



My Beastly Duke (Twisted Dukes #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: "Why would a duke want a woman who was jilted by his brother?"

Pressured to marry for her sister's sake, Lady Marina must accept the loveless match chosen for her. Only... the groom jilts her at the altar.

Beast. Monster. Abomination. After witnessing the ladies of the Ton fainting at the sight of him, the Duke of Harper knows he would not find a bride willing to marry him even if she walked into his study in her wedding gown.

So when Marina steps into his study demanding compensation for being jilted by the duke's brother, he decides that she will do. His terms are simple: no kissing, no lights, and no pets.

In this Regency Romance by bestselling author Loretta Levine, a desperate lady matches wits with a Duke so beastly she never expected to fall so madly in love with.

Total Pages (Source): 28

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“ I knew no sane man would wish to marry the likes of you!” Baron Wallace snarled at Marina, tilting his head back until his abnormally sharp nose pierced the air.

This can’t be happening, not now.

Marina allowed her bouquet of lilies to fall to her side, her fingers strangling the stems as she clenched her fist. The racing of her heart only added to the uncomfortable atmosphere already permeating the air.

The chapel was filled with members of the ton that looked her up and down with scornful glances. The low susurrations that filtered through the crowd made her uneasy as she shifted from foot to foot. Her long train hung down the back of her silver dress, reminding her of the reason she stood in front of the altar. Alone.

“I have had just about enough of you and your sniveling family. My patience has all but worn out with the lot of you. You will pack your things immediately and take your mother, sister, and pets with you!” The baron hissed loud enough for the guests in the front to hear, his large belly protruding beyond his frame.

Looking at her mother and sister huddled together in the front row, Marina noticed the color draining from her mother’s face. Johanna Wallace’s usually pale skin now resembled a pitcher of milk. While her mother’s health had not been the greatest since her father passed, it seemed to take a turn for the worse whenever anything strange or stressful occurred.

Prudence huddled closer to her mother’s side, gripping her thin fingers as if her life depended on it. The young girl had never warmed to her uncle, but the feelings of

hatred seemed to worsen whenever the new baron would go on a rant.

“I do not wish to sound indelicate, Miss Wallace, but we cannot wait all day. Perhaps it is time to accept that the groom has changed his mind?” The vicar stepped forward and spoke to Marina in a calm tone that did little to ease her nerves. The elderly man’s thin skin seemed to stretch over his knuckles as he clasped his fingers in a solemn gesture.

Focusing on the doors at the other end of the aisle, Marina took a deep breath and clenched her jaw until her teeth ached. Her long blonde hair, which had been plated into an elaborate braid, annoyed her beyond measure as she wished she could pull it all loose.

All of this for nothing...

The stems of her flowers turned to pulp beneath the pressure of her grip.

“Perhaps Mr. Marner heard the stories regarding her father...” The whispered sentence reached Marina’s ears just in time to see her mother fainting in the front pew.

“Mama! Please, wake up...” A wave of gasps filled the air as Marina’s fourteen-year-old sister began to sob beside her mother’s unconscious form that had slumped forward in her seat.

Marina was about to rush forward when her best friends came to her aid.

Penelope Patterson, the Duchess of Huxton rushed to Lady Wallace’s side, fanning her face furiously. Her doe-like brown eyes stared up at Marina while Lady Cordelia came to her friend’s aid.

“Marina, do you not think perhaps, that we should tell everyone to go home? This is only causing a spectacle.” She glanced wearily at the baron who was fuming with rage as he glared at the scene unfolding.

Guests craned their necks in their seats in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the fainted Dowager Baroness of Wallace who was beginning to stir. Prudence had managed to calm herself, yet her cheeks were stained with tears.

“I do not think that Mr. Marner is going to make an appearance.” Cordelia was apologetic, wringing her gloved hands in front of her.

How dare he jilt me at the altar?

Her pulse raced with anger when she looked over her friend’s shoulder at the judgmental glares of the ton. There were people she had never seen in her life, and then there were people who had once been her friends, or at least, had pretended to be her friends.

“Right.” She hissed under her breath and lifted the hem of her dress, stepping forward with her head held high. Some of the tiny white flowers that had been woven into her braid, fell at her feet as she descended the steps.

People’s heads turned in shock, watching her make her way down the aisle as Marina did her best to ignore their judgmental glares.

“Marina, where are you going?” Cordelia and Penelope both rushed to keep up with their friend’s hurried steps as sniggers and smirks followed them down the aisle.

Pushing open the doors, Marina stepped into the bright sun, her veil trailing behind her in the slight breeze as she stopped for a breath. Something needed to be done about the situation at hand, but she certainly was not about to further the scene in the

chapel.

“Marina! Where are you going?” Penelope asked almost breathlessly, stopping for a moment on the stairs to fix her red dress. The richness of the fabric complimented her pale complexion.

“I am going to ensure that the groom’s family does right by mine.”

Cordelia and Penelope exchanged looks of concern while biting their lips.

“What do you mean?”

“There is one man who did not bother to return his invitation.” Marina narrowed her eyes at the imagined image of her supposed husband-to-be and set off down the street on her own.

“Are you certain that you will not be attending the wedding, Your Grace? There may still be time for the wedding breakfast, if not the ceremony.”

The butler placed a glass of whisky beside the duke, before coming up straight. His stick-like posture always amazed Aaron as he wondered how the man remained so rigid.

Reaching for the glass, Aaron swirled the amber liquid a few times before taking a sip. “No, there is no reason for me to attend that sham of a wedding,” he grumbled under his breath and shifted his position in the high-backed chair that was hidden in the corner of the room.

The invitation that lay next to him on the desk drew his attention away from the glass. The black-slanted writing mocked him relentlessly as he clenched his jaw.

You are cordially invited to attend the wedding of Miss Marina Wallace to the youngest son of the late Duke of Harper, Mr. Adam Marner.

The sentence made Aaron snort in derision. There was only one reason that his brother had insisted on the marriage, and that reason had little to do with love or even honor. The wedding was a sham and farce as far as he was concerned.

“I understand, Your Grace. Perhaps we should start the search for a wife of your own. It is, after all, expected of a duke.” The butler placed his arms behind his back and stiffened his spine, looking into the shadows above the duke’s head.

Smirking at the suggestion, Aaron shook his head and threw back another swig of his whisky. “Do not make me laugh. If there is anything more ridiculous than finding me a wife, I have not heard of it.” He placed the glass back on the table beside him before sitting back and running his fingers over the right side of his face.

“Oh, I do not know, Your Grace, stranger things have happened. There is always the possibility of an arranged marriage. We could write to some of your relatives in Scotland, or perhaps even France. There is always a desperate young lady seeking a title and wealth.” The butler’s tone softened as a mischievous twinkle appeared in his eyes.

Desperate...

The man’s words made Aaron smirk in amusement. After so many years of living on his own, the butler had become something of a friend to him. Even if their stations in life had caused a divide, Aaron and his butler were able to keep each other company without crossing the boundaries of disrespect and propriety. The duke had lost many friends after the accident that had ruined his face. The rivalry with his brother had not helped either.

“It would take more than just a desperate woman to find me a wife, Jeeves. Any woman who tied herself to the likes of me and my hideous appearance would have to be sent by God. And where would I meet her when I hardly ever leave this house? A bride would have to come storming into this very room if I am ever to be married.” He gestured to the room at large with a sweep of his arm.

“You never know, Your Grace. Miracles have been known to...” The butler stopped speaking and frowned when the sound of frantic knocking echoed down the empty halls.

“I wonder who that could be.” Aaron’s brows creased into a frown as he waved the butler away. The only visitor he ever received was his brother, and that was unlikely given the fact that it was the day of his wedding.

Bowing low, the butler hurried from the room, disappearing around the corner in the dark hallway beyond.

Perhaps he had come to gloat.

Aaron let out a heavy sigh as he brooded in the darkness of the parlor. Light had been his enemy for years, along with the rivalry between him and his brother.

Minutes seemed to pass before the startled butler reappeared at the door. His eyes carried a look of confusion that instantly piqued Aaron’s attention. “A... A Miss Wallace to see you, Your Grace.” He swallowed hard and shook his head before stepping aside.

“Where is he?” The high-pitched voice of a woman called out from the shadows before the woman in question stepped into the room; her beautiful features were marred with anger as she glared.

“Miss Wallace?” Aaron held his breath and stood, puzzled by the sudden appearance of a bride. His eyes wandered over her slim figure, halting at the swelling of her breasts beneath the silver gown. She was certainly beautiful, there was no denying that her appearance stirred something within him.

Swallowing hard, the woman seemed to try and adjust her bright blue eyes to the darkness surrounding the duke. Her cat-like features spoke of elegance and grace, yet the fierceness in her eyes intrigued him more than anything else. “I apologize for the interruption, Your Grace, but since you had not bothered to respond to the invitation, I thought I might find you here.” Her eyes narrowed sharply as her chest rose and fell with every labored breath.

The strands of golden hair that hung in her face, added to her beauty as she reached back and removed the veil from her head. Allowing the sheer fabric to fall to the floor at her feet, she took up a stance of utter determination.

“Was there something that you needed me for, Miss Wallace?” Arron, crossed his arms over his chest, keeping as far back in the shadows as possible. His eyes searched the hallway behind her for any signs of his brother.

“As a matter of fact, there is. I am here to demand satisfaction. I shall not leave until justice is served.” She lifted her chin defiantly in the air, staring into the darkness as if she could see into his soul.

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“ And what exactly do you mean by justice and satisfaction?” The duke’s voice taunted her from the shadows.

Marina’s heart raced as the deep sound of the duke’s voice washed over her body. She could only make out the outline of his features, yet the heavy notes of timber stirred something within her core.

Tilting her head to the side, she stood her ground despite the rapid beating of her heart.

Why does he not step into the light?

She looked around the room and noted the only sliver of light that broke through a crack in the heavy drapes. A light breeze moved the slim beam of light around the room, stopping short of the duke’s feet. It struck her as odd that the drapes were closed when the sun was shining, yet her focus was immediately drawn back to the figure in the shadows. Even in the darkness, Marina could tell how tall and imposing the duke was.

The dark figure that his frame cut in the light was almost too intimidating, yet she could not run now. Not when she had come this far.

“My family’s honor, Your Grace. Imagine my surprise when I was left alone at the altar this morning. Hundreds of people came to witness my wedding, yet they saw me humiliated instead.” She managed to keep the quiver of fear from her voice.

The tall figure seemed to flinch for a second but quickly replied in a cool tone. “That

does sound like something my brother would do. Yet I fail to see how any of this is my concern?" The scorn and mockery that were evident in his voice grated on her nerves.

Does he care so little?

"It is your concern, Your Grace. My family has been humiliated by your brother." She could not believe how cavalier the man was acting when the reputation of her family was on the line. The wedding may not have been his idea, but his brother's actions certainly reflected poorly on his name as well.

"Am I my brother's keeper? His actions are no concern of mine." He cocked his head to the side and seemed to stare at her even through the darkness of the shadows.

A strange sensation prickled down her spine as she wondered if his eyes were devouring her body. There was something almost animalistic about the sound of his voice, which had her mind racing with unwanted thoughts.

Is he as attractive as his voice?

The prickle of fear turned to one of pleasure as she imagined all the possibilities attached to the voice.

"Do you not care what your brother does, Your Grace? I certainly would care if my sister or mother were in a similar situation. Is that not what family does?" She felt her pulse racing when she could sense the smirk on his lips. Even with the absence of his physical appearance, Marina could sense that danger oozed from his very being. She felt drawn to him in a way she could not understand. Something about the way he spoke and carried himself in the shadows drew her in like a deer to a snare.

Parts of her being urged her to run while she still had the chance, yet she could not

fight the inkling of desire and curiosity that had been sparked in her chest.

“What compensation would you demand? Should I have my brother publicly flogged for his actions? What kind of woman are you, Miss Wallace? Does your humiliation demand equal amounts of scorn on my brother’s behalf?” His tone carried a hint of sarcasm and enjoyment that sent a shiver down her spine once again.

Why am I feeling like this?

Her breathing deepened as her heart began to race from all the questions running through her mind. Who was this man hiding in the shadows? Had she unknowingly walked into the den of a monster? She tried to hide the deep breath that shook her chest as she lifted her chin in the air. “There were costs involved in preparing for this day. My mother spent her very last pence on having this dress made. And now we are to be tossed out on the streets!”

A moment of silence passed between them as the duke seemed to consider her words.

“You may leave us now, Jeeves.” He waved his hand in the air, making Marina jump as she suddenly recalled the butler who had shown her in. How had she forgotten that somebody else was in the room with them?

The man bowed respectfully and left the room, shutting the door behind him with a loud creak that made her jump.

Marina’s palms began to sweat as she curled her fingers into fists at her sides. The room suddenly felt far too small for the two of them.

“Will ten pounds suffice for the cost of the dress? His voice almost startled her when he spoke again.

“That... that should suffice quite nicely, Your Grace.” Confusion filled her mind at the unexpected gesture. His sudden kindness stood in stark contrast to the rest of his behavior.

“If you look to the right, there is a desk in front of the window. You will find the money you need in the top drawer.” The shadowy figure nodded toward the opposite end of the room, watching her every move as she hesitated.

Taking a deep breath, Marina worked up the courage to cross the room and open the drawer, feeling the coolness of the wooden handle beneath her fingertips. She had to adjust her eyes to the dim lighting as she reached into the drawer. Her fingers barely brushed the edges of a pouch when the duke’s voice brought her to a halt.

“You may leave the dress in the corner of the room before you leave.” His voice was low and dangerous.

What?

Her body rose instantly as every nerve at the back of her neck began to prickle. Was he finally showing his true intentions now that they were alone? Surprise shook her body when she realized that she wasn’t entirely afraid of the dark and mysterious duke.

“I beg your pardon?” Marina whipped around, shutting the drawer behind her with a deafening thud as she leaned against the desk. The pit of her stomach knotted with fear and confusion as she waited for his response.

The mockery in his voice grew thicker as he took a step forward but remained in the shadows. “I feel it is only fair that I keep the dress if I am to purchase it. What benefit would I receive from simply paying for a dress that I do now own?”

Her pulse raced as her mouth fell open in shock, leaving her almost speechless as she sought for the words. “How dare you! I would never compromise my honor by undressing in front of a man. Even suggesting such a thing is cruel and... and vile. I see now that you are nothing more than a rake. You should be taking responsibility for your brother’s actions.” She raised her hand and covered her throat, feeling the dryness that crept in and choked her words.

“My brother’s affairs are his own, and I will remind you that it was you who came to me seeking compensation.” His mouth came into view in the sliver of light that filtered through the window, exposing his strong jaw and well-defined lips that curled into a sneer.

Her heart skipped a beat when the pit of her stomach fluttered furiously. “I... I should have known what kind of man you were when you did not even bother to attend your own brother’s wedding.” Her chest began to rise and fall with every breath as her eyes searched for a path of escape.

Tilting his head to the side when the sliver of light moved away from his face, the duke laughed. “Obviously, I did not miss much if you are now standing before me in the gown I wish to purchase.”

Sucking in a sharp breath, Marina decided to leave, lifting the hem of her dress from the carpet.

“Would you leave without gaining the satisfaction that you so passionately demanded?” His voice made her pause, mid-flight, just as she reached his side.

The tone of his voice made her slightly exasperated as she wished she could see his face. “I refuse to demean myself by accepting your offer. Your brother may have made a fool out of me, but that is where it ends. I bid you farewell, Your Grace.” Her fighting spirit returned as she lifted her head and fixed her eyes on the door. There

were many things she would do to save her family's honor, but compromising her virtue was not one of them. Even if she was intrigued by the duke and the danger that he oozed.

"If the money is not to your liking, then perhaps you would be happier as my bride?"

His words caught her off guard, making her gasp as she froze, her fingers clutching the cool copper of the handle.

"You must be joking..."

Aaron noted the shock in her eyes when she turned to look at him. She had not even seen his face, and she had already been repulsed by the idea. "I can assure you that I would not make such an offer out of jest. I can make you a duchess and provide an end to all of your family's problems."

Marina swallowed hard, her chest rising and falling with every breath. "Why would a man like you want a woman who was rejected by his brother?"

The look of exasperation in her eyes piqued his interest as he wondered why Adam had jilted her at the altar. She certainly was not lacking in beauty. "I am in need of a bride, and you are desperate to find a solution to your family's shame. The situation seems to be mutually advantageous..." His eyes moved over her body, resting on her perfectly shaped breasts before moving to her waist which boasted an hourglass figure.

He was surprised to see a glint of something entirely unexpected in her eyes when his gaze traveled back up her body.

Desire?

He could not help but wonder what she was thinking as she looked at him, and how long it would last when she saw his scars.

“You are a duke. Surely, the women of the ton are falling at your feet. You could have your pick of brides.” The proud tilt of her chin ignited a spark of curiosity in his chest.

“The women of the ton certainly fall at my feet, but not for the reasons that you would think.” The pit of his stomach turned with anxiety when he noted the look of confusion in her eyes. Taking a step forward, he allowed the sliver of light to fall across his face, illuminating the thick map of scars that extended from the side of his nose, all the way to his right ear.

Her lips parted in a silent gasp as she sucked in a sharp breath, making him regret the decision entirely as he stepped back into the shadows.

“Forgive me, Your Grace. I did not realize...”

“You did not realize that I am a beast?” He cut her short, clenching his fists at his sides until his knuckles cracked.

Realization dawned on her face as she looked around the room. “What happened?” her voice was low and breathy, barely audible above a whisper, yet she did not seem to waver or even glance at the door.

“War happened.” He ran his tongue over his lips, trying to read her thoughts as she remained rooted to the spot. Many women had fainted at the sight of his scars, yet the pity in her eyes somehow seemed worse.

“I am sorry, Your Grace. I can only imagine how difficult things have been for you.” Her breaths continued to push her breasts up and down, yet she did not seem to fear

him any more than she did from the start.

“Don’t you dare pity me.” He snapped and closed the distance between them, gripping her wrist as he pinned it to the door beside her head.

Marina’s breaths turned to panting as she searched his face, lingering on his scar before meeting his eyes. The warmth of her body seeped into his, making him shift his thigh against hers as she lifted her leg ever so slightly.

“Will you allow me to undress you and pay for the gown, or will you be accepting my proposal?” He tore his eyes away from her chest and gazed into her piercing blue eyes, searching for the disgust that should have been lingering in their depths.

Her tongue flicked over her lips, moistening the fullness of her perfectly shaped mouth. “If I may leave, Your Grace, I will find another way to satisfy my need for justice.”

He leaned in closer for a second, wanting to sample the taste of her. “Go then.” He breathed beside her ear, letting go of her wrist as he took a step back.

Why didn’t she flinch?

His mind felt muddled with thoughts of confusion as her lack of disgust bore into his soul. She had been shocked by his scar, but not repulsed. If she had been, she had done a great job of hiding it from him.

Pushing herself up, Marina straightened her dress where the fabric had moved up an inch to reveal her stocking-covered ankle. Her eyes lingered on him for a moment. “I bid you a good day, Your Grace. I doubt that our paths shall ever cross again.” She reached behind her back and turned the handle. Her eyes never left his face for a second until she had stepped into the hall and shut the door in his face.

Aaron took a moment to compose his thoughts as he stared at the door. Who was this lady who did not seem to shy away from his scars? She had been shocked, yet not disgusted. Something within his chest stirred as the scent of her lavender perfume lingered in the air.

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“ I want all of you out!” The sound of the baron’s voice spurred her on as Marina raced up the steps of her childhood home. The commotion from behind the doors had already begun to attract a crowd on the street outside.

“What is going on in here?” She burst through the front doors, breathing heavily. The sight that greeted her eyes was almost too much for her racing heart to bear.

Maids and footmen alike rushed up and down the stairs while her mother and sister stood sobbing in a corner. The entrance hall was packed with suitcases and trunks that barely allowed enough room for anyone to move.

Swearing under her breath, Marina searched for her uncle amidst the chaos. One of her dogs was barking incessantly adding to the already chaotic scene.

“Shut this bloody beast up before I fetch my hunting rifle! I never understood why these beasts were allowed to roam the halls as if they owned the place!” The baron shrieked angrily, alerting Marina to his presence around the corner.

Springing into action, Marina sprinted around the corner and almost collided with a maid.

The older woman shrieked and dropped the stack of linen she was carrying, steadying herself against the railing of the stairs.

Marina reached the back of the hall in time to see her uncle aiming a kick at her dog.

The spaniel jumped out of reach just in time, snapping its jaws at the baron’s ankle

before continuing to bark.

Rushing to her dog's side, Marina knelt and drew the creature into her lap, stroking its brown patchy ears as it snarled.

"I have warned you about these blasted creatures of yours before! Animals do not belong in a house. You had better shut this one up before I mount its head on the wall with the rest of my trophies. You and your mother had better be out as soon as the sun is up in the morning!" His round face turned red as he screamed.

Realizing why her mother and sister were crying, Marina came up straight with her dog in her arms, glancing at the trunks and suitcases lining the halls. The baron had threatened many times to throw them out, but he had never gone as far as having their belongings packed. The sight made her angrier than anything else that happened to her during the day.

The baron narrowed his eyes at her, thrusting his finger in her face as she jerked her head back. "This was the last straw, I warned you that I would not put up with this forever. You were not able to secure a good marriage, and now you and your family will rot in the country. I do not care if the dower house has fallen into disrepair, you will leave this house!" He snapped his hand back to his side when the spaniel's teeth missed his finger by an inch.

"If you would just..." Marina began but found herself being cut short when he whirled on his feet and marched away from her.

Heaving a sigh, Marina soothed her dog, kissing the top of her head before handing her to one of the footmen in passing. "Please ensure that she goes for a walk. You may take her up to my chambers when you return. Are the rest of them in my chambers?" She glanced around the packed hall and failed to spot any of her cats.

“They are, Miss Wallace.” The man bowed respectfully before taking the spaniel from her arms and making his way down the hall.

Shaking her head, Marina picked her way through the trunks and cases, making her way to her mother and sister.

Johanna leaned heavily against the wall with one hand lifted to her chest. Her green eyes were dull from crying and her usually neat blonde hair, which was lightly streaked with silver, hung down her face. “This is too awful for words.” She sobbed softly, bringing her handkerchief up to her mouth and shaking her head.

Prudence’s bright green eyes flashed with anger as she glared down the hall. Her rose cheeks were streaked with tears, and wisps of her light brown hair clung to her face.

“Try and take a deep breath, Mama, fussing like this will only make you ill.” Marina placed her hand on her arm and guided her onto the bottom step.

“Will I ever know any peace in this life?” her mother buried her face in her hands and continued to sob. “First your father brings us to shame by dying in the bed of his mistress, and now this! Will we be doomed to live under the scorn of others for the rest of our lives?” Her sobs turned to wailing as she shook her head in desperation.

Feeling her body give in to the exhaustion of the day, Marina sank to her mother’s side on the step, burying her own head in her hands. She had been a fool not to accept the duke’s offer of marriage. Her mother and sister were now doomed to live in the country on nothing more than a mere stipend.

The duke’s strong body flashed in her mind. She had been attracted to him in a way that she had never experienced before. Despite the scars on his face, he was still more dashing than his brother. The duke made her flesh tingle with desire, while his brother had not so much as evoked a smile. She had allowed her stubbornness to win

when she should have thought things through.

It is too late now.

She took a deep breath and straightened, looking around the crowded hall. There was no use crying over spilled milk, not when she needed to come up with a plan.

Marina looked around the table as she tightened her grip on the knife. She had wanted to skip dinner altogether, but her mother had insisted on taking the higher moral ground. The atmosphere in the dining room was sullen, apart from the satisfied look on the baron's face.

"I have sent word to the dower house already; the servants will be expecting your arrival early tomorrow morning." He sat back in his chair and looked from Marina to her mother, ignoring Prudence.

The relationship between the baron and the young girl had been strained from the start. Prudence had decided to make his life as difficult as possible by playing as many pranks as she could, while the baron had refused to acknowledge her existence. Marina thought the latter to be far more childish than her younger sister's behavior.

"I am surprised that the dower house still employs staff. Isn't the roof collapsing on one side of the house?" Marina spoke up before her mother could reply.

The baron narrowed his eyes at her, tossing his cloth napkin beside his plate. "The roof will be repaired, and as for the staff, your mother can see about hiring them. I have done what was required of me. You could also do the cooking and cleaning on your own if hiring is too much of a hassle for you."

"So, we are to be treated like servants," Marina muttered under her breath and shook her head, turning her gaze back to the bowl of soup in front of her.

“What was that?” The baron snapped, his eyes darkening.

Marina was about to open her mouth with a reply when her mother cut her short.

“Marina was just saying that we are grateful for your kindness. I am not sure what we would have done, had you not been so generous as to gift us the old dower house.” She addressed the baron while keeping her gaze on Marina, shooting her a warning look.

Allowing the knife she had used to butter her bread to fall beside her plate, Marina forced a smile. “Of course, we are. I can’t think of a better place to raise a young girl. Prudence will benefit greatly from the mold in the attic and even the mice that undoubtedly reside in the pantry.”

“I have had just about enough of your impertinence!” The baron’s chair scraped across the floor as he flew to his feet. “My first offer of help was not good enough for this family! And by God, I will not stand for this kind of treatment! You ungrateful who-”

“My lord!” He fixed his beady eyes on Johanna who stared at her plate with an expressionless face.

Gripping the fabric over her knees, Marina balled her fists. She had not blamed her mother for not wanting to marry the baron, she would have refused him all the same. No woman wanted to be tied to a pompous man such as him. She realized in the loaded silence that she would have to placate the situation for the sake of her family.

“I apologize for my impertinence, my lord.” The formal address felt bitter on her tongue as she forced it out.

“That is what I thought...” The baron began to lower himself back into his chair

when the butler suddenly cleared his throat at the door. “What is it?” He snapped at the man.

“His Grace, the Duke of Harper is here to see you, my lord.” The butler held his head high, making his tall frame seem even stiffer.

Marina’s head snapped up as she glanced from her mother to the butler.

“Isn’t that...” Prudence sat up straight, her voice trailing off when the duke appeared behind the butler in the doorway.

“I have come to ask for Miss Marina Wallace’s hand in marriage.” His eyes found Marina from across the room, making her heart beat faster as the pit of her stomach fluttered with nerves.

“It is Mr. Marner’s brother!” Prudence uttered in shock before her mother could place her hand on her arm and silence her.

Coming to his feet, the baron knocked over his glass of wine. “Your Grace! I was not expecting you this evening.” His round face filled with color.

“How could you when I myself did not know that I was coming?” The duke tore his eyes from Marina and stared down at the baron with a look of contempt.

“Why is his face so scarred?” Prudence whispered to their mother, as Johanna shushed her quite violently.

Marina noticed the way that the duke stiffened as he held his head even higher.

“I would like to have a word with Miss Wallace in private.” His words were polite, yet his voice left no question as to his intentions.

This is not a request.

She felt a shiver of pleasure at his commanding tone.

“I hardly think that is proper, an unmarried lady should never...” The baron’s words trailed off when the duke lifted his hand to silence him.

“There is no impropriety when the young lady in question is to be my wife.” The duke’s eyes bore into hers, causing a wave of heat to rush up the back of her neck.

The baron faltered in his words before taking a step back and standing behind his chair. “Of... of course, Your Grace.”

A small amount of satisfaction filled her chest as Marina lifted her dress and led the way out of the room, pushing past the duke and butler. She made her way across the hall that still housed their belongings and waited for the duke to enter the parlor before shutting the door behind them.

“Am I to take it that you wish to accept my proposal in private?” The duke smirked, running his tongue over his bottom lip before drawing it between his teeth.

The pit of her stomach fluttered uncontrollably as she turned her back to the door. “May I begin by asking why it is that you felt so entitled to show up at my home unannounced, Your Grace?” Her pulse began to race when the corner of his mouth tilted into a wolfish grin. The floral walls of the parlor almost felt too small as he took a step forward.

“How could I not when you left your veil behind? If you did not want me to pay you a visit, then you should not have made such a dramatic exit.” His deep brown eyes bore into hers, making her realize once again how handsome he was despite the scar on his face.

“You seem to feel quite entitled, Your Grace. Why is it that you are so insistent on marrying me? I know that you do not wish to make me your wife, not in an honest way.” Her lips parted with a ragged breath as she placed her hands behind her on the door, using the cool wood as support.

Why does he look at me like that?

Unwanted thoughts filled her mind once again as he closed the distance between them and placed his arm above her on the door. She had fought the urge to kiss him in his study, yet she could feel her resolve melting again as she pictured his lips on hers. What would it feel like if he took her in his arms and ran his strong hands over her body?

“As I mentioned before, I am in need of a wife. I need an heir, and if I overheard the conversation correctly, you are in need of a home.” The heated look in his eyes as he dipped his gaze to her chest before lifting it back to her lips made the pit of her stomach knot with delicious tension.

“I am not a brooding mare, Your Grace...” her voice was low and breathy.

Leaning closer, the duke cupped her chin in the palm of his hand and forced her to meet his gaze. “I am fine with that arrangement. If you are a brooding mare, then that means I shall be a stud.” His eyes flashed with a look that sent shivers of pleasure down her spine. “Now, will you allow me to rescue you from this situation?” He ran his thumb over her jawline, causing heat to fill her cheeks.

Her breathing deepened as the woody scent of his soap filled her lungs. “I will agree to a marriage of convenience under one condition, Your Grace.”

“And what is that?” His hot breath tickled her neck just below her ear as he leaned in to whisper.

“My family needs a home.” She shut her eyes against the sensation of his body pressing into hers.

Drawing back, the duke held her gaze. “Very well, I shall provide a house for your family, but,” she gripped her wrist in his hand when her body relaxed. “You shall provide me with an heir before you return to them.” His thumb ran over her wrist, caressing her beating pulse before letting go.

“Very well.” She swallowed hard, fighting against the urge to place her hands on his chest.

A veiled expression fell over his face as he glanced around the room, seemingly unphased by the acceptance of his proposal. “And another thing. I spotted several animals lounging on the stairs as I entered, there will be no pets in your new home.” He narrowed his eyes at her.

“Of course, Your Grace,” She regained control of her breathing and crossed her fingers behind her back.

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A few days later...

Aaron held his breath as Marina appeared at the doors of the chapel. She looked like a vision in her white dress with gold trimmings.

She looks so pure.

A pang of guilt hit the pit of his stomach when she took the few first steps onto the aisle. Her long blonde hair had been pinned to the back of her head in an elaborate bun that boasted hundreds of tiny pearls. The money he had given to her family to replace the dress she had worn before, seemed to have gone to good use as the bright afternoon light lit up the veil that traveled behind her.

Tearing his gaze away from the serenity in her face, Aaron berated himself for forcing such a beautiful woman to be his wife. He was not even sure what had driven him to the decision. She had shown up in his home, and the next thing he knew, he was asking her to be his wife.

“Dearly beloved, we have gathered here today...” The vicar’s voice brought his attention back to the present as Aaron looked up to see that Marina had stopped beside him at the altar.

The sheer veil that covered her face did little to hide the fact that her eyes remained fixed on the vicar.

She cannot even stand to look at me...

Bitter feelings of self-resentment filled his chest as his body stiffened beside her.

Well, no matter. She is to be my wife now.

The few people attending the wedding shifted in their seats, creating a distraction from the turmoil in his mind.

“The bonds between a husband and wife are a blessing from God, gifted to us with love, and should not be taken lightly. If there is anyone present who knows of any lawful reason why these two individuals should not be joined in Holy Matrimony, let them speak now or forever hold their peace.” The vicar narrowed his beady eyes at the crowd, looking over Aaron and Marina’s heads.

The moment of silence that ensued made his palms sweat as Aaron’s hand twitched at his side.

Am I a monster for forcing her to do this?

His throat suddenly felt dry as he envisioned the life she would lead at his side. People would stare in curiosity and poke fun at the woman who married the beast. He was forcing her into a life of ridicule and scorn.

The vicar continued before Arron could respond. “Do you, Miss Marina Wallace, take Aaron Marner, the Duke of Harper, to be your lawfully wedded husband? To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and obey, till death do you part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give him your troth?”

The moment seemed to drag on forever before Marina ran her tongue over her lips and responded. “I do.”

The guests seemed to heave a sigh of relief as Aaron let out a breath. He had half expected her to say no. Yet he knew in the back of his mind that she needed the marriage to help her family.

“And do you, Aaron Marner, the Duke of Harper, take this woman, Marina Wallace, to be your lawfully wedded wife? To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and obey, till death, do you part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto, give her your troth?” The Vicar proceeded immediately and turned to Aaron.

I should not.

Aaron held his breath as Marina glanced at him out of the corner of her eyes. The tender look of pleading tore at his heart when he suddenly realized that leaving her at the altar would only cause her family more harm than good.

“I do,” he uttered the words firmly, swallowing hard when a look of relief flashed in her eyes.

The vicar nodded and took a step back. “By the power invested in me by God, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride.”

Aaron turned to Marina, watching carefully as her lips parted with a gentle breath. He lifted the veil as her eyes fluttered shut, giving him a moment to admire the beauty of her naturally long lashes. His heart fluttered in his chest as he leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers, savoring the moment as the softest sigh escaped her.

He was about to pull back when Marina responded, her lips tenderly pressing into his as they parted ever so slightly.

“Wonderful.” A high-pitched woman's voice broke them apart.

Marina drew back, her eyelids fluttering as if she had been in a daze.

“I am so happy for you.” Johanna Marner came forward, clasping her hands in front of her chest. Her pale cheeks flushed with a hint of color.

“Thank you, Mama,” Marina cleared her throat and turned to her mother with a smile. “I think it is only right that I formally introduce my husband. His visit the other evening was quite brief. May I present, the Duke of Harper, my husband.” Her face suddenly stiffened as she said the words.

“It is an honor and a privilege, Your Grace. May I also thank you personally for the kindness you showed to me and my youngest daughter? The house you have provided is more than I ever could have asked for or imagined.” Marina’s mother curtsied respectfully, coming up with a warm smile as her youngest daughter came to her side.

The irate look of anger and distaste in the young girl’s green, doe-like eyes, caught him off guard. “It is a pleasure, Lady Wallace, and this must be Miss Prudence Wallace?” He forced a smile and hoped that his scar would not scare her.

“Prudence, remember your manners.” Johanna Wallace bumped her daughter in the side, forcing a polite smile as she laughed nervously.

Prudence narrowed her eyes, glaring at Aaron as she set her jaw. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Grace. I hope to see you sometime for tea. The frogs should be spawning sometime soon if I am not mistaken.” She barely curtsied before gripping her mother’s arm.

“Prudence!” Johanna elbowed her youngest daughter in the side while Marina bit on her lips.

Aaron was not sure what the girl meant with her comment about frogs, but he was

certain from her mother's reaction that it could not have been good.

"Well, I think we had better get going. I am sorry that there will be no wedding feast, but I did want to keep things as small as possible," Marina addressed her mother and sister, looping her arm into Aaron's in an unexpected gesture.

Her action caught him off guard, but Aaron reminded himself of the fact that she had chosen a private wedding with just her family.

"Never mind all of that, your sister and I will be having tea in our new parlor. You go and settle into your new home; we will have you over for tea once you are settled." Johanna cupped her daughter's cheek and smiled, making the guilt in the pit of his stomach, rise to his chest.

I have made her marry a monster.

Marina glanced at the duke from the corner of her eyes, noting the way he kept avoiding her gaze. She had been hurt by his cool manner when she reached the altar, he had never so much as glanced in her direction.

Does he regret asking me to marry him?

Her heart beat furiously from images of the night that lay ahead. Her mother had prepared her in such a manner that she could not bring herself to look at him. Would he be tender with her, or would be rough and demanding, oozing the danger that he had shown her in the parlor and study? Her stomach knotted painfully again when she recalled the feeling of his lips against hers.

"At what time will we have dinner?" Marina broke the silence that seemed to linger on for far too long.

The duke turned to her with a puzzled expression, his voice and face once again cool. “There will be no dinner.”

“No dinner? Do you intend on starving me, Your Grace?”

“I will not starve you, wife. I only meant that we are not to have dinner together. Your dinner shall be served in your private parlor as soon as we arrive.”

The gruffness in his tone sent shivers down her spine. “Will we not be dining together, Your Grace?”

He shook his head dismissively. “The staff will be at your beck and call whenever you need them. There will be no need for the two of us to communicate regularly.” He turned back to the window, hiding the side of his face with the scar.

“I do not understand, is your plan to treat me like a brooding mare after all? I insist on having dinner with my husband, at least on our wedding night. If I am to sire an heir for you, then I wish to know you better beforehand.” She cocked her head to the side in a challenge, defying his cool dismissal.

Aaron looked back at her with an angry scowl. “I will not be told what to do in my own home, remember that.” His voice dropped to a dangerously low growl as he narrowed his eyes.

Marina’s heart thudded furiously as she realized that she would need to hold her tongue when it came to the duke. He was not a man to be trifled with, even if she felt as if he was already trifling with her heart.

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Marina picked at the pieces of roast meat on her plate, pushing them around with her fork. Her stomach churned with nausea as she eventually gave up and placed her knife and fork beside her plate. Not even the potatoes or anything else seemed appetizing to her after the sight of the meat.

She had been surprised when Aaron summoned her to dinner, yet now she wished he had allowed her to stay in her chambers.

“Is something the matter?” The duke eventually growled, sitting back in his chair and glaring at her. “Is the dining room not to your liking, or did you have something else in mind for dinner?” He looked at the untouched plate of roasted meats on the table in front of her. His own plate was laden with beef and pheasant.

Marina pulled up her nose and made a face. “There is nothing wrong with your home, Your Grace. In fact, I have never seen such a lovely mansion. I am truly blessed to call it my home.” She looked at the fine mahogany chairs, the crystal chandelier above the table, and even the portraits on the wall. It was clear to her that no expense had been saved when decorating his lavish home.

Aaron raised an eyebrow and waited for her response, cocking his head to the side in confusion.

Heaving a sigh, she averted her gaze from her plate, wishing for one of the footmen to take it away. “I do not eat meat, Your Grace. I cannot live in a world where animals have to suffer and die for the pleasure of humans. There are far too many animals that get killed for senseless pleasure.” She swallowed hard when the scent of beef lingered in the air above her plate.

His brow creased into a deep frown. “I do not understand, what would you eat instead of meat?” He gestured to the feast of meat that had been prepared for their wedding. It was clear to Marina that no expense had been spared when picking the finest cuts. She wondered if any animals had been spared in the aftermath of her wedding.

Rolling her eyes, Marina sat forward and nudged her plate aside. “Oh, there are several alternatives, Your Grace. Vegetables, fruits, cheeses, and bread. Many things come to mind other than the formerly free and beautiful carcasses of animals. Rest assured that I will be having a word with the cook about the food that gets served on my plate. A larger spread of grains will be in order, preferably ones that have not been marinating in animal fat.”

Swearing under his breath, Aaron turned back to his plate and shook his head. “Suit yourself, as long as I do not have to eat any of that.” He cut into a large piece of beef, allowing some of the fat to drip onto the potatoes.

Disgust churned her stomach when a footman carried in a tray of roasted pheasants.

“I thought I said that the pheasants were to be brought out once I was done with the roast!” Aaron banged his fist on the table, making the poor footman jump along with Marina.

The poor man almost dropped the tray as he scurried to remove it from the room.

He is so harsh when displeased...

Marina swallowed hard as she watched him devour the piece of meat on his plate. She almost felt as if she should keep quiet in his presence, yet the defiance she felt to defend her convictions overtook her fear.

“Do you not care for the souls of the animals that you eat? Do you not think that they

love in the same way that we do?” She became increasingly irate as she pushed the plate of meat completely away from herself. She had never been able to stomach the smell of meat, let alone the sight of it on her plate.

“No, I cannot say that I have. Do you not think of the poor animals whose food you are stealing?” He looked up from his plate with a puzzled expression.

His question confused Marina, making her frown. “I beg your pardon?”

The duke nodded to the meager spread of vegetables beside the massive roast in the center of the table. “Do the deer in the forest not eat the vegetables on the table? Has it ever occurred to you that by eating their food, you are doing them a far greater unkindness than eating them?”

“There is more than enough food on God’s green earth to allow us to eat alongside the deer. Never in my life have I ever been faced with such a ridiculous argument. When you see an animal starving on the streets of London, would you rather kill them or give them some food? If your answer is the former, then I sincerely hope you grow a conscience!”

Aaron looked at her with a great deal of exasperation and speared a piece of meat with his fork. “You would certainly not do well in a war.” The duke gritted his teeth and placed a forkful of roast beef in his mouth, chewing slowly as he held her gaze.

“Were you planning on sending me to war, Your Grace? If so then, I must protest to the terms of our marriage.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm as she glared at him.

“If anyone is going to war, it will be me. At least then I will be able to eat my meat in peace. How you have come this far in life with such an absurd view, is beyond me.” Aaron continued to eat his food, unperturbed by her protests or anything she had said.

Her irritation with his behavior suddenly made her want to see things in a different light. She had agreed to the marriage of convenience, yet she was not about to live in a house where none of her views were taken seriously. The baron had forced her to live in a home filled with his grotesque hunting trophies, but that would not be the case with the duke. “I will have you know that...” Marina’s voice trailed off when the sound of clapping suddenly cut through the air.

“Bravo, Aaron, quite a brazen move, I must say.” Adam stepped into the room, smirking at his brother before winking at Marina. His slow clapping petered out as he locked his eyes on his brother. “I see that congratulations are in order.”

Her blood turned to ice as a wave of disgust that had nothing to do with the meat washed over her body. Seeing the man who had jilted her at the altar left her with a deep feeling of rage and resentment that coiled in her stomach.

Just who does he think he is?

She suddenly felt grateful that she had not married a man who would make such a mockery of serious matters.

“And what do you mean by that?” Aaron’s eyes darkened as he glared at his brother. The look of irritation that had been on his face was suddenly replaced by a veiled expression.

Walking over to the table, Adam pulled out a chair opposite his brother and slumped into the seat, flinging his arm over the back of the chair. His boyish looks, light brown hair, and even lighter brown eyes stood in stark contrast to his brother’s darker complexion. Even as they were seated, Marina could tell that Aaron was at least a head taller than his younger brother.

“Marrying the woman I left at the altar, of course. Even you have to admit that that

was quite a brazen move, brother. I knew you were jealous of me, but stealing my bride is something else.” He reached for a piece of the roast beef that stood in the middle of the table and popped it into his mouth. “Even if I no longer intended to marry her.”

The sight sickened Marina as she turned her gaze back to her husband. It took every fiber of her being not to wipe the smug grin off of his face. Leaving her at the altar was one thing, but bragging about it was entirely a different matter.

Aaron seemed to be seething with anger as he ran his fingers over his jaw. “You are quite mistaken if you think that I married Miss Wallace to spite you.”

Adam smirked, shaking his head as he took his arm off the back of the chair and leaned on the table. “Come, come, brother, let us not act coy just because Miss Wallace is present. You and I both know that this was a ploy to prove that you could win where I left off.”

Miss Wallace?

Marina wondered what had happened to the ‘wife’ that Aaron had used in the carriage. She seemed to have stepped into the midst of a family feud that did not make any sense to her.

“Marriage is not a game, Adam. Although I am not surprised that you would think of it as such.” Aaron reached for his glass, taking a sip of his wine.

His words seemed to anger Adam as he clenched his jaw and glanced at Marina. “I understand, you have to act like the all-mighty duke in front of your bride. Never fret, brother, I shall play along if that is what you wish.” He turned to Marina with a mocking smile that made her want to slap him across the face.

How dare the man who had jilted her at the altar, come traipsing into her new home as if he had not done anything wrong at all? He had not even offered an explanation or apology, but Marina had a sneaking suspicion that it had to do with their feud. If that were the case, she was not about to play their game.

Placing her hands on the table, she pushed herself up and faced her almost-husband with a smile. "I regret to inform you that you are quite wrong. His Grace did not marry me out of spite or whatever reason it is that you think. It was I who went to your brother and offered myself up for marriage. You see after you so kindly left me at the altar, I was left in the very difficult situation of dealing with a scandal!"

The expression on Adam's face suddenly changed as he looked at the table. Something she had said seemed to have struck a chord.

"Your brother was gracious enough to accept my offer, saving me and my family from the scandal that you created. After the almost-ruin and difficult situation that you left me in, I hardly think it is appropriate to act with an air of superiority. Now, if you do not mind, I will excuse myself and head to my chambers. I am quite tired after such a long and vexing day. Good day to you, Mr. Marner." She felt an immense sense of satisfaction as she turned away from the table, leaving the men to continue their argument without her.

The look of admiration and surprise that she saw reflected in her husband's eyes, made her heart flutter as she left the room.

She had not been expecting to see Mr. Marner at dinner, but she also had not been expecting the duke to treat her as coolly as he did in the chapel and carriage. The fact that he had treated her like a burden made her wonder what the evening ahead would hold.

Would he treat her with kindness, or would he throw her on the bed and demand the

consummation of their marriage?

Her heart raced with anticipation as she placed her hand on the banister and began to ascend the stairs of her new home.

I am the Duchess of Harper, wife to the Duke of Harper.

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Marina's feet were aching by the time she reached her chambers. All she wanted was a hot bath and her bed after such a taxing day.

There is still the wedding night.

The thought made her freeze with her hand on the door. What would it be like to consummate her marriage with the duke? She certainly felt attracted to him, there was no denying that. His very being exuded an aura of power that pulled her in, making her feel as if she were sampling forbidden fruit.

The pit of her stomach knotted in a delicious melody of attraction and fear. Would he be gentle with her, or would he demand what was his and leave the room soon after? She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth at the thought of his muscular figure looking down at her on the bed.

“Your Grace!”

Marina almost jumped back as the door was yanked away from her fingers, revealing a startled maid in a black dress.

The girl quickly backed up and curtsied so low that Marina was afraid her legs would fold in half. Her bright blonde hair and charming green eyes seemed very pretty. “I beg your most humble pardon, Your Grace. I have often been told that I should think before I act. The housekeeper has warned me so many times not to open doors like a bull in a china shop!” The flurry of information that came from the girl's lips, made Marina's mind whirl.

“I think you had better take a deep breath.” Marina raised her hand to her head and adjusted her eyes, wondering who the strange maid was.

“Of course, Your Grace!” The girl came up straight and took a deep breath, holding it for a little too long before Marina nodded for her to let it out. Her cheeks had begun to fill with color by the time she breathed.

“Now, let’s start over with your name?” She encouraged the young girl, hoping that she would not pass out beforehand.

Clearing her throat, the maid tucked a loose strand of her blonde hair behind her ear. “My name is Isolde Hewit, Your Grace. I am to be your lady's maid.” The proud look in her eyes, along with her uncalculated mannerisms, let Marina know that it was indeed the very first time that the young girl would be attending to a lady.

“I see,” Marina nodded.

Panic now filled the young girl’s eyes. “I do apologize for my abrupt behavior, Your Grace. I want to please you ever so badly. It is just there was not any time for training, or to hire a lady’s maid. We have never had a lady, you see.” Yet another flurry of words filled the air before Marina could stop it.

“You may calm down, Isolde. There is plenty of time for us to get to know one another. I am not about to send you back to...” Her words trailed off as she hoped that Isolde would fill in the rest.

“Oh, head housemaid, Your Grace. I have been in service since I was sixteen.” She held her head up high, speaking of the work and dedication she placed in her job.

“And how old are you now?” Marina sized her up, placing her somewhere in her early twenties.

“Nineteen, Your Grace.” Isolde curtsied again.

A child.

Marina wondered why a girl so young was allowed to take on such an important role in the house. “Only three years of service. That is quite a climb.”

“I can assure you that I am very well trained, Your Grace. Maybe not as a lady’s maid, but I am certain that you will not find me lacking in any of my other tasks.”

Marina looked over the girl’s shoulder and noticed how impeccably clean her chambers appeared. Nothing was out of place and a fresh nightdress along with a robe and slippers had already been placed on the chair in front of her dresser. “Well, I think we should get on just fine then; we can learn together.”

Isolde’s bright green eyes widened with grateful shock, making Marina wonder if the girl was about to run up and hug her. “Thank you, Your Grace. You are a kind person.” The look of restraint in her eyes almost seemed too painful to bear.

“We can start by taking off these shoes and doing something about the ache in my feet.” Feeling amused by the bubbly young girl, Marina walked to her large, four-poster bed and perched on the edge, waiting expectantly for Isolde who continued to smile at her.

“Shoes! Of course!” Isolde rushed forward after a brief moment of hesitation.

It is going to be a long road to learning.

Marina pursed her lips into a hidden smile as the girl lifted the layers of fabric and began to remove her shoes. The girl’s behavior provided her with a great deal of amusement if nothing else. At least she would have one friendly face in the manor if

things did not go well between her and the duke.

The duke...

Her husband suddenly came to mind once again as her heart fluttered. Would he be coming to her room, or would he give her a few nights to settle in first? He did state that siring an heir was one of the conditions of their marriage, and there was only one way to achieve that, as far as Marina knew.

“I can’t tell you how glad we are that His Grace has found someone to fall in love with!” Isolde broke through her train of thought.

“We?” Marina asked when the girl had removed her shoes and came up straight.

“All of the staff, Your Grace. There were prayers for His Grace to find someone to fall in love with.” She explained before taking the shoes to the door and leaving them outside in the hall.

“I can assure you that love was not part of our arrangement.” Marina found her comment strange, yet not so strange that it caused her any amount of alarm. It was endearing to know that the duke’s staff wanted him to be happy.

Isolde turned around with her eyes wide as if Marina had sworn at her. “Oh, but you must fall in love with him, Your Grace!”

“And why is that?” she asked as Isolde came forward to help her undress.

Color filled the girl’s face once again as she chewed on the inside of her cheeks. “Well, all of us have been hoping that His Grace would fall in love. He is quite difficult to deal with at present, Your Grace. If you do not mind me speaking in such an open manner.” She quickly remembered her place.

“Is the duke cruel to the staff?” Marina’s throat suddenly felt dry as she thought of the scar on his face and the dark look in his eyes whenever he challenged her. Had it been a mistake to marry someone she had not even known by reputation?

“Not cruel, Your Grace, but certainly strict and demanding, would perhaps be a better way of stating things.” Isolde held her breath when she realized that she had said too much.

Marina could see by the look in the young girl’s eyes that she was afraid of saying too much. Or perhaps she was too afraid to speak out against her master. “You do not have to fear, Isolde, you may speak freely in my presence.”

The girl let out a breath of relief as she began to pick up the wedding dress and undergarments that Marina had just been wearing. “Thank you, Your Grace, I knew you were a kind soul. Please do not think that the duke has ever been cruel to any of us, he is just... just...”

“Just difficult and grumpy?” Marina offered.

Isolde’s lips curled into an understanding smile. “Yes, Your Grace, difficult and grumpy are definitely suitable descriptions.”

A moment of understanding passed between the two women before Isolde broke the silence. “I had better get these garments to the wash, Your Grace. Will there be anything else this evening before I leave you?”

Marina turned to the floor-length mirror and examined her reflection in the new night dress before answering. “No, I think I have everything that I need.” Her pulse raced with doubt as she passed her tongue over her lips.

“I am sure that His Grace will find your appearance most satisfactory, Your Grace,”

Isolde replied as if she could read Marina's mind.

"Thank you, Isolde." She forced a smile before waiting for the maid to leave the room. Out of everything that she feared, her appearance in front of the duke was not one of them.

Hours had passed as Marina lay on her bed, staring hopelessly at the ceiling.

It does not seem like he is coming.

Her heart raced with a mixture of confusion and disappointment. Had she wanted him to come to her bed? She tried to reason with herself that it was better if he was respecting her time to settle in.

Turning over with a sigh, she was about to blow out the candle beside her bed when the door suddenly opened.

"Your Grace?" Her heart began to race as the large figure remained in the shadow.

Why hadn't he brought a candle with him?

She felt herself backing up until the tips of her fingers touched the solid wood of the bed's frame.

"Blow out the candle." His voice was ominously low.

"I beg your pardon, Your Grace?" Her voice was breathy as her fingers curled around the hardwood of the poster.

"I said blow it out." He raised his voice to a commanding tone.

Does he not want me to see his face?

Her breathing deepened as her chest rose and fell, making her hard nipples brush against the fabric of her night dress.

“Your Grace, I do not care if...”

“You are to obey my commands.” His voice was low but commanding, sending a shiver of fear down her spine.

Doing as he commanded, she made her way across the room and blew out the candle, unsure of what to expect next.

The sound of his heavy footsteps made her gasp for breath as he came into the dark room, shutting the door behind him. She was about to turn around when his strong arms suddenly encircled her shoulders, pulling her body against his rock-hard muscles.

Every chiseled line of his chest and abdomen was evident through the fabric of his clothes. A sharp gasp of surprise escaped her throat when his hands suddenly cupped her breasts, teasing her hard nipples against his palms.

She could hardly contain the excitement that flooded her body when he squeezed her breasts, pulling her body closer to her thighs.

Running the palm of his hands over her breasts, he made his way down her body, feeling her sides and abdomen before scrunching her dress up in his fists.

Why do I want him to touch me?

She began to envision his hands roaming beneath her clothes as she suddenly turned

in his arms, catching herself by surprise as much as the duke. Her body seemed to be responding to his touch as if it possessed a mind of its own.

The duke seemed startled for a second before gripping her waist and running his hands over her firm buttocks. The roughness he displayed in gripping her waist, made her breath catch in her throat.

“Will you... kiss me?” Marina stood on her toes, tilting her head slightly back as she ran the tips of her fingers over his chest.

The duke ran his hand up her arm, gripping her chin before running his thumb over her jawline. “I will be the one calling the shots, Kitten. You will purr for me when I tell you to. Kissing will not be necessary for consummating this marriage.” His voice sent shivers of pleasure over her skin as her nipples hardened even further, pressing into his chest as her breasts rubbed against his muscles.

Her lips drew closer to his as she pushed herself up on her toes, wanting his lips to consume hers with every fiber of her being.

Running his fingers down her neck, he paused at the base of her throat, gently drawing a line over her collarbone before encircling her neck with his thick fingers.

Why do I suddenly want him so badly?

Her core ached with desire as she pressed her body into his. None of the fear or questions that had been plaguing her mind seemed to matter anymore. Not when she gasped beneath the tips of his fingers as his free hand reached her breast.

She was about to respond when his lips came crashing down on hers, kissing her passionately as his tongue explored the depths of her warm mouth.

The confusion that his contradicting statement and action had created was soon washed away by pleasure as his hands hungrily moved over her body.

Her lips parted willingly, welcoming him in as he placed his hands on her hips and lifted her legs around his waist. She felt herself being carried backward before Aaron allowed her to fall onto the bed. Her body bounced slightly off the mattress as he quickly positioned himself between her thighs. Placing his hands on her hips, he roughly tugged her down until his body was pressing into hers. A gasp of pleasure escaped her throat when she felt his erection pressing into her most intimate parts. A whole new world was opening to her as she lifted her hips, wanting the duke to make her his wife.

“Your Grace, I...” Her voice trailed off in ecstasy when the full weight of his body rested on hers.

Gripping her wrists, he tangled his fingers in hers before placing her hands on either side of her head. The unexpected gesture sent a rush of pleasure up her thighs as the pit of her stomach knotted furiously with a strange fluttering sensation of desire.

Moving his hand down her side, he gripped her buttocks and pulled her body closer to his with a deep groan that emanated from his chest.

“Please...” she whimpered as the aching between her thighs became almost unbearable. She wanted him to take her then and there without hesitation.

Aaron’s body suddenly froze, stiffening above her as he paused with his mouth beside her ear. His hot breath tickled her skin before quickly turning to an icy chill.

“That is enough for now. We can continue this some other time.” He pushed himself off of her body leaving a void that suddenly felt too empty.

Did I do something wrong?

Her chest rose and fell with every breath when the duke hovered over her for a second before, adding to the already overwhelming confusion.

“Your Grace, what...?”

“I shall not like to repeat myself. Good night.” His voice was cool and distant.

Marina could hardly catch her breath as the duke turned away and shut the door behind him.

Had she not responded to him in a way that made it clear that she wanted him? Shame filled her chest as she thought of her hands eagerly snaking around his neck when he had lifted her. Had she seemed too eager? She had not planned on responding so intensely, yet her body had betrayed the fear she had harbored earlier in the evening.

Turning over, she shimmied her body up the bed and lay on her pillows. Her heart ached with confusion as she gripped the pillow and pulled it down to her chest, clutching at the only form of comfort she could find.

“What did I do to put him off?”

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Marina's eyes opened as she stared at the ceiling in groggy confusion.

He left me alone last night.

The crushing confusion came back to her all at once as she recalled the way his body had stiffened above hers. Had he found her repulsive or lacking in certain ways?

Her mind reeled with questions that she did not know how to answer.

"Good morning, Your Grace. I hope you slept well." Isolde came bounding into the room before Marina could finish her thought.

The girl's mannerisms and sense of propriety certainly needed work, but there were far more pressing matters for Marina to deal with at present.

"I did, thank you, Isolde, what time will breakfast be served? Is His Grace already in the breakfast room?" She made up her mind not to avoid her husband. If she was to get to the bottom of what happened, then she needed to spend more time in his presence. Broaching the subject was no easy matter, yet a small spark of hope ignited in her chest.

"Oh, uhm, well, we assumed that your breakfast would be brought up to your chambers this morning, Your Grace. His Grace has already had breakfast and left." Isolde seemed uncertain of how to act when Marina's brow knitted into a frown.

"Did he mention when he would return?"

Isolde's tongue flicked over her lips as she shifted from foot to foot. "He did not, Your Grace. He only said that he would not be returning for a few days and that we were to make sure that your every need was seen to."

Every need besides being bed by my husband.

She felt even more conflicted at his sudden departure. Had he been so repulsed by her, that he could not bear to even be in the same house?

"Would you like me to have your breakfast sent up now, Your Grace?" Isolde seemed uncertain as her eyes drifted to the open door.

"No." Marina flung the sheets from her legs and came up straight. There were many things that she was willing to put up with, but she would not lie in bed sulking.

"When would you like it to be sent up, Your Grace?" Isolde became increasingly uncertain as she fidgeted with the frilled edges of her apron.

Marina flung her gown around her shoulders, fastening the satin sash at her waist before making her way to the dressing table. "I will not be having my breakfast in bed, nor will I in the future. You may help me get dressed before instructing the housekeeper that I will break my fast at seven sharp every morning in the breakfast room."

Isolde's eyes widened again in a trait that Marina was quickly beginning to recognize as part of her character. "Certainly, Your Grace." She hurried forward and began to straighten Marina's hair.

"Did His Grace happen to say where he was headed for the next few days?" Marina lifted her gaze in the mirror as Isolde pinned her hair in place.

“He did not, Your Grace. His Grace often goes away on business, one can only assume that that is the case this morning. If it is not too impertinent of me to presume, Your Grace.” She quickly corrected herself before placing a few pins between her lips.

Marina took a deep breath and waited patiently for Isolde to finish as she mulled over the situation at the back of her mind.

Business.

What business could a newly married duke possibly have that could not even wait a few days? He could have been more considerate and left a note, at least then she would know that she had not made a terrible mistake by marrying him.

I still would not have had a choice.

She reminded herself of the infuriating fact that his brother had jilted her at the altar and her uncle tossed her out of her house.

“What activities can I set up for the rest of the day, Your Grace? Will you be requiring the use of the pianoforte, or perhaps getting to know the house a little better? The gardens are lovely this time of year for tea.” Isolde offered with a helpful smile.

The thought of having to spend her days in simple frivolity until her husband returned set her on edge. She would not mope around the house like an expectant waif. “I think I will invite some of my friends over for tea this afternoon. I know it is very short notice, but I am sure they would be thrilled.”

“So soon, Your Grace? Is it not proper to wait a few weeks before welcoming any guests?” Isolde inquired innocently.

Taking a deep breath, she reminded herself that her maid was not at fault for speaking her mind. “It is proper to wait at least two weeks. Considering the fact that His Grace has already gone away on business though, I think my actions can be excused.”

“Very well, Your Grace, I did not mean to be presumptuous. Shall I have the tea prepared in the rose garden? The scent is heavenly this time of year.”

“Yes, thank you. Have tea prepared for the four of us. It will be nice to have some semblance of my old life amidst all of the chaos.” She held her head eye and examined her reflection in the mirror.

“Chaos, Your Grace?” Isolde tilted her head to the side in confusion.

“Never mind, just a turn of phrase. I did not mean anything by it.” Marina offered the girl a warm smile in the mirror. In many ways, Isolde reminded her of her sister, both naïve and innocent, yet Prudence was far feistier.

Isolde’s reflection seemed to relax. “Very well, Your Grace. I shall have the footmen send the invitations as soon as they are written. The tea shall be ready and waiting as soon as the ladies have arrived.”

“Thank you,” Marina noted how efficient Isolde was despite her penitent for chatter and impropriety. At least that was something that set her mind at ease, even if her husband had left her with a heart full of questions.

“It can’t be all that bad.” Penelope Huxton sat up straight in her seat, looking at the others over the rim of her cup as she sipped her tea.

Marina licked her lips before sipping from her own cup and looking around the garden.

Isolde had been right, the garden filled with roses was both a delight to the eyes as well as the nose. Yet she could not bring herself to enjoy the scenery in light of her worries. Various colors and even kinds of roses bloomed in all directions as far as the eye could see.

“Let Marina tell us her reason for inviting us over before we go and make any assumptions.” Eleanor Harrison, the Duchess of Larsen gently scolded her friend before smiling at Marina.

Cordelia exchanged an amused glance with Marina before reaching for a scone.

“It has been one day since the wedding, Eleanor. One day . There has to be a reason that Marina has asked us over for tea so urgently.” Penelope had always been the wisest of their group.

Eleanor let out an exasperated sigh as her shoulders slumped in defeat.

“I did need your advice on matters of marital... duties,” Marina stated her case as gently as she could, wondering if asking Cordelia over had been the right decision.

Color filled her best friend’s cheeks as Cordelia averted her gaze, allowing her naturally long lashes to shade her beautiful green eyes. At twenty-two, Cordelia had yet to find a husband. While her presence presented Marina with a great deal of comfort, her lack of knowledge on the matter did not help the current situation.

“See, I knew the situation was quite dire when I received the untimely note.” Penelope nodded her head triumphantly and gestured for Marina to go on.

Shifting uncomfortably in her seat, Marina cleared her throat before placing her cup back on the table that sat between the four friends. “Well, it is just that I do not quite understand how these things are supposed to work. The duke came to my chambers

last night and...”

Penelope cut her short with a knowing smile. “That is very normal dear. Marital duties can be quite fun with the right amount of affection.”

Eleanor almost spat out her tea as Cordelia blushed the deepest shade of red.

“Come now, Eleanor, you are a married woman. You know how fun matters can be when love and attraction are involved.” Penelope continued to tease her friend with a wry smile.

It was Eleanor and Penelope’s turn to exchange a knowing glance.

“What Penelope is trying to say, is that there is no shame in the marital act. You are a married woman now, Marina, all is fair in love and war.” Eleanor smiled fondly at her own words and sat back in her white wicker chair.

“War seems to be more prominent than love, not that I think either will ever exist between us,” Marina grumbled as she thought how the duke had left things between them before his very abrupt departure.

The knowing glances between her two married friends began to annoy Marina as they smiled at each other.

“Believe it or not, that too can be a very good thing.” Penelope winked at Marina before biting her lips and blushing.

Rolling her eyes with a playful shake of her head, Eleanor turned her body toward Marina. “What Penelope is trying to say, is that these things can be normal at the start until you and your husband find ways to co-exist. It was not easy for either of us.”

Penelope shook her head more seriously now. “No, it was not. Neither of us married for love. Much like you, it was a union born out of convenience. Love only came later. As did desire.”

“I hardly think that the duke and I will be falling in love. His lack of emotions last night assured me of that if nothing else.” She held back on telling her friends that his reaction had come before the marriage could be consummated.

She was not certain why, but the thought of sharing such intimate details of her marriage, even with her close friends, did not seem right at all. She may not have finished the interaction with her husband, yet it still seemed far too intimate to share.

“These things come with time, dearest, there is so much to be discovered in your marriage, do not give up hope just yet. Xander fell for me even after all those things my father did,” Eleanor added sweetly.

“Do you want the duke to love you?” Cordelia spoke up, catching the others off-guard as they all turned to her in confusion.

Marina felt her heart racing at the question.

Do I want him to love me?

She shook off the uncomfortable question and reassured herself that her reaction to his assumed rejection was just due to confusion and self-esteem.

Penelope and Eleanor seemed to be watching her quite intently as their eyes portrayed a look she did not understand.

Feeling as if she were obligated to reply, Marina cleared her throat. “I do not think it necessary for the duke to fall in love with me. Our marriage is one of convenience

and nothing more. I was in need of a husband to stave off the shame from my family's name, and he needed a wife to sire an heir. Quite frankly, the arrangement does not require love. I was simply confused as to why a married man would set off on a business trip the day after his wedding."

Penelope now placed her empty cup back on the tray and looked Marina in the eyes. "Did he say anything before leaving? Or even after you... finished last night?" She glanced in Cordelia's direction before choosing her words.

Marina shook her head, averting her gaze to focus on the half-eaten cakes and sandwiches that were still on the plates.

"This may have been just as big of a shock to the duke as it was to you, dearest. Give him time to come around, some men only realize they are married when they either fall in love or hear the yowling of their heir for the very first time." Eleanor offered her comfort in a soothing voice.

"I guess it will be the latter for the duke then," Marina added begrudgingly, eliciting more concerned glances from her friends.

The atmosphere seemed to fill with concern, as Cordelia watched her so intently that Marina felt compelled to set their minds at ease.

"Not that it matters, like I said before, our marriage is one of convenience and nothing more. I simply wanted to understand if the duke's actions were normal." She forced a smile that did not quite reach her eyes.

Penelope and Eleanor seemed more relaxed, yet Cordelia's eyes still seemed to harbor concern.

I do not need the duke to love me. I do not have to be like my friends. Their

circumstances were different.

She swallowed hard at the reassuring thought. She tried to convince herself that the only reason she was struggling with his sudden departure, from her bed as well as their house, had more to do with duty than anything else.

It could not have been the start of something more, after all, she had only just met the man.

“Rest assured my dear, everything will make sense in time. Most men are strange creatures at the start of a marriage. Think of your husband as an imperfect tapestry. There may be a few stitches here and there that need to be unpicked and sewn back into place.” Penelope declared in a helpful tone.

Pursing her lips in disapproval, Eleanor gave her friend a disapproving glance before turning back to Marina. “I do not think that it is healthy to view your husband as someone you can change. He is who he always was and always will be. It is your job to make sure that you bring the best out in him. It will be your love, attention, and devotion that allows him a safe enough space to be his true self.”

“How is that different from what I said?” Penelope raised an eyebrow and challenged her friend.

Turning her body toward Penelope, Eleanor sighed. “It is very different; Marina should not be trying to change the duke. He is a man, not a tapestry. A married couple needs to learn how to coincide harmoniously. What good will changing him do?”

“Don’t you think Rhysand changed for me?”

The two entered a bickering match that did not require either Marina or Cordelia’s attention.

Cocking her head to the side, Cordelia stared at her friend, her eyes conveying the same question as before.

...Do you need the duke to love you?...

The pit of her stomach tightened with feelings of uncertainty as her friends' bickering match faded into the background of her mind. Nothing seemed clearer to her after all of their advice. What was she to do once he returned from wherever it was that he had gotten to?

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She was scared of me.

Aaron felt his chest clenching with anger as he thought of his wedding night. Marina seemed to have been enjoying his touch until she had whimpered. Had she been scared of him, or had she found him too repulsive? The sound that emanated from her throat when he had lain on top of her still haunted him at night.

He had tried to be gentle at first, yet his desire for her body had overpowered him in the moment.

Kicking at a pebble that lay in the middle of the road, he made his way past the quaint little cottages and picked a path that led into the woods beyond the village. He had needed some time away from the house and Marina. The sleepy little village allowed him the necessary quiet and anonymity that he needed to gather his thoughts. Leaving his wife on the day after the wedding had not been one of the best decisions he had ever made, yet he needed the distance to keep himself from hurting her again.

“Help me! Please!” A woman’s scream echoed through the high canopy of the trees as Aaron looked up in shock.

A nearby flock of birds took flight, making his pulse jolt with adrenaline.

His blood ran cold at the sound of the bloodcurdling scream. Whoever had screamed, was in a great deal of danger.

Setting out at a run, he headed in the direction of the scream as he pushed through the underbrush and low-hanging branches. A few thorny bushes tore at his clothes before

he reached an opening where his blood ran cold at the sight before him.

“Please! Don’t hurt me, I beg of you!” A young woman with light brown hair and a terrified face lay at the foot of four older men who seemed to be enjoying her discomfort.

“Did you hear that, John? The lass is begging us now.” One of the men laughed as he turned to his friend.

The tallest of the men who sported bald head and dirty clothes, looked down at the woman with a wild look of lust in his eyes. “She did not seem so humble when she pulled her nose up at us in the tavern.” His voice was icy cold and devoid of emotion.

Looking back at the girl who had raised her arms in defense, Aaron realized that she wore the stained dress and apron of a young woman who presumably served beer in a tavern.

The other men snickered in unison, advancing on her as she attempted to back away from them in the rich earth of the forest floor.

“I think we had better teach her some manners. She needs to learn her place in this world. What do you say, lads?” The first man with messy blonde hair and even dirtier clothes spoke up again.

The first man licked his lips before taking a step forward and raising his hands as if he were about to reach for her.

“No!” The girl gave another gut-wrenching scream as she curled into a ball at the foot of a giant, oak, covering her face with her arm.

Aaron did not wait any longer as he lunged forward, gripping the tallest man by the

back of his shirt as he yanked him to the ground.

“What the devil?” The man who had spoken first took a step back, raising his fists in defense as his friend landed on his back in the dirt.

The other two men who had remained silent exchanged a look of fear before running off into the forest.

“I suggest you do the same if you know what is good for you.” Aaron narrowed his eyes at the man standing opposite him while keeping an eye on his friend who groaned in pain.

“And just who do we have here? It is not often that a lardy-dah lord wanders into our forest. This could be our lucky day, John. A virgin to share as well as loot to buy a round at the tavern.” The man’s eyes flashed with greed as he glanced at Aaron’s fine clothes.

John scurried to his feet and stood between Aaron and the girl on the ground, licking his lips hungrily as he narrowed his eyes in anger. “I think we had better show this so-called lord who he is dealing with.” He spat in the dirt before wiping his mouth on his grimy shirt.

Aaron’s body tensed as he readied his body for a fight. He never relished a battle, but he was always ready when one presented itself.

The girl whimpered in fear as her body shook, never looking up as she attempted to make herself as small as possible.

The man who had been referred to as John, let out a fierce cry of battle before lunging at Aaron with both fists raised.

The maneuver was all too easy to dodge as Aaron stepped to the side, sending the man sprawling into the trunk of a tree as he lost his footing.

“You think you are better than us, you bloody bastard!” The other assailant pulled a knife from his belt, lunging at Aaron with his teeth bared.

Acting quickly, Aaron gripped his arm in with vice-like pressure, squeezing as he stepped aside until the man yelped in pain and dropped the knife in the dirt. His movements were quicker than lightning as he placed his boot beneath the dagger and flung it into the bushes.

John seemed to have regained consciousness as he came barreling toward Aaron with his head down.

Using the first man as a weapon, Aaron swung him around, using the short stature of his body like a pole as he flung him into his friend.

The men’s eyes widened in shock as they found themselves colliding with one another in the middle of the clearing. Their bodies went sprawling into the dirt in a tangled mess of arms and legs as they both yelped in pain.

“Have you had enough, or do I need to obliterate you both?” Aaron growled in anger, taking a step forward.

The first man scurried to his feet, helping his friend up before he backed away.

John narrowed his eyes as she seemed to be considering his options, looking from Aaron to the girl who still lay in a ball with her face hidden.

Feinting in their direction, Aaron made a mock flinch that sent the men falling over their feet as they attempted to scurry away.

“Who was that bloody bastard?” John asked his friend as they moved quickly through the line of trees.

Their voices grew fainter as they disappeared into a thicker of trees.

Shaking his head in disgust, Aaron turned to the cowering girl when he was certain that the assailants were not coming back. “You may stand up now, you are safe.”

The girl continued to shake, refusing to look up as she curled into an even tighter ball with her knees pulled up to her chest.

Feeling his anger subside, he knelt at her side and gently touched her arm, retreating when she flinched. “You may open your eyes. The men have gone, you had better leave these woods in case they come back.”

His words seemed to reach her as she slowly stopped trembling and lowered her arms.

“Why were you alone in the woods?” He pushed himself up and took a step back, allowing the girl enough space to come to her feet.

It took her a few moments of staring into the trees beyond her head before she swallowed and attempted to stand. “I... I... I was gathering some berries for a pie. I think those men followed me into the woods. They are not regulars in the tavern.” Her voice was hoarse from screaming.

Aaron nodded and scanned the surrounding trees to make sure. They had not seemed like men who would live in a small village that mainly consisted of farmers. Their clothes and even the smell of strong drink on their bodies spoke of a life of thievery.

“I am not sure what I would have done if you had not come along. I owe you my life,

sir.” She pushed herself up from the dirt and began to dust off her dress without looking up. Her hands were still slightly shaky from the whole ordeal.

“You had better carry something with you like a knife for protection, or even better, do not come into the woods on your own.” He watched as she took a deep breath and struggled to compose herself.

“I will be sure to ask one of my brothers to accompany me in the future...” Her words trailed off as she looked up in shock, her eyes filling with fear and dread.

Realization dawned on him as her eyes darted back and forth over the scar on his face.

A final scream of terror escaped her throat as her face turned red. Darting past him, she sped off in the direction he had entered the forest.

Aaron swore under his breath as rage filled his chest. He had saved her life, yet the horrid appearance of his scarred face had sent her running. The sound of Marina whimpering beneath his body echoed in his mind.

Will I ever escape the curse of these scars?

He waited a moment or two for the girl to gain a head start before begrudgingly following her at a distance. The thugs were bound to be waiting in the shadows and watching their every move, waiting for a second chance to pounce.

The path out of the woods seemed to take forever until he reached the end, keeping his distance as he watched the young girl run to safety.

Is this the thanks that I get?

He clenched his jaw in anger and crossed his arms over his chest before leaning against a tree. All he had wanted was a few days of peace before he headed back to the mess that was his marriage.

Men from the tavern came rushing out to hear the girl's tale of woe before one of the other maids escorted her back into the tavern.

"It is time to go back home," he whispered to himself when the coast was clear. Picking a path that would lead away from the tavern and most of the distress, he made his way back to the room he had been renting above the stables.

"Aaron, what in the devil's name are you doing here?" Adam's voice made him halt in his tracks.

Turning around, he searched in confusion until his eyes landed on his brother who seemed to be coming from the direction of a brothel. Irritation churned in the pit of his stomach as he caught sight of his brother's tousled hair. "Certainly not the same thing as you." He clenched his jaw.

Adam's eyes narrowed in suspicion as the corner of his mouth curled into a smile. "No, you should be at home doing what I have been doing, but with your wife. Are things not going well after all the effort you put in to upstage me?"

"Not everything in life is a competition, Adam. It is a concept that you still need to learn." He turned on his heel and headed toward the stables, wanting to get as far away from his brother as possible.

Hurrying to keep up, Adam fell into step beside him. "Come now, big brother, you know as well as I do that everything in life is always a competition. At least with us, in our family, everything has always been a competition."

Feeling his blood boil, he stopped and turned to look at Adam. “Our father is no longer here, Adam. There is nobody left to impress. The sooner you realize that the sooner you can grow up.”

Adam’s eyes froze over for a second with a look that could have easily been mistaken for hurt. “Father may be dead, but the competition between us is far from over.” The tone of his voice was more serious, almost threatening.

“It is for me,” Aaron replied coolly after a moment of contemplation and pushed past his brother.

Unrelenting in his pursuit, Adam once again hurried to catch up. “Now don’t be sour just because you have lost at the bed games with Miss Wallace.” He taunted Aaron.

“I have not lost; she is my wife, is she not? And she is now the Duchess of Harper.” He found himself being dragged into the conversation against his better judgment.

Laughing from the pit of his stomach, Adam continued. “Forgive me, but the game has not been won until you have bedded the woman. Duchess or not, your marriage will remain a farce until you have been successful in that regard. And judging by your sudden appearance in a village miles away from your home, I think I am correct in assuming you have not.”

“Go back to your paid pleasures, Adam, I am heading home. I suggest you do the same, yet I am not certain where you reside these days. Have you taken up permanent residence in one of the many brothels in and around London?” He shot back when they rounded a deserted street that led to the stables.

Adam smirked. “You know that your biting tone only confirms my suspicions? And I will have you know that paying for my pleasure adds to the excitement. There are plenty of eager ladies around the ton that could warm my bed.”

One of the stable hands greeted Aaron when they entered through the large wooden doors.

“Ready my horse as well my belongings in my chambers. I wish to leave at once,” he barked at the young man who sprang into action, clutching at his tattered hat as he ran from the stables.

Adam placed his arm across the doorway when Aaron made a move to leave. “One challenge to prove who is better, that is all I am asking for.” He narrowed his eyes with a malicious smile that somewhat distorted his features.

“I do not wish to play games with you. We are no longer children.” Aaron placed his hand on his brother’s arm and moved it aside. He began to walk away when Adam called out to him.

“Shall I see you back at the house then? Usual time, usual place?”

“Give it up, Adam, I refuse to play these games with you.” He called over his shoulder and waved his brother away before heading onto the main building of the stables where he intended to collect his belongings and return to his wife.

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“ I can’t believe that it has been three days, and he still has not let me know where he is or when he is coming back.” Marina gingerly sipped her tea, having little to no appetite at all.

Cordelia seemed distracted as she stared off into the distance past the many beds of roses.

Realizing that she had been agonizing about her own situation instead of offering her friend some much-needed support, Marina placed her cup back on the tray. “How have things been with your mama? I know I can’t be easy with your father’s passing.”

“Hmm?” Cordelia blinked a few times as if she were seeing Marina for the very first time.

“I was asking how things are with your mama now?” She tilted her head to the side in sympathy and pursed her lips.

“Oh, it has been quite a struggle navigating these new waters. I will say that.” Her friend drew her lower lip between her teeth and applied pressure until the skin turned white.

It had only been a few months since Cordelia’s father had passed. Her mother had since regressed into drinking as a way of coping with the loss. The recent spectacles she had caused at social events had become fodder for the gossip mill, creating even more uncomfortable situations for Cordelia to deal with.

“Have you tried speaking to her? Perhaps it is something that the two of you need to

navigate together?" She tried making a helpful suggestion but quickly realized by the sadness in her friend's eyes that her suggestions were futile.

"That, and just about everything else I can think of. Whenever anyone mentions my father's death, she runs to her chambers and locks the door. If we are in public, she immediately seeks out something to numb the pain. Being a wallflower had the advantage of nobody ever paying me much attention, now it feels as if all eyes are on me."

Leaning over the table, Marina placed her hand over her friend's hand in a comforting gesture. "I know things are not easy for you. Unfortunately, the ton is not a forgiving entity, nor do they forget very easily."

"Of course, here I am complaining about my mother's behavior when you know what I am going through as much as anyone else. You lost your father as well; the rumor mill has not been kind to your family. Not to mention your uncle." Cordelia seemed to snap out of her daze as she forced a smile.

"There is no need to apologize, at least we can lament to one another. There is nothing more comforting than a listening ear and an understanding heart." She felt the weight of the world lifting from her shoulders as she and her friend exchanged an understanding smile.

Taking her hand away, Cordelia sat back in her chair. "Now that I have stopped being the most selfish person known to man, how are you holding up with the situation here? Has the duke still not sent word as to where he is or when he shall return?"

Biting the inside of her cheek, Marina looked at her friend with a guilty expression. "No, I wish he would send me a note, but half of me is relieved that he is away for now."

“Why is that?” Cordelia asked with a frown.

“I am afraid that he might be very mad when he realizes that I have gone against his wishes.” Her pulse raced slightly when she pictured his reaction to something she had arranged to be done.

Cordelia seemed at a loss as she tilted her head to the side, but Marina decided to keep things to herself for now.

Marina shook her head before reaching for her half-finished cup of tea. “Any indication of where he is would be appreciated.....” Her words came to an abrupt stop as a feathery object suddenly landed in her tea, causing drops to splatter all over her face and dress.

Tea dripped from her hair and face, soaking her white dress with large, wet blotches.

“Was that a bird?” Cordelia leaned forward and craned her neck in an attempt to get a better look at the cup.

Marina felt too stunned to respond at first before wiping the tea from her face. “A bird?” She frowned and lifted one of the feathers between her fingers and thumb, holding it up in front of her face.

Dirtied tea dripped back into the cup as both women stared at it in shock. The small brown ball with a cone of feathers dangled helplessly in the air.

“Is that... a shuttle cock?” Cordelia asked almost incredulously.

“I think it is. That or a very, very unfortunate-looking bird.” Marina held it away from her face just in case the object suddenly sprang to life.

“Where did it go?” A deep male voice suddenly made the woman look up with a frown.

“Is that...?” Cordelia’s eyes widened with surprise.

Marina’s heart skipped a beat as she let out a shaky breath. “It certainly sounds like my husband, yes.” A moment of confusion ensued as she tried to determine where the voice had come from. It did not take her very long to discern that the duke and another man were playing a game just beyond the garden.

“Just what on earth is going on?” She shook her head in frustration more than anything else before placing the spoiled cup of tea back on the table and pushing herself up.

Cordelia followed suit and hurried behind Marina as they set off with the shuttle cock in the direction of the noise.

It did not take them long to come across a puzzling scene of Aaron and his brother battling furiously with two rackets over a net that had been fastened to two poles.

Their clothes clung to their bodies from the effort they were putting in as they ran back and forth from one end of the net to the other. Both brothers seemed equally skilled at the sport, each grimacing with a loud grunt of exertion when they volley the shuttle cock back to the other player.

Marina’s heart skipped a beat when her eyes settled on the strong muscles of her husband’s back. Yet the strange fluttering was quickly replaced by anger as she realized that he had come home without letting her know.

How long had he been there? And when was he going to let her know that he had returned?

Crossing her arms over her chest, she pursed her lips in disapproval, seething with anger as she watched them play.

“Do you suppose they will beat each with the rackets?” Cordelia whispered to her despite the fact that the men were quite a distance away from them.

Marina clenched her jaw until her teeth began to ache. “Oh, at least one of them should be bludgeoned with a racket. Or both.” She felt her anger growing the more she watched her husband play.

Jumping into the air with a great display of strength and agility, Adam volleyed the ball in his brother’s direction. A broad smile spread across his lips when it seemed as if Aaron would not reach the other end of the net in time.

Aaron, however, was too fast for the trick and quickly volleyed the shuttle cock back before Adam could regain his footing. The shuttle cock made contact with the tip of Aaron’s racket, sending it flying back with great speed.

Everyone seemed to be watching in slow motion as Adam dived, landing on his stomach in front of the net. The shuttle cock landed on the grass, barely nicking the tip of his racket with a feather.

“I win. Happy now?” The duke gripped his racket with both hands and lifted it above his head in a display of victory.

“Do you suppose they will bludgeon each other now?” Cordelia shot Adam a cautious glance as it seemed as if he were about to burst with anger.

“I demand a rematch!” Adam jumped to his feet, gripping the handle of his racket until his knuckles turned white.

The smirk on the duke's face only broadened. "We can have a rematch until the breath leaves your lungs, it will not make you any better."

Adam narrowed his eyes, clenching his jaw until it seemed as if a vein in his head would pop. "I do not accept this!" he raised his voice as anger seeped from his very being.

The duke simply shrugged, pulling the corner of his mouth to the side. "You can refuse to accept it for as long as you like, the outcome will remain the same. I told you; I am tired of playing these games with you. Now leave me alone."

His words seemed to hit a nerve with Adam as a racket went flying past his head.

Moving to the side, Aaron stepped out of the racket's way just as it zoomed past his face.

Cursing under his breath, Adam turned from the net and stomped off in the direction of the house.

"Well, that was very mature, I think you may have dodged a bullet when he jilted you at the altar. I had better take my leave before any more sporting equipment goes flying through the air." Cordelia teased her gently before bumping her arm and heading back toward their abandoned tea.

Marina felt conflicted as she stood looking at the man who had left her on the morning after their wedding.

He seemed utterly unaware of her presence until she came forward and picked up the racket that Adam had abandoned.

"I am glad to see that you have returned home safely, Your Grace. And that you seem

to have regained your mirth. Care to venture an explanation as to where you went?" She came up straight and tapped the edge of the racket against her palm.

Turning around, Aaron looked at her with a veiled expression. "We had an agreement, my business is my own, no questions asked. I do not need to clarify my absence during the day when all I need are your nights."

The hungry look in his eyes as they swept over her body, sent a wave of confusion coursing through her veins.

What is he thinking? Does he find me attractive or not?

She wondered again for the hundredth time why he had left her bed so abruptly. The racket in his hands gave her an idea.

"Well, since I do not seem to be entitled to the nights either, how about a game?" She lifted the racket along with her shoulders and pursed her lips with raised eyebrows.

"I said I am tired of playing games. I will be at my study."

"And yet you indulged your brother quite willfully, Your Grace."

"You are saying that because you do not know Adam. It was the only way to get him off my back."

"Well, you do not seem to know me either, Your Grace. It will be the only way to get me off your back as well."

The duke seemed to be considering her words before nodding toward the net. "As you wish."

Her heart skittered a little as he crossed the net with a single jump, using the pole as leverage. Taking up the position that Aaron had just abandoned, Marina readied herself for the game.

Aaron waited until she was in place before sending the shuttle cock in her direction.

Marina batted it easy back before starting her plan. “Has the relationship with your brother always been so strained?” She gently probed for information.

“What makes you think that the relationship is strained?” Aaron kept his eyes on the game, avoiding looking at her.

“Anyone with two eyes on their head can see that the two of you have a... troubled relationship. There was the argument on the night of our wedding, and he did not seem to take the loss very well just now.” She watched his face carefully as they played.

Aaron’s jaw tightened a little before he answered. “Let’s just say life has not been very easy for us.”

“Life is not easy for any of us.” She ran a little to the left as Aaron gave his shot just a little more pressure.

“It has been harder for Adam and myself, trust me.”

Marina began to regret her decision to challenge him as her corset pressed against her ribs. She had not worn the correct clothing for badminton, yet now that she had him talking, she felt compelled to carry on. “Why don’t we make this game more interesting, then? Every time the shuttle cock is on your side of the net, you have to state something about your life that you think is worse than mine.”

“And when it is on your side?” He raised an eyebrow in question.

“I shall say something that I feel is equal, or worse than what you said.” Her breathing began to deepen as he picked up the pace, forcing her to exert more effort.

Aaron volleyed back and forth for a moment before nodding. “You start.”

Licking the corner of her mouth, Marina jumped at the chance. “My father died beneath his mistress and left us to fend for ourselves against the rumors.” She placed more force behind the shot, thinking of the predicament that their father had left them in.

Aaron reached the shuttle cock with ease and smacked it back. “My father used to pit me and my brother against each other for his own amusement.” His admission caught Marina off guard as she almost missed the shot, reaching it just in time.

“I was jilted at the altar by your brother!” A few strands of hair came loose as she placed all of her weight behind the shot.

“I fought in a war that scarred me for the rest of my life!” He bared his teeth in a fierce grimace, making Marina’s heart pound with fear.

“I had to leave my family behind and start a new life!” She almost tripped as she scurried to make the shot.

“I was rejected by my betrothed because of my scars!” he placed so much force behind the shot that the shuttle cock went singing past her head and missed her ear by inches.

Panting for breath, Marina placed her hands on her hips and looked at the shuttle cock that lay on the grass in the distance.

He was engaged before!

A strange feeling of jealousy and pity clutched at her chest as she turned her head back toward Aaron. She had not even realized how much he had been through in his life. His father had pitted him and his brother against one another. He had fought in a war, and that war had left him with scars.

“Aaron, I’m...”

“Don’t you dare pity me.” His voice was tinged with hurt and anger as he allowed the racket to fall to the ground at his feet.

“No, I did not mean to...” Her words trailed off as she watched Aaron stalking away from her.

A slight breeze picked up, whipping the loose strands of her hair about her face.

She had come so close to seeing a glimpse of him that she had never seen before. Yet it was her pity that had made him withdraw. She could not help but wonder what else he would have told her if the game had gone on for just a bit longer.

How had he gotten those scars in battle, had he lost? Who had he intended to marry before he had come along? It suddenly made sense to her why he had accepted the arrangement. The woman he had intended to marry had rejected him.

Did he love her?

Panic suddenly surged through her body as her chest ached. There were so many questions, with no answers in sight.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:14 am

“Who in God’s name is causing all of this racket?” Aaron thrust his book aside on the desk in his study and stood.

Three days had passed since the game of badminton. Three days of peace and quiet that had suddenly been interrupted by an unholy row. Even Marina had been avoiding him since the game, yet now there seemed to be something else happening downstairs.

“Can a man not have some peace?” He grumbled under his breath. Trudging from the study, he made his way across the hall and down the stairs where a circus seemed to be unfolding before his eyes.

“What is going on here?” He yelled above the noise as footmen and maids scurried to catch animals of all shapes and sizes.

Several balls of fluff that were almost unidentifiable between cats and dogs, scurried in all directions, kicking up a fuss as servants tried to restrain them.

“Where did these animals come from?” he barked at a passing footman who had just managed to restrain one of the smaller balls of fluff.

Panic filled the man’s eyes as he came up straight with a small white dog in his hands. “A carriage from the Wallace residence arrived just a few moments ago, Your Grace.”

“And you thought it a good idea to bring the creatures inside!” He felt his irritation rising when he recalled all the animals he had seen in the baron’s house.

“Not me Your Grace. We were instructed to bring the animals in by a footman of the baron’s; he said it was of the utmost importance that he does not return with the animals.” The man stood to attention and attempted not to flinch when the dog began to wiggle and lick his face.

“And what of cages? Did they travel in the carriage like royalty?” He could not believe what he was seeing and hearing when a small grey dog began to chase an orange one up the stairs.

“There were no cages, Your Grace. The man simply handed them to us one at a time.” He swallowed hard now, trying to inch the dog away from his face.

“How many of these blasted creatures are there?”

“I am not sure, Your Grace, we lost count.” The footman lost the battle as he resigned himself to being licked on the cheek in repeated motions.

A very large cat that he recalled from Marina’s home flicked its tail at him in passing and hissed.

Aaron had a mind to turn around and leave if it had not been for Marina who suddenly appeared at the foot of the stairs.

“My babies! I thought they would never arrive!” She lifted the hem of her dress and rushed forward as a very small and annoying dog ran into her arms.

The fluffy grey creature licked her face, jumping in its hind legs as it yapped incessantly amidst Marina’s giggles of delight.

The ache in his head only began to grow when two footmen carrying a very large cage ambled past him.

“Where would you like us to put this, Your Grace?” The elder of the two men asked Marina, not even bothering to include Aaron in the decision.

“You may set him down in the parlor. Henry the VIII likes to be in open spaces where he can overhear plenty of conversations.” She gave the dog a final hug before pushing herself up and dusting off her dress. The number of tiny hairs that fell to the floor made Aaron’s skin crawl.

“Henry the VIII?” He asked with a small shake of his head, pinching the bridge of his nose between his finger and thumb.

Marina expressed a light giggle that caught him off guard. He had never seen her so giddy about anything at all. “Henry the VIII used to be called Blue.”

“That is quite a jump.” Aaron began to wonder why he was even entertaining the nonsense when a fluffy white cat shot across his boots.

A slurry of yelling footmen and maids came rushing past them, yelling for the cat to stop.

Aaron had to take a step back in an attempt to avoid being knocked over by the hoard.

Glancing in the direction of the chaos, Marina shook her head and carried on as if nothing strange had occurred at all. “Anyway, like I was saying, he used to be named Blue, because of the color of his feathers. We tried to get him several companions over the years, but they all ended up dying. Thus, we renamed him Henry the VIII.” She nodded her head triumphantly as if she had made perfect sense.

Taking a moment to stare at her with his head cocked to the side, Aaron contemplated all of the ways that everything she had said infuriated him.

“It is a perfectly normal name for a bird, I can assure you of that.” She bit on her lips, suppressing a smile that only furthered his anger.

“I am fairly certain that it is not. What I would rather know, however, is why you have seen fit to bring a literal menagerie into my home?” he narrowed his eyes at her and clenched his jaw.

Marina’s eyes widened with wonder. “A menagerie would be a wonderful thing! Can you just imagine how many beautiful birds I could own? They could fly freely above our heads while we enjoy our tea in an exotic garden.” Her cat-like blue eyes sparkled with dreams of flying birds.

“More birds for Henry to execute?” He grumbled under his breath and shook his head.

Clearing her throat, she sobered up. “Henry will not kill any more mates. He is a reformed bird.”

“Was this a conversation that you had with him personally? Because if so, I would love to know how that went.” He began to tap his foot impatiently at the ridiculous conversation he was having.

“Well, I spent an awful lot of time telling him how...”

“I did not mean it literally!” Aaron gave her an incredulous look, wondering what he had gotten himself into.

Marina’s cheeks filled with color as she shut her mouth.

This woman is going to be the death of me.

“I warned you about bringing animals into my home. Did I not?” He felt his irritation growing when the same gaggle of servants from earlier came back into the hall carrying the white cat.

Reaching out instinctively, Marina took the cat from a maid and gently stroked her fur. “There were a lot of things that were promised at the start of the marriage.” She glanced at the servants and waited for them to leave before continuing. “One of them being an heir. I hesitate to remind you, but the sooner you provide me with a child, the sooner I will be able to return to my mother and sister.”

“You can’t just change the agreement because things are not going your way!” He took a step forward and stared at her.

“Bloody bastard!”

Aaron stopped in his tracks with his mouth slightly agape. “What did you just call me?”

Blushing deeply, Marina attempted to hide behind her cat. “It was not me, Your Grace. It was Henry.”

“Bloody bastard, bloody bastard!” The chanting echoed from the parlor, carrying into the entrance hall.

“One of the many conversations that you have had with the bird?” He turned back to Marina with his eyebrows raised.

“Of course not! He picked it up from the current baron of Wallace. He has quite a temper on him. I would never say such vulgar things.” She raised her head defiantly.

“Then I think you had better have another one of your little conversations with the

bird. What if we have important guests over?” He suddenly realized that he had unwittingly given permission for the animals to stay.

The corners of her mouth curved into a smile. “Then I would hope that our guests have a good sense of humor.” She placed the cat on the floor and watched it dart up the stairs before sauntering triumphantly into the parlor.

How did we get here?

He went over the conversation in his mind before shrugging it off and marching into the parlor. “I will not tolerate these animals in my home. They must go back to where they came from at once!”

Marina stood beside the cage, rubbing the beak of a very large bird that seemed large enough to remove a finger.

“The birds will stay as long as I do, Your Grace. The choice is yours as to how long that stay will be.” She turned to him with a sweet smile that made something in his chest shift.

“You should be careful what you wish for, wife.” His voice suddenly dropped to a dangerously low tone. What was this power that she held over him where she could awaken his desires with a simple smile? He had spent hours over the past few days trying to avoid her, yet even when he was mad at her, he could not help but want her.

Marina dropped her hand from the bird and looked at him. “Or what, Your Grace?” She backed away from the cage when Aaron began to advance on her.

“Or I might just make good on my promise.” He stopped in front of her and raised an arm above her head when her back was pressed against a wall.

The dark look of passion in her eyes almost sent him over the edge as he looked down at her, resting his forearm on the wall above her head.

Her chest rose and fell with every breath as she parted her lips ever so slightly. “Isn’t that part of the agreement, Your Grace? That you should sire an heir. Our marriage will not be consummated until you do.”

Aaron allowed the corner of his mouth to hook into a smile as he raised one hand and ran the back of his finger over her jawline. “And what does a lady like you know of consummating a marriage?” His eyes dipped to her perfect lips, wandering to her slender neck before resting on the perfect shape of her breasts.

“I... I do not know much, but I do know that it is more than what you have already given me.” Her voice was low and breathy, almost husky as her eyelids fluttered a few times.

Leaning in closer, Aaron pressed his body into hers, enjoying the subtle gasp that escaped her lips. “And when I do decide to consummate this marriage properly, will you obey my every command?” His finger traced a path down her jawline to her throat, stopping at the swelling of her breasts above her corset. The plump flesh made him draw his lower lip into his mouth as he breathed in the warm scent of her skin.

“I...” Her breathing deepened even further when he brought his lips closer to hers.

“You what?” He demanded more firmly, bringing his free hand up to her waist where he gave it a gentle squeeze.

“I shall obey your every command when the time comes...” Her eyes fluttered shut as she turned her head to the side, exposing her slender neck.

His passion almost overtook him as he pressed the full weight of his body into hers

before dipping his head to her neck.

The tiny gasp of pleasure that escaped her throat, drove him on as he pulled his lips over the tender flesh of her neck. “How badly do you want to become my wife?” He growled against her throat, dragging his hand up the side of her body before placing it around her neck.

Her breasts pressed against his chest with every labored breath that came from her lips. “More than you know.” She seemed to be in a trance when he moved his hand up her throat and over her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes as he spoke.

“I will make you mine, Marina... Do not regret your request when I make you crawl to me...” He expected to see fear in her eyes, yet the desire that darkened the deep hues of blue only proved to flame the fire in his chest.

She is so beautiful.

His thoughts almost betrayed him when he leaned in closer for a kiss, brushing his lips against hers.

“Shit! You bloody bastard!” The bird squawked uncontrollably, seemingly losing his mind in his cage as he flapped his wings.

Realizing how exposed they were in the open parlor, Aaron let go of her chin, stealing one last glance at her before taking a step back.

Marina’s daze seemed to lift as well as she pushed herself up from the wall and struggled to regain control of her breathing.

Licking over his lips, he turned toward the bird. “That thing shall be kept in a room far away from quests, you may bring him out when nobody is here.” He tried to focus

on his breathing, needing to calm the fire she had ignited in his loins.

She simply nodded while letting out a deep breath.

“And as for the cats and dogs, the moment I see any ‘mess’ in the house, they shall be banished to the barn. The only reason I am not doing so now is because of our agreement.”

Her chest still rose and fell as she breathed, seemingly unable to speak. The rich color that had filled her cheeks made him want her even more when he realized that she had been just as taken by the situation as he had.

How is it possible for her to want me?

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:14 am

Aaron braced himself as he stepped into her chambers, shutting the door behind him. He had not wanted his hand to be forced, yet the day had shown him that the sooner he sired an heir, the sooner his house would return to normal.

The animals had run amuck for most of the afternoon until Aaron forced them into the servants' hall. He had warned Marina that the creatures, including the foul-mouthed bird, would reside below the stairs until further notice.

None of those things seemed to matter anymore as he watched her running a comb through her long hair. The soft strands glinted in the dim light, creating a waterfall of silk down her shoulders.

Marina looked up from her dresser, meeting his gaze in the mirror. "Your Grace?" Her eyes were intensely dark as she followed his path to the bedside table where a single candle burned in its holder.

"Don't." She suddenly stood with her hand on the back of her chair, looking at him with her lips slightly parted.

Pausing just in front of the table, he turned his head to look at her with his eyebrows raised.

"I would like to see you, if we are to consummate this marriage, then I do not want to do it the dark." Her lips quivered slightly as she spoke, hinting at the anxiety she must have been feeling.

Coming up straight, he looked at her, feeling a strange stirring in his chest.

Why does she make me feel like this?

His eyes wandered over her body and stopped at her ankles. The robe had been tightly drawn to the sides, yet there was no sign of a dress hanging beneath. Had she been anticipating his arrival? The thought drove him wild with lust as the bulge in his breeches pressed against the fabric.

Marina averted her gaze and blushed as if had been able to read his thoughts.

“Very well.” He nodded and drew away from the candle.

The relief in her eyes was short-lived when his smile turned to a wolfish grin.

“But we shall do things my way.” His gaze wandered back up her body and rested on her breasts as her nipples hardened beneath the fabric. It took all of his strength to keep himself from taking her in his arms and ripping the fabric from her body.

The whimper she had given on the first night in her chambers kept him from acting too harshly. He needed to take his time and ease her into the situation for now.

“Your Grace?” She seemed to muster the courage to utter the question.

Spotting her dresser, Aaron walked across the room and opened the drawers, finding what he was looking for after a moment or two.

Marina’s breasts rose and fell rapidly beneath her gown as she saw the silk scarf on his hands.

“Do you trust me?” He spoke softly before running the fabric through his fingers and meeting her gaze.

“Yes but... how will I know what is happening?” Her fingers clutched the back of the chair when he came forward, making her knuckles turn white.

“There are other more subtle ways to enjoy the pleasures. One can find a whole new world when one comes to rely on all of your other senses...” He walked around her, placing the scarf over her eyes as she gasped a little in shock.

“Will it hurt?” Her voice was soft and steeped in concern as he fastened the fabric behind her head.

“No, I will be gentle.” He placed his hands on her shoulders, feeling the slight tremor that ran through her body when he brought his lips closer to her ear. Her reaction made him wonder if he was doing the right thing, yet she did not seem to be pulling away from him or cowering in fear. On the contrary, she seemed to be leaning into what he was doing.

The soft light of the flickering flame highlighted the contours of her neck as he pressed his lips against the tender flesh. Reaching around, he gripped the sash of her robe and slowly undid the knot, allowing the fabric to fall from her shoulders and pool at her feet.

Marina instinctively reached up to cover her breasts even though her back was turned to him.

“Don’t,” he commanded in a sharp tone, gripping her hands and lowering them to her sides as he admired the soft dimples on her lower back above her buttocks.

Her arms quickly relented to his grip as he lowered them to her sides and turned her around. The dark shade of her hard nipples flamed the desire between his thighs. Her breasts were perfectly plump and firm, adding to her curvy figure.

A soft gasp of surprise escaped her lips when he raised his hands and touched the puckered flesh, running his thumbs over the tips.

“Shhh... Just enjoy the sensations.” He cupped her breasts in both hands and gave a gentle squeeze before dropping his hands to her sides.

The intoxicating scent of roses filled his lungs, making him take a deep breath as he touched her chest. Her beauty was incomparable to any woman he had ever seen in his life.

“Will you kiss me first?” She seemed to panic when he dropped his head to her chest.

Glancing up at her, he flicked his tongue over her left nipple, eliciting another sharp gasp. “I will kiss you wherever you ask me to. You may find me kissing you in places that you never even dreamed of.” He closed his mouth over the dark bud and used his tongue to make her moan, swirling it slowly in steady motions.

Her hands moved to his head, tangling her fingers in his thick mop of hair as her gasps slowly turned to moans.

The sounds of her pleasure were like music to his ears as he discovered all of the ways that he could touch her body. Moving to her other breast, he licked the nipples a few times before drawing it into his mouth and repeating the process.

Making her way down his neck, her fingers traced a path to his back before he stopped her by placing his hands over hers.

“No,” he commanded her firmly, moving her arms back to her sides before coming up straight.”

“But I...” Her voice was soft and breathy as she began to plead and raised her hand to

his face.

Catching it right before she touched his scar, he drew her fingers to his lips and kissed them. “You are not to touch me.” His voice was gruff when he suddenly drew her against his body.

Marina’s breathing deepened into soft sighs of pleasure when he lowered his head and kissed her lips. The motions were soft and tender at first, lingering for just a moment before he used his tongue to part her lips. Responding in kind, she opened her mouth with a fierce hunger, accepting his jousting tongue before drawing his lower lip into her mouth.

Aaron growled with pleasure before lifting her in his arms and carrying her toward the bed. Laying her on her back with her legs hanging over the edge, he took a step back and removed his shirt.

“Will you not permit me to look at you, Your Grace?” Her cheeks were filled with color as she panted for breath.

“No.” He took his time to admire her body in the flickering light of the candle before lowering himself onto the bed beside her. Her took great care not to place any kind of weight on her as he made himself comfortable and began to fondle her breasts.

“Aaron... I need...” She breathed his name with such passion that he could not help but draw her breast into his mouth, flicking his tongue over her nipple.

His name on her lips sounded like heaven to him as he licked and sucked at her nipple before reaching over to pinch the other.

“What do you need, Kitten?”

Moans of pleasure filled the air as he ran his hand down her body, stopping at the curve of her hip when she arched her back.

“Maybe if I touch you here? Hm?”

Sensing that she was enjoying the attention, he worked his way down her thigh, grinning against her breast. His fingers gently pushed her knees apart before seeking out the warmth between her thighs.

Marina almost screamed when his fingers reached the little nub of pleasure at the apex of her folds. Sucking in a sharp breath, she tilted her head back, exposing her throat to his lips.

He continued to play with his fingers between her thighs while kissing a path down her body and thigh, reaching her ankle. Pushing himself off of the bed, he gripped her ankle in his hand, kissing the soft flesh before withdrawing his fingers.

“Aaron...” she panted his name again. Her cheeks and neck were red with her efforts from trying not to scream when he began to kiss his way down the inside of her leg.

“Shh... if you liked what I did with my fingers, then you are about to enjoy this a whole lot more.” He could not help but grin as he gently parted her thighs and lowered himself between her legs. Moving her legs over his shoulders, he gently pressed her knees back, opening his view to the greatest delight of all.

The warmth of her folds met his tongue, making her squirm with pleasure as he flicked back and forth. Taking his time, he explored her core, gently at first, before using his lips as well as his tongue. The sweet scent of her perfume engulfed his senses as he ran his hands up and down her thighs, enhancing the way she was responding to his touch.

Her thighs began to tremble as he worked his tongue, causing her body to shift a little closer to his lips. Her movements quickly turned into uncontrollable squirming as he picked up the pace.

Reaching down, she gripped his hair, tangling her fingers in a desperate plea to regain some control over the situation. A painful tug made him stop for just a moment.

“Just let yourself feel...” he raised his head and whispered against the inside of her thigh before kissing her flesh. The soft swirling sensation his tongue was creating against her thigh, calmed the vigor that had taken hold of her body.

Marina did as she was told, lifting her hands from his hair before placing them beside her head. The softness of her breasts in the flickering light was too much for Aaron to resist as he reached up and cupped them both while he returned to his task.

“Good girl. Now surrender to me.”

Her body squirmed more vigorously beneath the onslaught of his tongue, writhing with undeniable pleasure as her panting grew louder. There was no mistaking her pleasure for hurt this time as he slowed the pace at regular intervals before adding bursts of speed. His hands worked her breasts, kneading the soft flesh before pinching her nipples between his fingers and thumbs.

The control he felt in pleasuring her body was utterly intoxicating as he reveled in the way she writhed for him. Every touch and flick of his tongue drove her closer to the inevitable edge.

Loud moans of pleasure filled the air as her body tensed, pushing his head deeper between her thighs.

“Will you come for me, sweetheart?”

Locking his lips against the little body of pleasure, he quickly flicked his tongue back and forth while sucking.

“Aaron!” She suddenly screamed out and arched her back, locking his head between her thighs as wave after wave of pleasure coursed through her body. The undeniable tremors that shook her legs drove him on as he gently dragged his tongue over her folds, bringing her down from the high.

Collapsing on the bed, she groaned for him to stop as her fingers dug into the sheets.

“I like the way you purr for me, Kitten.” He gripped her thighs and kissed a path back up her body before lying beside her on the bed.

Marina seemed to be catching her breath as he lay beside her and gently ran the palm of his hands over her hard nipples. “I thought I was about to faint...” her breathing came in rapid succession as she reached up to remove the scarf.

“Not yet.” He quickly gripped her wrist and lowered it back to her side.

“But I want to see you.” She pleaded with him, her lips parting with every labored breath.

He gripped her breast firmly before swinging his leg over her body, pinning her body to the bed while still taking care not to harm her. “We are not done yet,” he growled before pressing his lips against hers.

“There is more?” She unexpectedly moaned with pleasure again before wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Do you want to feel what you do to me?”

Aaron gently lowered his body onto hers, positioning his knees between her thighs. The hard bulge in his breeches pressed against her core, making her moan as he deepened the kiss.

Bringing her legs up on either side of his body, she wrapped her legs around his waist, drawing his body even closer to hers.

He was about to remove his breeches when her hands snaked down his neck, heading directly toward his back. Panic took over as he quickly reached for her arms and pinned them beside her head on the bed. “That is enough for this evening.” He pushed himself off of her and quickly reached for his shirt before pulling it over his head.

Marina’s brows knit together in a frown as her body stiffened on the bed. “I...I do not understand.”

Looking down at her beautiful figure, he realized just how close she had come to discovering the monster that he was.

I can’t let her see me like this.

Dread filled his body when he wondered what she would think if she saw his body. Would she be repulsed by him?

Her breasts rose and fell in the flickering light as she waited for Aaron to respond.

“There will be plenty of time for the rest.” He made his way back to the bed and gripped the sheet, pulling it over her naked body.

A look of disappointment came over her face when he backed away, leaving the room before shutting the door firmly behind him.

She will not want me when she sees the monster beneath my shirt.

He shut his eyes and leaned the back of his head against the door, wishing that things could have been different. His life would have been normal if his father had not been such a sick excuse of a man.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:14 am

Marina awoke alone in her bed, groggily looking around as she tried to recall what happened the previous night.

Aaron.

Heat suddenly flooded her cheeks as she spotted the silk scarf lying beside the bed. Her body had created a fine melody beneath the onslaught of his touches, yet he had left her again.

Confusion filled her mind as she sucked her lips between her teeth and wondered what had made him stop. There had to be something that made him withdraw, they had both been so in tune with one another until the very end.

There has to be something I am doing wrong...

Her mind reeled with all kinds of possibilities until her mind finally landed on Adam.

The doors to her chambers swung open, revealing a bright-eyed Isolde who came bounding into the room with a stack of fresh linen. "Good morning Your Grace," she chirped in a sing-song voice.

Having become used to the girl's wild and somewhat untamable ways, Marina rolled over and sat up straight. "Good morning, Isolde, has the breakfast been set already?"

"It has, Your Grace. His Grace has already eaten and gone for a ride, but breakfast and a fresh pot of tea are waiting for you in the breakfast room." She placed the stack of fresh linen on the dresser and looked around the room.

“Oh.” Hope sank in Marina’s chest as she had thought that Aaron would be waiting for her. Everything had changed for her in the space of one evening, yet nothing seemed to have changed for him.

“Were you planning on wearing your scarf this morning, Your Grace?” Isolde made her way toward the garment and picked it up.

Thinking quickly, Marina bit her lips, praying that she would not blush. “Yes, I am afraid I got a bit carried away last night when I was going through my dresses.” Images of Aaron’s body flashed across her mind in a dirty flurry.

Isolde did not seem to think anything strange as she carried the scarf back to the dresser before folding it neatly.

Feeling as if she had dodged a bullet, Marina decided to change the subject. “Isolde, do you know His Grace’s brother, Mr. Adam Marner?”

The maid frowned at the strange question, busying herself with her back to Marina before responding. “Of course, Your Grace. Mr. Marner used to live here when I first started as a maid.”

“Good, I have only met him briefly, once before we were supposed to get married, and once after I married the duke. What can you tell me of his character and the relationship with His Grace?” Marina swung her legs from the bed and flung the sheets aside, not caring that she was naked. Isolde had seen her naked so many times when she bathed that it hardly mattered at present.

Isolde seemed thoughtful for a moment before turning around and fetching the robe. “I am afraid that it would not be proper for me to venture an opinion on either of those questions, Your Grace.” She held the robe out to Marina as she stood and slipped her arms in.

Now she wants to be proper.

Marina felt a wave of frustration come over her. The girl had ventured far worse opinions over subjects that did not concern her even in the slightest. Yet the relationship between Aaron and his brother was off-limits. “You do not have to give me your opinion, Isolde. I was just wondering if you knew about their falling out?”

“I can’t say that I do, Your Grace. Both His Grace and Mr. Marner are very private men. They like to keep their affairs to themselves.” She seemed a little stiffer than any of the previous times when the girl had let her mouth run away with her.

“Really? Mr. Marner does not strike me as the kind of man who keeps too many of his affairs private. I heard rumors of his rakish ways even before we were to get married.” Aaron was by nature a very private and brooding man, yet the image was hard to place upon Adam.

The maid pursed her lips into a stiff smile. “That is why I said, Your Grace, that I could not venture an opinion. I am but a maid, these kinds of things are not for the likes of me. Servants like to gossip, but I have always been a bit of a pariah in this house.”

Marina examined her face closely before taking a seat in front of her mirror. Isolde was right in a way; she was far too much of an outcast among the other servants because of her lack of propriety. If there was any gossip, then she was sure that none of them would have shared it with Isolde. “I suppose you are right, I just wanted to know a bit more about the man I married.”

The girl’s body seemed to relax a bit as she came up behind Marina and began to fix her hair. “That is only natural, Your Grace.”

A sudden idea occurred to her as she watched the girl fixing her hair. “I know, I think

I should invite Mr. Marner to stay with us for a while, perhaps I can mend the fences between them.”

Isolde gasped as she dropped the brush on the carpet before mumbling something about being too clumsy and retrieving the brush.

“What do you think of the idea?” Marina asked her gently when she came up straight.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace?” She went back to combing a loose strand of hair.

“I want to invite His Grace’s brother over to stay for a while. It may just be the thing to heal their broken relationship if they are forced to spend more time together.”

Taking a deep breath, Isolde forced a smile that did not quite reach her eyes. “I can understand why you would think that, Your Grace, but it may not be the best of ideas. Although I do not know too much about the relationship between His Grace and Mr. Marner, I do know that their competitiveness reached a dangerous point. Mr. Marner has not stayed here at the mansion since the passing of the late duke.”

Her words struck a chord with Marina as she wondered what had happened. She knew that Aaron’s scars had come from a battle, he had said as much. Yet she could not understand why he would be willing to talk about that, and not the situation with his brother.

“Be that as it may, I think that having someone like me to intervene, they may be able to place their differences aside.” She offered her maid a reassuring nod in the mirror.

“As you say, Your Grace. One never knows what may happen. I am sure that Mr. Marner would appreciate an invitation either way.” She finished trying Marina’s hair in a bow and proceeded to fetch her garments from the dresser.

I think it is a very good idea. Perhaps it is his bad relationship with his brother that does not let Aaron be happy.

She began to make plans for all the ways that she would throw her husband and his brother together. She would have all three of them eat together for every meal, whether Aaron approved of it or not.

Surely, there was no way that her plan could fail.

“What are you doing here?” Aaron glared at his brother over breakfast the following day.

“I received an invitation from your lovely wife. Perhaps she has tired of your company.” Adam offered him a triumphant grin before tucking into his kippers.

Turning to Marina, Aaron shot her an expectant look, raising his eyebrow in a question.

Marina quickly came to her feet, pushing her chair aside as she smiled at him. “I thought it might be a nice idea to have your brother over for a while. The two of you did seem to enjoy your spirited match of badminton.”

Aaron clenched his fingers into fists at his sides, there was no way that she could have known what was truly going on between them. Yet he could not risk telling her the truth without going into great detail.

“I hope you do not mind?” She asked him more gently after a brief pause.

“Of course, he does not mind. Do you, big brother?” Adam winked in her direction before aiming the question at Aaron.

The grimace of displeasure that spread over her lips before she could hide it gave Aaron a great deal of pleasure as he pulled his chair back to sit.

At least she seems immune to his charms.

“How long will you be staying?” He grunted at Adam before pulling a loaf of bread and cheese closer to his plate.

“As long as the lady of the house wishes me to stay.” Adam shot him another challenging look before sipping his mug of ale.

“Isn’t it a bit early to be drinking?” Aaron shot back, wishing he had forbidden his wife from inviting any of their relatives to stay. The situation of siring an heir was already complicated enough between them without having to deal with Adam.

Licking his lips, Adam took another sip. “You may find that a glass of ale in the mornings loosens you up, something you are sorely in need of, brother.”

“Being too loose can be something of a problem at times. You would know that if you had any real responsibility in life.” Aaron lost his appetite as he dropped a chunk of bread into his plate.

Marina intervened by clearing her throat. “I was thinking that a picnic might be nice this afternoon. The weather is perfect, possibly even for a walk around the estate?” she offered cheerfully.

“Adam is not to be trusted to roam the estates, even with witnesses.” He responded a little too sharply. Even from the corner of his eye, Aaron could tell that Marina winced at his rebuke.

“Come now, Aaron, a picnic is a good idea. It would also be a good opportunity to

challenge each other to a good hunt! Or have you lost confidence in your aim after all of these years?"

Aaron's body suddenly froze as he looked into his brother's eyes. "I do not think that either of us needs reminding of the last time guns were involved." His voice dripped to a dangerously low tone.

Adam's dark eyes clouded over with a look that Aaron could not decipher. There seemed to be something lingering there, whether it was shame, resentment, or even pride, Aaron could not tell.

"Shit!" The deep squawk broke through the awkward silence.

"I thought I said that the bird is to be kept downstairs." Aaron turned to Marina with an angry frown, listening to the noise coming from the parlor beside the dining room.

Marina opened her mouth to respond, but Adam cut her off.

"Come off of it, Aaron, I was the one who brought the bird upstairs. I went downstairs and found him absolutely fascinating. A gem like that should not be kept hidden from the rest of the world." His smile broadened as the bird let out a slurry of cusses."

"Shit! Shit! Bloody bastard!"

"For heaven's sake, does that bird know anything other than those words?" Aaron rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"Well, he did know a very lovely lullaby before the new baron came to live with us. That might still be in there somewhere." Marina offered with an apologetic shrug.

Throwing his head back, Adam let out a laugh from deep within his chest, shaking his head when he caught his breath. “Where is your sense of humor, Aaron? I will adopt the bird from Marina if you really want to part ways with it.”

“Marina? I did not realize that you and the duchess were on a first-name basis already.” Aaron glared at him, feeling a strange sensation in the pit of his stomach.

Jealousy?

He quickly shook off the thought and clenched his jaw.

“Well, maybe one of us should be, she is as you said, the new Duchess of Harper.” Adam seemed to be challenging him as he shoveled a bite of kippers into his mouth.

“Maybe I should ki-”

“The scandal sheet that you requested, Sir.” The atmosphere was growing quite tense when a footman suddenly entered the dining room with a tray. He bowed respectfully beside Adam and lowered the tray.

“Splendid, I was looking forward to this.” Adam seemed to forget all about the standoff as he rubbed his hands together, allowing a few loose crumbs to fall back onto his plate.

“Do you really read those things?” Marina beat Aaron to the question as she sipped her tea.

“Of course, he does. I would not have expected any less from him,” Aaron grumbled under his breath and shook his head in disgust.

Taking the sheet from the tray, Adam ignored them all as he opened to the very first

page. “You need to start reading them yourself, brother. It might shock you to learn that there is more going on in the world than what happens behind your closed doors.”

Aaron noted the look of concern in his wife’s eyes as she looked at him carefully, watching his every move whenever Adam spoke. He began to wonder if she was laboring under some silly notion of unity by inviting his brother over to stay.

“Would you look at that! It seems as if some monster has been terrorizing one of the nearby villages. A young woman barely got away with her life the other day. It says here that he tried to attack her in the forest when she went to pick berries. What is this world coming to...” Adam shook his head and winked at Aaron before turning the page.

The blood in his veins suddenly froze as Aaron gripped the fork beside his plate. His face flushed hot with shame.

Monster?

He had saved that young girl from a fate worse than death, yet the sheet said that he had tried to attack her. Did his appearance count for more than his actions?

“That is ghastly, I wonder if anyone has caught this beast by now? Did it say what kind of monster it was? Was it a bear or a man?” A very visible shiver ran down her body as Marina clutched at her arms.

“Excuse me, I feel as if I have suddenly lost my appetite.” Aaron stood and pushed the chair back with his knees, causing the legs to scrape over the floor.

“Your Grace?” Marina stood as Adam’s eyes followed him out the door.

Picking up his pace, Aaron headed for his study. Had his brother done it on purpose? They were, after all, both in the village at the same time as the attack. He could have gotten wind of the gossip and ordered the scandal sheet for dramatic effect. Marina's invitation had more than likely come just in time for Adam to conveniently deliver the blow.

"Your Grace, would you please wait!" Marina caught up to him just as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

"What is it?" He snapped as he turned around to face her.

Marina stopped breathlessly in front of him as she frowned. "I just wanted to know what had upset you so. Was it something that your brother had said, or the scandal sheet? I personally never read them. They carry far too much gossip and not enough truth."

His eyes searched her face as he wondered what she thought of him when she looked at his scar. Did she think of him as a monster like the girl he had saved in the forest?

"Your Grace, I only want to get to know you better." She took a step forward, reaching for his cheek.

Backing away sharply, he pushed her hand to the side. "You know me well enough to have married me. There is nothing more that needs to be said between us. Now if you would excuse me, there is some business that I need to attend to." He whirled around and took the steps two at a time, leaving Marina standing at the bottom of the stairs.

I just wish that they would all leave me alone.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:14 am

Looking around the garden, Marina felt frustration begin to set in as she wondered where her husband had gotten to. He had left so abruptly after breakfast, that she had spent the rest of her day trying to track him down.

Why had he reacted so strongly, even toward her? She still was not certain if it had been the scandal sheet or his brother's sudden appearance that had placed him in such a bad mood. Either way, she was beginning to lose patience with him.

Spotting his valet entering through the backdoor that led to the kitchen, Marina quickly flagged him down and approached with haste. "I am so glad I have found you; do you know where His Grace has gotten to?"

The tall, distinguished man with grey hair and a matching moustache, bowed respectfully with one arm over his chest. "Good evening, Your Grace. His Grace is in his chambers, preparing for his evening bath."

How did he slip past me again?

She almost began to tap her foot impatiently when she realized that he had been under her nose the entire time. "Thank you, would you mind waiting a while before bringing up the hot water? There are a few things that His Grace and I need to discuss in private."

"Most certainly, Your Grace, I shall instruct the footmen to wait until they are called." The valet bowed respectfully again and backed away.

Having bought herself some time, Marina lifted the hem of her skirt and hurried into

the house, climbing the stairs as quickly as her legs would allow her. She did not want to give the duke a chance to escape again if he caught wind of her coming.

Crossing the gallery, Marina neared the door to his chambers when she was almost out of breath. Her heart suddenly raced when she realized that she had never been inside his chambers. Not knowing what to expect, she swallowed hard and rapped on the door.

“Come in,” Aaron’s muffled voice carried through the door.

Taking a deep breath, she readied herself for a fight before turning the handle and stepping inside. The sharp gasp that escaped her throat when she caught sight of her husband’s bare back filled the air with a quiet unease.

“I thought I told you that there is nothing more to be said between us.” He spoke to her quietly without turning around. His large frame was leaning against the mantle of the fireplace as if he had been staring into the non-existent fire.

“I... Aaron, I did not realize that...” Her voice suddenly became choked with emotion as she took in the full extent of his scarred back. The thick map of knots looked as if someone had repeatedly beaten him with a whip.

Turning around, he faced her with a distant look in his eyes. “Did not realize what? That I am a deformed monster all over? Well, now you know.” His eyes grew even colder as he reached for the cotton shirt that had been flung over the back of a chair.

Shutting the door behind her, Marina quickly came forward and stopped him from lifting the shirt over his head. “You are not a monster, Aaron, I just did not know why you kept pushing me away. I understand now that you never wanted me to see those scars, but they do not frighten me.” The sound of his name on her lips felt completely natural to her as she held his gaze.

He swallowed and took a deep breath. "I should never have trapped you into a marriage with a monster like me." His voice sounded vulnerable for the very first time since Marina had met him.

Reaching up, she placed her hand over his scarred cheek, refusing to back away when he flinched. "You did not trap me into marriage. I needed this marriage as much as you did, and I do not regret it."

A strange look of compassion clouded his eyes as he lowered the hand that he had intended to stop her with.

"How did you get those scars? Was it from war?" Her mind filled with grotesque images of torture as the sound of men screaming in pain rang in her ears. Had he been captured by the enemy? Her heart broke for the hours upon hours and anguish that he must have endured.

Shaking his head, Aaron placed his hand over hers, cupping her fingers against his cheek for a second before lowering her hand. "No, these scars were not from war. They were a gift from my father. An ever-present reminder that competition was far more valuable than Adam and I ever were to him."

Dread filled her body as an icy chill ran through her veins. What kind of father would do that to his sons? "Aaron, I am so sorry." She shook her head and lifted her hands to cover her mouth, utterly shocked at what she was hearing.

"I told you; I do not desire your pity." Turning away from her again, he walked back to the fireplace and rested his arm on the mantle. "My father would constantly pit us against one another as boys. Whoever lost, got the end of his whip." The distance in his voice made her want to pull him into her arms, yet she knew that he would likely push her away. There was still a barrier between them that needed to be broken down.

“Does your brother have the same scars that you do?” She asked him gently, wanting to reach out while respecting his boundaries. The man she had married was a far more complex individual than even she had realized.

“No, I would let him win most of the time so that I would get the beating. He wanted nothing more than to please our father. Pitting us against one another only served to cause a rift between us. Adam and I have never been able to see eye to eye on any matter.” His voice held a note of bitterness that had not gone unnoticed by Marina.

“Does Adam know what you did for him?” She swallowed hard at the thought of all the beatings Aaron had endured on his brother’s behalf. There was something worse about knowing that the beatings had come from a man that should have protected his sons, rather than an enemy at war.

Pushing himself off of the mantle, Aaron drew the tip of his finger over the scar on his cheek. “I would never burden him with such a debt. The burdens I carry are far too heavy for anyone else.”

“But if you tried... You would no longer feel the need to push us away. Any of us.” She shook her head and came forward aching for the pain and loneliness that he must have been enduring for years.

“I have handled it on my own this far, there is no reason to change things now.” He raised his gaze to meet hers. The stubborn look of resilience in his eyes matched the icy indifference of his tone.

He has been hurt so many times.

She recalled the fact that he had once been betrothed before they had met. Had the girl rejected him after learning the truth?

“The scar on my face is not from the beatings.” He held her gaze as if he could read her mind, and Marina suddenly realized that she had been staring.

“None of your scars bother me, Aaron. I hope you believe me,” she pleaded with him as he made his way to a chair, slumping down in the cushions.

Her words did not seem to have an effect as he ran his fingers over the lengthy scar. “Adam and I used to live to win. All we ever cared about was who could be the best at riding or badminton. We even went as far as enlisting in the war against the French.”

Feeling compelled by the story, Marina chose the chair opposite Aaron and sat, listening intently to what he had to say.

“War was nothing more than a game to us. Who could kill the most enemy soldiers? How many battles were won solely because of our valor? An unfortunate result of my father’s teachings. Had I known then what I know now, I would have taken things more seriously. War is no game, and neither is there honor in taking another man’s life.”

The tense way that he stared past and into the empty fireplace, sent chills down Marina’s spine.

“I still recall the battle as if it were yesterday. Adam and I were both junior officers, more so because of privileged births than anything else. The battle had just started when Adam declared that he had gotten the most kills of the past week. Being the stupid child that I was, I let it get to me as I forged a path ahead with my blade.”

The slicing motion that he made through the air, made her throat feel dry as she pictured what, or rather who had been at the other end of the blade.

“It was not until much later in the day that I realized Adam had been missing. I had gotten so caught up in the game, that I had failed to check on him. Panic-stricken, I charged around the many dead bodies. Some of our own men, but mostly those of the French. It took me a while, but I finally found him, laying in the dirt on his back with an enemy blade pointed at his throat.”

“And you saved him...” Marina suddenly felt the tears stinging the back of her eyes as so much of his cold personality made sense to her.

“I jumped in with my sword just as the enemy was about to drive his sword into Adam’s throat. The fatigue of the battle had gotten to me and misjudged the step, pushing the man out of the way but landing on Adam. The man of course sought revenge, and I got the sharp end of the blade.”

“But Adam was safe.”

He raised his head and met her gaze as if he were seeing her for the very first time. “Adam was safe, and I was scarred for the rest of my life. I came home to a betrothed who saw me as a monster rather than the future Duke of Harper.”

“Aaron, I can’t imagine what you must have gone through.” It took all of her restraint not to cry as she stood and came to his chair, kneeling in front of him.

Aaron looked down at her, more vulnerable than when he had started talking.

“I want you to know that I do not see you as a monster, on the contrary, I think you are rather brave as well as handsome. I do not know a single man that would have made it through half of the things that you have endured in your life.” She took his hands in hers and kissed them before laying them back on his lap.

The look of vulnerability in his eyes suddenly clouded over with anger. “Don’t pity

me, Marina, I have lived with these scars for long enough to know that I am a monster.” He gripped her hands and pushed them away, making her sit back on her haunches.

Marina suddenly felt even more confused as she watched him move away from her, placing enough distance between them to make it feel like a void.

“I have dealt with my younger brother up until now, there is no need for you to interfere.” He gave her such a cold look that Marina felt like fleeing.

Why won't he listen to me?

She suddenly felt more hurt and rejected than the night of their wedding. He had opened up to her, and she in turn had tried to make him feel safe. Had none of what she had said even made a small dent in the wall he had built?

“I know that look of pity in your eyes, and I will have no part of it...” He looked her over one last time before leaving the room and shutting the door firmly behind him.

Pity?

Is that what all of this was about? Did he hate the pity that he saw in other's eyes when they gazed at his scars? A mixture of anger and hatred suddenly hit the pit of her stomach. Curling her fingers into a fist, she pressed against her abdomen, trying to will the pain away.

She needed to do something that would make him see that she was not the enemy. Far from it, she wanted to help him.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:14 am

A few days had passed since Aaron had opened up to Marina, and nothing she did seemed to be having an impact on him. She wanted nothing more than for him to see that she was on his side. She had even gone as far as sending Adam away, stating that she would invite him again soon.

What she had not expected was that her mother and sister would arrive for tea. She wished that their visit would not make things too much worse.

“You look wonderful darling.” Johanna Wallace came forward, kissing her daughter on the cheek.

“And you look even better than I can remember. Have you been doing anything different, Mama?” Marina took a step back, holding her mother’s hands in her own as she examined the color of her cheeks.

Her mother’s eyes sparkled with life. “I think it is the weight of the world that has been lifted from your dear old Mama’s shoulders, dearest. The house that the duke set up for me and your sister is magnificent, as is the stipend he sends to us every week. We want for nothing.”

As if on cue, Prudence appeared at her mother’s side, sporting the latest fashions that did not seem to improve her countenance. “Will your new husband be joining us for tea?” She instantly narrowed her eyes, her lips remaining pursed in a thin line.

Sensing a war, Marina reached for her sister’s hands. “Now, you listen to me; I do not want you playing any tricks on the duke. He has done quite a lot for us, especially for you and Mama. You cannot treat him like you treated the baron.” She used her

sternest voice to get her point across.

“But he took you away from me and Mama,” Prudence replied in a cool voice. The scowl never left her cherub face.

“He did not take me away, Prudence. We got married, there is a difference.” Marina came up straight with a sigh, realizing that she would have to keep an eye on her sister.

“You should have married his brother! Adam Marner is far more handsome than the beastly duke.” She said his name in such a dreamy tone that Marina looked at her mother with a frown.

Her mother mouthed the words ‘never mind’ while shaking her head.

“May I go on ahead and greet the animals?” Prudence asked in a sweet tone that Marina did not quite trust.

“You may, but I am warning you, no tricks, young lady.” She narrowed her eyes to convey her seriousness but could not help but smile as her sister scampered away.

It was easy to forget that Prudence was still a child. She had lost her father at thirteen and endured more than most by the time she was fourteen.

Looking back at her mother, Marina noted the exasperation on her face.

“I am afraid that your sister had developed something of a fancy for Mr. Marner. He is all she can talk about. Mr. Marner this, Mr. Marner that, I have to remind her that he jilted you at the altar!” Johanna explained in exasperation.

“Mr. Marner? Why on earth would she fancy him?” Marina raked her brain for any

kind of redeeming qualities that her sister could have possibly seen in the man.

“He bumped into us after your wedding when we were out for tea. He insisted upon paying for us, even though I did tell him that the duke provides us with more than enough. And after humiliating us like that! Can you imagine the nerve of the man?” She pursed her lips in disapproval.

There is that competition again.

Marina saw right through Adam’s kindness and his plan for paying for the tea. His hope was more than likely that the news would reach Aaron and a competition would ensue.

Her mother continued with an exasperated expression. “He made quite a fuss of her, you know, saying how pretty she is and that he knew she would grow up to be just as charming as her older sister. She has been taken with him ever since.”

“Let’s hope she grows out of it then. Mr. Marner is not only too old for her, but he is the last person that I wish to have as a husband for Prudence one day.” She looped her arm into her mother’s and led the way to the garden where tea was to be served.

Johanna chuckled, seeming more alive than she had in years.

He has done so much for us.

Marina could not help but feel a strong sense of urgency to have the man she had married connect with others.

“Lady Wallace.” Aaron suddenly appeared around the corner, almost colliding with them.

“There you are, Your Grace. I was just about to come looking for you.” Marina offered him a warm smile. “My mother and sister have come for tea.

Aaron eyed her wearily. “I hope you enjoy your tea then.” He was about to step away when Marina let go of her mother’s arm and gripped his arm firmly, looking him in the eyes.

“I thought you might like to join us for tea, Your Grace. I know that it would mean a great deal to all of us if you did.” She stood her ground, unwavering beneath his untrusting glare.

“Of course, we would. I cannot think of many ways that I can repay you for your kindness; perhaps our company would suffice.” Her mother joined in when an awkward silence ensued.

Hesitant at first, Aaron allowed himself to be led to the gardens, never joining in on the chatter.

All he needs is a little more time.

Marina could not help but glance at him whenever she could. She was not certain what had changed, yet her life’s goal had suddenly changed, she wanted nothing more than to see her husband smile.

They had just about reached the section of the garden where they would enjoy their tea when Prudence suddenly appeared from behind a bush. The guilty look on her face suddenly made Marina cringe.

“Where have you been?” She looked at the slight muddy stains on her sister’s dress and the mischievous glint in her eyes.

“I was waiting for His Grace to make an appearance, of course.” She curtsied in an uncommonly polite manner that set Marina’s nerves on edge.

Exchanging a worried glance with her mother, Marina decided to sit her sister as far away from the duke as possible. There had been one incident with the baron where his tea had turned out to be ink. That was one mistake that Marina was not willing to make again.

“Shall we?” Marina smiled and gestured for the group to head to the table while shooting her sister a warning glance over her shoulder.

Everything on the table beneath the giant oak tree seemed to be in place. The cakes seemed untouched while the cups all seemed clean. Marina did a double check of everything before taking a seat opposite Prudence where she could keep as close an eye on the girl as possible.

“Your Grace, may I pour your tea?” Prudence piped up quickly, eliciting warning bells from the older woman.

It was Johanna who jumped in quickly and put a stop to the idea. “I think Marina should be the one to pour his tea but thank you for offering.” She forced a fake giggle that only succeeded in deepening Aaron’s discomfort.

Taking the pot cautiously, Marina made sure to check the spout before pouring the tea.

Their mother seemed to lean forward as she craned her neck to see the color. “It is just tea, just normal tea.” She laughed again, reaching for her youngest daughter’s hand beneath the table and giving it a warning squeeze.

Aaron furrowed his brows, looking from Marina to her mother.

It took her a moment to trust the tea, but she breathed a sigh of relief with the fragrant and non-nauseating aroma wafted to her nose. “Milk, Your Grace?” Marina asked him with a smile as she placed the cup in front of him.

“Yes please.” The duke seemed stiffer than anything else.

Eyeing the contents of the jug carefully, Marina began to pour the white liquid into the tea, watching closely for any signs of trickery.

“What is that over there?!” Prudence suddenly jumped to her feet and pointed past their heads.

Everyone jumped, causing Marina to spill some of the milk on Aaron.

“Your Grace! I am so sorry!” Marina hurried to clean the spill with a napkin while Prudence sat back and giggled.

“You must forgive my youngest daughter, Your Grace. She fancies herself something of a jester. It is a notion that I am trying to get rid of. Perhaps a few years in finishing school will do the trick.” She turned her face to her youngest daughter with a scornful glare.

“Don’t even mention it, Lady Wallace. I understand how children can be.” Aaron offered a forced smile.

Being referred to as a child did not sit well with Prudence, as her smile quickly turned to a frown.

“Would you care for sugar, Your Grace?” Marina attempted to salvage the tea.

“Two please,” he cleared his throat and adjusted his position in his seat.

The lumps of sugar dissolved easily in the tea, setting Marina's mind at ease as she gave the cup a gentle stir with a spoon before sitting back.

Prudence, who seemed to be watching his cup with a great deal of concentration, quickly snapped out of her daze when Marina offered her milk. "No thank you, I will not be having any milk or sugar." She quickly placed her hand over her cup and smiled.

Oh, Lord. What has she done?

Grubbing one of the lumps of sugar, Marina quickly turned away from the table and licked the cube.

Just sugar?

She turned back to her sister with a frown, recalling the time when Prudence had replaced the sugar in the larder with ones of salt.

"On second thought, I think I will have two lumps of sugar." Prudence held her cup out with a bright smile.

Raising her eyebrows, Marina obliged and gave her two lumps of sugar, wondering what it was that she had done.

Aaron took a sip of his tea and frowned, causing the pit of Marina's stomach to fall to her feet.

"Is anything the matter, Your Grace?" Johanna asked with a great deal of concern.

Licking his lips a few times Aaron eyed his cup of tea. "It tastes a little... fishy."

Placing the jug of milk back on the table, Marina glared at her sister. “Prudence. What did you do?”

“I do not know what you are talking about.” Prudence looked away, shrugging her shoulders.

Recalling the large pond at the other end of the garden, Marina suddenly took the cup from Aaron and poured the contents into her saucer. Everything seemed fine at first until the final drops came oozing over the rim, plopping into the saucer.

“Are those fish eggs?” Aaron suddenly asked, looking a little green.

Shutting her eyes, Marina shook her head. “Your Grace, I am so, so sorry. I will fetch you a clean cup and have the milk jug cleaned.”

“I think I have had enough tea for one afternoon. You may enjoy the rest of your visit without me.” He pushed himself up from his seat and hurried away from the table.

Turning in unison, Marina and her mother both glared daggers at Prudence.

Aaron stood with his hands behind his back as he watched the ladies in the garden enjoying their tea. From what he could see from the window, Marina and her mother had given the young girl quite a talking to after he left the table.

He would have laughed under normal circumstances, but the taste of fish still lingered in the back of his throat. Even with the practical joke, Aaron had been looking for an excuse to leave the table.

I do not belong in her world.

He recalled the pity in her eyes when he had told her the truth in his chambers. A

woman as pretty and fine as Marina deserved a husband who was not a monster. Not a man she would pity.

“Your Grace, the Baron of Wallace is here to call on you.”

Aaron turned to the doorway with a frown when the butler suddenly announced the arrival. “Have him join the ladies for tea.” He dismissed the intrusion, hoping to turn back to his thoughts.

“I have already suggested that, Your Grace. The baron is insistent upon seeing you, and not the ladies.”

“Oh, very well, send him in.” Aaron sighed reluctantly and made his way to his desk, taking a seat as the butler disappeared.

It did not take the man very long to reappear with the baron following close behind. “Baron Wallace, Your Grace.”

Gesturing for the baron to have a seat, Aaron waited patiently for him to state his business.

“Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Your Grace. I know that a man like you must be very busy.” The baron fidgeted with the edge of his coat before taking a seat.

“What is it that you need, Wallace?” Aaron could already feel his patience thinning as the man spluttered.

“Straight to the point then, I see, very efficient. You see there, was the matter of Marina’s dowry...” His face paled a little when Aaron moved his head from side to side, making a dull cracking sound.

“I excused the dowry payment to make amends for my brother’s poor behavior.” A sinking feeling that he knew exactly how the visit would end, began to take Aaron over.

“And a very generous gesture that was, Your Grace. It is just that taking care of her mother as well as her sister has not been cheap. The bulk of the estate passed to me, but only a small portion was left to the late baron’s wife and daughters.”

Aaron cut him short when he could see the direction that the conversation was headed. “And that expense has been lifted from your shoulders as well. I see to all of their needs now; none of the financial burdens are yours to bear.”

“And I am grateful for that, Your Grace. It is just that I have looked after them for a whole year. I am sure you are aware of the fact that it takes a great deal of capital to look after young ladies. Had the Dowager Baroness accepted my offer of marriage from the beginning, I would have assumed more responsibility, but she chose not to accept,” he muttered under his breath.

“Just what is it that you are asking of me?”

The man paled noticeably before flicking his tongue over his dry lips. “I was hoping that since you showed such generosity to Marina’s mother and sister, you would be open to compensating me for my efforts as well.”

“Money. You want money,” Aaron remarked dryly, seeing the man for what he was. There had been rumors of the baron’s greed, but he had not realized just how greedy the man was.

“Well, yes, I did foot the bill so to speak for a year.” The baron lifted his head proudly.

Placing the palms of his hands flat on the desk, Aaron pushed himself up and stared down at the man. “Leave my house, Wallace. Leave and never come back here ever again.”

The look of panic in the man’s eyes was quickly replaced by one of anger. “I should have known that the stories about you were true. They said that your personality was just as hideous as your face. Well, I can see now that Marina will live a harsh life filled with cruelty if she is to stay married to you.”

Pulling himself up to his full height, Aaron raised his voice. “Leave now before I have you thrown out!”

The baron cowered beneath his withering stare and scurried from the room, leaving Aaron alone as he slumped back into his chair.

Will I be doomed to live a life of scorn forever?

He ran his fingers over the scar on his cheek, wishing for the thousandth time that things could have been different.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:14 am

Giving herself the once over in the mirror, Marina made sure that everything was in place. From her neatly pinned hair to the folds of her satin dress that fell to the floor. So much was riding on the dinner she had planned, especially after her sister's behavior.

Shaking her head, Marina could not help but smile as she thought of the tea. She had been furious at the time, but it now brought a smile to her lips. Springing a dinner on Aaron did not seem like the best plan, but it seemed like a far better one than having her sister over again.

"Your guests have arrived, Your Grace." Isolde popped her head around the corner and smiled.

"Thank you, Isolde, I shall be right down." Marina took a deep breath and turned to the mirror giving herself a final once over.

It is now or never.

She turned around and headed straight for Aaron's study, knocking on the door before pushing it open.

Looking up in surprise, Aaron let go of the piece of parchment that he had been reading on his desk. "You look... Beautiful." The question in his eyes was almost palpable.

"Thank you, Your Grace. Flattery will get you everywhere." She held her head high, knowing that she had done her best to look good for him.

“Any special occasion?” He laced his fingers together and rested his elbows on his desk.

Taking a deep breath, she offered him a smile that she hoped would soften the blow. “Now, I do not want you to get angry with me. I know the tea with my sister and mother did not go very well, but I was hoping you would give this just one more shot and come down to dinner with me and my friends. I promise you that the ladies will make a much better impression. No fish eggs in sight.” She ended on a hopeful note.

Aaron stared at her for a moment, making her slightly nervous as she waited for his response. “Why do you keep arranging these things?” He asked her honestly.

“Because, Your Grace, I want you to get to know the people in my life. I was hoping that you would see that not everyone will view you as a monster.”

His eyes filled with a strange look that she could not quite place her finger on.

“Please, just this one dinner, if it does not go well, then I promise you that I will never arrange anything of the sort ever again.” She hoped that her honesty would breach his walls.

Taking a moment to chew on the inside of his cheeks, Aaron nodded. “Just a few of your friends?”

“Just three of my closest friends. Two of them are married and one is still unwed, but she is the quietest of them all.” Marina waited a few moments before drawing her bottom lip between her teeth. “Please, I know you do not fully understand why, but it means so much to me. Just this one dinner. Have I ever asked you for anything else since I have been here?”

Aaron’s expression seemed pained, but he nodded again. “Very well, one dinner

would not hurt.”

Marina felt like running to his side and throwing her arms around his neck, but she held back and smiled. “Thank you, Your Grace. Our guests are already here, but we shall wait for you before we start.” She beamed at him before turning and leaving the room.

Finally, things are starting to look up.

Her heart felt lighter than a feather as she giddily made her way down the stairs, looking forward to the evening that lay ahead.

“Perhaps we should go and see where he is?” Penelope suggested with an encouraging smile while glancing at their husbands at the other end of the room.

Rhysand, the Duke of Huxton, stood silently by with his arms crossed over his chest while Eleanor’s husband, the Duke of Larsen, proceeded to complain about a recent boxing match that he had attended. Both seemed utterly bored with the situation when Rhysand stifled a yawn.

Looking around the table at her friends who had all done their best to arrive on time in their finest dresses, Marina shook her head. “No, I think we had better start the first course. The duke promised he would be here, let us not allow the food to go to waste.

Cordelia exchanged a concerned look with Eleanor before shifting forward in her seat. “I guess it would not hurt to start the first course; the duke can always join right in when he arrives.”

The heaviness of her heart betrayed her smile as Marina gestured for the butler to begin serving the first course.

He promised me.

Marina found herself glancing at the doorway through the first course. She barely added anything to the conversation throughout the rest of dinner, and she merely nodded at the others when they attempted to converse with her.

“I think it is time for sherry.” Marina stood at the end of the dessert and forced a smile.

Her friends all enhanced worried glances before Penelope came forward. “Marina, darling, I think we had better go. You are distracted enough, and we both know that you will not be able to rest until you have settled matters with the duke.” She placed her hand on Marina’s arm and gave her an encouraging squeeze.

Looking around the table at the worried faces, she suddenly realized that she had been a terrible hostess. “I am so sorry for not paying more attention to you ladies this evening. You all made such an effort to come, and I have done nothing but ignore you.”

The men both seemed to realize that something was happening when they stopped their discussion and looked at the women.

“Marina, we understand. Marriage is never easy. These things tend to happen from time to time.” Eleanor stood and offered her another reassuring smile before glancing at her husband.

Cordelia stood next and joined in. “I may not be married yet, but I do understand that things are not always as simple as they may seem. We should go home, and you should go and talk to your husband.”

The kindness and understanding that her friends were showing almost made her cry

as she took a deep breath. “Thank you, ladies, I am not sure what I would do without you. All three of you are one in a million.”

“Perhaps you should revisit the lessons that your governess gave you, your counting seems to be just a little bit off.” Penelope winked at her, eliciting a few laughs from the others.

Seeing the ladies to their carriages along with their husbands, Marina waited for them all to leave before looking up at the house.

The window to the study flickered with the burning light of a candle.

“Right,” she muttered to herself and marched back into the house, stomping up the stairs like a thunderous cloud. She barely even opened the door before rushing right in.

Aaron once again looked up, more startled this time than he had been earlier in the evening.

“Do you hate me? Is that what it is? Do you resent agreeing to make me your wife? Please explain the situation to me, because I have honestly been back and for in my mind and I am tired of trying.” Hot tears stung the back of her eyes.

“Marina, I...” He began as he stood.

“You what? Please tell me, Your Grace. You made me a promise that you would show up to a dinner with all of my friends, and instead of introducing them to my husband, I had to sit through a dinner alone!” A single tear fell down her cheek now as she lost control.

Aaron stood rooted to the spot, seemingly silent as he watched her.

“Would you like us to have this marriage annulled? If that is the case, tell me now so that I may put myself out of this misery. I am tired of trying, Aaron, so tired!” She balled her fists at her side and glared at him, wishing that she had gone to bed instead.

“Don’t you ever dare suggest that again!” He raised his voice, making her tremble slightly as she stood her ground.

“Then what would you have me do? You certainly do not want me as your wife. What purpose am I serving here if not to give you an heir?”

His eyes grew darker as his face became more serious. “Kneel,” he commanded her.

“I beg your pardon?” She took a step back from him, wondering what he meant.

“You want to be my wife, do you not? Is that not why you are in here screaming at me? Now do as you are told, and kneel.” He pointed to the ground in front of his feet with a serious look in his eyes.

Feeling her legs shaking, Marina did as she was told and dropped to her hands and knees, suddenly aroused by his commanding tone.

“Now, crawl to me, wife.” His voice was deep and harsh, sending a shiver of pleasure down her spine.

Placing one hand in front of the other like a cat, she began to crawl to him, keeping her gaze fixed on his.

Dropping to his haunches, Aaron cupped her chin and looked into her eyes. “You are never to speak to me in that manner ever again, do I make myself clear, Kitten?” He brought his lips closer to hers.

Marina nodded, her lips parting slightly.

“I want you to say it. I want to hear you submit before I make you purr for me.” He brushed his lips against hers.

“Yes, Your Grace.” She breathed against his lips.

Relenting to the kiss with full force, Aaron searched the depths of her mouth with his tongue. He wanted more of her as his arousal pushed against his breeches. Scooping her up in his arms, he carried her to his desk and used one arm to sweep the clutter to the floor.

Marina gasped in surprise, keeping her gaze fixed on his as he placed her on the desk. Her heart skipped a beat when he took a step back and removed his shirt, discarding it the side before stepping from his breeches.

The fullness of his erection that came into view, made Marina bite on her lips as she raised her eyes.

“Do you like what you see, Kitten?” He advanced on her without waiting for a reply.

The wave of pleasure that washed through her body when he reached behind her back and undid her dress almost sent her over the edge. She wanted him to touch her, to finally make her his wife and show her how it felt.

“All in good time,” Aaron whispered in her ear, gripping the shoulder of her dress as he slipped it down her arm.

She could not help but moan when he kissed her neck, dragging his lips over her shoulder. She had not even noticed that he had been working the laces of her corset until her breasts sprang free. Gasping in surprise, she leaned back on her hands as

Aaron took her breasts into his mouth. First one, before devouring the other.

The hot sensations that his tongue was creating on her breast had her gasping for breath as he moved his hand up her thigh.

“Aaron, I cannot wait any longer,” she mumbled under his hot kisses.

Cold air kissed her nipple as he drew away, parting her knees before positioning himself between her thighs. He entered her slowly, allowing her folds to adjust to the size of him. Yet any pain was quickly replaced by pleasure when he began to move back and forth.

The steady rhythm of his thighs pressing against hers, drove Marina wild as she began to enjoy the sensation more and more. She felt filled to the very brim as he thrust his thick cock in and out.

“Aaron,” she whispered his name desperately as she gripped his shoulders, feeling herself being pulled closer to the edge.

Grunting with pleasure, Aaron placed his hands on her hips, pulling her closer as he picked up the pace.

Their bodies melded together, creating a brand-new sensation of ecstasy as she began to cry out for more.

“You take me so well, sweetheart,” Aaron called out, thrusting violently between her thighs as he dipped his head and kissed her lips, sucking on her tongue.

Marina could not hold off any longer as she felt her climax building. Leaning back on the desk, she placed her elbows behind her for support and whimpered, allowing Aaron to take her to the edge.

One final thrust had her crying out in pleasure as stars suddenly burst behind her eyelids. Her body shook and trembled with every breath when Aaron cried out, collapsing on top of her with a final grunt.

The warmth that filled her core was utterly indescribable as Marina lay on the desk, panting for breath with Aaron on top of her.

“How did that feel?” Aaron reached up and traced a pattern over her breast as he nestled his face in her cleavage.

“I... I do not know how to describe it. I feel fuller somehow.” She opened her eyes, blinking a few times as she realized that her legs were still trembling.

“That is how it is supposed to feel.” He turned his head once again and kissed the side of her breast.

The unexpected sensation sent yet another shiver of pleasure through her body. “Will I be pregnant now?” She asked him almost sheepishly, worrying that he would send her away if she was. She could not explain it, but something had changed between them over the past month. She could not bear the thought of being away from him for too long.

Chuckling under his breath, Aaron pushed himself up and smiled down at her. “You might be, but it usually takes a few more tries. The only way to be certain is to do this more often.”

Her heart suddenly lifted when she noted the sparkle in his eyes. “Well, I think we had better practice at least once a day then. Don’t you agree?”

He shook his head and helped her to sit up, placing his forehead against hers in a tender and unexpected moment. “Marina, I am sorry that I broke my promise. Things

are not always easy for me.”

“I know. Let us not dwell on that any longer.” She pushed her head against his, reveling in the moment they shared. The world suddenly seemed like a different place to her, making her wonder if anything could shatter her newfound happiness.

“I would very much like to take you to my bed now, Your Grace. That is, if you are willing to spend the night with me?”

His offer caught her off guard and she drew back slightly. “I would love to spend the night in your chambers, Your Grace. Perhaps we will be able to practice again before morning?”

Aaron drew back and looked at her his eyes darkening with lust again. “Be careful what you wish for, Kitten. It might just come true.” He pressed his lips against hers, drawing her into his arms with a passionate kiss.

It did not take long for Aaron to scoop her up in his arms, carrying her down the hall and to his chambers.

Is that what it is going to be like from here on out?

Marina’s heart was singing when he carried her into his chambers and kicked the door shut behind his back. He lay her on the bed before crawling to her side and drawing her naked body against his.

Her hands moved to his back, gently drawing a pattern over his scars. The thickness of the matted flesh beneath the tips of her fingers quivered slightly as she moved back and forth.

He seemed to be enjoying the attention, yet Marina could not help but wonder if

something else would not tear them apart. After all, most scars were rarely ever just skin deep.

Why am I feeling like this?

She looked up at his sleeping face when he began to snore. Everything inside of her screamed in agony when she wondered if he loved her.

Do I care if he loves me?

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:14 am

“Thank you for doing this,” Marina placed her hand on his arm and smiled, making his heart jolt.

“It’s the least that I can do.” Aaron relaxed slightly at her side as they watched the carriage approaching the house in the distance.

He had not wanted to have tea with his wife’s friends’ husbands, but he knew it would make her happy. And after the last time he had stood her up, he did not want to disappoint her for a second time.

The carriage came to a stop right in front of the house as Marina practically pulled him down the stairs.

A footman opened the door, revealing Marina’s two married friends along with their husbands.

A strange look flashed across the men’s faces when they simultaneously locked eyes with Aaron.

“It is lovely to have you all here again.” Marina beamed with pride as she greeted her friends.

The first of the women to come forward was a lady who introduced herself as the Duchess of Larsen and her husband, Xander Harrison. “It is a pleasure to finally make your, Your Grace.”

Larsen’s face was stark and unreadable, yet his eyes spoke of the defiance and

outgoing nature that would undoubtedly clash with Aaron.

This is going to be a long afternoon.

Aaron returned the gesture with a stiff smile before Marina took his arm.

“And this is Penelope, the Duchess of Huxton, and her husband, Rhysand, the Duke of Huxton.” She beamed with pride and gave his arm a gentle squeeze of encouragement.

Reminding himself why he had agreed to the afternoon, Aaron welcomed them after a brief introduction from Marina. “I hope you will all feel welcome here this afternoon.”

“Just this afternoon?” Eleanor whispered under her breath, but quickly looked away with a sheepish smile when she noticed that Aaron had heard.

“I think we should all go inside and have some tea to start things off.” Marina quickly intervened to avoid any kind of awkwardness and proceeded to usher them all up the stairs and into the house.

What have I gotten myself into?

Aaron heaved a sigh and practically dragged himself into the house. Penelope Patterson and her husband seemed quite nice. Rhysand at least seemed to be the quiet brooding type, but Aaron could tell then Eleanor was quite chatty and her husband equally outgoing and sociable.

They had barely entered the house when Marina stopped and turned in her tracks, making a face as if she had forgotten something. “Shoot, I completely forgot about that new dress that I wanted to show the ladies.” She shook her head in a comical

fashion that made Aaron want to roll his eyes.

Penelope looked slightly confused, but Eleanor nodded vigorously and hurried to Marina's side. "How silly of me, I completely forgot to remind you about that, don't you recall that we discussed this, Penelope?" Eleanor raised her eyebrows and widened her eyes.

Aaron almost felt like sighing and rolling his eyes when Penelope caught the hint.

"Oh yes, that dress. How silly of me." She hurried forward and linked her arm through Marina's.

"Will you gentlemen mind excusing us while we head upstairs? We shall call down later when we are done with the dress." Marina shot Aaron a bright smile that tugged at his heart once again.

The men all watched the ladies ascend the stairs before Xander turned to face them. "I do not know about you gentlemen, but I think that the three of us have just borne witness to a plot. If none of us were married, I would begin to fear that we were being set up for a marriage of convenience." He turned to Rhysand with a grin. "I am afraid that you are not my type, Huxton."

Aaron felt more at ease when the Duke of Huxton rolled his eyes.

"As if I would consider an obnoxious fool such as yourself," Rhysand grumbled under his breath.

Bursting out in laughter, Xander turned back to Aaron. "You must excuse the Duke of Huxton, Harper. He has the personality and sense of humor of a wet piece of cheese."

The corner of Aaron's mouth curled into a smile as he relaxed in their presence. "Shall we have a glass of brandy while we wait?"

"That sounds like a marvelous idea." Xander rubbed his hands together eagerly and followed Aaron into the study where he poured them each a glass from the cabinet.

Taking their seats in front of the unlit fire, Aaron watched as Xander lifted his glass to his lips and sipped before swirling the amber liquid. "So, are you going to tell us where you got those scars, or are we to stare at them all afternoon without knowing?"

Rhysand almost choked on his whisky while Aaron instantly stiffened, not knowing how to take such a direct question.

"Xander, you can be a bit of a bastard at times. You must forgive him, Harper. He means well, but he never knows when to take his foot out of his mouth."

"Bloody bastard!" Henry screeched from the adjacent room, making the situation even more awkward as all three men sat in silence.

Shutting his eyes and shaking his head, Aaron sighed. "I must apologize gentlemen; my wife's parrot has a struggle with social etiquette."

"So, you should understand Larsen then." Rhysand raised his eyebrows.

Xander merely smirked and continued to sip his whisky.

Settling down a little more, Aaron realized that it was better to get the question out of the way. "I got the scars in battle saving my brother's life," he simply stated the facts before taking another sip of his whisky.

A moment of understanding seemed to pass between the men as Xander sobered up

considerably. “My apologies, Harper. An act of valor such as yours should never be made fun of or taken for granted.” He seemed genuinely sincere in his apology.

“You are a far greater man than most scum of the ton.” Rhysand raised his glass in salute before chugging the final drops.

A strange feeling of camaraderie that Aaron had not experienced in years, suddenly enveloped his chest. It had been a long time since anyone had looked at him with respect. Perhaps Marina had not been too far off in thinking that making him rejoin society would be a good thing.

Marina’s heart raced a little when she finally went to see where Aaron had gotten to after their guest’s departure. Everything seemed to have gone well, or at least that is what she had seen when she came down to find all three deep in conversation about boxing and war.

“Aaron?” She poked her head around the door of the study and smiled nervously at him.

Looking up from his papers, he met her gaze, making her heart flutter as she entered the room and shut the door behind her.

“You disappeared so quickly after we saw them off, I was worried that something had upset you.” She gently broached the subject.

“I apologize for not waiting. The Duke of Huxton mentioned something about a business venture, and I wanted to check something in my ledgers.” His face seemed relaxed, making her breathe a sigh of relief.

“I take it that things went well?” She walked up to the desk and allowed her eyes to wander over the papers.

Nodding, Aaron allowed the papers he had been holding to flutter to the desk as he examined her face. "I do not think that I would mind seeing them again. It is strange; neither of them seemed to view me as a monster once they knew what had happened."

Her heart suddenly felt light as her lisp broke into a smile. "I am glad you had a good time."

Tilting his head to the side, Aaron continued to search her face, making her slightly nervous as she fidgeted with her dress.

"What is it, Marina? You can ask me anything."

"Do you really mean that?"

"Unless it is a favor that has to do with taking in more animals or me having to quit eating meat for life, then yes."

"Well... I just... Were you in love with the woman you were engaged with?" Marina just blurted the words, hoping that he would not get defensive or closed up again.

He took a moment to gather his thoughts, running his tongue over his lips. "I can't say that I was in love with her. I was certainly taken with her. I know now that it was a youthful error in judgement. But now that I am older, I can see that she never would have made a good wife. Anyone who runs away at the first sign of trouble should never be considered as a good partner. I guess what I am trying to say, is that I never loved or... desired her."

Does this mean...? No, I cannot possibly let my hopes up.

Still, she was relieved to learn that he had never loved the woman he had almost

married in the past. But could he ever love her?

The thought made her pulse race as he stood and closed the distance between them, bringing his face closer to hers as he reached for a loose strand of her hair.

“Aaron?” Her eyes searched his face, making the pit of her stomach knot deliciously with desire when he pressed his body closer to hers.

“You know, there was a moment his afternoon when I really wanted the guests to leave...”

She cocked her head to the side in confusion when the corner of his mouth titled into a smile.

Placing his hand on her hip, he began to bunch up her dress in his fist, keeping his eyes locked on hers.

The fabric moved up her leg as her heart raced with desire.

“I wanted everyone to leave so that I could have you to myself...” he growled under his breath before leaning in pressing his lips against hers.

Shudders of pleasure suddenly overtook her body as his tongue snaked into her mouth, searching the warm depths with eager passion.

His hand slipped beneath her dress and chimes, making its way to her thighs and gently venturing between.

A soft gasp escaped her throat when his fingers reached her folds and expertly sought the tiny nub that brought her pleasure.

Placing her hands behind her back, she braced herself on against the desk as her chest began to rise and fall with every stroke of his fingers. Her thoughts quickly faded into the background of her pleasure when he dropped to his knees and lifted her dress, burying his face between her thighs.

“Will you be a good girl for me and stay still?” He commanded her sternly before flicking his tongue over her folds.

Gasping louder, Marina felt her legs being lifted over his shoulders as she scooted her buttocks onto the desk. Her entire body shivered with pleasure as he rhythmically used his tongue to push her to the edge of oblivion where nothing else mattered.

Aaron’s hands worked their way up her thighs beneath her dress and chemise, gently massaging her flesh and adding to her pleasure.

It did not take long until she was whimpering for release as she leaned back on the desk. “Aaron!” She cried out and cupped her own breasts when her legs began to tremble with pleasure. Every fiber of her being was crying out for release when he gripped her hips, holding her body in place as he doubled his efforts.

She was practically screaming when her body began to writhe, signaling the ecstasy that had reached its peak.

Taking his time, Aaron continued to gently lick her down from the high, before stopping entirely and emerging for breath. The look in his eyes made her heart beat even faster when he leaned down and lifted her dress, gently running his fingers over her folds as she shuddered.

“I cannot help but wonder... Will you come for me again?” The dark look of desire in his eyes almost sent her over the edge once again as he scooted her further back on the desk and opened her thighs, dipping his head once again.

Her breath had barely come back when the sensations of pleasure began to build once again, making her glad that she was now laying on her back. Bursts of pleasure made her whimper when he reached up and cupped her breasts, roughly rolling his palms over her hard nipples through her dress.

Moaning loudly, she feared she would burst when her body once again began to tremble with the onslaught of a second release.

“Aaron, I can’t, this is too much!” She began to move furiously when he moved his hands down her body and held her hips firmly in place, making her yield to his tongue for once again.

“I never said that you could move, Kitten.”

Coming down to her elbows, Marina propped herself up on the desk as her body trembled and shook in a violent manner that had her screaming.

The release came all too quickly when he added two fingers to join his tongue.

Her hips bucked beneath his hands when he suddenly sucked her folds into his mouth, making her fall back on the desk in bliss. “Aaron!” She creamed almost breathlessly as her legs lost all control.

Kissing her gently for a few moments, Aaron made his way up her body and gently lay beside her, not caring if any of the papers were torn or crumpled.

“That was quite something,” she panted for breath, bringing her hands up to cover her eyes.

Running his fingers over her chest, he gently reached for her hand and guided it between her thighs. “We are not done just yet.” He looked into her eyes when she

finally managed to open them.

Marina could feel her heart racing again as she slipped her hand into his breeches and touched the rock-hard girth of his erection. She gently began to move her hand up and down as his eyes shut with pleasure. “I want to please you,” She whispered in his ear, feeling his erection move along with her hand.

“You cannot imagine what you do to me, Marina...”

Aaron’s face contorted with pleasure when she moved down on her knees and took the whole length of him into her mouth. She was timid at first but with his encouragement, Marina became more and more eager to lick and slide it in and out of her mouth. The motions continued for a few moments as she felt his body tensing, signaling the impending release.

He quickly placed his hand on her shoulder to brace himself when his legs shuddered. “Oh!” He collapsed against her body, breathing heavily as she worked him down.

“Did I do that right?” She asked him quietly before kissing him deeply.

Aaron could hardly breath when he returned her kiss. “I think it is safe to say that I never wish to leave this room ever again.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:14 am

Marina glanced at Aaron as they made their way up the grand steps of the Duke and Duchess of Huxton's country manor. His gaze was stark and unreadable, fixed on the doors ahead of them.

The stiffness of his posture almost made Marina regret her decision to force him to accept the invitation. Things had been going well between them ever since he had come to her room. She hoped and prayed that the ball would not create yet another barrier between them.

"It looks like most of the ton has been invited," she cheerfully tried to distract him with conversation as they reached the top of the stairs.

The corner of Aaron's mouth twitched ever so slightly as they entered a crowded entrance hall.

Gazes followed them as lords and ladies turned their heads to whisper to their companions, shooting their venomous judgment in Aaron's direction.

"I think I see Penelope with Eleanor! We should go and make our presence known." Marina gave his arm a gentle squeeze and tried to steer him away from all the judgmental glances.

Aaron's jaw clenched as his body continued to stiffen. "I think our presence is very much known," he grumbled under his breath, barely glancing in her direction.

Taking a deep breath, Marina continued to pull him forward, determined to make a success of the evening. "Penelope, Eleanor, may I finally introduce you to my

husband, the Duke of Harper.” She offered them a bright smile, hoping that they would pick up on her hidden message to make him feel welcome.

Eleanor seemed to be staring him down before finally offering her hand. “It is a pleasure to see you again.” She came back up with a polite smile, causing Marina to breathe a sigh of relief. It was hard to tell at times if Eleanor was going to say something that would certainly make matters worse. She harbored quite a reputation for speaking her mind in the past.

Aaron bowed respectfully. “The pleasure is all mine. I trust that you have been well, since our last meeting. There were a few matters that needed my attention.”

“We have, Your Grace, and the gentlemen are just as eager to speak with you again. Penelope offered her hand in turn, exuding her usual aura of sunshine.

“I shall be glad to speak to them again,” he answered stiffly while forcing a smile. Marina could see that Penelope was about to respond when Eleanor quickly took over the conversation. “If you would like to make yourself a bit more comfortable, our husbands are just over there by the table of refreshments.” She pointed to a long table that had been set up at the back of the ballroom that was visible through the open doors.

Penelope’s eyes flashed mischievously as her lips curled into a smile before being drawn between her teeth.

Aaron simply nodded and headed in the direction that Eleanor had pointed out to him.

“Don’t you dare say anything snarky. I know what you are thinking. I am thinking it as well but let them be.” Eleanor immediately rounded on their friend before offering Marina a reassuring smile.

“What are you talking about?” Marina asked with a frown, not understanding what her friends were carrying on about.

“Nothing at all.” Eleanor corrected quickly with a nervous smile.

“Oh, come off of it, Eleanor. Marina can tell that we are hiding something from her.” Penelope laughed.

Feeling her frustration growing, Marina took a deep breath. “Well, out with it then.” She lifted her chin defiantly in the air, raising her eyebrows at her friends.

Both Penelope and Eleanor stifled a giggle before looking at her.

“It is just that you seem to be glowing quite differently...” Eleanor stated tactfully, drawing her bottom lip between her teeth.

Marina’s frown deepened as she felt even more confused. “I do not understand. Have the two of you been sampling the punch all evening?” She looked expectantly from one to the other.

Penelope seemed to perk up as she rose to the challenge. “What I was going to say to the duke was that it is a pleasure to finally meet the man who has suddenly made our friend... glow!” She used the word again after a moment’s hesitation.

How can they tell?

Marina felt a jolt of shock as she pursed her lips. She had not seen her friends in quite a while, yet they had somehow become privy to her secret.

Eleanor lowered her voice conspiratorially and leaned closer to Marina. “There is no need to look so pale, Marina, dear, Penny and I are married women. We can tell that

you and the duke have... consummated... your marriage. You seem much closer, even by the way you walked in. Married women can tell these things, you know.”

A wave of relief washed over her body as Marina’s shoulders relaxed. “I did not think you would be able to tell, it is a relief, really.”

Coming to her sides, Eleanor and Penelope each hooked an arm through hers as they began to lead her into the crowded ballroom.

“There is nothing to fret over, Eleanor and I are just glad that you have finally experienced the joys of marriage. We will not ask you for any explicit details, as those things must stay between a husband and a wife.” Penelope winked at her.

Marina smiled thankfully, grateful that her friends were discreet despite their teasing. Her smile, however, faded quickly when she spotted Cordelia from across the room.

The lady was pacing back and forth, looking as if she were about to cry as she bit on her nails.

Doing a quick scan of the room, Marina and her friends noted the wave of gossip that seemed to be pulsating through the guests.

“What do you think has happened?” Penelope asked, her eyes never leaving Cordelia for a second.

“I do not know, but I think we had better find out.” Marina lifted her head high and pushed through the throng of whispering lords and ladies.

The three reached Cordelia just in time as a single tear fell down the girl’s cheek.

Penelope rushed forward and guided her to a bench while dabbing her eyes with a

clean handkerchief. “Hush now dear, there is no need to cry. Tell us what has happened.”

Marina stopped in front of them, acting as a shield while Eleanor sidled closer to a group of women, hoping to catch a snippet of their conversation.

Cordelia took a deep breath and sighed. “It is awful, I will never find a match. I am doomed to become a spinster at this rate.” She took another shaky breath before continuing. “I have sent my mother home in a carriage, but not before she was able to make a mockery out of us again.”

Sympathy bloomed in her chest as Marina tilted her head to the side with a sympathetic smile. Things were not easy for Cordelia with the loss of her father, and her mother’s actions never seemed to make matters any better.

“What happened, dearest?” Penelope coaxed her gently, making sure that none of the girl’s tears left stains on her cheeks.

Shutting her eyes, Cordelia shook her head. “She had a bit too much to drink again and offered herself to Lord Kelpton. She said that she would offer him greater pleasure than his wife ever could.”

Marina raised her hands to her lips as her heart broke for her friend. People would certainly not have looked at such a public display of vulgarity with any kind of understanding.

“I tried to keep it quiet, but I think some people may have overheard.” Her shoulders began to shake as tears flowed freely down her cheeks.

“I hate to interrupt, ladies, but I do not think that it was Cordelia’s mother who created the sudden surge of whispers.” Eleanor drew their attention to the side as all

three women looked at her in confusion.

Meeting Marina's gaze, Eleanor nodded toward a scandal sheet that was being passed from hand to hand.

A feeling of dread overtook her as she felt her chest clenching.

Acting quickly, Penelope stood and skillfully intercepted the sheet before it could be passed on. "My apologies, ladies, but I do think that your mothers will thank me. Young debutants should not be reading such nonsense." She gave the group of young girls a stern look as they glared at her before sauntering off.

Giving the girls a moment to saunter away, Penelope dropped her eyes to the paper and gasped, her skin paling as she read.

"What is it?" Marina hurried forward and fumbled for the sheet as Penelope handed it to her.

Her blood ran cold as her eyes scanned the page, making her instantly realize what had caused the commotion.

It has come to the ton's attention that the recent publication requires a certain amount of clarification. It was not, in fact, a monster that terrorized a young woman in a nearby village, but one of the ton's prestigious names.

Although, one could argue that any man, no matter how noble, who terrorizes a young woman in a forest, is a monster. The vile beast has been identified as none other than the beastly Duke of Harper.

The world suddenly faded away as Marina looked up in shock. "Who would say such a thing? It is all a lie!" She stated determinedly before realizing that her friends were

staring behind her.

Turning in confusion, Marina was suddenly confronted with hundreds of eyes that were fixed on her.

Far off, in a distant corner, stood Aaron, his eyes filled with rage as he kept to the shadows.

“You should all be ashamed of yourselves!” She raised her voice for everyone to hear. “The Duke of Harper is not a monster or a beast. He is one of the most kind-hearted men that I know. I am proud to be his wife, and you should all find better things to occupy your time with. I demand to know who wrote such a lie!” Her words fell short when Eleanor suddenly tapped her on the shoulder, bringing her attention back to the sheet.

Looking down with a frown, Marina continued to scan the page, sifting through the paragraphs of heinous descriptions and lies. Reaching the bottom of the page, her heart suddenly stopped beating. There in bold print, stood an unmistakable name at the end of the column.

Sources close to the duke have confirmed that His Grace was not at home during the time of the incident. Mr. Adam Marner was entirely too eager to confirm the information. “This has to be a mistake,” she whispered before looking up at her friends.

How could he do this to his brother?

It was no wonder that everyone believed what they were reading, the article had been signed off by the duke’s brother.

Shock took over when she recalled the breakfast where Adam had requested a

scandal sheet to be brought to him. Had he been playing some kind of game all along?

No. It has to be a mistake. Why would he do this?

She turned back to the room, ignoring the crowd as her eyes searched for her husband, catching a glimpse of his back before he disappeared through the doors.

“Excuse me, I need to go after my husband.” She handed the sheet back to Penelope before lifting the hem of her dress and pushing through the throng.

Women and men gasped as she cleared a path, not caring if she stepped on any feet or breached the borders of propriety.

She waded through the crowd before reaching the doors and bursting into the empty entrance hall. “Aaron, wait!” she called after him, hurrying forward when she saw him taking the steps two at a time.

Aaron did not seem to be paying attention to her as he reached the bottom of the steps and continued toward his carriage.

“Aaron, please, wait! Let’s talk about this!” Heat flushed her face as she hurried to keep up.

Turning without warning, Aaron snapped at her. “No, I am done talking!”. His eyes were filled with rage and hurt, making her heart ache as she stopped and took a step back.

“Aaron, I will understand if you try and explain, I am only trying to help...”

“Help? Is that what you call it? I have been humiliated in front of the entire ton! You

can never leave me well enough alone. My affairs with my brother have nothing to do with you! Nor do I need you to defend me like that.” He flung his arm in the air, gesturing to the house behind him where the music had begun to play again.

Her heart broke into a million pieces when she noted the accusation in his eyes. “I do not understand...”

“No, you do not. You keep trying to turn me into something that I am not, making out as if I am this great hero when, in fact, I am a monster! You have been pushing and pushing me into your world but you know what? I do not want to fit into it!” He raised his voice, advancing on her until he was towering over her.

It took Marina a moment to reflect on his words until she found the strength to straighten. “Well, if that is how you truly feel, Your Grace, then I have happy tidings for you. I am with child. As per our agreement, you never have to set eyes on me again. I will leave for my mother’s house tonight.”

Aaron took a step back as if he had been slapped and stared at her. “Why did you not-”

“This is what you wanted, is it not? An heir to carry your line?” She raised an eyebrow in question despite the trembling that she felt throughout her body.

Swallowing hard, Aaron straightened and let out a breath. “Well, that is good news. My duty as your husband is done. We can commence with the second part of our agreement and live our lives separately, given that it is done discreetly.”

“Discreetly. That is all that matters to you, isn’t it?” Marina shook her head, hoping for a response other than the cold words that had come from his lips.

“Yes, do not pretend that I have ever led you to believe that I wanted anything more.

You are with child, which is all that was required between us.”

His words cut through her chest like a sharp knife as she shut her eyes against the hot sting of tears.

How could this happen? Nothing should have ended like this.

“Now, if you will excuse me, I am sure that your friends will be able to organize a carriage for you. I will have your belongings sent to your mother’s lodgings as soon as possible.”

His voice trailed off as Marina kept her eyes shut. It was almost too painful for her to look at him as she heard his footsteps retreating, followed by the sound of a carriage door and horses' hooves beating the gravel.

Maybe it is better this way...

A single hot tear fell down her cheeks as she folded her arms around her waist, cradling the unborn child who she thought had been created out of love.

How terribly stupid have I been?

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:14 am

Why must I destroy everything that I touch?

Aaron shut his eyes in anger, cursing himself as the carriage neared his country mansion. He had been happy to hear that Marina was pregnant, thrilled in fact, yet the faces of all the guests judging him had suddenly come to mind.

What kind of life would she have if she stayed at his side? What was worse, he could not even begin to fathom the scorn that their child would face. The heir of a monster would be labeled for life.

No.

Marina and his child would be far better off living a life that was separate from him.

The carriage came to a stop in front of the silent mansion, bringing Aaron back to the reason why everything had taken such a drastic turn.

Shoving open the carriage door, Aaron jumped out before the footman could even reach him.

“Where is he?” he demanded angrily, pushing past the startled servants who had gone white in the face.

Without waiting for a reply, he stormed up the steps, taking them two at a time before bursting through the front doors.

“Adam! Where the hell are you? Show your face this instant, you coward!” He saw

red as he stormed through the house, glaring into empty rooms before reaching the parlor.

Adam jumped to his feet, looking at Aaron with a strange look as the scandal sheet dangled from his hand.

“Bloody bastard!” The bird greeted him with a loud squawk.

“You shut that bloody bird up before I have both of you thrown onto the street!” He yelled angrily, glaring at the bird before rounding on Adam, who suddenly jumped behind an armchair, clutching the back until his knuckles turned white.

“Bloody bastard!” The parrot squawked louder and attacked his dish of food before furiously bobbing his head up and down with his wings splayed.

Adam cleared his throat, speaking in a reasonable tone. “I know it seems like a good idea to shout at the bird, but it will only make matters worse.”

Aaron laughed incredulously, feeling as if he could fling his brother through the open window. “Have you suddenly become a bird whisperer? As if you could understand the stupid creature.”

Adam raised his head high, lifting his chin with an air of pride. “As a matter of fact, I have been spending a great deal of time with the bird. He only seems to pick up on cussing, so I would watch my mouth if I were you.” He sniffed importantly.

“What utter bollocks!” Aaron rolled his eyes, feeling his anger sore at his brother’s audacity.

“Bollocks, shit!” Henry repeated on cue.

“I tried to warn you.” Adam rushed forward and placed an old blanket over the cage, silencing the bird who flapped his wings. “I have been trying to get him to say anything other than the vulgarity that he spews, but the bird has an ear for it.”

“Much like the man protecting him.” Aaron narrowed his eyes, spotting the scandal sheet that was still in his brother’s hand.

Ensuring that the blanket was in place, Adam noted Aaron’s gaze and looked from the sheet to his brother. “Now, I know what this looks like. Let me just begin by saying that I was as shocked as you must have been.”

Aaron laughed derisively now. “Do you expect me to believe that it was not you when your name is so clearly mentioned?” He advanced on Adam, making his brother sprint to the other side of the room with all of the furniture between them.

“As a matter of fact, I do expect you to believe me. Out of everything that I have done, have I ever publicly ridiculed you? I want to prove I am better than you, how does this meet those ends?” He eyed the door nervously, looking as if he were about to bolt at a moment’s notice.

Aaron’s anger was quickly replaced by disbelief as he looked at his brother. “When will you stop playing these games, Adam? Life is not one big contest that you can win. Have you looked around lately? Father is dead, who are you trying to impress now that he is not here?” He shook his head in disgust.

“You do not understand, Aaron. You never did!” Adam tried to run out of the room but Aaron blocked his path.

“I do not care to understand anymore. Just stay and fight me like a man, you coward!”

“Aaron, stop it. I do not want to fight you.”

“Then tell me! Tell me once and for all. What are you trying to prove? Who are you trying to impress?”

“You!” Adam’s voice was almost childlike as he turned red in the face.

For the second time that evening, Aaron felt as if he had been doused with a bucket of icy water. “What do you mean?”

“It has always been you, Aaron, I never really cared for Father. He was an utter bastard! Why would I want to impress him?”

“Bastard, bastard!” The bird squawked from beneath his blanket.

Adam looked at the cage with a sigh and shook his head, lowering his voice. “I have never sought our father’s approval; it is yours that matters to me. As a child, I wanted to be just like you, and I tried very hard, despite our father pitting us against one another.”

Running his tongue over his lips, Aaron waited for his brother to continue. In all their years of rivalry, he had never seen Adam speak so openly.

Shaking his head, Adam walked around the settee and slumped into the cushions, allowing the scandal sheet to drift to the floor at his feet. “I know that you took the beatings for me. I tried to grow stronger so that I would be able to ‘let’ you win and take the beatings, but you always seemed to know how to lose.” He let out a snort of derision and shook his head. “Isn’t it funny that the two of us had to compete to be the better loser?”

Aaron came forward and took the seat opposite his brother, sinking into the cushions

with the same tired demeanor. It seemed surreal to him that his brother had known all along and had never uttered a word.

“Do not look so shocked, I am not an idiot. You are five years my senior and I kept on winning as a child. For a while, I resented you for allowing me to win, but when I was old enough, I came to realize the sacrifices you were making. Those sacrifices alone made you stronger than me in every possible way.”

“But why did you never say anything if you knew?” Aaron finally spoke up.

“How could I when you have been hellbent on pushing the world away for the past how many years? At first, it was pride that kept me from speaking to you, but after the battle...” His words trailed off as his eyes wandered over the scar on Aaron’s face.

Lifting his hand, Aaron ran the tips of his fingers over the knotted ropes.

“I wanted to speak to you after the battle, but you had become cold after being humiliated and rejected.” His words were filled with understanding as if he had been waiting for a decade to broach the subject. “You were never the same again, Aaron. The only way I could get you to look at me was challenging you like Father used to do to us. Do you think he would have been proud of the legacy he has left behind? Two strapping young sons that have the emotional intelligence of wet blankets.”

The corner of his mouth hooked into a faint smile, despite the seriousness of the conversation. “Do not call me strapping, I find it very disturbing.” Aaron lowered his hand and met his brother’s gaze.

Allowing his lips to crack into a smile, Adam threw his head back and laughed, shaking his head when he eventually caught his breath. “What are we doing, Aaron? I do not know about you, but I am tired of this bitterness and resentment between us.

Can we not just call it a day and be friends?”

A moment of silence ensued between them as Aaron considered his words. It seemed almost too easy to have a lifelong feud come to an end in a matter of minutes, but was not that what Marina had been encouraging him to do?

The sudden thought made his chest clench as he recalled the hurt look in her eyes.

I hurt her.

He swallowed hard as he reminded himself that pushing her away was the best thing that he could have done for her. A woman as beautiful as Marina did not deserve to be associated with a monster like him.

Adam spoke up again, drawing Aaron from his thoughts. “I know there is a lot that I need to ask your forgiveness for, Aaron, but please believe me when I say that it was not me who placed the article in the scandal sheet. Have you ever known the gossipmongers to provide a source?”

Something suddenly clicked at the back of Aaron’s mind as he chewed over his brother’s words. It was highly unusual for a gossip sheet to provide a source. The piece had been presented in the sheet in the form of an article rather than a tantalizing tidbit.

“Whoever had given the information to the printers, had done so with the intention of creating division between us. Why anyone would want to further the feud, I do not know.” Adam shook his head in disbelief before standing and walking across the room where he poured them each a stiff drink from the cart in the corner of the room.

“I think I know who could have done it.” Aaron accepted the drink, taking a large gulp and allowing the amber liquid to burn the back of his throat.

Following suit, Adam sipped his glass and returned to his seat.

“What do you know of the Baron of Wallace?” Aaron leaned forward, recalling the afternoon tea when the baron had paid him a visit.

“Not much, he is a bit of a greedy cad, but he is known as a smarmy leech. Most of the clubs in London will not allow the man into their establishments.” He sat back on the settee and seemed to relax now that the whisky was beginning to take effect.

“He asked me for money, and I declined his request. I think that may have left a rather bad taste in his crown.” Aaron wondered what the man was capable of if this was his reaction to a simple no.

His chest clenched when he thought of the way Marina had stood up for him, defending his name in front of the entire ton. If the baron’s plan had been to humiliate them both, then he had failed on the account of Marina.

Why did she stand up for me like that?

His brow suddenly creased as he swirled the last few drops of whisky in the bottom of his glass, watching the vortex as if it could give him an answer.

It felt almost impossible to him that someone as fine and beautiful as his wife could have fallen in love with him. Pushing the thought aside and reminding himself that she could not possibly love him, he threw back the last drops of whisky and placed the glass beside him.

“So now what, if we can prove that it was the Baron of Wallace, do we go after him and make him apologize?” Adam asked thoughtfully.

Aaron shook his head with a heavy sigh. “No, we leave things as they are. Marina is

with child and has gone back to her mother. Things worked out as they should, even if the baron had meant to publicly scorn me. Marina and the child are better off with a life far away from me.”

Adam’s brow now creased into a frown as he licked over his lips. “But wouldn’t you want the child to grow up with its father?”

“I may not be a monster like our father was, but I am one in appearance. It is far more loving for a father to take a step back and allow his child to thrive, than let them grow up under the shadow of cruelty.” His chest felt hollow as he said the words, making him wish that things could have been different.

The moment dragged on between them as the men sat in silence, each realizing the gravity of the legacy their father had left them. They may have managed to build a bridge between them, but that did not mean that their father had not left them with invisible scars.

“Whore!”

Both men jumped when Henry VIII suddenly screeched from his cage.

“I am sorry Aaron, but the bird has a mind of its own. I spent all bloody morning trying to teach it how to say ‘pretty bird’ and ‘hello’. The bloody bastard never uttered so much as a word until he overheard me teasing one of your footmen about a brothel. I swear he is doing it on purpose. The bird is malicious.”

“Bloody brothel!” Henry announced quite gleefully.

“You see! He is entirely out of control!” Adam gestured toward the closed cage in exasperation.

Shaking his head, Aaron shut his eyes. “He may as well stay where he is, it is not like we will be expecting much company now that Marina is not here.”

Adam’s face fell as the look of exasperation faded from his eyes. “You know I never meant to hurt her, or you, Aaron. Marina is a good woman, I left her at the altar because... let’s just say that you are a far worthier man than I am.” His voice trailed off on a sad note.

Looking at his younger brother, Aaron felt as if he were seeing him for the very first time. “Why did you decide to jilt her at the altar? There were more reasonable ways to call off the wedding.”

Placing his hands on the armrests of the chair, Adam pushed himself up while avoiding his brother’s gaze. “That is nothing that you need to concern yourself with. My reasons were my own and I stick by them, no matter how selfish they may have been.” He lingered for a second as if he wanted to say something but shook his head instead.

“I will say this, Aaron. Marina is good for you. I have seen a change in you since she came into your life. Do not let her slip through your fingers, no matter how noble you think you are being.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:14 am

She is better off without me...

Aaron stared blankly at the pieces of parchment in front of him on the desk. He had been trying all morning to focus, yet he could not bring himself to think of anything other than Marina and his unborn child.

A week had passed since she had gone back to her mother and felt the need to remind himself every day that she was better off than she was at his side.

“Your Grace, there is a Miss Prudence Wallace to see you.” The butler’s voice interrupted his thoughts as Aaron blinked a few times and looked up. Out of all the people he had thought would come to see him, Marina’s mother included, Aaron had never expected Prudence.

The butler came back in no time at all, emerging from the hallways with a stern-faced Prudence behind him.

The girl seemed to have shot up a few inches since the last time he had seen her, yet that was normal for someone of her age. He bitterly wondered how often he would see his child; even if it was from a distance, the child needed to know who he was, but that did not mean that he intended to see them very often.

“Are you done being stubborn?” Prudence asked him without so much as a ‘How have you been?’ Her little cherubic face somehow seemed more mature as she glared at him from across the room.

“You may leave us.” Aaron dismissed the butler who left and shut the door behind

him.

Prudence rolled her eyes before shaking her head in disapproval. “You can spare me the lecture, Your Grace. I have ventured across London without a chaperone in secret. Considering the fact that you are my brother-in-law, I doubt that my presence in your house can cause much of a scandal.”

Sitting back in his chair, Aaron frowned and looked the girl in the eyes. She seemed to be on a mission, and he was not about to stop her until he knew what it was.

“Before you go ahead and ask any questions such as why I am here. I would like to know why you have abandoned my sister?” The stubbornness in her eyes was all too apparent and she stomped her foot on the carpet and placed her hands on her hips.

Humoring her, Aaron sat forward again and interlaced his fingers in front of him with his elbows on the desk. “And what business is it of yours? You are a child.”

Her green eyes narrowed angrily at him as they flashed with indignation. “I will be fifteen next month. I hardly think that makes me a child; in two more years I will be a debutant.”

Aaron nodded in amusement, enjoying the way she was carrying herself despite her meddling. He briefly hoped that if he was blessed with a daughter, she would have the gumption to stand up to any man like Prudence was doing. “Go on then, state your case.”

Prudence jutted her small chin in the air before continuing. “I may be considered a child in your eyes, Your Grace, but I am old enough to know that my sister is not happy. I have spent the last week lying awake at night while she cries herself to sleep. She is unhappy, despite what she may tell our mother every morning.”

The amusement suddenly left his body as Aaron thought of his wife crying herself to sleep at night. He had wanted a better life for her, not this.

“When will you be coming to collect her? At the risk of sounding too selfish, I would like a good night’s sleep, plus I think she is in love with you.” She stated as a matter of fact.

“And what do you know of such things?” he asked her more seriously, taking note of the way her eyes changed with the question.

“I will say it again, Your Grace, I may be a child, but I know a thing or two about unrequited love. It can make a person sick with longing.” Her voice was softer as she avoided looking at him.

Aaron gave her a moment to compose herself when it looked as if she were about to cry. “And what do you suppose I should do? I know that you like to eavesdrop, you are aware of the way that everyone speaks about me and my scars. Your sister is better off away from me.”

“Is she allowed a say in her happiness?” She looked at him with a serious expression, standing her ground as she refused to be brushed aside.

Rubbing the tips of his fingers against his thumb, Aaron kept his gaze fixed on hers, sizing her up as they challenged one another.

“I know that I have not made the best impression when it comes to you, Your Grace. My little joke with the fish eggs was childish, but when it comes to the happiness of my sister and mother, I do not jest. They are all that I have in this world.” Her bright green eyes filled with tears as she sighed, her shoulders slumping forward.

“Let’s say that I decide to bring your sister back, how do you think she would deal

with the onslaught of scorn and ridicule that will undoubtedly be flung in her direction?”

Cocking her head to the side, Prudence glared at him. “Did her reaction at the ball not mean anything to you, Your Grace? Marina is a strong woman, if you can’t see that, then perhaps you do not deserve her. Heaven alone knows why she loves you, but she does.”

Her words cut deep into his chest, making his heart clench painfully.

Is she right?

Did Marina actually love him while he was far too stubborn to see that he was hurting her? Even if he was trying to protect her, he was failing miserably by the sounds of it.

“If that is not enough to convince you tell help me, you should know that the Baron of Wallace has been harassing us.” She said more defiantly, pulling herself up a few inches.

“How has he been harassing you?” Aaron sat up straight and took more notice. The situation with the baron had been plaguing his mind ever since his conversation with Adam. If the man would go to such devious lengths to get revenge, then there was no telling what he would do in the future.

“He has been coming to our house, demanding money and threatening us with scandal if we do not give it to him. Just this morning, he showed up at our house screaming and shouting about how we owe him for where we are. Believe me when I say that he will not stop at anything. Even if it means hurting us or causing a scandal.” Her eyes shimmered slightly with tears, hinting at the fact that she was scared despite her behavior.

What would the baron do if he did not get his way? Would he resort to harassing them into submission, or something worse?

“And has your mother given him any money?” Aaron asked, intrigued by the turn of events.

Prudence shook her head. “No, we have turned him away, but he will not put up with that for very long. This morning, he said that we would pay with our lives if we kept on refusing him. He... he had a gun with him.” Her eyes were concerned despite the brave front that she was showing him.

With their lives?

Her words made him sit up a little straighter as he wondered if the man had been drinking. Even if he had not been in his right mind, it did not sit well with Aaron that he was willing to make such threats.

“I see,” Aaron answered, feeling as if he understood the feisty young girl and her need to protect her family. She had been pushed to his door out of fear more than anything else.

“Please, Your Grace, I am asking you to help us. You have done so much for my family already, but only you can help us. Marina needs you.” Her voice was pleading as she wrung her hands in front of her.

The door to the study suddenly opened, revealing Adam as they both looked up.

Aaron instantly noticed how the girl began to blush, acting more shyly as she rolled back and forth on the heels of her shoes.

“And what do we have here? You did not tell me that we were expecting such a

lovely young guest.” Adam winked at the girl, making a wave of heat fill her cheeks.

Unrequited love.

Aaron watched the interaction with interest as Prudence suddenly seemed to have swallowed her words. He was not certain how it had come about, but he was certain that Prudence had been referring to Adam.

“Miss Prudence has come to inform us that the Baron of Wallace has been pestering them for money. He has made a very concerning threat.” Aaron decided to spare the girl any more embarrassment as it seemed as if she wished to sidle toward the door.

“Is that so?” Adam’s demeanor instantly dropped as he looked from Prudence to his brother.

“That, and my sister is in love with the duke,” she mumbled under her breath before shifting her gaze away from Adam.

Looking at Aaron, Adam nodded with a look of understanding. “Well, we can’t leave those matters as they are. We will need to act at once, especially if Her Grace is in love with you.” He forced a smile and winked at Prudence who seemed to have lost all of her previous gumption.

Love can make fools of us all.

Aaron took pity on the young girl and decided to put her out of her misery before she melted onto his carpet. “Prudence, would you mind finding the housekeeper, and asking her to bring us some tea? I think there is a lot for the three of us to discuss.”

Nodding eagerly, with obvious pleasure at being included, Prudence skipped from the room in search of tea, pausing for a second in the doorway. “I will hold the fish eggs

this time.” She met Aaron’s gaze with a pleasant smile for the very time and then proceeded to skip down the hall.

“Fish eggs?” Adam asked while keeping his gaze on her.

“It is better not to ask,” Aaron grumbled.

Adam watched her leave with a smirk before turning back to his brother.

“The girl seems to think that she is in love with you.” Aaron watched his brother closely, wondering how it had all come about.

“She will soon learn that seeing me as a hero is far from the truth. She is still young; she will soon grow out of her infatuation. They all do,” Adam grumbled and shook his head.

“Is that why you jilted Marina? Was there another woman who outgrew her infatuation?” Aaron asked the question before he could stop himself. The new-found relationship between him and Adam was still new and he was not quite sure what that entailed.

Adam’s face darkened slightly as he licked over his lips. “That is beside the point. What we need to focus on now is the Baron of Wallace. We need to confront him and put an end to all of his shenanigans.”

“You are right. I did not peg the man as someone who would resort to violence with women, but if Miss Prudence is to be believed we, must act quickly. Apparently, he showed up at their house with a gun this morning.” Aaron pushed his questions aside, thinking of how they would go about confronting the man without making life more difficult for Marina and her family.

Adam raised his eyebrows at the new information but did not venture an opinion. “I think I may have the perfect opportunity for us to confront the old boy.”

“Go on,” Aaron glanced at the open door, ensuring their privacy before continuing.

“It just so happens that there is a hunt to be held in two days. I declined the offer, but I think it would be a good opportunity. Among the names mentioned to me, was that of the Baron of Wallace. If he wants to play with guns, then perhaps we can show him his folly.” He held Aaron’s gaze with a knowing look.

Nodding his understanding, Aaron sat back in his chair. “Is there enough time to accept the invitation? Will they not have finalized their numbers for the party by now?” He went over all the possible hurdles that could face them. Joining a hunting party at the last moment after declining the invitation would certainly seem suspicious unless they knew the right people.

“The lord hosting the little trip is a good friend of mine from our days in the Navy. He owes me a few favors and will not mind me asking.” Adam seemed confident.

“It is settled then. We will join the hunt and confront Baron Wallace. How he will react I cannot say, but something needs to be done.”

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“I think the Baron of Wallace has just arrived.” Aaron fixed the saddle on his horse, tightening the straps.

Aaron was still amazed at how Adam had managed to secure a spot on the hunt, even if it had been at the last minute. His social charms seemed to be something that came with a lot of perks, something that Aaron lacked because of his years of isolation.

A loud commotion made them turn their heads as the baron raged and shouted at one of his men, aiming at kick at the poor man when his gun was not handed to him quickly enough.

“I see him now. I have already asked to be paired up with him.” Adam nodded his acknowledgment while keeping a close eye on the baron who came striding toward them in his tweed hunting suit with a matching hat and brown leather boots.

Reaching the two men, the baron held his head high and looked down his nose at them. “Your Grace, Mr. Marner.” He greeted them both with an heir of disdain and superiority as he held his rifle close to his side.

It was Adam who stepped forward quickly and extended his hand before Aaron could say anything at all. “My Lord, I am so glad that you could join us today.” He shook the baron’s hand with a charming smile that never faltered for a moment.

Baron Wallace seemed uncertain at first but quickly returned the gesture, switching his gun from one hand to the next.

“I know that things have not gone down smoothly between us all in the past, but I

was hoping that this little trip could serve as an offering of peace between us.” Adam offered an explanation before letting go of his hand.

Peering over Adam’s shoulder, the baron glared at Aaron. “I can assure you that I was not at fault for any ‘rifts’ that may have occurred in our ‘family’, as you so eloquently put it, Mr. Marner.” He emphasized the words to make his point while lifting his upper lip in a half kind of snarl.

The way that the baron kept clutching at his gun made Aaron uneasy. Was this how he had shown up at Marina’s mother’s house? It was no wonder that Prudence had been so visibly shaken.

Aaron noticed the look his brother shot at him and held back, resisting the urge to swing at the arrogant coward. Letting go of the saddle, he walked around the horse and offered his hand to the baron. “I think it is time that we all bury the hatchet, no matter who was at fault.”

Baron Wallace eyed him suspiciously before accepting his hand. This mistrust in his eyes was only briefly overshadowed by arrogance.

“There now, I think we can all enjoy a prosperous hunt.” Adam clapped them each on a shoulder before walking back to his chestnut stallion and mounting.

A moment of tension ensued between the two men as Aaron tightened his grip, noting the twitch in the other man’s eyes as he did.

Coward.

“We had better be off before the sun is too high in the sky.” The organizer of the hunt mounted his mare, bringing the standoff to an end as Aaron took a step back.

Viscount Morris nodded to Adam, acknowledging his request to shoot with the baron and his brother before pointing his horse toward the line of trees on the other side of the estate. His pointed mustache twitched slightly in the wind as he urged his horse forward.

Taking a few steps back, Aaron tore his gaze away from the baron long enough to notice the look that his brother was giving him.

Not now.

He read the message clearly enough before placing his foot in the stirrup and pulling himself onto the back of the spotted mare.

Adam urged his horse alongside Aaron's as the baron made his way toward his own horse. Speaking through his teeth, he kept his smile fixed in place as he watched the baron. "You need to keep your emotions in check, Aaron. I know you want me to pummel the man into the ground, as do I, but we have to wait. We will be found wanting if there are any witnesses to our little drama, and Marina will not thank you for that."

Flexing his fingers over the reins, Aaron steadied his horse. "No, I dare say she would not." He saw reason in his brother's words as he thought of Marina. It was because of her that he was about to confront a man who had been harassing her family. No matter how badly he wanted to shame the man, he needed to think of how his actions would affect her.

"Then let us not waste any more time." Adam gave the reins a quick flick and dug his spurs into the horse's flanks before setting off at a trot.

Holding back for a second, Aaron watched his brother following the baron before urging his horse forward.

The pack of hunting dogs set off at alarming speed as they japed and barked, announcing the start of the hunt to all who cared to listen.

Fields and trees passed in a blur as both Aaron and his brother kept close to the baron, clearing a stream and several bushes.

“Fox to the left!” The Viscount called over his shoulder to the rest of the party just as the dogs veered off into the bushes.

Acting quickly, Adam jumped at their chance. “We will take this one!” He veered his horse in the direction of the dogs before anyone else had a chance to protest.

Seeing the hungry look in the baron’s eyes, Aaron kept a close watch on the man as they changed course in the direction of the dogs’ howling.

It wasn’t long before the three men realized that the dogs had chased their prey into a section of the woods that was too thick for them to venture with the horses.

“Blast it all!” The baron screeched in anger, turning red in the face. Yanking the reins of his horse, he pulled the poor creature to an abrupt stop, making the horse snort in protest.

No wonder the bloody bird cannot stop swearing.

Aaron almost laughed at the thought before gently bringing his horse to a stop in the clearing. Looking around, he realized that the rest of the hunting party had left them far behind. Only a faint sound of japing could be heard in the distance when Adam nodded to his brother.

Dismounting in unison, the brother led their horses to the side of the clearing where they could be tethered to an old stump with enough room to graze.

“What the devil are the two of you doing?! We should be rejoining the party! All of the best will be gone if we do not hurry.” The baron was almost out of breath as he yelled at them, the corners of his mouth practically foaming with rage.

“We will have to carry on by foot from here on, My Lord. I do not think you will want to miss this fox if I am not mistaken, her coat was white.” Adam called over his shoulder.

Speaking under his breath, Aaron whispered to his brother as he went to fasten the reins. “A white fox? Don’t you think that is a little too much?”

“The old dunce thinks we can carry on by foot up an embankment, I hardly think he will catch on,” Adam whispered back before reaching for his unloaded gun.

Looking back at the baron, Aaron noted the greed in his eyes his tongue flicked over his cracked lips. He looked almost manic and out of control as he waited for them.

Flinging his fat leg over the saddle, the baron struggled to dismount before landing with a dull thud on the forest floor. “I will ask you boys to let me have this one. Only an experienced hunter such as I am, will be able to catch it.”

Aaron raised an eyebrow before exchanging a look with Adam.

Suppressing a smirk, Adam ventured forward, his gun in hand. “It is as you say, My Lord. We will allow you to lead the way.”

The flattery seemed to work all too well as the baron’s eyes flashed with hunger. “We had better set off then.” He attempted to pass them, but quickly found his path being blocked by Aaron.

“I think we had better let the dogs run her tired before we give chase.” Aaron glared

at the man, towering above him.

“What is the meaning of this?” The baron’s eyes moved frantically between the brothers as he took a step back. The atmosphere in the small clearing seemed to change all too quickly.

“Before we continue, there is a small matter that my brother and I wish to discuss with you,” Adam informed him, placing his rifle against the base of a nearby tree to show that they meant no harm.

Aaron followed suit, yet his tone failed to convey the friendliness that Adam conveyed. “I would like to discuss the little article you posted on my brother’s behalf.”

The baron paled slightly as he backed himself against a tree. “You have no proof that it was me who wrote the article.” His tongue flicked nervously back and forth over his lips.

“You say that it was not you, yet we did not have to explain what we were referring to.” Aaron’s voice dropped to an icy tone.

Panicking, the baron attempted to back up even further but found his path blocked by the solid oak.

Stepping in, Adam attempted to calm the man. “We do not wish to harm you, Lord Wallace, we only want to talk and come to an understanding.”

Searching frantically for a path of escape, the baron realized that he was caged in like an animal. “Yes, it was I who wrote the article, and I will write another if you do not comply with my requests. You should have given me money when I came knocking, but you were too proud and stubborn.” His demeanor instantly changed as he glared

at Aaron.

Losing his temper, Aaron, lunged forward but found himself being held back by Adam.

“Don’t you dare come any closer!” The baron raised his rifle, pointing it directly at Aaron’s chest.

Taking a few steps back, Aaron and Adam both raised their hands.

“We do not wish to fight; all we want to do is come to a reasonable agreement. Lady Wallace and her daughters should not be harassed. Surely, we can come to an agreement among men?” Aaron spoke coolly, keeping an eye on the baron for any kind of opening.

The situation seemed to have escalated beyond their control when the baron loaded his gun, raising it even higher in the air as he shut one eye and aimed. “The only negotiations that will be taking place here, boys, have to do with how much money the two of you will be giving me. You thought yourselves very clever, strategically placing yourselves in my hunting party, but the joke is on you. I never back down. Neither of you has the guts to pull the trigger, but I do.”

Thinking quickly, Aaron tried to buy them some time while he inched closer to the baron. “There is no need for any of this. We can come to an agreement, as long as you leave my wife and her family alone.”

“Your wife? It strikes me as strange that you would so willingly claim her as yours after sending her back to live with her mother. Just the other day I was there while she sobbed in her chambers. You take me for a fool, Your Grace, but perhaps, it was you who was the fool.”

He is trying to distract us.

“You are far better looking than your beast of a brother, Mr. Marner. Perhaps you jilted the young lady at the altar because you did not wish to take responsibility for spoiling her. I would not blame you, as beautiful as she is, I would not wish to take responsibility for her either. If she was loose enough to allow you into her bed before marriage, then perhaps she deserves to be married to a monster.” His eyes flashed maliciously when Aaron clenched his jaw.

“That is a lie!” Aaron felt the rage bubbling up in his chest.

Manic laughter filled the air as the baron raised his gun even further and advanced, driving both of the brothers back. “It does not matter whether you believe me or not, I am sure that the rest of the ton will be more than happy to believe me. Besides, the two of you cannot do anything to me, everyone saw you lure me here into this clearing.”

Aaron began to see red when he realized that there was no reasoning with the man. He would stop at nothing to extort money from them, even if it meant ruining all of their reputations.

“A boar!” Distant shouts reached their ears as the sound of hooves crashing through the underbrush filled the air.

Looking around frantically, the baron licked his lips before pushing past them and running in the direction of the shouts.

“My Lord, I do not think that you should give chase on foot!” Adam tried to reason with him before turning to Aaron. “We have to stop him!” He hissed through his teeth before running to his horse.

Realizing the precarious situation they were in; Aaron followed suit and retrieved the reins before pulling himself into the saddle.

A moment of confusion filled the air, as a loud shriek filled the air, followed by firing guns and shouts.

What has the fool done?

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“Did you hear?!” Prudence came bursting into the room, nearly causing Marina and their mother to drop their tea.

“For heaven’s sake, Prudence. How many times do I have to tell you that young ladies do not run!” Johanna shook her head in exasperation and fixed her dress over her knees.

Stopping in her tracks, Prudence drew her lips into her mouth. “I apologize, Mama, but I am afraid that there is news that cannot wait. I was taking my walk with your maid as you suggested, when I heard the news.”

Marina smiled faintly at her little sister, turning back to the open window where she had been drinking her tea. She had noted the behavior of everyone on the street below, yet she had brushed it off as simple gossip. The town always seemed to buzz with life when anything happened at all.

Pursing her lips, Lady Wallace placed her cup back in its saucer and sighed. “Other than running, how many times have I told you that young ladies ought not to lend their ears to gossip?”

“But someone has died, Mama!” Prudence blurted out, lifting her hands to her mouth when her mother shot her another glare.

The blood in her veins turned to ice as Marina slowly turned from the window and placed her cup on the table beside her. Her very first thought had gone to Aaron. She had not heard from him since that night, yet that did not mean he was dead. She felt her pulse racing as she waited for her sister to continue.

“Well, out with it!” Lady Wallace demanded. “You have already begun; you may as well tell us.”

Her eyes filling with excitement, Prudence began to explain. “There was a hunt this morning, organized by Viscount Morris. Most of the men of the ton were there, including the duke and Mr. Marner!” Her face flushed with color as she motioned with her hands.

Fear gripped her chest as Marina reached out and steadied herself on the stone ledge of the windowsill.

This can’t be happening.

Lady Wallace quickly stood and made her way over to Marina, placing her hands on her daughter’s shoulders for support. “Out with it, child! Can you not see that you have shocked your poor sister? Who died?”

“It was an accident and...”

“Prudence!”

Marina could feel all of the blood draining from her face as she began to feel dizzy.

Prudence seemed to realize what she had done when she suddenly straightened. “Oh, I am sorry, Marina. It is Lord Wallace who died. He gave chase on foot after a wild boar and...”

Their mother hurried forward and gripped Prudence’s shoulders, turning her around as she rushed her from the room. “Now you get upstairs this instant, young lady. I have had quite enough of your antics. Your fanciful imagination will be the death of us all!” She called to her before shutting the door behind her back and leaning against

the wood.

Marina felt as if every breath had left her body as she lumped back into the chair, placing her hands over her abdomen.

“Dearest...” Her mother said softly before coming forward and placing her hand on her shoulder.

“It was not him.” Hot tears fell down her cheeks as she suddenly felt deflated. After all her brave talk of raising the child alone and never wishing to see Aaron again unless it was absolutely necessary, she had almost fainted at fearing he had died.

“My dearest,” Lady Wallace said more firmly and pulled a chair closer, sitting in front of her daughter as she clasped her hands.

“I know what you are about to say, Mama, but I cannot go back to him. I admit that I was overtaken by a moment of fear, but he cast me off. The duke does not love me.” She sniffed back her tears and sat up straighter, struggling to regain control of her breathing.

“I am not so sure about that, but what does concern me, is that I am more than certain you are in love with him.” She lifted her gaze, looking Marina in the eyes.

Am I?

She felt a strange fluttering sensation in the pit of her stomach as she rubbed over her abdomen. Was she in love with him? The thought made her chest clench as she realized the truth. If she was in love with him, then she was doomed to spend the rest of her life loving a man who did not return her affections.

“Dearest,” her mother exclaimed more urgently and gave her hands a gentle squeeze.

“I know Mama, but what am I to do? I told him that I was with child, and he banished me to your house. Even if I confess my love for him, what life will I lead with him? What life will our child lead with him? We are far better off staying with you and Prudence. At least then we will know that we are loved.” Her heart broke into a million pieces as she said the words.

If only he loved me as much as I do.

She thought of how fiercely she had tried to defend him at the ball when that heinous gossip sheet had been circulating. She had given her all, risking public humiliation, but he, in turn, had cast her away.

Sitting back, Lady Wallace sighed. “I will not force you to do what I think you should. You have always been a headstrong lady, Marina. Even more so than I ever was.” Her lips curled into a sad smile that did not reach her eyes.

“Everything will be fine, Mama. I promise the duke is a cold and unfeeling man, but he will not leave us without a penny. He will ensure that we have a comfortable life,” she said confidently, trying to reassure her mother.

Placing her hands on her knees, Lady Wallace sighed. “Not that we will have to worry about that even if he refuses to give you a penny.”

Marina’s brows creased into a frown as she stared at her mother.

“The baron of course. I think the shock was too great for you to consider the implications of his death. Of course, we will have to arrange a funeral and mourning service. Lord knows that the man will not be missed, but it will be expected of us.” She pushed herself up from her knees and made her way over to the tray of tea where she poured them each a fresh cup.

“Mama, can you please stop talking in riddles? My head is already aching from the shock.” Marina lifted her hand and massaged the side of her temple, hoping that the shock and onslaught of emotions would not make her ill. When all was said and done, she still wished to cherish the little life that was growing inside of her.

“Dearest, do you not recall that the only reason the baron had gotten the title along with the inheritance, was because he was the first line before one of your cousins?” Lady Wallace brought over the fresh cup of tea and handed it to her daughter.

Realization dawned on her when her mind finally felt clear enough to think.

Her mother nodded as she looked at her daughter. “Your cousin Alfred is a much kinder soul and even commented occasionally that he would gladly support me and your sister should the title and estate ever pass to him.”

“That does paint quite a different picture.” Marina nodded as she understood her mother’s relief. Their cousin would do what was right by her mother and sister.

“Exactly.” Lady Wallace nodded. “All is right with the world, even if a hateful man had to lose his life to achieve it.” Her shoulders slumped in relief as she sipped her tea. “I guess I was a bit harsh with Prudence, I had better go and fetch her. She will be sulking in her chambers by now.” Her mother was about to stand when Marina beat her to it.

“I will go, Mama, I need to move around a bit. I will check on Prudence, you can stay here and finish your tea.” She offered her mother a reassuring smile before heading toward the door and leaving the parlor.

The world seemed upside down to her as she made her way up the stairs, taking her time to run the tips of her fingers over the railing.

The baron was dead, she was with child, and her mother and sister were set for life. It seemed strange to her that it had only been two months ago that she had walked into the duke's home, demanding satisfaction.

Had satisfaction been achieved?

She paused for a moment at the top of the stairs, running her hand over her abdomen. It would only be a few more weeks before she began to show. She could not even imagine how life would be when her child was born.

Our child.

She reminded herself of the reality of her situation.

The child in her womb belonged to Aaron as much as it belonged to her.

Aaron. The man who did not return her love.

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“Is your plan to build an ark? Is there a flood coming, or are you intending on kidnapping your wife and sailing away if she does not accept your apology?” Adam placed his hands on his hips and stared at the mess of timber scattered across the grass.

Placing his hands on his knees and coming up straight, Aaron dusted his palms together and smirked. “Marina has always wanted a menagerie. I am going to build her one, albeit a small one, but it is something to start. I will go over plans for a bigger one to be built while we are away on honeymoon.”

“And what do you plan on placing inside this small one? A few rabbits?” Adam continued to tease his brother.

“Well, for starters, that bloody bird can fly around freely in this one. I can’t wait for him to be out of my house,” Aaron grumbled.

Henry VIII had taken to cursing whenever Aaron walked past the cage. He had decided to give them a few days to sort out the funeral for the Baron of Wallace before making his grand gesture of love.

Love.

The word felt utterly strange to him, even if he had not said it out loud.

Adam threw his hands up in the air. “In the poor bird’s defense, he is trying his best. This morning, he said ‘whole’ and I am taking that to mean a whole lot of progress.” He finished triumphantly.

Shaking his head in exasperation, Aaron looked at his younger brother with pity. “I think you misheard, Adam. He has taken to calling the butler a ‘whore’. I think he picked it up from your conversations with the footmen.”

Blushing ever so slightly, Adam drew his lips between his teeth, stifling his laughter.

“It is not funny you know. The poor man has served our family for decades. He is a proud man. As you can imagine, he has not taken kindly to being referred to as such. I have had to increase his wages in order for him to stay.”

Adam burst out laughing before sobering up beneath Aaron’s glares. “I admit that I may have crossed a boundary by suggesting some of the more prominent establishments to some of the men, but I would give anything to have seen the look on the old man’s face. He has always been a sour puss.”

Shaking his head out of exasperation, Aaron turned back to the piles of timber. “You can give me a hand out here since you have nothing better to do with your time.” He stepped over the boxes of nails and hammers and gripped the one end of a plank.

Doing as he was asked; Adam joined in and began to help. “Tell me, if I help you build this, am I entitled to half of Marina’s affections?”

“Not unless you want to end up living out here with your beloved bird,” Aaron shot back.

Allowing the corner of his mouth to curl into a smile, Adam went about measuring the parameters of the menagerie.

Taking a moment to watch his brother, Aaron noted the sadness in his expression. “Is something bothering you?” He ventured a question while laying out the planks.

“You are lucky to have Marina. I am glad that the marriage worked out for you, do not bungle it up again when she comes back.” Adam carried on with his task, the sadness still not leaving his eyes.

Pausing for a moment, Aaron cocked his head to the side. “Not that I am complaining, but why did you jilt her at the altar?”

Adam froze with his hands on a log, running his tongue over his lips. “I was going to marry her, but I realized that I could never give her everything that she deserved. I may be a bastard, Aaron but I would not marry a woman I could not love. Call me a fool, but I think marriage should at least be based on fondness.”

Deciding to let things go, Aaron gave his brother some space and went about working on the entrance. He had never thought of his brother as a romantic gentleman, far from it. Adam had always been somewhat of a rake. Yet he had realized that Adam had not frequented the brothers since he had come back home.

“Your Grace, there is a letter for you.”

The brothers looked up to see Marina’s maid holding a silver tray with the letter. Her bright green eyes sought Adam for a moment before focusing on the duke.

Cleaning his hands on an old rag, Aaron came forward and took the letter from the tray, his pulse racing as he undid the wax seal.

To whom it may concern,

The funeral of the late Baron of Wallace shall be held in two days at the London chapel. A private morning service shall be held afterward for the friends and family.

Kind regards, the Wallace family.

A frown creased his brow as Aaron took note of the lack of sentiment. It had been addressed in such a formal manner that he was not even sure if Marina had written it. Or perhaps it meant that she had. The hurt look in her eyes on the night of the ball still haunted him. She had poured out her heart in defense of him, and he in turn had turned her away.

“Is it any news?” Adam interrupted his train of thought.

Placing the letter back on the tray, Aaron turned back to his task, leaving the maid where she was. “It is the notice for the funeral, it will be held in two days.”

Adam nodded, resting his chin on top of the post he had planted.

“Will that be all, Your Grace?” Isolde asked stiffly, making Aaron frown. She had always been a jovial girl, yet her demeanor had changed quite drastically since Marina had left.

“You may bring us some tea in an hour.” He dismissed her with a nod.

Isolde curtsied and turned, making her way back toward the house.

“She seems to be quite distracted since Marina left. I wonder if I should not send her there to be with her mistress.” Aaron watched the maid leave, her bright blonde hair shining in the early morning sun.

Adam’s gaze remained fixed on her back as he answered somewhat distractedly. “I think she will be fine, there is no use in sending her away now. Your wife will be home soon.”

Shrugging in agreement, Aaron fixed his attention on the entranceway that was just beginning to take shape. There were only two days for him and Adam to pull off a

miracle, yet he was determined to have it done by then.

Two days later in London...

Aaron and his brother stood across from Marina with her mother and sister as they stood outside the tiny chapel where the mourning service had been held.

Marina barely glanced at him as she held her younger sister's arm. Even in her black dress, Aaron found her to be the most beautiful woman that he had ever seen in his life.

"Well, I guess there is no use in carrying on with tea and sandwiches at home; it is just the five of us." Lady Wallace said with a sigh. She had barely shed a tear during the service, and Aaron had not blamed her. The way that the baron had treated them, he was lucky that the five of them had even shown up.

"Did you hear from the family solicitor?" Aaron attempted to engage Marina but found his question being answered by her mother.

"We did," Lady Wallace perked up considerably. "Not to be disrespectful to the dead, but things are looking much brighter than they were before. Cousin Alfred has already written to inform us of his intentions. Prudence and I are to be looked after until she marries, and even then, I will have a place for life."

Prudence blushed slightly and almost hid behind her older sister as she glanced at Adam.

"That is good news, Lady Wallace, will you be moving back into the family home? You are of course welcome to keep the house that I gifted, it is yours and Prudence's for life." He added quickly, not wanting to seem as if he were kicking them out.

“I would like to keep the house.” Marina’s head shot up, meeting Aaron’s gaze for the very first time. The hurt that he saw in her eyes tore at his chest.

Allowing his gaze to linger on hers for a moment, Aaron continued. “Of course, you are welcome to keep the house, although I would like it if you would come back home.” He spoke boldly, not caring that the others were there.

A flash of confusion passed over her eyes as Marina’s brow furrowed. “I think I would like to stay here in London, even if my mother and sister move back to our family home.”

The silence that filled the air between them was almost palpable, making Aaron wish he could take her in his arms.

Breaking the uncomfortable silence, Lady Wallace spoke up. “I am sure that there will be plenty of time for all of those arrangements. Shall we all go back to the house for some refreshments?”

Marina tore her eyes away from his face and looked down the street, placing her arm protectively around her sister’s shoulders as if she were a shield between them.

“If you do not mind us taking over your plans, Lady Wallace, Aaron, and I have arranged a little surprise for you all back on the estate. We did anticipate a rather small turnout today and thought you would not mind.” Adam spoke up when the awkward moment between Aaron and Marina continued.

She hates me.

Aaron swallowed hard, refusing to look away from his wife. He needed to show her how wrong he had been in sending her away, even if it meant that he would have to force her to look at him.

Brightening up considerably, Prudence let go of Marina's arm and rushed to her mother's side. "Oh, can we please, Mama?! I would love to have tea with Mr. Marner... I mean the duke and Mr. Marner." She corrected herself quickly, blushing furiously.

"I do not know, dearest. Your sister might be very tired after such a long morning..." Lady Wallace bit the inside of her cheek and looked at Marina for an answer.

The hesitation in her gaze was almost painful as she looked at her younger sister. "I guess it would be all right, but not for the entire afternoon."

A small sense of triumph flooded his chest as hope sprang up. She may have been hesitant, but at least she had not said no.

"Great, shall we split up then? I could join Lady Wallace and Prudence in their carriage while Marina rides with you." Adam clapped his hands together triumphantly.

"No," Marina spoke up quickly, cutting off her sister's squeal of delight. "I think it is best if I stay with Prudence and my mother. The men can ride in one carriage, and the ladies in another." She hurriedly explained when everyone gave her a strange look.

"If you are sure," Adam added unsurely, looking at Aaron.

Swallowing his pride, Aaron forced a smile. "Whatever makes the ladies comfortable, we will follow behind on our carriage."

Lady Wallace curtsied and pulled their youngest daughter toward their carriage.

"But, Mama, I wanted to travel with Mr. Marner," Prudence whined.

“Hush now, you are far too eager for a young lady who is not even out.” Lady Wallace bustled her into the carriage, leaving Aaron and Marina alone with Adam.

“I will wait for you in the carriage.” Adam quickly excused himself and hurried off before Marina could protest.

“I had better...” Marina tried to escape but found herself being held back by Aaron as he gripped her hand. Looking at their hands, she took a deep breath.

“Marina, I know that you do not want to talk to me right now, but please give me a chance to explain. There is so much that I need to say to you.” He willed her to look up at him, feeling his heart break when tears formed in her eyes.

Letting out a shaky breath, Marina composed herself. “I do not wish to keep my mother and sister waiting, Your Grace. There is nothing left for us to discuss. I am keeping my end of the bargain; I suggest that you do yours.” She pulled her hand away from his and headed toward the carriage without looking back.

Watching her leave, Aaron remained rooted to the spot, wondering if he had gone too far at the ball. The woman he had married refused to even look at him.

“That was hard to watch,” Adam said softly after poking his head from the carriage.

“You were not supposed to be watching,” Aaron grumbled and made his way over, climbing into the carriage when a footman opened a door.

“You can’t expect me not to listen when you have gotten me so involved. I helped you build an entire menagerie for goodness' sake!” Adam teased.

Tapping the ceiling in the carriage, Aaron signaled for the footman to start. “It was just a small one, it does not have glass walls as it should.”

“Glass, netting, either way, you owe me. That was fine craftsmanship if ever there was.”

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Marina's breath caught in her chest as she stopped and looked up, making her sister and mother halt at her side.

"What is the matter, dearest? Are you feeling unwell?" Her mother looked at her with a frown.

"No, it is nothing." She shook her head quickly and looked at her feet, trying her best not to cry.

What does all of this mean ?

She took a deep breath, trying to compose herself as feelings of confusion overtook her mind. Was he trying to win her back? She could not understand why he had not come to see her, but suddenly seemed to be eager to have her back home.

"What is that building?" Prudence asked with a frown.

"I am not certain, dear, it looks like a greenhouse of sorts. Or possibly even a tea garden?" Lady Prudence turned to Marina with the question.

The large structure that seemed big enough to house a few horses, loomed in the distance. A strong wooden frame had been covered by netting that seemed to have been taken from a shipyard.

Lifting her head high, Marina began to walk toward the structure where the duke and Adam were waiting. "I do not know, but I would like to get this afternoon over and done with."

Making their way toward the men, the three women reached the structure as Aaron and Adam bowed.

“Welcome, ladies.” Adam greeted them in a friendly tone while Aaron kept his eyes fixed on Marina.

Now that they were closer, Marina could tell that the structure, while still being unfinished, had been crafted with the finest wood. Thick logs made up the corner supports, while thinner logs and planks finished the frame.

“It is not finished yet, but I hope that you will like it,” Aaron spoke directly to Marina, stepping aside as he opened the flap that sealed the entrance.

“Isn’t this exciting, Mama?” Prudence squealed in excitement and rushed in, pulling their mother along with her.

Adam smiled triumphantly and followed suit, as Marina lifted the hem of her black dress and stepped inside. Her breath was once again stilled as she marveled at the interior of the building.

Small bushes had been planted along the perimeter, boasting various berries and even roses. In the left corner, stood a potted Olive tree with branches that reached the high ceiling that presumably was meant to be finished with glass. She could not believe how beautiful it all looked even though it was far from done.

“Like I said, it is not finished, but I hope that you like it,” Aaron whispered behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders.

Heat filtered from his fingers, reaching her skin despite the thick fabric of her dress. Her eyes fluttered shut and her lips parted when he leaned a little closer, breathing on the scent of her hair as his breath tickled her ear.

“Marina, come and see the table!” Prudence interrupted the moment, squealing once again with delight.

Opening her eyes in shock, Marina realized that she had forgotten herself. Hastening forward, she moved away from Aaron without looking back.

“Isn’t it just beautiful?” Her mother asked with a bright smile when Marina made her way to the back of the structure beyond the entryway that had previously hidden things from view.

Marina’s chest began to rise and fall with labored breaths when she spotted the white, wicker table and chairs that were big enough to host them all. A smaller table to the side boasted stands of cakes and small sandwiches along with a pot of tea and cups. She almost felt as if she were going to faint as she made her way over and sat, slumping into her seat with effort.

“Please have a seat everyone.” Aaron gestured for them all to gather around the table before taking a seat opposite Marina.

Adam sat beside Prudence, stiffening slightly when Isolde came in to serve them all tea. She refused to look at Aaron as she greeted Marina with a curtsy before pouring the tea and serving it.

What does all of this mean?

Marina’s heart swelled with confusion as she struggled to understand what the gesture meant. Deep in her heart, she knew why Aaron had done, it. She had told him she wanted it very soon after they had met. Yet he had pushed her away, sent her to live with her mother and sister.

Marina’s mother thanked the maid and took her tea, looking increasingly delighted.

“Come now, Your Grace, you must tell us what this place is and why you built it. It is simply marvelous!”

Looking up, Marina met his gaze, her heart pounding as she waited for the answer.

“It is a menagerie, Lady Wallace. I built it for Marina. She told me that she wanted one for all of her pets.” He held her gaze as the corner of his mouth tugged into a smile.

Gasps of surprise and shock filled the air and even Isolde paused at the news, looking at Marina for her reaction.

“That is quite a grand gesture.” Lady Wallace exclaimed and placed her cup on the table.

“Have you ever heard of anything as romantic as that?” Prudence practically melted in her chair as she gave Adam a dreamy look, sighing heavily as she leaned her chin on her hand.

Everything seemed to happen all at once as Marina struggled to catch her breath.

“It is a grand gesture, a very grand one indeed. True love will always prevail.” Isolde said tearfully, looking from Prudence to Adam before placing the pot back on the table and turning to leave.

Everyone frowned as Adam jumped to his feet, spilling everyone’s tea over the rim of their cups as he bumped the table. Jumping forward, he gripped Isolde’s hand and held her back.

“Isolde wait! This can’t go on for any longer!” Adam yelled, pulling her closer.

Marina looked around the table in confusion, noting the frown on Aaron's face.

"What is going on here?" Aaron asked.

Swallowing hard before tearing his eyes away from her maid, Adam turned to his brother. "There is something that I need to tell you, something that I have been keeping a secret for far too long."

"Adam don't... you can't give everything up for me," Isolde whispered tearfully.

"Adam? She is addressing him by name?" Prudence looked at her mother in confusion.

Sensing that something was about to happen, their mother silenced her and reached for her youngest daughter's hand.

Adam glanced back at Isolde and pulled her to his side before turning back to Aaron. "No, I can't hide it any longer. I do not care who knows. I have been in love with this woman for a very long time."

"But she is a maid!" Prudence jumped to her feet, rushing from the table as she began to sob.

"I will go after her." Lady Wallace stood, gesturing for Marina to stay.

Sitting back in utter exasperation, Marina looked at Isolde who seemed to be pleading with her to understand. The girl's eyes were filled with tears, while her lips trembled.

"Go on," Aaron said calmly, taking Marina off guard.

Clearing his throat, Adam continued. "The reason that I could not marry Marina is

because I have been in love with Isolde. I thought if I married someone else, I could move in with my life, but I soon heard that Isolde would become her maid, I could not bear the thought of seeing her tend to my wife every day when she was the one who truly held my heart. And when Marina invited me to stay, I realized that I would never be able to love another woman for as long as I live.” He turned to Isolde now, taking both of her hands in his.

“Adam, I can’t accept this. You will be a social pariah and lose everything if we are together!” More tears streamed down her cheeks as Isolde’s voice trembled. “You would be a fool to want me. I am not worthy of you, Adam, I am just a maid...”

“Then I will be a fool for the rest of my life, as long as you are by my side.” He brushed her cheek with the back of her knuckles before leaning in for a gentle kiss.

Isolde sighed softly before wrapping her arms around his neck and leaning into the embrace.

Aaron seemed to give them a moment, before clearing his throat. “Is that what you truly want?” he looked at Adam when he finally broke away from the kiss.

Giving Isolde a loving look, he pulled her close to his side with his arm around her waist. “It is, I do not care if you cast me off. I want to marry Isolde.”

Nodding in understanding, Aaron stood. “Then you have my blessing. I do not know why you thought that I would not understand when I have been a social pariah for the past decade. You may marry whomever you choose, and I will not be casting you off.”

Isolde’s face filled with disbelief as she sucked in a sharp breath.

“Did you hear that? We have his blessing!” Adam’s voice was filled with disbelief as

he kissed her again.

Pulling away, Isolde looked him in the eyes. “I can’t believe this is happening. I have dreamed of marrying you for so long, but I never thought for a second that it would come true.” Tears of joy now filled her eyes as she leaned her head against his and shut her eyes.

Lifting his hand to her cheek, Adam spoke softly. “I think we need a moment alone, what do you say?”

Nodding with a laugh of disbelief, Isolde allowed herself to be dragged from the structure.

Marina had almost forgotten about her own troubles as she suddenly recalled why she was there. “I am happy for Adam. I think that Isolde will be good for him,” she spoke softly, not wanting to meet his gaze.

“I am glad, I never suspected a thing, but I can see that he truly loves her.” Aaron smiled at her, making her heart ache with the same confusing questions.

A brief moment of silence passed between them before she stood. “Well, I had better go and see how Prudence is doing. She had her heart set on Adam falling in love with her when she made her debut.”

“Marina please wait, there is something that I need to say to you.” Aaron stood along with her, reaching for her hand.

Pulling back, Marina withdrew her hand. “Aaron, please, I do not wish to do this. Things are well enough as they are.”

“They are not,” he said more forcefully and came around the table.

“Yes, they are!” The well of emotions that had been building in her chest finally exploded.

“Not before you listen to what I have to say.” Coming forward and taking her face in his hands, Aaron gently forced her to look at him. “I love you, Marina. I know that I hurt you, but I am trying to make you see that I was wrong.”

Her eyes widened in shock as she looked at him.

He looked to the side in anger at first before meeting her gaze once again. “I was wrong, as hard as it is for me to say, I was wrong, and I love you. I have loved you with every fiber of my being since that day in the chapel. You have consumed my thoughts day and night, and I can no longer ignore it.”

“But you...” her voice was broken and frail when she felt herself being overcome by emotions.

“No, no buts. I refuse to let you leave until you hear what I have to say. If you do not love me in return, I will let you go, but I am given to believe that you do love me, no matter how little I deserve that love.”

“Aaron I...” Her words trailed off when he shook his head.

“There is more that I must say. Not only do I love you, but I want to spend the rest of my life proving that to you. I built this little menagerie with my bare hands, hoping that you would see just how much I want to build our lives together. I want our children to grow up knowing that they were made out of love. This menagerie may just be a small one, but I will build you thousands more if that is what you want.”

Hot tears flowed down her cheeks as all the pain and resentment she had been feeling, slowed from her body. “Oh, Aaron...” Her words were silenced by a searing kiss as

he dipped his head, devouring her mouth like a man starved.

The kiss lasted for what felt like a lifetime until they drew apart for a breath.

“Will you forgive me?” He whispered while looking into her eyes.

“How could I not when you built me a menagerie with your own hands?” She felt so overcome by emotions that she could barely breathe.

He loves me.

Pulling her back into his arms, Aaron kissed her again before pulling back. “I think everyone else is otherwise occupied right now. Can we please go upstairs and take off that ridiculous black dress? Or do you feel as if there are still things that you need to mourn?” He searched her eyes for an answer.

“I would like that very much.” She smiled for the first time in weeks and allowed herself to be led from the menagerie where she was certain that love would bloom forever.

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Marina allowed herself to be guided into her chambers, feeling the heat of his kisses on the back of her neck. “Aaron, don’t you think that we should wait until the others have left?” She asked him breathlessly and shut her eyes, leaning the back of her head on his shoulder.

Growling in response, he brought his hands up to her chest, cupping her breasts firmly before pulling her back against his chest. “Adam can show them out, I said that I would help you out of this ridiculous dress, and that is exactly what I intend to do.”

A wave of pleasure ran down her spine when he kicked the door shut behind them and squeezed her breasts. Everything else in the world seemed to fade away as his tongue caressed the nape of her neck.

“I have missed you so much Marina, there has not been a moment in the past few weeks where I have not dreamed of touching you again.” He turned her around, looking her in the eyes before drawing her against his body.

His lips engulfed hers, searing his mouth with a fiery kiss when his tongue parted her lips. Every ounce of her resolve melted away as she collapsed into his arms like a puddle of water.

She wanted him, more than she had on the very first night. “Take me, Aaron, I do not want to wait any longer. I want you to make me yours.”

Pulling away slightly as he dipped his head to kiss her neck, Aaron growled. “That is exactly what I intend to do, Kitten, now purr for me...”

Moaning softly, Marina raised her hands, cupping his strong fingers over her breasts as she pressed her buttocks firmly against his groin.

Moving his hands down her sides, Aaron proceeded to move to her back, unbuttoning her dress as he exposed the laces of her corset. "But first, I need to get you out of this ridiculous dress..." He moved his hands over her shoulders, allowing her garments to slip to the floor.

Stepping out of her dress, she stood before him in the fading light that filtered through a gap in the drapes. Her lips parted slightly with a silent moan when his eyes roamed over her figure, taking in the shape of her waist beneath the corset.

Reaching behind her back, she fumbled with the laces for a moment before feeling her breasts spring free. The corset dropped to the ground beside the dress, leaving her free to pull her chemise over her head.

"That is more like it," Aaron growled, coming forward as he immediately dipped his head, taking her hard nipple into his mouth.

Moans of pleasure filled the air when he dropped to his knees, kissing a path down her abdomen. "You do not know how long I have wanted to do this." He flicked his tongue over her hip before kissing his way down to her thighs.

Leaning her head back, she shut her eyes and savored the hot feeling of his tongue dancing over her skin as she continued the path. His head was buried between her thighs before too long as she sighed with release, wanting him to continue as the tip of his tongue found the little nub of pleasure.

"Aaron..." She could not help but bury her fingers in his hair as she pulled him closer, purring in delight as his tongue obliged.

“God, I love when you say that...”

“You like your own name?”

“Only when you say it, Kitten.”

Reaching up, Aaron held her steady as he guided her leg over her shoulder, moving his head from side to side as he set to work.

Her body was trembling with pleasure when she reached behind, gripping the chair of her dresser for support.

His flicked back and forth in rhythmic, slow, motions, building an intensity in her core that threatened to explode.

She was just about ready to scream when he slowed his pace, drawing back after a final kiss. “Why did you stop?” She asked breathlessly, feeling a gush of cool air where his head had been.

Kissing the inside of her thigh, he slowly moved her leg from his shoulder and placed it back on the ground. “I want this moment to last a while longer. Don’t worry. I will allow you to scream once I have had my fill of your purring.” He came up straight, taking her into his arms as he kissed her lips.

The pressure of his arousal pressing against his breeches drove him insane as he lifted her in his arms, gripping her buttocks firmly as he carried her to the bed with her legs wrapped around his waist.

Placing her on the edge and laying her down, he took a step back and looked at her, keeping her gaze as he removed his shirt and stepped from his breeches.

Heat filled her cheeks as her eyes traveled down his body taking in the full extent of his arousal as her pulse raced.

“Now you will moan for me like you have never moaned before,” he commanded her in a low tone as he hovered above her, positioning himself over her.

“I will do whatever you say, Aaron...” Her voice was barely audible above a whisper when he lowered his head and once again took her breast into his mouth. Her stomach knotted deliciously when his tongue swirled over the erect bud. Squirming beneath the onslaught when his fingers sought the patch between her thighs, she whimpered with pleasure.

“Do you remember what it feels like to have me inside of you?” He asked before moving to her other breast and suckling her nipple.

“Yes...” She was barely able to utter the word as he moved his fingers down, dipping one just inside of her.

“Good.” He responded in a deep voice before lowering himself onto her body and removing his fingers.

Marina was caught off guard when he suddenly gripped her waist, pulling her on top of him as he rolled in his back. Her thighs straddled his hips while his arousal pushed against her core.

“Let me show you how to make love.” He held her gaze as he placed his hands on her hips, guiding her motions as he entered her with a single thrust.

Gasping with pleasure, Marina threw her head back, reveling in the sensation of her husband inside of her while her hair fell down her back in a waterfall of gold.

“Yes, good girl... just like that...” he moaned desperately as his hands guided her movements back and forth.

Looking down at him, Marina noted the look of pleasure on his face, urging her on as he shut his eyes. Her movements slowly picked up speed as she too began to whimper and gasp with pleasure.

Their movements became more and more frantic as she rocked back and forth, placing her hands behind her on his thighs for support.

“Marina...” Aaron growled louder this time as his hands left her hips, making their way up her body where they cupped her breasts and teased her nipples.

Moaning quickly turned to panting when the tension in her core began to build, threatening to release at any moment. “Aaron, I think I....” Her voice trailed off as she began to tremble, feeling every muscle in her body tighten in ecstasy.

“Oh, Marina!” Aaron’s body suddenly stiffened, as he finished inside of her, filling her body with intense heat as she spiraled down from the orgasm that wracked her body.

Her scream filled the air as every muscle in her body suddenly jolted, sending waves of pleasure throughout. Collapsing on top of him, she panted for breath while he moved the strands of her hair from her face.

“I so love it when you come for me, Kitten,” he gently whispered against the top of her head.

The hard feeling of his warm muscles beneath her cheek, brought a warm sense of safety to her being. She relaxed completely and allowed him to move her to the side, carefully positioning her body against his.

“Are you happy?” He asked her softly, pressing a gentle kiss against her forehead.

Opening her eyes with a bright smile, Marina looked at him. “Happier than anyone has a right to be.”

His eyes filled with sorrow again, making her heart ache unexpectedly. “I am so sorry, Marina, I thought that I was protecting you, but I did not realize that I was only protecting myself and hurting you in the process. Can you ever forgive me for being so selfish?”

Lifting her hand, she stroked his cheek. “There is nothing to forgive anymore. I too was foolish, thinking that I could stay away from you and be content with things when I knew that my very breath called to you. I may not have said it in my menagerie, but I love you, Aaron. I love you ever so much that I felt as if I would die for the love of you.”

Surprise filled his eyes as Aaron looked at her.

“Do you not believe me?”

He shook his head and buried his face in the nape of her neck. “I am a monster, Marina. How could you love anyone who is as scarred as I am?”

“Because you are my scarred duke. I would not want to have anyone else as my husband. As stubborn, pig-headed, and difficult as you are, you are mine. Scars and all.” She ran the tips of her fingers over his scars, feeling as if her chest would burst with love.

Drawing her closer, Aaron kissed her passionately, searching the inside of her mouth with his warm tongue.

She felt almost breathless when he let her go, allowing her to fall back onto the pillow as he propped himself up beside her on his elbow.

“I thank God every day that you came into my life. I still remember the look of fiery determination in your eyes when you stormed into the room, demanding satisfaction.”

Bubbly laughter escaped her throat, filling the air with brightness. “And I can still recall the look of utter panic in your eyes when you saw all of my animals. I thought for sure that you would turn around and leave!”

“I almost did.” Aron’s laughter mingled with hers for the very first time, making her see him in an entirely different light.

“I am glad that you decided to go through with the arrangement. I could not imagine myself being happier with anyone else. Even if my bird has a foul mouth.”

Rolling his eyes, Aaron tilted his head back before pinching the bridge of his nose between his finger and thumb. “About that bloody bird, I think you should know now that Adam has taught him a few new words.”

“What kind of words?” Marina propped herself up with both of her elbows behind her back.

Sighing heavily, Aaron once again shook his head. “Let’s just say that we should start looking for a new butler. I do not think that ours will be staying on for much longer. You will soon hear the words that I am referring to.”

Frowning for a moment, Marina cocked her head to the side before laughing at her husband’s exasperated expression. “You know, in a strange way, the only legacy that the late Baron of Wallace has left us is Henry’s penchant for bad words. It seems quite poetic considering the fact that he hated all of my animals.”

“I never thought that I would say this, but I think there is at least one thing that the late baron and I had in common.” He raised his eyebrows at her.

Suppressing her laughter, Marina reached out and cupped his cheek, falling back down when he deepened the kiss. Their tongues tangled together, each fighting for dominance until she yielded to him and pulled back with a soft sigh.

“On a serious note, I will start ordering the glass for your little menagerie before will begin plans on the bigger one.” He looked at her with so much love that it felt as if her heart would burst.

“Don’t, you can save the glass for the bigger one, I want that one to stay exactly as it is now. It is exactly like our love, perfect in all of its imperfect ways, and who knows? Perhaps Adam and Isolde would want to get married there soon. It is the sight of their declaration.”

Taking her hand in his, Adam kissed her palm, lingering for a moment before pressing it against his cheek. “Thank you for accepting me and my family exactly as I am. Any other woman would have pulled up her nose at the idea of her brother-in-law marrying her former maid.”

Marina could not help but smile as the warmth of his cheek seeped into her palm. “I want you to remember this feeling when I come home with stray dogs and cats.”

Narrowing his eyes for a moment, Aaron glared at her. “Why do I get the feeling that you were waiting for the right moment to slip that in?”

“Because this has all been an ingenious plan to trap you. I knew from the very moment that I stormed into your drawing room that you would give in to my every whim if I made you fall in love with me.”

Lunging forward, Aaron began to tickle her sides, making her scream with laughter as she as she tried her best to fight him off.

“Are you sure that you want to make me melt to your every whim, Your Grace?” He laughed heartily as she turned red in the face.

“I yield, I yield!” She lost her breath before he finally stopped.

Giving her a moment to regain her composure, Aaron allowed his eyes to wonder over her naked body before settling on her abdomen where the tiniest hint of a bump had begun to form. “Do you think that it is a girl or a boy?”

“What do you want it to be?” She asked him softly, placing her hand over his.

A dreamy look came into his eyes as he slowly moved his hand back and forth. “I would like a boy. A strapping young lad to carry on the family name. I could teach him how to hun... not kill any animals because it means so much to his mother.” He corrected quickly.

Pursing her lips in bemusement, Marina waited for him to continue.

“But then again, having a sweet young girl would be just as big of a blessing, as long as she is just as kind and caring as her mother.” He sighed so deeply that Marina felt like kissing him all over again.

“I think it is fine to wish for both, whatever this baby will be, I know that I want another one with you soon after. And after that one, I want us to try for another. And after that child is born, I think we should only stop when our hair is turning grey.”

“Why stop then?” Aaron teased her and gently tickled her side once again.

“I love you Aaron, my scarred duke.”

“I love you too, my absolutely perfect wife.”

The End?

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:14 am

Four Years Later

“Marina, would you please stop fussing so, my dress is perfect!” Prudence shook her head and smiled at her sister’s reflection in the mirror. The year Prudence had spent at the finishing school had turned her into quite the elegant young lady.

“I will stop fussing when you stop moving around so much!” Marina scolded her before bending over and fixing her hem despite her heavily pregnant belly.

Prudence examined her reflection in the mirror for a moment smiling.

“There, now you look just as perfect as you the young woman that I know you are.” Marina smiled at her, rubbing over her swollen belly as she came up straight.

The champagne color of her silk dress shone in the dim light of the fading sun that filtered through the open drapes. “Thank you for agreeing to come with me this evening. I know it is not proper for a lady so heavily pregnant to be in attendance, but I do appreciate it.”

Smiling back at her, Marina laughed. “When have you ever known this family to do anything that is socially acceptable? I was jilted at the altar and married the brother of the man who jilted me. Adam married a maid, and Mama has gone married an untitled merchant at the ripe old age of sixty! I think that the ton expects the unexpected from us at this point, don’t you? I’m just surprised that have not driven us out by now.”

Prudence rolled her eyes in agreement, despite the urge to laugh before bending over

and picking up her niece who came toddling toward her.

Marina watched as her younger sister picked up her daughter, holding her on her hip. “You know, strangely, she looks more like you than me.” She reached out and stroked the rich brown curls that hung down her daughter’s back.

“It was you that named her after me, it was bound to come back on you at some point.” Prudence kissed her niece’s cheek before placing her back on the ground and watching her toddle away.

“Are you ready to face the firing squad? I know Mama is waiting downstairs. She is quite anxious to see you.”

Turning back to the mirror, Prudence took a deep breath and smiled. “It is now or never. And who knows, perhaps I will meet my prince charming this evening.”

“Is that something that you are looking forward to?” Marina asked her curiously.

“I wanted to study and see the world before I got married. I am eighteen, I have traveled the world, looked under every rock and stone, and painted landscapes until I was blue in the face. I think that my head will explode with all of the knowledge if I lean anymore.”

Closing the distance between them, Marina reached for her hands. “As long as it is what you want. I know how disappointed you were when Adam married Isolde, but you have borne it all so bravely. Aaron and I are willing to fund all of your travels if that is what you wish to do for the rest of your life.”

“I want this,” Prudence responded confidently. “I have seen the way that you, and even Adam have bloomed in your marriage. I want someone to look at me like there is nothing more important in the world.”

“And it will happen, in time. Possibly not this evening, but it will happen.” Marina cupped her cheek.

Raising an eyebrow, Prudence gave her a challenging look. “Do you question my ability to find a husband, dear sister?”

Marina laughed and shook her head. “Not at all, but I do not want you to get your hopes up or get ahead of yourself. This is your debut ball, after all.”

“There is no need to worry about me, Marina, I have seen more of life in the past four years than I care to admit. I will be just fine.”

Biting the inside of her cheek, Marina took a step back, trying her best to let go of the little sister that she’d helped raise. “I know you will, it’s just hard not to see you as that mischievous little girl anymore.”

“I know.” Marina took a deep breath and stepped aside so that her younger sister could descend the stairs and officially become one of the many hopeful young ladies of the ton. It almost felt surreal to her as she watched her leaving the room. So much had happened, yet she wished that she could hold onto some things, even if it was just for a moment or two.

“You took your time in getting here.” Aaron came up behind his wife, making her jump slightly when he spoke in her ear.

“Your Grace! You should not sneak up on me like that! I almost gave birth to our child right here!” Marina grumbled at him, placing her hand over her swollen belly.

Raising an eyebrow, Aaron gave her a questioning look as he narrowed his eyes.

“I am not up to anything before you ask. Prudence has asked me to let her do the rounds with Mama while I rest.” She turned away from him and peered around a pillar to check on things.

“So, you are up to something. And pray tell what it was that made Prudence ask you to rest?” His voice was laden with amusement as he watched her.

“Bold of you to assume that I did anything. I am pregnant after all. She could have just been concerned about my health.” Marina defended herself, briefly glancing at him, before craning her neck to see where her sister and mother were headed.

Between the throng of guests that crowded the ballroom, she could just make out the back of her sister’s head as she curtsied to a handsome young man who seemed far too arrogant for her.

“Your Grace...” Aaron laughed softly and placed his hands on her shoulders.

Feeling irritable at having her plans being thwarted, Marina relented and allowed herself to be led over to a bench. “All right, it was not nothing. A young gentleman may have come to make her acquaintance, and I may have said no and pulled her away before the introduction could be made.” She placed both of her hands on her abdomen for support when Aaron helped her sit.

“Marina, you have to let her go. Prudence is debutant now. She has to find her own way in the world, and your mother is there to guide her. You have our son to worry about now.” Aaron gave her a loving look that eased her irritation.

“I know, I just do not think that Prudence would be happy with a young man who forgot to shave his mustache. She needs a clean-cut young man who will be able to keep up with her intellect, not some foolish young shipper snapper.” She winced slightly when the baby kicked, making her regret her decision to come out. At eight

months pregnant, she was carrying much heavier than she did with Prudence.

Aaron sighed and shook his head before raising an eyebrow again. “You declined an introduction because the young man had a mustache?”

“Do not look at me like that, you were not there. It looked like a lost caterpillar trying to escape.” She pulled a face and gestured with her finger across her upper lip.

Stifling his laughter, Aaron smirked. “No, I was not there, and while your description had left me more than curious to see the young man, I was busy looking for my wife and unborn son.”

Relaxing as she gazed at her husband, Marina felt all of her worries melting away. “You are certain that it is a boy this time, Your Grace?” The happiness in his eyes made her chest flutter despite the fact that they had been married for six years. It did not seem to matter how much time passed, their love never wavered, even for a second.

“I do, and even if it is not, I will be holding you to our little agreement.” His eyes took on a mischievous glint.

“And what agreement was that, Your Grace?” It was Marina’s turn to raise her eyebrow in a question.

Leaning over, Aaron whispered in her ear, making her blush. “Did you forget about the day when I won you back? You promised to try for children with me, no matter how many times it took to build our little army. I am very much looking forward to all of the trying.”

Heat crept up the back of her neck as a fine layer of bumps spread over her skin. It still amazed her how Aaron could make her feel like the most beautiful woman in the

room, even if she was on the brink of giving birth.

“That is the promise that I am talking about.” Aaron leaned back and winked at her, ignoring the rest of the world as he gazed into her eyes.

It still amazed Marina that the two of them could be in a crowded room, and not care about anyone else. Aaron no longer shied away from the public eye, no matter how many strange looks he received because of his scars. In truth, Marina hardly noticed them anymore, all she could see was the man that she had fallen head over heels in love with.

“Do not look now, but I think that your sister may have just met someone to your liking,” Aaron announced after glancing over his shoulder.

“Where?” Marina almost slapped him in the face as she struggled to her feet, eager to see the man whom he had seen.

Aaron grumbled something inaudible under his breath before helping her up and gesturing across the room.

There, among the throng of ladies and gentlemen, stood Prudence, curtsying to a young man who seemed to captivate her every breath.

The gentleman in question was a tall young man of roughly twenty or more. His jet-black hair and ice-blue eyes followed Prudence as they made their way onto the dancefloor.

“Who is that?” Marina hissed, practically pulling Aaron down to her level as she gripped his arm.

“I would like it if you did not injure me in your attempts to spy on your little sister.”

Aaron winced and removed her hand, shaking his head.

“Yes, yes, but who is he? He looks very distinguished.” Marina once again craned her neck as she attempted to get a better look.

The couple took up their stance, staring into each other’s eyes as the music began to play. The young man moved her effortlessly across the floor, seemingly in tune with her every breath as her chest rose and fell.

“I think I have seen him before. He is a distant cousin of the royal family. As far as I know, he has his own title as a duke.” Aaron frowned as he tried to recall all of the details. “Anthony, something or the other, I think his name is.”

“Royalty?” Marina practically collided with his chest as she spun around to face him. “Why do you not pay more attention to gossip? I need to know more if Prudence is to marry into the royal family.” She was almost frantic with giddiness as she turned back to them.

Prudence seemed to be utterly enthralled by the young man as she paid little to no attention to anyone else in the room.

Placing his hands on his wife’s shoulders, Aaron turned her away and steered her back in the direction of the bench. “Distant royalty, it is not like she would be dining with the King and Queen if they got married. Besides, I think it is about time that you had a rest, our son will be here sooner than expected if you do not calm down.”

Feeling a sharp twinge in her belly, Marina stopped and placed her hand on the back of the bench. “I think you are right, you had better take me home and send for the midwife; I may have overexerted myself this evening.”

Aaron paced back and forth in front of the closed chamber doors as he waited impatiently for any news. The silence behind the closed doors was almost too deafening as he hoped and prayed for good news.

“Where is she?” Prudence came rushing forward in her gown, her eyes frantic. “Mama told me the news as soon as I was finished with the dance. She has gone to be with little Prudence while we wait for the news. Is she all right? I will never forgive myself if anything happens to her or the baby.”

Aaron raised his hands to stop her. “The midwife has not been out yet, but she said that is not entirely unusual for a woman to give birth a little earlier when she is carrying as heavily as Marina.

Prudence seemed as if she were about to faint when Marina suddenly screamed.

Aaron stopped pacing and stared at Prudence as all of the blood drained from his face.

Acting quickly, Prudence came to his aid. “Right, it seems as if things are in full swing. We will need a distraction.”

Aaron began to pace again when Marina continued to scream. “Your dance! How was your dance? Marina seemed to think that you were quite taken with the young man.”

Glancing at the door with concern, Prudence chewed the inside of her cheek. “My dance, right, yes. He is a distant cousin of the King, Anthony Hemsworth, the Duke of Pemberley.” She recited the facts as if she practiced them.

Nodding vigorously, Aaron attempted to focus on her words rather than his wife’s screams which were now growing more urgent. “The king, that is wonderful.”

“It is all right, it is not as if I would be dining with the King and Queen if we were to get married.” She answered and began to pace alongside him as they waited.”

“That is what I said.” Aaron glanced at her in surprise, finding it hard to believe that she had been that naughty young girl who had marched into his study and demanded his help. Something that she and her older sister seemed to have in common.

A terribly long moan filled the air before everything suddenly went silent.

Looking at Prudence in shock, Aaron could feel his heart beating in his ears. “Did you hear a cry? I did not hear a cry.” Fear filled his chest.

Prudence was about to open the door when a healthy, and somewhat angry cry of an infant met their ears. “Oh, thank God.” Her shoulders slumped in relief as when Aaron smiled.

“Thank God, indeed,” he was about to knock on the door and ask if he could enter when the door suddenly opened to reveal a young maid.

“I am sorry, Your Grace, but the midwife has asked if you would not mind waiting just a few more moments, something quite unexpected has happened.” She looked past them down the hallway as if she could not believe what she had seen and experienced.

Exchanging a look of concern, Aaron and Prudence both stopped.

“Mother and baby are quite well; it is just that...” Her words trailed off as a second long, and an even louder moan filled the air. “Oh, dear.” Her head disappeared around the door once again before anything more could be explained.

Prudence nodded as if she understood. “Perhaps she is busy delivering the...”

Stopping in his tracks, Aaron shook his head. “Please, no medical descriptions. I do not want to hear what happens behind that door; it is bad enough having to wait without hearing all of the gory details.”

Rolling her eyes, Prudence shook her head. “I will never understand you, men. You spend years fighting in bloody wars and even hunting helpless animals. Yet the second that birth is mentioned, you all become too delicate to listen.”

“I resent that; I have not gone hunting in years. You know that your sister does not approve of killing animals.” Aaron shot back, returning momentarily to his old bickering matches from when Prudence the first was younger. “We do not even eat meat on Wednesdays and Fridays anymore.”

“That is not the point.” She rolled her eyes again but quickly stopped speaking when everything went silent.

Tension filled the air when silence ensued.

“That’s it, I do not care what I see, I am going in now.” Aaron placed his hand on the door but stopped when another small cry filled the air. “I think it is safe to say that our second child has a healthy chest.”

“I do not think that is your second child, Your Grace. That cry sounded a little different to me.” Prudence began to smile as if she knew something that he did not.

Taking a step back when the door opened, Aaron found himself face to face with the old midwife.

“Hasty, I see. Well, Your Grace, you can go on in.” She beamed from ear to ear before disappearing down the hall.

Not wasting any time, Aaron hurried into the room and smiled when he saw his wife smiling down at an infant. “My dearest, I was so worried about you.” His heart melted at the way she beamed down at their child.

“We are just fine, Your Grace, come and meet your son.” Marina lifted her gaze smiling at him.

“Can I come in now as well? I have been waiting almost as long as His Grace has.” Prudence poked her head around the corner before coming into the room.

Not wanting to lose his privilege of being the first to hold his son, Aaron closed the distance between him and the bed, scooping his son up in his arms.

Prudence stopped and glared at him, folding her arms over her chest.

Laughing from the bed, Marina lay back, exhausted from the ordeal. “It is all right. There are enough babies for both of you to hold at the same time.” She gestured to the back of the room.

Turning around at the same time, Prudence and Aaron suddenly noticed the maid at the back of the room who was holding a second bundle.

“I knew it!” Prudence almost screamed as she rushed forward and took the baby from the nurse, cradling it carefully against her chest.

Turning back to his wife in shock, Aaron felt stunned when she smiled at him.

“My apologies, Your Grace, I should have said that you may come and meet our sons. It would seem that the reason I was carrying so heavy was that our practicing has become a little too good.”

Prudence blushed at her sister's words and turned away with the second baby, giving them a moment of privacy.

Beaming with pride despite his disbelief, Aaron lowered himself with the baby onto the bed, perching next to his wife. "I can't believe that the midwife did not tell us."

Marina shook her head, apparently, it is not unheard of to miss it. I am just happy that everything went well. I am quite tired now." She leaned back on the pillows and looked up at him.

"You should rest now, you deserve it, what do you think we should name them? They both seem like strapping young lads with strong chests."

"I think that you can name them. You gave me the honor of naming our daughter. It is only fair."

Feeling as if his heart were about to explode with pride, Aaron looked down at his first-born son. "I think that this one can be Adam since he was the first, and he seems quite mischievous."

"And our other son?" Marina asked him with a pleased smile.

Looking up, Aaron met Prudence's gaze. "Perhaps his aunt should name him. He is, after all, someone that I think will get along with her a lot. Fish eggs, and all things considered."

The End

Chapter 1

“Eleanor Langley, I told you not to wear that corset!” Laura hissed, her long, pointy fingers flying for the waist of her daughter’s green silk dress. “Why, you simply look like a cow! Suck your stomach this instant!”

Her peach-complected cheeks suddenly turning red, Eleanor quickly countered her mother’s touch and swatted her claw-like hands away. There was nothing wrong with her stomach and she knew it well, it was just that her mother had unfortunately caught her slouching in the carriage seat.

“There is nothing wrong with my corset, Mama,” Eleanor quipped back as she smoothed her hands down her ample bosom and small waist. The sunset hue made her honey eyes practically glow with warmth, and she felt radiant in her fashion choices.

“You have gained weight,” her mother fretted, shaking her head hurriedly as she looked over Eleanor. “I told you to start the diet your sister followed! Do not you want to find a handsome husband as she did?”

“Edna and I are not the same people, Mama,” Eleanor replied, feeling her temper spike. Ever since her older sister had gotten married to a baron two years ago, her parents- a self-made successful businessman and a daughter of an Earl, had pressured their daughter to become more like their eldest. Eleanor had disliked being constantly compared to her older sister, and now, after two years of no success in the marriage market, she downright loathed it. Her ability to ignore her parents' constant jabs was waning, and she felt a type of explosion slowly building inside of her.

“Enough, you two,” Victor Langley commanded, glowering at both his wife and daughter with his beady brown eyes. “I do not need to remind you how important tonight is for all of us. It is the first ball of the Season, Eleanor, and you will impress the Ton this evening. Am I understood? Tonight is not just for socializing. There is important work to be done.”

“Yes, Papa,” Eleanor replied, lowering her eyes away from his glare. She knew better than to argue with her father when it came to public expectations.

“Your father is working hard to improve this family’s status, darling,” Laura sneered at Eleanor as she put a consoling hand on her husband’s large chest. “It would do you well to help him this evening by trying your best to impress our peers.”

Eleanor fought the urge to roll her eyes and instead looked out the carriage window. She wanted no part in her father’s social climbing, and unlike him, did not care what a title or fortune would do for their status. She knew people were likely already laughing at them.

As a social climber, Victor Langley had built his business from the ground up and had been infuriated when his money could not buy him the respect of nobility. It was only by marrying her mother that he had somewhat been accepted into the fold of Ton, but even then, they had kept him at the fringes. As the years passed and his social standing remained stagnant, Eleanor watched as her already cold father only grew more calculating.

“Here we are,” Victor announced, fretting with his cravat as the carriage pulled to a stop. Laura tried to help him as she showered him with compliments, but he only snapped at her to stop her chattering and pushed her hands away.

“I mean it, you two,” he growled, taking one more look at his wife and daughter. “Tonight is important. Do not ruin it for me.”

As Victor left the carriage, Laura turned to Eleanor with a glare and looked her up and down one more time.

“I would not dare eat anything this evening if I were you,” her mother hissed, looking disgusted. “So, Lord help me if I catch you...” Laura did not finish her sentence, instead only shaking her head disapprovingly as she gave Eleanor a long stare.

Eleanor let out an exhausted sigh as she was left for a moment in the carriage alone, but before she could muster her strength, she heard her father’s loud, angry voice bellowing from outside.

“What is the meaning of this, boy?”

She instantly felt a clenching in her gut as she heard the footman insist that their family was not invited. It did not take her long to see that her father and mother were garnering quite the looks from the other guests as they argued over their right to attend.

“Do you not know who I am?” Her father bellowed into the footman’s face. “I am the heir of an Earl! My daughter is the new Baroness of Wilten! How dare you refuse me entry!”

“If you could just procure your invitation, my lord...” the footman stammered as he took a step back from Victor’s rotund, encroaching figure, “We could clear this up quickly.”

“Who are you to demand proof from us?” Laura hissed, coming to her husband’s defense.

Oh, not the tale about him being an heir again!

“Mama, please,” Eleanor pled as she caught up to her parents. “Perhaps we should just go.”

“Nonsense, we have every right to be here,” Laura quipped, taking her elbow from her daughter. “The man is just being cocky for the sake of it. Never you worry, your father will take care of it.”

Eleanor groaned inwardly as she watched the embarrassing scene unfold, wondering how on earth her parents ever blamed her for their exile from society. Around them, the crowd of onlookers was continuing to grow, and to her right, Eleanor spotted her dear friend, Cordelia Farrington, and her mother, coming toward her. Relief flooded through her as she saw her friend’s approaching face, and she hurried toward her.

“Eleanor, darling! What is the excitement?” Cordelia whispered through her smile as she took Eleanor’s hands. The two friends squeezed one another’s palms tightly and they leaned in to touch their cheeks to one another. As usual, Eleanor’s friend looked delicately beautiful in her array of pastel blues and purples. Why the lovely young woman preferred to stand against the wall with Eleanor at parties instead of among the fray of gentlemen was beyond her, but Eleanor appreciated her more for it.

“My parents are at it again,” Eleanor whispered back, flicking a worried look over to them. “I am afraid they have once more invited themselves to an event somehow expecting to just be let in. Oh, Cordelia! It is so terribly embarrassing!”

“Oh, dear,” Cordelia whispered, casting a sympathetic look at her friend before both young women looked up to Cordelia’s mother, Lady Lavinia Farrington, Marchioness of Salisbury. As one of the most fashionable and respected ladies of the Ton, a single word from her lips could solve Eleanor’s problems. As usual, the marchioness looked down at her daughter’s friend with a compassionate, pitying look, and moved away from them to go speak with the footman.

Eleanor knew that, like most members of the Ton, Cordelia's mother did not approve of her parents. Luckily for her though, the lady did not allow Eleanor to suffer for her parents' shortcomings. In a mere moment after the marchioness approached the angry Mr. Langley, the shouting had ceased, the crowd dispersed, and the five of them were all walking into the poshly decorated foyer of Newbury Hall. The moment they were inside, Eleanor's parents all but ran toward the ballroom, leaving their daughter behind in order to make their next attempt at social acceptance.

"Thank you for your intervention, Lady Salisbury," Eleanor whispered to Cordelia's mother as they passed through the foyer and into the crowded ballroom.

"Anytime, dear," the beautiful noblewoman whispered back as she squeezed Eleanor's arm. "Now go with my daughter and have a good time. Do not let your parents dampen your spirits."

"Come, Eleanor," Cordelia said excitedly as her mother moved gracefully off toward her friends, "I see Marina by the refreshments table. Let us go meet her."

Starting to feel the stress of the evening begin to melt away, Eleanor smiled as she and Cordelia made their way through the crowd of elegantly dressed socialites and toward their dear friend, Marina. As the three young women came together, they embraced and quickly fell to talking.

"Have you heard the latest gossip?" Marina whispered, picking up a glass of champagne.

"Heard?" Eleanor laughed dryly, picking up her glass. "We experienced it. Thank heavens for your mother, Cordelia, or I would still be outside with my face red as a beet."

Marina gave her a quick, sympathetic look before shaking her head. Eleanor was no

fool and knew that word of what had just unfolded outside had already spread through the entire party.

“Trust me, darling, no one will care about that tonight,” Marina replied quickly. “Not with a certain gentleman’s arrival.”

“Intrigue!” Cordelia hissed excitedly, stepping closer to her two friends. “Do not keep us waiting! What is the news, Marina?”

Though Eleanor was no fan of the Ton’s gossip, even she was curious. It had to be someone quite special for them to blot out the embarrassment that was her parents' entitlement. She took another sip of her champagne and took a quick look around the room, wondering who Marina could be talking about.

“Well,” Marina started, her voice dripping with giddiness, “It seems that the mysterious Duke of Larsen has finally decided to step out of his secluded little kingdom and summer here!”

“The Duke of Larsen?” Cordelia gasped, immediately looking around. “Gosh, my father speaks of him. Says he is an absolute monster in the boardroom. Mama says it is a shame he is so ill-tempered. Supposedly he is quite handsome—”

“Oh, come now,” Marina laughed softly, her lips curling up into a smirk as she wagged her eyebrows, “He cannot be as cold as they say.”

“Cold?” Eleanor mused. “I heard that he is heartless, dangerous even.”

“What is the difference?” Cordelia asked.

According to my books, quite a lot, Eleanor mused silently.

“It does not matter,” Marina interjected dismissively. “What matters is there is excitement. And you know how the Ton is when there is a new eligible bachelor around. I cannot wait to watch all these desperate ladies fall over themselves to get to him.”

“So wicked!” Eleanor laughed.

“I do not care,” Marina retorted, throwing a look around the room. “It will be satisfying to be the ones laughing at them and not the other way around for once.”

Eleanor’s smile diminished a little as she looked away from her friends. It was true. The three of them were often the most teased by their peers for being wallflowers. And, while she did not mind the possibility of spinsterhood, she knew her two friends ached to be wooed by a handsome nobleman as soon as possible.

Cordelia and Eleanor shared a quick glance, then Cordelia nodded toward Marina and pulled her away from the refreshment table.

“Very well, then,” Cordelia encouraged gently, “Let us take a look around, shall we? See what effect this new mystery man has on our adversaries.”

“Let’s hope that is all we spot,” Eleanor murmured under her breath as they walked into the fray.

As she looked around, her eyes searched not for the duke, but for her parents. Neither of them was anywhere to be seen, which worried her greatly. She was not exactly sure what new plan they were up to, but by the way, they had been acting, it could not have been good.

I know they are up to something.

“Jesus and God Almighty, would you look at that one! I think I am in love!” Richard groaned as he gawked at the latest group of ladies that had passed them. Xander rolled his steel grey eyes and then cast them over to his overly excited cousin.

“For heaven’s sake, Cousin,” Xander pleaded, his dark voice laced with an edge, “I am only here to get you out of trouble, not help you get into it. It is bad enough that I had to come all of the way up here to clean up this messy deal you have gotten into. And I have put up with you dragging me to this awful, stuffy thing of a party. But I will not duel for you for taking some young lady’s honor. Keep it in your pants while we are here or I swear I will cut it off the moment you pass out drunk again.”

Some would say that Xander’s low, threatening words to his cousin were a bit too rough but after everything the twenty-five-year-old idiot had put him through, the man was lucky Xander had not done the deed already. Xander despised the hypocrisy and pettiness of the English Ton and wanted nothing to do with it. Now, for the good of the family, he had been forced out of his haven in order to clean up the mess his cousin had made.

“Do not be so cross, Cousin,” Richard pouted, looking annoyingly more like a petulant teenager than a grown man. He raised his tumbler of whiskey- his fourth- to his lips, and added dryly, “You should be happy. You solved the issue, got everyone their money back, and the family’s reputation is once again stellar. As usual, you have saved the day, and tomorrow morning we will be on our way back home.”

Xander bit back the bitter words gnawing at his throat, refusing to let his cousin goad him into a petty fight. Not after finally clearing up his latest near-scandal. He needed to walk away, just for a minute, and cool his temper. He had no doubt that left to his own devices, Richard would cause a new scandal but he could not take it anymore.

“Where are you going?” Richard called after him as he began to walk away.

“I need a refill,” Xander called back, “Try not to get arrested while I am gone.”

Xander did not hear the remark Richard shot back at him nor did he care. Instead, he focused on skirting around the room full of eligible ladies and toward the nearest balcony.

“Your Grace, how pleasant it is to meet you.” A blonde middle-aged woman draped in blue and silver stepped in front of Xander so quickly he nearly ran her over; his feet stopping at the very last second.

“Good evening, my lady,” he nodded curtly, already stepping around her.

“Oh, you must not go yet, Your Grace!” Another woman in plum purple stopped him yet again.

“We must introduce our daughters,” the woman in blue insisted.

“Another time,” Xander quipped back, dodging their advances yet again.

Ever since he and Richard had entered the city, mothers and daughters of the Ton had shown up at every possible decent place to introduce themselves to him. A phenomenon, no doubt, that his grandmother was responsible for. He was quite certain that the moment he had told his grandmother that he would be going to London to solve Richard’s issue, she had picked up her quill and wrote to all of her friends, daughters, and granddaughters, alerting them of their chance.

After a few more close calls and one brief stop to pick up a fresh tumbler of whiskey, Xander finally made his way to the empty balcony, closed the windowed French doors, and took a deep breath of the warm, fresh air. The scent of lilies, lavender, and other blooming buds filled his lungs, reminding him of home, and he felt a little more like himself.

After one more deep breath, Xander ran a hand through his unruly dark hair, straightened his black jacket over his wide, muscular chest, and turned around to lean his backside casually against the rail. As he took a sip of his whiskey, his stormy eyes looked through the plated glass windows of the balcony's French doors and took in the view of the party. As his eyes traveled over the scene, they stopped when he saw a glint of brown curls through the sea of pastels. Her—

“Beautiful evening, Your Grace,” a deep voice said suddenly, alerting Xander that he was not alone. He quickly took his eyes off of the beautiful woman through the window and turned his head to see a rather short, rotund man with dark, receding hair staring at him smugly.

“Do I know you?” Xander asked curtly, looking him up and down.

“Of course, I do not mean outside, do I?” The man asked with a smirk, ignoring his question and nodding toward the window panes.

Realizing how he must have looked while gawking at the brunette, Xander chuckled dryly and shook his head.

“I suppose it is,” he agreed nonchalantly. “I was just out here to get some air; I am sure you need the same. I will leave you to it.”

Xander moved toward the one open door but the man moved in front of him, blocking his path. He raised a cool brow at him as they came eye level with one another. Something was not right about this man.

“Actually, Your Grace, I have come to have a word with you,” the man stated, reaching behind himself to close the other French door, blocking them off from the party, “I have a business deal too good to refuse.”

“I only do business with men I trust and seeing as I do not know you, I certainly do not trust you,” Xander replied, his voice growing cold. He knew when he was being threatened, and he did not handle such things lightly. “Therefore, you and I have nothing to discuss. Now move. Or I will move you.”

“Come now, Your Grace!” The man boasted joyfully as he threw his arms up, “There is no need for such a quarrel! You and I are to be more than just friends, we are to be family!”

“What?” Xander spat as the man began to laugh rather madly. Something was wrong here. This was no business deal, and he knew it.

“Allow me to introduce myself, Your Grace,” the man continued, reaching into his inner jacket pocket to produce a small, leather portfolio. “My name is Victor Langley, and I am about to be your father-in-law.”

Chapter 2

“Wake up, lazy bones!” Edna’s voice boomed through the silence of Eleanor’s slumber.

Eleanor let out a groan as the vivid pictures of last night’s ball vanished from her mind’s eye, and became joltingly aware of her older sister’s movements. Curtains were being flung open as Edna continued to insist that she wake, and accepting that she would not be allowed back to sleep, Eleanor begrudgingly opened her eyes. As she did so, Edna crawled onto her bed and gave her rump a sharp slap, making Eleanor yelp and suddenly sit up on her knees.

“Edna! What are you doing here?” Eleanor snapped, pushing her sister’s pestering hands away from her tangled strands of hair. “Aren’t you and your new husband supposed to be making the next line of Papa’s legacy?”

“You are so wicked when you are grumpy!” Edna exclaimed, teasing her as only a big sister could. Her hands flew out again quickly, laying pinches on Eleanor’s sides, and Eleanor hissed out a curse as she all but flung herself out of bed to get away from her sister’s antics. At this, Edna only laughed.

“And you are such a child,” Eleanor shot back, rolling her eyes as she walked to the washstand. She was not sure why her older sister was there but she did not like it.

“Seriously, what are you doing here?” She insisted, washing her face.

“Mama and Papa begged me to come,” Edna replied, inspecting her nails casually as

she dropped her act of affectionate big sister. “They wrote that they have arranged big plans for you today and that my attendance was absolutely crucial.”

“What are you talking about?” Eleanor asked, taking a step back from Edna. “Mama and Papa have told me nothing.”

Edna laughed as she lifted herself off of the bed and smoothed her expensive teal silk gown down her person.

“Why would they?” Edna asked, “You would only have messed it up if you had known. I will call for your lady’s maid so get down quickly.”

Something was not right. Edna was too gleeful about what she knew. But where would she run to? Where could she hide? Knowing she had no choice but to deal with what was waiting for her downstairs, Eleanor flew into action. Frightened or not, she decided she was not going to let her parents see her as such.

“Ah, here is our little, sleeping pup!” Edna exclaimed in a mocking tone as Eleanor walked into the drawing room. She clapped her hands in excitement above her plate of breakfast, which made their parents laugh.

“Good morning, little dove,” Victor added, looking up at Eleanor gleefully as his big fingers continued to pull the flesh of his morning kippers off of their bones. “We have wonderful news for you today.”

“Sit, Eleanor, sit,” Laura insisted, fluttering her hand toward the seat between her and her husband. “Your father has done something positively amazing for you!”

The sinking feeling Eleanor had felt in her stomach earlier only grew worse as she took her seat, but she kept her chin up high and smiled as prettily at her father as she could.

“Do not keep me in suspense,” she pleaded, trying to cover her dread with an excited tone, “Please, Papa, I am aching to know!”

“You are to be married!” Victor boomed, shooting to his feet in excitement as he triumphantly thumped his fist against the table. As he did so, Laura let out a sound of glee as she clapped her hands, and Edna started to hum as she danced two pieces of toast across her plate.

Whatever warmth Eleanor had been able to retain drained out of her right then.

“What?” She managed to breathe.

“Oh, I am so thrilled for you, darling,” her mother gushed, reaching over to grasp her hand. “Your father has caught you the best husband! You are set for life! Your troubles, our troubles, are officially over!”

“No.” The word came out of Eleanor’s lips before she could stop it, ceasing the celebrations immediately. “I have not chosen anyone,” Eleanor continued, refusing to back down. “My husband will be my choice, just as Edna was allowed to choose hers. That is what you always—”

“You will not be ungrateful for this,” her father bellowed suddenly; his feigned kindness was now gone. “Edna was wise with her time and her choices. It has been two years now and you have failed to do the same.”

“Do not dare be petulant, child,” Laura hissed suddenly, coming to her husband’s defense. “You have no idea the lengths your father has gone to accomplish this arrangement.”

“I will not marry a man I do not know. I will marry for love!” Eleanor shouted suddenly, coming to her feet with a sudden gust of rage. “It is you that seek the social

graces of the Ton, not me,” she continued, “I will not tie myself to a man simply for social or financial gain, I refuse!”

“You have no choice!” Victor boomed, rising to his feet so fast that his rotund belly pushed over the nearby coffee pot. Eleanor’s eyes moved to the black stain spreading across the white lace tablecloth and felt as if it was her own soul being blotted out by darkness.

The strength in her legs waned, her knees began to tremble, and as her father’s wrath filled the room, Eleanor felt her body lower back down into her chair. Tears pricked at her honey eyes as Eleanor looked down at her plate; her head hanging above it as if she were waiting for the guillotine.

A few more tense, silent moments passed before Victor’s ruddy complexion paled and he slowly lowered himself back down into his cushioned chair. With two meaty fingers, he beckoned a servant forth, and the family sat in further silence as the dirty tablecloth was quickly but carefully removed and taken away.

“This was an ugly morning,” Victor announced, his deep tone calmer, but still ringing with annoyance. “Let us not all it continue into the evening. Eleanor, look at me.”

Eleanor fought the urge to spit in her papa’s direction and forced her head to turn toward him. What gross, awful creature had her father chained her to for his social gain?

“A recent turn of events has made it possible to accept an arrangement with the Duke of Larsen,” he stated, his tone pragmatic and unemotional.

This brought up Eleanor short, and she straightened her posture a bit. The Duke of Larsen? Rumors about the heartless man flashed in her mind. How could be possible that such a man would want to marry her?

“I do understand that you had hoped to marry for something...” Her father continued, fluttering his fingers in the air- “That was more of a fairytale, but life is not such. Not for us. The man is extremely wealthy, well-respected, and powerful. He will make a formidable husband for you.”

“Not to mention devilishly handsome,” Edna jabbed in, resuming her earlier antics, “He has been the man to catch the last ten Seasons! And you have him, little sister.”

Eleanor caught her sister’s smug smile droop a little as she picked up her teacup and added, “Be grateful. Some of us were not that lucky.”

“I suppose I am just confused,” Eleanor admitted, still trying to grasp the dizzying array of events. “I do not know the duke,” she continued gently, “the duke does not know me. Why would he want to marry me if he does not know me?”

“You must not worry yourself about such things, dear,” Laura insisted, touching her fingertips to her perfectly styled hair. “Arranged marriages are a successful, longstanding tradition among our people, and you should simply thank your father for accomplishing such a match.”

“Indeed,” her father agreed, his voice finally settling down into its usual timber. He stood from the table again, this time more elegantly, and gave a single nod toward his family.

“Now,” he continued, his gaze focusing in on Eleanor, “I have an appointment with your betrothed at White’s in an hour, then he shall be joining us for dinner. I expect that by his arrival, your temperament will be much improved.”

Eleanor felt herself nod numbly.

“Good,” he stated, calmer now. “Now if you will excuse me. I must go change my

coat.”

Just as Eleanor’s father reached the doorway to the drawing room, Bernard, the house butler, appeared, almost running into his Master.

“A thousand apologies, Sir,” the balding servant stammered quickly, working as best as he could to get his wiry thin body to help stabilize Victor’s much larger one.

“Blast, you fool!” Victor boomed, staggering back into the wall. “What in heaven's name are you doing? You know I have an important meeting to get to and you are knocking me off my feet!”

“Mr. Langley,” Xander greeted sharply, stepping out of the shadows of the hallway. The portly man responsible for his ruin stopped shouting at the butler immediately, and his big eyes grew bigger as he realized his plan had been pushed slightly awry.

“I am so sorry , Sir, ” Bernard apologized again, his voice pleading, “But that is why I have come. It appears that your appointment has come to you.”

“Your Grace,” Victor stated with agitation, his hands quickly working to adjust his mussed clothes and hair. “What are you doing here? I said we were to meet at White’s to discuss your wedding details, and then you were to come here for dinner.”

After a little digging, Xander discovered that Victor Langley was nothing but an avid social climber whose life goal was to somehow be born again into nobility, and Xander was simply a pawn in making that happen. So, when Xander found out just how many times the man had been denied membership at White’s- their intended meeting place, he could not help but pull access away just a little bit longer.

“I know,” Xander stated, smirking as he entered the room. As he did so, he heard the quiet gasps from the two ladies at the table, and he glanced toward them. His mind

quickly scanned through the information he had been given, and identified them as Laura Langley and Lady Edna Wilten; the wife and eldest daughter of his newest nemesis.

Unlike his future bride, whose entire person sparkled like amber among ash, they had no startling features. Their straw blonde hair, dark brown eyes, and small upturned noses were like the countless others of the Ton. Ordinary wrapped in tulle. Xander drew his eyes back to Victor and strolled further into the room; his gait casual and confident.

“That was the original arrangement, yes,” Xander replied matter-of-factly, walking past Victor and toward the bar cart beyond him, “But my days, to both of our dismay- are busier than most would like. I am afraid I simply cannot afford to give our business an entire day.”

A wicked glee filled Xander as Victor began to stammer and object, but instead of paying the bastard any mind, he went about deliberating on his drink of choice before pouring himself an ample glass full- not for his temperament, but for his pain.

Though he was walking with confidence, his body was screaming at him for the pain he had put it through the last two nights. Needing an outlet, he had spent his time in the ring, boxing. The release of aggression had been glorious and the wins many, but he was now covered in bruises and ached beyond description. He drank the glass in one swallow, giving the strong brew a chance to delightfully numb his aching wounds, and then caught Victor off from whatever it was he had been rambling about.

“You see, the thing is, Langley,” Xander pushed, “You have no choice in this, as I do not. So, we have this moment, and the two-” he paused, checking his pocket watch, “one hour and fifty-two minutes, to conclude this business. Shall we proceed, or scrap the contract altogether?”

Pleasure filled Xander as he saw his adversary finally wilt beneath his dominance. Did this man really think he would make it easy on him? Unable to help himself, his eyes flicked back toward his intended bride. Her full, rosy lips held a smirk of satisfaction; as if she was enjoying this scene immensely.

Interesting.

“Very well, Your Grace,” Victor stated, pulling Xander from his brief distraction.

The defeated tone in Victor’s voice suddenly sealed the second crack in his armor, and Xander reigned in his curiosity. After giving him a nod, Victor led Xander over to the table, where the three ladies had risen from their chairs. He introduced his wife first; whom he had also done some research on.

There was nothing special or particularly ruthless about her- at least, compared to what most mothers would do to arrange a high-profile marriage for their daughters- but it was reported that she was vainer than most, and spent quite a lot of Victor’s new, mediocre-size fortune on crates of beauty creams, cosmetics, dresses, shoes, jewelry, and wigs from Paris.

“And this is my youngest daughter and your betrothed, Your Grace,” Victor stated, finally arriving at the woman he would be forced to call wife. “Miss Eleanor Langley. Eleanor, come meet your soon-to-be-husband.”

Unlike her mother and older sister, Eleanor did not smile or bat her eyelashes at Xander as she offered her hand to him. Instead, she raised her vivid honey eyes directly to his, her gaze once more shooting to the very core of him.

“It is a pleasure to formally meet you, Your Grace,” she responded. The sheer coldness in her tone shocked him. It was the polar opposite of the warmth she radiated, and for the first time since he had been blackmailed, Xander wondered how

she felt about the arrangement.

Shaking off his moment of surprise- a rarity for him, Xander accepted Eleanor's hand. The moment he did, a strong pulse of electricity jolted through him, spreading from his fingertips and going directly toward his inner armor.

Xander had been with women- many in fact, and quite enjoyed their touch and the way they allowed him to touch them. But never at any time had his hand come in contact with a woman- her mere hand, no less- and felt such a strong current. Unable to take the sensation or the confusion, Xander pulled his hand away swiftly and took a step backward. One of Eleanor's delicate brows perked up at him as he did so, but he refused to meet her eyes again.

"Right, then," he stated, walking toward the seat furthest away from all of them, "let's get this meeting started. We have a wedding to plan."

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:14 am

“ So, you see that is why it is necessary to have the reception at the Royal Greenhouse proceeding the ceremony at Holy Trinity,” Victor drolled on, “It is so that we may walk our wedding procession through the street, announcing our good fortune! As I stated earlier, our family, me in particular, has been known for our drive to-”

“Yes, that is all very interesting,” Xander stated, rising to his feet, “but I must excuse myself for a moment.”

After being bombarded with inappropriate questions regarding his lineage and state of wealth, Xander had then been forced to listen to forty-five minutes of the pompous man’s boorish voice as he listed off an equal number of self-accomplishments and demands. Between wedding details and details of either Victor's, his wife’s, or his daughters’ accomplishments, Xander’s gaze had wandered to Eleanor.

She had not even spared a glance toward him since he had pulled his hand away from hers, and had said absolutely nothing; despite the many moments her mother and sister had interjected to add some boring detail about their lives. Somewhere between struggling to pay attention to the plans of his future wedding and wondering what in the bloody hell his future wife was thinking, Xander had started devising a plan.

“I beg your pardon?” Victor asked, looking annoyed at the interruption. “This is a very important discussion, Your Grace. With a man of your stature, it is highly vital that we—”

“I am sure you are correct, but nature waits for no man’s politeness,” Xander stated bluntly.

A stifled laugh escaped from Eleanor's lips as Victor's face turned red with rage and began to nod his head so violently that his double chin began to jiggle.

"Very well," he said gruffly, "I will have a servant show you-"

"No need," Xander shot back, already walking through the doorway, "I will find it myself."

The moment he was outside and saw no one was going to follow him, Xander made his way stealthily down the hall, opening each door delicately until he found the room he was looking for: Victor's study. Stealing inside, he shut the door silently and quickly went to work looking for the evidence the man had on him.

Victor had presented the proof the night of the ball, so Xander knew they were as authentic as the position he had been blackmailed into. However, if he could find the proof and set it aflame, he could be free of this forced marriage and from London society altogether.

"Now where the hell is it?"

Xander looked through cabinets and drawers, opened every portfolio, every keepsake box, and every hollowed-out book he could find, but all he found were rolls of bank notes, old jewelry, and a few debt notes that looked annoying but not blackmail-worthy. Disgusted with his lack of results, Xander grabbed a cigar from one of the many expensive boxes he had found, lit it, and flopped forcefully into the chair behind Victor's desk. He had underestimated his opponent, and it annoyed him greatly.

He took a puff from the cigar, letting the smoke linger for a moment in his mouth, and then exhaled slowly. He had to stay calm and find the proof. If it was not here, that only meant it had to be somewhere else in the house. Xander did a quick mental estimation of how many rooms the large manor had and came up with at least twelve

if the downstairs layout was any indication. Just as he was wondering if he had enough time to steal upstairs and try to find the right one, Xander heard the door open.

Thinking it was Victor, Xander rose to his feet, feeling the muscles of his aching body tense for the incoming argument about to come his way. He clenched his fists and grit his teeth, ready to drop the act of politeness and downright threaten the man with violence, and then saw Eleanor's brown hair appear around the slightly opened door. Xander felt the tension in his body dissipate as the young woman stepped into his view, and then quietly closed the door behind her.

Despite the startling difference in appearance Eleanor had with the rest of her family members, Xander had still been expecting her to behave like them. And yet, she had not spoken a word; had not shown an inkling of excitement like the others. Finally, he could take her silence no longer.

"What are we to do about this?" He asked her bluntly, settling back down into the chair.

At this, Eleanor's plump lips pulled into a smirk, and she too took a seat.

"About this marriage or about you being in my father's study, smoking his cigars?" She asked, her tone dripping with sarcasm. It surprised Xander greatly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"What part did you not comprehend, Your Grace?" She asked placatingly, her brows drawing down in mock concern, "Are you asking what we are going to do about this obviously forced marriage or are you asking what we are going to do about your dreadfully poor manners?"

Victor's temper spiked as his grey eyes darkened, and he took another drag from his

cigar. It was not often he was talked to this way. In fact, he had never been spoken to so brazenly. He took his time studying Eleanor's eyes and saw a fury that very well may have matched his own.

Very well, he thought devilishly, readying himself to argue, let us play this game.

"My poor manners?" He asked, his tone void of emotion.

"Yes, your poor manners," Eleanor confirmed quickly, "It is not just you that wants this meeting over with. I too would rather be doing absolutely anything else, and the longer you dally here, the further we are from that accomplishment!"

Xander could not help the sudden grin that broke out across his face as Eleanor lectured him.

"And what of your manners?" He asked, stopping her before she could berate him further. "Is that how you choose to speak to your future husband? Careful, my lady. Such talk could set you up for quite the punishment."

Xander felt a stir in his groin as Eleanor's eyes suddenly widened and her soft peach cheeks turned a crimson red. She lifted her nose at him as her lips nearly curled into a sneer, and he nearly chuckled.

"Perhaps I was mistaken," Eleanor hissed, rising to her feet. "You seem as horrid as my father."

She put her hands on the desk and leaned until their faces were only a forearm's length apart, and as she did so, a brown curl escaped its pin, falling over her left eye in a devilishly seductive way. Upon seeing it, Xander suddenly felt his breath hitch, and the urge to reach out and touch the silky tendril was almost overwhelming. It was only the pure rage in her honey eyes that stopped him from doing so.

“Know this, husband-to-be,” she whispered, her tone as heated as her eyes, “I will take punishment from no man. No matter what his station over me may be. I will accept your hand if I must, but I will hurl myself from a cliff before I allow you to think I am a meek, mewling creature.”

Afraid of what she might say next, Eleanor pushed herself away from the desk and walked quickly to the study door. Her entire body was vibrating with fury and if she did not leave soon, she was going to burst into tears by the pure frustration of it all.

Her fingertips were just about to touch the brass knob when suddenly, she felt a warm grip around her waist, and she was whirled around in a flurry of motion. She could not help the gasp that escaped her throat as Xander’s grey eyes locked in her eyes the same way his hands locked on her wrists. Desire spiked through her but that did not stop her from throwing him a hateful gaze and pushing against his weighted grip- no matter how little use it was.

“Calm yourself, Honey,” Xander warned, his voice low, and thick with caution as his eyes burned into hers. “And I will give you one chance to apologize for such a horrid accusation. I am nothing like your father.”

Defiance reared up strong in Eleanor and she raised her chin higher. Pinned to the door or not, she was not about to allow him to frighten her. Despite the strange effect it was having on her, she kept her eyes on his and kept her gaze level and unflustered.

“Prove it is not true,” she countered coyly, flexing her fingers above his grip on her palms- another small act of defiance. “If you want your apology so badly.”

“You prove you are not like him first,” Xander answered challengingly, suspicion suddenly rising in his eyes. “You are his daughter after all, and like most ladies, I assume you want a rich husband. How do I know you were not complicit in your father’s schemes?”

She had no idea Xander had loosened his grip on her hands until one of them suddenly shot out, striking the man sharply across the face. Panic rose in her as she realized what she had just done, but something had snapped in her, and she raised her hand to strike him again. This time though Xander expected it, and caught her wrist easily before pinning it to the wall again.

“Do not do that again,” He warned her, the calmness in his voice scaring her more than the earlier anger. “I am finding this amusing but I do have my limits.”

Upon saying this, Xander released her wrists and took a step backward, allowing her to decide what to do next. Eleanor thought of going to her parents, of telling them what had just happened, but what good would that do? She would only be berated and punished; most likely even locked in her room until her wedding day. Instead, she chose to take a calming breath and gather herself.

“I am simply confused,” she said at last, finally bringing her eyes back to his. The now familiar flutter in her stomach returned, annoying her.

“About what?” He asked calmly. If he was still furious about the slap, he was not showing it.

“I am aware of your reputation, Your Grace,” she stated, trying to choose her words as respectfully as possible, “It is no secret that you relish your freedom and do not seek marriage.”

Xander nodded at this, and as he did so, Eleanor was sure she saw the briefest flash of an ugly purple bruise below the collar of his buttoned shirt.

“It is true,” he agreed, walking back to his cigar. “But it was always unavoidable. As the heir to my title, I knew it would happen eventually.”

“So why me, then?” Eleanor asked, following him back to the desk. “There are plenty

of other ladies to choose from . Many much better mannered and better titled than me, and who actually want you.”

The sudden bark of laughter that came from Xander as she said this last bit surprised her, making her pause.

“Oh, so you do not want me?” He asked, amusement written on his handsome face. “Truly?”

She gave him an exhausted look. The man obviously enjoyed bantering and she was growing weary of keeping track of how many directions the emotions of the conversation could go.

“Do not act like you want me, either,” she sighed. They were getting nowhere, and her parents were no doubt on the verge of coming to look for them by now.

“What if I did?” Xander asked, leaning forward in his chair, grinning from ear to ear. “What if I did want you?”

The question suddenly had a shot of embarrassing joy going through her, but she knew better.

“You play too much, Your Grace,” Eleanor huffed, turning away from him. As she did so she heard the clatter of objects being knocked over and then felt Xander’s hand once more close around her wrist.

She turned back to ask him to let go, but she was met with the most intriguing look. He was smiling, obviously amused, but there was also an earnest curiosity. Could he possibly be enjoying this conversation? Still holding onto her wrist, Xander put the cigar down and walked around the desk until he was standing just a finger’s length away from her.

“You do not know me, Your Grace,” Eleanor managed to whisper, feeling suddenly caught by his heated gaze.

“And you do not know me,” Xander replied, his tone matching hers, “And yet, we find ourselves in this situation.”

Strange but delicious shivers overtook Eleanor’s body as Xander’s hand slowly came up to her face. As the pad of his thumb gently caressed the bottom of her lip, she felt her heart begin to pound rapidly and felt the room around her spin. His touch lingered there only a moment before it made its way down her chin, and as his thumb swept over the delicate flesh of its underside, the rest of his hand formed a circle around her throat.

Despite knowing she should be frightened, Eleanor felt her excitement grow as his fingers slowly caressed and gently tightened around her neck. She knew she should speak. To tell him to move away, but the words would not form.

She looked at him imploringly, as if he could somehow help. But as he moved closer, and his chiseled lips grazed gently over hers, Eleanor felt a hot, tightening sensation in her lower belly, and she realized it was he she needed help with.

“You are quite the interesting creature. You know that?” Xander’s barely whispered voice came from the depths of his chest, the tone of it making Eleanor’s legs want to buckle.

“And you are quite the devilish one.” She heard the words, and understood that they came from her- but they did not sound like her. She had practically purred the words, her voice dipping into a seductive tone of which she did not know she possessed.

A rumbled growl was all Eleanor heard before she felt Xander’s free arm wrap tightly around her waist, his lips taking full possession of hers. Need exploded through her entire body and hummed in her most intimate of places as she tasted his lips and felt

his raw desire and passion on Xander's lips, but instead of giving in, Eleanor pressed both hands against the duke's hardened chest and stepped back.

Desire had nearly turned Xander's grey eyes black, and the very sight of him, looking so flustered, so close to losing control, sent a shot of need through her so great that she nearly leaned forward again. But this man had not answered her questions, and no matter how devilishly handsome he looked, she was not going to give him the satisfaction of giving in to him.

"I heard you were a rake," she told him, pressing harder against his chest. While he had stopped his kiss, he had not let her go. "I can now see why it is said. Now tell me what this deal is you have with my father. Why me?"

She pressed against his chest again, harder this time, and Xander complied with letting her go. He took a step backward, looking slightly shaken, and ran a hand through his mussed, dark hair before straightening his jacket.

"We will have plenty of time to talk about it when we are wed," Xander said finally, his deliciously deep voice laced with restraint. Eleanor's jaw dropped as she looked at him in shock.

"What?"

Xander nodded and took another steadying breath before his devilish grin returned.

"Yes, I believe I will be amenable to this arrangement after all," He stated confidently, his eyes slowly raking down her figure. "As for our arrangement, if you really do not know, you should ask your father."

"Your Grace, what does that mean?" Eleanor implored, starting to grow annoyed with how possessively he was looking at her. "And would you stop looking at me like that? It is most... unsettling!"

At this Xander laughed suddenly, dipped in place one more quick kiss on her lips, and then moved around her toward the door.

“Get used to it, Honey,” he stated as he opened the door. “I will be your husband soon and I rather enjoy looking at you.”