



# Just Think of the Scandal (The Fairplace Family Novellas #2)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Theophilus Fairplace didn't intend to wind up betrothed to a near-stranger by the end of his cousin's house party. But after an act of kindness goes wrong, he accidentally compromises Miss Eliska Czerninová, and now they're getting married.

Eliska isn't sure she wants to wed Theo. He's an excellent kisser, but she's wary of marriage while her inheritance is still being held hostage in Prague courts by a nationalist judge.

It really shouldn't come to Theo's surprise when Eliska jilts him, but he can't so easily walk away from her. Desperate to discover why she left, he sets off to find her. Once reunited, the sparking chemistry which sealed their fate heats up again. But when tragedy strikes during their journey, will they find the courage to claim their bond to protect one another?

**Total Pages (Source):** 22

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm*

May 1864

Blatherwycke Hall, Warwickshire

He was drunk. Very drunk. That was the only explanation.

“I can scarcely believe it!” one shrill, female voice cut through his mental haze like a serrated knife.

Theo winced at the pain. Perhaps the after-alcohol headache? Or both? He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, then tried again to view the scene around him.

Three or four matrons stood clustered together like weeds in a garden, bristling with moral outrage. Behind him stood several darkly-dressed figures, silent as execution witnesses. Theo tried to turn to better recognize them, but his head spun and he nearly cast up his accounts on the Aubusson rug.

Where was he? There were the revolting puce walls, the interlocking diamond pattern of the rug. Ah, he recognized the rug. An upstairs corridor in his second cousin’s country manor. But why?

“Just think of the scandal!” another shrill voice hissed.

Theo winced and rubbed a throbbing temple. Perhaps this was all a fever dream. He vaguely recalled going up to bed late last night—truthfully, the wee hours of the morning. And then he’d been unceremoniously yanked from his soggy, wine-induced dreams by rough hands and hauled into the corridor.

The bunch of harpies were still shrieking.

“Theophilus St. John Fairplace!” a deep voice boomed. It reverberated up and down the hall. The harpies fell silent. Theo imagined the frames on the wall rattled. His own knees were close to rattling.

This could not be good. Theo blinked rapidly, wishing he could sober up. Where was coffee when you needed it?

The row of men behind him hissed in sympathy.

“Sorry, old chap,” one whispered. Theo finally recognized a voice. It was Evelyn Huston-Ives, his third cousin. The man who’d invited him to this house party. Suspicion mixed with anger stirred in Theo’s veins. Whatever had happened, he was sure Evelyn had something to do with it. He always was a rogue.

If that were Evelyn, his third cousin...Theo swung his head around to face the booming voice.

That was the Baron of Erswich, Theo’s second cousin once removed. Evelyn’s father. A man without a shred of humor.

Isn’t he supposed to be gone on business? Theo racked his memory, trying to recall yesterday. Yes, Theo was fairly certain the baron had been called away for a day, because all the young men had seen that as an opportunity to get sossed on the good liquor.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Theophilus?” the baron bellowed, hands uncharacteristically on his hips. His graying mutton chops quivered with rage and his normally pale skin was now red.

“Umm,” Theo began eloquently.

Evelyn finally stepped forward, clapping a hand to Theo’s shoulder. He didn’t seem nearly as fishy about the gills, Theo noted sourly. “Father, I don’t think the situation is as dire as what you believe.”

Theo gratefully nodded.

The women gasped and looked to the baron, waiting for his retort.

“Not dire ?” the baron repeated. He stared incredulously at his relations. “I left for one day of this blasted house party, and you bucks couldn’t behave yourselves for one day ? Theo, I expected better of you.”

Vaguely, Theo became aware that other doors down the corridor were opening and heads popping out. Perfect. A larger audience. He wondered if he’d be escorted from the manor before learning what he’d done.

Lord Erswich flung a meaty hand to his side. “This is not nothing. She is family and under my care.”

Theo’s eyesight finally came into focus, and he peered in the direction his cousin pointed.

A young woman leaned against the green wallpaper, clutching a pale blue wrapper around her nightgown. Her thin ankles emerged from the last ruffle, and her toes scrunched in the rug.

Theo blinked against the flickering gaslight.

Her hair, a pale strawberry gold, hung over one shoulder in a mussed braid, and her

face was so bloodless Theo knew she had to be terrified. Still, she didn't shake or swoon. In fact, her face was raised, jaw set, ready to face complete social ruination.

"Uncle," she started, voice quaking but adamant. Her German-Bohemian accent was melodious. "He didn't—we didn't—"

One of the women snorted. "I know what I saw."

Theo glared at her. They weren't harpies; they were vultures. Ready to feast on this young woman's downfall and spread the gossip for their own entertainment.

The implications finally crashed on top of him, and for a heartbeat he couldn't breathe. The shock and horror of the situation built up until it was a roaring in his ears.

The baron stuck a thick finger toward him, jowls shaking. "My study. Five minutes." He beckoned to a maid hiding in a nearby alcove. "Take Miss Czerninová back to her bed chamber to compose herself."

If only Theo had five moments of peace. That, a quick bath, and a cup of bracing coffee, and he would be able to remember last night and prove to everyone he didn't ravish Elizabeth Czerninová.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm*

The night before

Eliska Czerninová held her head high as the other young women clustered on the far side of the parlor, giggling over the men.

The house party had been going for four days—long enough for the young women to decide which men were best to flirt with, who would be most willing to steal a kiss, and which was the poorest and least eligible among them. There were around eighteen guests, most handpicked and invited by her cousin, Evelyn Huston-Ives. A few of the older, married couples were friends or business acquaintances of her uncle, the baron. Most of them were heading off to bed soon, as it was nearing midnight.

That would leave the young, unmarried men and women mostly unchaperoned, for most of the mothers had become complacent about propriety, as it was the fourth evening and no one had acted inappropriately thus far.

Eliska held back a smile as she smoothed her green skirts and adjusted her seat in the velvet red settee. These English and their rigid expectations of respectability. She was half English, yes, but she'd been raised mostly in Prague, her father's home, and Europeans weren't quite as stuffy about things as the English.

"Did you see how Mr. Grey was looking at Flora over dinner? Like he was starving and wanted to gobble her up!" The leader of the group, Victoria, giggled as she twirled one of her sausage curls.

"I thought he was looking at the soup tureen," another girl put in. Her fan fluttered just below her limpid blue eyes. Poor lass, she still belonged in the schoolroom if

Eliska had anything to say about it, and was outmatched when it came to the other girls' matchmaking and flirting.

Eliska eyed the gathering as their skirts swayed near the fireplace. They'd chosen that area because it was in direct view of the parlor doors. On the second night, Victoria Glumley had declared the fireplace a perfect framing, a display that naturally drew the eye, and therefore she would stand there. When the young men entered the room after smoking cigars or doing whatever men do, they'd find four lovely young misses arranged with their best figures on display, like a painting.

Eliska debated joining them tonight. She hadn't the first two nights because it had seemed so affected and, well, obvious what they were doing. But she also hated sitting on the settee by herself, sticking out like a sore thumb.

She'd thought she knew English culture well enough. Her mother had been English. They'd visited her mother's family several times over the years. Eliska had even attended a house party before—but now she realized it wasn't a true English house party. It had been a family gathering during Christmas. Surprisingly different from a group of friends and acquaintances in rainy spring.

"Girls, cease your fidgeting, please !" A large, middle-aged woman harrumphed in a nearby chair. A glass of something alcoholic dangled from her fingers. Her pink cheeks were flushed and black eyes bright, evident to all the young women she'd had quite a bit to drink already. "The men will come when they come. Stop fluttering like a bunch of moths." Her black cap slid down her forehead, threatening to spill into her eyes.

Victoria and three others gave Schoolgirl a look of censure, as if it was her fault her companion was a boor.

Schoolgirl blushed. "Yes, Mrs. Baker."

The other girls should be thanking her, Eliska thought privately. Their mothers had all gone to bed because they thought Mrs. Baker would be a strong moral influence. But by this point in the week, all the young women knew in three more drinks she'd be fast asleep.

You'll never make new friends if you don't exert yourself. Eliska sighed and stood, ready to find a spot by the fireplace with the others. She was a long-term houseguest, just going along with whatever the baron decided to do.

The Cowper twins, who were night-and-day images of one another with their dark brown and white blond hair, eyed her and then the limited space around the fireplace nervously. They shuffled a few inches to the right. Those fashionable crinolines pressed against each other, causing Flower, Schoolgirl, and The Twins to fight for their balance.

Victoria, however, tall with a bosom made to drive men mad, arched a perfect golden brow at Eliska, halting her approach.

Eliska was twenty-three years old. She spoke four languages, could navigate both English and Austro-Hungarian nobility, had dined with Habsburgs, survived a cholera outbreak unscathed, only to become an orphan. She still wore half-mourning sometimes. Victoria Glumley was no match for Eliska.

Poise, my dear, poise and dignity. Her mother's words in a crisp upper-class British accent echoed in her head.

You are a Czernin, her father had told her many times. You are descended from people strong and clever enough to be Czech nobility in an Austrian kingdom.

Though Eliska was a bit uncertain how to traverse this situation without the rest of the guests automatically assuming the odd foreigner to be at fault if things went



badly. Before she could get her feet moving again, the door to the parlor banged open and five young men bounded in, reeking of cigar smoke.

Immediately all the women fluttered their eyelashes and smiled.

Eliska inwardly shrugged and went back to her seat on the settee.

“Perfect timing!” Mrs. Baker exclaimed, tipping back her glass and draining it dry. “Could one of you men refill this for me?” She waved it in the air, the crystal catching and refracting light from the sconces.

Eliska bit back a smile as she looked at the men, wondering which would capitulate tonight.

The men, all young, wealthy, and eligible, as Victoria put it, glanced at each other. Their neckties were loosened, even a waistcoat button or two popped open. Evelyn Huston-Ives, the heir to the Erswich barony, looked at his four friends.

Evelyn wagged his auburn eyebrows. After a brief, wordless conference, Mr. Fairplace sighed and stalked over to the tipsy Mrs. Baker and plucked the drink from her hand. “What can I get you, madam?” he asked politely. “Sherry?”

“Brandy,” came the definite reply.

Mr. Fairplace had already half turned, but he paused and looked back at the woman. “B-brand?”

“Yes. The strong stuff.” Mrs. Baker nodded, her double chin wagging, and folded her hands across her stomach. Her black crepe dress looked matte in the gaslight.

Mr. Fairplace shrugged and walked toward the drink table on the far side of the room.

Eliska glanced at him as he passed by. He was, she had gathered, considered something of a poor relation to the baron. Not that she could judge. He was of average height but had broad shoulders, with brown hair and sideburns. It was quite dashing, she had to admit.

Well, she amended as she watched him pour, he wasn't a poor relation. She'd overheard Evelyn say before the party how Mr. Fairplace's older brother was not only a knighted war hero but a wealthy businessman. Their only sin was to be peripheral players of High Society, jockeying for position from the outside.

"His mother is a member of a junior branch of the Huston-Ives," Evelyn had explained. "Father's second cousin."

And Eliska was the baroness's niece. Orphaned, inheritance tied up in the complex Czech-Hungarian court system, and now living with her mother's sister in Great Britain until something more permanent could be arranged. She'd received a letter only last week from her father's legal firm, informing her of yet another procedural delay. Maybe I should go back. Stay with old friends and request an expedited filing. Or whatever they're called .

A delighted shriek caught her attention.

"Oh, marvelous!" Victoria clapped her hands and beamed up at the men like they'd set the stars in the sky. "I just adore parlor games."

"Do, let's!" Schoolgirl smiled shyly.

"Now we just have to decide on what game to play." Lord William Percy was dazzling. Tall, thin, with a perfectly groomed blond mustache and skin-tight trousers, he was everything Eliska had imagined a British aristocrat would be. And he was the fourth son of a marquess.

“Reverend Crawley’s Game,” blurted a heavyset, brown-haired friend eagerly, darting a glance at Flower girl.

Eliska and everyone else gathered in a circle in the middle of the room, which was difficult with the women’s full skirts, and stuck both hands in the middle.

“I say,” exclaimed Mrs. Baker from her chair, swaying heavily to one side. “Is this quite appropriate?”

“Absolutely,” Evelyn assured. “Perfectly respectable. Everyone grab someone’s hand. As long as it’s not the person beside you, it can be anyone.”

One twin stifled a giggle. “Any hand?”

“Yes. We’re creating a knot and then the goal is to untwist us.” One man gave his male friends a rather smug look. Look what I’ve done for us, it said.

“Oh, I don’t think Mama would approve—” Schoolgirl began, but one of the other girls shifted and Schoolgirl gasped, jerking her foot backward. “But I suppose we can try anyway,” she offered feebly.

Eliska reached blindly through the mass of grasping hands and caught two: one slender with long nails and the other was large, a bit...hairy?...with blunt nails.

A twin whispered, “How risqué!”

“Mmm,” Evelyn said. “I think I’ve got the prettiest two hands in the room.”

“Mr. Huston-Ives!” Victoria exclaimed in censure, but her eyes sparkled.

“Everyone holding hands?” the leader confirmed. “Brilliant. Now, we untwist the

knot.”

The group immediately examined the twenty hands linked haphazardly in the middle. “Perhaps if we just...”

“I think Miss Cowper should kneel down and crawl under the group and pop up between Mr. Fairplace and Lord William,” said the Scottish friend.

Both twins dropped to their knees, then glanced at one another in confusion. “Which Miss Cowper?” they asked together.

Soon enough everyone’s bodies and arms were twisted together. The Flower girl was somehow stuck underneath a tangle of hands, kneeling while giggling. Schoolgirl was twisted backward, gripping a male hand so hard her knuckles were turning white. The Scot had discovered, to his dismay, he was holding Lord William’s and another man’s hands, but had consoled himself by cozying up to Victoria, who had her front pressed to his left side, holding on to Flower girl with one hand and Evelyn with the other.

Eliska, who had first thought this was a rather tame game by Continental standards, quickly found herself trying to maneuver toward Lord William, who held her left hand, and a twin, who was bent over backward to fit under two other arms raised like a high bridge.

“Erm, hello.”

Eliska looked up to see Mr. Fairplace sidling close, facing outward and arms pulled taut. He kept sidling, close enough to brush against her skirts. This game was not tame, not even by Continental standards.

Mr. Fairplace halted, leaning awkwardly backward so he didn’t get too far into

Eliska's personal space.

“Keep moving. This angle is pulling my arm from its socket,” hissed one of the men.

Mr. Fairplace gave Eliska an apologetic look and shuffled even closer, until Eliska wondered if her crinolines would be bent when she took them off tonight.

And then he came so close that he leaned over her, just a breath away.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm*

Mr. Fairplace smelled like sandalwood and lavender, and his navy silk waistcoat had brass buttons stamped with fleur-de-lis.

He had deep brown eyes, she realized. Dark chocolate, like her favorite treat. And his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled.

Eliska hadn't paid one unattached gentleman any more attention than the others. She'd conversed with them, played croquet and cards with them, listened to the girls discuss who was the most handsome—but she'd not been this close to one of them. They hadn't paid her any particular attention, either. When the girls had debated who was most handsome, Eliska had voted for the Scot, a very tall, long-limbed gentleman with twinkling blue eyes, a Grecian nose, and a broad forehead that made him look intelligent.

She was wrong, she realized now. Mr. Fairplace was the most handsome gentleman present. Those warm, deep eyes were framed by thick lashes and his shoulders barely fit into his dinner jacket. His hair, she noticed now, was wavy, with life enough in it to be interesting. And those side whiskers accentuated a square jaw with a cleft in the chin. Oh, yes, very delicious looking. A heat began in the center of her chest, spreading across her body as every part of her became aware of every part of him.

“Miss Czerninová? Miss Elizabeth Czerninová? Are you well?”

Eliska blinked as she suddenly became aware of his concerned look, just a few inches from her face. “Oh, yes, perfectly.” She watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed; it was perfectly at her eye level. She fought to keep her breathing even.

Mr. Fairplace smiled, friendly and cheerful. “Good. I was concerned you were ill for a moment there.” He was so close she could feel warmth radiating from his chest. The toes of his black shoes had disappeared under her skirts. “So, tell me, what are the parlor games in the Bohemian Lands like?”

They stood as close to one another as if they were waltzing. Eliska hid a nervous smile. Waltzing wasn’t scandalous—any more—because the couple was in constant movement. But they weren’t moving at all. In fact, Eliska could tilt her head forward and rest her forehead against his shoulder.

She wouldn’t. She wouldn’t. But she could if she wanted to.

She licked her dry lips to give herself another heartbeat to pull herself together. “Um, yes, probably quite similar. Though I’ve never played this game before.”

His eyes roved her face. “Me, either,” he whispered conspiratorially.

It took Eliska a second to remember what he was talking about. “It’s entertaining to be sure.” She flashed a nervous smile.

As the game continued, Eliska found herself hoping that he wouldn’t be pulled away. He wasn’t, not until the end. By that time Mr. Fairplace had told her about his family home in London, his older brother, his wife, and their brood of children, and inquired how long she’d been at Blatherwycke Hall (two months already), how much longer she’d be there (she didn’t know), how she enjoyed England (lovely but it rained a lot), and how she liked having Evelyn for a cousin (she demurred, he laughed).

Eliska answered him evenly, but her heart pounded at his nearness and she knew she was just one comment away from an embarrassing blush the entire time.

When the game ended, everyone properly in a circle holding hands, she sighed with

relief. A house party is no place to form a tendre, she scolded herself. Eliska was in no condition for courtship, as Victoria was always quick to remind. She was going home soon.

Mrs. Baker snored quietly in her seat, empty glass toppled over in her lap. It was past midnight now, but no one was eager for bed. Most of the girls were blushing, like Eliska, and a few of the men seemed quite confident in their charms.

“Oh, let’s play Farmyard!” Victoria Glumley clapped her hands, fluttering her eyelashes at Lord William.

“I don’t think I’m familiar with that one,” Schoolgirl said.

“It’s quite simple really,” Lord William said with a smirk. “We all pretend to be animals.”

“Hush, Lord William.” Victoria sent him a saucy look.

The twins glanced at one another, unsure. “We’ve played this before—”

“Capital.” Victoria cut them off. She stood in the center of the room, in command. “Everyone, find a seat near one another.”

“Who has not played Farmyard before?”

Eliska, Schoolgirl, and the Scot raised their hands.

Victoria smiled wickedly. “Brilliant. Everyone must shut their eyes, and I will go around the room and whisper a farm animal in each person’s ear. Then, when I shout ‘farmyard!’ we will all open our eyes, jump up, and make the noise of the animal we’ve been assigned. It will be a loud cacophony.”



Lord William grinned, stroking his mustache.

Eliska obediently closed her eyes and waited for Victoria to come around and whisper in her ear. After a few moments of listening to the men clear their throats, Victoria's skirts swishing, and the fire popping in the hearth, she finally felt Victoria bend close and breathe into her ear, "Donkey."

Another moment passed, and then Victoria clapped her hands. "Open your eyes!"

Eliska opened them.

"Farmyard!" Victoria shouted merrily.

Eliska jumped up and brayed as she'd been told. "Hee-haw! Hee-haw!"

Everyone sat in their seats, staring at her with varying emotions: mirth, satisfaction, embarrassment, and pity. No one else jumped up to perform their animal noise.

She froze, mortification turning her body to ice. She frantically scanned each person's face. Had she misunderstood? She glanced at Victoria for understanding.

Victoria stood in the center of the room, holding her stomach and biting her cheeks to keep from laughing.

Lord William burst into chuckles, and Victoria could hold it in no longer. She laughed loudly.

"Oh, Miss Czerninová! You should see your face." She wiped tears from her eyes. "Goodness, that was quite a show. How funny!"

Schoolgirl, eyes wide, looked back and forth between Eliska and Victoria. Then she

burst into high-pitched giggles, the relief on her face so evident it was obvious to all that she laughed to pacify Victoria and never draw her attention the way Eliska had.

The rest of the group chuckled, some uncomfortably.

Eliska sat back down, face as red as a tomato, she was certain. She wouldn't be humiliated. Not by a little English slip of a girl who was trying to impress an aristocrat. Eliska forced herself to laugh as if she'd been in on the prank all along. "How clever!" Her tongue felt heavy in her mouth and her cheeks hurt from smiling so broadly. "What a funny English game."

She refused to look at Mr. Fairplace. She'd thought he was so polite, so kind. He'd never displayed any sort of rudeness or meanness in any other game. Was it her?

Was she not wanted here? She forced herself to keep laughing as she looked at Evelyn, her cousin, her host.

He was laughing, too. "Ah, Elizabeth." He shook his head. "You're a good sport."

Eliska's belly flared hot with a coal of anger, but she couldn't show it now. "Of course, cousin. What else is the foreign relation for, but to amuse the guests?" She waited until the laughing stopped, watching as Victoria sat beside Lord William, a smug smile playing across her lips.

After two minutes of the group deliberating on the next game, she stood and said quietly, "I'm heading for bed now."

Flower and Schoolgirl waved goodbye. Mr. Fairplace frowned at her. She refused to meet his eyes.

Instead of heading for her bedchamber, however, she stopped at the little drawing

room at the top of the stairs. It had a low fire lit in the grate and a stack of books on the side table by the settee.

Eliska couldn't go to sleep now, not with the laughter roaring in her ears. She blinked away the sting of hot, angry tears. Humiliated just because Victoria could. Eliska flopped onto the settee and picked up the first book she saw, hoping to drown out the memory until she was so tired she'd fall asleep instantly.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm*

Theo finished another whiskey. He didn't usually drink this much, but Evelyn had broken out the high-quality Scottish whiskey that his father never would've allowed a pack of bucks access to.

"This is quite good, actually," the Scot said, and that was a stamp of approval if Theo had ever heard one.

"The girls are amusing when we can get them away from their chaperones," one man said, popping the lid off a decanter of port. "Good games tonight. Evelyn, can we convince your father to stay away another night?"

The men laughed.

Evelyn shook his head, the gaslight highlighting the auburn in his brown hair. "More's the pity. So drink up, mates!" He raised his glass in the air, rousing a cheer from the men.

Theo groped for the whisky bottle and poured four fingers into his cup. He wanted to forget the look on Miss Czerninová's face when she realized she'd been the butt of a prank. The confusion in her pale blue eyes faded to understanding, and then came that flash of hurt. But what kicked him in the gut was the mask she'd pulled on in the blink of an eye, laughing like it was a great joke she'd been in on.

She might've fooled everyone else, but not him. Because he'd been staring into those entrancing eyes for at least ten minutes during Reverend Crawley's Game, being absolutely gobsmacked over how special she was. Miss Czerninová had faded into the group of other unmarried young women, and he hadn't tried to get to know any of

them individually. He wasn't looking to marry, and none of the parents present would want their daughter to set her cap for a mere mister when Lord William, courtesy title or not, was in the room.

When his third cousin Evelyn had invited him to the house party, Theo was surprised. They'd attended Oxford at the same time and so had run amuck together for two years. After two years, Evelyn decided he'd achieved enough social polish and left for a Grand Tour. Theo had stayed the final year and graduated in '59, then joined his older brother Dennis to pool their life savings into investments.

Thankfully, their speculation had paid off—most of it was in railway stock, anyway, and that seemed a sure bet—and now Theo had enough of his own, independent wealth he could do things like go to a house party with people in high society and not worry others would see him as a fortune hunter.

But after Oxford, Evelyn and Theo hadn't remained close. Partially it was the nature of their social status: Evelyn spent his time in White's and gambling hells that only allowed the nobility inside. And partially, Theo was beginning to realize, although they were both twenty-six, Evelyn still spent his time as if he were twenty. All a lark, no care in the world, throwing money on anything that moved.

Still, the party was fun. Theo had been raised primarily in London, so though he was a gentleman he hadn't as much opportunity to hunt, shoot, ride, or stomp around nature as the other men with country estates.

An image of Miss Czerninová flashed before his eyes, braying like a donkey because she'd believed it to be a part of the game. Well, mostly fun.

Theo had honestly expected that he would be told to bray like a donkey, since he seemed just on the outskirts of the group. None of the young women were flirting with him like the wealthier men, and the young men all knew one another. Theo

showed up knowing only Evelyn. So when Miss Glumley had whispered, “No animal sound, just be silent,” in his ear, Theo had been quite relieved. Until he learned who had been singled out: the one young person more left out of the group than him.

“She’s Bohemian,” Evelyn had told Theo that first afternoon, when Theo had asked about the other guests. “Elizabeth Czerninová. But not the fun kind of Bohemian.” He chuckled, no doubt thinking of Parisian girls, absinthe, and artists living in garrets. “No, she’s actually Bohemian. Born and raised in Prague. My mother’s sister married some Bohemian noble and only came back for Christmas. Aunt Judith died of cholera last summer, and Uncle Rolf died in a hunting accident a couple months later in autumn while visiting Hungarian royalty. Elizabeth planned to stay in Prague but I gather she’s penniless until the courts pull her inheritance out of probate. Or whatever Bohemian courts call it. Or are they Austrian?”

Theo had mentally slotted her into several categories: penniless, pretty, orphan, foreign , and then moved on to the other guests.

But now, he mused, decidedly more bosky than he’d been when playing parlor games, she had several new adjectives. Proud, intelligent, lonely, brave.

“What are you woolgathering about, Fairplace?” One of the men pulled off his waistcoat and dropped it on the floor beside other clothing. As soon as the ladies had departed for the night, the men had pulled off their coats and neckties and began drinking the whiskey.

“Probably thinking about my cousin,” Evelyn hiccupped, showing unusual perception. “Mish Chern Cherneenka.” He squinted. “Czerninovo?”

Theo shifted in his seat. “Czerninová, you dolt. She’s your first cousin. How can you not remember that?”

Evelyn gave him an affronted look. "I'm foxed . I shouldn't be required to remember anything right now."

"The foreign bit of skirt?" Lord William clarified. "Ah, she's a pretty thing. Quiet, it seems. But then that's always a good thing in women."

Theo took another drink. Miss Czerninová was lovely. She spoke just the right amount, he thought. Perfect for her. Besides, he could practically hear his opinionated sister's voice in his head saying that only weak-minded men preferred quiet women. Theo smirked, for he had to agree.

"You don't see that color of hair very often," the Scot mused.

"Somewhere between red and blond," another agreed.

"They say women from the Continent are fast and loose." Lord William waggled his eyebrows. "Anyone here had the chance to test that with her yet?"

Theo's mood turned blacker. "What?"

"I bet she's learned all sorts of things. I wouldn't mind sinking my teeth into that arse."

The Scot grunted his agreement. "I wonder what her hair looks like when it's down. And against bare, pale skin." He glanced around. "Anyone willing to tup her and let us know?"

Theo was drunk, but he wasn't a lecher. He stared at Evelyn, waiting for him to shut his friends up.

But Evelyn smirked, then took another gulp of his drink.

“I’ll volunteer.” Lord William sniggered. “She’s a quiet little thing, but those women tend to scream the loudest during a fuck.”

Why wasn’t Evelyn saying something? He was not only the host of the party but also Miss Czerninová’s closest male relative. He was supposed to be protective of her, damn it! Theo glowered in his direction, but Evelyn didn’t seem to notice.

Fine. Fine .

Theo knocked back his drink, ignoring the fiery pain surging down his throat, and wiped his mouth with the back of the hand that still held the glass. He stood so quickly the Scot and Lord William glanced at him in surprise.

“Miss Czerninová is not only a lady and a guest, but niece of the baron. She deserves to be spoken of with respect, just like any other woman here.” He swayed, glaring at Lord William.

Lord William raised his hands in a gesture of harmlessness and raised his eyebrows to imply, What’s your problem?

“It’s past three in the morning. I’m going to bed.” Theo slammed the glass on the table beside him and stalked out of the room. He barely avoided flinging the door shut with a bang.

Theo stomped upstairs toward the guest rooms, weaving on the stairs. As he reached the top, the long Aubusson runner stretched across the mahogany floor muffled his footsteps. The wide corridor stretched out on either side of him, the gaslights on the walls flickering so low he couldn’t see farther than two doors in both directions. But the room just in front of him, at the top of the stairs, had gaslights on full blast and the door wide open.



Was someone in there? Who, at this hour of the night?

Theo had just enough sobriety left to silently walk in mostly a straight line and lean heavily against the doorframe to peer inside.

His heart skipped a beat.

Inside, sprawled across a navy velvet settee, was Miss Czerninová. The gaslight flickered across her hair, which had fallen from its chignon. The crinolines under her skirts were bent and mishappen, causing several layers of green skirt and frothy, cream petticoats to hike up her leg, exposing her stockings. She appeared to be sleeping.

Theo rubbed his face and stepped closer to make sure she was well.

“Miss Czerninová?” he whispered, reaching the edge of the settee.

She snored, scratched her side, and shifted on the seat.

An empty bottle fell with a muted thud onto the carpet.

Theo’s brows rose in surprise. He knelt and picked up the empty bottle, examining it. It hadn’t been sherry, the light alcohol society allowed women to drink. He sniffed the bottle. Port. And heavy stuff. He smiled, slanting a glance at the unconscious woman. “My, my, Miss Czerninová. I hadn’t taken you for a lush.”

She snored softly in response, the crinolines flaring upward to show off more of her stockinged calves. Her slippers peeked from under the settee.

Theo, in his inebriated state, struggled to make sense of exactly why Miss Czerninová was passed out drunk in the upstairs drawing room. He glanced around, looking for

clues.

Two books had tumbled off their perch on the side table, laying with pages open and spine cracked on the carpet. He peered closer at her and saw she'd fallen asleep with her face pressed against a third book. She'd have terrible sleep lines across her face when she woke.

What had she been reading? Theo leaned over her to catch a glimpse of the title.

The faint scent of bergamot and violets wafted up to him, mixed with port. His groin tightened at the unexpected, feminine perfume. Apparently, he wasn't so bosky that he couldn't appreciate a woman.

A beautiful woman, he realized. Elizabeth Czerninová was beautiful. Not just pretty, like he'd originally assumed. Her hair, like strands of the dawn, wisped around her flushed cheeks, and a thick braid had tumbled free of the chignon. Even her eyelashes were that reddish gold color, he noticed. They cast the faintest shadow along her cheek.

Theo grimaced, adjusting his trousers. He tried very hard to marshal his thoughts. Before he'd been staring at the curve of her cheeks, the shell of her ear, the soft skin of her neck like a blathering idiot he'd been...trying to discover something.

No, wait. Before that he'd been angry. He'd be furious while stalking up to bed. Why was he so angry? It had to do with the woman before him...but not at her.

Then Lord William's vulgar comments came back to him. The sniggering. Evelyn refusing to do a thing about it.

Theo's jaw clenched.

He couldn't leave her like this, all alone in a public place in the middle of the night. Not when there were cads like Lord William lurking.

"Mish Sherneenová," he whispered.

She grunted.

He closed his eyes to focus on the pronunciation. "Czerninová."

This time she roused enough to swat at him. "Shhh."

"You..." He closed his eyes, trying to concentrate on the right words. "You need to go to bed."

She snored.

Theo rocked back on his heels, not sure how to solve this problem. She wasn't waking up. He could go rouse a maid. But that seemed rather unfair and excessive. He could lie across the door to keep her safe. He could poke her until she woke. But then she might scream and everyone would think he was ravishing her. Theo tapped his lip with a forefinger.

Aha!

He'd carry her to her bed. It would be silent, quick, and keep her safe from any of the gentlemen downstairs.

Mind made up, Theo carefully slid his arms under her, nearly going cross-eyed with concentration, and lifted. He stumbled through the door back into the corridor, nearly knocking her head into the doorframe.

“Whoopsies,” he muttered. Then he looked down the long, darkened hall. “Mish Chernin-Chern—” He jostled her in his arms. “Where’s your room?”

She opened one eye, grumbling. “How should I know?” She promptly fell back asleep.

It took nearly ten minutes of standing in the corridor, racking his brain, for Theo to remember where her door was.

I’m quite clever, he congratulated himself as he more-or-less staggered down the hall. I must not be as foxed as I thought.

He jiggled the knob, trying very hard not to drop his damsel in distress, and pushed the door open with his foot. Shadows covered the room. His knee hit a low table, then the side of a chair. His poor shins hit the edge of the bed before he realized he was there.

Theo dropped her on the bed.

“Umph,” she growled, but then rolled over and drooled on her pillow.

Theo raked a hand through his sweaty hair, wondering what he was supposed to do now. Undress her? No, probably not. At least unbutton her dress? He didn’t think he could reach it. Maybe remove her stockings?

Again, his cock made his presence known at the most inconvenient time. Theo wasn’t seducing anyone. Not now, he told it firmly. Go back to sleep. Bother me tomorrow.

Theo settled for pulling up the quilt folded at the bottom of the bed, draping it over her prone body, and stumbling back out the door.

There we are. He glanced back at her door with a smug expression, taking inordinate care not to click the knob as he shut it. He paused in the hall, suddenly unable to remember where his bedchamber lay. He rumbled his hair and tried to straighten his wrinkled attire as he lumbered toward his door. He'd lost his coat and waistcoat long ago. Very subtle, he thought approvingly. No one will ever know.

He was too drunk to notice the pair of eyes peeping from beyond Lady Colston's cracked door.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm*

The next morning

After the discovery

All Eliska wanted was to lay her head on the desk before her, cover it with her arms, and sleep for a thousand years.

Her head hurt. Her eyes hurt. Her joints hurt. How could this much of her body ache when she wasn't ill?

The grandfather clock in the far corner of the room ticked and tocked, and it felt like a spike pounding into her head.

Uncle Erswich huffed on his side of the desk, and the god-awful stench of cigar smoke wafted through the air. Eliska groaned and went to lay her head down when she realized she already had, and it was as dark already as she could make it with her arms covering her head.

A scratch came at the door. Eliska shuddered at her uncle's loud call to enter. She didn't bother raising her head as the soft footfalls of a servant came forward and she heard the rattle of a tea set on the polished wooden desk.

"Pour yourself some tea," her uncle said brusquely. "It'll make you feel better."

Eliska hesitated, then remembered he was currently the only thing standing between her and homelessness. She reached for the silver teapot and fixed herself tea, though she privately wished for strong coffee. These British and their tea.

As soon as she'd finished stirring in the cream and sugar she picked up her cup and shut her eyes against the glare of the room. Eliska had a vague sense that her life was falling apart—again—and she should be far more frantic. But her head hurt too much to think of anything beyond sleep. God, she just wanted sleep.

Poise and dignity. Clever and strong.

The door opened again, this time without warning.

Eliska kept the teacup to her lips, breathing in the hot fragrance. Even if tea wasn't her favorite, the scent was comforting. It reminded her of her mother.

"Ah, you've finally deigned to join us." Uncle Erswich's snide remark cut like a dagger into Eliska's skull. She fought back a moan.

Heavy steps sounded, then clothes rustling and a loud thump just to Eliska's right.

She slit her eyes and turned her head just a fraction, not too fast to make the room spin, and saw Mr. Fairplace slouched in a chair, one elbow propped on an arm and cradling his head in one hand.

"Baron," he greeted. Mr. Fairplace slanted a look at Eliska, and she saw the same bleary expression with the same red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes that she wore. "Miss Czerninová."

"I gave you five minutes, and you took ten."

Mr. Fairplace straightened a little, and a cup and saucer rattled in his other hand.

Eliska smelled coffee. The good kind. Why had he gotten coffee? What did she need to do to get a cup? And damn it, how did he look so fresh, besides his eyes?

Mr. Fairplace's clothes were freshly pressed, his hair roughly combed, and she bet the inside of his mouth didn't taste like something had crawled inside and died overnight.

"Forgive me, my lord." Mr. Fairplace took a swig of his coffee. "I didn't think it would be respectful to show up in your study for this conference in last night's clothes."

"Or smelling of last night's whiskey," the baron harrumphed. "After this I'm having a word with my butler and my son. That whiskey is not to be released unless I am present."

A short, tense silence followed. Eliska wondered if she'd be asked to return to Prague. Or sent away to a drafty old house to live with a great aunt she didn't yet know existed. Prague fit with her plans nicely.

"I have a problem," her uncle announced, drumming his fingers on the edge of his desk.

Eliska opened her eyes more fully and stared at the tall, rotund man on the other side. Sunlight gleamed on the bald pate of his head, while his graying mutton chops were thick and full.

"My lord," Mr. Fairplace began. "Appearances are not what they—"

"Let me speak." His voice did not thunder or boom, but was so low and heavy Eliska imagined it might cause an earthquake.

Mr. Fairplace fell silent.

"I have a problem. At my son's urging I agreed to a house party before hunting season started. I let him invite his friends, as I invited my associates. I also



encouraged my niece, newly arrived in England, to participate.”

Eliska winced.

“I thought: Evelyn’s friends can be a bit fast. But Theo’s always been a good influence on him. So when I was called to another estate for the day, I decided to trust that nothing too terrible could happen in my absence.”

Eliska resisted the urge to fidget.

“I return home early this morning, but before I can retire for a bath and rest, Lady Colton accosts me in the foyer. And do you know what she says?” The baron’s bushy eyebrows rose.

Eliska couldn’t tell if this was a rhetorical question or not. After a short pause, her uncle continued.

“She tells me that she was awoken in the middle of the night by all sorts of goings on in the hallway, and that when she went to see what was wrong, she witnessed my cousin’s son, the one who I thought was a good influence, leaving the room of my niece. Half dressed. Hair askew. Reeking of whiskey.”

Eliska froze. She had blurry, uncertain images from the night before. She’d wondered how she’d ended up in bed when the last thing she could remember was reading a book and drinking straight from a bottle in the upstairs drawing room.

When a maid had come in and woken her at half eight that morning, flustered and wringing her hands, Eliska had groggily rolled out of bed and changed into a nightgown. Which, now that she was more alert, she reflected made no sense. She should’ve put on new clothes. But then, she’d never drunk so much in her life. After the nightgown, she’d thrown a wrapper on and followed the beckoning maid out the

door and into absolute pandemonium.

Once she'd realized what her uncle was shouting about, she almost cast up her accounts. Mr. Fairplace hadn't ravished her! At least...she didn't think so. She'd been fully clothed. Though she still didn't know how she'd gotten into her own bed.

Eliska's head throbbed, and she swore she'd never drink again. Not even so much as a tippie.

"You, sir, have compromised my niece. Exposed her to ruination. The entire house party knows you've stolen her innocence."

Eliska blushed furiously. How was this happening? She'd never been caught up in anything scandalous in her life, and now by the end of the week the majority of the British aristocracy would consider her a fallen woman. She'd never be able to show her face in England again.

Her aunt and uncle were absolute sticklers for propriety, even by British standards. What if they made her leave? The Czech courts were dragging their heels now that revolution against the Austrian monarchy was surging ahead. Eliska put a hand to her stomach, bile rising in the back of her throat.

"I did not compromise Miss Czerninová," Mr. Fairplace said firmly. "Nothing improper happened last night."

Eliska's shoulders relaxed with relief.

But Lord Erswich gave Mr. Fairplace a look. "She is not an upstairs chambermaid. Nor a governess. You cannot whisk this away as if it never happened. My niece is a lady. Her mother is descended from earls, and her father, Count Czernin of Moravia, was one of the few Czech nobles in the Bohemian lands. His family has produced

ministers and courtiers for the Habsburgs for hundreds of years. And now she resides with me until her inheritance is sorted out.”

Pride surged in her breast at her recited lineage. Her family had, for two hundred years, balanced precariously between Czech heritage and Austrian noble society and thrived. She might be the only remaining direct descendant of the Czernin title, but she would not let her ancestors down. She turned in her seat to look at both her uncle and Mr. Fairplace.

Mr. Fairplace slumped further into his chair. If he went any lower, she thought, his head would be on the seat. He gave a heavy sigh, then sat up straighter than a board. He set his coffee cup down and turned to face her directly. Mr. Fairplace leaned forward, putting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands. “Miss Czerninová,” he began formally.

Eliska tensed at the change in his tone.

“It would be an honor if you would accept my hand in marriage and make me...the happiest of men.” His eyes, slightly less bloodshot, stared so intently into her own she fidgeted. How did he discomfit her so?

Eliska blinked, quite certain she’d misunderstood. Her English was impeccable and she barely had an accent. But somewhere between the English and the wine from last night, she’d taken a turn and was unable to hear clearly. Her breath stuttered.

“Well, Elizabeth?” her uncle prompted.

She looked wildly between the two men, body heating and heart pounding. “Is this a joke?”

Mr. Fairplace pulled back, affronted. “Upon my honor, no.”

The baron sighed. “Elizabeth, you will marry Mr. Fairplace to save your reputation.”

“I—I,” she stuttered, finally putting the pieces of the morning together. It truly was this dire. Her tongue was thick, her mouth dry. Her body overheated, but everything else felt completely numb.

Mr. Fairplace sighed, rubbing his hand across his face. “I realize that these circumstances are not...ideal—”

Eliska wasn’t able to hold back a snort.

“—and that I do not appear as if I have much to recommend myself.” He glanced down at his clothes and gave her a wry smile. “However, we can spend our engagement getting to know one another. I’m sure we can come to some accord before we wed.”

Eliska didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. To some accord? What did that mean? A polite, quiet marriage where they steered clear of one another to keep harmony? Except when we make babies. Her face heated at the thought, and she hoped neither man could guess where her thoughts went. Making babies with Mr. Fairplace will not be a burden. He was dreadfully handsome, and last night during the parlor game she thought her heart would beat right out of her chest while she was practically in his arms.

She softened, even listing toward the man who might become her husband. The air felt thick and full of possibilities.

The baron cleared his throat. “You will wed tomorrow.”

Both Eliska and Mr. Fairplace jerked and stared at him in alarm.

“T-t-tomorrow?” Eliska demanded.

He nodded, albeit sympathetically. “The sooner the better. I will not play with Elizabeth’s reputation, as it is already suspended by a single fraying thread. When this house party ends, I want those gossiping busybodies to carry tales of a marriage, not a midnight rendezvous and shoddy betrothal.”

“But my lord,” Mr. Fairplace attempted.

“Besides, there could be a child. The sooner the better, I say.”

“There is no child!” Eliska and Mr. Fairplace blurted together.

“We’ll find out in a few months, shan’t we?” The baron drummed his fingers on the desk again. “I’ll need to travel to London to request a special license from the archbishop. Theophilus, you will come with me. It’s time to take responsibility for your actions. We’ll catch the 11:25 train from the village and arrive in London in time for a late lunch.”

Oh God, this was happening so fast. “I haven’t said yes,” she reminded them.

Mr. Fairplace eyed her. “If you refuse me Society will be cruel.”

“To me or to you?” she shot back, though she knew she was being petulant. Of course she, as the woman, would face the steepest consequences.

“I have no wish to be known as a man who would use a lady and then spurn her. It would impact my life a little,” he admitted. “But here in Great Britain, Miss Czerninová, you would be disinvited from every event. Your marital prospects would wither. Gentlemen would assume the basest things about you and treat you like a dox—a potential courtesan.”

“If you have any sense of self-preservation,” her uncle rumbled, “you will wed him tomorrow in the village church.”

She’d never get her inheritance if the magistrate heard about this. He’d put it so deeply in probate she’d never retrieve not just the money, but her family’s holdings and heritage. All she had left. Eliska sighed, accepting defeat. “Very well, Mr. Fairplace. I shall make you the happiest of men and marry you.” She rubbed her temple with her free hand. Everything felt like it was happening to someone else.

“Don’t sound so excited about it,” Mr. Fairplace teased.

Surprised he could jest right now, she looked at him.

He flashed a wry, mocking smile.

“Good.” Lord Erswich thumped the desk with his fist, clearly happy that one matter of business had been decided upon and was ready to move forward. “We leave in half an hour.”

Eliska rather resented how quickly he moved on from a decision that would alter the course of her entire life.

“Should I pack an overnight bag, or...?” Mr. Fairplace did not seem much more pleased than Eliska about the turn of events. “And perhaps we can spare a moment at the post office to send a telegram to my mother?” His tone was biting, and his eyes snapped with frustration. “She’ll be most put out to miss my wedding.”

The baron of Erswich glared across the desk at him, as if to say, That’s your own fault.

Eliska groaned and poured herself a second cup of tea. She didn’t quite feel human

yet, but she thought she could keep some buttered toast down.

Her uncle barreled to the door. “Well, Theophilus?” He paused with his hand on the doorknob.

“I’m going to spend a few moments with my fiancée,” Mr. Fairplace said mildly.

The baron harrumphed but left, leaving the door wide open for propriety’s sake.

Eliska looked at the man who would be her husband tomorrow, a frisson of alarm shooting up and down her spine.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm*

Theo reined in his frustration. “What happened last night?”

Miss Czerninová shook her head. “That’s what I mean to ask you!”

He sighed and ran both hands through his hair. “I came across you in the upstairs drawing room, passed out with an empty bottle like a swizzler—”

“I do not know that word, sir,” Miss Czerninová said stiffly.

“Swizzler? A drunkard. Drunk as an owl,” Theo continued, ignoring her gasp of outrage. “So I tried to do the kind thing and carry you to your bed so no hissing tabbies would see you still feeling alcohol’s effects the next morning, nor would any rogues in residence come across you in a, ah, vulnerable state.” For goodness’ sake, the tips of his ears burned. He broke eye contact, glancing at the ground between their chairs.

“You carried me to bed?” Miss Czerninová stared at him in a mixture of horror and dismay. “Into my bedroom? And what do owls have to do with alco—never mind, that’s not the important part.”

Theo fought to withhold a frown. “Yes, we’ve established that. I did it to save you.”

Her bloodshot eyes widened. “Save me! Save me?” She pursed her lips. “Like you saved me after the farmyard game?” Color rushed up her neck, staining her cheeks, and she shut her eyes as if wishing to pretend she’d never said that. Gods, she was beautiful.



An awkward silence fell between them. Guilt at his inaction last night made his eyes ache more.

Theo had a sudden epiphany. “That’s why you drank yourself silly.”

Her eyes slitted open and she glared, which was tantamount to a confession.

He leaned back in his chair, all the pieces coming together. “You left as soon as you could after that terrible prank.”

She gave a jerky nod, expression imperious, as if she dared him to mock her now.

“And instead of reading to distract yourself from Miss Glumley, you drank a whole bottle of port.”

The pink in her cheeks turned to red. “I read and sipped port. Besides, it was hardly the whole bottle.”

Theo raised his brows.

“It wasn’t the whole bottle,” she insisted with great dignity.

He decided there were larger issues to discuss and let it go. “It seems like we both had the best intentions, fully innocent, and—”

“ Why couldn’t you leave me in the—drawing room?” Miss Czerninová began to wail, then immediately hushed to a whisper. Theo bet she’d never felt the morning after effects of drink before, and her head was probably throbbing worse than his.

“Because I did not trust some of the men around here while foxed. You were more vulnerable than you knew. There was...intemperate talk after the ladies went to bed,

and I thought it possible one of the men, while inebriated, might accost you.”

She blanched.

Finally . She understood.

“I truly was trying to help you,” he added quietly.

Miss Czerninová sighed and rubbed her forehead with long, delicate fingers. “What a pickle.”

“Should I ring for some teacakes?” Theo wasn’t sure how to proceed with this conversation. “You won’t cast up your accounts, will you?”

She gave him a haughty look. “I think not.”

Theo slowly stood, giving himself time to adjust to the new elevation without falling over, rang the bellpull on the wall behind the desk, and sat back down. “So. I have little time, it appears, before an impromptu appointment with the archbishop. Should we take that time to get to know one another?”

She stared at him incredulously. He shifted nervously. Just when he thought she would burst into tears, she threw back her head and laughed, then groaned and put both hands on her head as if she could stop her brain from rattling inside her skull.

“I don’t even...I cannot comprehend...” She finally gave up and gave him a practiced, polite smile. “If we are betrothed you might as well call me Eliska.”

“I thought your Christian name was Elizabeth?” Theo liked the sound of Eliska, though. Sweet, plucky, winsome, it was everything she seemed to be, based on their conversation last night while she leaned against his chest.

“It is the English version of my name. But I’ve always been called Eliska. It’s an old family name, which is why my father named me despite it being Czech.”

Theo wasn’t up to date on the latest politics of Central Europe, but he knew that most Bohemian nobility were actually German or Austrian, and pledged fealty to the Austrian Habsburg dynasty. Her family was one of the few ethnically Czech aristocratic nobles in the Lands of the Bohemian Crown.

“Of course whenever we visited the court of the emperor and empress in Vienna, I went by Elisabeth. My mother hoped I would find favor with the empress by sharing her name.”

“Did it?” Theo inquired. He’d never met Queen Victoria, the English counterpart. Eliska was more elevated and connected than he’d first assumed.

Eliska shrugged. “Perhaps. But she is still so at odds with the dowager empress and the rest of the court. It didn’t make much difference for me.”

“Do you have hopes to return to the Habsburg court?” Theo asked, realizing they might have completely different goals in life. What would he do with a wife who didn’t want to live in England? Or perhaps theirs could be an aristocratic marriage, where they lived together just long enough to have a child or two, and then part ways amicably.

Eliska shrugged again, pain and resignation glinting in her red-rimmed eyes. “If the courts release my inheritance. If the Lands of the Bohemian Crown can find a balance between Czech revolution and Habsburg absolutism.”

He’d heard stirrings of war and revolution across Central and Southern Europe, but he hadn’t paid much attention. Once he’d seen the aftermath of the Crimean War in his older brother and other returned veterans, he didn’t read the newspapers with as

much enthusiasm anymore. Most of his investments were in Canadian, Australian, and British railroad stock, so he didn't have to be an expert on the Austrian kingdom.

"Prague is a beautiful city," she continued, eyes growing distant. "Have you ever been?"

Theo shook his head.

"The cathedrals and clocks, the coffee shops and mansions...it's unlike any other city on the continent. I hope you get the chance to go someday."

Theo cleared his throat. "Perhaps you can take me. I can't go on a honeymoon trip abroad right now, but in a year or so?"

She blinked, returning to the present. "Oh. Yes. Because we're marrying one another."

Right. Just that wee detail.

A maid entered with a fresh tea tray, complete with buttered toast and other light food. Eliska thanked her, then poured both of them tea and delicately munched on some toast. Her color looked better, he noted. Not quite so sickly pale.

"Please call me Theo," he said, trying to make some headway in the last few moments he had.

"Not Theophilus?" Her lips quirked upward.

He shuddered. "God, no. No one calls me that but the baron. And my mother, when I'm in trouble."

“You mentioned your mother earlier,” she prompted, sounding hesitant.

Theo smiled. “Yes, she lives in Nottingham with my older brother and his family. We were raised in London, but when my brother and his wife began having children they went to our father’s family home. She joined them to be near the grandchildren.” Eliska and I will give her more grandchildren. The thought struck him like a bullet, seeing his future rearrange itself, sharpen and change. He’d always imagined he’d marry sometime, when he found the right woman. And children would likely follow.

Now he had a name. Now he knew his children might have her red-gold hair and her pale eyes. And maybe she’d sing them German lullabies. The swift motion made his eyes blur and stomach grow queasy. Life wasn’t supposed to change in a split second, was it? This morning he was a happily single man, and now he was fairly certain his children would grow up learning German from their mother.

He stood abruptly, not able to breathe under the weight of new expectations.

Eliska stared up at him, confusion spreading across her face. “Are you leaving already?”

Theo nodded, resisting the urge to rub his temples. “I should go,” he said, searching for a reason to flee the room. “The, uh, train.”

Eliska nodded gravely and rose. “Return as soon as you can. I’d like to discuss how we can change the argument of my court case.”

He winced. “What?”

“If you’re my husband, the courts will listen to you. We’ll need to schedule a meeting with my English solicitors and review how this marriage will change the way we approach the magistrates in Prague.”

Oh, god. He was inheriting a massive legal headache on top of a wife. How had this—never mind, he knew how this had happened.

“Let’s wait until our heads stop ringing,” Theo suggested.

Her lips curved into a small smile and she nodded.

Eliska’s eyes truly were gorgeous, he realized, even when bloodshot. They stood, staring at one another, so close her skirts nearly brushed his calves. The air grew thick around them. Theo’s heart pounded in his ears, making his head hurt worse. But he continued to stare at her, taking in those delicate features, the sharp nose and thin, arched brows. Her eyelashes were so fine and pale.

“Mr.—I mean, Theo?” she murmured, raising those dawn-colored eyebrows in question.

Theo mentally shook himself. “I should...I should be going.”

She nodded.

Unaccountably warm, Theo turned to leave. He paused. His brother, Dennis, always touched or kissed his wife before leaving the room. His father had always gestured some sort of farewell to Theo’s mother, too. He cleared his throat, heat rising up his neck. But if he were doing this he’d do it right.

Quickly, before he could overthink and before she could scorn his attention, Theo bent back to her and dipped his head, pressing his lips to her cheek, and whirled out of the room.

At least, that’s what he meant to do. But when his lips met the warm, smooth skin of her face, he breathed in her soft, violet scent. Wisps of wild, pillow-mussed hair

tickled his face. This close to her, he became intensely aware of her figure and the warmth of her body.

She exhaled sharply through her mouth, the rush of hot air flitting across the bottom of his jaw. The soft, feminine sound sent a bolt of awareness and arousal through his body. He bit back a groan just before it escaped. His groin tightened.

Theo forced himself to pull back, rocking on his heels. Her eyelashes were fine filaments of gold he could only see up close. Dazed, he searched her face for any similar signs of connection or longing. She stared back at him, eyes as wide as saucers, hand hovering in the air, as if she'd been bringing them up to grab at him, but he'd left too soon. He had a sudden impulse to step forward, to take those hands and wrap them around him.

He cleared his throat and dipped into a short bow. "Miss Czerninová. I shall return." He fled, jerking his jacket to cover what little it could of his trousers. No one needed to know a little sigh and kiss on the cheek had him already at half-mast.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm*

All Eliska wanted was to fall back into bed and sleep. When she woke up, perhaps she'd find this was all a strange, demented dream. She didn't want to face the rest of the guests. She did not need to hear all their thoughts on the fast, loose ways of Continental women.

But she freshened up, then went to the breakfast room with her head high. She hated how nervous and frightened she was. It was only social censure. She'd survived her family's household catching cholera, for goodness' sake.

Heart thumping, Eliska entered the breakfast room.

People at the table froze, conversation screeching to a halt. Eyes stared at her. They felt like ants crawling all over her skin.

Eliska resisted the urge to fidget. She demurely clasped her hands before her wide, lavender skirts rather than fisting them in the folds like she wanted. As gracefully as she could, Eliska drifted to the sideboard to load a plate with toast, eggs, and marmalade. The spot between her shoulder blades itched.

Slowly conversation resumed, stuttering onward.

Eliska found an empty seat between one of the matrons and one of the Cowper twins. She made to sit, but the matron looked up and frowned at her.

"This spot is taken, I'm afraid."

"I beg your pardon." For a few seconds Eliska thought the woman had been honest.



But then as she reached a seat at the far end of the table with a floral arrangement blocking her view, she realized she was being shunned.

She burned with embarrassment but kept her expression calm, suddenly thankful for her mother's etiquette lessons.

The girls she'd played parlor games with last night glanced at her with wide eyes and scandalized expressions. The men, all old enough to be her father, leered between taking bites of toast and drinking their coffee. The young men, the ones Theo had been so worried about, were nowhere to be found. Likely still sleeping off the excess of last night.

Eliska gestured for a footman to get her coffee. Maybe that would clear her head and make everything better.

Quickly, before she'd finished her meal, the table emptied. Some hurried away with scornful looks. The rest ignored her completely. Eliska sat at the end of the table by herself, drinking the rest of her coffee and pretending it didn't hurt.

Maybe I can catch a train back to London, she mused. And on to the Bohemian Lands. The cholera that had taken half the household and her mother had also cut through Prague, killing the common Czech people and the German-Austrian nobility alike. Several of her mother's friends had perished, and the rest were still likely hiding in their country estates in Moravia. Eliska could probably go find someone who'd been friends with either her mother or father. There had been too much chaos at the time she'd decided to travel to England. But perhaps if she journeyed back they could take her in.

My reputation won't be damaged there, she reasoned. News shan't travel that quickly. But then again, it might. The telegraph was quick, and newspapers were only a few weeks delayed. She didn't think many in Bohemian society would read the

British scandal sheets. But...if they did...

She didn't have any relatives to claim the Czernin title, able to protect or shun her. Her mother would be horrified, but she'd also never made Eliska do anything she hated. Her father would've spun some clever tale and then called in a favor from another Habsburg courtier to squash the rumor.

The magistrate ruling in Eliska's inheritance case was hostile toward German and Austrian nobility, as he was Moravian and fought his way into the upper echelons of power. He conducted his courtroom in Czech, not German, and was also religiously conservative. If he caught wind of Eliska's comprised reputation, he'd delay the hearings as long as he could to keep the money out of the hands of frivolous nobles and make interest for the local Czech government off her court fees.

She wished to return to Prague to discuss better arguments, though she knew it was likely pointless.

No, she had to go through with the marriage. Probably.

Maybe the magistrate would take a liking to Theo, as a non-aristocratic British man of business. Hopefully. He seemed like a good man, not prone to drink or gambling from what she'd witnessed already. He was the most principled and sober of the party's young men, and she liked that. Eliska drank the last of her coffee, now cold, and sighed. She'd take this one day at a time.

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By supper Eliska was tired, so tired, of smiling and pretending all was well. She'd told anyone who would listen that a romance had blossomed between Mr. Fairplace and herself. She'd been just as surprised as everyone else, but love comes on its own timetable. Yes, he'd already asked the baron for her hand in marriage and they'd

gotten carried away in celebration. What did she like best about him? His honorable spirit, of course. And those deep brown eyes.

The young men had kept their distance from the ladies today, as if compromise was catching. Their eyes followed her through the garden and on the lawn, expressions inscrutable. Eliska hated it. She'd been mostly ignored the previous days, and it was unnerving to suddenly be the center of attention. Especially when everyone pretended she wasn't.

Her uncle and Mr. Fairplace—Theo, she corrected herself—returned just as the dinner bell gonged. Eliska's heart skipped a beat. Finally . He could take some attention off her.

Lord Erswich blundered in, his presence filling the parlor. He was still wearing his traveling jacket and smelled faintly of coal smoke. Theo strolled in behind him.

Eliska's body prickled with awareness. Which annoyed her. Was she so attuned to his presence because she was attracted to him, or because of the strange, uncomfortable situation?

His eyes scanned the room until they lit upon her. His eyes sharpened and his mouth curved—not quite in a smile, but at least recognition.

Her heart skipped another beat. She hadn't expected to bear the weight of his full attention. She struggled to breathe, trying not to falter under his gaze. She wouldn't shy away like a blushing violet. Shrinking violet? However the English saying went.

“We've just returned,” her uncle was telling someone nearby. “My cousin's boy is head over heels, you see, and begged me to go with him to get a special license. Seems he just can't wait, ho! Young bucks in love.”

Eliska watched Theo's face to see how he felt at being cast as a fool for Cupid.

"He's worried she'll be snapped up when we go to London for the Season," the baron declared loudly and with a wink. "Best grab her up now, y'see."

Theo's half-smile never wavered, nor did his eyes upon hers. His hair was windswept from the ride in from the station, and though his clothing was crumpled and travel-worn, he was still handsome.

Her cousin Evelyn strode over and shook his hand. "Welcome back, Theo. Just in time for the parson's noose."

Theo broke his eye contact with Eliska to speak to Evelyn. The group began to pair up, men escorting women across the hall into the dining room by order of rank. Normally Eliska would be somewhere in the middle as a count's daughter. But England didn't give much weight to foreign titles, she'd learned, and so she'd fallen to the back. So had Theo.

The past nights he'd escorted Mrs. Baker the companion. But she'd retired early with a megrim and so tonight he was hers.

Eliska gulped as she drifted to his side. He held out an elbow and she tucked her hand through. The warmth of his body nearly made her shiver.

"Good evening." He glanced sidelong at her.

"Good evening," Eliska replied. She hunted for something to say. In the past they'd exchanged pleasantries about the weather, favorite books, even a bit of fashion. She knew his younger sister loved fashion. But now, with the betrothal looming between them, everything was fraught with her nerves.

“How have they been treating you?” Theo asked quietly as they followed the crowd.

Eliska shrugged. “Not too badly.”

Theo made a sound in the back of his throat. “I’m sorry I left you to deal with it alone.”

“You couldn’t have helped it,” Eliska said.

“But Evelyn was kind and made sure you weren’t left out?”

“Evelyn and I didn’t speak all day,” Eliska admitted.

Theo snorted derisively. “He’s your cousin. They didn’t snub you?”

Eliska shook her head. “I’m not going to rub myself in somewhere.”

Theo choked. “You’re what ?”

Eliska looked at him curiously. “They do not want me there. Do you English not have a saying for this?”

His brows furrowed as he tried to understand. “Ah, you won’t force yourself somewhere you’re not wanted.”

She smiled. “Precisely.” They entered the dining room and he left her at her seat, which was several places away from him.

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Theo had spent the whole trip to London trying to ignore his glowering cousin the

baron. He'd let Lord Erswich force his way through the Doctors Commons to get the special license, made a quick stop to a jeweler, and climbed back aboard the train. His cousin glowered some more, then even began to give a speech about treating Miss Czerninová well. Theo had given his elder cousin an incredulous look—he wasn't the one pushing for this marriage—and they'd sat in silence the rest of the way. At the station he found a telegram reply from his mother, promising to do her best to be at Blatherwycke by eleven o'clock in the morning, just in time for the ceremony at the village church.

That telegram, those stark words in black and white, made it all too real. Theo crumpled the paper in his hands and hyperventilated most of the trip back to Blatherwycke in the curricule the baron drove. Everything is about to change. Whether I like it or not.

His breathing didn't ease until he entered the parlor and saw her. Eliska stood behind a settee, a little separate from the guests. Had she been mistreated? Why was she so alone? A fierce protectiveness welled up inside, surprising him. Even more so when he realized the tightness in his chest had eased at the sight of her.

She was beautiful, he realized. No, he'd already known that. But this was the first time he'd walked into a room and seen her as his betrothed, the woman he'd wed tomorrow. The woman he'd bed.

His blood heated at the thought of her under him, dawn streaking against the silk sheets and her pale limbs twined around him. His breath caught at the vision. He wanted her. Oh, how he wanted her.

At the end of supper the women stood to withdraw. Eliska shot to her feet a second after the others. Few had spoken to her. She wasn't a usually talkative person—at least, he didn't think so—but she enjoyed good conversation and he thought she had an original perspective as she was not wholly British.

The older women didn't glance Eliska's way as they filed out of the room. The young women did, though, clearly torn between wanting to snub her and wanting to bask in her infamy.

Eliska's chin rose and she began to follow the women. She was so composed that Theo almost missed how her hands trembled, nearly hidden by her skirts.

No. She deserved better than this. It was all his fault they thought she was wanton. He threw his serviette on his dessert plate and stood, the chair legs scraping the wooden floor.

"Pardon me, gentlemen, but I wish to join my betrothed tonight." He bowed slightly to the baron, who nodded in return.

Eliska paused on the threshold of the dining room. "Oh." She paused. "That's unnecessary. I do not wish..." Her voice trailed off as his long strides rounded the table and ate up the space between them. She didn't glance at the table.

Theo did, and found all the men wearing knowing smirks. Lord William said something, which made the young men guffaw. Anger expanded in his chest, making it tight. These men were part of the reason Eliska and he were trapped in this mess, and they viewed it as a spectacle. No, a farce.

He reached Eliska and took her hand in his. The warm, soft fingers spasmed at his touch, then settled in his grasp. Her hand fit perfectly in his. A wave of tenderness and sexual longing washed over him suddenly, sending his mind reeling. He tightened his grip on her hand, using it as an anchor for the present. "Shall we?" he managed to get out.

She nodded, and they left the room together.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm*

Eliska leaned into Theo's side, relishing the feel of his hand around hers. She'd been hesitant, embarrassed even, to accept his attentions. But he'd grabbed her hand anyway—not escorting her with his arm, but hand in hand—and she realized she wanted him with her. She was tired of pretending not to notice the remarks.

“I don't know what I'm doing,” she admitted, glancing up at his profile. He cut a stark, handsome figure in his black dinner attire.

“Me, either.” Theo didn't look at her as they walked, but he squeezed her hand.

It sent tingles up her arm. Eliska suddenly had the urge to slip inside those strong arms, have his hands stroke her back, and rest against his sturdy chest. She mentally shook herself. She'd barely noticed Theo as an option before. Why was she suddenly obsessing over him now? Besides knowing that tomorrow would be their wedding night.

Eliska swallowed. “It occurs to me that we still know very little about one another. There are so many facts I want to know before sharing a home with you. We could prove completely unsuited.”

He gave her an amused look. “Such as?”

“How do you feel about dogs?”

“Marvelous creatures,” he answered without hesitation. “Do you have any?”

Eliska shook her head. Her mother had owned two lapdogs, but Eliska hadn't been



able to bring them to England. “I want one, though. Will you be the sort of husband to require obedience and expect me to request your permission before making any purchase?”

Theo halted, turning to her with a surprised expression. “I have no idea what sort of husband I’ll be. I’d never given the matter much thought.”

“When you find out, will you let me know?” Eliska asked, relieved he seemed as adrift as her.

He laughed. “Oh, thank God you have a sense of humor. I wouldn’t want a shrew for a wife.”

Eliska fought a smile, but she suspected it slipped out anyway. “I could say the same about you.”

“So we are agreed?” Theo asked, walking once more and tugging her close to him.

“About the dog?” Eliska asked breathlessly, confused.

“About using humor to steady us through this...transition.” He added after a thought, “And yes, about the dog.”

Eliska opened her mouth to say more, but they had reached the open door of the drawing room. The ladies were talking in small clusters, sitting in settees and chairs. She pasted a smile on her face and clutched Theo’s hand a little tighter.

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“Let’s play a game!” Victoria Glumley clapped her hands.

The room filled with an awkward silence as people tried not to look at Eliska and Theo. Everyone knew what happened last night after the games.

The evening had passed in quiet conversation. The older men had gone to see something in the baron's study while the matrons began slipping away to bed. Two mothers remained, however, due to last night.

Eliska had never been a cautionary tale before. She did not like it. What made her angry, however, was that after tomorrow everything would be smoothed over and she'd be respectable again. She was the same person yesterday, today, and tomorrow. But all that mattered was a ring on her finger, not the person who wore it.

"Did you have any games in mind?" one of the young men asked.

Evelyn folded his arms and grinned. "We have such a lovely bunch. And a wedding tomorrow!" He winked in Theo's direction, who didn't acknowledge it. "Why don't we play Marriages and Divorces?"

The Cowper twins giggled.

"I've never played this game," Schoolgirl said.

The Scot took pity on her and explained the game as Evelyn sent a footman for paper and pencils. The two mothers sat engrossed in conversation, only glancing over periodically.

"And what shall be our forfeit?" Victoria batted her eyelashes.

"A kiss?" Lord William suggested with a rakish grin.

Victoria gasped in mock outrage and slapped his arm. "Why, sir! We are respectable

ladies.” Her gaze flitted across the room to land on Eliska, a condescending smirk playing across her lips. Except for Eliska.

Eliska refused to be baited.

Once the footman delivered paper and pencils, Evelyn distributed them to the group. “Get in two lines facing one another,” he declared. “Men on one side, ladies on the other.”

Eliska caught Theo’s eyes as the group rearranged themselves. His eyes sparked with secret amusement as he played along. But he carefully inserted himself in line to be opposite Eliska. She smiled her thanks.

“Now we all have five minutes to write a character sketch of your partner. Good qualities and flaws. Then I, the judge—” Evelyn twirled his imaginary hat— “will hear your cases. I will announce you are married or divorced, depending on how well you like one another. I will also consider requests.”

Eliska took a deep breath. This was hitting rather close to home. She kept her eyes trained on Evelyn, not brave enough to look at Theo.

“And the forfeit?” one of the men called out.

“For a divorce, the couple must waltz blindfolded,” Evelyn decided amidst laughter.

Eliska did not plan on getting a divorce. She was determined to start her real marriage right, to give it every chance of success, and apparently that started with this game.

“Ready, go!” Evelyn watched his pocket watch. “Five minutes and counting.”

The group began furiously scribbling across their pages. Giggles punctuated the

silence as the young men and women looked up at their partners, then back down at the page.

But this wasn't a game for Eliska. Or Theo, either. She chewed on her pencil, looking up through her lashes at her betrothed.

Handsome, she wrote. That was certainly a mark in favor.

Loves his mother, she added, finally getting into the sway of the role.

Enjoys talking about books(?)

Dances the waltz splendidly

Possesses great honor. He was marrying her when technically he didn't have to. He wasn't ruined like her.

Kind

Sense of humor

Loves dogs

She moved over to the defects column as Evelyn announced two minutes remaining.

Quiet. That wasn't too terrible a character flaw, was it? And she did wish he'd spoken more throughout the week, so she'd know him better by now.

Likes liver and onions . This was most definitely a character flaw.

Ought to fight harder

Doesn't know German philosophers well

Needs more friends

She glanced up at him, hoping for inspiration to strike. He looked up at the same time. Their eyes met and her belly flipped. Heat crept up her neck and her eyes darted downward, unable again to bear the weight of his gaze.

Beautiful eyes, she scrawled at the bottom. Strong arms.

“Time!” Evelyn sang out. “Now, which couple will go first?”

Several hands shot up. Evelyn chose Victoria and Lord William, who walked together and faced Evelyn as if they were a couple pleading their case to a judge, papers in hand. They read off one another's attributes, laughing all the while. The rest of the group laughed, too.

“You had better have written I had a nice smile,” one man told a Cowper twin as they waited their turn.

She gave him a saucy look. “You'll have to find out, won't you?”

So far none of the couples asked for a divorce. It was too much fun to pretend to be married.

Theo and Eliska hung back until they were the last.

The others laughed and clapped as they approached the judge. “Marriage! Marriage!”

Evelyn gestured to Eliska. “Ladies first.”

Eliska cleared her throat and held her page out. It trembled in the air. “Handsome,” she read aloud.

“Speak up! We can’t hear you!”

Eliska looked up at Theo, who shot her a wry smile. But his eyes were encouraging, fortifying. He gave a little nod, and she went back to her page, reading the list. “Beautiful eyes,” she stumbled on, and absolutely refused to read aloud the part about strong arms.

Theo’s beautiful eyes flared at her words, though she couldn’t tell the emotion within. “Is it my turn?”

“The lady must read your faults,” Evelyn reminded.

Stuttering, Eliska raced through the short list and looked up at Theo, gauging his reaction. He smiled quizzically at the last two but didn’t protest.

Then he looked at his paper and began to speak.

Eliska didn’t think she could breathe. Everyone was staring at them. He must say nice things about her. It would be too humiliating if he didn’t. Oh God, he wouldn’t ask for a divorce, would he? That seemed a bad omen. Please play along, she silently pleaded.

Poise and dignity, Elizabeth, darling.

Eliska straightened and raised her chin.

Theo’s eyes flicked from the page to her, as if he was reading his list to her rather than the judge. “Beautiful eyes,” he began in a clear voice.

Eliska flushed, even though it was a common attribute on everyone's sketches.

"Cultured. Widely read." He stumbled a little. "Hair," he finally got out.

Hair? What about her hair? Eliska didn't have strong opinions about her hair either way, but it felt like the rest of the world did. It was what people noticed first and felt free to comment on. What did he think about her hair?

"Blushes easily," he continued.

Evelyn interrupted. "So we've moved on to the character defects?"

Theo looked up in surprise. "No. I'm still on the positives."

Eliska blushed then, face flaming. And drat him, Theo noticed. A slow grin spread across his face as his eyes drank in the sight. Which, of course, only made her blush more.

Delight bloomed across Theo's features, and then Eliska was blushing for a different reason. Finally, he took pity on her and returned to his list.

"Sense of humor. Resilient. Beautiful. Loves dogs." He cleared his throat and folded his sheet of paper into quarters, then stuck it in his pocket.

Eliska sent him a private smile. Loves dogs. At least they had that in common.

"And the flaws?" Evelyn prompted.

"I, uh, I didn't write any," Theo said gruffly, fidgeting with his jacket pocket.

Evelyn's eyebrows rose at this, and he glanced at Eliska. "Your verdict?"

“Marriage,” she said, shy delight unfurling within her. She shouldn’t have doubted him. He had played his part of devoted, lovesick swain perfectly.

“Marriage,” Theo agreed.

“I now pronounce you man and wife!” Evelyn clapped his hands and grinned at the group. “I feel like a proud mother hen.”

Eliska laughed with everyone else to hide the unsteady shift in her heart. Tomorrow she’d really be a wife. To a man with beautiful eyes who didn’t allow anyone to shame her in public.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm*

Theo resisted the urge to touch the lone curl falling from Eliska's chignon. How he longed to wrap it around his finger. Like rose gold, it was something so valuable he'd be content with only a little. Just a strand or two.

She laughed with the group and his heart thumped.

He was bound to get married one day anyway. It happened to most people. Why not marry Eliska Czerninová? She was beautiful, intelligent, brave. He bet she'd be a good kisser, too. The length of her lavender skirts suggested she had long legs, and he wished he could see them.

But I will, he realized. I'll see them tomorrow night. He grinned. Being married to her would be no hardship, he decided. Not at all.

One of the mothers stood. "It's late. We should all find our beds. Our own beds." She gave Theo a look.

Theo refused to be cowed. He merely smiled back as he touched Eliska's elbow, a gesture of intimacy he could make now.

She glanced back at him in question. His smile grew. Why was she looking at him? Oh, right. Because he was touching her elbow. Quickly he tried to think up something not idiotic to say.

"So you take issue with the fact I'm unfamiliar with German philosophers?"

She flushed as the others milled about, delaying the retreat to bed as long as the

matrons would allow.

He watched the pink color spread across her pale face, changing even the tips of her ears a shade or two. Tomorrow night he would lick them, he decided. He'd whisper all sorts of things in her ears to turn them bright red, and then he'd lick them.

"I, uh, I had to put something," she said, drawing his attention back to the conversation. "Although you didn't." Her eyes grew large as she gazed up at him with gratitude. "Thank you. That was very kind of you, to play the man in love. It has salvaged my pride." It made her an object of fascination among the other girls rather than an object of scorn or pity, he thought. She was ruined, but ruined because of passionate love, and therefore she still had some value, Theo decoded.

"This is not a Drury Lane drama up for public consumption," he told her firmly. "This is our life. Of course I'll always support you. It's us together. That's how I want my marriage to work." Partners, companions. Perhaps they wouldn't be the love of each other's lives, but they'd build something solid and safe as an oak tree.

"Oh." The sound escaped as a sigh. Eliska swayed closer, ignoring how her skirts warped from the pressure of his shins. "That...That's lovely. We can make this marriage into a safe harbor for both of us. I love that."

Theo looked up, realizing they were alone. Somehow everyone else had filed out. It was just them and the flickering gaslight. Even no servants could be found. He carefully, slowly, set his hands on her shoulders. She was the perfect height, really. How had he not noticed this earlier? Her lips looked so soft, so inviting. He had to kiss her. It was imperative.

"Miss Czerninová," he rasped. "Eliska. I need to kiss you."

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Eliska blinked. I need to kiss you. No one had ever said that to her before. Her toes curled in her slippers in anticipation. It was polite, after all, she reasoned. He needed it. Who was she to deny him? And he'd be kissing her a lot tomorrow. She should let him now, so she could get used to the sensation. Ease herself into married life, in a way. She gave a jerky nod, holding her breath. "Yes." She'd never been so nervous about a first kiss.

His mouth curved into a smile, and then his face descended toward hers.

His lips touched hers gently, oh so gently, at first. A thrill went down Eliska's spine. She let him mold his lips to hers, still so gently it felt like a butterfly's touch. When Theo pulled away she felt the scrape of his five o'clock shadow on his jawline. The softness followed by roughness made her shiver.

"Eliska?" he whispered, eyes searching hers.

Oh, he needed to do that again. This was like smelling her favorite dessert and being told to wait until tomorrow for a taste. She did not like being teased.

She placed her hands on his chest for balance and stood on her tiptoes, lips parted and begging for more.

"I need more," he uttered with a groan. His hands moved from her shoulders to her back. Theo gathered her in his arms, heedless of her skirts and crinolines, and kissed her again. This time he pressed harder, a true kiss.

His warm breath made her clutch him tighter, and she moved her lips under his. He took the lead, nibbling and licking the corners of her mouth. She gasped when his tongue flicked between her lips, and he took that as the invitation she intended.

Growing bolder, Eliska slid her hands inside his jacket and gripped the edges of his

waistcoat. The bristles on his jaw scraped against her cheeks as she opened to him, reveling in the wet heat of his mouth.

He sucked her tongue into his mouth, drawing up a moan of delight out of her. She could feel his heart beating beneath her hands. The scent of him filled her nostrils, the hint of sweat from his travels and the whiff of cologne he'd put on hours ago.

Eliska had never been kissed so passionately before. She clung to him, awash in sensation as her body responded to the virile man touching her.

He pulled away from her mouth only to kiss the pulse in her neck. His hands roamed her back, smoothing out tense muscles and sending flutters down her spine and her stomach. Her core began to ache in time with his touches. She yearned to draw closer, to put her skin against his skin.

Theo licked up her neck, then kissed away the moisture left behind, until he made it to her ears. She rubbed her cheek against his stubble. The new, masculine sensation was erotic; Eliska had the sudden urge to rub her face against him like a cat, to mark him with her scent and take his scent as her own.

"These ears," Theo murmured, and bit gently on her lobe. "I've been staring at them all night."

Eliska almost pulled back to ask him to explain, but his tongue was doing things in her ear that made her belly swoop and her thighs clench. She panted, running her hands up and down his chest.

Theo's hands drifted around her waist and then against her stomach. The heat bled through the layers of clothing between them. "You're gorgeous," he whispered before licking the shell of her ear again. One hand gripped her waist, a steady anchor as passion threatened to pull her away. The other slid up her abdomen to cup her right

breast.

She gasped, aching for more of his touch. She'd been kissed before by several Habsburg courtiers, but none had ever made her physically hurt with longing. She rubbed her thighs together, the drawers damp between her legs.

His hand massaged her through the layers of silk bodice, corset, and chemise. Her nipple beaded up at his touch, but it wasn't enough. She groaned in protest, and his hand moved up to the neckline of her gown. Theo's fingers slipped below the ruffled edge, but couldn't get farther. The wide boatneck of the bodice kept his hand from reaching her bosom.

Eliska opened her mouth to beg him to loosen her gown when a sound outside the door broke their tryst.

"Should find where Fairplace ran off to. We need one more for a proper game of billiards." A male voice broke the stillness of the house.

Eliska gasped and jerked from Theo's arms. He let her retreat and hastily smoothed his hair, then straightened his dinner jacket. She put the back of her hand to her mouth, hoping her lips weren't as swollen and red as they felt.

Two of Evelyn's friends rounded the corner and halted at the threshold. "Fairplace," one of them said after a pause.

Eliska raised her chin and hoped she didn't blush. "Thank you for your thoughts on Kant. I hope we may continue this intercourse tomorrow." She straightened her skirts and headed for the door. "Gentlemen." She nodded at them.

They parted, and she sailed between them, heading for the stairs as if she was Empress Sisi herself.

“Intercourse,” one repeated, and the other sniggered.

Eliska had no idea what was so funny. Social intercourse was conversation. Bah , she grew tired of these English never giving her any room for error. Once in the darkness of the stairs, however, she grabbed the banister and pressed a hand to her heart. It still pounded, as if it knew Theo was still nearby and she’d see him again tomorrow.

She put her hands to her cheeks and grinned. She could delay an expedite request attempt for now. Maybe marriage to Theo wouldn’t be so bad.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm*

Theo rubbed his eyes, grateful the game was wrapping up. As he waited for his turn, knowing he would lose—he was rubbish at billiards—his mind drifted back to Eliska.

Lord William drank brandy straight from a crystal decanter, his necktie and waistcoat long gone. “Cheers to the stag caught in the parson’s trap.”

Theo ignored them, hoping they’d all retire to bed and he could have a night of uninterrupted sleep before his mother arrived and the wedding occurred.

Wedding. With Eliska.

She was so beautiful. He felt drunk as an owl. Theo took stock of himself, glancing at the bar to remember. No, he hadn’t had a drop tonight. He wasn’t going to be suffering an alcohol headache on his wedding day, and he didn’t want any more disasters. He wasn’t drunk on alcohol, he realized, but that kiss.

She’d tasted like...like sunshine on violets. Like strawberries and chocolate. Like...he squinted at the balls on the green felt, trying to think of another simile.

Damn. Maybe he was drunk.

But those eyes...he could go swimming in those blue, blue eyes and never come up for air. He’d drown quite happily if he died holding her in his arms, her curves pressed against him.

Thank goodness she had a sense of humor. He hadn’t seen much of it yet, but he loved that both of them wanted a dog. Maybe they’d want the same breed. Or maybe

they'd bicker over it, neither giving way, until all the frustration turned to lust and they made up by making love.

No, he'd just get her the breed she wanted, he realized.

When he'd written the character sketch for the silly game, he scribbled line after line, hardly stopping to think about it. Apparently, he'd picked up a lot of details about her over the past week without noticing. They all flooded to the forefront now that she would be his wife.

After the wedding he'd take her away immediately. He didn't want her exposed to any more ridicule from the house guests. They'd travel to London, to his family's townhouse. Ever since Violet, his sister, had married and his mother moved to Nottingham to be near her grandchildren, he'd had the run of the place. Now that he thought about it, the house desperately needed a woman's touch.

In a couple of months, they could honeymoon in Prague. He had enough money for an extended holiday, and he'd set up meetings with her solicitors and find out how to get her the inheritance she was owed.

And then, if all were going well, perhaps they could—

“Are you going to shoot?” Evelyn asked.

Theo started, rubbing the back of his neck. “Uh, sure. Didn't realize it was my turn.”

The game ended a few shots later, thankfully. Theo gratefully set his cue stick away and urged the men onward, up the stairs and toward the bedrooms.

“Can't believe you'll be a married man tomorrow,” Evelyn said as they reached the first landing.



Theo nodded. "I like her, though."

The men chortled, as if he'd told a joke.

"Oh, he likes her jolly well," one told the others. "When we found him in the drawing room, he still had Miss Czerninová with him." He wagged his eyebrows for effect.

The men laughed or clapped him on the back.

Theo's shoulders stiffened at their touch and hastened his pace. He was so sick of this group. Evelyn needed better friends.

"Shame it's happening so fast," Evelyn said. "Or I would've made a stag party and brought in some entertainment. There's this serving wench at the local tavern." He belched.

"Oh, is she the one with the tits the size of melons?" one man inquired. "I stopped for some cider on the way in, and she's quite the looker."

Theo glanced at him with disgust. He'd talk about the attractive women he saw when foxed too, but not...not like that. "I don't want a stag party like that."

They traveled down the corridor like a herd of wildebeest. Theo's door was the closest, thank goodness. He eyed the shadows that covered his recessed door.

"Married!" Evelyn was still going on about it.

Theo ignored him, feeling rather like a rankled dog. Yes, married. Yes, it was ridiculous. Yes, he couldn't believe it either. Yes, it was fast.

Yes, she was beautiful. Yes, she fit against his body just perfectly. Yes, her ears

pinkened after his kisses. Yes, her faint accent was adorable. Yes, she was possibly smarter than him. Yes, he was lucky, oh so desperately lucky, that it was her he'd compromised and not one of the other girls.

The men reached the end of the corridor where all the gas lamps were off. Theo could scarcely see the hand before his face, and he groped for the doorknob before catching the cool metal.

"We can always go to a courtesan's palace next time I'm in London," Evelyn offered. "Since I can't celebrate your wedding beforehand."

Theo glanced back at his cousin in surprise. Theo hadn't expected Evelyn to be a paragon of marital virtue—fidelity in marriage was so middle class—but he couldn't believe Evelyn was offering to help him find a courtesan, encouraging adultery, and all on the eve of his wedding. And with Evelyn's own cousin! Men were supposed to protect the lone women in their care.

With a curl of his lip, Theo didn't even bother to reply. He opened his door and silently shut it behind the men, still joking and stomping around in the corridor.

"Do you think her maidenhair matches her head?" Lord William asked rather loudly, if Theo could hear it through the door.

"Maybe he'll tell us after the wedding night," one suggested.

More muffled laughter and whispers came.

Theo's whole body clenched in anger. How could they treat his bride that way? How could they talk about any young woman that way? Fists clenched, he opened his door to punch some sense into them.

But they had already disappeared into their rooms.

He stood fuming in the doorway. He was taking Eliska away tomorrow as soon as the ceremony was over. No breakfast, no celebration. She deserved better than this lot. Their marriage was real and deserved respect. He'd honor it by not treating it as a jest for the other men.

He went back to his room and shut the door silently, clenching the knob so hard it bit into his palm. And then he went to bed, looking forward to his plans for tomorrow.

???

Eliska stood in the corridor, sheltered by a plant and the shadows of the alcove. Her body went hot, then cold. Her fingers tingled as her mind tried to comprehend what she'd just heard.

Her face burned with humiliation and outrage. She had half a mind to stalk into those men's rooms and drag them to their mothers by their ears.

She shivered in shock. Her nightgown swirled around her bare legs and her feet were frozen, yet again, to the carpeting. She'd just wanted to surprise Theo. Just wait until he was at his door and then dart out and surprise him with a goodnight kiss.

She was already ruined, so she might as well enjoy it. On her last night of maidenhood.

And then those men. Her mouth tasted bitter, as if she'd swallowed bile. Those horrible men. Never had she felt so objectified and dissected in her life. Men could be monsters.

But the worst part. The worst part was Theo.

He hadn't said a word.

She'd squinted through the darkness, but had only been able to see the clump of young bucks, those loud and obnoxious creatures, chuckling in the hall. Theo had been one of them.

He'd promised.

That was the only thing her mind could alight on. He'd promised.

He'd promised to respect her, to honor their marriage. She'd written he was kind and possessed great honor in the sketch!

Eliska sucked in a ragged breath. I can't marry a man like that. Her chest hurt. She sagged against the wall, one hand over her mouth and the other over her heart. Her mind raced. Trying to come up with an answer. Trying to justify what Theo had done. Trying to find an escape.

I can't marry him. She shuddered at the thought of him going back to their cousin and friends, describing her body in graphic detail for their amusement. Her stomach roiled and she thought she might be sick.

She couldn't do it. She'd go back to the Lands of the Bohemian Crown and find work as a teacher at a girl's finishing school before subjecting herself to this casual disdain. Even her father, who cared deeply about their social standing, would support that under the circumstances. Maybe the magistrate would take pity on her. She had to try.

Her vision blurred. She wiped her tears away, angry she was crying over a man not worth them. Eliska took a deep, shaky breath and tiptoed back to her room.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:30 pm*

Theo whistled as he shaved, imagining how the rest of his day would unfold. He wondered what Eliska was doing now. Was she putting on a white dress? Did she have a white dress? Theo swiped the razor across one cheek. Did women from the Bohemian Lands wear white on their wedding day?

He should ask. He should ask all sorts of questions. Theo had no idea how the nobility in Prague celebrated holidays. What other cultural things should he know about? Theo wanted to start out right.

Theo felt strangely giddy, like his mind was soaring far above his body as he dressed in his finest clothes for the day. He inspected the cuff of his coat and frowned. It was evening attire for a formal dinner, what he'd worn last night. He couldn't wear that to be married! Maybe Evelyn will let me borrow a morning coat.

Once dressed and prepared for the day, Theo glanced one last time in the mirror to check for unruly hair. Smiling, he left his room and trotted down the stairs. Any minute now his mother would arrive. He couldn't wait to introduce his mother to Eliska.

Knowing his mother, she'd scold him ferociously for getting in this situation. But she'd warm up to Eliska quickly. Drat, he hadn't asked Eliska if she enjoyed arranging florals or gardening. Mother loved both those activities, and he hoped they'd bond over something.

Servants passed through the hallway, their livery crisp and precise.

Theo nodded his thanks to a footman who opened the breakfast door. He strolled into

the room. “Good morning!”

Several people looked up at him in surprise, some with annoyance.

Not morning people, then. Theo cheerfully pulled out a seat next to Evelyn and gestured for a cup of tea. “Can I borrow a morning coat from you? I didn’t think I was getting married on this trip, so I didn’t bring formal morning attire.” He chuckled a little.

Evelyn gave him an appraising frown. “You’re awfully jolly.”

“A man should be cheerful about his wedding,” Theo replied. He turned and glanced at the buffet, eyeing the breakfast options.

“When is the ceremony?” one of the baron’s friends inquired over his morning paper.

The baron, the cousin who was forcing the whole arrangement, stepped into the room, a wide grin stretching his face. “The wedding’s at one o’clock in the afternoon. Nice work with a special license.”

Theo kept his expression neutral, though frustration burgeoned inside him, making his chest tight and his throat ache. It was his wedding, his marriage, and yet the baron had arranged everything. Theo hadn’t even met the vicar yet! He and Eliska were just pawns, shuffled here and there.

He couldn’t wait to leave. In the privacy of his own home— their own home—they could get to know one another and create a firm foundation for a marriage. His mind skipped to the small library in the townhouse. Did his father have a collection of books by German philosophers?

Theo took another sip of tea. No matter. If he didn’t, Theo and Eliska would purchase

some. He just needed to get through today, and then he and Eliska would sort things out between themselves.

The butler appeared at the door and announced, “Mrs. Fairplace is here, my lord.” He stepped out of the doorway to reveal Theo’s mother.

Mother stood there, searching the room until her light brown eyes alighted on him. She beamed, her round face seeming to brighten the entire room. She’d already removed her hat, and her graying blond hair was tucked neatly in place, a braid wrapping around the crown of her head. “Darling!” She stepped forward, hands outstretched.

Theo stood and rounded the table to greet his mother. He grasped her hands, then pulled her into an embrace. Her head tucked under his chin, and he breathed in the familiar scent of her perfume. “You made it.”

She pulled back and gave him a look. “I am your mother. I would never miss your wedding if I could help it. Your brother and his wife send their regrets. They would’ve traveled, too, but two of the children have a spring cold. And your sister couldn’t travel without her husband, who was busy as well.”

Theo nodded. He hadn’t seen much of Violet since she’d married last year. “I’m glad you could make it.”

“I cannot wait to meet your lovely bride!” his mother announced loudly for all to hear. But she gave him a chiding look that Theo interpreted as, Just you wait until we’re alone. Theo smiled nervously. She’d probably take Eliska’s side.

“Where is she?” Mother glanced around the breakfast room. The guests quickly averted their eyes, pretending they hadn’t been watching the drama of Theo’s life. He repressed a shudder. He couldn’t wait to whisk Eliska away.

“Still sleeping, I imagine,” Lord Erswich said. “The bride should have her beauty sleep.” He leaned back in his chair, chortling.

“And where is your wife, Erswich?” Mother pinned him with a stare. “Helping Miss Czerninová to prepare for the wedding?”

“She’s in Paris. Her yearly holiday.” The baron folded his hands across his stomach.

“Then who is helping her? She doesn’t have a mother, and she needs someone.”

His heart lurched. Why hadn’t he considered this? Why hadn’t he requested some sort of companionship for her? Theo clenched his jaw. He’d be better. He’d learn to be a husband.

“She’s borrowing one of our parlor maids as a lady’s maid,” the baron said defensively. “She’ll get her prepared.”

Mother tsked. “The poor girl’s barely out of mourning! Does she even have a white dress to wear?”

The baron looked somehow baffled and embarrassed at the same time. “We had very short notice about the wedding.”

Theo barely held back his snort. He wouldn’t give the guests any more drama than they already witnessed.

“All girls deserve a wedding dress,” Mother said firmly. “Especially girls who don’t have their family with them.”

“We’re her family,” the baron pointed out defensively.



Mother pursed her lips. "I'll go see what she needs." She turned to the butler, who stood just outside the open door. "Do take me to Miss Czerninová's room, please. And if the maid isn't there, send her up immediately. A girl deserves to be spoiled on her wedding day."

Theo stood there awkwardly as his mother swept out of the room. He took a belated step to follow her, but Evelyn called him back.

"Don't you know it's bad luck to see the bride before the wedding?"

Theo wanted to ignore that advice, particularly because it came from Evelyn. Plus, he didn't want to take advice about his own betrothed from someone else. He should know her better and be able to decide upon the best course of action, damn him. But Evelyn was right. Uncomfortable and feeling on display, he meandered back to his seat.

I hope Mama likes Eliska . Maybe he could slip upstairs on the pretense of delivering coffee. Then he could stay and check on her. He drummed his fingers on the table, wishing time would speed by.

Conversation started back up. From the corner of his eye, Theo saw the baron stretch, then lean forward in his chair and open his mouth.

Theo closed his eyes. Oh, God please no. If Lord Erswich was going to give him marriage advice after everything he'd orchestrated, Theo might scream.

The breakfast door opened again, sparing Theo the lecture for a few more seconds. His mother entered the room, lips pale and pinched, and a furrow had formed between her eyebrows. "Theo," she said quietly. "Can you come with me for a moment?" She discreetly waved a folded note in her hand, sheltered by her wide skirts.

His heart quickened. Something's wrong.

Theo immediately stood and followed his mother into the foyer. "What is it?" He closed the door behind him.

Mother glanced down the hall at a nearby footman standing at attention. She gestured for Theo to walk away. "She wasn't in her room."

He let out a slow breath of relief. That wasn't too bad. "Perhaps she's in another part of the house."

But Mother shook her head. "The bed didn't look like it had been slept in. And I found this on the dressing table." She handed the note to Theo.

He took it as if it was a viper. Bracing himself, Theo unfolded the note and scanned the page.

Dear Mr. Fairplace,

I hope this note doesn't put you or the house into too much of an uproar. By the time you read this I will be on my way back to the Lands of the Bohemian Crown.

Upon greater reflection, I have decided I cannot marry you. I require a partner I can trust, respect, and hopefully hold affection for. I do not believe we suit.

Thank you for your proposal. Please feel free to tell the guests I broke things off.

Regretfully,

Eliska

Theo stared at it. Stared some more. Then read it again. Blood pounded in his ears, and his entire vision narrowed down to the single sheet of cream paper.

“Oh, dear.” Mother wrung her hands. “It is bad news. She’s gone, isn’t she?”

“Gone?” Evelyn’s hands emerged out of nowhere and plucked the note from Theo’s grasp before he had a chance to jerk it away. Theo blinked. Where did he come from?

Evelyn’s eyes flicked back and forth, then he glanced up at Theo. “Who’s Eliska?”

Theo snapped. “Who’s Eliska? Your fucking cousin, that’s who!”

“Theophilus Fairplace!” Mother gasped.

Theo snatched the note back from Evelyn. “That’s mine.”

“I suppose you’re not getting married, then.” Evelyn slapped Theo’s back. “What a relief! I was going to pour one out for you tonight.”

“I’m not dreading my marriage,” Theo growled, shoving the note into his pocket. “So don’t bother grieving for me.”

“Theo,” Mother began.

Theo turned to her. “How could she just leave? Damn it, I deserve a reason. What does she mean? Why don’t we suit?”

Mother shrugged helplessly. “Did you two argue?”

“No!” Theo raked a hand through his hair. “I thought we were getting along smashingly.” His gut clenched and his chest suddenly felt too tight. “Why didn’t she

just explain to me in person?” How could she do this? And with such an abrupt end? He couldn’t breathe properly. Theo rubbed his chest.

Bloody hell, he’d looked forward to kissing her again. Why, after they’d agreed? They were supposed to get a dog together. And—oh god, she’d be ruined, and he wouldn’t be able to protect her. “Doesn’t she understand she can’t refuse? She’s compromised! Ruined.” His heartbeat galloped as he rubbed his sweaty palms on his trousers. “They’ll eat her alive.”

“Honestly, I’d just thank her for the lucky escape and put it all behind me,” Evelyn told him.

Theo whirled on his third cousin, snarling. “I don’t want a lucky escape. I want an explanation.”

“Theo,” Mother tried again.

“That blasted girl.” Theo’s chest ached for some odd reason. “She’s not stupid. Why does she think she can travel alone to Prague and get her inheritance without a chaperone? Does she even have the money for travel?” His heart lurched. She probably doesn’t. She probably barely had enough for a train ticket to London.

He had to find her. He had to make sure she was safe. Terrible things could happen to her. It was his responsibility as her betrothed. He should go.

“Theo, I think you should find her.”

“Not now, Mama. I need to grab my things and find her.” He halted and turned back.

“Wait. You agree?”

She nodded. “She sounds hurt.”

Alarm shot through Theo's body, sending a sour taste to the back of his mouth. "Hurt?" he barked. "Why do you think she's hurt?" He glared at Evelyn. "What did you do?"

Evelyn stared back, eyes wide. "Nothing! Good heavens, Theo, you're acting the fool."

"I don't care," Theo snarled.

"I don't mean physically harmed," his mother broke in. "I mean hurt emotionally."

"I'm going to find her." Theo stormed toward the stairs.

"My father is her unofficial guardian," Evelyn called out. "We can make him go instead, if you like."

Theo grabbed the banister and propelled himself down the stairs at a gallop. He didn't know when she'd left. She could already be halfway to London by now, and then he'd have to search all the hotels. "Evelyn, go fuck yourself."

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:30 pm*

Eliska sighed as she leaned back in her bench seat. Bone-deep weariness settled through her. She hadn't expected to feel so sad. Angry, yes. But the sadness had surprised her. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes. She turned her head to the window in the train compartment door, watching last-minute passengers run for the open compartments.

She'd been sitting at the station for five hours until the first train to London had finally prepared for departure. Eliska shivered at the memory of the cool, damp spring air that permeated the station. She wore her heavy wool cloak, and the petticoats over her crinolines helped, but nothing could fully combat the rain. Her gray half-mourning frock was permanently bedraggled, and she'd lost her gloves somewhere along the way.

Eliska had been dreading the journey because she knew she should buy a third class ticket for a shilling sixpence since her funds were so limited. She needed to save as much as possible for a ladies' hotel in London and then the packet ship across the Channel. But while third class had roofs over their head, which meant the sparks and ash from the engine wouldn't singe clothing, the windows were still open and the seating was just a hard, narrow bench running lengthwise down the carriage.

Thankfully, though her funds wouldn't appreciate it, there were no third class carriages on this train. She had to choose between first class—with its velvet upholstery and seats for four per compartment at the end of the line, far from a potential explosion if the engine crashed—and second class—with wooden seats for six per compartment.

She hoped the foul weather would keep most passengers away. Women rarely

traveled alone on the railway because one never knew who her compartment-mate could be. And once the train was moving, there was no way to escape rough treatment unless one wished to jump out the compartment door and onto the tracks rushing by below.

Eliska was fiscally responsible and had chosen a second class compartment, the fifth of eight cars, and promptly closed the door behind her in hopes people would assume it was full and try one of the other two compartments in the carriage.

The train whistled, and her heart lurched at the sudden noise.

She was going home.

Why wasn't she excited?

Her vision blurred and she pressed a fist to her mouth. Damn that Theophilus Fairplace. For one moment she thought she'd have a chance at a family again. And he'd ripped it all away. She tried to tell herself she was lucky, as she'd shivered inside the waiting room of the tiny rural station, huddling next to the coal heater for warmth. She could've discovered his character after they were wed. That would be infinitely worse.

Maybe one day she'd be grateful. Right now, she just hurt.

The train ground to life, the engine rattling far up ahead. Eliska held her breath, counting the seconds before the train departed the station. So close...so close...The carriage jerked forward, and she breathed a sigh of relief. She had the whole compartment to herself.

The door wrenched open.

Eliska stifled a gasp as Theo threw his head inside the carriage. His hair was wild, his chest heaved, and the feral look in his eyes made her heart skitter.

His eyes narrowed on her. “You.” It was an accusation.

Eliska raised her chin in a show of false bravado. “Mr. Fairplace, please leave the carriage before you’re pulled off the platform and crushed underneath the wheels.”

Rather than backing away as the train rolled forward, he climbed into the carriage with her.

Eliska gaped. “Wh-what are you doing?”

He grunted, leaning forward and jerking the door shut. “What does it look like I’m doing?” He glared at her. “I’m going to London.”

This could not be happening. “But... why ? And why are you in my compartment?”

“I don’t know,” he replied caustically, sitting across from her and crossing one leg, resting an ankle on the other leg’s knee. A rather common, vulgar pose. But Eliska was rather drawn to it, particularly how it made his trousers tighten and show off his thighs. She jerked her gaze away, face going hot.

“Why would I be on a train to London right now? Should I be somewhere else? Perhaps a church?”

Eliska winced.

“And why, Eliska, do you think I should be at the village church right about now?” His brows slashed downward in an angry vee. He threaded his fingers together, clasping his hands until his leather gloves creaked.



Oh, he was angry. She hadn't anticipated this. Perhaps she should've known being jilted would hurt his pride. She just assumed he would sulk rather than seek revenge. Eliska licked her dry lips, trying to think of an answer that wouldn't further anger him. "Mr. Fairplace, I can see you're...agitated."

Theo barked out a laugh. "Agitated? Me?"

Eliska eyed him. Actually, he looked rather deranged. His coat was muddy, his collar damp and limp from the rain. His hair skewed in all different directions, and he had circles under his eyes. "Mr. Fairplace," she tried again in tones she'd use to soothe an angry barncat. "You are free to go back to Blatherwycke and tell them all how badly I've treated you. I think perhaps if you got off at the next stop, we could part amicably—"

He laughed again, a hard, sharp sound that made her flinch. Perhaps he noticed her flinch, for he cut off the noise and fell silent. He still glared, though. "No," he said distinctly.

"Mr. Fairplace," she tried a third time.

"Theo," he replied gruffly, peeling one wet leather glove off his hand. He slapped it against the seat beside him.

"What?" She blinked, bewildered.

"It's Theo." His jaw clenched as he slid a forefinger between the other glove and his palm. He worked the second off, finger by finger, his eyes never once leaving Eliska's face. "I told you to call me Theo."

Eliska wondered if there was a language barrier. She'd never had problems with her English before this week. But perhaps he came from a corner of England that used a

different dialect? “Theo,” she amended.

He adjusted in his seat, tomcat hackles still raised but perhaps willing to be stroked if she appeared apologetic enough. “Yes?” The train jerked beneath them as it picked up speed.

“Why do you care so much?”

He stared at her, the expectant look disappearing from his face, leaving it blank. She was not groveling like he wanted, she suspected. “What? No, I don’t. I don’t care so much.” He leaned as far back as the hard wooden backrest would allow him. He crossed his legs the other way, the other ankle over the other knee. He set his jaw. “I don’t care.”

Eliska wrinkled her brow. “Then...why are you here?”

He took a breath. “Because, because you’re my betrothed.”

Eliska cocked her head. “Not anymore. I know you read my note, otherwise you wouldn’t be here.”

He set his clenched jaw in one hand and glared out the window. Rain spattered against the glass.

Eliska allowed a moment to go by for them both to gather their thoughts. “I’m not your betrothed,” she said gently. “If you don’t care, why are you here?”

“Because you broke your word!” He turned his face and the look in his brown eyes took her breath away. The emotion in his eyes cut through the rising tension between them and tore at her heart. “You promised,” he said more quietly. “We both agreed to wed. And...I like the idea of a dog, but I’m rubbish with names. I was counting on

you to choose a name.”

Eliska stared at him just as he stared at her, trying to make sense of why this man would race through the worst rainstorm of the year and hop on an uncomfortable train just to castigate her. His eyes softened, just a hair, and she finally recognized the emotion.

“You’re hurt,” she breathed.

He jerked back again. “Am not.”

“I thought I would hurt your pride. But...” She searched his face again to make certain. “I hurt you .”

His gaze flicked to the floor between them. “I rather liked the idea of traveling to Prague,” he admitted, voice rough. “And what am I supposed to do with a dog? I work in a business office. I travel to my brother’s home in Nottingham. Who would watch the dog while I’m gone?”

“Oh,” Eliska breathed. “I thought...I thought I was doing us both a favor.”

He looked up at her that instant. “Why? Did I act churlish? Have I not treated you well?” He sighed. “Look, if it’s about the character sketch, if I’m not academic enough for you, I can work on that. Have you heard of a fellow called Marx? Absolute radical, but he wrote a few pamphlets on political and economic theory and sometimes gives lectures in London. I can take you to listen to him.” He leaned forward now, planting his elbows on his knees and letting his hands dangle between his thighs. In this tight, confined space he was a whirlwind of energy. “You can explain his manifesto to me,” he encouraged. “I’m sure you’d enjoy teaching me.”

Eliska barely refrained from letting her mouth fall open at his rushed speech. “No, it’s

not about the silly game last night. It's...it's about what happened later."

His face went white, and suddenly he leaned as far away from her as he could. "Because I kissed you? I went too far, didn't I? Forgive me. I've never been with a virgin before. I was hasty, I can admit that. We can certainly go slower." He broke off, face turning a bright red. "Er, you do know what happens between a man and a woman, do you not?"

Eliska would've laughed out loud if the situation between them hadn't been so dire.

Theo must've interpreted her silence as a mark of horror, for he rushed on. "My mother can explain things to you, if you like. That's probably awkward, seeing as how she's going to be your mother-in-law. But we can go however slow you want. We can—" he gulped, "—wait as long as you want. I promise not to demand my, er, husbandly rights."

He was being so adorably awkward, stumbling for words and alternately going red and then pale. Eliska didn't know whether to pat his hand, laugh, or kiss him.

But no, she couldn't forget why she'd left. Eliska straightened her spine and rallied. "Theo, I left because of what happened after the kiss. After you and your friends got, what's the word, foxed." The humiliation and anger flooded back. "I was in the corridor last night. I planned to—never mind, it doesn't matter why I was out there. But I heard you talking about me."

Theo's face went blank as he clearly tried to recall. Then his jaw dropped, and he looked at her with horror.

Eliska folded her arms across her chest and waited.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:30 pm*

Theo's heart dropped into his shoes as he realized what she'd heard last night. But I wasn't a part of that. He swallowed. "I'm so sorry you heard that."

Eliska snorted. "I bet you are."

He passed a hand over his brow. "Now this makes much more sense." The frantic, panicked feeling that overcame him when he read her note finally abated, leaving guilt and regret in its place. If he had known she'd been listening.... Well, that hardly mattered, did it? He should've called them out right there in the corridor in the middle of the night. Dueling didn't happen anymore, but he could've done something to defend Eliska's honor. She deserved a few bloody noses in her name at the least.

"I am sorry," he said, lowering his hand to meet her gaze. "I beg your forgiveness. The men—they are not my friends—were absolutely foxed last night. I didn't drink a drop because I wanted to feel well for our wedding and because the last time I drank, things went rather sideways, didn't they?" He offered a small smile, but she didn't return it. She stared across the small compartment, arms crossed.

"They behaved abominably. I ignored their remarks until the end, when I reached my room. I told myself that not speaking up would just make the conversation end sooner. I imagined taking you away immediately following the ceremony to get us far from prying eyes."

Eliska looked at her gray skirts, then back up at him, wariness in every line of her body.

Theo wanted her to believe him more than anything. "I swear to you, I did not

condone or take part in their words. I have no plans whatsoever to allow Evelyn to take me to a courtesan. Ever .”

The look on her face told him that she didn’t believe him.

“My father was faithful to my mother,” he explained. “He’s been gone for ten years, but their marriage was a happy one. My older brother adores his wife. I think he’d die before he committed adultery. I have always expected to treat my wife the same way. My father came from a banking family and he was a barrister; I was not raised with aristocratic values concerning marriage.” He paused, then took the risk. “I don’t know what expectations are for nobility in Prague or the Austrian court, but I hope you will be faithful to me, also.”

“I am no longer your betrothed,” she told him stiffly.

He nodded. “After Evelyn’s offer, I went into my room and shut the door. I heard someone say other things.” He winced. “I opened the door, ready to plant a few facers if necessary so they’d understand they shouldn’t talk about a woman like that. Especially not my betrothed, not in my hearing.”

Eliska made a little sound of protest at his choice of words.

“I know, I know. We’re not betrothed.” Theo hung his head. “I despise that you heard the exchange. I wish I could go back and respond differently. By the time I opened the door they were mostly all in their own rooms. I missed my chance.” He wondered, belatedly, if this is what Eliska had meant when she wrote, ought to fight harder.

“Do you know how that made me feel? Those horrible men commenting on my body, like I’m nothing more than a—than a vase? Some sort of vessel for men’s lusts?”

“I can only imagine,” Theo said honestly. “But I can swear to you that I do not think of you that way. Our courtship is not a Drury Lane drama,” he said. “And you, as my wife, would be respected. I’d never tarnish what we have or break your trust by sharing private details for people to laugh about.”

Eliska’s arms had slowly dropped throughout the conversation, no longer held tightly across her chest. Now they drooped in her lap. She looked at him with such painful hope it sent a pang through his heart. “I...I believe you. Thinking back, I didn’t hear your voice among them.”

Theo sighed with relief, though he knew it wasn’t over yet. “I desperately apologize. Could you eventually find it in your heart to forgive me?”

She opened her mouth, but he rushed ahead to forestall any firm denial. “When you’re ready, of course. I shall not ask again.”

Eliska nodded.

They fell into silence punctuated by the rumble of the locomotive. Theo searched for a way to break the awkwardness growing between them.

“Horrible rain we’re having,” he commented.

Eliska tilted her head. “I thought this was typical for England.”

He laughed. “True, but this amount of rain is unusual.” Theo pointed out the window, foggy and blurred with raindrops. “Can you see the fields, how they’re nothing but ponds now?”

She leaned forward and squinted at the blurry glass, bringing her head next to his. He took a breath, smelling spring on her. His chest ached and he rubbed it with his fist.

The depth of hurt and anger had shallowed now. He didn't think he'd ever forget the bone-deep relief he felt when he finally opened the correct compartment and saw his betrothed sitting safe and sound. Theo hadn't known what to expect. The entire race in his cousin's curricule to the train station had been fraught with fear.

What if she fell in a ditch and hadn't made it to the village? What if she had to purchase a ticket to a little, out-of-the-way line and he missed her? What if she'd already departed? What if there were a train crash? What if her English failed her and she went the wrong direction? What if a brute joined her compartment and she was alone with a violent man?

Theo had pushed the poor horse harder despite the furrows in the muddy lane. He'd wiped rain out of his eyes since apparently he'd forgotten to grab his hat on the way out.

Now he sat in a puddle, his trousers drenched, looking at the sunrise as she stared at the rain outside. She was beautiful.

Eliska's blue, blue eyes turned to look at him. "You can get off at the next stop."

Theo shook his head. "Not without you."

She gave him an incredulous look. "Sir, I am going all the way to London."

Theo shrugged off his damp coat and set it to the side, hoping to air it out. "Then I'm going to London."

"We are not betrothed," Eliska said.

Each time she said those words it stung. Theo ran his fingers through his wet hair. "I'm still escorting you to London."



She huffed. “That’s not necessary.”

Theo gave her a long-suffering look. “Did you come all the way from Prague by yourself?”

“No, I had a paid companion. She departed once my uncle picked me up in London.”

“And you’re about to have an unpaid companion,” Theo said. Travel for women by themselves wasn’t very safe. Travel for anyone by themselves wasn’t very safe. One could be stuck in tight spaces with strangers, good or ill, subject to accidents and being diverted far off one’s path with no way to communicate back home, or without a partner to watch one’s belongings in shifts to protect against theft. Border crossings, particularly in the middle of the night, could be exhausting and subject women to unruly guards. It was always better to have a travel companion, especially if one was a young woman.

Eliska sputtered. “You cannot mean to travel all the way to Prague with me!”

Theo had not planned that far ahead. “I’ll join you to London and make sure you’re safely ensconced at a reputable hotel.” At least . He paused. “Are you sure you want to continue with your plans to Prague? After our conversation?”

She eyed him, but didn’t say anything.

Theo’s stomach felt like he had drunk curdled milk.

They sat silently for the next twenty minutes until the train stopped at the next village. Theo gestured toward the door. “Do you need to stretch your legs? Use the lavatory?”

Eliska looked out the window at the rain. “Not really.”

Theo opened the door. “These benches are uncomfortable, and the more it rains the colder it’ll be. I’m going to buy a blanket.” He stepped out and went in search of a platform vendor. Once he completed his business, he passed the line of people waiting to use the lavatory and hopped back in the compartment.

Eliska took one of the blankets from him, and he breathed a sigh of relief that she was still there, waiting on him. Theo hadn’t realized he’d half expected her to disappear into the rain and fog until he saw her, corporeal and ordinary as any human still on the uncomfortable wooden seat.

“Here, let me help you.” Theo unfolded the blanket that Eliska struggled to manipulate due to her overflowing skirts and crinolines. It was a scratchy, gray thing, just one step above a horse blanket. But it was thick and dry. He leaned forward, tucking the ends behind her back. It brought his face close to her bosom.

They realized it at the same time. Eliska froze. Theo didn’t even see her breathing. Theo, on the other hand, was tempted to reach forward and pluck a jet button from her bodice with his teeth. He’d tug and tug until it popped free, and then her bodice would gape open just enough, hopefully, for him to see her corset.

What color would it be? She’d look gorgeous in purple, he thought. A rich emerald green or even a dusty rose would suit her coloring. Perhaps he could buy her a bright yellow corset one day, to match her sunrise complexion. She needed a new wardrobe after being in mourning and half-mourning for nine months.

Eliska cleared her throat.

Theo jerked back to himself. Right. He slowly eased up, his gaze riveted to the front of her bodice. “Forgive me,” he murmured, still indecently close. Her pulse throbbed in her neck. He imagined pressing a kiss there. His cock twitched.

“Theo,” Eliska breathed.

He stayed close, leaning across the small compartment to better catch the glint in her eyes. “Yes, Eliska?”

Her cheeks flushed and her eyes were dilated. She’d started breathing again, and it was all he could do to keep his eyes fixed to hers and not on her rising breasts. He’d woken this morning thinking he’d have sex with this beautiful, intelligent woman. He’d been looking forward to it. He imagined she’d look something like this in bed, pink and eager, eyes wide and focused. He wanted to know how long her hair was. How high the arches of her feet were. If she had birthmarks or dimples behind her knees. The color of her nipples.

Her breath warmed his lips. Her tongue whisked out from between her lips, and the sight of her wet, pink mouth made his cock harden. Her eyes flicked to the side. “Did you bring hot food, Theo?” she breathed.

Theo took the dismissal gracefully. He sat back in his seat, tucking his own blanket around him, then reached for the hot bread wrapped in newspaper and the two tin cups of lukewarm tea. “I thought you might be hungry.” He handed one cup over and then tore the hunk of bread in half.

He thought of his mother, likely stuck at Blatherwycke Hall wondering what had happened. He would send her a telegram at the next stop. Theo laughed, swallowing a large bite of bread.

“What is it?” Eliska sipped the bitter brew, eyeing him over the rim.

“My mother would be appalled by my lack of table manners. It’s a good thing she stayed behind at Blatherwycke.”

Eliska's eyes widened in dismay. "Oh, your mother! I forgot she was coming." She blushed. "I'm afraid I acted impulsively."

"I wish you had trusted me enough to come to me, to demand an explanation for my behavior, rather than jilting me," Theo admitted. "I thought we were friends."

Eliska plucked a bite from her half of the bread with thumb and forefinger, then put it in her mouth and chewed while thinking. "I could have, yes. But we've known one another for less than a week. If we'd been raised together, I'd have hunted you down and demanded an explanation. But why would I give you the benefit of the doubt when we have no history together of you proving yourself trustworthy?"

Theo winced. That stung, though he couldn't deny the truth of her words. "I'd like us to build a history together now." He didn't even know why he cared so much. Why he didn't want her to disappear.

Apparently Eliska didn't either. She eyed him warily. "Are you a fortune hunter?"

Theo reared back, surprised. "No, of course not."

She rolled her eyes. "Why are you so determined to marry me then?"

"The baron wouldn't shackle you to a fortune hunter," Theo assured her. "If I were the sort of man to trifle with a lady's affections just to get a hold of her inheritance, he wouldn't have allowed Evelyn to invite me to the party, much less suggest we marry one another."

She hummed suspiciously.

Theo spread his arms wide, displaying himself. "I'm not sure how to convince you that I don't care about your wealth."

“My inheritance is tied up in the courts,” Eliska reminded him. “It could be years before I see a single gulden from my father’s estate. If you need a fortune, I am not, as you British say, a sure bet.”

Theo shook his head, chuckling. “Eliska, Eliska.” He brushed the crumbs off his hands and off his blanket. “Yes, I am a second son. My father’s father was a bank clerk, yes. But my father made and lost and remade a fortune before his death ten years ago, even as a barrister. My mother receives a lifetime allowance from the Huston-Ives fortune, and when she dies the principal will be given in a lump sum to my younger sister. That was a part of their marriage contract. My brother and I invest in railways. Both the actual track and the engines and carriages. I had planned to return to our London office after the house party to review a report our clerk created about the Pullman company in the United States. Dennis and I are considering investing there, too.”

Eliska took another bite of bread, listening intently.

“I do not have the fortune that comes with generations of wealth and a title, like Lord Erswich or your father. But I am more than comfortable.”

“It seems my English has been faulty as of late,” she said dryly. “Define ‘more than comfortable.’”

Theo shifted his weight on the seat. “I can send my sons to a university without worrying about scholarships. I can send my daughters to one of those fancy finishing schools. I can buy my wife dresses of blue silk that match her eyes. We can take a honeymoon to Prague without saving in advance.”

“We are not betrothed anymore.” But she tried to hide a smile by taking another bite of bread, so Theo counted that as progress.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:30 pm*

After a moment, Eliska asked, "Will the rain slow the train much?"

"Perhaps," Theo answered after a pause. "It's been raining for days. Sometimes bridges get flooded and tracks are washed out. I think we're going slower than normal."

"My journey from Prague was slow," Eliska commented.

"Tell me about it." Theo looked rather snug and cozy, wedged in the corner of his seat, the gray blanket tucked under his chin.

"My papa died in a hunting accident. A cousin of the Habsburgs shot his rifle too soon and it killed him." Eliska swallowed. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I started telling the story that far back. That has little to do with the sleeping trains I traveled across France on."

"No," Theo said gently. "Tell me about your father. I'd like to learn more about the people who raised you."

Eliska swallowed again. "My papa had the largest, thickest mustache you've ever seen. And it tickled when he kissed me. He was away often, at Court, but when he traveled home or we joined him in Austria, it was always special. When I was little he'd throw me in the air and my mother would scold him, but then she'd laugh and I was so happy." Sadness settled over her like a shroud. "Papa was Czech, so he had to work extra hard at proving himself among the Austrian nobles. He couldn't speak Czech, but I remember falling asleep in his arms once while he sang an old Czech lullaby he must've learned from his nurse."

“Czech nationalism worried him, though he never talked to me about it,” Eliska said. “He felt caught between both sides.” She cleared her throat. “Austria was neutral during the Crimean War, but he traveled with a diplomatic entourage to Turkey to see what was happening. He wouldn’t talk to my mother about what he’d seen among the British soldiers. He said it was too awful to speak of. So she and I sneaked newspapers and read them together when he was gone. He’d begun discussing finding me a husband. He had one picked for me when I was sixteen, but the man died of influenza.”

“Did you love him?”

The question took Eliska by surprise. “What? No. I scarcely knew him. We’d met twice and that was all. But last year Papa began looking again.” Her vision blurred and her eyes burned from unshed tears. “Obviously that was cut short. He was still grieving Mother, but he felt it was his duty to join the Court again. I stayed behind in Prague because I didn’t want to leave our home yet.”

“And your mother?” Theo prompted, voice soft and gentle.

“The Bohemian Lands had a bad wave of cholera. I mean, it always comes around each summer. But this time it was worse than normal. We thought we were safe in our Prague townhouse. Papa was traveling, otherwise he might’ve perished, too. Our whole household caught it.” Eliska shivered, remembering the horrible sickness that had descended upon family and servants alike. She had vomited endlessly, spitting up any water she had managed to swallow, ruining her bedsheets with waste, and at the end had no one left to tend her. When she came to, her skin a bluish-gray, she’d crawled from her bed to find the damp sponge a servant had left and sucked it dry.

“Our scullery maid died first. She first showed symptoms at dawn, and she was dead by nightfall.” Eliska clenched her jaw, refusing to relive the terrifying memories. How fear and disease had stalked through the house and they had no way to stop it.

Then the hall boy, Cook, and her mother's lady's maid fell ill next. Her mother had locked Eliska in her room to keep her away from the foul odors and bad air. The butler had called for a doctor, but so many households were suffering no one knew when the doctor might arrive.

For two days it spread through the household. In the end, Eliska and her mother fell ill around the same time. Eliska voided her bowels all over the red velvet chair in her room. Her embarrassment faded almost immediately as the disease ravaged her body. Her tongue had felt swollen and dry. She craved water more than anything, but nothing would stay in her body. And when she woke again, she discovered the disease had left her and three parlor maids and a footman alive, though so weak they could scarcely crawl through the house. Cook, the hall boy, the butler, and her mother were dead.

She'd never forget opening a window to see dawn crest across the city, watching sunlight limn the gothic towers of Old Town, and feeling like it was still midnight in her home. That the sun would never rise again in her heart.

"You don't have to tell me how she died," Theo broke into her thoughts. "Tell me the good things. How did a British lady meet and wed a Czech noble?"

"She met him through family friends," Eliska told him, grateful for the distraction from her memories. "Her best friend was part of an old, aristocratic family in Prague. Mother spent Christmas with them one year and met Papa by the Christmas tree." She smiled wistfully at the good days far gone. "My mother looked like Uncle Erswich. Stout with a round face and thick, wavy dark hair."

"You take after your father?" Theo asked, surprise in his tone.

Eliska nodded. "The hair."



His eyes flared. "I like your hair."

She had the sudden, ridiculous urge to pull all the pins out and let it fall around her shoulders just to see his expression. The kiss last night had almost turned into more. Eliska didn't have a pocket watch, but she'd guess it was around teatime. If she hadn't run, they'd be married now.

"If I hadn't run," she said impulsively, "Where would we be right now?"

Theo smiled. "On a train, headed to London."

Eliska laughed, but she shook her head. "Truly?"

"Yes. But in first class and with all our luggage in the break van." He glanced down at the worn leather valise on the floor between them. "I assume this is all you brought?"

Eliska nodded. "I shall send for the rest of my things once I find a hotel in London."

Theo's voice turned velvety and sensual. "We'd be on a train because, as your husband, I'd take you away from all the nonsense at Blatherwycke. I'd have sent a telegram ahead to warn the housekeeper I was returning early with a wife."

"A telegram? Sounds expensive just to communicate return times with your housekeeper," Eliska murmured.

"I want the house ready and prepared for you," Theo said. "I'd ask if you wanted supper at a restaurant near the train station, but secretly I'd hope you will say no."

Eliska raised her eyebrows. "Why?"

His smile made her toes curl. “Because it’s our wedding night, love.”

Heat unfurled in her stomach, spreading to every inch of her body. She was sure her face was flaming red. Try as she might, she couldn’t look away from his magnetic gaze. She cleared her throat, trying to sound prim and proper as a British governess. “Are all men like this?”

Undaunted, his smile only grew. “If all men were married to you, they’d never leave your bedchamber.”

Eliska’s face burned hotter than the sun. “You’re...you’re just saying that,” she managed.

“I’m saying it because it’s true.” He paused. “Do you want to know something wicked?”

“Yes,” she blurted, leaning forward. She shouldn’t be encouraging him. Her plan was to return to Prague and live with one of her mother’s friends while refining her next response to the court, wasn’t it? Even if the reason she jilted him had been a misunderstanding, the betrothal had been ridiculous from the beginning.

“Last night, when I fell asleep, I was thinking about how you’d look in my bed with your hair down.”

A thrill shot through Eliska at his words and the gleam in his eyes. The heat in her belly moved further south, pooling between her thighs. “Truly?” she breathed.

“Oh, yes.” Theo’s smile turned absolutely sinful. “I imagined licking your ears again. Then running my tongue down your skin here.” His hand reached out and his index finger traced a line down the side of her neck.

Eliska shivered. Distantly, she knew this was inappropriate. They weren't married. It was bad enough they were sharing a closed compartment for hours without a chaperone. But the touch of his finger ignited a fire beneath her skin. She wanted to bite his finger. She wanted it in her mouth so she could show him just how much he affected her.

“And when I'd used my tongue to find the length of your collarbone, I'd go lower still.” Somehow, they were both leaning forward, knees touching, his index finger hovering just above the buttons that concealed her breasts. “I also planned to explore your feet. I'll cover you in kisses, and—”

The train jerked to a sudden, screeching halt.

Eliska grimaced, putting her hands over her ears. “What is happening?”

Theo nearly toppled into her lap. He shoved himself back into a sitting position as the train shuddered. “I'm not sure.”

“We're not at a station, are we?” Eliska glanced out the window but could see only rain streaking the glass.

Theo shook his head. “It must be the weather.”

“But why would we stop?” Eliska asked aloud. “Surely that's dangerous.”

After a moment of tense silence, Theo sighed and reached for the door. He opened it halfway and stuck his head out into the drizzle, looking up and down the line.

Eliska waited for him to return and shut the door behind him.

“We're stopped before a bridge, it looks.” Theo ran his hands through his hair to rid

himself of the excess water. “My guess is that the water level is too high to cross the bridge right now, and we’re waiting to see if we can back up to the last station.”

“This seems dangerous.” Eliska flushed with embarrassment that her impulsive decision had put them in this predicament. The compartment had darkened as the day wore on and the rainclouds didn’t abate.

A loud thud hit the door, followed by further pounding.

Eliska jumped.

Theo leaned forward and opened the door. Rain drizzled onto the threshold, and a dark, sodden figure loomed in the doorway. “Yes?”

The man outside adjusted his cap, revealing tired, baggy eyes set in a warm, brown face and a full black beard. Rain beaded on the waterproof cape over his navy wool uniform. “We’re stopping for the night,” the rail worker announced.

“The whole night?” Theo clarified.

The man nodded. “It’s rained for over a week straight. The engineer’s decided it’s too dangerous to travel the bridge now, but the water’s beginning to recede. In the morning we’ll check again and continue onward. I’m going up and down the carriages letting everyone know.” He gestured with his thumb. “If you’ve any luggage in the break van, you’re welcome to come retrieve it. But I’m not delivering anything.”

Eliska leaned forward. “Which station will we backtrack to?” On the way to England, while she’d been somewhere in France, a landslide had taken out some of the track. The train had reversed course, going back to the previous station and let passengers off for the night. The next morning, they reboarded and set off on a different route.

But the man shook his head. “We aren’t. We’re staying put.”

Eliska stared at him. “All night? We’re spending the night on the tracks?”

He nodded. “This branch doesn’t have solid signaling. Everything is run by timetable. If we back up, we throw the timetable out the window and run the risk of another train hitting us from behind.”

Eliska blanched.

“Are you handing out any food and extra blankets, then?” Theo glanced around. “Or more oil for the lamp?”

“I’ll see what we have in the break van, but I doubt it’s much. We expect passengers to purchase whatever they need at the stations.” With that announcement, the man turned and stomped through puddles to the carriage behind them.

Theo shut the door, and they stared at one another in dismay in the growing shadows.

“Can you light the lamp?” Eliska gestured toward the lamp bolted to the wall opposite the door. A small, tin container of oil hung from the arm of the lamp, and she assumed a matchbook rested somewhere nearby.

Eliska tried to keep calm as Theo worked the lamp. When a flame sparked, filling the compartment with weak, yellow light and the smell of paraffin filled the small space, she focused on the scent and flickering shadows. “I’m such a fool,” she muttered, rubbing her forehead.

“Why do you say that?” Theo shifted in his seat, probably trying to find a position that didn’t numb his rear.

Eliska sighed. “I bet you wish you’d just let me go and not followed.”

After a pause, Theo said, “I don’t, actually. I think this is where I prefer to be.”

Eliska gave him a look of pure disbelief.

He laughed, the shadows highlighting the handsome contours of his face. He adjusted his blanket, making his shoulders shift and upper arms bulge. Eliska caught her breath. In another world she’d be preparing to make love to him right now. Maybe they’d explore one another’s bodies on the train to whet their appetites. She bet Theo had plenty of practice, based on his looks. Or perhaps not. He did seem content to fade into the background in crowds. Eliska had overlooked him at first, though now she realized how foolish that had been.

In another timeline, another world...she would’ve enjoyed going to his home and falling into his bed with him.

“I like you,” Theo admitted, breaking into her thoughts. “I think you’re brave and intelligent and resilient and...intrepid.” In the low light it was hard to be sure, but it looked like he blushed at the last word, as if embarrassed by waxing poetic.

Eliska glanced down at her hands clasped in her lap.

Theo reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She nearly started at the sudden warmth of his hand. But it felt right and good, like he should’ve been doing that all along. She looked up at him through her lashes. “I like you, too. I think you’re kind and honorable and unswerving.”

“I have no doubt we can make a solid go at it.”

“We’re not betrothed anymore,” Eliska reminded him for the hundredth time.

Theo just smiled.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:30 pm*

Theo had surprisingly little difficulty putting his discomfort and concerns aside, instead focusing on the fascinating woman sitting across from him. He was absurdly glad he'd run after her.

After a couple of hours of entertaining one another with conversation about their upbringing, impressions of the rest of the houseguests, and whatever came to mind, Eliska's stomach rumbled.

She put a hand to her belly. "Oh, dear."

"I don't have any more food," Theo apologized.

She reached for her reticule on the end of the bench. "I packed what I could with scones from Blatherwycke's kitchens." She passed out two dry, crumbly scones to him.

Theo took them, holding them delicately between thumb and forefinger. He ate carefully, consuming every crumb.

All light outside faded away, as did the sound of misting rain. Cold air drifted through the cracks in the door, its fingers clutching and sending shivers down his spine.

After some time watching Eliska drape and redrape her blanket, curling into as much of a ball her crinolines would allow, Theo made a decision.

He slapped his knees and stood as best he could. "Right. We'll freeze to death if we



stay like this.”

Eliska’s eyes widened in the firelight, fear glinting. “Truly?”

“Not actually.” Theo stood hunched over and began folding his blanket. “English springs aren’t that cold. I’m just using hyperbole.”

She eased under her blanket. “What are you doing?”

Theo shrugged his dried jacket back on, then turned to her. “We’re moving to first class.”

She stared, uncomprehending. “We are?”

“Absolutely. They have velvet cushioned seating, better-smelling oil in their lamp, another blanket, the floor has a rug, and the window has a curtain. We’ll be far warmer over there.”

“Is there room for us?” Eliska looked skeptical.

“The train is only half full. I opened most of the compartments before I found you. The carriage right behind us is first class for all three compartments.”

Her eyes brightened and she struggled to get off the bench, her gray skirts and crinolines flailing around her. “Let’s go!”

Theo eyed her outfit. “I don’t even know how you fit through the door this morning.” He hefted her valise.

She laughed. “I did have to squeeze the skirts.” She draped her blanket over one arm and snatched up her reticule. “Lead the way.”

Theo braced against the cold, wet air and opened the door. He hopped down and immediately regretted it. Water splashed up his legs, soaking his socks and trousers up to his knees.

“Did you land in a puddle?” Eliska whispered from behind.

Theo grimaced and tried to shake the water off, feeling rather like a wet dog. “It’s not too bad,” he lied. He turned in a circle, trying to get the lay of the land. He stood in puddles surrounded by mud on the edge of the track. Clouds covered the moon, so he couldn’t see anything beyond the carriage right beside him.

He glanced over his shoulder to see Eliska leaning out of the carriage, hands braced on the door frame, skirts squished inward. “You’ll never make it dressed like that.”

Eliska gave him a look. “I’m not spending the night in here by myself!”

Theo tried to ignore the water dripping down his shins. “Take your crinolines off, then climb on my back.”

She laughed. “No, I’ll find a way.”

“I’m quite serious.” Theo stepped backward until he was in position. “Come on. I promise I won’t look, if that’s what worries you.”

Eliska fell silent. He could practically feel her thinking. “Oh, very well.”

Theo took her blanket and reticule so she could wriggle free of her wire hoops. It took forever. Eliska huffed and grunted behind him, punctuated by rustling fabric. Although he had imagined—more than once—the sounds of her disrobing, he received no pleasure from the exercise, for he was still standing in a puddle of water. His leather shoes would never recover.

“Ready?” Her whisper came much closer than he’d anticipated, and he jumped at the warm breath on the nape of his neck.

“Ready.” He held his arms out. “I’ve given piggyback rides to my niece and nephew, so you’re with an expert.”

She laughed, and then her arms were around his shoulders and her breasts pressed against his shoulder blades.

Very well, a little water is worth this.

Theo tried to hook his arms under her knees, but all he felt were acres and acres of petticoats. “What—what—where are your legs, woman?”

Eliska wriggled against him, and he felt her knees somewhere in his ribs. “Right there!” She laughed, breaking the thick, smothering silence with glee. An answering smile tugged at Theo’s lips.

After much fumbling and mock grumbling, they finally got his arms under Eliska’s legs. Theo felt lighter than he had all day. He never thought he’d be thanking his lucky stars his betrothed was European—he hadn’t thought it would make much difference either way—but right now he was. Theo doubted many British ladies of gentle birth would climb onto his back and bear him touching their legs in such an intimate fashion. His sister told him that girls in finishing schools were instructed to use the word “limb” rather than “leg.” Thank goodness Eliska was Eliska.

She squeezed his chest. “Ready.”

Theo hiked her high on his back and plodded through the muddy puddles to the next carriage. She’d left her crinolines behind in the compartment, and her skirts likely trailed in the mud behind them. But she was warm and cheerful despite the

circumstances, and he didn't think he'd ever had this much fun holding a woman before.

"You're going slow," she complained cheerfully.

Theo snorted. "You try walking through this mud with a person on your back."

Eliska wriggled against him, and his cock pressed against the seam of his trousers. Her left foot knocked into his left knee. But apparently his body liked it, for his cock was somehow at half-mast.

"Did you just kick me?" Theo asked in mock outrage. "I am not a horse, madam. I will not go faster if you stick me with your spurs."

Eliska bent over his shoulder, laughing. "Oh, none of this is funny at all and yet I can't stop." Her breath was hot against his cheek, and all he wanted to do was keep her laughing. Maybe she'd stay with him.

In a few moments that felt like hours, somehow they maneuvered themselves into the first class compartment. They took turns sitting at the open compartment door to remove their wet and muddy shoes. Theo rolled his socks down, too. When he turned back, Eliska had lit the lamp on the wall, and his chest seized at the sight.

Eliska had bent over, grappling at her back to remove a few petticoats from under her wool skirts. With her crinolines gone he could make out the natural curve of her waist and hips. In the struggle to find better accommodations, her hair had fallen around her face. Lamplight caressed the curve of her cheek and gilded her dawn-colored hair, turning it to pure flame. She was so beautiful, even in this bedraggled state. Perhaps especially because of her bedraggled state, for it proved that despite her appearance she was a true flesh-and-blood woman. All he wanted was to tangle his hands in her locks and drag her lips to his. He clenched his fist to keep from doing it.

“I’m exhausted.” Eliska covered her mouth in a yawn as she looked up at him. “You don’t mind if I take off some of these garments, do you?”

Yes, absolutely . “Go right ahead,” he acquiesced. Considering exactly how they’d found themselves in this predicament, he was going to be the most proper, courteous gentleman to ever walk the face of England.

Theo sat on one of the upholstered seats, stroking the velvet. It wasn’t exactly soft, but when compared to the wooden seat of second class, he was thrilled.

Eliska turned and squirmed, panting and breathing as she fought her way out of her restrictive undergarments. Once three petticoats the size of sails were piled beside Theo, she sat opposite him and smiled. “We can use those as extra blankets tonight.”

Theo gritted his teeth at the idea of touching her undergarments but not her. So close and yet so far. “Whatever makes you more comfortable.”

Eliska then decided torture was the next activity for the evening, for she set one stockinged foot on the edge of the seat beside Theo. Her wool skirt tumbled back, puddling somewhere around mid-thigh. She reached down, oblivious to Theo’s torment, and unhooked her garter and began rolling her stocking down in slow, seductive movements.

Theo’s fist tightened in his lap, and he looked away.

“You seem tense,” she commented.

“No, not really,” Theo managed.

“Are you tired from today?”

“Yes, that’s it,” he agreed. “And worried about the bridge in the morning.”

She’d finished one stocking and switched legs, dropping the first and then propping her other leg beside Theo and began the same procedure.

Theo sneaked a glance at her bare knee and imagined kissing it. Her long, soft fingers made deft work of the stocking, and soon he could see her entire calf. It was as smooth and unblemished as he’d imagined. No, Theo couldn’t look anymore. It was too much. He turned his head.

Eliska tossed her rolled-up stockings into her valise and Theo breathed a sigh of relief. He was ready to thank Saint Peter himself the torture had ended.

And then she fingered the buttons on her bodice.

Theo barely held back a groan.

She chattered merrily away as she popped open each jet button, revealing snatches of white undergarment as the shadows played across her chest.

How could she be talking right now? Didn’t she know what she was doing to him?

Theo gave up. He watched. She didn’t even seem to notice his hot, hungry gaze as she wriggled her shoulders, then her arms, out of her bodice. Soon she sat, bare arms lit by the lamplight, hair tumbling around her shoulders, nose red with the chill. “Oh goodness, it’s cold.” She shivered and rubbed her arms.

Her corset was vivid purple. Not mourning colors. She had that provocative color under the gray wool frock?

Damn it, why was he learning this information now, when she’d declared he couldn’t

do anything about it? What he truly wanted to know next was the color of her nipples. It was cruel to know her corset was purple. Lilac. Lavender. Whatever girls called that color.

Theo had had enough. He tossed the soft, first class blanket at her. “You shouldn’t have undressed then,” he growled. Did she not care? Did she have no respect for his fraying self-control?

Eliska slowly wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. “My feet are cold.”

Theo’s were, too. He’d tucked them under his blanket already. He opened his mouth to offer to rub warmth back into her feet, but decided that was too far. We’re not betrothed anymore , she kept telling him. Damn it, this was supposed to be his wedding night.

“Can...can I sit next to you?” Her voice came soft and hesitant from the shadows.

Why not? He was already at his limit. Why not push it a little more? Theo had the mad desire to laugh. He deserved a medal. “If you insist.”

She hesitated, clearly unsure she was actually welcome by his reluctant tone.

“Come on, now.” Theo snaked his hand out of his blanket and reached for her, tugging her hand out from her blanket and gently pulling her toward him.

“Oh!” Eliska tipped forward. She landed half in his lap, half sprawled across the seating. Her mouth was far, far too close to his cock. It rallied, growing completely erect as if to greet the woman who’d caused so much torment and torture. Traitor , Theo cursed. She doesn’t want you. Calm down.

Eliska scrambled up and burrowed into his side, somehow sliding under his blanket

and draping hers on top of them both. It was like magic. Theo didn't even know how she did it. He reluctantly raised an arm, and she slipped in, resting her cheek against his heart. "Ugh!" she jerked away. "Your waistcoat is damp."

Yes, yes it was. That discomfort was one of the only reasons Theo still had a grip on his sanity.

"Don't you wish to remove it?" she asked, innocent as a lamb.

Theo barked a laugh. She had to be doing this on purpose. "No, I think I'll keep it on."

She sighed. "Very well. But I think you'd be far more comfortable with it off."

No, he wouldn't. In fact, he was considering taking a hike through the puddles on the track.

"Theo," she said after a tense silence. "Why do you keep insisting upon marrying me? Besides ruining me," she added.

"I got used to the idea," he said gruffly, ducking his head. "I don't like last-minute changes." The truth was he wanted her. Badly. More than anything in his entire life. But it wasn't just his body straining for her. His chest ached in that peculiar way when he witnessed a beautiful sunrise and knew he'd never have the privilege of seeing it again. She was so sweet and winsome, so utterly delightful and smart about some things and truly innocent when it came to others—a fascinating juxtaposition. He needed to know her more. He needed to feel that giddy lightness that rolled over him when she smiled. He needed to cause that smile, to give her joy when she'd experienced so much grief recently. He wanted to tell her all his secrets, hopes, and fears—and he wanted to hear hers, too.



This seemed far more serious than his original infatuation.

Eliska's hand slid forward and wrapped around his thigh.

Theo tensed. Good god, was she seducing him? She simply had to be doing this on purpose. He couldn't take it anymore.

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Eliska inwardly sighed. He must be dull-witted. Which was a true shame, because she'd enjoyed everything about Theophilus Fairplace thus far. How much more obvious did she need to be? She was trying to seduce him. On purpose. And he was as oblivious to her as a cow chewing cud.

Continental European girls weren't as prudish as their British neighbors, but even they couldn't waltz right up to a man and ask him to tup her. Well, she could, if she wanted to be labeled a shameless trollop.

Eliska wasn't ashamed of knowing about sex, nor about wanting it. She'd never had it, of course, but she'd heard raving reviews about it from a few married women. Good girls were allowed to enjoy sex once married. She was pretty sure she'd got that right. She sighed. Perhaps curtailing their betrothal had been short-sighted after all. This could've been her wedding night.

She was fairly certain she could be a good girl and enjoy sex. It was a radical notion, but she'd read a few pamphlets by French feminists, and they seemed far more knowledgeable about the topic than she. Eliska just couldn't quite overcome her virginal modesty enough to rip her clothes off and say, "Take me now, Theo!"

"Eliska," he said in the growly voice he used when he was frustrated with her. Her toes curled and she gripped his thigh.

"Yes?" she breathed, raising her head so it would be easier for him to kiss her.

"What are you doing?"

She floundered. If only she was like those sophisticated French feminists.

“Well?” he demanded, his body tense against her.

“I...I was remembering last night,” she improvised. It was true. “How you warmed me with your touch. And kisses.”

He froze. “Eliska,” he said evenly.

“Yes?”

“Please be very clear.”

“Very well.”

“Are you asking me to kiss you?”

She gathered her courage. “Yes. Because the train is cold, you see, and— umph!”

His lips captured hers in a searing kiss. He devoured her, sending burning fire down her throat, through her whole body, and down to her icy toes.

Eliska moaned and rose on her knees to better reach his mouth.

His hands delved into her tangled hair. He stroked and teased, twisting her locks and lifting them off her shoulders so he could trail kisses down her neck. He nibbled at her pulse as she pressed tiny kisses across his temple, his forehead, his cheekbones. The scrape of whiskers roughed her lips, and she shivered in desire.

Suddenly Theo grabbed her hips and swung her around, until she straddled him, her knees on either side of his hips. He growled again and his fingers pressed into her

skin, through her chemise. “You’re everything,” he murmured against her skin, his lips making a searing path back up to her mouth. He bit her lower lip, drawing a gasp from her, then soothed it with his tongue.

She opened to him, and he responded, tangling his tongue with hers. The wet heat of him sent tingles up and down her spine, as did the vulnerable position he held her in. Eliska planted both hands on his shoulders and gripped them as his hands moved from her hips to her backside. He grabbed her buttocks and groaned, sending vibrations from his mouth to hers.

“Theo,” she gasped. She plucked at the buttons of his waistcoat, fumbling through the haze of her passion.

His hands roamed her body, then he cursed and ripped her corset open. Cold air rushed in as her chemise gaped, but it was quickly replaced by hot, questing fingers. He massaged her shoulders as he kissed harder and harder. His mouth went back to her bosom, where he exhaled right above her nipple. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she scrambled with the shoulder of his waistcoat, shoving it off, and then went for his limp and bedraggled necktie.

“You’re so lovely, so perfect.” He peppered her with compliments as his hands ran up and down the outside of her legs. He even stroked past her knee, reaching to cup the back of her calves to warm them.

Eliska’s body ached with emerging desire. Her core grew slick with need, and her intimate skin throbbed nearly to the point of pain. “Theo, please! Theo, more.” She widened her legs.

“Are you spreading your legs for me, sweet Eliska? Do you need my hand to soothe you?”

“Yes!” she nearly sobbed. “Yes.”

His strong, hot fingers turned to the inside of her thighs. She was so sensitive she nearly jumped at his touch. But once she realized what he was doing, she leaned closer, silently begging him to trail those fingers higher and higher.

She buried her face next to his, panting in his ear.

“You sat there so demurely, like you didn’t want me. Didn’t want my hands to do this.” He did something exquisite with just the tips of his fingers against the edge between her thighs and her core, then dragged them away.

“Pretending to be such a good girl.” His voice was sin incarnate.

“I am a good girl,” she huffed indignantly.

“Yes, you are,” he agreed, stroking the inside of her quivering thigh. “And good girls do as they’re told, don’t they?”

Eliska’s mind bucked at that. “I’m a grown, unattached woman.”

“Of course you are,” Theo agreed smoothly. “But here, when it’s just us, when it’s just me, you’ll do as I say. Because it makes us both happy.”

“Oh,” she sighed as his fingers stroked the short curls of her mons. “Yes, just for you.”

“And why is that?” he asked, turning his face to nip the lobe of her ear.

She shook her head, unable to speak.

He suddenly pinched her thigh. Not hard enough to hurt, but in her sensitized state it was like an electrical shock. “Why is that, Eliska? Tell me, so I know what to do.”

“Because it makes us both happy,” she groaned.

“Very good.” He rewarded her with two fingers gently swiping up her folds.

She keened, unable to hold such pleasure within her body.

Theo chuckled, and part of her wanted to pull back and tell him not to take pleasure in her neediness, that he shouldn’t relish having this much power over her. But then she heard the tight undertone of his laugh, felt the tension in his shoulders, and the tremor in his hand steadying her with a grip on her hip. He was just as needy, just as affected. In fact, she might have him in her thrall.

“Oh, so wet and perfect,” Theo groaned, sliding his fingers up and down her sex. “Already prepared for me.”

Eliska nodded, her face in the crook of his neck.

“What if I want more?” he breathed, rubbing her gently. “Can you give me more of yourself? Can you make yourself wetter, if it would please me?” His voice was rough now, less controlled. “Will you be a good girl and do as I say?” Then his thumb touched the bundle of nerves near the top and she gasped, shuddering against him.

“Ah, there’s a lovely lass,” he praised. “Now tell me what you want.”

Eliska shook her head, so overwhelmed she wasn’t sure what to ask for. Wasn’t sure she could get the words out even if she did.

Theo read her hesitation correctly. “Then I’ll tell you what I want. Because you want

to make me happy, don't you? Then rub yourself against my hand. That's it, buck if you need to. I've got you. You're only doing as you're told."

The tension in Eliska's body rose to greater heights. Pleasure swirled and swooped inside her, and yet it wasn't enough. Her hands turned to claws, gripping his shoulders so tight she wondered if he'd have fingernail marks underneath his shirt.

"I'm telling you now that I need to see your breasts," Theo grunted. "And you're going to obey me, yes?"

Eliska released his shoulders and grappled with her chemise, dragging it upward and tucking it under her chin. She didn't have a chance to feel cold, for Theo whisked a blanket around her shoulders, creating a safe cocoon.

"Oh, such beauties," Theo declared. "I knew they'd be perfect." His hands resumed their place. "Now: I'm busy seeing to your pleasure."

Eliska ground against his palm, thighs tight and breasts heaving with need. "Yes."

"So that means I deserve a little pleasure, too," Theo continued. "And you're going to be a good girl and give me what I ask for."

Eliska grunted.

"Take your hands and bring your breasts up to my mouth," he directed. "It would give me great pleasure to taste your nipples."

Face flushing, Eliska did as she was told. She cupped her warm breasts and brought them to his lips, even though it put her in a precarious position, trying to balance over him.

“That’s right, that’s exactly right.” Theo put his mouth to one nipple, sucking and licking.

Eliska cried out as he drew pleasure right out of her core, spreading it up her abdomen and across her breasts like little sparks of sunlight. The position, where she depended upon his hands for balance, sent a thrill of arousal through her.

“That’s perfect,” he murmured between her breasts. “I could feel you clenching. Whatever you thought of, do it again, my love.” He spun his hand and inserted one finger into her sheath.

Eliska’s arousal shot high at the sensation.

“Yes, again,” Theo directed. “So wet, so ready to please me.” He carefully and slowly inserted a second finger.

It was tight. Eliska shifted on her knees, wanting to do this all night but knowing her legs would give out soon.

Theo took his mouth to her other nipple, and he bit gently. She mewled as the pleasure drove her higher. She felt dizzy with desire. “Oh, please, Theo, please,” she babbled.

“Such a good girl, asking so politely,” he complimented, then kissed her nipple. “Good girls are rewarded.” He turned his hand again, making a motion with his fingers inside her and simultaneously rubbing his thumb in a circle over her clitoris.

She exploded in a shower of sparks, pleasure arcing through her body. Her head rolled back, and the chemise dropped, curtaining the marvelous sensation his hand had caused. “Oh my,” she said once she got her breath back.



Theo stared at her, breathing just as heavily. His hand emerged from her chemise. His fingers glistened in the lamplight. “Breathtaking,” he whispered to himself, never once looking away from her face. His two fingers slid into his mouth, and he sucked them clean.

Eliska was not prepared for how aroused the sight made her. She sank down, setting her bare bottom on the edge of his knees. “What about you?”

Theo stiffened. “Oh, you mustn’t feel the need to reciprocate. I don’t expect anything.”

Hmm. So he was being dull-witted again.

Eliska leaned forward until she could feel the ridge beneath his trouser falls. “Are you sure?” she asked breathlessly. “Good girls always make their friends feel welcome. And thanked.”

Theo choked. “Oh, God.”

Eliska counted that as progress. She slipped a hand down and gripped his clothed erection. She’d been kissed a few times, had even felt a man’s cock as he crowded into her space during a kiss. She knew they liked to call it a cock. But she’d never touched one, even over the trousers. She’d have to be bold.

“I did everything you told me to,” she encouraged. “I was a good girl, wasn’t I?”

“Yes, very,” he gritted. Both hands now clasped her waist.

“So I deserve a reward.”

He laughed. “I already gave you your reward.”

She batted her eyes shamelessly, and his lips quirked upward at her obvious attempts. “You’re being difficult, Theo.”

“I don’t want you to do anything you’ll regret tomorrow, love.”

“I’ll never regret you.” It was truth. Eliska rubbed his length in what she hoped was a seductive manner.

Theo rolled his hips against her, face taut with repressed desire. “I don’t know.”

“You said this would make both of us happy.”

His face softened, and he cupped her cheek. “Oh, love, you have made me very, very happy already.”

Eliska’s heart ached. “I want to be with you. In every way.” She took a steadying breath. “Please?”

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Theo couldn't hold back any longer. It was physically painful to do so. Other men had complained about aching ballocks when their amorous activities had been cut off early. But Theo's ballocks didn't ache. His heart did, somehow.

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her thoroughly, sweetly, effortlessly. Because kissing her felt like the most natural, beautiful thing in the world. How had he not even known she existed a week ago? He needed her in his life. Forever.

Theo carefully arranged her on the seats, stripping her of her chemise until only her bare skin touched the blanket. He pulled his shirt off as quickly as he could, then shucked his trousers in the limited space. This was not going to be a graceful endeavor. Maybe tomorrow in London he could prove to her he had more prowess than this.

He gathered her in one arm, cupping her back with his forearm so she had as much relief from the seating as possible. When he settled over her, her soft, inviting warm body nearly made him spill right there.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and smiled. "Hello, darling." Damn, why did her smile always turn him into a besotted fool? He kissed her forehead. "You know how this works?"

Eliska nodded. "You'll go slow?"

"Yes. And I shan't risk getting you with child." He hoped it wouldn't hurt her at all. Some women didn't experience pain, he'd heard. Theo reached down and parted her legs, hooking the outside leg over his hips. Her foot rested just perfectly on the small

of his back. He wanted to lay on top of her, to feel her breasts pressed against his chest. But this was already less than ideal circumstances for deflowering a virgin. He instead ground his pelvis against hers, pleasure already building at the base of his spine.

His cock twitched in delight at being so close to her already. Theo took time to stroke her folds again with his fingers, stoking her passion once more. Only when she gasped and shivered beneath him did he tilt his hips and notch the crown of his cock at her sheath.

He gritted his teeth against the exquisite feeling, hoping he'd at least get one or two thrusts in. He'd always enjoyed his time with women—not that he'd slept with many, just a handful or less—but something about this was different. It felt portentous. As if heralding a new era of his life.

Theo eased his way in, nearly choking at how tight and hot and wet she was. Society might say that she was ruined, but he knew the truth, even as he crept forward, retreated, then crept a little further forward. She had ruined him.

Eliska made a face, and he froze. “Too painful?”

She screwed up her face in a thoughtful frown. “Not sure. Strange. I feel so...full,” she added wonderingly.

Theo hoped that was a good thing. He waited a little longer to give her a moment to accustom herself to him, stroking her hair and licking her ear. When she nodded her assent, he continued. He kept his thrust gentle, slow. He didn't want to miss a moment of this with hard, quick pounding. Each slide in and nearly out felt like touching the sun—overwhelming and intense and blinding all at once.

Her breathy pants came closer and closer together, and soon she writhed beneath him.

“Can I do it again? This soon?” she asked him.

“Let’s find out.” Theo slid his hand down between their bodies and stroked the nub of sensitive flesh in time to his thrusts. He changed his angle until a look of rapture crossed her face, and then he twisted his legs to make sure he could sustain it.

All too soon his ballocks tightened, and he gasped. Theo bit his tongue and renewed his efforts to make her experience another paroxysm. He didn’t know how much longer he could hold off. He gasped again, this time relief, when he felt her muscles ripple around him and her head turn from side to side. He had just enough presence of mind to jerk from her body and spill his seed on her stomach. Pleasure crested and tore through him like a wildfire, leaving him wrung dry of his strength. He buried his face in her hair, gathering his shredded fortitude.

Despite the relief and joy of the moment, a sadness crept in at the corners of his mind. Theo ignored it as he searched for any scrap of fabric to clean them up with. He settled on his necktie, which wasn’t ideal, but he didn’t care. He was just happy she was glowing.

“Mmmm,” Eliska murmured as he covered her back up in the blankets. “Do you think we can sleep on the seat together?”

Theo doubted it, but he was game to try. He wordlessly adjusted her body so they lay on their sides. He draped his legs across the middle of the compartment and rested his feet on the opposite seat.

Eliska fell asleep almost immediately, judging by her soft, even breathing. Theo lay awake longer, a strange bittersweetness overcoming him.

Then he finally knew. He understood the answer to all his questions. Why he’d been sad to pull out and spill on her belly. Why he’d felt so betrayed upon reading her

note. Why he was experiencing the worst and best night of his life simultaneously. Why he craved her smile.

He loved her.

He wasn't just smitten with a bad case of calf love that would make even a fourteen year old boy embarrassed. He loved her. That's why he wanted to marry her.

Theo thought back to the marriage and divorce game, which felt like years ago. That's why he hadn't listed any character flaws in her sketch. Except for one.

He sighed and shifted his weight to relieve a cramp in his leg. How did he convince her?

???

Theo woke in the morning to the rumbling, growling indication the locomotive had started and was cruising toward the bridge. He winced, his body making him aware of aches and pains from sleeping in such a contorted manner. The edge of one of the blankets slipped off his leg, and he nearly yelped at the cold.

Eliska mumbled something in her sleep, and her bottom nudged his front in a most enticing way. His cock, ready to greet the morning, somehow hardened further. He rocked against her, closing his eyes to revel in the feel of his skin against hers. He could wake this way every day for the rest of their lives.

Eliska turned in her sleep and nearly fell off the bench seating. Theo tucked an arm around her just in time, gathering her close. The feel of her bare back was so beautiful, so erotic, he wanted to strip her bare and lick down her spine, then perhaps draw the curve of her body anywhere he could memorialize it—books, buildings, paper advertisements.

Her eyelashes fluttered as she turned to face him, and the sight of her blue gaze felt like a kick in the chest. “Good morning.” Her voice was soft and dusky with sleep. “We survived the night?”

“I think I still have all my toes,” Theo confirmed. “Do you?”

Her lips curved. “None iced and fell off during the night.”

Theo’s heart was so full it hurt. He had to tell her. He had to explain why she needed to marry him. He’d wait. He’d wait for the right moment.

“Thank goodness we’re moving.” Eliska sat up. The blanket fell from her and for a heartbeat her breasts filled Theo’s vision, creamy with tawny nipples. He leaned forward to kiss one, but she whipped the blanket up before he could make contact, and his lips hit the blanket instead.

“What was this?” she giggled.

“Not satisfying, that’s what that was,” Theo grumbled. He scrubbed a hand over his face, wiping the sleep away, then put his hand behind his head and enjoyed the view of Eliska’s bare back. God, he wanted her all over again.

Eliska turned, still holding the blanket to her breasts, and looked him up and down. His side of the blanket draped across his midchest, so she got an eyeful of his arms, his hair, his flat, brown nipples, and more. Based on her rosy cheeks, she probably liked what she saw.

Theo grinned. “We should dress. Before we get to the next station.”

Eliska reluctantly agreed. They dressed one another, something Theo had never done before. He found he loved it. Probably because it involved Eliska.

They held their breath as the train crossed the bridge, but it passed without incident. The lamp had gone out during the night, but in the gray light of the cloudy morning Theo could see the wood paneling, the gold tassels hanging from the heavy window curtain, and the damask design cut into the velvet tufted pillows.

Soon they stopped in the next village. Theo volunteered to go find Eliska's crinolines in the second class compartment. "The railway workers are probably more exhausted than we are. I doubt they'll be checking who belongs where." While he was on the platform he bought two pastries and refilled his tin cups with hot tea. And all the while, all he could think was, Eliska, Eliska, Eliska . He hurried back to the carriage so Eliska could run to the lavatory. He imagined telling her as soon as she returned.

She returned to the first class compartment just before the whistle blew. "I saw the engineer trading places. Looks like the engineer from last night is getting off shift to sleep, thank goodness. I'm glad we have a fresh engineer who got a good night's sleep."

They devoured the food Theo had purchased. Eliska thanked him as she licked the crumbs from her fingers. "I was woefully unprepared for such an inconvenience as last night."

Theo, mesmerized by the sight of her tongue licking her fingers, reached out and gently grasped her wrist. She glanced at him in surprise, then flushed as he brought her hand to his mouth and sucked each fingertip dry.

"Theo," she said, not quite an admonishment.

He smiled at her. "Delicious."

Her blush deepened, which made his heart thump queerly. "Eliska," he said, unable to hold it back any longer.



“Hmm?” She pulled the curtain back to look out the window at the passing, soggy countryside.

“Eliska, please marry me. I love you.” The words bubbled forth, leaving him tongue-tied and inarticulate. All air escaped from the compartment, leaving him faint and rather ill.

Eliska froze, then turned her head and stared at him, eyes wide with shock.

Shock was never a good sign.

“Are you...proposing to me?”

Theo nodded, wondering how to salvage this. Should he wedge himself on the floor? He wasn't sure he'd fit between the seats, but he'd try.

“Theo,” Eliska breathed. “We're not betrothed.”

“Yes, that's why I'm proposing,” Theo replied, whole body tensing for a blow.

She just blinked at him, unable to think of anything to say. Oh God, she'd refuse him. He just knew it. “Theo, you don't need to marry me because of last night. I was already ruined before we slept together. Nothing changed.”

“No,” Theo insisted. “That's not why. I mean, I would, of course, because I couldn't leave a woman to face social ruin alone. But I'm proposing today because I want to. Because I love you.”

She continued to stare, eyebrows drawing together in faint confusion.

He couldn't breathe. He wasn't sure his heart was even beating.

“You’re just saying you love me because you don’t know how else to convince me,” she decided. “I like you very much, Theo Fairplace. But please don’t do this.”

Theo wanted to groan. “No, I’m not saying this to convince you.”

“Then your feelings changed because of last night. The truth is, however, we still don’t know one another that well. You’re letting last night influence your thoughts.”

Theo ran a hand through his hair. “How can I prove to you that I truly love you? None of this is a performance.”

Eliska shrugged helplessly.

A thought struck Theo. “Wait. I lied the other night.”

Hurt crossed her face.

Theo stuck his hand in his jacket pocket, finding the crumpled paper and withdrawing it with a flourish. “Here? See.”

Eliska eyed him warily but took the paper. She smoothed the creases out on her lap, the unfolded it. “Is this the character sketch from the game?”

“Yes.” Theo leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Read it.”

Eliska glanced down, eyes flitting across the page.

“I told Evelyn you had no flaws. But that’s not true.” Theo jabbed at the flaw side of the paper. “See? I wrote one down.”

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Eliska read the single line.

She doesn't love me.

Confusion dulled her senses. She looked up at Theo, the man who was suddenly so dear to her. Who'd followed her not out of pride, she realized, but pain. Who piggybacked her so she wouldn't get muddy, who tried his drunken best to protect her even before they were friends. "Why is this a flaw?"

"Because even then it was important to me, even though I didn't understand why." He stared at her, his brown eyes so bright with emotion she felt the need to shield her eyes. "I considered it a flaw that you didn't love me. Because I wanted, no, needed you to. Because I loved you, even before I recognized the sentiment." He took one of her hands in both of his. "Dearest love, my Eliska, please make me the happiest of men and marry me."

Eliska hadn't expected this. She didn't know what to say.

"If you don't love me, I don't mind. Much," he said desperately, bringing her hand to his lips. "I'll happily spend the rest of my life convincing you to love me."

"Oh, Theo, no," she said in dismay. "You deserve so much better than coaxing a woman to value you. You're far too wonderful to settle for anything less than a wife who chose you fully and freely with love in her heart."

Theo's face went slack, as if she'd dealt him a mortal wound. "You're refusing me."

“No!” Eliska rubbed her forehead. “I just...I’d just resigned myself to being ruined and going back to Prague on my own.” She tangled her fingers through his, trying to think. The train rattled and clacked around them.

She imagined a life with Theo. Breakfasting with him each morning. Buying a dog together. Making babies in their bed each night. Each stage of life she could imagine had Theo in it beside her. When she tried to replace his image with another, faceless man, the image dulled immediately, as if all sunshine had been sucked from the frame. The deep longing in her heart ballooned and grew, until she thought her ribs might break from the pressure. “Theo,” she whispered. I think I love you.

But he wasn’t paying attention. Instead he was frowning, peering out the window. “Something isn’t right.”

“What?” Eliska’s senses went on alert. She pulled the curtain back from the edge of the window.

“Do you feel the difference?” Theo’s frown deepened. “The locomotive is jerking around. It’s swaying more than normal.”

“Could it be the rain?” Eliska’s heart skipped a beat.

“I’m not sure. I think—”

The carriage jerked to the side, sending Eliska to the ground and Theo bracing himself against the walls. With a heavy thud and metallic crash, the world went sideways.

Eliska screamed as she went tumbling head first.

Theo launched himself and tackled her against the seat, wrapping his arms around her

and ducking his head.

They crashed as the carriage tilted around them. Eliska's breath was driven out of her lungs by the sharp edge of the lamp on the wall. Her head hit the wood paneling, and Theo grunted. Pain jarred through every point in her body. Her skirts and petticoats flew around her head, making her go blind.

Shocking pain ricocheted through her body. Her head began to pound. Her abdomen screamed at her, and the rest of her body throbbed with sensation that she knew would turn into pain once her mind had cataloged them.

The world stilled.

Eliska's ears rang in the deafening silence. Her vision was still coming back into focus as she took stock of her body. Everything hurt. The handle of her valise dug into her ribs.

Outside she could hear the faint sounds of crashes and shouting. Eliska strained to hear telltale signs of the locomotive exploding from overpressurized steam, but eventually gave up.

"Theo," she croaked, turning her head gently enough it didn't make her vision go white. "Are you hurt?"

He gave no response.

Her pulse, already high, shot even higher. "Theo!" Her voice came out shrill and sharp. "Theo, answer me!"

Oh, God, no, please, no. Her heart in her throat, she tried to roll over to examine Theo. He slumped against her, pinning her to the wood paneled wall that had become

the floor. She tried to pull herself out from under him, but there was very little place to go. Theo was deadweight atop of her.

Blood trickled down her forehead, coating her eyelashes and blocking her sight. She blinked and wiped her eyes with the back of one hand. It only made her sight more limited. She dragged herself out from under his limp body, using the dented metal lamp as leverage. The broken wire hoops of her crinolines dug into her legs when she turned, making her gasp in pain.

Theo lay crumpled on the floor. The light from the window streamed down on them, now a shattered skylight. Glass shards gleamed across every corner of the compartment.

Eliska clambered over her skirts, gritting her teeth against the pain as sharp points of wire pierced her skin. “Theo, please say something.” She reached for him, stroking the hair back from his face with shaking hands. “Theo?”

The back of his head was wet with blood, and it was already swelling into a goose’s egg. She tenderly felt his neck and shoulders.

His back rose and fell almost imperceptibly.

She sighed with relief. He was alive. “Please wake up,” she whispered. Eliska looked up at the broken window. “I don’t know how to lift you up out of this mess.”

Muffled sounds of whistles and yelling cut through the mangled carriage. Far off in a distant corner of her mind she recognized rescuers might be coming their way eventually. She thought about stripping her skirts off and climbing out the broken window.

Theo moaned.

Eliska's heart skipped a beat, and all thoughts of escape evaporated. She put a hand to his forehead. "Darling, can you hear me? Where does it hurt?" She remembered the way his arms closed around her as he shielded her from the worst of the impact. Tears welled in her eyes, and she blinked them away.

"Eliska?" he asked, voice slurred with pain.

She put a fist to her mouth to stifle a sob. "Theo, darling. Theo. How is your neck? Your back?"

His hand spasmed against the wood paneling. "Everything hurts. What happened?"

"The train crashed as we neared the station."

He groaned again. "It's coming back to me." He paused. "My leg hurts like the devil."

"But your neck?" Eliska prompted.

"Blinding headache. My vision keeps going...black." Theo paused between words, and his voice was thick and fuzzy. His brow creased in pain and his face was bone white.

Eliska tried to remain calm. "I'm going to set your head in my lap. If it hurts, tell me and I'll stop." She waited for a response, but none came, so she went ahead. She carefully slid into a sitting position next to him, hunched over to avoid hitting her head on one of the seats. Eliska carefully lifted his head into her lap. He grunted loudly and she froze, his head half lowered. "What hurts?"

"My leg. Fuck, my leg." Theo's eyes drifted closed and he lost consciousness again.

Panic welled up inside her chest, beating its wings against her ribs and clawing its way up her throat. She choked down a scream.

Clever and strong, mein liebchen, her father's voice whispered.

I need to take care of him, as he cared for me. She forced her breathing to be steady and even as she settled his head in her lap and stroked his hair. Her fingers turned bright red with his blood but she didn't stop.

He couldn't die. She didn't know what she'd do without him. She needed him like she needed water and air.

I love him, she realized. He can't die just as I've found him.

He jerked, moaning and grimacing. "Shhh, my love, shh," she tried to comfort. "Help will be here soon." She hoped.

Eliska hummed through her numb lips. He quieted at her voice. "Spi mé malé poup?, spi malé holoub?," she sang quietly, images of beautiful Czech summers and warm, strong arms holding her high flitting through her mind. The lullaby never failed to bring comfort. She sang it now for both Theo and herself.

Still unconscious, his face twisted in pain, then he whimpered, making Eliska's heart ache for him. She wished she could go back to say something, anything that would soothe any discomfort he currently had. Why couldn't she have known her heart faster? Answered him more confidently? Why had she resisted him?

Eliska could only hope he didn't have internal injuries. She hadn't seen his front; he still lay chest-down. She didn't know if he was slowly bleeding out and the blood was seeping into his clothes. Blood smudged her skirts.



“I love you,” she crooned after the lullaby. “I’m sorry for not saying it sooner. I love you and I need you to be well.”

He didn’t respond.

After a few moments the sounds of people outside grew nearer.

Eliska carefully slid out from beneath his head, letting him rest on a pile of ripped petticoats. Then she climbed on the seats, lifting until she was eye-level with the compartment door.

“Help!” She shot her hand out the window, sending shards of glass tinkling down. She shut her eyes and turned her face just in time. Fire cut down her forearm where she’d cut herself, but she pushed past the pain. “Help! We’re in here! Help!”

Someone shouted and footsteps thumped closer.

A head suddenly appeared. “You alive in there?” The man adjusted his railway uniform hat, ginger sideburns bristling and squinted down at her. “Is it just you?” His Scottish burr was so strong it took Eliska a second to translate.

“No,” Eliska called back. “My...my...I have someone with me. He’s unconscious.”

Another face peered down, this one with features often found in people from East Asia, and the two heads blocked most of the sunlight. “Hmmm. I’ll get the ropes.” His Scottish accent was even stronger. He disappeared.

“The locomotive won’t explode, will it?” Eliska asked, fear making her heart pound. “How trapped are we?”

“You’re safe, miss. Almost.” The first Scotsman glanced toward the site of the crash,

where Eliska couldn't see. "It appears the engine jumped the tracks right as it was coming into the station. The steam burned the engineers, surely, but there won't be an explosion. It would've already happened." He whistled. "You're lucky you're in first class near the back. The injuries I've seen at the front...." The rail worker shook his head.

That did very little to reassure Eliska.

"He hit his head. It's bleeding. He needs a doctor immediately." Eliska gripped the edge of the window hard enough the frame cut into her fingers. "Please get him out. Please."

"We will, lass. Don't you worry."

Suddenly rope was thrown through the window, smacking Eliska in the face. She covered her face with her hands too late.

"Right." The second face was back. "Is he still unconscious?"

Eliska looked down. "Yes."

"I've already got a loop tied. You just need to get it over his head and arms and then we'll pull him up.

"I can do that." Eliska scrambled down. She pulled her ragged skirt and remaining petticoat up, ripped the crinoline off as fast as she could, and shoved it away. Her legs had blood trickling from multiple puncture wounds. It took her several minutes to get the rope around Theo's upper body the way the men directed. Then she stuffed ripped sections of her petticoat between the rope and Theo's body so it wouldn't cut into him. Another section she draped across the edge of the window to blunt any remaining fragments of glass.

“Take him up,” she called. “Is there a doctor?”

“We’re taking the wounded to the local tavern,” one man told her as they pulled on the rope.

Eliska bit her lip to fight against tears as she watched Theo be hoisted into the air. His leg hung awkwardly, and blood stained his trousers. She didn’t take her eyes off him until he disappeared over the edge.

“Your turn, miss.” The first man stuck his hand down. “Any luggage?”

Eliska told herself that everything would be fine. The rescuers wouldn’t care about luggage if an explosion was imminent. She handed up her valise, then climbed as high as she could and grabbed his hands. Theo’s gloves were long gone, so she didn’t search for them. The man pulled her out.

Her skirt ripped as she went, and the strain in her arms made her cry out. But she was free.

Eliska blinked in the late morning light, glancing around to orient herself.

The station house stood up ahead and behind it sat stone houses and shops of the village. The great black locomotive had turned on its side and skidded up the rest of the track and onto the platform, sending wood shattering and flying off like giant-sized toothpicks. Rescuers clambered over the sideways carriages with ropes, ladders, and even saws. A few passengers stood nearby, a glazed expression across their faces. Eliska suspected she wore it, too. And closer up ahead lay bodies, still in the dirt. Blood pooled into the ground around them, and she could just make out clothes burned onto red, shriveled skin.

Her stomach turned, and the horror of it struck her anew. She turned and retched up

breakfast into the grass. Some splattered on her skirt, now missing its hem completely, and her scuffed boots.

“Here now, you’re out.” The Scottish-Asian rail worker awkwardly patted her shoulder. “Do you have any family? I can take you to the church. Uninjured survivors are going there.”

Theo.

Eliska looked frantically for him, and saw him being laid on a makeshift stretcher of broken wood and canvas tied into knots. The blood on his trousers had grown in size and already bruises were forming across his gray face.

She cried out and flew to him, landing on her knees in the mud beside him. “Theo,” she sobbed. “Theo, you have to wake up. They’re taking you to the doctor.” She grabbed his hand and squeezed. I love you, I love you.

Theo groaned and his eyes fluttered open.

“You know him?” The second rescuer stood nearby, hands on his hips and breathing heavily from the hard work.

Theo turned toward Eliska, clenching his jaw. “Eliska,” he whispered, eyes clearing. “Are you well?”

“Yes,” Eliska answered both men. She longed to kiss Theo’s brow and promise all would be well. “I know him well.”

“We’re not betrothed, remember?” His whisper was rough with pain.

Eliska looked up at the rescuer. “That’s right. It was our wedding yesterday.”

“Oh, you’re married? Why didn’t you say so?”

“Yes,” Eliska said firmly, looking back at Theo, who stared at her as if she were his anchor to life. She smoothed hair wet with sweat and blood from his face. “Yes, I’m his wife.”

“Let’s get you somewhere more comfortable,” the man said cheerfully. “The vicar may have room for you both.”

Eliska held Theo’s hand even as the men lifted the rough stretcher. She walked beside it all the way, smiling reassuringly until Theo’s eyes closed again.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:30 pm*

Theo awoke to the sunrise falling across his face. He blinked, lifting his head to better understand where he was.

Pale yellow light spilled through a crack in a lace curtain, illuminating the small but cheerful bedroom. A design of pink roses papered the walls. A whitewashed stand with a pale green pitcher and bowl stood in one corner, a looking glass hanging above it. A chest of drawers perched against the wall, and opposite that was the whitewashed door with an antique knob. His bed was piled high with pillows, a white coverlet, and Eliska, curled in a ball near the foot of the bed.

His whole body ached. He shifted, and his left leg screamed at him. A groan escaped his lips.

Eliska bolted upright, hair the color of a rosy dawn spilling around her. She wore a faded dress he didn't recognize. Cuts marked her forearms and bruises marred her neck and face. Her eyes fastened to his. "Theo! You're awake!" She pounced like a dog with a scent, prowling up the bed to put a hand to his brow.

Theo basked in her touch, another groan escaping.

"We're at the local vicar's house," she said before he could even think to ask where they were. "They took us in yesterday. You likely have two cracked ribs. The doctor came by and set your leg." She shuddered. "You screamed. The vicar's wife and I held you down on their kitchen table. I never, ever want to see you in pain like that again." Her pale face had turned paler at the recollection.

"Are you hurt?" Theo's throat felt like someone had scraped his inside raw, and it

sounded little better than a whisper.

“Bruises here and there. Scratches from the broken glass. You protected me.” Her hand caressed down his brow and cheek to rest on his chest, where his heart beat. “My love.” She opened her mouth to speak more, but her eyes filled with tears, and she burst into sobs.

Theo was horrified. “Oh, darling. I’m so sorry you were so frightened. It must’ve been terrifying to be caught inside that carriage with no way to escape.” He barely remembered any of it except the pain that had clouded all other senses.

“No, you idiot man! I was terrified for you . Have you ever been convinced someone you love was about to die right in front of you, with no way to stop it?”

Theo forced himself into a half-reclining position. It took too long and his whole body hurt with the effort. But he needed her close. He embraced her, pulling her gently against him.

“I shouldn’t lay against you,” Eliska cried into his nightshirt. “You’re bruised enough as it is. Your whole chest is black and blue.”

Theo stroked her hair, marveling at the silky texture. “Shh, my sweet Eliska. I’m here. I’m alive.”

“I can’t lose you, too,” Eliska said between sobs. “Not another person. Not again.”

Theo pressed kisses to her hair. “I’m here. We’re here,” he repeated over and over. “I love you.”

Eliska’s weeping quieted after a moment. She nestled quietly in his arms. All in all, this wasn’t a bad place to be, Theo reflected. He could get used to her body against

his.

She finally pulled back to look him in the eyes, wiping her face with both her hands. “As soon as you’re well enough to be moved we’re going back to Blatherwycke and getting that special license.”

Theo’s heart soared.

“That is, I mean, if you still want me.” Eliska eyed him.

Theo grinned. “Come here.”

She moved. “What? Why?”

“Because my ribs hurt too much to move, and I need to do something.”

Her breath warmed his face. “What do you need to do?”

“This.”

Theo took her face into his hands and kissed her. Eliska’s soft gasp of surprised pleasure made his body yearn for her. He kissed her over and over, lips caressing hers. His tongue flicked the corner of her mouth, then he opened his mouth in an invitation for her to join him. Her tongue tenderly stroked his upper lip, then she slipped inside. Their tongues curled over one another, twining and dancing together in a celebration of life and love.

After several long moments of breathing her scent and memorizing her mouth, Theo pulled back to breathe. Resting his forehead on hers, he smiled. “Of course I still want you.”



Her answering smile lit the room like the sunrise.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:30 pm*

One week later

Blatherwycke Hall

Theo fondled the length of his instrument, eyeing his wife.

She saw the naked lust in his gaze and blushed. But she let her pale yellow dressing gown slip further off her shoulder. “Do you like it?” Eliska asked shyly.

“Very much.” Theo turned his hand over the rod and spread his legs. “Come here.”

Eliska crossed the bedroom, the silk of her dressing robe and nightrail whispering against her skin. It made his cock hard. “Yes, husband?” Her voice made all his hair stand on end. She stopped between his legs.

Theo wanted to rip the robe right off her. “Is the door shut?”

She nodded. “I think we have the entire wing to ourselves.” Then she blushed. “Everyone knows what we’re doing. Because it’s our wedding night.”

Theo grinned. He rather liked the idea of everyone knowing he was the lucky bastard who got to make love to Mrs. Eliska Fairplace—a surprising change from when he felt like a theater spectacle. “The servants are too busy cleaning up after the house party to think of us. And if they do, it will just remind them of their own times.”

“At least Uncle Erswich and Evelyn left after the ceremony.”

Theo agreed with that. “I dislike our relatives. But Erswich did bring us together, in his own way, so I suppose I’ll have to tolerate the Huston-Ives.”

Eliska giggled. Then she arched her brows and looked at his lap. “Are you going to hold that all night, or are you going to hold your bride?”

Theo set his crutch on the ground and heaved himself into a standing position. It had taken three days before he’d gotten out of the vicar’s spare bed, and then they’d had a whole afternoon’s carriage ride back to Blatherwycke. Neither felt like traveling by train for a while. They planned to travel to the Bohemian Lands next month for a honeymoon and legal trip, and would journey mostly by boat and carriage.

Eliska smiled up at him. “Can you hobble to the bed?”

He scoffed. “Hobble? I’ll show you.”

“Or I can help you.” She ran a finger down his chest, tracing a lazy, meandering path to his trousers and hooked her index finger in his waistband.

“Mmmm, on second thought, I’m weak. So weak. You’ll have to support me with your whole body.” Theo dramatically staggered. “No, too far. Too professional. I need you closer. Your breasts, darling, I need your breasts supporting my side.”

She snickered but obliged, walking with him to the bed. She took his crutch and set it aside, then eased him onto the bed.

When they’d arrived at Blatherwycke, they’d met a recalcitrant baron and Theo’s mother frazzled with worry. Once Theo had assured his mother he was recovering, he’d demanded his uncle call their rector back and marry them immediately. It turned out the rector was out of town for a few days, so for four days Theo had to chastely kiss Eliska’s cheek goodnight and watch his mother walk Eliska back to her rooms.

He'd fallen asleep in his bed alone, uncomfortable, and yearning for his betrothed. But now, he supposed as he fell back on the soft mattress and brought her to settle beside him on her side, it was worth it. His leg was stable enough now he could be intimate with Eliska again, and while the sudden abstinence nearly made him go mad, it made this much sweeter.

"Are you sure you're ready?" Eliska's teasing demeanor vanished, replaced with concern.

Theo was oddly touched. "Are you exercising your wifely privilege already?" At her confused look, he explained. "Wives are always worrying over their husbands."

She rolled her eyes. "Because men never take care of themselves. It's the same in Prague as in England. And likely everywhere in the world."

Theo cupped her face with one hand. "I like it. I love knowing I belong to you, and you take care of your people. And I promise to worry over you, too." Then his smile turned wicked. "Let me prove to you how ready I am." He ran his fingers through her loose hair, then reached for her hand and placed it over his erection. He raised one brow. "See?"

Eliska shook her head and laughed. "Very well. But tell me if I start hurting you."

Theo put both his hands behind his head and gave her a very satisfied look. "Maybe I'll lie back and make you do all the work."

Eliska's eyes sparked, then she blushed and looked away.

"What?" Theo was instantly intrigued. "Eliska, I demand you tell me your thoughts at once."

She rubbed his erection but didn't look at him. "I was thinking that good girls are very industrious and known for their hard work."

His cock practically leaped in her hand. He forced his voice to remain even. "You liked that game?"

Eliska nodded.

"I'm so glad," he purred. "Because I was hoping some sweet, biddable girl would come along and please me. Will you be sweet?"

She nodded.

"Will you be biddable?"

She nodded.

"You'll obey all my commands?"

She hesitated.

Theo stroked her arm. "It's a game," he reassured softly. "And we'll learn how to play the game together. I'll learn what orders you want to hear and you'll learn how I like to be obeyed. It's always for both of us. If both of us aren't happy, then it's no longer a game we'll play."

"I'll obey everything my lord and master requires," she replied with a saucy toss of her head. The firelight highlighted the rose and gold of her hair.

"My first command," Theo said as soon as he could breathe again, "Is to prepare yourself for me." He gestured with his chin. "Take off your clothes. Slowly."

Eliska didn't hesitate. She even twirled her hair a bit, undulating her body in an enticing manner. By the time she was naked with all that lovely expanse of skin on display, Theo was rock hard.

"Touch yourself," he rasped.

She slid her hand down her belly, combing her maidenhair with her fingernails, and then slid two fingers along her quim. Her body rippled at the pleasurable sensation. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes.

"No, you must look at me," Theo insisted. He'd almost begged, but remembered just in time he was supposed to be in charge here.

Eliska slowly drew her head up and looked at him, her eyes glazed with lust. It took all of his self-control not to pull his hands from behind his head, grab her, and rut her into the mattress.

"Pinch those pretty nipples for me."

She obeyed, plumping and firming her breasts. Those dusky nipples darkened with desire as she played, one hand between her legs and one plucking at her nipples.

Theo's whole body was tense. He didn't know how much more of this he could take. And they'd only just started. "Put a finger inside yourself," he crooned. "Tell me how it feels. Tell me what I'm missing."

Eliska twisted her hand to obey. Her gasp made his blood boil. "Oh, I feel full. I feel like I've been so empty and aching, and it's finally been staunched." She smiled slyly. "But not enough. I'll need you to staunch it completely."

Theo's resolve crumbled. "I need you."

“Good girls always give their husbands what they need.” She nodded seriously, then jerked as her fingers must’ve hit a particularly wonderful spot.

“Up,” he demanded. “Up here. Sit on my face.”

She blinked, likely in shock. He’d meant to introduce her to the greater variety of sexual acts more slowly, but he couldn’t help it. And it was his wedding night, damnit. He withdrew his hands from his pillow and grabbed her hips as she got to her knees. He guided her to hover above him, her knees on the edges of his pillow.

“This is a rather, erm, vulnerable position,” Eliska said. “Are you staring at me?”

“Oh, absolutely.” Theo turned his head and kissed the inside of one thigh. “It’s the most beautiful sight in the world.”

She made a bashful sound.

“I’m serious.” He nipped her thigh. “I used to love sunrises. Now I love how pretty and pink you are. I can’t wait to make love to you during a Bohemian sunrise next season.” He had the perfect view. Theo was laid back, as comfortable as could be, and heaven hovered just above him. He stared at her sex, noting the variation of pink skin tones the nearer to her sheathe and nubbin. Pale, dawn hair curled at the edges, framing this decadent vision. Folds of skin tucked and swirled, curving in sensual lines. Her lips gleamed from her own arousal, and the sight drove him mad.

“You smell divine,” he choked out. “I could look at you all night.” The shadows played across the ridges and valleys her skin made, a tantalizing peekaboo that made him yearn to discover all her secrets. Theo gently pulled her hips down. “On my face now.”

Eliska obeyed, but he could tell she was uncertain. “A good girl will answer me

honestly when I ask a question,” Theo prefaced, relishing the heat of her body all around him. “Do you want to try this, or do you want to wait?”

Eliska thought for a moment. “I think I want to try this.”

Pride warmed his heart. “My good, sweet girl.” He kissed the very heart of her. “I’ll make sure you love it.” He kept his hands bracketing her thighs, supporting as she lowered onto his face.

And then he feasted.

Theo licked and nipped, sucked and hummed. He twisted his tongue through every crease, in every crevice, around every plump piece of skin. He flicked his tongue inside of her, relishing how her body tensed and relaxed, then tensed again. Her arousal dripped into his mouth, and he lapped it up like the sweetest honey. He was in heaven. He could imagine no other place he’d rather be right now than under his wife’s quim. By the time he sucked her little nubbin between his lips and tongued it, she cried out and exploded. Her thighs clamped together, boxing his ears. He held on for dear life as she writhed above him. He couldn’t breathe and had never been happier about it.

When the waves of pleasure slowed, she wiggled down and rested on his chest, avoiding as many of the bruises as she could.

For several moments they silently looked at one another, stroking muscles and curves of flesh. Caressing healing bruises and scratches. Admiring one another as works of art.

Theo slid her down his body and she artfully avoided his broken leg. His cock throbbed at the sensation of her body sliding against it. “Ride me.” He whispered his command.



Eliska nodded. She rose up on her knees once more, this time notching his cock to her entrance, and gently sat down.

Theo bit his lower lip. She was so hot and slick.

When Eliska sat, his penis fully erect within her, she bent down and kissed his lips. “You’re covered in my fluids,” she told him. She planted her hands on his chest, and her thumbs rubbed his nipples.

“That’s my girl.” He urged her to move around him, to bring him in and out of her body. He thrust when his leg allowed, and all too soon his own body tensed in preparation of climax. She tensed around him, eyes wide with wonder and joy. He wanted to hold on longer, to enjoy the sparks down his spine and settling in his pelvis, but he liked her too much, and he flew past the cliff into his climax, spending his seed inside her. Theo gasped and shuddered with relief. Eliska curled over him, sheltering him with her body.

Tenderness filled his heart. He wrapped his body around hers and kissed her hair. “My love,” he murmured, not even sure what he was trying to say beyond that he was hers and she had his love for all eternity.

Eliska kissed his chest. “I’m so glad we married.”

Theo was too happy to smile. He nuzzled her hair. “Just think of the scandal if we hadn’t.”

She snorted with laughter. “Ah, my love, just think of the life we have ahead of us.”

Theo did. His arms tightened around her. “I can’t wait.”

The End

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:30 pm*

March 1865

Prague, Land of the Bohemian Crown

Theo grabbed Eliska's hand and hurried across the square.

She laughed, her free hand clapping her hat to her head as her shoes clacked on the cobblestones. "What are you doing?"

He charged right through a flock of gray pigeons, his heart lightening at the flurry of wings. "I'm celebrating, of course." He grinned, the cool spring air hitting the back of his throat. He glanced over his shoulder at his wife.

Her reddish gold hair shone under the Bohemian afternoon light, wisps flying free. Her purple silk gown billowed around her, the epitome of Austro-Hungarian fashion. Spots of color appeared on her pale cheeks, and her eyes sparkled despite his impromptu race.

The buildings of Prague's Old Town towered around them, making Theo feel like they'd stepped back into the Middle Ages.

Bells rang out behind them. Theo stopped, delighted. He turned to stare at the gothic church that made up one edge of the square. The aged spires pierced the sky, while the architecture and flying buttresses graced the skyline just beyond the square. The bells echoed across the city but also reverberated below, the gongs bouncing off the cobbles and the historic buildings and the tower of the Old Town Hall behind them. Even the statue of Jan Huss looked cheerful today.

Eliska laughed. "I had no idea legal proceedings delighted you so."

Theo just pulled her close and kissed her. Right there in the square. Among the pigeons and tourists and bankers crossing paths. He cupped the nape of her neck.

It started as a hard, fierce kiss of victory. But then Eliska melted into him, and his lips softened while his cock tightened at the suggestion. He kissed her as long as he thought he could get away with, then pulled away. He could taste the smile on her lips.

"Are you delighted that in a few months' time you'll be a very wealthy man?" Eliska teased.

He rolled his eyes and released her reluctantly. "I'm fairly certain there are some legal clauses buried somewhere in the paperwork so I don't get to take control of all your money. Especially since I'm a foreigner."

"But at least you're not an Austrian foreigner," Eliska pointed out.

Theo hummed in agreement as the pigeons settled back down around them. "The judge seemed almost personally affronted that I wasn't Bohemian. Or Czech. I almost apologized to the man," Theo marveled. "At least my German was bad. I think he liked that."

The Moravian judge in charge of Eliska's inheritance case was a conservative, stodgy old man with bushy mutton chops and a large mole on his right cheek. Although conservative in many ways, he was a staunch nationalist and wanted the Austro-Hungarians out of his homeland. Theo couldn't exactly fault the man.

As the bells stopped ringing Theo glanced behind him, in the direction of the Old Town Hall. "Is that where the astronomical clock is?"

Eliska, who'd seen it several times as a schoolgirl, nodded.

"I want to see it." Theo took a step toward the medieval building. They'd arrive in the Bohemian Lands only four days ago after an arduous rail journey, and most of the time they'd had in Prague so far had been spent with lawyers and clerks and anyone that was helping getting Eliska's case settled.

It was their first, but not last, trip to Prague. Eliska had decided to wait for a trip until her legal team had a date for their case to appear on the docket. They'd spent the last nine months or so settling into Theo's—their—London townhouse. Theo's sister Violet lived just down the street in a far nicer townhouse with her banking husband, but they didn't visit as much as Theo had anticipated.

Regardless, Eliska was having a wonderful time making the townhouse hers and filling the study with all those philosophy books Theo didn't understand.

They'd decided to use this trip not just to settle Eliska's family's assets, but also as a belated honeymoon. They'd spend a month in the area, then a few days in Paris during their return. It was a glorious trip, and Theo loved getting to know an entirely new side to Eliska. She was terribly blunt when she spoke German, and he'd never realized it.

The only downside was leaving behind Wolfgang, their puppy. He was a gangly, long-legged creature. Too large to be a lapdog already, but convinced he should be. His wiry white coat shed all over their townhouse, much to the maids' dismay, but the whole house adored him. Theo and Eliska missed him, but knew he would be spoiled rotten by the time they returned.

Eliska didn't budge as Theo pulled her with him.

He glanced back in surprise. "Do you not wish to see the clock?" He smiled. "Am I

behaving too much like a tourist for you?”

She smiled coyly and bit her lower lip. “I just thought...since the judge finally ruled to move everything out of probate and release funds to me...we might want to celebrate. Together. In our hotel room. Alone.”

Theo’s heart skipped a beat at those words. “Yes,” he choked. “Immediately. Yes, let’s.” He turned in a circle. “Which way’s our hotel?”

Eliska giggled and grabbed his shoulders from behind, pointing him in the correct direction. “Two blocks down, then the white building on your right.”

“Obviously.” Theo took up her hand again, threading his fingers through hers. They strolled across the rest of the square. Eliska quickened her step. Theo matched it. Then she skipped over a broken cobble and went just a little faster. Theo smirked and lengthened his stride.

Soon they were laughing again and hurrying out of the square and around the corner. Theo let Eliska lead the way, as he was content to bask in the sights and smells of the Old Town. Every once and a while he caught whiff of rubbish and sewer smells, like any city, but he also scented cinnamon treats and flowers growing from hanging pots. German filled the air around him, though to his surprise quite a few people were also speaking Czech to one another. Eliska told him it was a relatively new development, and that when she was a child she almost never heard it spoken on the street. The Austro-Hungarian control was slipping, slowly but surely.

They reached their hotel, all gilt gold and Italian marble, with Turkish rugs laid out in the lobby. Eliska slowed as they reached the center of the lobby. Other guests of many nationalities passed to and fro. Hotel staff in their crisp red and black uniforms hurried quietly about.

Theo tugged Eliska around the wide, low table with the ginormous fresh flower bouquet. Gaslight sparkled across the marble floor, refracted from the crystal chandelier above them. Theo threaded his fingers through Eliska's as they mounted the first flight of stairs to their room. They had splurged on an expensive suite in an expensive, Old Town hotel because—thankfully, correctly—they had hoped Eliska's inheritance would be released.

Eliska glanced up at him in surprise as he slowed at the top of the stairs, ducking toward an alcove. No one was about. Guests were likely visiting the sights of Prague and the staff had already cleaned this floor earlier in the day.

Theo turned and put his hands on her shoulders, backing Eliska into the alcove that already housed a bust of Mozart on a dark wood pedestal.

“What are you doing?” Eliska asked, brows drawn together.

Theo smiled, and it must've shown his intent clearly enough, for she fluttered her eyelashes as a faint blush spread to her face.

“Here?” she whispered. “Right now?”

“An appetizer,” Theo told her, squeezing her shoulders.

She darted a glance over his shoulder, likely ascertaining the emptiness of the hallway, then met his gaze. “If you so desire it,” she said breathlessly, submissively. “I'm eager to please.”

His cock leapt at the suggestion in her tone. They didn't play this game all the time, but it always delighted him when they did. Eliska was always eager to please, which kept Theo on his toes to always come up with activities for their bedsport.

“This is what you’re going to do,” he told her in low tones. “You’re going to unbutton your bodice for me. Right here. Right now. And show me those pretty tits of yours.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Right—right here?”

Theo mock frowned. “Will you obey like a good girl?”

Eliska’s gaze, which had moved to peer over his shoulder, was dragged back to his eyes. “I—I—no, of course I’m a good girl.”

Theo smiled and stroked his thumbs against the fabric over her shoulders. “I’m blocking any sight of you. No one is going to see my girl.”

She bit her lip, still hesitant.

Theo waited patiently.

Then her fingers slipped to the mother of pearl buttons at her high-necked bodice. She’d worn formal, courtroom-worthy attire today, and it made Theo want to pull it right off her. One by one she unbuttoned her bodice, her pale fingers flipping across the fabric. Theo resisted the urge to nip at them. Instead he kept an imperious stance and stared down at his wife, crowding her space so no one would see anything if they walked past.

Soon her bodice gaped open, revealing a prettily embroidered cream corset cover. Deep purple flowers and green ivy sprawled across the neckline.

“Let it down,” he told her.

Heat flared in her eyes. She reached up and untied one tape at her shoulder, then the

other. The lawn cover fell, gathering at her hips. It revealed a deep purple corset edged with black lacing and stitching. His favorite corset of hers. Theo had watched her put it on this morning and wished they'd had more time to fuck before they were needed in court. Now he could rectify that.

He bit back a groan of desire. His cock had gone rock hard in his trousers. He had half a mind to tell her to fish it out of his placket, but that's not what he wanted from her in the hallway. That could wait until their rooms.

"Drag the corset and chemise down," he ordered, voice barely above a whisper.

Eliska broke eye contact, glancing again over his shoulder.

"Nervous?" he asked with a smile.

She gave him a look. "You've never had me do this before," she hissed, even as her hands pulled her garments down just enough for her nipples to peep over the top stitching.

"And you're such a brave, adventurous girl to do so," he praised.

Her eyes dilated and her cheeks flushed at those words.

"Now you're going to pull your breasts out—as best as you can—and set your hands on my shoulders."

She obeyed. Because she always did. Because it made her wet and him hard. Her fingernails dug through the superfine of his formal jacket, hard enough for him to feel pinpricks through the jacket and waistcoat and shirtsleeves.

"I'm going to enjoy myself," he told her. "And you're going to watch over my



shoulder and let me know if anyone rounds the corner.” He doubted anyone would. They were far enough down the hall only a few people would ever pass by. It was the feeling of danger without too much reality. But it was scandalous enough for his wife, for her breathing came quick and shallow, making her breasts rise and fall, framed prettily against the dramatic color of her undergarments.

She nodded jerkily. “But it always feels so good when you put your mouth on me,” she whispered. “How will I be able to keep my attention on the hallway?”

Theo grinned. “You’re a smart girl. I’m sure you’ll learn some way.” Then he bent his head and captured one nipple between his lips.

Eliska gasped and arched against him. Her fingernails dug deeper, and he felt tiny pinpricks of pain. He smiled against her warm flesh and sucked the swollen nipple further into his mouth.

Theo delighted in teasing her, using his lips and tongue and even teeth to scrape and lick and lave. The heat of her body warmed his face, and after a moment he let the nipple pop from his mouth. He licked the fine blue vein that traveled below the milky skin of her breast, causing her to squirm and the bust of Mozart to rock against his pedestal.

“Careful,” Theo murmured against her skin, chuckling.

Eliska whimpered.

“Anyone coming?” he asked as he licked his way to her other breast.

She gave a strangled sound that he interpreted as a no. “It’s so hard to concentrate,” she panted.

“I’m sure it is,” he said in mock sympathy, pinching her second nipple, rolling it between his fingers. “What if I stop? Should I stop?”

She whimpered again, one hand leaving his shoulder to cup the nape of his neck, to keep him pressed to her, then she obediently let it drop back to his shoulder.

“Good girl,” he noted. “Keep those hands where I told them to be.”

She nodded helplessly.

Then he worshipped her other breast. She was so sensitive. Soon he had her on tip-toes, alternately fighting or chasing the sensation he evoked in her.

Theo’s own blood pounded in his veins. His cock pressed desperately against the seam of his trousers, seeking the place it wanted.

A murmur of voices trickled down the hall, causing Eliska to freeze against him.

“Someone’s coming,” she whispered frantically.

Theo calmly disengaged, standing up straight and turning Eliska so she faced the bust, her back to his chest. He pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck, now exposed from the open bodice sagging from her shoulders. “Cover up,” he whispered. “No one will see you.”

The group of three or four people—Theo never turned to find out—talked amongst themselves as they reached the top of the stairs and strolled down the hall toward them.

Eliska’s panicked breathing caught Theo’s attention. He placed his hand on her shoulder.

“You’re safe. They can’t see you,” he assured as she quickly retied her tapes and jerked her bodice closed.

The group paused at a door several yards away from Theo and Eliska. As far as he could tell without looking at them, they hadn’t even noticed the Fairplaces. Once they entered and he heard the door closer, Theo backed away to give Eliska space.

She turned on him, eyes sparkling, lips flushed, the arousal still thrumming through her body. “Did I do well?”

He grinned. “I’m proud of you. You deserve a reward for that.” He put his arm around her shoulders and brought her a few steps further down the hall to their suite door.

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Eliska’s heart beat wildly as Theo ushered her into their suite.

The wood panelling created a rich atmosphere combined with the maroon draperies and the crystal decanter and cups on a table near the large, four-postered bed. Mid afternoon sun filtered through the gauzy curtains, diffusing the room in warm light. Along the wall was a small fireplace. Two white marble satyrs held the mantelpiece up, winking at her as Theo shut the door firmly behind them and kissed her nape.

She shivered, still reeling from the wicked game in the hall.

“More?” her husband asked her, reaching around to unbutton her bodice. Again.

She nodded, leaning against the warmth of his chest and reveling in the feel of his strong arms around her. “Was I good?” she whispered.

His breath heated her neck. “So very, very good. Brave, too.” He cleared his throat. “I don’t think I could've done that.”

She wrinkled her nose at the bed, slipping out of the bodice and letting it drop on the floor between them. Her heavy skirts pressed against their legs, and she set about rectifying that problem. “You could’ve. I'm sure. We trust each other.”

His lips brushed the freckles on her shoulder. “Your trust humbles me. I never take this for granted, how you're willing to play in a way that gives me power.”

Eliska laughed. She appreciated his recognition. Was grateful, even. But she didn't want to talk about it when they could still have their heads in the game. “Touch me, please. If I lean over the bed, will you see how ready for you I am?”

He growled, and his erection was so strong she could feel it through every layer of clothing she was trying to shed.

“I ought to send you over the bed and flip your skirts over your head. Spread your legs. Fuck you, leave you wanting as my seed drips down your legs.”

Eliska’s inner muscles clenched at the filthy words. “If that's what you wish.” She stepped toward the bed as her skirts fell and puddled on the floor, feeling the air behind her part as Theo stepped over her clothing and followed. “But shouldn’t I get that reward?” She threw a smile over her shoulder as she unhooked her corset.

He chuckled, low and dark in his throat. “I will entertain the idea.”

She felt him grip the hem of her chemise and help her get it over her head, leaving the bare curves of her back open to him. One large, male hand followed the path of her spine, making her skin pebble at the touch.

“Undress me,” he rasped.

She turned, bare-breasted now, and did so. He continued his torment from earlier by teasing and plucking at her nipples, making her squirm as she untied his necktie and unbuttoned his waistcoat.

By the time he was naked and she'd lost her drawers, they were both flushed and panting with arousal.

He ran a hand down her arm, shoulder to wrist, in an affectionate gesture as he stepped past her and arranged himself on the bed, back to the headboard, erection jutting expectantly before him. Theo raised an eyebrow at her.

She grinned and climbed onto the bed, feeling less graceful than him.

Theo beckoned her forward, until she knelt over his lap, his cock arrowed straight up at her quim. He ran two fingers along the slit between her legs. She rolled her eyes at the delicious sensation. When he pulled back, her arousal coated his fingers. He grunted in approval. “Sit down,” he urged in warm tones.

Eliska widened her stance, then sank onto his cock. She closed her eyes to relish the sensation of being filled so completely. Balancing herself with both hands on his shoulders, she dropped until he was seated fully inside her, and she sat on his lap. After taking a breath, she opened her eyes to meet his bright brown ones. She smiled. “Hello.”

He kissed her, lushly, deeply, fully. Then he kissed her again, framing her face in his hands.

Eliska's toes curled as his cocked twitched inside her and his lips melded to hers. On and on the kisses went. His hands drifted from her face to her neck to her breasts,

then wrapped around her waist, and urged her to move.

They rocked against one another. Eventually they found a pattern, and Eliska gasped as his cock nudged just the right spot inside her. Theo swallowed her gasp, then licked at her lips.

Eliska rocked inward, rubbing her breasts against the crisp hair of his chest. Sparks of pleasure and delight fizzed through her, driving her closer and closer to the edge.

She was so close. She had been ever since that Mozart bust.

“Do you feel it?” Theo asked between shallow thrusts. “Do you feel how much I want you?”

She nodded, her teeth scraping against his lips. They locked together in every way, arms wrapped round on another, and then the growing pleasure shot her forward, pushing her straight to the edge and she sprang over it.

Eliska shuddered and gasped in her husband’s arms, and then he followed after her. Once the aftershocks of their rapture had faded, and all that was left was warm skin and soft strokes and moisture pooled between them, once they had sated themselves and gentled one another down from their climaxes, Eliska slumped against him, resting her forehead on his shoulder.

“It’s always so good with you,” Theo murmured into her hair, his hand stroking up and down her back.

She kissed a mole just under his ear. “It’s always so good with you.”

They eased down, slipping under the covers and ignoring the mess between them for now. Theo snaked a hand beneath her, and she rested in the inside crook of his elbow.

Her hair spilled across the pillow and his chest. They sighed, watching the afternoon sun slide across the wooden floor.

“Are you happy?” Theo asked quietly.

Eliska looked up, trying to catch a glimpse of his face but only catching the underside of his chin. “What sort of question is that?”

Theo shifted under the covers. “I just...I just want to know. To make certain.”

She smiled. “Yes. We won my inheritance back today. Everything that can go to a female descendant, anyway. I’m relieved. I have you. I’m so grateful for you.”

“I did prove quite useful today, didn’t I?” His lofty tone made her laugh.

“Quite proud of yourself, are you?”

His smugness filled the room. He didn’t even have to answer verbally.

Eliska snorted. “I’m grateful to you because I love you, you schwachkopf. You didn’t need to charm a magistrate.”

He chuckled. After a pause he said, “so...you are content with our life?”

Eliska thought briefly of her monthly courses, how they came still with regularity. How she’d assumed that after nearly a year of marriage she’d be expecting a new family member. How it still wasn’t happening. “I had hoped...” she trailed off. She’d voiced her concerns at Christmas. He already knew. And it wasn’t like he could do anything about it.

Theo kissed her hair again. “Violet hasn’t had any children yet, either,” he reminded

her.

Violet, his younger sister, had been married for two years. She also had hoped for a child—not with the same insistent longing Eliska did, but they’d spoken of it together. When Blanche, the oldest sister-in-law, was busy wrangling her brood.

Eliska sighed. “It will happen if it’s meant to happen, I suppose.” Now that she had her inheritance, she would love to share it with her family. Not just the money. No, what mattered was the cottage on the Morava River, the heirloom jewelry of her paternal grandmother and the wedding dress of her mother. The Prague apartment they could enter tomorrow. The dusty old philosophy books packed away in crates. All of that, she wanted to share with children one day.

“We haven’t even been married a year,” Theo reminded her.

Eliska brushed off the melancholy feeling. “I have you, and that’s what matters.”

“And Wolfgang,” Theo reminded. “I’m fairly certain you married me for Wolfgang.”

Eliska giggled. “Ah, yes, our mighty hound. Sweet dear. The best wedding present a bridegroom could buy.”

“I’m fairly sure Dennis and Blanche’s children plan to ride him away when we’re not looking,” Theo told her.

“I’m fairly sure you’re correct,” she agreed. She yawned and stretched. “Tomorrow I get to show you the flat. And in a few days, let’s travel to Moravia.”

Theo curled on his side and embraced her. “I agree. But first, let me rest. And then we’ll go down to supper.”



Eliska wanted to shake him awake, to push him out of bed to get started on the next chapter of their lives together. But then she yawned. “Oh, very well. If we must.” She drifted off to sleep to the beating of her husband’s heart.

The End

### Excerpt

Violet rubbed her forehead, grateful the frantic hustle of getting off the ferry, to the railway station, confirming the tickets, and then getting aboard the train was over.

Night had fallen, she and Alma had skipped supper due to the travel, and now all she wanted was to fall into a bed and sleep for three days straight.

Alma glanced around the room. “Thank you for springing for a first class sleeper.”

“You’re welcome.” Violet knew it was extravagant, but as two women traveling alone overnight she thought it worth the cost.

They’d moved back onto a train run by a Swiss and French company, which meant the cars were older and less nice than the German ones she’d ridden on earlier that week. The Germans had apparently picked up a style from the Americans, making a second class car long with seating for up to forty people and an aisle down the middle. It was far nicer, especially for women traveling alone, than the French and English method of each carriage having four to six individual compartments that let out directly onto the platform.

Still, the French had sleeper compartments and those were amazing, so Violet couldn’t really complain.

“Why is your trunk in here, Mrs. Lloyd?”

“Hmm?” Violet opened her eyes and glanced around the tiny room. It had two velvet

upholstered bench seats that could pull out to become narrow beds, and the gas light on the wall had a small bottle of paraffin hanging beside it. Most of the floor was eaten up by—her trunk.

“That’s not supposed to be here,” Violet said. “Why on earth did they do that?” She started toward the trunk. “Alma, is yours here, too?”

Alma shook her head. “Mine’s in the break van, I assume. Where it’s supposed to be.”

Violet reached inside her reticule for the key to her trunk’s lock. She narrowed her eyes at the lock. It was broken. Had someone stolen from her while on the steamboat? Dread pooling in her stomach, she touched the lip of the lid, ready to see the damage.

A knock came at the door.

Violet paused and turned toward the door. “I thought we’d finished providing tickets to the conductor,” she murmured and opened the door.

Two large men stood outside, hats in hand. In the dim gaslight of the station platform she could just make out their clothing—wool coat, serviceable trousers, waistcoat. One man was blond with a beard, the other had heavy features and cauliflower ears of a former boxer.

They wore typical clothing of a clerk or shopkeeper, no uniform. So not railway workers. She did not like the look of them.

Violet straightened, eyeing them carefully and gripping the edge of the door. “Messieurs,” she greeted.

“Hello,” the blond man said English with a German accent. “We beg your pardon for disturbing you.”

“Yes?” Violet glanced over their shoulders, gauging the environment. The train was supposed to depart in three minutes.

“We are looking for a man. He’s tall, lean, with too-long curly hair. Have you seen anyone that matches that description?”

“No,” Violet said carefully. “Why? Is there a criminal on the loose?”

The blond man smiled reassuringly. “Not to worry, not to worry. We are just police trying to make sure someone doesn’t leave the country before some legal matters are settled.”

Violet eased. She still didn’t trust strange men, but this seemed like a legitimate reason to knock on train compartment doors. She shook her head. “No, I’m sorry. We haven’t seen anyone like that. I hope you get him, though.”

They bowed their heads in thanks, fitting their hats back on their heads. “Thank you. And please, if you do see anything odd, let us know.”

Violet’s brow furrowed. “We’re leaving in just a moment.”

At her words, the engine rumbled to life several cars ahead. The vibrations shook the carriage and she relaxed with relief that they would soon be on their journey away from whatever trouble this was.

“We’ll be on the train,” the former boxer said gruffly, in such a thick accent Violet had difficulty understanding him. Her own German was not very good, though, so she couldn’t complain.

“I wish you luck,” Violet said, and firmly closed the door. Alma sat on her seat, yawning. Violet turned and went to the upholstered bench seat that would become her bed. A pile of thick blankets sat folded at one end with a tiny pillow atop.

“Alma, do you want to dress for sleep now and I’ll make the beds?” She reached for the sheet and unfolded it.

Alma squeaked.

“Alma?” Violet asked, bending to tuck the edges of the sheet.

Alma didn’t reply.

Violet turned her head. “Alma, what—” she broke off, seeing Alma’s ghostly white face staring at the far side of the tiny room.

Violet turned and looked in the direction of her trunk. Her heart stopped.

A man stood in her trunk.

Her mouth dropped open and she staggered backward a step before hitting the carriage wall.

He must’ve pushed her trunk lid open when her back was turned and now swayed on his feet, wearing just trousers and a white shirt—no waistcoat, coat, or necktie. Blood drenched one shirtsleeve, dripping between his fingers.

Violet’s first thought was that he was ruining her clothing with his dirty shoes and dripping blood.

“Bitte,” the man said, face pale as he brandished his knife.

“Alma.” Violet spoke English, forcing her voice to remain calm even though her pulse pounded so loudly in her ears she could barely hear herself. “Come away from there. Instantly.”

The girl leaped to her feet and darted to Violet's side, clutching at Violet's outstretched hand with a whimper.

Violet pulled the girl behind her as best she could in the tight space, never taking her eyes off the dangerous man.

"You do not belong here," she told the man, switching to her broken German. "Get out." She pointed to the door.

The train rolled forward, sending everyone off balance. Alma stumbled, toppling and nearly yanking Violet on top of her. She spread her feet, planting herself more firmly in the moving carriage.

The man, already swaying on his feet, faltered and his shins hit the edge of Violet's trunk. That sent him over the edge, and he spilled out of the trunk and onto the floor with a loud groan. His hand still held the knife in a grip so tight his knuckles were white.

Violet hauled Alma back onto her feet and reached for the knob of the compartment door. "You must leave," she insisted, finally getting a good look at the man now some of the shock had worn off. He was tall, lean as could be with thick, muscular thighs and forearms. A mop of curly golden brown hair hung over his forehead, blocking her view of his eyes.

He laboriously shoved himself off the floor and into a kneeling position, holding the knife in front of him.

Violet opened the door, prepared to do all she could to shove him through it. Cold night air whipped into the compartment, sending her hair flying. She fought it back, clawing the strands out of her face so she could see the dangerous man.

Face tight with pain, he glanced at her, then the open door and the moving landscape

beyond. A look of amused disbelief crossed his face. “Nein,” he said firmly.

Violet stared at him, suddenly not sure what to do. She didn’t want to push a man off a moving train and accidentally kill him. But she also didn’t want to spend the next four hours with a criminal. He had to be the man the police were looking for.

“Shut the door,” the man said in German, wincing as he curled his wounded arm against his body. His handsome features annoyed her.

Violet didn’t know what else to do, so she shut the door.

The man staggered to his feet and then dropped onto Violet’s bed, mussing the sheet she’d halfway lain out.

Violet’s jaw clenched. She grabbed Alma’s hand, who still stood shaking in terror, and brought the girl over to her bench-bed. They sat together, holding hands, and stared at the man with the knife who sat just four or five feet away from them.

The man stared back.

For several moments they sat there, the only sound the rhythmic rattling of the wheels over the track as it gathered speed and headed for the French border.

“Who are you?” Violet demanded in German, at the same time the man said, “Who are you?”

They stared at one another again, each refusing to go first.

“M-m-my name’s Alma Beauchamp,” Alma said, finally breaking the stalemate.

Violet took a deep breath. This predicament was bad enough. But she had her friend’s daughter with her? Oh, this was bad. How was she going to get out of this without

getting Alma hurt?

The man nodded curtly. Alma's German was better than Violet's due to her time at the finishing school. He looked at Violet expectantly.

She raised her brows. You first.