he drew his mouth away.

She whimpered at the loss, but he merely shifted his attentions, touching his lips to the shell of her ear, flicking that flesh with the tip of his tongue then moving onward in his quest.

He placed his lips against her neck, touching them to the place where her pulse

pounded for him and his embrace.

Abaddon lightly suckled and nipped at that spot, and on a shuddery sigh, she tangled her fingers in his unfashionably long, black, strands and held him close.

She'd never believed she was capable of this because she had come to see in herself what the whole world did. Only to find, she was capable of great emotion and fire and burning, and that she wanted all of it.

She wanted to live life as fully as this embrace. She wanted to know love and passion and—

And she never could.

Glain wrenched back, recoiling from that truth and this embrace she ached to continue. She wept inside and railed at the impossibility of what she'd wanted.

“Stop,” she rasped, and even as he instantly ended that kiss, Glain shoved him.

Despite her ineffectual push against his broad, powerful physique, he straightened so very casually...as if they'd not just been making love with their mouths, and took several steps away from her.

Glain jumped up. Her skirts fell noisily about her ankles and to give her hands something to do, to give herself a purposeful task so she didn't have to meet Abaddon's eyes, she frantically patted at the front of her dress.

The bell at the front of the library jingled announcing a patron, and Glain lifted a frantic stare to Abaddon, needing him to retreat lest they be seen standing so closely together. Yet, with the speed of a London pickpocket who'd filched her reticule outside the theatre one night, years earlier, Abaddon had already moved.

Glain kept her head down and headed for the door.

“My lady,” Abaddon called. “You’re not going to want to forget your book.” He pointed to the volume she’d thought her father had burned, the one Opal rescued and returned.

And the only reason she grabbed it was so the dark-eyed patron now giving her a curious look didn’t wonder at her empty hands.

Throwing her shoulders back and tilting her chin, Glain marched from the library with her head held high and not a single word more for Abaddon Grimoire.

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A baddon didn't have too much of a problem with the nobility.

Yes, he thought they were hoity-toity, self-important snobs, but he also had seen enough of those men and women come through the door of this library to know they were to be pitied more than anything.

Gilded birds, the lot of them, trapped in cages, with their wings clipped, and no hope of flight or escape.

He'd seen enough and had enough experiences with them to also know their world was the last one he wished to belong to.

That those people weren't the kind he cared to rub shoulders with—aside from his dealings with the ones eager to fill their minds with knowledge or escape in the pages of the books he offered.

That was, with the exception of the Duke of Strathearn, his greatest sponsor, and the latest gentleman to enter his shop.

And now the exception includes a certain lady who kisses like a temptress .

“A quiet day,” the duke remarked. Tugging free his gloves, Strathearn stuffed them inside the front of his fine woolen cloak and cast an interested look out the window. “That is with the exception of...that one.”

He followed the other man's pointed stare to where Glain, her cheeks red from either her blush or the cold of the winter air, moved with purposeful steps towards the black

lacquered carriage waiting across the street.

Abaddon grunted. “You know, winters in London are quieter. To be expected there aren’t as many patrons,” he said, hoping that was enough to throw the other man off wherever this questioning was likely going.

Alas, his attempts proved in vain.

“I don’t recall seeing Lady Diamond here before,” Strathearn remarked.

“You know her?” Abaddon asked, that uncharacteristically impulsive question slipping out before he could call it back, and he silently cursed himself that lapse as his closest and only friend turned that sudden, entirely-too-interested focus back on Abaddon.

“Indeed. Our fathers were close as only two powerful dukes who took themselves and their stations too seriously could be.”

Of course, the duke would know a fellow duke’s daughter. Those two would move in the same circles. And it also meant, Strathearn had known Glain since she’d been a girl.

“Played together as children, did you?” Feigning casualness, Abaddon forced a drollness into his tone, attempting to pull more information from the other man about what Glain had been like as a girl.

The other man scoffed. “Hardly. She was a mere child, and I, a young man. My recollections of her largely include a silent, sullen girl too self-important to speak, even when spoken to. Her aloofness as a child, however, is nothing compared to the glacial woman she’s become. Now she’s Polite Society’s greatest Diamond, just as her Christian name suggests, as glitteringly beautiful as that precious stone, but as

cold and unfeeling as it, too.” The other man’s lips tipped up in a derisive smile. “Her reputation as an ice princess precedes her.”

“Ice princess?”

Strathearn nodded. “So much so, the ton even refers to her as such.”

Abaddon’s frown deepened.

The frigid moniker given the lady hardly matched the passionate creature who’d come undone in his arms not once, but twice now. No wonder she’d been cross when he called her princess. A woman who lifted into his kiss and whose hips moved rhythmically while he stroked his tongue against her, and—

Abaddon took a slow, steadying breath, pushing back those desirous musings.

“You seem to have a lot of questions about the lady,” the duke remarked, steepling his fingers, and studying Abaddon over the top of them.

“She’s a new patron.” The fib slipped smoothly from his tongue as only a boy, who’d lived and lied in the streets of East London could manage. Determined to put an end to the discussion, he proceeded to gather up the books Glain’s sister had been reading, stacking them in a neat pile to put them away for when she returned. “It’s my business to know about the people who enter my library.” His arms full, Abaddon headed for the front.

He’d first met Strathearn seven years earlier, when the man had inherited his late father’s title and obscene amounts of wealth. The young duke had come to Abaddon’s circulating library with an offer of some twenty-thousand pounds to renovate the building and update the volumes by some two thousand books. From that moment on, the two had become unlikely friends. That friendship, however, did not mean

Abaddon wanted or intended to talk about the desirous Lady Glain.

After he'd set aside Opal's books, Abaddon returned to where Strathearn, standing precisely as he'd left him, stared at him with a concerned look.

"What?" Abaddon asked impatiently.

"You'd do well to avoid that one, Grimoire."

"What would you have me do?" he snapped. "Turn her out of my library?" It was a vow he'd made, something he'd sworn never to do. Now, the other man would expect Abaddon do that to Glain?

"You can't forbid her from entering," his friend allowed. "No doubt she'd attempt to ruin you. For that slight, she would have her father do so."

His friend spoke of Glain's father, that nobleman who'd confiscated her book? Something told Abaddon Strathearn knew even less about the lady than Abaddon himself, did.

"I've noted your concerns."

"Just steer clear of her, as much as you're able, Grimoire. All of Polite Society does. Ladies and gentlemen alike."

He drew back in surprise. A duke's daughter, refined in every way, one who advised on rules of decorum, was shunned?

"There's such a thing as lords and ladies too aloof for even Polite Society," the duke explained, following Abaddon's train of thought. "She is one of them. Gentlemen have courted her, only to be coldly mocked as they did. She is known for having a

lofty opinion of herself.”

Annoyance rolled through him. “Perhaps those men are just bitter, attempting to save face.” He’d seen enough gents with inflated heads, who wouldn’t take well to rejection.

“Possibly,” Strathearn allowed. “I thought as much, too, once.”

Something hovered unspoken in his friend’s words but as real as if it had been uttered.

An unpleasant sensation roiled in his gut. “You courted the lady,” he said, his voice, rougher than usual. An image of the regal, basically royal pair together set his teeth on edge.

“Not at all.” A light flush filled the duke’s sharp cheeks. “In my case, I attempted nothing more than a dance with the lady. When I attempted to speak with her through the set, she looked away, appearing bored, and told me if I was searching for shared interests, not to bother, as there was absolutely nothing either of us had in common, except our link to a dukedom and in that, she was right. We are nothing alike.”

The duke dropped an arm around Abaddon’s shoulders. “And you, dear friend, will do well to remember that. A lady as cold and unfeeling and heartless as that one is also one who’d ruin you and your business, for nothing more than the pleasure it would bring her in doing so.”

As if he considered the matter put to rest, Strathearn gave Abaddon a light thump on the back, and headed off to inspect the latest shipment of books he’d personally funded.

Tension rippled through Abaddon’s frame as he clenched and unclenched his jaw.

That harsh assessment Strathearn had leveled at Glain, somehow grated as much as the idea of the lady with the other man.

It didn't matter that he'd been similar in his first and even his second opinion of her. The uncaring, unfeeling, cold woman described by Strathearn was inconsistent with the one who looked after her younger sister and brother with a greater care than even a governess would—or in this, case, had.

Glain had proven to be a woman with protective layers about her, and he found himself wanting to peel each one back, to discover who she really was inside, this lady who desperately longed for the freedom of reading books, but who feared doing so.

Abaddon knew one thing definitively—despite his friend's warnings, Abaddon had no intention of ending the arrangement he'd made with Glain, and he had every intention of finding out for himself more about the enigmatic beauty.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:35 pm

In Glain's nineteen years, she'd been a favored guest of the king, dining in the palace alongside him and some of the greatest dignitaries in the world. She'd attended famed performances given at both Covent Garden Theatre and the Theatre Royal of Drury Lane.

Never once in all Glain's attendance at those extravagant affairs had she felt the eager thrill of anticipation that she did the following morning as she made the short walk from her carriage to Abaddon's circulating library.

She'd never met anyone like him in her entire life.

In fact, she'd never known there could be anyone like him.

As she reached the narrow front stoop, she paused, schooling her features and calming her heart.

Or attempting to, anyway.

He was just a man.

A powerful, virile, quixotic man.

No, those reminders meant to steady her didn't help.

How could they? How, when he'd kissed her with so much passion that her lips and body still burned with the remembrance of the feel of him.

She—

The door opened, jarring her from her desirous musings, and a blush burned up her body as one of Abaddon's patrons beat a hasty berth around her. Glain came crashing back to the moment.

Enough. You are not some silly, pathetic creature with her head stuck up in the clouds. You are reasonable and rational and unmoved by everything.

She gave her head a slight, clearing shake, and entered the shop.

After she'd drawn the door shut behind her, she pushed the hood of her cloak back just enough so that she might take a look around.

Busier than it had been, all her previous times visiting combined, the circulating library buzzed with patrons, perusing shelves, and sitting at the tables throughout the room. She moved her gaze past all of those lords and ladies, many whose fine dress gave away their station. The men and women were so absorbed in whatever books they read that they didn't so much as spare her a glance.

And then Glain found him with her gaze.

Her eyes landed and locked on Abaddon. With his arms filled with a piled of books, he moved between the shelves his arms. Stacked against his broad chest as they were, the volumes looked impossibly small.

Just like that, her heart jumped and kept at a dangerously fast pace, and her mind, body, and soul recalled her and Abaddon's latest embrace.

As if he felt her stare, Abaddon paused, looking her way.

Glain shot a hand up, giving a slight, bold wave that would have scandalized her father, and shocked society.

But she didn't care. Something in being here and being with him freed her in ways she'd never been in her entire life.

He—

Abaddon inclined his head in return, then casually proceeded with those books he carried. He set them down on a gentleman's table. The two men, dissimilar in every way: Abaddon, broadly muscled, chiseled of stone, and bearing a look of one cut from the same cloth as the all-powerful god, Zeus. The other tall, but slender to the point of painfully so, and with a crop of black Byron-esque curls, artfully and deliberately arranged.

Abaddon's presence commanded. He finished up with his patron, and she felt her pulse skitter to a too-fast beat. She held her breath in anticipation.

Now, he'd come see her.

Now, he'd—

Now, he turned on his heel and headed down another aisle.

She wrinkled her nose. Her cheeks warmed by a thousand degrees, and she forced the hand still hanging mid-air back to her side.

It was not a familiar way she found herself—him not looking at her. Him not seeing her.

That's how the entire world treated her.

But all those other people, she'd sought to dissuade from noticing her or talking to her. For the world, she'd donned that frosty facade so that she might remain unmarried and stay with her younger siblings.

Abaddon on the other hand, for him she'd let her guard down and let herself be as approachable as she could be. That was, as approachable as she could make herself be.

Abaddon who was so very indifferent to Glain.

With all the grace and aplomb, she could muster still, Glain marched through the library, heading for that table tucked in the corner where she'd found Abaddon reading with her sister. Unlike yesterday when there'd been a number of volumes littering that small oak table, today it was empty.

Unlike before, he'd not pulled volumes he thought she might like to read, ones he'd set there to challenge her, and for her to challenge herself. Which was fine. Or really, it should be. She didn't need him picking books for her. She was more than capable of seeing to the task herself.

Oddly, that left her bereft.

For, she'd found she rather liked knowing he'd thought of her and picked books with her specifically in mind. Because it had meant he'd been thinking about her.

Just as she'd been incapable of thinking about anything other than him and his kiss. Their kiss.

To give herself a purposeful task, Glain unfasted the clasp at her throat, and shrugged out of her cloak. Close to where her table rested, several hooks hung bare upon the wall, and she availed herself of one of them.

Glain headed off in search of a book. Only as she moved along the increasingly familiar aisles, she found her gaze not perusing the many gold-leafed titles but searching instead for him.

Stop it.

Stop it.

Stop it, this instant.

Those commands were a deliberate mantra, she played over and over in her head.

Without seeing the title, Glain tugged out a book positioned at eye-level and peered through the peephole she'd made.

And then promptly wished she hadn't.

Her gaze locked on Abaddon and a pretty young woman with plump cheeks, and an equally pleasingly plump form—voluptuous in every way that Glain—painfully thin—was not.

He was speaking, giving that lady several books. Only as the young woman collected each one he handed over, her eyes weren't on the titles but rather the dashing man who'd personally selected them for her.

Glain's teeth set together hard, clanking so noisily it was a wonder the duo didn't hear her.

But then, why should they? They would have to be engrossed in anything other than one another and their blasted conversation to have noted the fact that Glain stood watching them, a vicious, insidious poison-filled jealousy channeling through her

veins.

Why shouldn't Abaddon note the petite, full-figured woman? With the lady's midnight black hair, wide green eyes, and ample curves, she was utterly beautiful.

Unlike Glain who who'd perfected icy, aloof indifference and sharp, disdainful glares, the other woman smiled freely. Damn if a different emotion other than jealousy didn't form in that wad in her throat. And if she didn't know better and if she were actually capable of the sentiment, something that felt like tears.

A low rumble: Abaddon's laugh, filled the aisles.

Something he said, a low murmured response he gave the lady elicited a little giggle and a brighter blush, and Glain could not help it.

She growled.

A low, primal, primitive, raw growl climbed her tight throat and lodged there.

Abaddon's gaze crashed and clashed with hers, noting her noticing him and Lady Perfection.

Heart thumping, Glain swiftly jammed the book onto the shelf.

Mayhap he'd not seen her. Perhaps he'd merely been searching for another book for his perfectly lovely patron. After all, Glain had arrived this morning, expecting it was going to be entirely different between her and Abaddon. How could it not? There'd been a seismic shift forged by his embraces. He'd shaken her and her world. He'd left her hot and burning, and longing for more—longing to see him.

Abaddon, on the other hand, hadn't even looked at her. Throughout her time here,

patrons had come and then gone, until only a handful remained, and still, he didn't visit her.

She stared blankly at the books that sat between her and Abaddon. That stack proved a blessed screen that saved her from seeing him and the latest woman he offered his assistance to.

In fact, he'd helped those two other patrons more than Glain, whom he'd hardly noticed, at all.

One a young dandy for whom he'd dropped that stack of books on a table.

The other, a striking beauty who made little attempt to conceal her interest.

Glain compressed her lips into a firm line. Good, let him entertain Lady Beautiful. That meant he wasn't bothering her.

"Have a good look?"

She gasped and spun about so quickly; her skirts snapped noisily at her ankles. Glain grasped the shelf to keep herself on her feet.

Abaddon stood at the end of the aisle with his arms crossed in that lazy negligent pose that put his heavily muscled chest on full display, only heightening his masculine appeal.

He strode toward her with those languid, panther-like steps that dried up all the moisture in her mouth.

And then his words registered.

The crooked grin on his hard lips indicated he'd noticed her scrutiny.

She gasped. "I most certainly was not looking at you," she said on a furious whisper the moment he reached her. "Why should I care one way or the other if you were helping the young lady?" She didn't . "I didn't,"

His opaque gaze glittered...with amusement? "I meant, did you have a good look at the books," he drawled.

Glain rocked back on her heels. "At the books," she repeated dumbly.

Abaddon nodded and pointed to the objects in question. She followed his gesture, and instantly recoiled, drawing her toes tight in her satin slippers.

That was what he'd been talking about.

"Y-Yes," she said, the words emerging in a high-pitched squeak she didn't recognize as her own voice. "I...I had a great look. A very good one." Great was better than good. "Great," she repeated her earlier clarifier. "Just... great," she muttered.

That glint in his dark brown eyes gleamed all the brighter.

He leaned down. "Noticing me and one of my patrons, were you?" he murmured, amusement lacing his deep baritone, and her cheeks burned hot with another blush.

"I...was not. At least, not intentionally," she mumbled.

He grinned.

His smile was that of a cat who swallowed the canary and chased it down with a bowl of fresh cream.

And damned if she didn't wish she were that ill-fated bird, so she could be free of this exchange, and his knowing eyes.

She'd noticed him.

No, she'd not just noticed him, she'd been watching him with a lady, and by the way she bristled and flushed, she'd not liked it, one bit.

There was a masculine thrill of satisfaction at the fact she'd been...jealous.

"Have a problem seeing me with another woman, is it?" he asked, and the lady's blush burned several shades brighter.

"Absolutely not. At all." She slashed her gloved palms down towards the wood floor.
"At. All."

"I believe you already said that, darling," he drawled.

If possible, she went an even brighter shade of crimson, her cheeks burning bright enough it was a wonder she didn't catch fire.

"Because it bore repeating. It's hardly my concern which patrons you spend your time with."

He schooled his features. "In which case, if you'll excuse me. The lady still required—"

"No, she doesn't. She's leaving," she exclaimed, pointing at the lady in question, just as the young woman swept outside, along with the last of the library patrons, until he and Glain were alone.

“So, you didn’t care I was assisting a pretty young lady?”

She gritted her teeth loud enough that they clinked noisily together. “ Was she pretty?”

“Oh, I think we’d say she is.”

Glain pursed her lips.

Bringing her shoulders back, the lady donned an indifferent and icy don’t-approach-me look he wagered she used with lords and ladies alike at ton events. “What you do is not my business, Mr. Grimoire,” she said quietly. “The only reason I may have—”

“Did,” he corrected with all the insolence only he could manage.

“Noticed you, was because we entered into an agreement with one another, and as such, it is my expectation that as I am honoring my commitment you will honor yours, and make yourself available to me.”

Abaddon preened. “Noticed me, did you?”

“As I said, it was hard not to notice, as we have an agreement, and you should have been helping me, as our time together is limited.”

The lady spoke the way only a peeress could.

Insolent. Rude. Filled with a knowledge of her own self-importance.

At their first meeting, he had judged her mightily for it.

Since that day, however, a great shift had occurred in how he viewed her.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she demanded, stealing a glance about. “Go,” she ordered. “Find me something to read.”

Her eyes were faintly pleading, directly belying the command of her words.

Abaddon remained rooted there, contemplating her still. “Do you know what I think, Glain?” he murmured quietly.

She tensed, but did not shake her head, so he continued without her invitation to do so.

“I believe you like being here. I believe your being here has only a small thing to do with the agreement we made, and everything to do with the fact you want to be here, Glain.”

Her eyes flew wide, her golden eyebrows shooting to her hairline.

“And I also believe,” he said, leaning in close, “that you like me.”

The long, graceful column of her throat worked, and he expected she’d deny his last claim.

But she didn’t. Instead, her gaze slid away from his, and to a point beyond his shoulder.

Intrigued and filled with more than a little masculine triumph at her unspoken admission, he brushed a finger down the curve of her jaw. “You don’t deny it.”

“Why would I?” she asked tightly as he guided her gaze back to his. She still, however, directed her words to a point above his brow. “I...do like you. I do like being here, that is,” she said on a rush.

“You don’t have to act like that, you know,” he murmured, moving his caress higher, brushing his fingers along her sharp, chiseled cheekbone. “Haughty, cold. Unfeeling.”

She stiffened, and then pulled away. “I am haughty, cold, and unfeeling,” she said on a furious whisper.

“A woman who burns hot like you is anything but.” He stroked the pad of his thumb along her slightly fuller lower lip, and rubbed, setting that pouting flesh a’tremble. “A woman who kisses like you do, Glain, has fire inside, and is far more than the silk-stocking ordering me and everyone about.”

Glain drew back like he’d struck her. Her cheeks paled.

“You don’t know anything of it,” she spoke in hushed tones, laced with fury, and then in a clear indication she intended to say nothing else of it, spun on her heel, and marched, in the opposite direction, to the end of the aisle.

He easily overtook her long strides with his even longer ones.

Catching her gently but firmly by the arm, he steered her through the doorway located at the very end of the row.

He closed the door behind them, shutting them away in his private offices. The click of that door drowned out the lady’s gasp.

“What do you think you are doing?” she demanded on a furious whisper. “This is hardly proper.”

“Well, it’s hard to have a proper conversation in the middle of the library.”

“I’m not looking to have a proper conversation.”

“An improper one, then,” he said, keeping his features deadpan.

“Not an improper one, eith—” Her words abruptly cut off, and she wrinkled her nose in that endearing way of hers. “You’re teasing.”

He also suspected that two days ago she wouldn’t have been able to spot whether a person was teasing her. He suspected even more that no one ever had teased her.

“Do you know what I think, Glain?”

She tensed, and for a long moment said absolutely nothing, and for an even longer one, she didn’t so much as twitch a muscle or blink. And he waited.

Because he also knew she wanted to know...that eventually she’d give him the go-ahead to continue.

And then ever so faintly, but still discernable, she shook her head.

Abaddon continued. “I think you’re the most flawless lady, I’ve ever seen walk into my library. And if I were one who rubbed shoulders with your sort, in ballrooms and dining rooms, then I bet you’d be the most flawless lady I met there, too. But no one is as perfect as you let on that you are. No one is that cold. No one is that icy and unapproachable.”

“I a-m,” Her voice caught slightly.

“You are, but it’s by design, so I’m left with the question of...why?”

“Because I’m some puzzle,” she gritted out. “Some mystery that you’d seek to solve.

Well, I've told you before, I'm not a mystery to make sense of. Let me spare you once more the disillusion that I'm anything more than precisely what you've taken me for." She made to step around him, but he slid into her path, blocking her way.

"No, that isn't it, Glain," he said quietly.

"Then, what is it?" she cried softly, modulated even in frustrated fury, as only she could be.

"Because like I said, I suspect you like me...and I like you, too."

Her lips parted, and her jaw slackened, and she wore the same look of wonderment as someone who'd first caught glimpse of new, foreign lands. And then, her entire body jerked, as she drew up into herself. "No one likes me."

"I don't think anyone really knows you."

I don't think anyone really knows you.

She wanted to tell him to shut the hell up, in just that, rude, unrestrained way, too.

She wanted to tell him that he knew absolutely nothing about what he said.

Only...he did.

And he was right.

And she was torn in equal parts, wanting to both flee as fast and far away from him and this place and continue running never to return, and wanting to stay here with him forever, in this moment, where there was truth, and at last a person who saw her, who saw more than the shallow, snobbish lady she let herself be.

“I am precisely what you take me for, Abaddon,” she finally brought herself to say. “I’m nothing more than that.” Her voice sounded tired to her own ears.

And she was.

Tired to her soul of being alone and being cold and she didn’t want to be this way, and yet, she had to, and she also now knew no other way.

He cupped her cheek in a tender touch, his large palm rough and callused, and she leaned into him.

“No, you’re not,” he said, with a conviction he shouldn’t possess, for Glain herself didn’t even have that confidence about herself in those spoken words. “There’s so much more to you. The facade you present to the world, is not who you truly are inside. The question is...why?”

She stood there, so close she was nearly in Abaddon’s embrace, so close, but not close enough. She wanted to be in his arms, because in his arms, she felt...alive. She felt like a real person with warm blood flowing in her veins and believed, in those instances, that he might be right. That she was somehow more.

“I was not always this way.” She hardly recognized her whisper as quiet and small as it was, and she wanted to run from that admission, hide herself away before she spoke freely about herself. For she didn’t speak about herself. She was the Ice Princess, immune from pain and disdain and cold looks.

Only, Abaddon stared at her with a quiet patience, in a way that made her want to open herself to someone.

Nay, she wanted to open herself to him, let him in.

“I was very much like Opal.” Her gaze grew distant and her smile wistful as she recalled herself of long ago. “I was even more wild than my sister. There wasn’t a tree too tall to scale, or a lake too wide I could not swim...and naked, at that.” She closed her eyes briefly, the recollection so vivid, of her sluicing through the chilled waters so swiftly, she’d ceased to feel the cold, and had only been invigorated. “I read everything. Absolutely everything. My mother handpicked my governess...”

“One of those stern sorts who sought to transform you?” he predicted after Glain’s long stretch of silence.

“Anything but,” she said, smiling as she recalled that equally passionate instructor. She had formed the closest of friendship with the woman. Despite the difference in years between them, they’d been kindred souls lashing out at the constraints imposed upon them.

“She encouraged me to think and to do more than just sketch and curtsy. I was never freer than I was with Mrs. Burton.”

A coldness rushed in. Glain interlocked her fingers and stared at the fine leather that encased those digits. “Until my father finally took note. He discovered me and my mother and Mrs. Burton engaged in a snowball fight.” Her chest tightened, the same way it had from racing around that long ago day, in the frigid winter air. “Duke’s daughters did not run, and they did not laugh and smile obscenely. They were proper and polite and prim and groomed for but one purpose, making advantageous marriages,” she repeated each word by rote.

“It was the last snowball I threw,” she said, and sucked in a shuddery breath. “And it was also the last I saw of my mother. After that, he exiled her to one of his country properties, and only he visited her, and then he did so with the express intention of getting more children on her. Periodically, a wet nurse would return with a new babe. Opal and Flint. There was another between their births, but he was sickly and feeble,

and died not long after he'd taken his first breath."

Glain struggled to speak through a pain that would always be there. "My mother died giving birth to Flint."

"Oh, Glain," he said softly, and she found comfort in that gentle offering of his support.

"My mother was lionhearted," she said. "Like my sister." Unlike the person Glain had shaped herself into. "Eventually, he crushed my mother. But my sister does not realize what can happen, what will happen, if she conducts herself in a way the duke doesn't approve of," she said, willing him to understand. "And I...I needed to protect her and Flint."

His eyes fixed on her face. "What are you saying?" The gentleness in that question threatened to undo her.

Glain hesitated, before turning over that great secret she'd carried. "I know what I am. I know my birthright and dowry and," she grimaced, "how I look make me an object that many men would seek to possess, and if they did...if they do...then I won't be there to protect my brother and sister. They will be on their own."

He stared intently at her. Then understanding dawned in his eyes. "You presented yourself as a woman people feared being around."

She hesitated, and then slowly nodded. "Sometimes I wonder that it was so easy. I am his daughter, after all. How else to explain how I was able to make myself a woman men wouldn't consider marrying, and a person other women don't wish to call friend?"

When she finished, she waited for the rush of discomfort and nervousness that came

in revealing the most intimate parts about her life to another.

Only, it didn't come.

Rather, it felt so very good to share of herself—to let another soul in.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:35 pm

If a person had asked Abaddon just days ago about Lady Glain, he'd have said there was nothing more than what existed on the surface, and if there was somehow anything more, then he'd no wish to look closer to figure out.

And he'd have been as wrong as every other person who'd ever judged her.

What a fool he'd been.

Sometimes I wonder that it was so easy. I am his daughter, after all. How else to explain how I was able to make myself a woman men wouldn't consider marrying, and a person other women don't wish to call friend....

She'd known so much hurt and pain at her father's hands.

Was it a wonder Glain had shaped herself into a distant figure, one who shut out the rest of the world, and kept people out, and kept herself from feeling?

Abaddon carefully measured his words. "Glain, your father is a cruel bastard who hurt you, your siblings, and your mother. He isn't a man who'd think about protecting Opal and Flint. The fact that you did means you're nothing like him," he said quietly. Her chin quavered, and she dropped her gaze to her gleaming leather boots. Needing her to hear him, to see him, and all the truths he spoke, Abaddon guided her chin up until her gaze met his. "You are nothing like him," he repeated for a second time, willing her to understand that. To believe it. "In any way."

And then a lone tear wound down her cheek: a singular fat, crystalline drop that took a meandering path. Followed quickly by another. And another.

Surprise lit Glain's eyes, and she drew back slightly, touching a finger to one of those tears. "I'm crying," she whispered. And then, a beautiful, exuberant, fulsome laugh spilled from her lips. "I'm crying," she said in a joy-tinged echo. Gripping him by the front of his jacket, she brought herself up onto tiptoes to meet his gaze. "I'm crying."

"Glain?" he asked, concernedly. "Are you all right?"

"I am! Better than I've been in so long. I buried away all my emotions and built an armor inside to protect myself, only I forgot how wonderful it is to just feel ."

She laughed all the harder, and the happiness emanating from her person enveloped him in such a warmth and reciprocal joy, he wanted the feeling to continue forever. He wanted to be consumed whole by this nameless sensation, one he'd never, ever felt before.

Then, stepping out of his arms, Glain danced a happy little jig around the now-empty library, laughing all the while as she did, and he found himself joining in. His mirth mixed and melded with hers.

"Come on," he finally said, taking her gently by the hand, and her merriment ebbed.

"Where are we going?" she puzzled aloud as Abaddon led her back to the library.

He fetched her cloak from the hook and helped her into it.

Abaddon paused only long enough to grab up his thick wool cloak, and toss it around his shoulders, before collecting her fingers once more, and guiding her on.

Glain puzzled her brow. "What are you doing?" She adjusted her stride, hurrying to keep up. "Are you throwing me out?" her query emerged breathless and harried.

His heart tugged. “We,” he gently corrected her. “What are we doing, you mean? And no, I’m not throwing you out. Why would I throw you out?”

Some of the tension eased from her narrow frame, and he felt the way her fingers softened in his. “Because of my father,” she said. “Because I reminded you how powerful he is, and how he would not tolerate me being here in your library. That he would ruin you the same way he did her.”

From the corner of his eye, he caught the way she scrabbled with her lower lip, and Abaddon slowed his steps, ceasing the flight he’d set them on, and he looked squarely at her.

“I’m not afraid of your father, Glain,” he said gently, but with an intentional firmness underlying that pronouncement.

“You should be.” She slipped her fingers from his, and hugged herself in a sad, lonely little embrace, and he mourned that transformation, wanting to bring them back to just moments ago when joy had transformed her. “He is not a good man, Abaddon. He is powerful and uses that power to shape the world, bending it and people to fit his will and...” Her tone grew increasingly frenzied. “And he could destroy your library if he so wished it, and you...he could—”

“Shh,” he said gently, touching a finger against her lips, staying that frantic flow. “I’m not afraid of him,” he repeated. “I’ve dealt with uglier, meaner, more heartless monsters during my days on the streets.”

Her gaze grew stricken. “I didn’t know you lived on the streets,” she whispered. “What you must think of me complaining about my comfortable life as a duke’s daughter.” Her voice broke, and she turned her gaze from his.

“Hey now,” he said gruffly. Cupping her cheek and angling her face, he guided her

eyes back to his. “There are different kinds of hardships, and what you endured, having a father separate you from your mother, witnessing how he treated her...” Like a goddamned broodmare . Rage spiraled once more, and he took a slow breath, fighting hard for control. When he trusted himself to again speak, without fury shaking his tones, he continued. “You were hurt emotionally by the man who should have done everything in his power to protect you from pain. And that, Glain? That’s no small pain. It’s no less significant because it’s different than the suffering I knew. It’s just as real and profound and hard.”

Her mouth trembled, and a glassy sheen filled her eyes.

A pained groan escaped him. “Don’t cry.”

She blinked wildly. “I don’t c-cry.” And she didn’t. Those tears remained trapped in her eyes. “The d-duke said they are signs of weakness.”

Never more had Abaddon wanted to find a man and thrash him within an inch of his rotted life.

Wordlessly, he tugged Glain into his arms, pressing her slender frame against his chest, and he just held her. He held her as she desperately needed to be held.

She was soft and quiet through that silent embrace.

Only when he felt the tension ebb once more did he free her. “Come,” he said gruffly, catching her by the hand once more, and leading them outside.

A gust of cool winter air stole the air from his lungs and stung his nostrils.

“Where a-are we going?” she asked, her voice trembling from the cold, and her breath stirred a soft cloud of white.

“You’ll see.”

They continued north along the silent, empty London streets covered by the latest dusting of snow, until the cobblestones gave rise to a wooded knoll in the distance.

Glain slowed her steps. “What is this place?” she whispered; her voice filled with a reverent awe.

He stared on at the lands ahead, recalling the same wonderment he’d felt as a boy when he’d first looked upon them. “Finsbury Park. That there,” he pointed to the source of her amazement. “Those are the last remains of the old Hornsey Wood,” he said, leading her onward to that almost mythical forestland, until they stopped before a pair of towering oaks their enormous branches twisted and blanketed in snow, giving them a look of old wizened scepters tasked with watching over this enchanted land.

He untangled their fingers, and instantly felt the loss and coldness which came from that separation.

And yet, she stared transfixed by the winter wonderland around them.

“It is...magnificent,” she whispered, that exhalation inordinately loud in the December quiet. Transfixed, Abaddon drank in the sight of her.

The cold had left her creamy white cheeks stained with endearing cherry red circles. Their walk had loosened the lady’s hood and the winter wind had tugged free several golden tendrils. Those wispy, flyaway strands somehow softened her.

“Magnificent,” he murmured softly.

Her. She was magnificent. Beauty and grace personified. And he wanted nothing

more than to erase the sadness from her eyes and chase it away with a smile.

In his life Abaddon had faced any number of dangers. None of them seemed greater than his falling for this woman before him.

Magnificent...

Glain's heart thumped wildly.

For when Abaddon had spoken in a husky baritone, she could almost believe he was talking about her.

Her gaze locked with his heated one. The intensity of his piercing brown eyes speared her; they robbed her of breath.

Hopelessly, she stared back at him.

Abaddon drifted closer, and her body swayed toward his. Her eyes slid shut, as her mind and soul both replayed their previous embraces, and she longed for another of his kisses, the ones made of magic that drove away all the sadness and misery that had been her life these past thirteen years and filled her with lightness and joy.

The snow crunched under his booted footfall, and even with her eyes closed, she felt him draw nearer, because her body ran so in tune with his, she didn't need to see him.

He—

Something hit her lightly, right where her heartbeat pounded, and Glain cocked her head, registering that slight chill.

Her eyes flew open, and she looked from the smattering of a shattered snowball upon

her chest over to Abaddon.

Abaddon's eyes which glittered, not with desire, but merriment.

Glain's brow climbed. "Did you just hit me with—?"

A second snowball hit her square in the chest, leaving more white flakes upon the emerald, green velvet.

"A snowball," Abaddon drawled, passing another missile he held back and forth between his strong hands, like a juggler she'd once observed at the Royal Circus. "Why, yes, I did."

This time, she was prepared for it.

With a breathless laugh, she dove out of the way just as he launched that snowball at her, diving for cover behind a tree. "You dastard." Her breathless laugh took the teeth from her words. "You cannot just go abou—eek—" She ducked behind the enormous trunk. His latest snowball struck the center of the tree with a sharp thwack .

"Are you coming out?"

"That depends," she called.

"On?"

"On whether or not you intend to stop pelting me with snow."

"Fine," he vowed.

Lifting her chin, Glain stepped out from behind her cover.

Thwack.

A third missile struck her in the shoulder, drawing a gasp from her lips, as she ducked behind the enormous, gnarled trunk once more.

“Abaddon Grimoire, did you just...lie to me?” she charged.

“All is fair in love and war, darling.”

Even as she knew he referred to the latter, her heart raced all the more. “I don’t throw snowballs.”

“That’s a shame.”

She wrinkled her nose. “And why is that?”

“Because it means you’re going to find yourself trampled with snowballs, then,” he drawled, his voice drifting closer, confirming he was nearer.

And this time, her heart beat hard for altogether different reasons. With a delicious joy stealing through her, she dove quickly from her hiding spot and headed for another nearby oak.

This time, Abaddon’s snowball sailed ineffectually over her shoulder, as she dropped behind the trunk of the tree. “Duke’s daughters do not have snowball fights,” she called in her haughtiest tones, even as she squatted and silently as possible assembled a snowball. The skill came back to her as if a lifetime hadn’t passed since she’d last played so in the snow with her mother.

“Seems you’re at a disadvantage, then, darling,” he teased.

Surging to her feet, she charged forward.

Abaddon's eyes flared with surprise, and she delighted in that moment of shock.

She tossed her snowballs in quick succession knocking the hat square from his head so that remnants of the projectile rained down on his dark hair, and shoulders, and pelted him square in his chest.

He glanced down and stared silently for a long while at the mark made on the black wool fabric of his cloak, then slowly he picked his gaze up. "Oh, this is war, Glain Carmichael."

With a breathless laugh, she dashed off, taking shelter behind another tree.

And as she and Abaddon raced about like two children, playing in the snow, time melted away, and Glain surrendered fully to the moment—until he caught her with another snowball to her chest.

Breathless with laughter, she collapsed on her back. The cold of the frigid snow penetrated her garments, but she didn't care. She felt only this great, full joy so very powerful within her.

And it was because of this man.

She angled her head and studied him as he joined her on the ground. Their shoulders touched. Their hips kissed.

"This was s-splendid," she said softly.

"Yes." His eyes locked briefly with hers, before he closed them. "It was."

And once more, even as she knew he was talking about the moment they'd shared, it felt so very much like he spoke of her.

With his eyes closed as they were, she studied him. She'd never known anyone like him. A man who dealt in books, and didn't seek to stifle what a woman read, but rather who encouraged her to expand her mind and grow...and who also played as freely as a child in the snow.

She loved him for it.

She...loved him.

Glain froze. Her heart ceased to beat.

Loved him? What was this? She couldn't love him. It wasn't possible. She knew him but a handful of days. He was practically a stranger.

He was also a stranger who'd challenged her more than she'd ever been challenged in her nineteen years. He was someone with whom she'd shared more of herself than anyone. He listened to her and spoke with her and encouraged her to read and be free in her thoughts and with her opinions.

And you're just confusing your appreciation with him for something more...

That's all it was. She sought to reassure herself of that.

Abaddon's quiet voice slashed through her frenzied musings. "What is it?"

She gasped and looked over to find his hooded stare upon her. "Nothing," she blurted. "I...it is nothing. I was just thinking." About the fact that I'm falling head over toes in love with you. "How did you find this place?" She'd wondered this since

they'd first come upon the park, and also the topic felt far safer to discuss than her burgeoning feelings for him.

He flipped onto his side. Propping himself up on an elbow, Abaddon rested his cheek in his hand so he could face her. "I discovered it by chance when I was a boy, picking pockets. I'd snagged a purse, and the gentleman noticed and called for the constable. I never ran as fast in all my life. I ran through the streets and kept on running until my lungs hurt and my legs were numb. And when I stopped..." With his spare hand, he gestured to the area around them. "I reached this place."

A wistful grin tugged at his hard lips, softening him in a way she'd never before seen him, and also in a way she'd have not thought possible. The sight of that smile did the strangest things to her heart's rhythm.

"I thought for a moment, I'd run so fast I'd carried myself back to some long-lost time, where trees grew, and grass covered the earth..."

The image he painted was so strong, so vivid, she could practically see a younger, smaller version of Abaddon Grimoire in her mind. She imagined him as he'd been. And she hated so much for him that his life had been filled with such strife and uncertainty that he'd been reduced to picking pockets in order to survive.

Abaddon shifted closer, drawing her back from her own thoughts, and returning her to this present moment with him. "But then as I headed closer, I noticed a tavern, and well, then I knew I was stuck still in regular old England."

Her gaze went to the inviting smoke emanating from the chimney. There were people inside that large, stone establishment. She should be concerned with the possibility of discovery and yet...she couldn't care.

For just like that, she was reminded all over again how very shallow she and her

entire existence had been, of the comforts she'd enjoyed while he had struggled so. Glain turned onto her side, matching his movements so they faced one another.

She moved her eyes over the chiseled planes of his beloved face, lingering her attention on the faint crescent moon scar at the upper portion of his right cheek, and the faint stubble that formed a day's worth of growth on his unshaved cheeks.

"I am so sorry, Abaddon," she said softly, suddenly wishing she had noticed people before him, and not because of him.

Abaddon shrugged. "I survived."

"But that doesn't mean it was easy to do so. And people of privilege, people like myself had a responsibility to notice and do something. Instead, they...I...we, remained oblivious to your suffering."

"You had your own suffering to contend with, Glain," he murmured, running a finger along her chilled cheek.

Only his touch, was warm, and the heat of that slight caress chased away the cold.

Her lashes fluttered, as she leaned in, just as he did.

They froze, their mouths separated by nothing more than a hairsbreadth. Reality fought them both for a foothold.

"I've done any number of dangerous things in my life, but somehow this need to be with you, Glain," he said quietly. "This seems like the greatest danger I've ever faced."

She dampened her mouth. "Because I'm a duke's daughter." She well understood

those reservations, that fear.

He ran his thumb over her lower lip, as was his way, in a touch she'd forever associate with this man.

“On the contrary, darling. Because I want you,” he said bluntly, drawing a gasp from her lips. “And I know nothing good could ever come of it for either of us.” He leaned close, and she leaned nearer, so close she felt the warm sough of his breath fan her lips. “But even so, I’m hopeless to stop—”

Glain kissed the remainder of the words from his lips.

He stilled for a moment, and then he met her kiss in kind.

His lips moved in time to hers, devouring that flesh, and then parting them, he slipped his tongue inside.

A desperate whimper escaped her as he kissed her like a man who wished to consume, and she ached to be consumed by him.

He rolled onto his back and drew her atop him, trading the chill of the frozen earth floor for the warmth of his heavily muscled chest. They never broke contact with their mouths, their kiss a fiery conflagration, a violent explosion of passion and hunger.

He lightly nipped at the tip of that flesh, and she suckled him in return.

Abaddon groaned and their bodies pressed as close as they were, she felt that rumble all the way through her.

And there was no winter cold.

Had there ever been cold of any kind? There was only this all-consuming, glorious heat that she felt low in her belly and wickedly between her legs where warmth pooled.

His tongue tangled with hers in a dance far more wicked than any waltz she'd danced.

Glain gripped the front of his cloak, wanting to crawl inside him.

She'd never be cold again. Not after this man. Not after this embrace. She was destined to be forever warm in—

Something cold and wet landed hard on her back, and she grunted.

Abaddon rolled her out of the way, just as another branch overhead shook, raining down a sizeable amount of snow.

They stared at the now bare branches responsible for that interruption, and Abaddon chuckled. "Come," he said, jumping fluidly to his feet. He stretched a hand out, tugging her up. "I have to get you back before you freeze."

Only, as she allowed him to lead her along, back through Finsbury Park, she found she wouldn't mind risking that cold just to be with him a moment longer.

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She came to the library every morning.

She'd taken to arriving prior to normal operating hours, and a large part of him believed—hoped, even—that her reason for doing so had to do with her wanting to be alone with him.

Sometimes she asked for his help selecting books.

Most times now she did not. Most times she fetched her own, filling her arms with volumes and bringing them to that same table...and then she'd call him over and speak to him.

Every time, excitement filled her voice and lit her eyes, as she spoke so quickly her words tumbled together, rolling as one long sentence that had the ability to make him laugh with her contagious enthusiasm.

He learned she loved the works of the Enlightened Thinkers—especially Mary Wollstonecraft.

He learned she also had a penchant for gothic novels, romantic in nature.

He knew when she spoke of either, her hands moved like little whirlwinds, as she gestured wildly.

This was one of those moments.

“Did you know that this only came to be,” she lifted up the slender copy of the book

he'd come to recognize as her favorite, "is because she was engaged in a war of words with Mr. Burke? She attacks not only hereditary privilege but also the words Mr. Burke uses to defend it."

Outside ice-tinged snowflakes pinged against the window.

"Burke didn't deny the existence of natural rights," he pointed out. "He simply thought they were too abstract to be applied to societies."

She drew back. "Surely you aren't defending Mr. Burke?"

Had he condemned Old King George and vowed a revolution, Glain couldn't have sounded more shocked and horrified.

Seated opposite her, Abaddon leaned in. "You sound like a regular ole' revolutionary, Glain."

"But you have to admit, there's merit to everything Miss Wollstonecraft says," she went on, and it didn't escape his notice that she didn't deny those claims. She didn't allow him a word edgewise.

"At first, when Miss Wollstonecraft published anonymously, everyone took her seriously. But the moment they printed her name in publication, people called her ideas emotional, and impassioned. Every analysis I've read of her works calls her incoherent and illogical, and yet, I cannot think of anyone who makes more sense than she."

Glain did. This woman right here. Being with her made more sense in the world than anything.

She continued, wholly oblivious to the thoughts spinning through his head. "She—"

Abaddon leaned in and kissed her.

And then, as if it were more natural than breathing or completing that unfinished though, she kissed him back. He moved his mouth against hers, drinking of her. She sighed softly, and he slipped inside to taste of her, too. Their tongues met.

“I want you, darling,” he whispered hoarsely between kisses, needing her to know so she understood his want, and so that she had the sense to halt all of this—stop when he was too much a coward and selfish bastard to break this connection.

Abaddon kissed a path down the curve of her cheek. He reached that soft, sensitive skin of her neck that he’d come to learn drove her wild when he worshipped. “You should go.”

Glain’s head fell back, and she groaned low and long and wonderful. “I want to stay.” She paused, angling away until their gazes met. “I want to stay here...with you.”

He searched her face, attempting to understand what she was saying. Did he merely imagine what he wanted her to be asking?

Not breaking contact with his eyes, Glain took his hand, and guided it to her breast, placing it over that organ that thumped and pounded wildly—for him. And his own matched and then rivaled her heart’s rhythm.

And he was lost.

Surrendering on a groan, Abaddon stood caught Glain up in his arms, and carried her through the library to his offices. All the while, he kissed her. She whimpered and moaned, and he devoured the breathy sounds of desire that escaped her.

He let them inside to his private office, headed to the small cot at the far back corner

of the room, then he laid her down.

“Do y-you live here?” she panted against his mouth. She sounded more intrigued and relieved than horrified.

His lips twitched. “No, darling. I’ve in a townhouse.” Not on the fine end of Mayfair where she and her sort lived, but on a respectable enough side. “On days I work longer, I occasionally take to staying the night.” He slipped his tongue inside her mouth, swirling the flesh with hers.

“W-Well, I am very glad you have a bed,” she breathed between each glide of flesh.

She chatted as much while making love as she did when conversing about books. It was an endearing detail about her, and a new discovery of her, too. And he found he yearned for all those intimate details of what made Glain who she was. He knew she snorted when she laughed and he knew the books that made her smile widest, but he wanted to know all there was to know about her: whether she snored when she slept or how she took her tea.

He froze.

His heart thumped frantically for a different reason.

A reason that had nothing to do with this hungering to make love to her, and everything to do with the even more intimate yearning he had for her.

Dazed, Glain’s lashes fluttered wildly. “Am I doing it w-wrong?”

Her hesitant question filled with such doubt, it chased away the panic clamoring in his mind.

He groaned. “You’re doing everything right, love.” Drowning out the voices jeering at him for loving where he oughtn’t, Abaddon surrendered to the moment.

Their lips met again, and this time, as he kissed her, he reached between them, working her modest neckline down, baring her skin to his gaze and worship.

Abaddon paused only long enough to drink in the sight of her, filling his palms with the gently rounded, silken flesh.

Under his scrutiny, her chest rose and fell harder and faster.

He brushed the pads of his thumbs over the pebbled pink tips. “You are magnificent,” he said huskily, his breath pitching faster, too.

Glain sank her teeth into her lower lip and moaned low and long. Her head fell back as she reflexively pressed herself against his touch.

Emboldened, Abaddon drew the peak of her right breast into his mouth, suckling deeply of her.

A shuddery gasp exploded from her lips, as she arched up. Tangling her fingers in his hair, she clasped him close, holding him in place. “Mmmm.”

That incoherent dissolution of her speech sent the heat of his hunger spiraling, and he growled his approval.

He worshiped that flesh, only pausing to switch his attentions to the previously neglected breast.

Glain moaned. Her hips moved with an increasing franticness as she pressed herself to the hard ridge of his arousal.

Abaddon edged her skirts and chemise up higher, then higher, and with every swath of skin exposed, he caressed his fingertips along that silken soft flesh. Her calves were surprisingly muscled as if she were secretly a Spartan warriorress who raced about wild lands. He moved his quest higher, sinking his fingers into her supple hip.

“Abaddon,” she groaned, the pace of her gyrations grew.

He slipped a hand between her legs, cupping her center, and Glain went suddenly, absolutely still.

Abaddon paused and lifted his gaze, determining whether she wished to stop. “Tell me what you want, love,” he murmured, his voice hoarse and desperate to his own ears. “Do you want me to stop?” Even as he asked it, he started to withdraw from the thatch of silken golden curls that covered her mound.

Glain laid her fingers over his, anchoring him in place, keeping him there.

Her eyes locked with his. “Do not stop.” Hers was a command of a queen, and he was more than content to spend the rest of his days as her subject, answering her desires.

He teased the entryway of her femininity, sliding his fingers through her damp curls, and then slowly, slid a digit inside her.

Glain stiffened, and then with a sharp hiss, she moved her hips once more, lifting wildly into his touch. “You’re so wet for me,” he praised, and she whimpered, the thrusting of her hips grew increasingly frenzied. His shaft ached, and he wanted to slip a knee between her thighs, part her, and plunge inside the only place he wished to be.

But even more than that, he wanted her pleasure.

He plunged another finger inside her wet, warm sheath. She cried out, that incoherent echo of her desire ratcheting around the room.

Sweat dotted his brow.

His body throbbed, his shaft aching from the need to make love to her in every way, but he continued to tend her hungering—stroking her over and over again. Inside and out. Slow and then fast, and then slow, once more. Until Glain was rocking her hips from side to side, gyrating against his touch.

Then sliding down her body, he lowered his mouth between her legs.

She gasped and pushed herself up onto her elbows. “Wh-What are you doing?”

He paused, looking up at her. “Do you trust me?”

She parted her legs in answer, in invitation, and then leant a breathless confirmation. “I do.”

Abaddon scooped under her buttocks, filling his hands with that voluptuous flesh. Then he guided her higher and lowered his mouth.

The scent of her—all desire and pure woman—flooded his senses, and he stroked his tongue over her warm, wet flesh, suckling of the little nub, lapping of her.

“Abaddon,” she gasped. Then as if his kiss had sapped her of all energy, she collapsed on the small bed and tangled her fingers in his hair, guiding him, riding his tongue.

In the past, sex had been sex.

It had always been nothing more than a physical need to tend, as basic as eating or drinking.

But that had been before Glain. With her, with this woman, all that mattered was her pleasure.

Glain who curved her fingers sharply in his scalp, tensing and relaxing, as she urged him on, and then guided him on, pressing him deeper when she yearned for it, and edging him back when the sensation became too much.

She was close.

He felt it in the frantic, disjointed thrusting of her hips, and knew by the tension in her body. "Come for me," he coaxed.

He increased his strokes, and then her entire body stiffened, and a wicked little curse exploded from her lips as he slipped his tongue inside her tight sheath once more.

"Abaddon," she screamed, his name a prayer and a plea, and she ground herself against his mouth, over and over, and he continued to drink of her, draining every last drop of her desire, until she collapsed, sated.

His heart thundered in his own ears, and his cock throbbed, aching for more. Aching for all of her.

Instead, he gently lowered her skirts and joined her on the narrow cot.

A soft, sated smile teased at her lips. "That was magnificent," she said, her voice still breathless, her breathing still quickened.

"You are magnificent," he said, tugging her against him, and she went, resting her

cheek against his chest.

“I never knew anything could be like that,” she said softly, stroking her fingers up and down, back and forth, over the place where his heart still pounded for her. She paused, and slowly lifted her gaze to his. “Like the books.”

He flashed an uneven smile. “Either that’s the greatest compliment for books in the history of compliments, or an indication that my efforts in lovemaking are lacking.”

Her lips twitched, and a light blush filled her cheeks. “Hardly. They’re different types of wonderful, but both splendidous.” Her eyes, locked with his, grew serious. “I just never knew I could feel passion, or that I could love books the way I do. And you,” she pressed her palm firmly against his chest, emphasizing her words. “You opened my eyes to all of it, and I can never repay you.”

He caught her hand and raised it to his mouth. “I don’t want repayment,” he murmured, pressing a kiss against the seam of her wrist. You. I want...you...

And God help him, that terrified the everlasting hell out of him. The last thing he knew anything about, and the last thing he wished to be part of, was Polite Society.

Glain’s eyes darkened. She ran her gaze searchingly over his face. “What is it, Abaddon?”

And he found himself unnerved in a new way: by her awareness of the tumult running through him.

“We should get you straightened up,” he said, too much a coward to talk to her about the thoughts knocking around his brain. “The library will open soon, and...I’d not see you ruined.”

Disappointment lit her expressive gaze.

The moment suddenly stilted when it had never been so between them—not even at their first tense meeting. Abaddon and Glain presented their backs to one another, each of them straightening their garments.

When they'd finished, they faced one another once more.

And all the breath in his body lodged somewhere in his chest at the sight of her.

Her cheeks were flushed a shade of cherry red, much the way they had when they'd frolicked in the snow. The sapphire and emerald peacock hair combs tucked in her hair had become loosened, releasing several blonde strands that hung enchantingly about her shoulders.

“What is it?” she asked, patting her face. “Do I look a fright?”

“You look...” Perfect. Breathtaking . “Just fine,” he murmured those safer words. “Just a couple of hairs out of place.” He proceeded to straighten those fine jeweled pieces in her hair, worth more than anything he'd owned for the first twenty years of his life, and still finer than anything he'd worn or possessed in his entire twenty-seven years. A tangible, material reminder of the different worlds they belonged to.

They headed from his offices, just as the tinny bell at the front door jingled announcing his latest patron.

Glain stopped abruptly, as her gaze landed on the figure framed in the doorway.

Abaddon followed her stare.

He silently cursed.

The Duke of Strathearn moved his gaze between Abaddon and Glain before ultimately settling on the lady. “Good day, Lady Diamond,” he greeted, with an aloof chill Abaddon had never recalled of the other man in all the years he’d known him. “Mr. Grimoire,” his friend said, not taking his focus off Glain.

A blush climbed up Glain’s prominent cheekbones, and she dropped a queenly curtsy. “Your Grace,” she returned in clipped tones to rival the duke before them, and also not ones Abaddon had heard in so very long from her. “Mr. Grimoire, I thank you for your assistance.” She made a show of gathering up some of her books and tucking them into her satchel.

Avoiding his eyes, she hastened around Strathearn, making a graceful beeline for the door.

His friend didn’t waste any time. “What are you doing?” he asked, the moment Glain had gone.

“I think it should be clear,” Abaddon said with a grunt. “I’m working.” To demonstrate as much, he proceeded to collect the two books Glain had left behind. He stacked them, putting them away for when she returned tomorrow.

“You know that isn’t what I’m talking about.”

Of course, as a notorious rogue, with a reputation for charming actresses and widows alike, Strathearn would have recognized the wrinkles in Glain’s gown.

“I’m talking about the lady. Nothing can come of that,” his friend said matter-of-factly. “Her sort? They’ll only break your heart.”

Her sort. “And what sort exactly is that?” he asked, infusing a steely warning there.

“A pompous lady,” Strathearn said bluntly. “One who is icy and cold and—”

“You don’t know her,” he said tightly.

“Actually, I do. I know both her type, and the lady herself.”

That reminder set Abaddon’s teeth on edge for a host of reasons.

His friend persisted. “She’ll take her pleasure with a man outside her station, but—”

“Have a care,” Abaddon warned in soft, steely tones that managed to briefly silence the other man.

“Think, man. Even if she did want a respectable future with you, would you want with one her ? One that requires you to be part of Polite Society? Not on the fringe of the ton, dealing in books, but dancing attendance on lords and attending balls and—”

He saw his own horror reflected back in the other man’s eyes.

“Precisely,” Strathearn said. “You don’t need her sort in your life. As it is, her father has her marked for a prince’s wife.”

A prince’s wife. She’d be royalty in every way.

And Abaddon found himself wanting to hiss and snarl like a wounded beast, and then hunt down the man who’d be the better match for her.

The duke rested a hand on his sleeve. “You need to let this go.”

His friend was right.

Abaddon needed to let her go.

And even understanding that truth, knowing he and Glain were two people born to two vastly different universes, he found himself secretly wishing there could be a future with her.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:35 pm

The moment Glain exited Abaddon's library, Glain wanted to turn and run.

She'd believed there couldn't be anything worse than being discovered by the Duke of Strathearn, until she hastened from the library, and found her father with his hands clasped behind his back, standing beside his black lacquer carriage.

The Duke of Devonshire lingered his hawk-eyed gaze on her slightly mussed tresses then he moved his focus to her face.

Cold and horror of the moment lent her teeth a noisy chatter, and Glain prayed the duke attributed the winter's chill to the color in her cheeks.

And then he locked his focus on her mouth, her swollen mouth. Her lips felt full and heavy from Abaddon's kiss...ten minutes? ten years? a lifetime ago?

She wanted to flee back inside and into Abaddon's arms, and away from this moment.

Alas, the decision was made for her—stolen from her.

"Get inside, Diamond," her father ordered.

Glain remained rooted to the pavement, wanting to tell him to go to hell, wanting to tell him even more explicitly what he could do with his ducal commands.

"Unless you want me to see this bloody library closed forever, I said get in," he said in a voice, his fury tightly controlled.

Glain sprang into movement. Resisting the urge to steal one last glance at Abaddon's circulating library, she accepted the driver's help, allowing him to hand her inside.

The duke joined her a moment later.

Glain made a show of staring out the window at the passing streets.

He knows.

From the moment she'd spied him there, she just knew. The Duke of Devonshire had gathered there'd been more of Glain's meetings with Abaddon. She'd seen it in his eyes.

Her father didn't again speak until the carriage lurched into motion. "Where is your maid?"

She kept herself motionless, refusing to tremble under his icy stare. "I was just finishing up and sent her on to my carriage." The lie slipped out surprisingly smooth and easy, considering the tumult inside.

This was bad. This was dire, indeed.

For her. But worse for Abaddon.

And for your time together.

As if sensing the lie, knowing one when he heard one, even one that had been effectively delivered, her father narrowed a sharp stare on her, and she remained still through this latest scrutiny.

"Let me see it, Diamond."

It took a moment to register he spoke to her. Because in these past weeks with Abaddon, she'd ceased to be Diamond and had come alive as only Glain, a woman capable of laughing and smiling and knowing love...

And also unfortunately, knowing great hurt.

"I said, let me see it," he barked, and she jumped at that unexpected loss of control.

With trembling fingers, she turned over her bag.

He tipped it over unceremoniously and her books tumbled to the floor of the carriage. Her precious volumes, hand selected by Abaddon who'd come to know so very well precisely what she loved to read, lay in a sad, sorry heap between her and her father's feet.

The copy of her Mary Wollstonecraft lay open on its spine, putting the title on full display. Never had Glain felt more exposed, more vulnerable than she did in this moment.

Her father grabbed his cane, and as if he were Perseus dealing with Medusa's serpent locks, he jabbed at the leather volume. "What do you think you're doing, Diamond?"

"They are just books," she said dumbly, wishing she had a greater defense than those words, particularly as they were so very much more to her.

"Just books?" he echoed. "Just books?" His voice climbed, and she felt her pulse rise, too, for the duke never showed such displays of emotion. He never showed any .

Bending down, Glain hastily returned the titles to her satchel. Her fingers trembled so mightily, she fumbled with that simple task.

As if recalling himself, the duke sucked in a slow, noisy breath through his flared hawkish nose.

He slapped the tip of his cane down on the lone title she'd not managed to tuck away from his wrathful stare.

And then he reached for that leather volume and took it from her. He robbed Glain of that beloved book, with the same ease all mercenary fathers and leaders everywhere, snatched rights and freedoms from their daughters and wives.

Glain wanted to rail. To snap and hiss like an angry cat. She yearned to rip that cherished copy from his fingers, shove the door open, jump from the fast-moving carriage, and run as fast and as far away as she could to another place and another time where no one sought to keep a woman from reading whatever book she so wished.

"Look at me, Glain," her father ordered, a frost to match the winter's day coated that demand.

Damn him. Damn him and his orders and his bullying her and her sister and brother, and their mother whom he'd banished from their lives.

For the first time ever, Glain met his gaze squarely, and glared at this man who'd sired her, with a lifetime's worth of hate.

He narrowed his eyes. "Do you think I can't take one look at you and know you've been conducting yourself like a wanton?"

Oh god. In an instant, she faltered, drawing back sharply into herself. Of course, she'd known he suspected but something in his speaking it aloud made it all the worse. "I've always known you had your mother's streak in you," he said crisply,

snapping off his gloves. He beat those fine leather articles together. “Wicked in every way, she was.”

And Glain knew she should be measured, she knew riling him was the absolute last thing she should do, and dropping her eyes, and being demure the first and only thing. But as he droned on, a harsh soliloquy on the woman who’d given her life, Glain’s rage kindled like a slow-building ember that fanned, and grew, into a blazing conflagration of fury. “Your mother—”

“My mother was not wicked. She loved to read and explore topics men are free to study. She challenged me to do the same. She was a good woman,” she said sharply, relishing in the way his brow flared with shock. “The very best.”

He sputtered. “Your mother was fortunate I was magnanimous and did not see her shut away for what she did.”

“What she did ?” she repeated. “What did she do other than teach me to laugh and love and live? And for that, you did send her away. Not to a hospital but to a place in the country.” Where he’d only ever visited the duchess until he’d managed to get an heir on her, in a final pregnancy which had taken her life.

“Your mother had outrageous thoughts about a woman’s place.”

He may as well have called Glain’s mother a faithless whore for the vitriol contained within his words.

“I’ll not have my daughter conduct herself in that same manner.” He glared at her. “You are done with that bookshop that caters to all manner of riffraff.”

“ Library. It is a circulating library and its doors are open to all people, regardless of station.”

“Precisely. It is—”

“It is as the world should be, Your Grace.” One where a person’s lineage, nor gender, mattered. Where people were all welcome and united in a shared love of literature.

Rage tightened his features. “You are done with that man. Am I clear?”

He couldn’t be clearer, and yet...

“No,” she said, in this continued show of defiance, the first she’d ever displayed against the duke and his dictates.

His eyebrows climbed.

Who knew how very exhilarating a show of rebellion in fact, was? Her euphoria lasted but a moment.

“I will see him ruined, Glain,” he said, almost bored sounding. “If that is what you wish.”

Her lungs constricted. Moments ago, she’d have sworn there could be no greater pain than when her mother had been ripped from her life, and the duke had begun his full oppression of Glain. But this? Knowing Abaddon would suffer at her father’s hands gutted her inside. She’d spare Abaddon every pain if she could.

Even if it meant the death of every happiness that came in just being with him.

She bit the inside of her cheek hard, scrabbling with that flesh, wanting to cry and rail and shout. In the end, she knew that would only add to her father’s fury, and that she risked Abaddon’s paying an even higher price.

The interminable carriage ride ended, and she made herself sit still, until the door had been opened for her, and a footman reached a hand inside to assist her down.

“Glain?” her father asked, staying her.

She glanced back.

The duke held a gloved palm out, his meaning clear.

Glain looked between that hated ducal hand and the satchel. He’d deny her not only seeing a man whom she desperately loved, but he’d assert himself even in interfering with what she chose to read?

“Now,” he demanded.

She tugged her satchel close. “No,” she said quietly. “You may determine where I go and don’t go, but I’ll not allow you to dictate what books I read.”

His snowy-white eyebrows snapped together in a line as shock stamped his features.

He quickly found himself. “Very well,” he said matter-of-factly, but she was not fooled by that uncharacteristic blasé response to her show of defiance. “You can enjoy your titillating, trashy books. I will take my displeasure to the bookshop owner peddling—”

Glain slapped her satchel in his hand.

“Very good, Diamond,” he said coolly. “Very good. That is all.”

That is all.

How casual he was about stealing literature from her, how matter of fact he was about exerting control over her. Hatred burned in her veins, threatening to set her afire from within.

“Damn you and your efforts to stamp out joy,” she said tightly.

She yanked her attention away from this man whom she so despised.

The footman held his fingers out once more, and this time she took them, ignoring the pitying glimmer in the servant’s eyes.

She made a slow, purposeful march up the stone steps, sailed through the front door, and climbed the stairs, feeling her father’s eyes upon her the whole way.

Only when she reached the hall, did she let her shoulders sag, and with a silent sob, Glain took flight, racing as fast as her legs could carry her. She yearned to run away from this place, and her father, and the threats he’d made, and from the pain of having her relationship with Abaddon severed...and the misery of not even having the freedom to read whatever books she wished to read.

Glain stumbled into her chambers. The moment she was inside, she collapsed against the solid oak panel of the closed-door borrowing support where she could.

Her chest and shoulders heaved, as she fought to breathe through the pain of it all. She’d believed all men were like her father. That they all sought to control and prevent a woman from having any freedom to exercise her thoughts and mind.

Until she’d met Abaddon. He’d not only challenged her to think more broadly but to explore philosophers and authors whom she’d never, ever thought to read, because she’d not known those works could make her feel as they had: her mind free and at the same time whirring with the magic of newly discovered ideas and thoughts she’d

never before considered, because of her previous ignorance. Abaddon had introduced her to thinkers and theories that made her see the world and her place in it, in a whole new way—which was no doubt why, weaker men wished to bury those books and starve women of the possibilities presented on those pages, so that they never hungered for more.

After all, one could not know the sweetness of chocolate without having tasted it upon their tongue.

Abaddon didn't seek to oppress Glain but rather, encouraged her to find her voice, and speak it freely. He had debated with her, and talked with her, and for the first time, since her mother had been ripped from her life, she'd felt free to share parts of herself with another person.

Tears welled in her eyes, and this time, she didn't fight them. This time, she welcomed the freedom that came in simply feeling and surrendering to her pain at the inequity that was a woman's life. At losing her books.

At losing Abaddon.

A tortured moan slipped from her lips, and she hugged her arms close, tightly around her middle, squeezing herself in a bid to tamp out some of this misery.

Her efforts proved futile.

She would never stop wanting him nor loving him. Because yes, she did love him. She didn't even fight that realization. She—

A hesitant knock sounded at her door, and she straightened. Her father.

"Glain?" her sister ventured, and some of the tension left her.

She smoothed her shaking palms over her face. “Enter.”

The panel opened, and her brother and sister stepped forward hesitantly. When Opal closed the door, she looked at Glain. “I...” Her words faded. “You’re crying,” she whispered, and their brother blanched, tugging sharply at his cravat. “I...I’ve never seen you cry.”

Yes, because she’d buried away all emotion.

No more.

Her father might control her in so many ways, but he’d not have this hold over her, too.

Flint looked over his little shoulder at the door covetously and grunted when Opal grabbed him by the arm and jerked him forward. “What is that for?” he demanded.

“You look like you want to leave.”

“I don’t want to leave,” he grouched, shifting back and forth on his feet. “I’m Glain’s brother. It’s my responsibility to protect her.”

No, it was her responsibility to protect them, and that was what she’d been doing all these years, and she’d never stop.

She reached out, grabbed them both, and pulled them into her arms. Opal and Flint immediately folded theirs about Glain.

“Whaffsthatfor,” her brother’s muffled response came buried against the fabric of her dress.

“I was wrong,” Glain whispered, drawing them closer, clinging to them. About so much. “I...Mr. Grimoire, and his library...” She made herself release them from her arms but placed her hands upon her sister’s little shoulders. Glain crouched slightly so she could look the smaller girl in the eyes. “I want you to continue going there. I will...protect you.” She might not be able to return but her sister could...and more importantly, her sister would. Glain looked over at Flint. “I’ll protect both of you.” Soon enough he’d return to Eton but until he did, and while he was here, she’d look after him, too.

“Hey, now,” he said gruffly. “That’s my job.”

“Our job,” Opal shot back, tossing a glare her brother’s way.

“It’s not,” Glain said gently, both touched and grateful for the evidence of their love.

Opal drew back. She passed a stricken gaze over Glain’s face. “But what about you?”

She forced a smile, the gesture feeling strained on her muscles. “I saw everything I needed to see,” she lied. “It was enough.” It would never be enough.

Fire lit Opal’s eyes. “I don’t believe that. I believe you care very much about the library and Mr. Grimoire. In fact, I believe you’ve fallen in love with him.”

Her sister’s words hit Glain squarely in the chest, and she recoiled from hearing another person—her sister—speak them aloud. Something in that made it more real and hearing this particular someone say it aloud only reinforced how impossible it was to love Abaddon, as nothing more could come of that relationship.

The fight and life drained from her being, and Glain slid slowly onto the floor, borrowing support from the door panel.

Opal hesitated, and then joined her on the floor, with a reluctant Flint sliding onto the other side of Glain.

“You...don’t deny it,” Opal ventured tentatively.

It wasn’t a question, and even if it had been Glain didn’t have the emotional energy to answer.

Opal rested her head upon Glain’s shoulder, and Glain closed her eyes, angling her head towards her sister’s. Alas, her sister hadn’t ever been comfortable or content with silence. “You should marry him, you know.”

A sharp, pained laugh exploded from Glain’s lips.

“What?” Opal said defensively. “You should.” The girl looked to their brother. “Isn’t that right, Flint?”

“Quite. He makes you happy and there’s nothing more important than—”

“You and Opal are more important. And if I marry, I won’t be here with you.”

Her sister proved relentless. “But we don’t want you to be here just because of us. Isn’t that right, Flint?”

The boy nodded. “Certainly not.”

“See,” Opal said earnestly. “We don’t want you to not marry the man you love—”

“It is done, Opal,” she said with a gentle insistence. “It is done,” she repeated as much for herself as for her sister and brother.

It was done.

The memory of the books she'd read and the time she'd spent with Abaddon would be enough.

They had to.

She'd stopped coming.

She'd sent around a polite enough note, thanking him for the time he'd spent elucidating her as to the nature of his establishment, and the enjoyable time she'd spent there—not with him, specifically—and had assured him that she'd seen all she'd needed to see.

And just like that, their time together was done. Sealed by nothing more than a respectful note of six sentences, and the swooping, elegant, inked letters that had made up her name.

Abaddon should have expected she would. From the first moment he'd met Lady Glain, he'd known their time together was limited, and that she was not the sort to enter this establishment. She'd been, in short, everything he'd expected of a pompous lady.

But in the weeks, they'd known one another, she'd proven so much more .

And mayhap that was what made her sudden disappearance from his life all the more agonizing.

It had been easier to think of her as a shallow, self-important lady who peered down her haughty nose at people outside of her station and books she deemed unworthy of her attention.

It was an entirely different thing to have discovered she'd only built and presented that masterful facade to the world, so that she could protect her younger siblings. That

underneath the sheen of ice the whole world—himself, at first, included, saw—was a fiery, passionate woman, possessed of a keen wit and intellect. A woman who devoured books like a starving man did bread.

Seated at the front table she'd made her own for all those times she'd come here, Abaddon re-read a note he'd already committed to memory.

It was for the best.

As Strathearn had pointed out, Glain belonged to a whole different stratum, and it was absolutely a world Abaddon had no wish to be part of. He was more than content to run his circulating library, procuring nothing more than books for both commoners and those people who were Glain's social equals. He didn't want to attend fancy dinners with them—lord knew he'd hated the lessons Strathearn had provided before those events Abaddon was forced to drag himself to with the express intent of procuring greater funds and sponsors among that ruling elite.

And he certainly didn't want to attend balls or any of it.

Abaddon traced a fingertip over the swoopy letters that made up her name.

The thing of it was, he would have done it; and he would have done it all gladly if it had meant she was in his life.

“ You look like hell.”

He glanced up.

At some point, Strathearn had entered the circulating library.

“Didn't even hear the bell,” his friend drawled. “I believe that, is a first.”

Abaddon grunted. “Strathearn. I don’t—” Want company. Want to talk.

Alas, he didn’t waste any more breath. Strathearn was already looking about for a seat. As a duke, Strathearn wasn’t a man who’d ever been told.

The gentleman dragged the nearest seat closer to Abaddon. He flipped it around, and straddled either side of the spindly, oak chair entire too small for his height.

“What was that you were saying, old chap?” Strathearn winged an eyebrow up. “You ‘don’t’ ...?”

“Nothing,” Abaddon muttered. Ordering him gone so he might have the quiet he sought, would be futile. As a duke, Strathearn wasn’t a man to be told no.

Strathearn’s gaze fell to Glain’s note.

Belatedly, Abaddon picked up the small sheet, folded it, and then tucked the parchment inside his jacket.

“Hmm,” Strathearn mused. “Never thought I’d see you this way.”

“What way?” he asked surlily. But he couldn’t help it. He was angry and miserable and spoiling for a fight.

“Besotted by a woman.” His friend gave his head a wry shake. “At that, a woman like Lady Diamond.”

He slapped a palm on the table and the books Glain had left behind, jumped. The books he refused to move because then it would mean all of her and all of her time here was at an end.

“What do you know of it, Strathearn?” he hissed. “You see what the whole world sees, but sometimes there is more to a person.”

As Abaddon spoke, his voice grew more booming, filling with fury. “If Mr. Baughan had taken me for nothing more than a street thief, even now I’d be stealing, dead, or worse.” He paused; taking several deep breaths to rein in his temper. “And there was... is more to her.”

Surprise glinted in Strathearn’s eyes, and his friend sharpened a knowing look on Abaddon’s normally ascetic face.

The fight went out of Abaddon. “And her name is Glain,” he finished tiredly, running a hand over his brow. “Her name is Glain.”

His friend beat his hat against his thigh. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

And yet, the words came tumbling forth from Abaddon: about the time he’d spent with Glain, and how desperately and hopelessly and helplessly in love he’d fallen with her. He shared with him the time he’d spent talking with Glain about books and philosophers, and his hungering for more with her.

When he’d finished, Abaddon removed her note, and read it once more. “Who the hell thought I’d find myself this way?”

From the corner of his eye, he caught the twitch of his friend’s mouth. “Certainly not I.” He paused. “Have you...thought about...speaking with the lady? Telling her how you feel? If she is the woman you take her to be—”

“She is.”

“Then, she will want a future with you, Abaddon,” his friend quietly finished over that interruption.

The bell announced a new patron and his friend glanced over, and Abaddon followed the other man’s gaze.

His heart jumped, and he braced, waited with bated breath for the woman to follow in behind that familiar pair, a young girl and boy.

But Lady Opal and Lord Flint merely drew the door shut and headed over. He and Strathearn made to stand, but like a duke he’d one day be, the boy waved them back.

“No need for any of that,” Opal said, availing herself to a chair, and spinning it around, she straddled it the way the duke beside her did. She nudged her chin his way. “I’m disappointed in you.”

The duke touched a hand to his chest. “I daresay that’s the first I’ve—”

“Stuff it. I’m clearly speaking to him.”

“Sorry,” Flint silently mouthed to the other gentleman, but Strathearn merely waved his hand in a like manner the boy had done moments ago.

Opal took in that exchange, and eyed the duke warily, before looking to Abaddon. “Is he a friend?”

Abaddon inclined his head. “He is. The Duke of Strath—”

“I don’t need introductions,” she cut him off. “Furthermore,” Opal scraped a derisive stare over the duke. “I’m well-aware of who that one is.”

Strathearn's lips twitched.

Opal dismissed the duke in favor of Abaddon. "I just want to be sure he's not some bastard,"

Strathearn and Flint both choked.

"Who's going to take exception if I call you out in front of him," the little warrior said over their fit. "I don't need him trying to shut down your library."

"And...you intend to call me out?" Abaddon hazarded, feeling the first stirrings of anything other than misery these past days.

"I sure as hell do," she snapped.

"We sure as hell do," Glain's brother corrected.

"Hush!" the girl scolded like a governess.

She fixed her fury back on Abaddon. "You did not come."

Abaddon stared at her.

She threw her hands up. "To see my sister."

"Was she...expecting me?" His heart kicked up its beat.

Opal narrowed her eyes into thin, dangerous slits. "I was expecting you."

There was a rush of disappointment. "Expecting me to..."

“To offer for her.” Exasperation sent her voice climbing.

A patron at the opposite end of the library looked over and frowned.

Abaddon inclined his head in apologies, before returning his attention to Glain’s sister. “Has she...given some indication that she,” wanted, “expected that?” he ventured, with a calm he didn’t feel.

The girl actually growled.

Lord Flint caught her by the arm.

And then the anger seeped from her taut little features. “I expected it,” she said again, this time, softly, sadly. “Because she was so very happy every time, she came from seeing you, and she laughed and read books and her eyes were so bright that I could only believe she loved you and that you loved her in return.”

Every word was a dagger dragged over his heart because he wanted everything Glain’s sister spoke of to be true.

And yet...

“Your sister and I came together because of an arrangement,” he said carefully. “And that arrangement ended.”

Opal’s frown deepened, and she looked over to Strathearn.

The duke shrugged. “Don’t look here. I told him he should go to the lady.”

The girl grunted. “I don’t much like dukes, but I might make an exception for you.”

Strathearn inclined his head. "I'm honored—"

"Don't make more of it than it is. I said I might make an exception. You're still a duke." Dismissing him, Opal looked to Abaddon. "My sister cannot come here," she said, her voice earnest. "I overheard it from the housekeeper who overheard it from one of the maids who is sweet with one of the footmen, that my father told her that he would shut down your library and ruin you if she continued visiting."

His chest tightened.

"What?" he whispered.

Flint nodded. "And she cried, Mr. Grim."

"She cried," Glain's sister repeated for good measure.

Oh. God. That was why she'd ceased coming around. Because her bastard of a father had intimidated her into doing so. Abaddon balled his hands into painful fists, wanting to throttle the man for hurting Glain as he had.

And me, I also hurt her. That realization threatened to split Abaddon in two.

"And he took her books." Fury burned bright in the little girl's eyes. "Her books, Mr. Grim. Her books. He handed them over to another footman to burn but that footman gave them to another footman who gave them to his sweetheart who is friendly with Glain's maid, who in turn gave them to Glain..." He sought to follow that lengthy chain of individuals. "And I have snuck into her room, when she is sleeping, and I find her with her books tucked under her pillow—"

A tortured groan escaped him, drowning out the rest of Opal's words.

Abaddon surged to his feet.

“Where are you going?” she demanded.

“I...” It occurred to him he didn’t even know where Glain lived.

Strathearn cleared his throat. “If I may?” He provided the address.

Flint’s eyes clouded with confusion. “That’s where we live.”

For the first time since she’d stormed the library that day, Opal’s eyes brightened with something other than the deserved fury. “It is! He is going for her!” She looked happily to Abaddon. “You’re going for her!”

Abaddon clenched his jaw. He was going for her, and he’d be damned ten times to Sunday if he left without having her in his life.

Strathearn jumped to his feet. “My carriage awaits.”

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:35 pm

Surprisingly, the prince was not the pompous person Glain had expected him to be.

He'd conducted himself with distinction during battles with Napoleon. He continued to serve as a diplomat and did not think anything of talking about those topics with her, a woman.

He was handsome, with a tall, slender frame, pleasing face, and clever mustache.

But none of it mattered.

He was not Abaddon.

He didn't speak about books and literature or ask for her opinion. Rather, he spoke about himself and his accomplishments, and seemed just as content speaking to her father as he did, her.

At that particular moment, the prince sat across from the duke, both men speaking about matters of horseflesh.

As they did, she welcomed the reprieve from having to be polite and pretend to be interested in him and whatever he spoke about.

Her gaze drifted over to the window. The curtains had been drawn back which placed the grey London sky on display. Then she saw it. A single flake. So faint, she may as well have imagined it. So small she blinked but when she opened her eyes again and looked, there was another. And another.

As the men's conversation droned on, her mind drifted to another day not so very long ago, but also one that may as well have been a lifetime past...to the time she and Abaddon had frolicked in the fields of snow, hurling snowball as their laughter had echoed on the still winter air.

She registered the frantic flurry of footfalls and looked up, just as the door was drawn open, and the family butler revealed the quartet behind him.

Her gaze bypassed the duke and her siblings for the tall, powerful man whose presence commanded greater than any mere title could.

Her heart tripled its beat. "Abaddon," she whispered, his name emerging noiseless.

A smile twinkled in the old butler's eyes. "A Mr. Grimoire to see Lady Diamond," the butler announced in his slightly nasally tones.

"What is the meaning of this?" her father demanded, surging to his feet. "We are entertaining."

Abaddon stepped into the room. "You forgot something, Glain," he called, easily overpowering her father's lofty tirade. Reaching inside his jacket as he came forward, he stopped before her, and withdrew a book.

She stared dumbly at the title she'd left behind that day. "Oh," she said, deflated.

His gaze locked with hers. "And you forgot something else...me."

His quiet pronouncement slammed into her, and incapable of words, she shot her eyes up to meet his.

Abaddon sank onto a knee beside her.

“Get away from her this instant!” her father shouted. Thumping a fist on the arm of the chair, he thundered for footmen.

Abaddon ignored him. “Every day since you’ve been gone, I’ve missed you,” he said quietly, stroking her cheek. Closing her eyes, Glain leaned into that bold, familiar, and magical touch. “I’ve missed your smile and debating you. I’ve missed watching you scour shelves, and...and...I miss the way you dog-ear your pages.” He paused, and she opened her eyes. “I love you, Glain, and I want to spend every day of our lives continuing to make you smile and finding out everything there is to know about you.”

Her chest quickened and tears filled her eyes. “You love me,” she whispered.

“And it is my hope that you can one day love me—”

“I love you,” she rasped, launching herself at Abaddon.

Abaddon, who easily caught her, and kept on his feet, holding her close.

Opal and Flint let out a triumphant cheer, clapping wildly.

“Footmen!” her father bellowed and then looked frantically to the prince. “You must forgive me. This upstart has no place—”

“It seems the couple is in love,” the prince said, with a smile in his voice.

Her father seethed, turning his wrath back on Glain and Abaddon. “I’ll see you destroyed.”

“Actually, you won’t,” Abaddon’s friend intoned from the doorway. “Mr. Grimoire has enough powerful patrons that your word will have no impact, one way or the other. I’ve as much if not more influence than you because I’m not a bastard about

my title.” He spoke with a haughty cool that only a duke could manage, and one to rival her father’s.

“Strathearn,” Glain’s father muttered. “I see you turned out nothing like your father.”

“Thank God, for that .” The younger duke flicked an imagined speck of lint from his shoulder. “It is interesting you should mention my late father. I’d be remiss if I failed to mention, thanks to he and his journals, I’ve a substantial bit of information that serves as a reminder to me.”

“Oh?” Her father peered at the other, formidable man. “And what reminder is that , Strathearn?”

The Duke of Strathearn locked his gaze with the older nobleman’s and smiled. “Not all of us are as illustrious as they may seem. Lady Diamond marrying Mr. Grimoire, and your younger children being free to visit whatever circulating library they so choose would really be no grand scandal in the scheme of...say, other things.”

Glain’s father blanched. He cast a frantic look at the frowning prince, and then returned his attention to the duke. “Are you th-threatening me?”

“I wouldn’t dare.” Strathearn inclined his head. The feigned levity vanished, as his eyes hardened. “I trust, given the circumstances, I won’t need to threaten you.”

His meaning remained clear.

The Duke of Devonshire cursed roundly.

Opal clapped her hands happily. “You’re definitely moving up in my estimation, Duke,” the girl praised.

Strathearn shot her a wink.

Abaddon rested his brow against Glain's, drawing her attention back to him.

"I'm not a prince," he said quietly, caressing her cheek once more. "I'm not a lord. I'm nothing more than the owner of a circulating library with a modest townhouse and even more modest wealth—"

"None of that matters," she interrupted, her voice breaking.

He continued over her interruption. "—asking you to marry—?"

Glain kissed the remainder of the proposal from his lips, and he returned that kiss.

Ignoring more of her father's blustering, Abaddon drew back and grinned. "Is that a 'yes', darling?"

"That is a yes," she murmured, and a giddy laugh spilled from Glain's lips, as he kissed her and, in his arms, she at last found herself... home .

The End