



My Dangerous Duke (The Twisted Dukes #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: "Get used to it, Honey. I will be your husband soon so you are stuck with me."

Eleanor Langley is her family's ticket into the highest echelons of the Ton. And she has no choice but to marry the man they dictate to her.

Dangerous. Arrogant. Heartless. The Duke of Larsen rules all his affairs with an iron fist. Until Eleanor's father dares to blackmail him and give him an ultimatum Xander cannot ignore: marry his daughter or his cousin dies.

And despite her efforts, Xander will not let himself fall for her seductive yet insolent tongue. Not until he does everything in his power to destroy the evidence and annul their marriage first...

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Page 1

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“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.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

“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."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 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.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

Eleanor stood in her father's study, stunned and more confused than ever as Xander shut the door behind him. What in the world had just happened?

"Eleanor!"

The boom of her father's voice jolted Eleanor out of her thoughts like a lightning bolt, and she jumped out of her frozen state to scurry to the door and crack it open. Her heart jumped into her throat when she saw the duke and her father standing but twenty paces away. The handsome devil wore a wide smile on his face as he shook her father's hand, infuriating her instantly, but what he said surprised her even more.

"Yes, once again, Langley, my apologies, but I must be off. As I just said, have your solicitor draw up whatever it is that you want in terms of wedding arrangements and I will see to it that it will be taken care of," Xander stated, his dominant tone steamrolling poor Victor like the weaker man he was.

"Why, thank you, Your Grace," Eleanor heard Victor say in awe, "It is quite a change from earlier temperament. Perhaps, moving forward, we can have a better understanding of one another."

At once, Eleanor saw Xander's smile drop and a fierce look returned to his eyes as he gazed down impassively at Victor.

"Make no mistake, Langley, we will never be friends," Xander stated, his tone full of disgust.

Eleanor's eyes quickly jumped back to her father's face and saw it was riddled with

guilt. What is the meaning of all this?

“But I am a man to make the best of any situation,” Xander continued matter-of-factly, “So here are my demands of the wedding, and Langley, when I tell you I will not be moved on these things, I mean it. I will only be pushed so far.”

“Name them,” her father all but stammered out, seemingly growing excited.

“While I have had an aversion to marriage, my grandmother has not. She will be thrilled to know that I am to be wed, and she will insist they be a part of certain things. You will let her, and you will never bring about how this deal was formed. If she asks how Miss Eleanor and I met, you shall say we met at the Starburst Ball, which is all the truth she will need.”

“O-of course,” Victor stammered, nodding his head so quickly that his jowls jiggled. “This shall be a wondrous day for all-”

“I am sure it will be,” Xander quipped, cutting Victor off. “But I must be going. Busy day as always, as you see.”

Eleanor watched her father once more stumble over parting pleasantries as the duke strode away from him and down the hall. As soon as he disappeared around the corner, Victor chuckled, nodded his head, and smiled triumphantly to himself.

“Well done, old boy,” he murmured aloud to himself as he began to walk back toward the drawing room, “Well done.”

“How was it, Your Grace?” Jared, Xander’s valet asked as he got into his carriage.

“Beyond interesting,” Xander stated curtly as he took his seat, “And we have much to do.”

“Right away, Your Grace,” Jared replied quickly. With swift, effective motions, the man rapped upon the ceiling of the carriage, pulled out his lap desk, put on his spectacles, and drew out his pen and paper. In truth, Jared was much more than Xander’s valet; his responsibilities were spreading further in both his personal and business life. Servant or not, Xander treated him with great respect.

“First and foremost, I need you to pen a missive to my grandmother, alerting her that I shall be married,” Xander began, stating it as if he were stating the mere weather. Jared’s head shot up as the carriage began to take them to the duke’s next appointment.

“What blessed news!” Jared exclaimed, “Congratulations, Your Grace!”

Xander was not yet sure if the union he was about to enter was an actual blessing or not, but he was certain that it was a mystery. Eleanor fascinated him greatly.

“Thank you, I suppose,” Xander mused briefly, “But back to business.”

Without another word, Jared’s head dropped to pen the missive Xander wanted to send to his grandmother. When he finished, he drew out a fresh paper and made out the long list of things Xander rattled off to him.

“I will not need you in this meeting, you may go. Once you have those things arranged let me know and I shall alert you of what is next,” Xander instructed as the carriage came to their next stop. “Take care of my grandmother’s letter first.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Jared replied quickly as Xander reached for the door, “But before you go, I must tell you something. Regarding your cousin.”

Xander’s mood, briefly lightened by Eleanor’s kiss and successfully steamrolling Victor, darkened once more, and he shut the carriage door with great force.

“What is it?” he demanded.

“I know you sent him off to Larsen but he has returned to London, Your Grace,” Jared replied meekly, visibly shrinking in his seat. “And has taken up residence in your quarters.”

A red haze settled over Xander’s vision as his chest filled with rage. This little detail was something he should have been informed of immediately. While his interest in Eleanor certainly made the blackmail easier to swallow, it still did not overshadow the fact that it was his cousin’s antics that had allowed him to be blackmailed in the first place.

“Get out,” Xander instructed, his tone void of all emotion. “Reschedule my appointments before you do anything else. I shall deal with this immediately.”

Jared exited the carriage without a word, but Xander could hear him instructing the driver to take his Master home at once. During the short drive, Xander’s mood only darkened. As soon as the carriage stopped he was out of it, striding up the stairs to his London House and directly up the stairs toward his bedchambers. Servants scattered the moment they saw him, stopping whatever they were doing the moment they saw his hardened face.

Not bothering with the door handle, Xander kicked open the double doors of his rooms, sending splinters flying off of them as they splayed apart, and marched inside to see his cousin and a woman naked in his bed, both of their eyes and mouths wide with alarm.

“Jesus, Cousin!” Richard exclaimed, jumping out of the bed as he pulled a sheet around his naked waist. “I knew you would be chapped about me being here but this is a bit much, is it not?”

Xander's eyes narrowed in on the woman his cousin had left on the bed, and the fear in her eyes only made him more disgusted.

"Get dressed and get out," his gravelly tone commanded as he stared directly into her eyes. With a gasp, the woman suddenly flew into motion, scrambling off the bed and toward her pile of clothes. In a moment, she had them thrown haphazardly on and was running toward the broken door.

"That was completely uncalled for," Richard started, but before he could finish his sentence, Xander was on him, his fist sailing directly into his cousin's chin, and for a brief moment, his rage was satisfied.

"Bloody Fucking Hell, Cousin!" Richard roared, staggering back as his hands flew to his mouth.

"Do not you dare tell me what is uncalled for, Richard!" Xander snarled, his fist clenching once more. "Do you have any idea what your debauchery has just cost this family? What it has cost me?"

A look of genuine confusion came over Richard's face, and his hand slowly dropped from his sore mouth.

"Xan, old chap," Richard said calmly, reaching a hand toward him, "What are you talking about?"

"Marcus."

The name came out of Xander's lips biting. It was a name that would be scorched in his mind forever. The night of the ball- of his demise- Victor had actually allowed him to read the letters Richard had received from his lover, Marcus; and they were disgustingly detailed in the description of not just their sexual acts, but their alleged

love. If the letters were to get out, it would ruin them all.

Richard froze.

“Who?”

“Oh, off it,” Xander growled, waving a frustrated hand toward his cousin. “I know what you wrote to him, and so does someone else.”

Richard’s face paled so drastically and so suddenly that for a moment, Xander’s anger dipped toward worry.

“Oh, God,” Richard groaned, “Someone has found us out. Who is it? What do they want from me?”

Xander laughed bitterly. Of course, his cousin was only worried about himself.

“You always think it is just about you, do you not?” He asked, shaking his head as walked over to Richard’s discarded breeches. He tossed them toward him bitterly, and Richard only gave him a confused look as he caught them.

“Tell me what has happened and I will fix it,” Richard stated as he drew his pants on. “They will kill me if I do not fix it, Xander. You know they will. They will have me hanged if word of this gets out.”

“I know,” Xander muttered bitterly, tossing him his shirt next. “Which is why you will come nowhere near this Marcus again, and I mean that literally. I am sending you back to Larsen where you shall live as a hermit while I handle this. You are in luck, Cousin. It is not you that this pathetic social climber wants, but me.”

Richard started to ask a question, but Xander cut him off.

“And so, help me, Cousin,” he warned gravely, “If you attempt to involve grandmother in this, I will put you in the ground myself! All she needs to know is that you are tired of partying and I am going to be married.”

Richard’s eyes bulged suddenly and despite the trouble he knew he was in, he chuckled.

“Married?” He repeated. “You are actually getting married? To whom?”

Realizing he had only given Richard snippets of details, Xander explained how Victor cornered him at their last ball and presented him with evidence of Richard and Marcus’s love affair. In return for his silence on the rather scandalous matter, Xander had agreed to marry Victor’s youngest daughter, Eleanor, and make her a duchess. Which would, in turn, elevate his own status. Xander found the way the man was willing to use people particularly disgusting, but until he had a foolproof way to get out from his thumb, he had to play along.

“So, are you ready to tell me about him now?” Xander asked, looking at his cousin coolly. “He must really be something to change all of this.”

“Xander,” Richard pleaded, his usual sarcastic and smug nature long gone as he looked toward his older cousin, “I know I have made a fool of myself with my lecherous ways. I know I have caused this family unjust pain. But Marcus, he is different. I know how wrong this sounds, Cousin, but I love him.”

“Ha!” Xander barked, unable to believe his very ears. He turned toward Richard and marched toward him, stopping only when they were face to face.

“You were just in bed with a woman!” he stated, pointing toward it. “ My bed. You have been in many women’s beds since we have gotten here, and have visited nearly every woman’s bed in our land. It is not your level of debauchery that surprises or

appalls me, Cousin, though I cannot say the same for the Ton if they were ever to find out, but it is the fact that you claim you can love.”

Richard’s brow furrowed as he shot Xander a dirty look, and quickly walked away from him.

“Like you would know more about love than I,” he shot back bitterly. “Your ledger is not pristine either, Xander. I may be known as a rake, but at least I am not known as a monster like you. People talk, you know. About how ruthless you are. Your force may not damage your reputation but it wins you no friends either.”

Xander realized at the moment that he had two options: to give in to his fury and beat his cousin to a bloody pulp- which would only cause more scandal- or walk away, and deal with his frustrations in a more suitable manner. Remembering that Jared’s missive was most likely on its way right now and that his grandmother would probably be arriving on the morrow, he chose the latter.

“I may be the monster I am known for,” Xander agreed, throwing Richard’s jacket- his final piece of clothing at him- “But it is the monster’s mercy that is saving your life. Go home, Richard. You have done enough damage here.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

“Eleanor, you look absolutely radiant!” Marina gushed, throwing her arms around Eleanor tightly. Despite her nerves, Eleanor let out a light laugh and returned the hug with just as much fervor. It was done. The banners had been read, and the vows were spoken. She was now the Duchess of Larsen.

“More like glistening,” Eleanor retorted, pulling back so she could dab her kerchief on her forehead. “I am sweating like a farmer; it is absolutely horrid.”

“No one has noticed your sweat, darling,” Cordelia replied sweetly, handing her friend her kerchief. “They were too focused on your beauty.”

“Truly,” Marina agreed quickly, delicately fluffing out the skirt of Eleanor’s shimmering wedding gown. “I have never seen you prettier. Your new grandmother has excellent taste.”

“Indeed, I do,” Margaret Harrison, Dowager Duchess of Larsen, and Eleanor’s new grandmother-in-law agreed as she joined the conversation. The older woman, dressed in a very regal emerald gown with a gold overlay for the occasion, smiled proudly at Eleanor as she squeezed her arm. In return, Eleanor smiled genuinely and reached for the woman’s white silk-gloved hands.

“You were a vision of grace and beauty up there with my grandson,” Margaret praised, her grey eyes shining with truth. “You did well, my girl. Very well.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Eleanor graciously replied.

“Now, now, no more of that,” Margaret chuckled, giving Eleanor’s hands. “It is

Grandmama to you now.”

Margaret’s happy expression suddenly shifted into a furtive glance, and she leaned in closer.

“Though that kindness does not extend to your mother or sister,” the Dowager muttered into her ear.

At this, Eleanor could not help but laugh. She had liked her new grandmama right away, and one of the many reasons was that she was strong-willed enough to put her pompous family in their place. When the Dowager Duchess had first arrived to meet her grandson’s bride-to-be, she had immediately showered Eleanor with affection and praise, but shortly after that, she set about dashing her parents’ dreams of a large, gaudy wedding.

“This is not how our family shows success or happiness,” Margaret had said simply and stiffly. “All of this-” she paused, flitting her hand through the air- “Will simply not do. We shall have a small ceremony in four weeks, not four months. I do not know how it is you have gotten my grandson to propose but I am not giving him any time to back out.”

“Four weeks!” Her Mother had exclaimed. “That is too soon! People will think there is foul play afoot.”

“Nonsense,” Margaret had quickly retorted, looking at Mrs. Langley as if she were a simpleton. “My grandson is to be one and thirty this year. He should have been wed ages ago. At this point, waiting is moot and the whole Ton knows it. So, we shall hold the wedding four weeks from now. We may keep the church if you like, but the guest list will be small and the reception will be slightly larger.”

Eleanor had felt no guilt for the glee she reveled in when she watched her arrogant

parents have their control taken away, and since then, had silently pledged allegiance to her new fairy grandmother.

“Now I know it is custom for the bride to have a few minutes alone with her friends between the wedding and reception to refresh,” Margaret stated presently, an air of authority to her tone, “But such time has passed. Gather yourself, child. You and your husband must receive your guests so that we may get this wedding breakfast going. Remember, we must be on the road to Larsen by nightfall.”

A rush of emotions hit Eleanor as she dabbed at her forehead one last time before letting the Dowager lead her back out into the reception hall. Despite her annoyance over not speaking to Xander since their little moment of passion in her father’s study, she had found herself looking forward to her wedding day. But, as her father walked her down the aisle, and she met the eyes of her future husband, she saw a look she could not decipher.

Other than to say the words required from them by the priest, Xander had said nothing. Had he changed his mind? Had he realized she was right about the better women out there, and now regretted this strange deal? Eleanor had asked her father about Xander’s proposal just as he had suggested, several times in fact, but each time she did so her father’s mood would darken and he would berate her for her ingratitude. During her last attempt to finally find out what was going on, he had threatened to lock her in her room until her wedding, so, she had finally stopped asking.

“I have our bride,” the Dowager announced as she led Eleanor back into the reception hall. “And where is our groom?”

“Right here.”

Xander’s words sounded so close to Eleanor’s ear that it startled her, and she gasped

as she whirled around; nearly smacking her nose into her husband's wide, tuxedoed chest. Xander's hands came around her shoulders immediately, preventing her from stumbling, and set her firmly back on her feet.

"What are you doing scaring your bride like that?" his grandmother huffed, swatting her grandson's arm. "Where are the manners I spent years teaching you?"

Xander's dark eyes lightened and glittered with amusement as he kept them on Eleanor.

"I did not mean to scare you, Honey ," he said softly, his one brow rising slightly as he tilted his head. "Forgive me?"

The tone of his voice and the directness of his gaze were sending a cacophony of interesting sensations through her body, but Eleanor ignored them all and allowed her annoyance at him to rise.

"For this transgression, yes," she replied sweetly, mimicking the tilt of his head. "For avoiding me and conversation? Not yet."

Xander smirked and rolled his eyes at her as Margaret let out a loud, sharp laugh and clapped her hands.

"Such pluck! I love it!" She crowed, reaching up to pinch Eleanor's cheeks.

"You will be good for my grandson, my girl," she praised as guests began to gather around them, "You are just what he needs."

"I am so disappointed that your cousin, Richard, could not be here," Xander's grandmother despaired for the hundredth time as she walked with him and Eleanor toward their carriage.

“Is it not you, Grandmother, that always says we must be gentle with poor, Little Richard?” Xander retorted, casting his grandmother a mischievous look. She tisked her tongue as she swatted at his arm, and he chuckled.

“It matters not,” he continued, pushing to be off the subject, “He is in Larsen and so shall we be in a few short hours.”

The subject dropped, and Xander let out a muted sigh of relief. The day had been stressful enough without his foolish cousin’s presence. Xander had arranged for Richard to enter the Royal Navy but he had not told his grandmother yet. Eleanor, who, aside from being startlingly beautiful in her wedding gown, had also been driving him startling mad with questions every spare second they had been given. Then of course, if it was not Eleanor, it was her parents, her sister, or his grandmother. All of whom demanded something different from him.

“I am sorry that your parents did not stay to send you off,” his grandmother apologized to Eleanor as she kissed both her cheeks, “But they seemed in a most urgent hurry.”

“Your offer to them of your country house was quite gracious,” Eleanor replied respectfully as she accepted his grandmother’s affections, “They were most excited to take advantage of whatever they had left of week’s end hours, I am sure. Besides it is of no matter to me, I am happy to go.”

Though still annoyed from her earlier pestering, Xander felt a swell of compassion and pride at his wife’s response. It was obvious that she understood who her parents were and what they wanted. Very much like himself, now that she had been properly played, she was being discarded. Xander could understand why he was being used, but what he did not comprehend was how little Victor Langley truly cared about his youngest daughter’s wellbeing.

“Well put, young lady,” the Dowager praised, stepping away from them both. “All right, farewell my darlings. I shall see you soon.”

“She is not coming with us?” Eleanor asked him as he opened the carriage door for her.

“She will be along in a few days,” Xander explained. “Unlike me, she does not have an aversion to London society.”

“You do not like London society?” Eleanor asked, still standing by the carriage.

“I do not believe I like any society,” Xander replied bluntly, nodding toward the entrance. “Go on, get in.”

Eleanor raised a brow as she took a step back and crossed her arms. “Are you not going to help me in?”

Xander’s hands, like they had all day, itched to wrap around his wife’s small waist once more- but he did not trust himself. If he started there, he did not know where he would stop. Ever since time in the study, no matter how battered his body had gotten in the ring, no matter how full of rage he was over Richard’s flagrant disregard for life, he dreamt of her every night.

Xander felt his jaw tick as he ground his teeth and drew in a deep breath, and without a word, he lifted his bride easily off of her feet- which produced a pretty gasp that caused an immediate stir in his groin- and deposited her as quickly as he could into her seat. Just as he feared, a primal need had shot through his fingertips and down his arms the moment he touched her; both infuriating and arousing him greatly.

Damn you, woman, Xander cursed silently as he quickly followed her into the carriage. After taking the opposite side, he rapped his knuckles on the roof, and the

driver immediately alerted the horses. As the carriage began to move, Xander settled back into his seat and cast his eyes to the floor.

He was a man of control; had lived his life by a certain set of strict standards, and because of that, he had succeeded greatly. As of late though, it seemed his ability to maintain that grasp on control had been slipping. First with being unable to control Richard, and now unable to control the reactions of his damned body. What the hell kind of man was he turning into?

“So, we are just not going to speak then?” Eleanor asked, pulling him out of his wallowing. Drawing his eyes upward, Xander met his bride’s honey eyes and saw they were glittering with annoyance and hurt. A mixture of pity, annoyance, amusement- and arousal- shot through him. Why did she have to be so beautiful when she was angry? It was like her entire body filled with fire and she began to illuminate. Even her hair seemed to crackle and come alive when she was annoyed.

“What is it you would like to talk about?” Xander, biting back a grin as he sat up straight.

“Well, for starters, why you were acting so cross today,” Eleanor immediately replied before going into a long list of his bad behaviors. “Do you not think people will deem it odd that you did not talk to me all day?” She asked then, adorably and fully worked up now. Xander was trying his best to take her seriously.

“Of course, I talked to you,” Xander replied with an escaped chuckle. “Plenty of people saw it.”

“What if it was not enough?” Eleanor pushed.

“And why are you worried?” Xander quipped back, raising a curious brow. “In your father’s study, you seemed not to care what others wanted or thought. Was that an

act?”

“Well, no,” Eleanor countered. “But are you not worried about rumors of unhappiness? Most will think I trapped you in the marriage.”

Not entirely untrue, Xander mused silently.

“Which means the unhappier you appear, the more they will believe that to be true,” she finished.

“And?” Xander drawled, smirking at her.

“You want people thinking you are trapped?” She asked, giving him a look of pure surprise. Xander shrugged his shoulders.

“I do not care what people think of me,” he murmured. It was true. He did not give a damn what people thought of him personally. But he would do anything to protect his grandparents’ legacy. Such as marrying a honey-eyed fire goddess for example.

“Perhaps you should,” Eleanor muttered, “It might surprise you.”

“I think you are not being truthful,” Xander stated bluntly, wanting to get off of the particular subject. “What really has you vexed so?” He pushed, rubbing his jaw as he rested his elbow on his knee. Eleanor looked back at him for a moment, as if she were struggling for an answer. Finally, she let out a huff, flopping ungraciously back into her seat, and rolled her eyes- an act Xander found quite amusing.

“This is just not how my wedding day was supposed to go,” she confessed, letting her hands flop down into the lap of her dress. “I know we are not marrying for love, but it all felt so- impersonal. Cold. Like a poorly cast play almost.”

At this, Xander could no longer hold in his laughter.

“I do not know if I would say poorly ,” he chuckled.

“Do not laugh at me,” Eleanor demanded, her peach cheeks flaming to crimson.

“Apologies,” Xander offered, then broke into another chuckle, which only served to fluster his bride more.

“But I must ask. How many weddings have you been to?”

Eleanor’s annoyance shifted to embarrassment as she suddenly looked away from him.

“Just my sister’s,” she admitted begrudgingly.

“Mhmm,” Xander hummed. “And how was it?”

Eleanor shrugged.

“Pomp and circumstance,” she said, then finally looked back at him. “But that was not the same. My sister and I are completely different and want different things-”

“Agreed,” Xander interjected quickly. At this, he saw a brief smile flitter across Eleanor’s frown but it quickly vanished as she continued talking.

“ She was marrying a baron. It had to be official. You are not a baron. Do not smile at me like that!”

“Apologies,” Xander replied quickly but made no effort to stop. “But I must ask,” he went on, leaning further toward her, “If you think a wedding would have to be

official for a baron, why would you not think it would have to be official for a duke? I am, after all, of higher noble rank than he.”

Xander watched her in amusement, thinking he was about to see her give another adorable pout. Instead, her beautiful molten eyes hardened into an emotionless mask, and she pressed her lips together tightly. With an assured nod, she wrapped her arms tighter around her small ribcage and looked out the window.

Her body language screamed defiance and resolution. He was attacking her, he realized. Silently, he had been all day. Other than saying the words demanded of him, he had not spoken to her as a husband would speak to his wife. These things seemed petty to him, but to her credit, he could understand her disappointment. When it came to being a husband, he had already admitted that he would be lacking.

“You look beautiful today,” he spoke, his deep voice radiating in the silence.

It was not much, but he did not know what else he could offer her. Eleanor raised a brow but did not deviate her gaze from the window.

You have done this to her, Xander thought, feeling guilt well up. You are no better than her father.

You do,” he assured her, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “I apologize if I have been... cold. I can be quite business-minded and with your father’s contract it just felt like-”

“Business,” Eleanor finished for him. The steel in her voice was sharp as she said it. Then she turned away from him to face the window with a stoic expression.

“Yes, this union is business,” Xander agreed begrudgingly. He felt another surge of guilt and he did not like it. What was there to feel guilty for? This blackmail business

deal was all Victor's doing. Not his.

“Thank you for the compliment, Your Grace,” Eleanor sighed, “It was most welcome. If you do not mind, though, I am feeling quite weary. I believe I shall try to rest my eyes.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

In her sleep, Eleanor felt warmth wrap slowly around her body, taking away the slight chill. With a sigh, she relaxed further, more comfortable than ever before, and reached for whatever it was that had been wrapped around her. Her fingers brushed against muscles wrapped in soft cotton, and with a gasp, she opened her eyes to see Xander staring down at her intently.

Sometime during the trip, he had taken off his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his white dress shirt. He had also removed his cravat and undid a couple of the buttons at the top; revealing lines of muscle, corded veins, and a soft tuft of dark chest hair. Xander's hair had also fallen out of whatever hold it had been kept in, and a lock of his dark hair fell over one of his eyes.

"How did you sleep?" Xander asked.

Eleanor felt the vibrations of his words through his chest, where her right hand had somehow landed. It tickled her palm and sent another curious sensation; this time a little lower, and more between her thighs.

"I-um," Eleanor rasped. She cleared her throat, feeling herself blush under his continued intent stare. "I apologize. I did not think I would actually sleep, I just meant to rest my eyes."

"It is all right," Xander assured her, his gaze dropping to her lips. "You speak in your sleep."

"I do not!" Eleanor gasped. Suddenly embarrassed, she attempted to squirm out of his arms and failed. With a chuckle, Xander simply tightened his muscles and had her

back against his chest.

“It is not a complaint,” he assured her, a smile tugging at his lips. “But I am a bit concerned. I do not know what the monkey was doing to the blue dog at the pond, but it sounded terrifying.”

“You lie!” Eleanor protested, unable to hold back her laugh.

“I speak the truth,” Xander countered, a sudden heat turning his silver eyes molten. He was smirking and still playful, but something had shifted in him. For a moment, his muscles tightened- as if he were about to bring her closer- but then they released, and Eleanor felt her body being carefully slid back down onto the carriage seat.

“We have arrived,” he informed her, finally looking away from her and toward the carriage window.

Eleanor followed Xander’s line of sight and her eyes widened as she took in the sheer size of Larsen Hall. The large stone fortress could have easily fit her family’s London Manor five times over.

“This is just for you?” She asked, unable to mask the awe in her voice.

“Not quite,” Xander chuckled, his own eyes searching over the large sculptures. “Though I do prefer when I have it to myself, the entire Harrison family has access to Larsen Hall, and there are many times I must host associates from abroad. In addition, there is a staff of fifty that we also house.”

He gave her a sideways glance.

“And, now that there is a duchess in the house, we shall be expected to host our fellow nobles when parties are required.”

Something in Xander's voice told her he was not thrilled about this, but before she could ask why it was necessary, Xander opened the carriage door and got out.

"Come," he urged softly, offering her his hand. "The staff is right inside waiting for you. They are most anxious to meet their new Lady of the House."

Taking his hand, Eleanor got out of the carriage and allowed Xander to lead her inside. Upon entering the massive marble-lined foyer, they were greeted by his staff, who offered them both warm congratulations. To his surprise, Eleanor's combative spirit from earlier vanished, and before his eyes, he saw a kind, gracious lady immediately begin to greet each servant with a smile and a soft touch.

"What was that?" Xander chuckled as he led her away afterward. Eleanor frowned at him as she let him lead her up the grand staircase.

"What do you mean?" She asked cautiously.

"Every time I speak with you, you are an insufferable minx," Xander was quick to explain, "But back there you were so kind and gentle."

"I am kind and gentle!" Eleanor gasped indignantly, making Xander laugh so suddenly that he nearly snorted. She shot him a dirty look as he tried to compose himself, and for a moment, wondered if she would throw him down the steps.

"You just bring out the wasp in me is all," she continued in a disgruntled tone, raising her nose high in the air. "I can be quite soft when allowed to be."

Xander had done well at keeping his arousal in check all day, but as Eleanor said this unknown double entendre, all of the dark, intimate thoughts he had kept locked up came tumbling out. Suddenly, he could taste her petal lips on his again, feel her silken skin crushed against his chest as he held her.

Her hair, much like right now, had held the faint scent of lilies. He knew exactly all of the ways she could be soft.

“If you say,” Xander muttered, grateful that they had reached the doors of her new room.

“Well, here we are.” He let go of her arm to open the door, then with a flourish, waved her into it. “The bed is no doubt lovely, and the servants will bring you whatever you need.”

Xander waited anxiously for her to go inside so he could shut the door and finally get to the solitude of his quarters and think. His heart, head, and cock, were all a tangled mess, and he did not trust himself.

“You are not coming with me?” She asked, not budging from her spot in the hall. There was a sliver of disappointment in her voice, but it was mostly covered by false indifference.

“I am one floor up,” he replied, ignoring the guilt he suddenly felt.

“Our rooms are not even adjacent?” Eleanor asked; the disappointment in her voice growing more apparent.

Though he really did want to walk away, Xander felt a sudden curious feeling of satisfaction at her reaction to this news.

“That bothers you?” He asked, taking a step closer to her.

Eleanor’s cheeks filled with color once more as she quickly looked away from him, and took a step back. Unknowingly, she had taken it in the direction of her rooms, and as Xander took another step toward her, she backed further into it.

“I thought we agreed this deal was just business?” He asked coyly, tilting his head slightly. The servants had already lit the oil lamps in the suite of rooms, casting a warm yellow glow around the vast space of the first room.

“I-” Eleanor stammered softly, continuing to slowly walk backward.

“As a woman who believes in love and romance...” Xander continued, this pursuit of her feeling more primal with each step, “Surely, you do not want to lie with a man you do not love.”

Eleanor gasped softly as her back met the far wall of the room, her honey eyes flickering with the lamp light as they remained locked on his. Her breathing had become slow and heavy, making her ample bosom rise and fall in a way that made Xander’s mouth water. His large hands braced the wall on either side of Eleanor’s shoulders, and he leaned in until their lips were barely a hair-width apart.

“You do not love me, do you, Honey?” He rasped, trying desperately to ignore the delicious scent wafting from his wife’s delectably graceful neck.

A soft whimper left Eleanor’s lips as her large honey eyes looked back at him pleadingly, and she slowly shook her head.

“No.” Her breathy admission sounded almost doubtful, and Xander could not stop the growl-like sound of approval that rumbled from his chest.

“Are you sure about that?” He asked, drawing his words as he circled his fingers finally gave in to their need and circled around her throat. For a moment, his eyes dropped to where his grip was, and as he felt her swallow beneath his hand, he felt another intense shot of arousal deep in his groin.

“I know you do not love me, Your Grace,” she breathed.

Her response had Xander's eyes shooting back up to hers, and the look of stark defiance in her eyes sent him over the edge. Before he could help himself, Xander's built-up lust took over. With a groan, his lips sealed possessively over hers as he pulled her away from the wall and toward his chest; arousal springing through him as she both melted and whimpered in his arms.

The carnal hunger he had felt before spread through Xander like wildfire as their kiss deepened, burning away anything that did not exist at that moment. His lips melded and parted with hers she picked up his rhythm, and the explosive passion simmered down to a low, white-hot flame that slowly began to burn him from the inside out.

Was it minutes? Hours? Xander was lost in time as he held his wife close and drank from her lips like they were honeyed wine.

"Oh, dear," A familiar and maternal voice spoke, shattering both the silence and the moment. Xander froze as he heard Mrs. Gaines, his beloved and longtime housekeeper, and reality came crashing back down around him.

"Apologies, Your Grace," the older woman chuckled, starting to leave, "We did not think you would start this quickly."

"And you thought correctly," he informed her quickly, his voice suddenly loud and practical, as it normally was. His eyes were still on Eleanor, who had gone from shocked, to confused and was now silently working her way toward embarrassment.

"Mrs. Gaines, I believe my wife is weary from our day," he stated in an impersonal tone. "Perhaps a drink and a bath would be good for her nerves. Now, I must go check on some things in my study before I can retire. Good night to you both."

He gave a stiff nod in Eleanor's direction, not meeting her eyes, and without another word, left the room.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

“ T here, now,” Mrs. Gaines cooed, placing a kind hand on each of Eleanor’s shoulders. “No need to cry, Your Grace. Your homesickness will fade in time.”

It was not homesickness that had forced the few tears rolling down Eleanor’s cheeks to come forth, nor was it sadness. It was rage. Xander Larsen was without a doubt the most confusing, infuriating man she had ever encountered, she now loathed her father for yoking her to him more than ever.

Not trusting her tone or her words, Eleanor cleared her throat and wiped her tears away, then forced herself to smile at the well-meaning housekeeper.

“I am sure you are right,” she said at last, “There is just so much emotion on one’s wedding day.”

The elderly woman smiled brightly at her as she began to nod furiously. She was a short, lithe woman, perhaps sixty or so, with mouse grey hair and pale brown eyes who exuded a grandmotherly air. Even in the brief moment she witnessed between Mrs. Gaines and Xander, she could tell that even her beast of a husband had a soft spot for the woman.

“I know exactly what you mean, Your Grace,” Mrs. Gaines sighed wistfully. She took Eleanor by the hand and began to lead her to the nearby door, opening it to reveal the large bedroom beyond.

“My nerves were a tangled mess on my wedding day.”

“They were?” Eleanor asked. Though she did not know why, she felt comforted by

this tidbit of information.

“Oh my, yes,” Mrs. Gaines laughed, “I think every bride is.” Continuing her tour as they chatted like old friends, the housekeeper walked Eleanor through the vast closet and then to the bathing suite; which made her eyes bulge.

Langley Manor was no small home and the amenities within it had been beyond suitable, but the luxury of the bathing room that lay in front of her was much more regal than she was used to. Unlike her copper tub at home which sat on the floor upon clawed legs, this tub, which was easily thrice the size of her old one, was made of something pearly white and embedded into the white and gray marble floor.

“Did His Grace not tell you what Langley is most known for?” Mrs. Gaines chuckled, clearly seeing the surprise on Eleanor’s face.

“No,” Eleanor muttered, stepping further into the Grecian-decorated room, “He did not.”

“That is just like him, it is,” Mrs. Gaines laughed affectionately, “So modest. We are known for our purifying hot springs, Your Grace, and the Estate has an underground spring running right below it. We pull it straight in with pipes.”

Eleanor was fascinated by this, but her curiosity did not overshadow her further annoyance with her new husband. Like her father, he had told her nothing. He had bickered with her, taunted her.

But that was not what had her body so intensely vibrating with feeling. His kiss, his touch, had made her body turn against her. She had melted like warm honey in his hands, and despite how furious she was at him, she wanted to do it again.

Not allowing herself to get sidetracked by the thought of Xander’s annoyingly

pleasurable touch or the luxury of her new home, Eleanor turned away from the bath and went back to her bedroom. It was only then that she noticed how it was decorated. The large, wrought-iron four-post bed had delicate metal vines and flowers that adorned its pillars. Above it hung translucent dark blue curtains, elegantly sashed at the ends of each corner of the bed.

It was a room far more elegant than what she was used to, and as she took it all in, she shifted uncomfortably on her feet, and then she froze. She had been so consumed with being forced to be married that the reality of her new title only now sunk in. She was a Duchess . A leader of people, of a house. A woman of status and finery.

She was still feeling the effects of Xander's kiss all throughout her body, and she had no idea what to do with herself. Just yet one more reason was she was beginning to hate him.

"I can tell you are overwhelmed," Mrs. Gaines stated diplomatically. "Come, why do you not sit down, and I will ring you some tea."

Eleanor still wanted to be defiant, but she recognized that her fight was not with this sweet woman. As she took a seat, Mrs. Gaines smiled toward her proudly, then pulled a golden rope that hung beside the fireplace. When she was done, she came back to Eleanor, kneeled at her feet, and began removing her shoes.

"It is a lot to take in," Mrs. Gaines stated, her hands working quickly and gently. "This Manor and all. Many a new servant is frightened of its size at first. I suspect it is the same for you. Has the Master given you a tour?"

Mrs. Gaines looked up at her and Eleanor shook her head.

"That boy," the housekeeper sighed, shaking her head in dismay as she returned to remove Eleanor's shoes and stockings. "I shall be happy to give you a full tour on the

morrow after you are well rested.”

Eleanor murmured her thanks, then in a louder voice asked if she could inquire on Mrs. Gaines.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Mrs. Gaines chuckled, “You needn’t ask permission. What can I tell you?”

“Despite your nerves,” Eleanor mused aloud, allowing her thoughts back on what Mrs. Gaines had said earlier, “Did you enjoy your wedding day?”

“Oh my, yes,” Mrs. Gaines chuckled softly, making swift work of her weathered hands then began to work on soothing circles over the bottom of Eleanor’s left foot, and she immediately felt some of her anger let go. “It was not as beautiful as yours, mind you, but it certainly made me feel like a princess on that day.”

“I am sure it did,” Eleanor agreed, smiling softly. At least there was one thing they had in common. They had both loved their dresses.

“There is your tea,” Mrs. Gaines announced when a bell went off a short time later. With effort, she rose from her knees and went to collect the tray. After preparing Eleanor’s cup to her liking, she placed it carefully in her hands and gave her a satisfactory nod.

“You look like you are feeling better already, Your Grace.”

“I am,” Eleanor agreed, smiling back at her.

“Happy to hear it,” Mrs. Gaines crowed. “Now, I shall go and draw you a bath while you have your tea, and while you have a good soak. After a good night’s sleep, I promise you, you will feel much improved.”

With as sure as Mrs. Gaines sounded, Eleanor very much wanted to believe her. But as the good-willed woman disappeared into the bath while Eleanor sipped her tea, she wondered just how true that could possibly be.

“Mrs. Gaines, not now,” Xander groaned. He had checked in on his cousin and some other personal matters before finally getting to his study, and just as he had been about to sit down to get a few things off his desk, the housekeeper had stridden in after a polite knock, insisting that she speak with him.

“It is about your bride,” Mrs. Gaines insisted, ignoring him. “You were too harsh with her when you left her quarters.”

“Do not start,” he sighed, rubbing his temples, “My bride is fine. She knows what our arrangement is and that I am certainly the man she needs.”

Mrs. Gaines began to say something else but Xander immediately tuned it out. In addition to the stress of the workload he faced now that he was back, Xander was struggling with what he had done in the carriage. He had not meant to keep her in his arms- he was just going to help her sit up and wake. But the moment he wrapped his arm around her, Eleanor sighed and snuggled into him, and before he knew it, his arms had sealed tightly around her and he had pulled her into his lap. Letting go of her in the carriage was difficult but prying him away from the kiss had been borderline painful.

These feelings both bothered and enticed him. On one hand, it was obvious he was attracted to Eleanor. But on the other, he was too disgusted by her father’s blackmail to trust any feelings toward her.

I cannot possibly care for the woman whose family trapped me in this marriage!

“Mrs. Gaines. Leave it be,” Xander stated, using a tone she knew better than to argue

with.

The older woman looked at him coolly for a long moment, her jaw working on what was no doubt an impolite response.

“Very well, Your Grace,” Mrs. Gaines stated numbly, at last, curtsying toward him. “My apologies for disturbing you.”

With an annoyed sigh, Xander sat down at his desk and tried to focus on his work. After an hour of failed attempts, however, he pushed himself to his feet in frustration and left the house. Once atop his horse, he made his way back to White’s .

“Well, well. What brings you here, Larsen?” Rhysand Patterson, Duke of Huxton, asked Xander, giving him an amused smile as he walked in.

“Going to best you in a boxing match,” Xander quipped back confidently, approaching Rhys and the bar with purposeful strides.

“Well, I would like to see you try,” Rhys mused, motioning toward the bartender. “Would you like a drink first to numb your pain?”

“After,” Xander insisted, nodding toward the back room.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

“H ell, Larsen, what did you do to yourself?” Rhys asked as Xander removed his shirt.

“Lost a little,” Xander mused, wrapping his hands, “Won a lot. Do not look at them if they bother you. They certainly do not bother me.”

“I am not afraid of a little black and blue,” Rhys scoffed, “But you might need a night or two to heal.”

“I will take a night or two to heal tomorrow,” Xander insisted, striding toward Rhys with his gloves up. Rhys followed quickly, seeing the rage in Xander’s eyes, and quickly went to work to block and counter his opponent’s hits. For a while, the two of them fought silently, Xander’s punches landing perfectly almost every time while Rhys only got a few in here and there.

“You are quite riled up,” Rhys said through panted breaths several minutes later. “Is this about you and Eleanor?”

What little anger Xander had been able to release in the last few minutes returned with vengeance upon hearing Rhys call his wife by her name. With a grunt, he released a punch to Rhys’s abdomen that made the man go to his knees.

He did not know Rhys well, and calling him a friend would certainly be a stretch. They matched each other well in boxing, but that was their only connection. What could he possibly know about his wife?

“How do you know my wife so well that you may call her by her name?” Xander

asked, a possessive urge sweeping over him as he stood over Rhys.

“Impressive, Larsen. How did you do it?” Rhys panted, keeping his eyes on Xander as he got back up to his feet. “Did you threaten her?”

The two men began to circle one another in a predatory fashion, their eyes locked; their feet moving in time.

“Why?” Xander asked calmly, staying focused. Controlled. “Is that what you think?”

“I think Eleanor would never marry a man like you willingly. You do not love anything. You cannot. You are incapable of it.”

Xander shrugged. He could not hide the truth.

“How very perceptive of you,” Xander said dryly, looking for his opening. “Now, tell me how you know my wife’s name or I will put you on the mat for your final time.”

“Easy,” Rhys chuckled, suddenly breaking out of his boxing stance and into a relaxed pose. “You are so easy to rile up. “Eleanor is a friend to my wife, Penelope.”

Taken by surprise at this, Xander did not register that Rhys had once more moved into a fighting position. He noticed too late, and as his opponent’s fist connected with his thigh, Xander let out a grunt of pain and fell to the mat.

“Cheap shot, Huxton,” Xander growled as his whole leg went to sleep.

Rhys let out a foxlike laugh as he jogged out of the ring to grab their drinks.

“That is what you get for acting ruthless with me. Unlike the others, I am not intimidated when you growl a little.”

Xander raised a defiant brow at him as the man leaned down and offered him the drink. Despite his intimidating stare, Rhys kept his eyes on him. Giving in, Xander rolled his eyes and accepted the drink.

“So seriously, how did you get her to marry you? All she talked about when she would visit was how every suitor her parents had lined up for her was not romantic enough. And you? Well, I do not think you have an ounce of romance anywhere in that bruised-up body of yours.”

Xander let out a grunt before chugging half of his drink. The man had a point.

“I do not know though,” Rhys mused, smirking, “You did get pretty rattled when I called her by her first name. You were ready to kill me. Some women can change men, you know.”

“Some men,” Xander sighed, shaking head, “Not me. It is not love that has me in the marriage. Nor is it love that has her in it, either.”

Having no one else to unburden himself to, he began to give Rhys the details of Victor’s blackmail scheme. Rhys seemed disinterested as he listened to him but he stayed quiet until Xander was done.

“You need help,” Rhys stated.

“We both do,” Xander agreed. “I cannot love, that is true. But she- she deserves love and a real husband.”

A sliver of hurt shivered through Xander’s chest as he said the words, but he ignored them.

“You have not consummated your marriage, I presume?” Rhys asked boldly.

“Why do you think I am here on my wedding night?” He asked, feeling his gut churn with conflict.

“I know some people,” Rhys stated, pretending not to notice Xander’s inner struggle. “I can get them on this if you need. Perhaps make things go a little quicker. My wife would truly kill me if you break Eleanor’s heart, so the sooner she gets out, the better.”

“You would do that?” Xander asked, looking at Rhys suspiciously. “The Cruel Duke has gone soft after all?”

Rhys gave a nonchalant shrug as he smirked at Xander. “For a fee, of course. Everything comes with a price.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

Three Days Later

“Y our Grace, she just wants a moment to speak with you,” Mrs. Gaines pleaded him. “Surely, you could spare just a few minutes for your-”

“I said no, Mrs. Gaines,” Xander barked, cutting her off. “Get out.”

He scurried around his desk to find the appropriate documents, feeling like a blundering fool. Just knowing Eleanor was now residing in the house with him was distracting his every thought. Every sound he heard, every shadow he saw, he found himself looking for her.

Their last kiss had plagued his dreams every night, stealing slumber away from him. Oftentimes he would wake up after a vivid dream, chest heaving, cock painfully hard, and he would have to touch himself just to relieve the pressure. Even when he did, it gave him no satisfaction and only served to feed his agitation.

“She is your wife!” Mrs. Gaines boomed suddenly, her voice reaching such a shrill pitch at the end so high that Xander winced and closed his book right away.

“And she is cared for!” He boomed back. Xander held great adoration for the matronly housekeeper but he could only handle so much.

“Whatever she wishes aside from my heart she may have,” he retorted adamantly, throwing his papers into his attaché, “Therefore, she has nothing to speak about with me!”

“I sorely disagree, Your Grace,” Eleanor stated bitterly, announcing her presence.

Xander looked toward the door and nearly groaned when he took in the sight of his wife. She was adorned in a light peach gown that matched her complexion almost perfectly; the shade so identical almost made her appear nude. Her long, curly hair was arranged half-up, the top spiraled into a braided bun. Amber jewels hung from her neck and earlobes, matching her eyes.

Lust poured through him as he met her glaring eyes, and he did his best to beat it down with self-control.

“Leave us,” Xander stated gruffly to Mrs. Gaines.

This time, the housekeeper made no objection to his command and left quickly without a word.

“Eleanor, I am busy.” Each word came out clipped. Restrained. As if talking had become a great difficulty.

“That much is evident,” she retorted.

Xander’s brows shot up as he heard the steel in her voice. He hated how her passion ignited his own. Even when she spoke to him harshly, her voice seemed to have an immediate effect on his cock. He needed her to leave. Immediately.

“What is that you want?” He asked bitterly, forcing himself to look away from her. He also turned his body to the side, praying she could not see what she did to him.

“To have dinner with you,” Eleanor replied quickly, embracing her hands in front of her.

“No,” Xander stated quickly.

“Some tea, then.”

“No.”

“How am I to be your wife and Duchess if you do not tell me what to do!” She exclaimed, her pink cheeks turning crimson as her brown eyes narrowed.

Xander paused, accepting the reality of her words. He had given her no direction on anything, other than to lean on Mrs. Gaines. But, what else could he offer her?

“I am afraid that is something you will have to figure out on your own,” he managed to say, unable to take her fierce gaze any longer.

Having nothing else to say, Xander headed to the door, directly to her left. His hand made it around the knob before Eleanor’s hands pressed against his chest and pushed. The heat of her touch seeped through his jacket and shirt, searing against his bare chest like a brand. Arousal quickly followed- a primal need urging him to push her against the wall and claim her.

“You may not like me but I am not your prisoner,” she stated emphatically, “And you may not treat me as such no matter what you think of me. I do not know what barrel my father has you over, and I presently do not care. I do not deserve to feel the disdain you have for him!”

A pain bloomed in Xander’s chest and guilt poured from it. The urge to crush her to him, to kiss her lips again and turn those biting words into whimpers roared through him so intensely he had to stop himself from shaking. Disdain? Yes, he had disdain for her, but not for the reason she thought. At least, not anymore.

“I apologize that your father did not pick a more romantic man to coerce,” he found himself saying, “But I will not change my life for you, or any other. My life, my responsibilities are to this land and to my family. There is room for nothing else. Now, remove your hands, and let me pass.”

Anger glittered in Eleanor’s golden eyes as static seemed to gather between them, but instead of taking her hands off him, she gave him a surprising shove, putting him against the wall. His body responded immediately and he let out a growl as he bared his teeth.

“You may intimidate everyone around you, Your Grace,” Eleanor whispered, rising on her toes as she drew her face close to his, “But you do not intimidate me.”

She kissed him then. Not deeply or even with desire. This kiss was a symbol; a show of her strength and courage. She was saying she would not fall before him like all of the others; that she would not comply.

Eleanor then left his study without another word, opening the door and slamming it shut behind her. Alone once more, Xander let out a groan of frustration and stalked to his desk. With disgust, he threw his attaché down, fell into his chair, and untied his trousers.

Damn her, he thought, touching himself as he imagined her beneath him. His fantasies were vivid as he worked his shaft, release came quickly. He suspected it was accelerated by his rage, and once he cleaned up, he grabbed his attaché and finally left his study.

“Are you ready to go, Your Grace?” Jared asked as they met in the foyer.

Xander threw him a commanding look in answer, and his valet quickly fell in step with him.

“Is there anything I can do, Your Grace?” Jared asked as they climbed into the carriage.

“Yes,” Xander barked, formulating a plan. “What is my schedule like for the next week or so?”

“Not so bad, Your Grace,” Jared replied, looking through the duke’s diary. “Just two meetings today in town and another on Thursday in Surrey.”

“Find something for me to do,” Xander demanded as the carriage began to roll. “I want my schedule full from morning to night with meetings at least a day away.”

Jared gave him a puzzling look.

“But Your Grace, you only just got married...”

“Just do it,” Xander growled, turning to the window.

Page 10

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Over A Week Later

“Do you truly like it or are you just being nice?” Eleanor asked, looking at her friends dubiously.

“Eleanor, please,” Cordelia laughed as she waved her arm around the largest sitting room in the Hall. “Look at all of this! It is absolutely gorgeous!”

“You truly do have quite the talent for decorating,” Marina praised, delicately plucking a large, perfect, pink peony from the golden vase of many. “These flowers are absolutely vivid.”

“Why don’t our flowers grow like this in London?” Penelope asked, playing the bright arrangement on their tea table.

“We are not that far from London. Mrs. Gaines says it is because of Larsen’s waters and their special properties. They make them brighter than most. I thought bringing some inside could add a little light and warmth to the place.”

Though the flowers had indeed brought in just that, it was not the only change she had made in the whole week that her husband had been gone. In fact, she had made quite a few. She had had some curtains changed, some furniture moved, and had the more sinister-looking tapestries rehung in the Hall’s armory.

“Tell us, darling,” Cordelia said as the three of them joined Penelope back at the table. “Aside from these lovely new touches to your new home- how are you doing as a married woman?”

“Yes, dearest, how is married life treating you?” Penelope asked, her tone almost worried.

Her dear friend, the Duchess of Huxton, had only been married to the notorious ‘Cruel Duke’ for a year. Penelope had somehow found a way into his heart and now had the man wrapped around her pinky finger. Eleanor had had her doubts about the union at first, but now it was clear that they had found a true love match in one another.

She knew that Penelope wished that for her too, but with Xander’s constant absence, it was an impossible feat. Eleanor let out a dry laugh, feeling a sliver of hurt slide through her. No, her and Xander’s story would not turn out like Rhys and Penny’s.

“He truly is heartless, my husband,” she admitted, shaking her head and blinking her eyes rapidly. Around her, all of her friends gasped, and she felt all three of them put their hands over hers.

“Completely so?” Marina asked, her eyes full of sympathy as she looked at Eleanor.

“Could he not be persuaded or changed a bit?” Penelope gently offered. “You know, Rhysand—”

“Yes, completely, and no, he could not,” Eleanor replied, feeling both detached and obsessed at the same time. It was maddening. “This... farce must come to an end. I am going to have this marriage annulled.”

Penelope, Marina, and Cordelia all looked at her as if she had gone mad. They all turned to one another, sharing a concerned glance, and then Marina reached for Eleanor’s hand.

“Darling,” she stated, her tone coddling, “You are aware that you cannot “just annul”

the marriage, are you not? His Grace must be the one to petition for it and even then-”

“I am not a fool, Marina,” Eleanor shot back in exasperation, pulling her hand away. “I know what has to happen. And while I may not be the one to orchestrate it, I have a plan. Once he sees we are a poor match, he will want me as far from him as possible.”

“Eleanor, come now,” Penelope urged, “You must give the marriage more time! Rhys was distant at first, too, but now...”

“Xander is not Rhysand,” Eleanor stated emphatically, then sighed as she rubbed the bridge of her nose. “You think I want to do this?” She asked, looking from friend to another. “You think I have not tried to find happiness with this arrangement? This is a failure on my part, too, and I feel it heavily every day. But it must end.”

“Does he hold no affection for you at all?” Cordelia asked, her delicate brow furrowed with sadness.

Eleanor felt tears threaten to prick at her eyes, but she pushed them down and steeled herself from the heartache and loneliness that she felt. She would not cry for this man. And she would not pity herself.

“We have had moments where I thought he could possibly feel something,” she replied matter-of-factly. “But I have only seen him once since our wedding night, and he left me to go on business.”

“No doubt taking care of something very important, my dear,” the Dowager Duchess answered, announcing her presence.

Eleanor paled as she looked toward Xander’s grandmother, fearing what she might have heard, but relaxed when she saw that the doors to the room had only just

opened. Collecting herself, Eleanor and her friends rose to their feet to curtsy. As she rose, she noticed that the Dowager Duchess was looking more at the room than them.

“What has happened in here?” Margaret asked, her brow furrowing as she seemed to study every inch of space.

Eleanor felt worried as her friends all looked at her timidly.

“Well...” she began, nearly stuttering. It had been a week since she had seen Xander’s grandmother and her curt tone caught her off guard. “I have been left to my own whims this week,” Eleanor explained, “so I thought I would rearrange some things. A little here and there to brighten up the space.”

“Hmm.” The Dowager hummed, “My grandson is very particular about his things, child. I am not sure he will be too happy with this new... ‘lighter’ look of things.”

“Well then, he can certainly come to speak to me about it,” Eleanor replied, gathering her courage, “But this is my home now, too, not just his. We shall have to find a compromise.”

The Dowager’s eyes snapped back at Eleanor as she still wore a rigid frown. Then, the old woman smirked, grinned, and then laughed rather loudly.

“Oh, I knew it,” the Dowager laughed. “I just knew you would do very well here.”

Surprised, Eleanor stood still and met her friends’ questioning glances as Margaret came to hug her tightly. They all looked back at her, shocked at first, then all of them began to giggle. It was clear now that Eleanor had just passed some sort of test, and the Dowager was quite happy about it.

“Would you join us for some tea?” Eleanor asked, happy that the Dowager had arrived.

Just as the woman was saying yes, the double doors to the sitting room suddenly flew open. It startled them all, but when Eleanor saw her husband’s silver gaze coming straight toward her, she felt anger instead of fear. She straightened her shoulders, raised her chin, and walked up to him with the same purposeful stride.

“What have you done?” He barked, coming so close she could have brushed her nose against his chest. “What is the meaning of all this?”

“Since I was left alone by my husband? Whatever I wanted. I am the lady of this house by your decree,” she replied matter-of-factly.

Her honey eyes remained locked on his glaring molten stare, not giving him an ounce of intimidation. However... as they stood this close, she could see the handsome lines on his face; smell his masculine scent, she felt something... else .

A sound, something more beast than man, left Xander’s chest.

“I can see you have had the time of it,” he scoffed, stepping back to wave his hand toward the colorful flower-patterned tapestries. “Where are the pieces from before?”

“In the armory,” she replied coolly, crossing her arms.

Xander’s eyes flew to the motion and he glowered as if taking the stance as a hostile move. He moved close again, this time, putting his hands on her arms and sending a shock through both of them so intense they both silently gasped.

“Uncross them,” he commanded after seemingly struggling to find his voice. He brought his burning gaze slowly up to hers once more and suddenly Eleanor felt a

rush of warmth spread over her inner thighs.

“Alexander James Harrison, you stop this ungentlemanly display this instant!” The Dowager Duchess ordered, her voice full of venom.

Against her will, Eleanor’s cheeks filled with flames as Xander kept her gaze and let her go. She felt her body tremble as she was released, her knees suddenly weak and her breath unsteady. Eventually, Xander dragged his eyes from hers and took a few more steps back before turning his full attention to his grandmother.

“Eleanor,” the Dowager sighed, turning an apologetic look toward her granddaughter-in-law. “Would you and your friends please give us some privacy? The west tulip gardens are particularly lovely this time of day. Perhaps a walk in the air would be the just the thing.”

Eleanor nodded as she felt her three friends gather around her. Her body was still reacting to Xander’s small touch, and it was taking an annoyingly long time to refocus. With whispered farewells, the four of them quickly left Xander and his grandmother to talk.

“What did you do with him?” His grandmother demanded as soon as Eleanor and her friends had left.

“Him who?” Xander asked bitterly, walking off to the drink cart.

“Do not be coy with me, boy,” Margaret scolded, hobbling right behind him. “Your bride might not know why you have been gone but I do. Richard is not here. I checked in every house we own and he is nowhere to be found. What have you done with him?”

“Richard,” Xander stated in a hard tone as he poured some whiskey, “Is now a

proud member of His Majesty's Navy. I had to take a few days to make sure he could not run away before his first deployment. Then I had some other matters to attend to."

"You did what?" His grandmother hissed, coming at him with her cane.

Xander caught it before it could land on the bruise he still sported from Rhys's cheap shot, and gently put the tip of the cane back to the ground. He did not want to hurt his grandmother, but he was not going to put up with her antics either.

"Do not do that again," he warned, before slowly draining his glass.

"Richard is not perfect," Margaret said in a trembling voice, "But he is still family. You are the head of this house and this Dukedom, Xander, and that means we all fall under your protection whether you like it or not."

Xander let out a bitter laugh and poured himself another.

"I am protecting Richard," he assured her, his tone like grit, "In the Navy, he can disappear and still have a good life. He has made too many mistakes here. It is to the point where I am paying too high a price for his stupidity, and it must stop. The boy needs to learn how to grow up and be a man."

"What are you talking about?" His grandmother asked, coming around to look at his face. He rolled his eyes and went to take a drink from his glass when Margaret's clawlike hand shot out and stole it from him. He looked at her in disbelief as she stared right into his eyes, and took the shot without so much as a cough.

"Do not play with me, boy," Margaret threatened, rising to her full height as she slammed the glass down. "You forget who was by your grandfather's side with pride when he ruled. Who helped you when you first took over his responsibilities? Tell me. What have you been keeping from me?"

“Fine,” Xander agreed, waving his grandmother to a seat, too weary to keep the secret any longer. “I shall be happy to explain. You see, darling little Richard wrote some very compromising letters that are currently being used to blackmail me.”

“What?” Margaret breathed, her eyes wide as she finally sank into the chair.

“That is what all of this has been about,” Xander confessed, waving his arm toward the newly changed scenery. “The marriage. Richard going into the Navy. It is all because Victor Langley has these letters. I need Richard away so I do not have to worry about him. And I need to be away from Eleanor because our wedding must be annulled after I find a way to destroy this evidence.”

“No,” Margaret gasped, shaking her head. “Xander, the circumstances are horrible, yes, but Eleanor is a wonderful young lady! She is not responsible for her father’s actions! I am sure she does not even know.

“She does not,” he confirmed quickly.

“Precisely! She will be a lovely duchess and a wonderful mother to your children.

“She needs something I cannot provide!” He did not mean to snarl the words, but it came out that way all the same. The now-familiar sense of guilt then resurfaced and he turned to the window. Margaret said nothing to his outburst, only giving him a pitying look.

He brought his fingertips to his temples and rubbed them as closed his eyes. He did not love Eleanor. It was true. But he could not deny the way his body responded to her presence. Each and every time she came near him, every muscle tightened, every breath became difficult. Thought was nearly impossible; save for fantasies of what she would feel like beneath him; her legs wrapped tightly around his hips as those honey-brown eyes looked at him with so much-

Xander let out a ragged sigh, shaking his head to erase yet another vividly erotic image of his wife, and walked away from his grandmother.

“Go back to London, Grandmother.”

“ A nother one?”

Xander looked quizzically at the piles of rocks sitting atop the candle stands in the hallway; wondering where they had all come from. It was the seventh pile he had found since he had got home that morning. He picked one up, trying to fathom why they were there and where else he might find them.

Hearing the click of heels, Xander lifted his head from his discovery, and dropped the rock; the heavy thing narrowly missing his foot. But he did not notice. Not with what was walking toward him.

Eleanor's hourglass figure was accentuated by the tight yet garish purple corset she was wearing; making the swell of her ample breasts sway in the rhythm of her footsteps. Then there was the skirt. A burnt orange fabric that had a long slit that traveled up the delicious expanse of Eleanor's long, naked left leg and thigh.

It took Xander a moment to pull his eyes away from all of the ways his wife's improper gown highlighted the enticing details of her figure, but when he finally looked up at her, he stifled a laugh by putting a hand over his mouth and his other arm around his waist.

“My, my, look at you,” he said with a whistle.

“You like it, Your Grace?” She asked sweetly, grinning far too wide. Suddenly realizing what Eleanor was trying to do, he let out a genuine laugh and nodded.

“I do, actually,” he admitted, walking a small circle around her as he rubbed his

bottom lip.

“It is quite- well, it is quite unique, is it not?” He asked, stopping when he came directly in front of the split in her skirt. Unable to help himself, he reached out, and ran his knuckles softly against the naked flesh, and immediately felt her thigh tremble. Xander could have sworn he heard her gasp next, which only satisfied him more.

“I particularly like this part,” he murmured, dragging his eyes up to hers.

Eleanor’s honey-brown eyes were bright with arousal and frustration- two feelings he understood very well. She seemed to battle with which one to choose for a moment before landing on frustration.

“You are not supposed to like it,” she pouted, walking away from him.

“Well, I do,” Xander replied arrogantly with a shrug as he fell in step behind her. “Where are you going dressed like that?”

Eleanor spun around on him to answer, but a commotion suddenly sprang from around the corner, and Xander’s smile dropped.

“My lady, please, you must wait to be announced!” The butler could be heard pleading.

“I do not have to wait to see my sister, step aside!” A woman’s shrill voice boomed next.

“Oh no,” Eleanor suddenly groaned as Edna turned the corner and saw them.

Xander looked quickly back at her, realizing what was about to happen. His wife had

probably planned to trick him into convincing him into an annulment with her antics, but she could not have possibly predicted her sister's unscheduled visit.

"What in Heaven's name are you doing, Eleanor?" Edna seethed, her eyes growing beady and sharp as she walked toward Eleanor. "Look at you! This is not how a duchess is to act!"

"Let go of me," Eleanor warned as Edna grabbed a hold of her arm.

"Are you trying to ruin this for all of us?" Edna hissed, dragging Eleanor forward. "What have you done to your clothes? To your face? Oh, God, your hair! Get upstairs this instant!"

Xander had debated whether or not to get involved with what was clearly a family matter, but when he saw the look of pure horror in Eleanor's eyes, he suddenly found himself in motion.

"Lady Wilten, you will let go of my wife," Xander demanded, stepping in front of Edna before she could make another move.

Edna's eyes widened with fear and shock and she began to stammer.

"Y-your Grace! This- this is not right- she knows-she-"

"She is the lady of this house and may do whatever she likes," he stated, staring her down. Edna's mouth opened and closed like a fish gasping for air on land, but Xander continued.

"You are not welcome in our home. Not today. Turn around and leave at once or the butler you just berated has my full blessing to get you out of here however he sees fit."

“But I rode for two hours to get here!” Edna burst out, finally able to speak. “I cannot just turn back!”

From his vest pocket, Xander pulled out his billfold and placed whatever was inside in Edna’s hands.

“There is an inn in town that will refresh your horses and has decent food. If you leave now, you will be home by nightfall.”

Eyes alight with greed, Edna quickly clenched her fist around the stack of notes and nodded. She attempted to toss one more glare at Eleanor before she left, but Xander moved with her, his gaze locking her in and forbidding such action. Without a word, she then turned on her heel and left, the butler following closely behind to ensure her exit.

Xander waited until Edna’s footsteps could no longer be heard before he turned back to Eleanor. Her eyes were no longer bright with mischief, and she looked almost ashamed of herself. Unable to take it, Xander cleared his throat and glanced away.

“Thank you,” she whispered, sounding so sad it bothered him.

“I do not like disrespect,” he stated simply. He should leave, he felt, to let her have some space, but he could not bring himself to. He hated seeing her sad. Even if she tried her best to have him annul their marriage, he would only do so once he had destroyed all the letters.

“So, rocks,” he said, picking up one from a nearby table to change the subject. “They are yours, I take it?”

“Yes,” she admitted, her voice hollow. “I like them.”

“Truly?” Xander asked. He kept his eyes on the rock he was holding but turned his body toward her. “Or is it just part of this little scheme you are trying to pull?”

“How did you...?”

Eleanor laughed and rolled her eyes, her true self coming back to him a little bit.

“I actually do like them,” Eleanor admitted, picking up one from the same pile. She had reached for a smooth, flat, black pebble the size of her palm. “I cannot say why, but I find them as beautiful as flowers.”

“Hmmm,” Xander murmured, sparing a glance toward her. She put the stone down, then turned away from him and toward the nearest wall.

“This space is too blank,” she declared, waving a hand at it as she tried to go back to her little act. “I think I shall do some painting. Add some flowers. Perhaps a large pony lying amongst them.” She pointed to no space in particular on the large blank canvas. “Right there.”

Xander sighed and put his own rock down, no longer having fun with this game.

“Honey, come. Stop with this,” he pleaded, not realizing he had just used her pet name in such a desperate tone. “You are not a madwoman as you are so clearly trying to pretend to be. What is this about?”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” She asked, suddenly bringing her eyes up to him curiously.

Damn it, he cursed silently.

“Never the matter,” he uttered dismissively, “Talk to me.”

Whatever pretense Eleanor had left seemed to wither, and her delicate shoulders sagged under some invisible pressure.

“You do not want to be married to me, do you?” She asked bluntly. “I thought maybe it was some act of desperation from your family. Needing a noblewoman to bear an heir. But it is not that, is it? I am just a means to some sort of mysterious end, am I not?”

Xander looked back at her, impressed by her perceptiveness.

“Yes,” he confessed. She nodded, looking relieved to know that she had been right.

“I had thought,” she went on, a sad smile touching her lips, “in the beginning, that there was something between us. Not love, to be sure, but something. Well, I am many things, Your Grace, but I am not arrogant. I am able to see my mistakes. I see now I imagined it all. So, since I cannot convince you out of this union, I have a proposal.”

“Can it wait until we get to my study?” He asked calmly. His question and the casual way he stated it seemed to throw Eleanor off guard, which made his lips almost twitch into a smile.

“I suppose,” she agreed after a moment.

“Good,” he said, taking her hand and walking. “It is just around the corner.”

The two of them walked quickly, their hands naturally tightening around one another as if they both needed the small touch.

“Well?” Xander asked when they were in his study. They were still standing by the door, his left hand and her right one still locked together. Eleanor looked up at him,

woefully this time, and it caused a wince in his body that, for a man assumed to have no feelings, he was not proud of.

“Let us annul in secret,” she said at last, her voice barely above her whisper. “Today.”

Xander looked back at her silently, his gaze hardening. There it was, out in the open for both of them. And yet, he still found himself saying...

“No.”

“No one has to know,” she pushed. “I can slip away. Penelope and Rhysand will surely allow me to stay in their home until I can figure things out. Then perhaps I will find a way to Paris or something. We will both be free.”

Xander was not ready for the intensity of emotion that hit him as Eleanor said this. Yes, he had been working night and day to get his hands on those letters so he could accomplish this very thing. Yet when Eleanor brought it up, it immediately released something dark and possessive inside of him.

With ease, Xander captured Eleanor’s hands with just one of his and had her pinned up against the door in a second. She gasped as his eyes locked on hers and struggled against his hold.

“Stay still,” he commanded, his voice a low growl as he brought his free hand up to the delicate curve of her jaw and tilted her chin up with just the touch of two fingertips.

Whether she liked it or not, Eleanor’s body obeyed him, and she went slack against the wall; putting all of her weight onto it and Xander’s hold.

“We handle this my way,” he went on, “The safest place for you is here right now,

whether that makes you happy or not. I will handle this. I just need more time.”

“Tell me what there is to handle,” Eleanor breathed, her eyes searching his. “Maybe I can help.”

“Absolutely not,” he replied quickly, shaking his head. “You will stay here, and you will act the part of a content housewife until I can get this handled.”

“Just like you cannot pretend to love, I cannot pretend to be happy or content,” Eleanor replied, her tone so calm and wise it irritated him.

“Why are you so stubborn?”

“You cannot control everything, Your Grace,” she pressed on, searching his eyes without fear. “If you want me to play a part, you must give me the inspiration to do so.”

“Inspiration?” Xander asked, feeling a stir in his groin as his mind exploded with filthy, erotic thoughts.

He had been holding back for ten days, doing everything he could to keep distracted from how much he fantasized about her, but she plagued every single one of his thoughts. It was not just her beauty that made his body ache with need either, but the way she stood up to him. Her fearlessness struck a competitive yet possessive nerve in him that he did not quite know how to handle.

“Inspiration, yes,” Eleanor breathed, her right brow arching slightly as her pupils widened with need.

With a groan, Xander’s lips claimed possession of her mouth as his hand slipped from her chin to her throat; reveling the way he could feel her pulse vibrate on his

fingertips when she moaned. He pressed closer against her until there was no way space between him, her, or the door.

Eleanor gave in to him immediately, letting him take the lead with long, caressing kisses to her lips and gentle but urgent prodding into her mouth when his tongue was ready to taste her. Eleanor moaned once more as he massaged his tongue against hers, making the hardness between his legs grow to a painful degree.

Wanting more, Xander released Eleanor's throat, letting his fingertips caress gently down the soft hills of her bosom, over the waist of her corset, and down to the high split in her skirt. Eleanor gasped as his fingers wrapped around her naked thigh, and Xander had to let out a muttered curse as he found her soft flesh slick and warm.

"If you want me to stop, simply say the word."

He pulled away from the kiss, breathing heavily, and used his temple to nudge Eleanor's head to the side so that he could taste her neck.

"Say it." She immediately shivered when his teeth scraped a particular spot, and when he did it again, she let out a mewl and buckled. "You cannot, can you, Honey?"

Eleanor's teeth sank into her bottom lip, defiance dancing in her eyes. "You are a heartless rake."

Feeling himself lose control, Xander released Eleanor's wrists so that he could brace a hand on each of her hips, and he went to his knees. With efficient strokes of his fingers, the already torn fabric was shredded away from her lower belly, Xander let out another whispered curse as he realized she had worn no undergarments beneath the monstrosity. He could clearly see her delicate pink petals, already engorged and glistening, and the beautiful little ruby nestled in its folds was practically begging for his attention.

“I am a heartless rake, yet you are dripping all over for me. What does that say about you?”

Losing all willpower, he dipped his mouth toward his own personal honeypot. Just as he had dreamed, Eleanor’s pleasure fed the gnawing craving that had been driving him mad, and he began to feast on her with fervor.

“Answer me, Honey.” Command hardened his voice into steel, sending Eleanor into heightened ecstasy.

Her eyelashes fluttered and her body trembled as she panted helplessly; Xander’s firm grip was the only thing keeping her on her feet. She had no idea what Xander was about when he had gone to his knees, but the moment she felt his warm, wet tongue slide between her thighs, she realized she did not care.

“If you do not say it, I will.” He slowly pushed two fingers inside of her. “It means that you are my wife, and you will do as I say.”

Pleasure unlike any other coursed through her as Xander’s tongue continued to cast a trance over her entire body, and she felt a part of herself let go.

“You do not even love me,” Eleanor panted amidst her pleasure.

“Love has nothing to do with this, Honey.”

Xander thrust his fingers inside her again and she threw her head back, mad with pleasure. Eleanor pressed her lips together tightly. She had been so focused on what Xander was doing she had not realized she had been letting out continual moans. But, she could not help it. There was a pressure building deep in her lower belly, growing with each flick of his tongue.

“Hush, sweetheart,” Xander purred, pulling back just enough to give her a reprimanding smack to her backside. “We cannot have the whole household hearing you.”

“My Lady!” Mrs. Gaines’s voice called from the hallway. “My Lady, a servant heard screaming, are you all right? Where are you?”

“Time has run out,” Xander chuckled, darkly, swirling his thumb teasingly around her clitoris.

“What?” She panted, not sure what he meant.

“That’s it. Give into it, Honey,” he coaxed, dipping his tongue inside her again, “let me feel you come for me.”

As Xander’s tongue delved deep inside of her, his thumb moved faster, building so much pressure that Eleanor found herself grabbing fistfuls of his hair for leverage.

“My Lady!” Mrs. Gaines’s voice rang again, this time closer.

“Now,” Xander commanded, suddenly thrusting his fingers between her wet folds again.

Eleanor’s squeezed shut and her back arched as her moans caught in her throat. The pressure building in her lower belly suddenly broke through whatever dam that kept it in place, and a great flood of release and wetness rushed from her inner thighs.

“Good girl,” Xander groaned, pressing his face further into her. With calm hands, he reached up and delicately untangled Eleanor’s fingers from his hair.

Unable to think, unable to move, Eleanor only watched and panted as Xander slowly

rose to his feet. His eyes locked on hers, he slowly drew a hand up to his mouth, and with the pad of his thumb, wiped his bottom lip.

A whimper was all Eleanor could produce before Xander's hands cupped her cheeks and he pulled her in for one more deep kiss. Wanting more, she moved to wrap her arms around his neck, but Xander's hand caught her wrists, and brought them back down.

"I think that is enough inspiration for now," he said, his voice sounding extremely strained.

Eleanor searched his face as he pulled back, noting how vexed he looked; how his entire body was trembling. She wanted to reach for him again, to pull him back for another kiss, but before she could, he was moving her to the side, and opening the door.

"Mrs. Gaines," Xander called, throwing Eleanor one more heated glance before he walked away. "I believe my wife is quite vexed. It would do her good to have a soothing bath."

Mrs. Gaines hurried past Xander and into his study and gasped as she saw Eleanor in her torn-up gown and mussed-up appearance.

"Good heavens, Your Grace!" Mrs. Gaines exclaimed, leading her out. "What happened to you?"

"I do not know," Eleanor whispered honestly. Though, she was sure they were referring to two entirely different things.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

“ I thought you said you were going to paint flowers all over these walls?” Cordelia asked, her eyes searching the pristine walls of the Larsen Hall.

The ball was in full swing and highly attended. Eleanor had worked tirelessly to make it a point of pride. If she was going to stay and play a part, she was going to do it well. She turned to her friend, amused to see that she appeared disappointed.

“No,” she replied, feeling a blush tinge her cheeks at the last time she had tried such a thing. “I have decided to put such childish things behind me. Besides, this ball is important to the Harrison name, and as a Harrison now, it is my responsibility to see that it goes well.”

“My, my,” Marina laughed, taking her arm as the three of them joined the mass of finely dressed nobles, “Look who is all mature.”

Eleanor smiled at her friend’s little jab. If she only knew.

“Oh, dear,” Penelope breathed, hiding her mouth with her champagne glass as her eyes darted toward the entrance. “Eleanor, it looks as if your family has arrived.”

Eleanor turned at once to the hall’s main entrance and indeed saw her father, mother, sister, and brother-in-law. It was the first time she had seen Edna since Xander had paid her to leave. Seeing them all now, she realized she could have gone a bit longer without a visit.

“The three of you should go on,” Eleanor encouraged, turning to her friends with a bright smile. “The Dowager is around here somewhere and you all always bring her

such joy.”

“Do you want Rhys to come save you in a few minutes?” Penelope asked sincerely.

“He is in the cigar room, but I can have him here immediately.”

“I do not know what I would do without you, girls,” Eleanor laughed, giving the three of them a gentle push, “But I shall be fine. Please, go enjoy the party.”

After seeing her friends off, Eleanor turned back toward the crowd and saw that her family was already making their way toward her. She scanned the great room quickly, hoping to spot Xander. But he was nowhere to be found; no doubt closing down some important deal or another. She had not seen him since he had left her in his study and had coordinated the ball with the Dowager and the staff alone.

She wished she had time to run to her rooms and check herself, but there was no time. For the ball, she had chosen to adorn a deep green gown with capped sleeves and black lace trim. Her arms had been adorned with elbow-length white-satin gloves and her circle of brown curls cushioned a small diamond-crested tiara that the Dowager had kindly allowed her to borrow.

“Mama, Papa,” she greeted timidly, curtsying to them respectfully as they approached. “Thank you so much for accepting our invitation.”

She then turned to Edna with a pleading glance.

“Sister,” she greeted as cheerfully as possible. “Good to see you again.”

Edna sniffed, pulled her husband’s arm closer to her, and said nothing.

“You have been lazy,” Her mother decreed, throwing a bored glance around the room.

“I beg your pardon?” Eleanor asked, feeling her cheeks grow hot with embarrassment.

“Nary a soul in this room knows who we are, Eleanor,” Laura Langley stated accusingly. “They do not know your name; they do not even know you. You were supposed to be helping your father further our family’s status, daughter, and you are failing.”

Eleanor looked from her mother’s disappointed face to her father’s, not at all aware of what they were referring to.

“I am afraid I had not realized that was a task required of me,” she said slowly, trying to comprehend.

Her father scoffed and rolled his eyes.

“What else do you think this marriage of yours was for?” He asked condescendingly.

Eleanor felt her father’s coarse words like a slap on the face, and as she was struggling to keep herself composed, she felt a sudden presence at her back. Her hurt changing to curiosity, she watched as all four sets of her family member’s eyes rose slowly above her head. Then as she heard Xander’s voice, and felt his warm breath tickle over the back of her bare neck, she suddenly knew.

“Apologies, Honey,” Xander purred in Eleanor’s ear, his eyes steady on Victor Langley. “I was showing the Duke of Huxton the armory and we got distracted.”

Straightening back up to his full height, Xander placed his hands on Eleanor’s shoulders and smiled frighteningly at his blackmailers. In front of him, Eleanor turned her head to look at him, her brown eyes wide with gratitude and surprise.

“It is all right, dearest,” she managed to say, a smile tugging across her lips. “My parents were just asking about my new responsibilities as a duchess.”

“Yes,” Xander stated quickly, staring Victor down. “She has been quite busy fulfilling her duties to our family.” He furrowed his brow slightly, feigning concern. “I pray it did not interrupt any of your plans. However, a duchess ranks far above any of you, does she not?”

Xander felt a deep satisfaction as he saw Eleanor’s family squirm like the very worms they were, and turned his wife around in his arms.

“I apologize for not being here to assist you for our first ball,” he told her, meeting her eyes. “But you did wonderfully without me. You were right about the redecorating. I have never seen this room look brighter.”

A look of pure relief shone through Eleanor’s eyes at this recognition, and she smiled up at him thankfully.

“Excuse me, son,” Victor mumbled.

“Your Grace,” Xander snapped, turning his eyes sharply to Eleanor’s Father. “You shall refer to me as Your Grace.”

Victor flinched at the steeliness of his voice, then shot him a dirty look. Xander looked back coolly, not at all bothered by the man’s discomfort.

“Your Grace,” Victor went on, trying to sound unfazed, “It has been over two weeks and I have still been denied entry at White’s. I am willing to be patient with such a delay but surely you will assist me in gaining entrance.”

Xander’s amusement faded as Victor’s boldness moved from annoying to downright

disrespectful.

“I will do no such thing,” Xander, retorted, moving Eleanor behind him so he could meet Victor eye to eye.

“That was our deal,” Victor hissed.

“You really want to bring that up now?” Xander asked, clenching his fists.

“The guests, Xander,” Eleanor whispered from behind him.

After a moment of inner struggle, Xander dragged his glare away from Victor and looked toward the full room. Most everyone was preoccupied with lively talk and leisure, but a few curious faces had already turned their way.

“Enjoy your stay in Larsen,” Xander stated with finality, turning his gaze back to Victor. “Now if you will excuse us, my wife and I need to greet our other guests.”

“We will speak again, Your Grace,” Victor called adamantly after him.

“As you say,” Xander quipped, continuing to lead Eleanor away.

They were soon surrounded by throngs of people, wanting to meet Eleanor and greet him as they passed. He had not lied that they needed to make the rounds. Xander knew his reputation as a dangerous man, and almost everyone was curious to see who was bold enough to marry him.

“You should not have done that,” Eleanor murmured when they were finally able to break away from the crowd.

“It needed to be done,” Xander stated, lifting two glasses of champagne off of a

nearby tray and handing one to her. “We need to appear as normal a couple as possible and introduce ourselves.”

“Not that,” Eleanor replied testily, “I mean with my father. I know you do not think much of him, but you should not vex him like that. He is more dangerous than most might think.”

Xander nearly choked on his champagne as he heard this, sputtering some over his chin as he laughed.

“I am afraid of very few things, Honey,” he scoffed, looking down at her. “Your father is not one of them.”

“Be careful, Xander,” she warned, looking at him seriously.

“He has played all of his cards,” Xander said with a shrug. “He has nothing else.”

Eleanor’s beautiful face furrowed into a frown as she once more crossed her arms at him again.

“I truly wish you would take me seriously sometimes,” she said in irritation.

“What makes you think I do not?” Xander quipped, feeling surprisingly in a good mood.

Eleanor opened her mouth to speak, but instead, she let out a sound of frustration and shook her head.

“No,” she stated adamantly.

“No, what?” Xander chuckled, his brow lifting in surprise.

“I am not arguing with you again. Not here. We need to call a truce.”

“I did not know we were at war,” he teased.

When his wife only gave him an annoyed look, he laughed and quickly agreed.

“All right, all right,” he coaxed, offering his hand. “I cannot have my wife seen mad at me at our first ball. Can you imagine the scandal?”

“I thought you did not care about what people think of you.”

When Eleanor did not look impressed, he changed his tactics.

“Dance with me,” he implored sincerely, leaving his hand extended.

She looked him up and dubiously, still unsure.

“You? Dance?”

“Quite well, actually,” Xander admitted. “Another one of Grandmother’s required lessons. Allow me to prove it to you?”

After looking him up and down once more, Eleanor finally took his hand, and with a smile, he led her to the dance floor.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

“Lady Cambell shall be expecting us for tea later today.”

“Mama, we have already paid three visits this very afternoon. I am sure my guests need me to tend to them as well.”

“This has been an absolutely horrid trip,” Laura Langley seethed, throwing a disgusted look at Eleanor. “We have been here for days and what do you do to help us? Nothing!”

“I tried to tell you, Mama,” Edna said snarkily from behind her mother’s shoulder.

“I am sorry to disappoint you, Mama but I am exhausted,” Eleanor stated, pushing through another wave of dizziness. The mere presence of her family was causing her heart to race and her breathing to shorten. And the more days they were staying with them, the worse she felt.

“You are full of excuses, Eleanor! I said-”

I should not have extended the invitation to the house party.

“Mrs. Langley, Lady Wilten,” Penelope greeted politely, stepping between her friend and her family, “There you are. I have been looking everywhere for you! You simply must come to meet my aunt; she is a Viscountess who hosts a salon for Ladies every third Thursday. She would love to meet you.”

Laura and Edna’s eyes alighted with excitement, and without another word toward Eleanor, they followed Penelope like flies to a carcass. Eleanor felt another wave of

fatigue wash over her as she turned away from her mother and sister, and was met with an insistent Marina holding a cup of tea for her.

“Drink something,” she encouraged. “Eat something as well. You have barely touched any food these last few days, Eleanor!”

“I do not want it!” Eleanor insisted, pushing away the tea cup and saucer Marina was trying to push on her. “Food or tea.”

“It is heavy with brandy,” Marina whispered, pushing the cup toward her again. “Trust me, you need it.”

Wearily, Eleanor took the teacup and took a long sip; feeling the immediate calming effects of the peach liquor. It helped- but only a little. It was day three of her parents’ visit and her resolve was wearing thin. Thus far, her family had tried their hardest to make themselves important among the Ton and had failed miserably.

Her father was too pompous, and her mother and sister too eager to be the center of attention. It caused most peers to put a wide berth between them; only refraining from gossip because of Xander’s well-known dark temper for such things. The only one who had not caused a scene thus far was Edna’s husband, William. But it was obvious he was growing bored, and Eleanor had as much faith in him as in her sister.

“Eleanor, darling, are you sure you are all right?” Cordelia asked, leaning forward to study her friend’s face.

“Just a bit exhausted,” Eleanor sighed, dabbing at her forehead with her kerchief. The wind had made the day blessedly cool, but she was still sweating a surprising bit. “Mother and Edna have been dragging me to all of those ladies’ tea functions, you know. Their behavior can be... tedious.”

Cordelia still looked at her worriedly, but she nodded.

“How long is their stay?” She asked next.

“One more day this week, then they wish to return to London at the beginning of August. They want me to throw an end-of-summer ball in London for them.”

The sound of her friend’s voice became muffled as Eleanor suddenly felt a wave of nausea wash over her. She looked up from the table, finding her vision blurry, and began to feel lightheaded as she saw a black figure approaching the table.

“Eleanor?” Xander’s voice sounded thick and distant like he was speaking through water. She tried to look up, but the light burned her eyes.

“Xander,” she sighed before sinking into darkness.

“What happened to her?” Xander’s voice clashed above her like a symbol, making her ears ache. Though her eyes were already closed, she clenched them tighter and tensed her body.

Eleanor was moving, she quickly realized, but it was not her legs that were carrying her. They were hanging uselessly over a well-muscled arm. There was a thumping in her left ear; rapid and powerful, and through her exhaustion, she realized it was her husband’s manic heartbeat. He was scared?

“We do not know,” she heard a voice say behind them. “She was not looking well and she had mentioned that her par-”

“Marina!” Another hissed, then added “ Certain guests were becoming quite vexing. Perhaps it has affected her sleep these past few days.”

“Mrs. Gaines, where have you been!” Xander snapped above her, making her wince and whimper.

Eleanor immediately felt Xander’s arms bring her even closer to him as they kept moving, and then she felt his lips caress against her temple as he whispered, “I am sorry, Honey.”

The sudden tenderness in his voice relaxed Eleanor immediately, and she once more sank fully into his arms.

“Get the physician at once, have him meet us in her quarters,” he then instructed in his normal voice.

“Right away, Your Grace,” Mrs. Gaines stated, her voice, and all the others fading away once more.

Eleanor awoke as the taste and substance of tar filled her mouth, making her choke and sputter. She tried to turn her head away and purge, but she felt a strong hand on her chin and her mouth was forced open. Once more the spoon clanged hard against her teeth, and then a hand was slapped over her mouth so that she was forced to swallow. She coughed and gagged as it went down, and finally forced her eyes open to pleadingly look at the old man with a beak nose and glasses that was holding her down.

“Let go of her!” She heard Xander roar, along with the sounds of restrained struggle.

“She is beyond exhaustion, Your Grace, yet her body keeps trying to awaken.” The physician shouted back matter-of-factly, “Her nervous system is confused. She needs to be put into a deep sleep so her body can heal. A heavy dose will have to do.”

As Eleanor felt a heaviness take over her body and her eyes slowly started to close

again, she heard the sound of someone being pushed, then rapid footsteps before she heard a yelp. Eleanor's eyes fluttered open just enough to see the beak-nosed man being pulled away from above her.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

“Y our Grace,” Mrs. Gaines said gently from behind him.

Xander felt her hand on his shoulder, but he did not move. He had not moved a single inch since he had pulled the chair up to Eleanor’s bed and waited for her to wake.

“Yes, Mrs. Gaines?” He asked, keeping his eyes on his sleeping wife. It had been over a day now and she still had not awoken.

“The Langleys have departed, as you commanded, and the Duke and Duchess of Huxton have agreed to take over hosting the rest of the week’s festivities. Your other guests should be gone by this evening. Everyone is sending their thoughts and prayers to the duchess.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Gaines,” Xander replied, keeping his fingers tightly interlaced as he held them to his chin. “And the physician? Is he all right?”

From behind him, Mrs. Gaines let out a small sigh and he could imagine her shaking his head at him.

“After the staff made him aware of how much worse it could have been, he is feeling quite thankful all he got was a bruise.”

Unable to help himself, a smirk broke through Xander’s set frown. A red mist had settled over his vision when he saw Eleanor being treated so roughly. Then, when the man had so brutally slapped his hand over her mouth, he had lost control and lunged. Two of his servants had caught him and pled for him to allow the doctor to work. But when the physician began to smile down at Eleanor the way he did as he held her

mouth shut, something in him had broken.

He had the two men off of him in an instant and before he knew it Xander was on top of the man. It had taken four servants then to pull him off him, and two others to carry the terrified physician out.

“I want him replaced by tomorrow and I want you to choose who it is,” Xander commanded. “I will not have her touched like that ever again. And be sure they bring laudanum. What kind of physical does not keep a steady supply of laudanum?”

Xander unintentionally added a hard tonal edge to his last sentence, and it caused Eleanor to stir slightly. He froze as she rubbed her cheek against her pillow, sighed slowly, then relaxed again. Only when he saw her resume her deep breathing once more, did he allow himself to do the same.

“It shall be an honor,” Mrs. Gaines replied, keeping her voice down.

Done with the conversation, Xander nodded toward the door and waited for her to leave. When she did not move after several moments, Xander begrudgingly dragged his eyes away from Eleanor and turned around to his longtime housekeeper.

“Is there something else?” He asked, slightly annoyed that she had not left yet.

Mrs. Gaines stared back at him steadily.

“Though I know you to be otherwise, you are not known as a particularly gentle man,” she stated, “You have a dominant side to you that has always been obvious, and your strictness has earned you a reputation, but you have never lost control...”

“Today, Your Grace, that was not so. In all my years as a member of your staff, I have never seen you attack a man the way you attacked that physician. I am not

saying that what he did was right, but you could have hurt him, Your Grace.”

It was true and Xander knew it. If the other servants had not gotten to him, who knows what he would have done? He could not explain it, though. The ferocity that came over him when he saw Eleanor choking- the overall need to protect her. It had consumed him so quickly and so fully that it rendered him a slave to it.

“Have Jared send the physician a couple hundred pounds and the title’s deepest apologies,” he grumbled.

There was not much else he could do. That would have to be enough. That, and, keeping an eye on his temper when it came to his wife.

“I will,” Mrs. Gaines agreed quickly, “But, Your Grace, there is something else.”

“What now, Mrs. Gaines?” Xander sighed wearily.

“Well, typically, Your Grace, it is the staff that would tend to a duchess when she is ill,” Mrs. Gaines explained calmly, “Not the duke.”

Xander stayed silent a moment, his eyes moving back to Eleanor as he began to rub his jaw.

“I will see to it,” he said dismissively, waving her off.

“That is just not how things are done,” she sighed.

“That is how they are being done today,” Xander snapped back in a low tone, careful not to disturb Eleanor again.

Mrs. Gaines gave him an interesting look, one he did not quite know how to read, and

he rolled his eyes.

“Tell me what to do,” he demanded.

“Keep an eye on her temperature,” Mrs. Gaines explained in a motherly fashion, arguing no further. “Do not let her get too hot or too cold. It is almost time for her to be given some water again, and you will need to do that every half hour or so. Gently lift the back of her head and spoon some water between her lips slowly. Be careful, or she will choke.”

Xander nodded quickly.

“And food?” He asked, glancing down at his wife.

“You will have to allow me to bring up some broth from time to time, but water will be the most important.”

“I will allow it. Thank you, Mrs. Gaines,” Xander replied.

“Of course, Your Grace,” She replied but still did not leave. With a sigh, Xander brought his eyes back to her one more time.

“What is it, Mrs. Gaines?” He asked warily.

Mrs. Gaines smirked back at him as she clasped her hands together and shrugged.

“Nothing, Your Grace,” she replied sweetly. “I have just never seen you behave like this before.”

Xander shifted uncomfortably under Mrs. Gaines all-knowing gaze, and he looked away.

“She is under my protection until this mess is sorted,” he grunted out. “That is all.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” She replied quickly, finally making her way toward the door. “I shall leave you to it.”

“No more visitors,” he called out quickly.

Xander waited long after he was left alone before he moved again, and only then it was to step up to Eleanor’s bed. Silently, he looked down at her, taking his time to study her features in the dimming afternoon light. Her lady’s maid and Mrs. Gaines had convinced him to step out of the room long enough to get her out of her gown and into her nightdress, so she now lay in a simple white linen chemise, the white sheets of her bed pulled up to her waist. It had been up to her shoulders, but subtle movements in Eleanor’s slumber had caused the covers to fall lower. Mrs. Gaines had also removed all of the pins from Eleanor’s hair, and her curls spread like silk across the stark white pillows.

Unable to help himself, Xander reached out and captured one of the long, brown curls. Gently rubbing the strands, he found the texture surprisingly silky and soft. Not at all like his, which was thick and coarse. Releasing the curl, his fingertips traveled over the pillow to her pale cream cheek and pale peach lips. His touch was gentle; reverent, as he took in the shallow darkness beneath her eyes and the hollowness in her cheeks.

How long had she been this stressed and he had not noticed? How long had she suffered in silence? Guilt began to rack through him as he realized the flaws in keeping a physical distance between them. He had assumed she would be safe here but he had foolishly underestimated how much her family could compromise that when they appeared.

He was trying to keep Eleanor out of Victor’s blackmailing as much as possible, but

the man seemed intent on using his daughter by whatever means necessary to further his standing. Even to her own detriment. He needed to keep them away from her, he knew that. But he had no idea how.

Eleanor awoke to the feeling of something cool and wet trickling down her throat. She swallowed greedily at the feel of the water and tried to raise her head. It was only then that she realized a large hand was supporting the back of her neck, and she was gently being pulled back down.

“Easy.” Xander’s deep, coaxing voice sounded through the darkness. “Are you coming around, Honey?”

Eleanor moaned softly. Her tongue darted between her lips and she found them papery and dry.

“More,” she pleaded. The spoon came to her lips again as she felt large fingers massage the back of her neck, and she drank again.

“Open those beautiful eyes for me, Honey, and I will give you much more,” Xander promised, his deep tone still warm and coaxing.

Through her fogginess, Eleanor felt a warmth bloom in her veins at the sound of Xander’s deep voice. The husky, slightly gruff tone eased her discomfort, and she felt the urge to obey. Her eyelids felt heavy and stiff at first, but after a moment of fluttering, she finally opened them to see Xander’s cool silver gaze looking down at her. It took a minute for the rest of the details to settle in, but she eventually saw that he was seated in a chair very close to the top of the bed, her head nestled under his hand and against his chest.

“There you are,” he whispered, a look of relief skittering across his face as he stroked her hair. “You have been out for quite a while.”

“What happened?” Her voice came out hoarse again, and with another gentle shush, Xander moved to reposition himself. His hand was still on the back of her neck; he raised her up with ease and slid in behind her. Once he settled, he gently brought her back to rest against his chest.

“Try to drink this for me first,” he insisted, bringing a teacup of water to her lips. “Then I will answer your questions.”

Eleanor tried to put her hands around the cup but Xander’s firm grip kept her from taking it herself, and as he cupped her jaw gently with his free hand, he tipped the teacup with the other; letting a small, steady trickle of water pour into her mouth.

“Better?” He asked when Eleanor’s eyes silently told him she was done.

She nodded, her eyes still glued to him.

Where had he come from? Had he been there when she fainted?

“The physician said you were dangerously exhausted,” Xander informed her as he sat the teacup down. “One of your friends suggested you were not sleeping well lately. Another mentioned you have not been eating. I knew your parents vexed you but I do not believe I quite understood the scale. Why did you not tell me?”

Because you do not care, she thought. Eleanor was not sure at all what was happening. Xander had been distant since the moment they had gotten married and now suddenly he was in bed with her, holding her as if she were precious. Longing and confusion shot through as she looked up at him.

Yes, his little tongue trick had been lovely and deeply pleasurable, but she knew what it was: an appeasement. It certainly worked, and she had enjoyed it immensely, but it did not give her any mixed signals. This, however, was.

“You have problems you must handle on your own and so do I,” she replied, her voice less strained now. Xander let out a long breath through his nostrils as he looked down at her, then shook his head as he looked away.

“My problems do not cause me to faint from exhaustion, Eleanor,” he replied defensively. “Until we get this annulment, you are under my protection, and I take that quite seriously.”

“Are you mad at me for fainting?” She asked, turning in his arms to look at him. He threw her a glare before a low growl came from his chest.

“No,” he huffed out. “I am mad because I could have prevented it. All you had to do was tell me.”

“And how am I to tell you if you are never here?” She asked, looking up at him innocently.

Eleanor felt Xander’s muscles tense beneath her and watched his mouth form into a sneer of amusement. Another guttural sound from his chest was all she got. Unable to help herself, she smiled and shook her head as she leaned into his chest.

There were questions, many in fact, as to why he was the one taking care of her if he did not care for her, but she was content to let them go for now. She felt more rested than she had in weeks and Xander’s protective embrace was keeping her incredibly relaxed.

“You need to eat,” Xander stated, beginning to shift beneath her. “I shall alert Mrs. Gaines for more broth. Maybe some bread too. Just a little.”

“Not yet,” she countered quickly, gripping his arm.

Xander stilled immediately but looked down at her with a cocked brow.

“You have been asleep for nearly two days; you must eat something.”

Two days, Eleanor mused. Had he been by her side that entire time?

“I will,” she promised, giving him a pleading look. “I am just not ready quite yet. Please? May we stay a little longer?”

Xander met her eyes again, still with a stern look, but after a few moments, he nodded and relaxed his back into the pillows.

“A little longer,” he agreed, almost begrudgingly, “An hour at most. I will not let you go without eating any longer than that.”

“I accept your terms,” Eleanor sighed, wiggling comfortably into his body.

“Your family vexes you, too,” she added softly, trying to keep the conversation going. She felt Xander’s chest tense behind her, though, and immediately decided to drop it. Absentmindedly, she began to run her fingertips slowly up and down the bare flesh of Xander’s muscled forearm that was locked across her chest, holding her to him. The corded muscles that lay beneath his taut flesh were warm and firm, and covered by a swath of dark brown hair that was surprisingly soft.

Several moments later, she realized she had not felt Xander take another breath yet. Tilting her head a little to look at him, she saw his silver eyes burning brightly down at her, and his chiseled lips were set into a straight line. Everything in him had frozen- even his heartbeat.

“Sorry,” she whispered, pulling her hand away from his arm. He continued his intense stare for several more painstakingly slow moments, then he finally exhaled

and averted his eyes. Without looking back at her, he reached down and put her hand back on his arm.

Pressing her lips together to hide her smile, Eleanor settled back down into her comfortable spot and began to gently stroke the hairs on his arm again. With his free arm, he reached toward her nightstand, refilled her teacup with water, and brought it to her lips again.

“Come,” he commanded, “You need more. And you must eat soon.”

This time, Eleanor obeyed his command silently, letting him care for her.

“You are right,” he agreed, sitting the empty cup back down on the nightstand.

“Hmm?” Eleanor asked, feeling surprisingly drowsy again.

“About my family vexing me. Especially as of late.” She paused. “Your cousin, Richard?” She asked, glancing up at him.

Xander eyes widened slightly in surprise but, this time, he did not frown.

“You are more perceptive than you are given credit for,” he said begrudgingly. “What have you heard of him? Has your father asked about him?”

“My father? No, not at all. And it is not what I hear, it is more of how often people have asked for or about him in this last week. They say he is quite charming and much missed.”

“I am sure,” Xander uttered under his breath.

“But my sister is quite charming in public,” she went on, “Or at least can be when she

really tries. The thing is, though, I am the only one who knows how difficult she is. Is that how Richard is for you? Difficult?"

Xander let out a bark of a laugh as his hand went to her hair. Eleanor immediately felt pleasure trickle from the top of her head down to her toes as his strong fingertips gently massaged her scalp. Unable to keep them open, her eyes fluttered shut as she melted further into him.

"He is," she heard Xander say, feeling his words vibrating in his chest. "His recklessness has become a danger to... well, more than just myself now. I had to send him off with the Navy to keep him out of trouble. Many people have been upset by his absence, but it is for the best."

"Will he ever be allowed to come home?" She asked, fighting the urge to drift back to sleep.

"He will be back from a voyage in less than a month," Xander replied, his voice sounding deeper and more distant. "No, no, little one," Xander chuckled, pulling Eleanor back from slumber with a gentle shake. "You have to eat first before you go back to sleep."

He went to move her, but she clung to him.

"Not yet," she pouted, burrowing her face into a white button-up shirt.

"Are you always like this?" He asked, his voice full of amusement as he got out of bed, stood, and placed Eleanor back down on the bed- alone.

"Only when I am sick," she teased, feeling a little more herself again.

Xander smirked at her as he shook his head, then began to walk toward the servant's

bell.

“You are feeling better. Mrs. Gaines will be up shortly with your soup,” he told her, walking further away from her. “I will let her know you are to finish every drop.”

“Wait,” Eleanor said anxiously, feeling her heart clench painfully as he went to leave.

To her relief, Xander stopped immediately and turned to look at her with those devilishly charismatic silver eyes. His eyebrows were tensed slightly as if he was trying to hide any emotion.

“Please stay,” she pleaded, finally giving in to what she wanted to say since her wedding night.

His eyes widened slightly as his chiseled lips parted just enough to reveal a glimmer of his white teeth, but he said nothing.

“You do not- I mean, you could stay. I-”

Tell him, her heart urged her. Tell him you feel better than you have ever felt in his arms and you want to sleep in them.

“I will stay,” Xander agreed quietly, saving Eleanor from the dreadful confession.

She breathed a sigh of relief as he let go of the doorknob, and began to walk back toward her.

“You will?”

He nodded, taking a seat in the chair by her bed. It was a far cry from what she wanted, but it was better than him leaving.

“On one condition,” he told her, holding her gaze as he laced his fingers together and rested his elbows on his knees.

“Oh?” She asked, feeling both timid and excited.

“If you are going to be under my care,” Xander informed, her silver eyes beginning to glow again. “You must do as I say. No arguing.”

“I do not argue, we have a truce,” she whispered, unable to help it. Her lips spread into a full grin as he cocked an eyebrow at her as his lips twitched. “I promise,” she agreed quickly as Mrs. Gaines knocked on the door. “If you say, I obey.”

The humor in Xander’s gaze was suddenly taken over by something else. Something that made her entire body feel sensitive and her lower belly spasm as it did the night in his study.

“Careful, Honey,” he warned, his voice deeper, more primal than before. “That kind of talk can be dangerous.”

As Mrs. Gaines flew into the room like an excited bird, Eleanor and Xander continued to stare at one another. She was not sure if he was warning her- or himself.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

Three Weeks Later

“Why are we doing this?” Xander fumed, staring daggers down at Eleanor. “After what happened last time, I was hoping we would have a valid reason to kick your parents out of our home.”

Eleanor had recovered from her bout of sickness, and since then, her relationship with Xander had changed drastically. He still was gone a lot, looking for a way to get them both out of this mess, and he still did not sleep in her bed; but he no longer tried to avoid her.

“We have many reasons,” Eleanor replied, continuing to toy with his cravat.

He was sure she was done now and just fussing, but he let her. Though he would never admit it, he had been starting to give in to his cravings a little. A touch of her hand here, or a tug of the arm there. Nowhere near enough; it only scraped the smallest surface of his deep itch.

“Name them,” he demanded, trying to stay focused.

She threw him a look that clearly said watch yourself, then gently pushed his chest and walked away from him.

“Well to start, yes. My parents have been pressuring me to host another soiree,” she replied, taking a seat, “Then there is the fact that all of our friends are here and how little time you have made for them.”

“You mean your friends .”

She glared at him and Xander grunted, casting his eyes away from her.

“And, most importantly, because your cousin Richard is back home. He shall be most thankful that you have held a little welcome party for him.”

“He is going to know right away it was not my idea,” Xander retorted.

“He will be thankful for your company all the same,” she chirped back cheerfully.

“And your parents?” He asked next.

Xander looked back over at her, but now it was Eleanor who was avoiding his gaze.

“You have given my father the help he needs to gain access to White’s,” she replied matter-of-factly, grabbing the book on the nearby table with lightning speed and opening it.

“Oh, look, Shakespeare,” she noted, throwing him a quick smile. “I never knew you were a romantic, darling.”

“He can be quite bloody with his battles when he is not writing love sonnets,” Xander quipped defensively as he plucked the book out of her hands and snapped it shut, “And what do you mean I have gained him access to White’s? Certainly, I would remember pulling such strings.”

“Well,” Eleanor sighed, crossing her arms and staring down at the carpet as Xander hunkered down before her. “Perhaps you do not remember because it was your wife who actually wrote the missive to the club. It just happened to be on your letterhead. Either way, the effects of such cause remain the same.”

Xander suddenly rose to his feet, not sure whether to be mad, offended, or impressed.

“You did what?” He asked. Oh, he realized, feeling the first emotion take over. It was going to be anger. Eleanor shot to her feet quickly, glaring up at him.

“It was a solution to a problem,” she argued. “We do not want him here and the only reason he wants to be here is to get access to White’s. This way we only have to put up with him and my family through dinner. They already have plans to sleep somewhere else, Mother’s cousins’ house in Bath, I assured it. This gives us as limited time with them as possible while still fulfilling obligations.”

“You should have talked to me about it first,” he argued, still angry despite her logic. “My word, unlike your father’s, means something to this society and if I vouch for a man like him so willingly, it brings a lot into question!”

“It is done,” Eleanor stated with a shrug, clearly unruffled by his outburst. “You will thank me for it later.”

Unable to help it, Xander actually felt his jaw drop.

“You are insane,” he breathed.

“You mispronounced clever,” she tossed back sarcastically, walking away. “Come, our guests are arriving any moment.”

“Say it,” Eleanor purred, sending a dangerous carnal shiver down Xander’s spine. He looked down at her sideways, a smile threatening to break the frown on his lips.

“You were right,” he sighed, rolling his eyes.

“I beg your pardon?” Eleanor asked, her beautiful smile growing bigger. She looked

radiant tonight in her mint green satin gown with her hair only half up. And if her actions that evening did not deserve praise, her beauty certainly did. Either way, he had to admit the truth.

“You were right,” he stated louder, feeling downright wrong for verbalizing such a confession. “About everything.”

Indeed, she had. Eleanor’s deviant plan of sending her father off to the club had worked like a charm, and her family had barely been able to make it through dessert before they were bidding everyone goodbye. As for the rest of the guest list, Eleanor had done extremely well. Keeping the soiree simple and classy, the list consisted of her parents, his grandmother, Richard, Rhys, and Penelope.

Even Richard, to his surprise, had been a joy to have home so far. The only annoying part of the evening was Penelope’s uninvited brother, Patrick, showing up. Not liking strangers in his home, Xander was put off by this immediately. Patrick also did not help himself when he kept putting his hands on Xander’s wife.

Not much. A hand to her elbow, at her back. But Xander was ready to break the man’s hand if he pushed his luck.

“That is the nicest thing you have ever said to me,” Eleanor sighed dramatically, making him give in and chuckle.

“That is enough gloating,” Xander tried to chastise. It only made them both laugh, though, and Xander felt warmth fill his chest as he looked down at his wife.

“Very well,” she agreed, waving her hands in surrender. “On a serious note, your grandmother has sent me to fetch you, gentlemen. She declares that you have been out here smoking cigars long enough and that it is time to play cards. Also, she shall be taking everyone’s money.”

“Oh, she absolutely will,” Xander replied seriously, nodding toward Rhys and the others to come in. “Keep an eye on your cards, she is a beast.”

Back inside, Xander moved Eleanor’s chair so that she could sit at the card table. But, as he moved to sit down next to her, the Dowager’s cane came out of nowhere and thwacked him on the calf.

“What do you think you are doing?” The Dowager asked as Eleanor, Penelope, and her sister, Lydia, stifled their laughter.

“I thought we were playing cards?” Xander asked with a confused look.

“We are!” the Dowager agreed, smiling nicely, “But you go with the gentlemen and Eleanor is with us ladies. We shall declare the table winners at the end and then hold a two-card draw. Winner takes all.”

Smirking as he watched Eleanor try to hide her smile behind her cards, Xander cleared his throat, then went to take a seat at the other card table. A moment later, Rhysand and his friend, Patrick, filed in and joined him.

So much for a man who claimed he did not have any friends.

“So, Larsen,” Patrick said casually as they began their first hand. “How is it going making an heir?”

Patrick’s absurdly inappropriate question caught Xander off guard as he was taking a sip of his whiskey, and he coughed and sputtered as he felt his anger rise.

“I do not believe that is any of your business, Mr. Hislop,” he stated, trying to remain calm as the others laughed at Patrick’s boldness.

How did Penelope's brother simply invite himself here?

"I believe it is," Patrick quipped back, a tad more serious. "Eleanor is a friend to the ladies, and I, for one, am not looking forward to the tongue-lashing I shall receive when you break Eleanor's heart. None of us are. For the sake of all of us give her a child already so we can all breathe easier."

Blindsided by the man's crude and blunt language, Xander did not immediately see that Rhys was giving him a steady glare. When he did though, Xander looked back at him challengingly, refusing to back down.

"It is true," Rhys stated, "Penelope will not let me have a good night's sleep for months if you break Eleanor's heart. She is already bothering me constantly about it; wondering why you are always leaving her alone."

Rhys cocked his head slightly, still looking at Xander.

"Why are you always gone, Xander?" He asked with feigned innocence.

"Not a single part of my personal life is open for your discussion or judgment, and I hardly know you," he stated, giving Patrick a hard look first, then Rhys.

"But it is open to opinion," Patrick pushed boldly, smirking. "Rumor has it you are slinking about trying to find ways to get an annulment. But you know what I saw tonight, Larsen?"

"You do not know me, you will not speak to me with such familiarity," Xander warned.

"I saw your eyes glued to that pretty wife of yours. All. Night. Long," Patrick stated with emphasis, ignoring him.

Xander deadpanned, the call out so blunt that he did not have anything to respond to it.

“You know,” Rhys chimed in, “It would not be the end of the world if you discovered you were in love.”

“Seeing as how I took your arse down to the mat four times the other night, you should be more worried about your boxing skills than my marriage,” Xander retorted defensively.

Finished with the conversation and unable to focus on his cards, Xander tossed them down to the table and rose from his chair.

“You have been boxing with Xander instead of me?” Patrick asked Rhys in a hurt tone. “I thought I was your best friend?”

“I never said you were my best friend,” Rhys quipped back as he got up to follow Xander, “Now be a man and get back to your cards.”

A roar of laughter went up behind Rhys and Xander as they walked out of the room, only serving to irritate Xander some more.

“Leave me be,” Xander warned. “Why did you bring him? He was not invited and he is extremely annoying.”

“He is Penelope’s brother and she wanted him to come,” Rhys scoffed, keeping up with Xander’s brisk pace easily. “Besides, everyone else loves him. Including your wife.”

This brought Xander up short, stopping so abruptly that Rhys actually walked several steps ahead before he realized it.

“What did you say?” Xander asked, feeling his vision turn red.

Rhys seemed to catch this and he rolled his eyes, walked back, and clapped Xander on the shoulder.

“Relax, Larsen. As friends. Siblings at most. He is Penelope’s brother after all. They practically all grew up together.”

Rhys then looked him down, his humor fading as he drew a more sincere conclusion.

“You know, you getting upset at this might be an indication that you are actually feeling something for this woman.”

“Just because it happened for you, it does not mean we are all the same.”

Xander glared down at Rhys threateningly for a moment before he kept walking. Then, from behind him, he heard Rhys sigh loudly and say, “I found your letters.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

“How?” Xander demanded, looking at Rhys from across his desk. The moment Rhys had said those magic words, Xander had grabbed ahold of him and all but dragged him into his study.

“You have your ways, I have mine,” Rhys replied with a grave expression, no longer joking. “What is important is that they have been found and confirmed with an eye witness in Langley’s wife’s cousin’s house in Bath. It is not his house so he had to be clever with his hiding spot, but we found it.”

“Did you get them?” He asked, feeling his shoulders tense. “Are they here?”

“No,” Rhys replied quickly, crossing his legs and lacing his fingers together.

“Why the bloody hell not?” Xander growled.

Rhys looked at Xander steadily for a long, infuriating moment before he finally said, “Because I want you to be sure about this, Larsen. I am not your friend, I understand that, but Eleanor is Penelope’s friend. And what I saw this evening was not two strangers just muddling through marriage, but two people who greatly enjoyed each other’s company. You bicker quite frequently, sure, but it is so obvious that the two of you love it.”

Xander struggled for a moment as the truth was thrown to his feet, but he quickly regained composure. It did not matter. It was not just about them. It was about the principle of it all. Victor Langley had to pay for his blackmail. And Eleanor... Eleanor would find her prince charming one day. Someone who knew exactly how to love her.

“Get the letters as soon as possible,” Xander rasped, rubbing the tension at the back of his neck. “For her sake more than anyone else’s.”

“It will be a few weeks,” Rhys explained. “The house is brimming with summer guests. It will be too easy to get caught. But at the end of the Season, it will be empty of everyone but a ghost staff. It will be easy then. Can you wait that long?”

“Do I have a choice?” Xander bit out.

“Patrick, stop,” Eleanor laughed, shooing his hands away with her fan, “Your stories are deplorable.”

“I am in love,” he stated tipsily, giving her a sloppy grin. “Why, oh why, did you not marry me, Ellie girl?”

“Please!” Eleanor laughed loudly, also a bit too deep in her cups. In fact, the entire dinner party had seemed to be so. Grinning from ear to ear, she reached up and patted Patrick on the cheek. “You are like a brother, little Patrick.”

A look of feigned shock and disappointment came over Patrick’s face as he dramatically staggered back.

“Little ?” He breathed, looking devastated. “You wound me, Your Grace.”

A deep belly laugh poured from Eleanor at the site of Patrick’s feigned heartbreak.

“What is so funny over here?” Xander’s cousin Richard asked, joining them with a mirthful grin.

Tonight was the first time Eleanor had been given a chance to meet the man, and though he had seemed a little reserved at times, she could not quite figure out what it

was about him that infuriated her husband so.

“Eleanor has just given me those most terrible of insults,” Patrick continued dramatically, clutching his chest.

“Oh, do tell.” A shiver went down Eleanor’s spine as she heard Xander’s voice, but as she spun to face him, her smile vanished when she saw his scowl.

“I also heard you laughing,” he told her, keeping his silver eyes on her. “I do not think I have ever heard you laugh quite so hard.”

“I make her laugh,” Patrick shrugged drunkenly, leaning on Eleanor’s shoulder.

Eleanor sensed danger for Patrick as Xander’s glare moved from her to him, and she shrugged his elbow off her shoulder. He looked with the pouty look of a toddler, but this time, no one laughed. In fact, the room had grown very quiet.

“She called me little,” Patrick explained too drunk to sense the danger he was in.

Still glaring, Xander cocked a brow.

“And what would she know about your... size?”

“Patrick is Penny’s brother,” she explained, looking carefully from Patrick to Xander.

“I have always looked at him in a similar fashion.”

She then let out a laugh as she threw a teasing look at Patrick.

“He may be older but I have always found his nature is quite childlike. Hence why I call him little.”

A satisfied smirk touched Xander's lips briefly as Patrick threw her a wounded look, but then his mouth formed into a grim line once more.

"Patrick, have you been drinking again?" Penelope rushed to gather her brother before he caused more of a scene.

"Come, cousin!" Richard yelled drunkenly, breaking the tension. "We are all family here! Brothers, sisters, cousins."

He drunkenly turned toward Eleanor and pointed at her.

"And you. You are a little bit everything, are you not, you little minx."

"Watch it, Richard," Xander warned, turning his glare toward him.

"I am just saying she must be something special," Richard went on, ignoring the danger. "I mean, I got sent away because of all of this, but her? She gets rewarded with a title and my home!"

"What are you talking about?" Eleanor asked, her tipsiness beginning to fade as concern took over.

"Nothing," Xander ground out, moving her out of the way so that he could go chest-to-chest with his cousin.

"You. Get. Everything!" Richard boomed in his face.

Xander did not blink or flinch at the verbal assault, but Eleanor did. Worriedly, she looked around and caught the Dowager's fearful look in particular.

"Everything," Richard growled out again, losing his composure. He threw a dirty

look toward Eleanor. “Even the things you do not want.”

“Larsen,” Rhys said, moving to step in. Before he could follow through though, Penelope was suddenly yanking him backward and giving him a threatening glare.

“He does not want either of us around, you know,” Richard said, continuing to focus on Eleanor. “Now all three of us are in hell because of your father.”

“That is enough!” Xander growled, grabbing Richard by the lapels.

Not bothering to think first, Eleanor rushed between the two men, facing Xander, and placed her hands firmly on either side of his jaw. Behind her, she heard Richard being restrained by Patrick and Rhys.

Xander tried to rear back from her hold at first but she kept her grip, forcing him to look at her. His silver eyes seethed with anger as he glared back at her, but as she continued to refuse to stand down, they eventually simmered into a cool rain gray. His jaw finally unlocked then, and she felt him lean into her touch.

“I believe we have all had enough fun for tonight,” the Dowager announced with a clap of her hands from behind them. “Thank you for coming, everyone, but it seems we have let our cups get too full.”

“Richard, come with me,” the Dowager commanded calmly as she approached the still-frozen trio.

“No,” Richard all but sobbed, still glaring at Eleanor and Xander. “He keeps saying this is my fault. But this? This is all her doing!”

“Come to bed, sweetheart, now!” the Dowager coaxed.

Two servants arrived at her side to help her while Eleanor continued to hold Xander's gaze. She waited long after she heard the door close and silence filled the room before she finally let him go and spoke.

"What in the hell was that?" She asked.

"Watch your language," Xander bit out, quickly growing angry again. "And you tell me."

Eleanor looked at him in shock.

"Tell you what?" She asked, flabbergasted.

"I have never heard you laugh like that," he repeated again.

Eleanor huffed out a laugh, thinking he could not be in earnest, but when she saw the look on his face, she immediately frowned.

"You cannot be serious," she stated in disbelief.

"How much time have you and Patrick spent together?" He asked next. "How well do you know each other?"

Utterly stunned by this sudden jealous behavior, Eleanor turned on her heel and walked away.

"Where do you think you are going?" He asked, following her. "Do not just walk away from me while we are talking!"

"We are not talking, Your Grace," she replied matter-of-factly-, "you are accusing, and I do not have to stay put and accept such disrespect. Especially when I have done

nothing to earn it!”

“You must control yourself,” he insisted, catching up to her as they walked briskly up the stairs. “We are in a precarious position.”

“Control,” she scoffed, not moving, “That is all you want, isn’t it? You just want everyone around you to obey and behave exactly as you wish.”

“Do not dare take Richard’s side on this,” Xander growled, following behind her closely as she opened the doors to her quarters. “You have no idea of the responsibilities that come with my role and how many times he has made me hate that reality. I do not like what I have become but I did it in order to protect this family. A family that you are now a part of!”

“For how long?” She shouted back, whirling on him so fast that his eyes widened in surprise. “You cannot wait to get rid of me, can you not? Just like your cousin. What did we ever do to you?”

Xander was on her in an instant, his much bigger body pressing her against the wall as his left hand touched her chin. Heat poured through her body and pooled in her lower belly as his eyes burned into his.

“You do not put yourself in the same category as him,” he stated, deathly serious. “You did nothing wrong. You hear me? Nothing you did was wrong. You are the only innocent one in all of this. Which is why I am trying to protect you until I can get this sorted out.”

Eleanor reached out and put a palm on his cheek, and saw that he fought not to pull away.

“You are putting so much on yourself,” she whispered, worried for him. “It will

destroy you if you do not stop. Talk to me. I can help.”

Several tense seconds ticked by before Xander answered.

“It is best I handle things alone.”

“But if you allowed help, you would have more time to rest,” she explained with a sigh. “More time to discover what makes you happy. Don’t you want to do what makes you happy?”

“Trust me, you and the world do not want that,” he scoffed bitterly, glancing away.

“Of course, I do,” she answered, giving him a puzzling look. “Why would I not?”

Xander’s eyes turned back to her possessively, making her breath hitch.

“For starters, I would have beat your dear little Patrick to a bloody pulp for putting his arms on you.”

Although she was sure Xander was trying to shock her, Eleanor’s body only grew more sensitive instead. She knew it was wrong, but the image of Xander defending her only made her nipples harden and a warm moisture seep between her legs.

“You are jealous,” she panted, suddenly unable to catch her breath. Xander growled as he braced his free hand against the wall beside her ear, and stared at her like a predator ready to catch his prey.

“I. Am. Not. Jealous.” He bit it, emphasizing each word with both his voice and the tightening of his fingers around Eleanor’s throat.

She smiled up at him almost wickedly, meeting his stare full-on.

“Yes. You. Are.”

Eleanor had no time to think or react before Xander’s mouth slammed down on hers with a possessive growl. Unlike before, she did not simply let him kiss her into submission. Instead, she kissed him back with just as much fervor, letting her tongue and lips battle his as she drove her fingers through his hair.

Pleasure laced through her as she felt Xander gather her skirts and then lift her off her feet. Immediately, she wrapped her legs around his waist, pressing her sex tightly against the hardened length between his legs.

Xander moaned and she gasped as she flicked her hips subtly, discovering how it could bring her great pleasure if she glided against one particular spot. Clinging to him tightly, she did it again, this time more boldly.

A whispered curse broke through Xander’s lips before he delivered a nip to her bottom lip for such dirty tricks. She yelped, at first, but something wild had been unleashed in her. Moving her lips down to his neck, she sank her teeth in deeply, reveling in the way Xander hissed out a breath and pressed her closer.

“You should not have let him touch you, Honey.”

After a few fevered steps, Xander pushed her through her bedroom door and the two of them fell in a tangle of limbs onto the bed as they reignited their kiss. Eleanor’s hands gripped needily at his jacket, pulling it away from his shoulders before attacking the buttons on his vest.

“I did not...” Eleanor’s reply melted into a sigh as she tried to undress.

“Do you want to know why?” Xander continued as if she had not tried to answer him.

“Because you are mine . Because I cannot take my mind off you all day, even if I

want to...”

Euphoria filled her as Xander moved not to stop her but to aide her in her efforts, and once the thing was flung off, he tore at the top buttons of his white collared shirt, spraying them to the floor before he yanked the thing over his head and threw it away. Eleanor’s mouth watered as she saw the broad, naked expanse of her husband’s well-muscled torso. She had never seen the male form nude before, not even in a sculpture garden. But now she understood why it was so obsessed over.

“Get over here,” Xander commanded, gripping her wrist and yanking her toward him.

Eleanor gasped as Xander gathered her back in his arms and kissed her feverishly again. With quick work of his fingers, he untethered her layers until she left in nothing but her short, see-through figure-hugging white chemise. When he finished, he pulled her back to rake his eyes down her figure, and when he did so, Eleanor felt a deep satisfaction as she saw the blatant desire in his eyes.

Needing him, she wrapped her arms around his neck and used her legs to bring him back down to the bed. Xander came willingly, but as he tried to pin her to the mattress, Eleanor fought, and somehow ended up atop him, her thighs once more straddling the ample-sized rigidity beneath his breeches.

A bite here or swivel of her hips there and she was back on top. A breathtaking kiss or the feel of his rough hands massaging her breasts and abdomen and he was back on top. For a moment, Eleanor thought she was winning the erotically fun game they had just created, but as she moved to bite his neck again, Xander suddenly twisted his body, regained control, and this time, when he pinned her down, she could not get up.

“You are driving me mad,” he panted, holding her wrists tight as his nose brushed against hers.

“And what do you think you are doing to me?” She whispered, leaning up to lip at his bottom lip.

With a groan, Xander once more kissed her possessively, ripping his lips away from her only when she was just about to run out of breath. His kisses continued down her jaw, behind her ear, and down her throat; further down until he reached her breasts and swirled his tongue teasingly over the thin, white material that covered her taut pink nipple.

Eleanor gasped as her back arched, thrusting her right breast further into his hot mouth for more. To her relief, Xander quickly obliged, his tongue lapping greedily at her flesh. His one hand released her wrists, moving down to caress her left breast and begin to tease her other nipple with her fingertips.

“Xander,” Eleanor gasped, her eyelashes fluttering as his tongue and fingers drove her wild. His touch was somehow both too much and nowhere near enough, and she could not help the uncontrollable tremors that raced through her as he continued to devour her.

Eleanor let out a moan of relief and sadness when Xander’s lips and hand moved away from her breasts and down her abdomen, but she quickly forgot what she was sad about when she felt him push her chemise up around her hips; exposing her glistening petals.

Xander groaned in what seemed like pleased agony as he rested his forehead on her lower abdomen and inhaled deeply. Finally letting go of her wrists with his other hand, he pushed both arms under her legs and possessively pulled her sex directly to his face.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

Xander stared intently down at Eleanor's scantily-clad body. She was on her side, a pillow hugged to her tightly, and her naked thigh was crossed over, giving the most perfect view of her pert backside. Her curls were a tangled mess on the pillows.

He had meant to teach her a lesson, but he had made a grave mistake. The pleasure he found within Eleanor's body rivaled anything he had felt- and they had not even consummated their marriage yet. He had lost himself in her, giving in to his sexual needs instead of his need for control, and had made her thighs shake with his tongue until she had passed out from the pleasure.

Normally, he would be proud of such a venture. But, as he recognized the affection growing in his heart for the woman laid before him, fear snuck up on him. Xander pulled his eyes away from Eleanor and looked toward the open window. The moon was nearly full, and shed a pale light over her nymphlike figure.

Desire rose in him, making his cock stir. He wanted more. So much more. For a moment, he grappled with the urge to get back into bed. To pull her close to him, wake her up once more with his tongue, and claim so badly what he wanted to. Disturbed by how much he wanted just that, Xander finished getting dressed, forced himself to walk out the door, and only when he was in the hallway did he allow himself to stop and breathe.

Checking his pocket watch, he saw that it was ten. Far too early for Rhys to be home. He was no doubt at the club, probably with Patrick in the ring. Perfect. That would be all that he needed.

"You. Out." Xander demanded to Patrick as he strode into the club's back boxing

room.

Patrick looked over at Rhys with an arched brow as Xander began to pull off his shirt, but Rhys only rolled his eyes and motioned with his head for him to leave the ring. With a sigh, Patrick shook his head and headed toward the cords.

“You have fouled my mood and my wife’s, Larsen,” Rhys informed him as Xander got into the ring. “You might not want to do this.”

“You think your evening is ruined?” Xander snorted, wrapping his knuckles. His body was vibrating with tension, and if he did not let it out soon, he truly feared what was going to happen.

“Gloves?” Rhys asked, moving into his stance as Xander came toward him.

“I would rather not,” Xander said gruffly, moving into his stance.

“Fine,” Rhys sighed, going up to the balls of his feet. “It is your bruises.”

Xander had Rhys eating his words at first, his punches and kicks landing with force and precision as they went through the first four rounds. But, as the fifth round began, his strength no longer matched his anger, and in growing frustration, he began making mistakes. He was soon losing. Badly.

“You have had enough?” Rhys panted as he took Xander to the mat.

“No,” he said through ragged breaths, pushing the man’s hand away.

“You need to get yourself under control, Larsen,” Rhys warned as he backed up.

“I am in control!” Xander ground out, readying himself for the sixth round.

“Yeah,” Rhys laughed bitterly as they began their dance again. “What happened at the house earlier then?”

No longer interested in talking, Xander lunged forward with a right hook. Rhys jumped back, the hit barely connecting with his jaw, and he retaliated with a solid punch to Xander’s ribs. Pain bloomed in his abdomen as he went down, and in a dirty move, he grabbed ahold of Rhys’ legs and pulled them out from under him.

“Rhys, enough, the man has lost his mind,” Patrick barked, approaching them. Rhys worked himself free before Patrick got to them and gave his friend a warning glare to stay away.

“Is this really how you want to do it?” Rhys asked, giving Xander one more chance. “You know I am not one to show mercy.”

It was too late, though, and he knew it.

“Come on,” Xander urged, raising his bruised fists as he got to his feet. “Give me everything you have got.”

Eleanor awoke to the sharp sound of something metal hitting marble, and when she opened her eyes, she noticed two things immediately. One, Xander was not in bed with her. Two, more sounds and a dim yellow glow were coming from her open bathing room door.

Eleanor sat up, straining to make out the sounds she was hearing, then jumped out of bed when she heard another clang and Xander’s growl. Her eyes grew wide with fear as she saw her devilishly handsome husband standing before her, shirtless, bruised, and bleeding. Spilling over on the counter and to the floor was a pair of small scissors, and a mess of bloodied, torn-up linens.

Behind him, she vaguely recognized an open door that she had thought was just a closet. Instead, there was a staircase behind the door, and she realized their rooms had adjoined after all.

“Xander,” she breathed, rushing toward him.

“I did not mean to wake you,” he all but whispered, catching her wrists before her hands could touch him. “Go back to bed. I will take care of this upstairs.”

“No!” She half-whispered and half-yelled as she wrenched her wrists out of his grip. “What happened to you? Where did you go?”

“Eleanor, please,” Xander urged. He looked away, leaning his lower back against the counter as he pressed a rag to a cut on his chest. She could hear his breathing starting to grow heavier, and his muscles were twitching. For a moment, she thought of obeying him. Of turning a blind eye to what she saw and going back to bed.

Only, it would repeat all again, wouldn’t it? She would wake up to another day of this strange game she and Xander had grown addicted to. No.

“In the bath,” she directed, her voice soft but insistent.

When Xander did not move, she moved to the large tub, put in the plug, and pulled down the pumps to release the hot water. As her hands moved to undo his trousers, she kept her eyes upward, focused on the array of colorful bruises that covered him. Luckily, there was only one on his face; a purple crescent moon that took up his left temple and cheekbone, turning blue close to his eyes. The pain, she realized, had to be excruciating.

“You do not have to do this,” Xander said as she went to lead him to the tub. She looked back at him, but he still would not look at her. “I can handle this alone.”

“Not this,” Eleanor said softly, reaching up to gingerly move a strand of his hair off of his bruised temple and cheek. “This time, I am in control.”

Xander finally looked at her, his eyes glistening with emotion, and Eleanor felt her heart ache for him. Her husband, the Ton’s most ruthless member, had run into something he could not fix. And it was destroying him. Without a word, he let her finish leading him to the tub. When he went in, he sank down slowly, his eyes on the water.

Keeping her eyes focused on her work, Eleanor took a clean cloth and began to wash Xander down, careful to have a light touch. If he was in pain, which she was sure he was, he was not showing it. Save for the constant vibrations that came from beneath his taut skin, he did not flinch once.

When she finished, he stood up on his own and let her towel him off. Then, after rummaging through the many mirrored little cabinets in the room and finding whatever ointments she could, she began to massage each wound gently one at a time.

She was just finishing rubbing ointment on the last one; a particularly large green and purple bruise on his left pectoral muscle, when his hand came up and gently stopped her. Eleanor’s brows flew up, and relief poured through when she saw Xander’s silver orbs, once again shining with life, staring back down at her.

“Thank you,” he whispered, caressing the back of her hand with his thumb. “I think I got lost there for a bit.”

“Whatever it is you are holding on to, let it go,” she pleaded. It was painful to see him like this, and she needed it to stop.

“No one has ever cared for me like this before. You really do not have to do this.”

“Why do you feel so guilty of letting others care for you?”

“I just... I am not sure. I guess after my parents’ death, I learned how to take care of myself. And Richard.”

“What about your grandparents? Your grandmother seems quite gentle to me.”

“Are we talking about the same person?” Xander’s breath hitched when she touched a painful spot for just a moment. “My grandparents were both of the notion that children must be seen, not heard. Richard was excluded from most rules though. But me? I had to learn to be tough and handle my own pain.”

His eyes still on hers, he brought her hand up to his mouth and placed a kiss so gentle on her palm it made her throat grow tight with tears.

“You need to let others care for you more often.”

“For now,” he promised, wrapping his other arm around her waist, pressing her as close to him as possible.

Eleanor could not help the soft sob of relief that tore from her throat as Xander kissed her. This one was not explosive, like all those times before. Instead, it was a deep, slow-burning kiss that melted them both from the inside out. Xander’s hands moved down to her backside, lifting her up with ease. Immediately she spread her legs and wrapped them around his waist.

Not breaking their kiss, Xander walked them back into the bedroom. Once he reached the bed, he laid Eleanor down gently, covering her small body completely with his much bigger one. Eleanor gasped and gripped at the bruised muscles on his back as he broke his lips from hers and moved down to her neck, lapping and nipping at her greedily. She closed her eyes and arched her back, wanting more.

A strangled sound, something between pain and agony, released from Xander's throat, and he suddenly pulled back and balanced himself above her on his arms. Eleanor immediately felt cold and lonely as he pulled away, and she scrambled to bring him back to her.

"Honey, wait," he rasped, his deep voice strained. He looked so tense; so conflicted- and she could not stand it.

"Why?" She nearly cried, still trying to pull his shoulders back down to her.

Xander's silver eyes sparked as she did so, and with a tortured groan, he obeyed her touch and came back down atop her. Wanting to make sure he went nowhere, she locked her legs around his, holding him to her.

"You are going to be the death of me."

Xander's cock jumped hungrily as Eleanor wrapped her legs around his and he felt the apex of her legs press hotly into him. He had been in agony for weeks. Wanting her, fantasizing about her. Even torturing himself by trying to get the upper hand with his first tongue trick- and he could not take it anymore.

His fingers felt clumsy as they found their way to Eleanor's thin chemise, but just like her, he did not want to break their skin-to-skin contact. Eventually, the bit of fabric came up between them, lifted over her head delicately before being tossed to the floor.

Eleanor's body, warm and supple, was quick to take away the annoying cold by rubbing her long legs sensually over his muscled backside. Unknowingly, she was driving him wild. Nudging his rigid and aching-to-be-touched cock against her already slick entrance with every little movement.

If that was not bad enough, his mouth could not seem to get its fill of her. Her lips, tongue, neck, breasts. He had ravaged them all and left her panting and pleading for him not to stop. Every part of her tasted like heaven and he needed more.

“Spread your legs for me.”

Untangling his fingers from hers, he began to kiss down her body, loving every tremble and gasp she gave him as he did so. This time, after he began to slide his tongue slowly and possessively over her soft, dewy folds and desperate clitoris, he swirled his finger in slow circles at the entrance of her tight sheath. As he had hoped, her muscles clenched around him hungrily, pleading for more.

“Xander,” she breathed above him, her body growing more tense as her orgasm neared.

Knowing what she needed, Xander’s tongue and fingers moved in time to a more intense speed, and he let out a moan of pleasure as her orgasm flooded into his mouth.

Xander’s thighs trembled with pent-up need as he slowly dragged his body up to her, letting every inch of their torsos touch before he nestled his hips between her parted legs. In the candlelight, he could see Eleanor’s mesmerizing eyes glazed over with desire, and he knew then more than ever that he could not stop himself from giving her what she wanted.

Slowly, so as not to hurt her, Xander slid the head of his rigid girth between her folds. He had to hold back a groan as her tight, soaking, warm walls clasped at him greedily, already causing him so much pleasure. Achingly, he continued his steady advance, letting her adjust inch by gradual inch until he could feel her maidenhood brush the tip of his cock. He was not even halfway inside yet, but he wanted this to be as painless as possible for her.

“Hang on to me,” he urged tenderly, thrusting himself past her breaking point.

Eleanor let a whimper of pain as her dam broke, and obeyed his warning by digging her nails deep into his back. Xander took his time, letting her breaths and movements tell him how fast or slow to go. But soon, her legs and arms relaxed around him, her sharp breaths stretched into a low, needy panting, and her eyes were burning bright with desire again.

Gathering her in his arms, Xander let himself finally sink fully into her and allowed his hips to set their own pace. Eleanor’s lips, pressed against his ear, let out a continual sweet song of moans and pleas as he began to thrust harder, faster, driving them both closer to their climax.

Need fully taking over, Xander rolled with Eleanor in his arms until she was sprawled over his chest. With one hand pinning her hips atop his own, and the other wrapped tightly around her back, he began to buck up into her tight sheath with a sudden primal need. Every ounce of tension, of pain, of anxiety seethed out of him like toxic sweat as he claimed thorough possession of Eleanor’s body.

“Xander,” she panted, turning her head up to his as she moved in a constant swaying motion on his chest. “I think... I do not know what is happening... something different...”

Xander moaned deeply as he cut off her words with a deep kiss. The poor darling did not know what her temple of seduction was even capable of, but he was very happy to educate her.

“Hold it,” he urged, his strokes changing from fast and hard to deeper, more intense ones that would brush the tip of his cock against the little inner button. “Let it build.”

“No,” she moaned, looking at him desperately as he saw her pleasure grow more

intense.

“You can do it, Honey,” he coaxed, clamping his other arm harder down on her hips.

“We will do this together.”

“I cannot,” Eleanor moaned desperately, her thighs beginning to quiver as he felt her warm, wet walls grow tighter around his length.

Realizing he could not either, Xander let out a feral growl, and he began to pump her sheath up and down his cock in wonton desire until he felt them both explode. Once he felt his orgasm release, Xander clamped both hands down on Eleanor’s hips, locking her body tightly against his own as his cock spasmed deeply inside of her tightly clenching walls; quivering from their own ecstasy.

“You are so perfect, Eleanor.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

They stayed like that for several minutes, both of them needing a moment to catch their breath. Then, with the utmost care, Xander slid himself from between her thighs. Eleanor whimpered, already missing the feel of him, but let out a sigh of relief when Xander shifted her until they were on their sides, and he wrapped his muscular body around hers.

“Are you in pain?” Xander asked, worried for her as he cupped her cheek and looked down at her eyes. Touched by his tenderness, she felt a ball of emotions get stuck in her throat.

“Not at the moment,” she breathed shakily, meaning it. For now, nothing could get past the layers of pleasure she was buried under.

Xander let out a breathy laugh of relief as he leaned down and kissed her sweetly.

“You did so well,” he praised, peppering kisses into her hair and forehead. “Now it is my turn to give you a bath.”

“Why? Eleanor asked drowsily. Her body was still humming with pleasure and Xander’s cocoon-like embrace was quickly lulling her to sleep. The last thing she wanted to do was move.

“Your mother did not tell you?” Xander asked, his deep voice calm through his kisses. “Hmmm, well. Not to worry. It is perfectly normal.”

“What is normal?” Eleanor asked, suddenly wide awake.

She moved to sit up, and as she did so she felt a deep, dull ache in her lower belly. Curiously, she looked down and gasped when she saw her white sheets were smeared with crimson. Embarrassment flooded through Eleanor as she began to scramble off of the bed, but Xander quickly caught her and pulled her to him.

“Honey, it is all right,” he soothed.

“It is not!” She yelled in a strangled voice, gathering one of the sheets around her.

Xander pressed his lips together tightly, as if holding back a laugh.

“I think I prefer you the way you were earlier,” she stated sourly, walking away from him.

Before she could take more than two steps, she felt a sharp slap to her rump and was then lifted off her feet and held to Xander’s chest.

“That was not very nice,” he replied, looking down at her with a wolfish grin. “And I know you do not mean it.”

Maybe she did not, but she was still angry at him for laughing at her.

“Put me down,” she asked, more pleading than demanding. “I shall do this myself. You should go away. Far away. Perhaps you never coming back is a good idea after all.”

Xander only rolled his eyes as he carried her into the bathing room. When he got to the center of the room, he seemed to debate whether or not to put her on her feet or on the counter, and to Eleanor’s dismay, Xander placed her on the highest one- far too tall for her to climb down. It was as if he knew she would try it, and it annoyed her greatly.

“I am not going anywhere, especially tonight,” he replied casually as he pulled the levers to the water pumps. “And neither are you. You took care of me earlier.”

“That was different,” Eleanor countered quickly.

Xander shook his head, looking at her as if she were ridiculous.

“It simply means that you are no longer a maiden. And if I may be honest, I would have been concerned if you had not bled.”

Eleanor did not need him to explain further to understand that her purity had been symbolized by it, but why had her mother not told her? Or her sister? Or her romance books? They wrote of the passionate kisses and fevered heartbeats, but none of this was in any of them.

“This is not right,” she pouted, feeling foolish both for her ignorance and for the way she was handling it. “How do you know more about this than I do?”

Xander looked over at her with a smirk and raised a brow, and Eleanor suddenly remembered. Her husband, the man who had just been so sweet and gentle with her, had probably done the same with many, many women.

“Right,” she whispered, lowering her eyes, a bright streak of crimson on her sheet dress holding her attention.

A moment later, she felt the back of Xander’s hand softly caress her cheek, then his thumb and pointer finger tilted her chin so that she would look at him. His silver gaze held a quiet strength; a surety.

“I have not been with anyone else since our marriage,” he told her, his voice heavy with truth.

“Have you wanted to?”

Eleanor did not mean to ask the question. It had been a day full of intense events, but this last one had made every fantasy, every dream she had had for the last month come true. She wanted to just savor it... but some recessed part of her brain spoke out before she could stop it.

For a moment, Eleanor thought she saw a hint of anger flutter through Xander’s cool gaze, but when she blinked it was gone, and he was giving her that same intense, soul-seeing look again.

“I have not,” he replied calmly. “Have you?”

“I do not want anyone touching me but you,” Eleanor blurted out.

Would you stop?! Eleanor yelled at herself. Had Xander’s fantastic lovemaking broken her ability to filter her words?

Xander’s eyes filled with intense possessiveness as Eleanor spoke her truth, making something inside of her shiver and gasp with need. When he reached up for her, she went into his arms willingly and was disappointed when he only placed her on her feet.

“Seems like we are both happy then,” he surmised, raking his eyes down her body as he pulled the stained sheet away from her. Eleanor trembled under his hungry gaze, feeling another stir of desire through the ache in her lower belly.

“Are we done arguing now?” He asked, his tone sultry as his left brow perked.

Eleanor nodded.

Xander smiled.

“Good. Come.”

He grabbed her hand, leading her the last few steps to the now-full bath, and helped her in. Eleanor sighed in relief as the lavender-scented warm water surrounded her, but when Xander moved to get in behind her, she tensed, took up as much space as she could, and asked what he was doing.

“You cannot get in!” She gasped, mortified.

“I thought we were done arguing?” He asked, moving her easily and sliding in behind her.

“But-”

Xander brought her back to his chest, pinning her there with one arm around her waist.

“No buts,” his deep voice commanded as he grabbed the washcloth with his free hand. “You had control earlier. Now it is my turn.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

Four Weeks Later

“Y es, Jared, that is fine,” Xander said testily, wishing the man would hurry up. He felt another deep tug of pleasure as Eleanor’s tongue reached the base of his extremely hardened cock, and he rapped his knuckles on his desk to stop himself from moaning. When that failed, he forced out a loud cough and began to tap his pen on this desk.

“Everything all right, Your Grace?”

“Yes. That is all, isn’t it?” He asked, looking up at his valet.

“Just one more point, Your Grace,” Jared informed him.

Xander groaned internally, starting to wonder whether this little game he and Eleanor had created was more pleasurable or torturous. Since their first time together in bed, she had proven herself to be a most willing student of lovemaking, and he feared he had created, in some twisted way, his perfect little monster. Sweet and pure on the outside; dark and seductive on the inside. They were barely able to stay away from one another.

“What is this?” Xander asked, losing focus as Eleanor’s tongue brought him closer to his climax.

Xander tried to comprehend his valet’s words as he drew ever and ever closer, but when he realized he had reached the end of his resolve, he gave up trying to listen, signed the portfolio, and immediately ordered Jared to leave.

The moment the door shut behind him, Eleanor's hands clenched down on Xander's thighs, and she suckled harder, bringing him to climax in seconds.

"Oh my God," Xander panted, pulling Eleanor out from under his desk. Her eyes were bright with desire and her full lips were dewy from her blessed work. He moaned in approval as he drew his thumb across her bottom lip, and then kissed her deeply.

"You held on longer this time," she teased, smiling through her kisses.

"I had to," Xander groaned, resting his forehead against hers. "Jared would not bloody leave. Every time I thought we were done; he would pull one more paper out of his arse."

"I like this game," Eleanor giggled, getting comfortable in his lap.

"I love this game," Xander, agreed with a satisfied smile. "But it has proven to be potentially dangerous as I have no idea what I have just signed for Jared. I could have signed over Larsen Hall to him for all I know."

"Oh, no," Eleanor gasped in mock concern. "Well, we cannot have that, can we?"

"Mmm," Xander murmured, pulling her in for another kiss. "We certainly cannot."

His head was churning through the many deliciously dark ways he could pay his wife back for her little act of service when another knock on the door came. They both sighed in annoyance as they broke their kiss and, against his wishes, he let Eleanor get off of his lap so they could adjust themselves.

"Later?" He asked, winking at her as they finished.

“You better,” She warned, her grin incredibly alluring as she looked at him from the chaise lounge.

Xander gave her one more heated look before he turned his focus to the door and said, “Enter.”

“Ah, good, you are both here,” The Dowager stated after the butler opened the door.

Xander and Eleanor threw one another one more amused glance, both hiding their smiles.

“How are you today, Your Grace?” Eleanor greeted, getting up to help Margaret take a seat.

“Quite happy,” the Matriarch announced, accepting Eleanor’s help. “It seems our dear Richard is home again. For a longer visit this time.”

“How long?” Xander asked, his mood changing immediately.

“He was vague on the details,” the Dowager sighed, her expression shifting from pleased to concerned. “But he is not himself. More on edge than ever since his last visit. He wishes to speak with you privately before we have tea as a family.”

The illusion of bliss had settled over Larsen Hall since the night Xander came home beaten and bloodied a month ago. There was no more tension between him and Eleanor, and in Richard’s absence, there had been no unnecessary fires for him to put out. Even Victor, as annoying as he was, had been placated lately by Eleanor’s little act of forgery.

With Richard home, though, the illusion was now shattered, and the intense emotions he had been free from for a month were now all rushing back to him.

“I will have the butler fetch him and bring him here,” Xander stated, his emotionless mask sliding back into place. “We shall join you for tea in the day room when we are done.”

Satisfied with this answer, Margaret got up and made her way to the door.

“Is everything all right?” Eleanor whispered to him as his grandmother called for her to come.

“Of course it is,” he lied, feeling a sense of doom as he swept a quick caress across her cheek. “Go on. We will be there soon.”

Eleanor gave him a look, and he knew she saw through him. To his relief though, she gave him a nod and went to catch up to his grandmother.

“I cannot keep doing this, Cousin,” Richard stated adamantly as soon as the two of them were alone.

“It is good to see you too, Richard,” Xander replied in a hard tone.

“Stop it,” Richard demanded, his voice strangled. “I am serious, Xander, I cannot do this anymore. I am not built for this. I hate it. Everyone somehow knows what I am, and I swear I am in more danger on those boats than I am on land!”

“That may be so,” Xander countered, his voice rising as he rose back to his feet. “But you are far less dangerous to people out there than you are here, and I cannot keep cleaning up your mistakes!”

“I am not going back,” Richard stated, baring his teeth. “Not for your benefit or anyone else’s! All I have ever wanted was a life of my own, Xander. If you would have just let me have it, this would have never happened!”

“You cannot be serious!” Xander boomed incredulously. “Every time you are left alone, Richard, every time, you have made a mess. Why are we having the conversation? This is a subject much over-discussed. If you want to be a man, Richard, you are going to have to prove it!”

Richard’s teeth drew back in a sneer as his eyes grew dark and he balled his fists.

“Is that what you want?” he asked, drawing his fists to his face as he took a step toward Xander. “You need me to prove to you I am a man?”

“Richard, please,” Xander drawled, shaking his head as he turned around. “Enough of-”

Before he could finish his sentence, Xander felt the weight of his cousin’s body fly into him, and the two men tumbled to the floor in a mess of swinging fists.

Both Eleanor and Margaret’s heads shot up as the sound of shouting protruded the silence.

“Oh no,” the Dowager whispered, her eyes growing wide with fear.

“What is that?” Eleanor asked, moving to her side.

“I fear it is the worst,” Margaret replied, her voice quivering as she began to pull Eleanor to the door. “Come, my dear, we must hurry! By the sound of it, Xander is about to kill him.”

Fear ran through Eleanor as she walked briskly with the Dowager Duchess, who was moving surprisingly fast with her cane.

“Kill who, Your Grace?” Eleanor asked.

“Who else?” Margaret cried as they neared the doors to the study.

Before she could ask why, Margaret pushed open Xander’s study doors, and Eleanor caught up with her just in time to stop the old woman from getting between the two quarreling men.

“Stop this at once!” Margaret shouted, slamming the butt of her cane repeatedly on the ground.

“I need to be free of this!” Richard roared, pushing away from Xander and his grandmother. “I cannot take it anymore!”

“You. Have. No. Choice.” Xander ground out.

“Why does he have no choice?” the Dowager demanded to know, taking Richard’s side. “He is a grown man! If he does not want to be in the Navy, he should not have to.”

“Grandmother, please,” Xander pleaded, “You and Eleanor need to leave. Out. Now.”

“But your grandmother is right, Xander,” Eleanor argued, trying to find the sense in it all. “If he wishes to leave the Navy, why not let him?”

A look of betrayal hovered in Xander’s eyes but before he could speak, Richard broke out of Margaret’s embrace and came striding toward Eleanor.

“You stay out of this,” he growled, his face contorted with rage. “This is all of your fault! You and your greedy, nosy father and his blackmail. It is you that has taken everything away from me!”

“Richard,” Xander warned, taking a step toward him.

“What is my fault?” Eleanor asked, urging Richard to ignore her husband’s threatening gaze. “You have said that before. Why? What does it mean?”

“Because, you little twit, your marriage to Xander is nothing but a response from blackmail from your father!” Richard exploded. “Your father has letters written by me to my lover, Marcus, and the bastard has us both by the shaft!”

“Blackmail...?”

The sound of flesh being slapped rang through the room, causing silence to fall over everyone as Margaret pulled her hand away from Richard’s now bright red cheek. Eleanor looked on at the scene with a detached numbness. Took in Richard’s shocked, pale face. Margaret’s seething disappointment. Xander’s rage.

“To your quarters,” the Dowager hissed, grabbing Richard firmly by the wrist. “Immediately.

“Grandmother, I-”

“I said go!” Margaret bellowed, pulling him along before he could finish.

Eleanor...” Xander said, his voice raw as they were left alone.

“What was he talking about?” Eleanor asked, whirling around to face him. Xander’s face filled with pity, causing a stir of rage and shame to rise in her.

“Honey,” Xander rasped.

“No!” She demanded, her voice breaking as tears pricked her eyes. “You finally tell me the truth of why you married me, and you tell me now!”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

“Eleanor, let me explain...”

A strange, swallowed-up feeling Xander never experienced before spread through him as he saw the look of realization spread across Eleanor’s beautiful face.

“Your cousin prefers the company of men. That is why you married me. That is what the blackmail was,” she stated, her voice dull; lifeless. It caused a pain in his heart that he immediately hated.

“I had no choice,” Xander stated, straining to remain calm. “The night I first saw you, your father approached me with damning evidence against my cousin. I told him that was Richard’s business, but Victor did not want him. He wanted me.”

“Of course,” Eleanor breathed, not blinking. “Your title. Your social status. My father would not settle for Richard. Not when he could have you. You are everything my father wants to be. And I was the key to getting it.”

“I did not give a damn about what he wanted when this first happened,” Xander snapped.

He did not mean for it to come out so harsh, but now he was just scrambling to tell her the truth. He needed her to listen, to understand how everything had changed between them... How he had fallen in love with her.

“I was going to find the evidence and destroy it the day I came to your house, but I could not find them. Instead, you found me, and you intrigued me from that very moment you told me you did not want me. I found you strange and beautiful, and was

immediately enraged that I was so attracted to someone I could never trust.”

Images of Victor’s library, Eleanor’s seductive smirk, and their first kiss flashed through his mind violently, making him lose his words. He thought of the rage in her eyes that had simmered into desire that first time. How he felt her rigid body suddenly relax- how he felt his own relax when he had pressed himself against her.

“But, by the time we arrived here after our wedding,” he went on, “I knew that you could not have anything to do with it and that you were innocent in all of this.”

“Oh, then you realized,” Eleanor scoffed, her glassy eyes looking away.

“You have no idea how many times women have tried to trap me into a marriage,” he replied sharply, his defenses rising. “The tricks they would try were awful. Attempting to lock me in a room alone with them, or stuffing one of their kerchiefs into my pocket secretly, then pointing it out publicly later. The mamas were often worse, calling me awful things when I refused to honor their daughters. But do you think any of them ever wanted me? No! They just wanted my title and everything that came with it!”

“And you wanted me to save the reputation of your family,” she shot back, a tear spilling down her cheek. “It is not different! You had a choice! You could have accepted the blow and left me out of all of this.”

“My family would have never survived the scandal that would have broken if your father released those letters,” Xander quickly replied, “Our good reputation would be gone forever. Not to mention Richard would most likely lose his life. This was no mere grab for marriage but the potential loss of everything my family and I know.”

This seemed to put a brief pause on Eleanor’s growing anger, and he continued.

“Eleanor, I cannot take back that it took me time to see that you were innocent, but the moment I did, I realized I had to protect you just as much as Richard.”

“Protect me from what?” She asked, her brows furrowing.

He wanted to stop, to speak no more on this, and gather her in his arms. They could not talk if their mouths were doing other things, and he could make love to her until she forgot- until he forgot- about all of it.

“From me,” Xander finally answered, his voice vibrating with emotion. “You made it clear you wanted love. Real, true love, and I knew I could not give it to you. I wanted you in body, yes- God yes, from the very beginning- but if I abstained from my lust, if I left you pure, then when we annulled, you could still have a chance at finding that love you wanted. I would take any fault in the separation; accept any rumor of my callousness, if it meant that you came out of this pure.”

“But I am pure no longer!” She shouted back, the pain in her voice so evident in made him grimace.

“This was all business from the start but I-”

A sob escaped her throat as she shook her head vehemently. Her eyes were rimmed brightly with red, yet no tears fell. She was shaking visibly from her pent-up emotion, and when it looked like she was about to crumble, he could not stop himself from going to her.

“Do not dare touch me,” Eleanor commanded, her voice trembling as she put one hand up and took several steps back. Her eyes were nearly red with rage as she looked at him with pure betrayal.

Xander forced his body to stop, his heart immediately screaming in protest.

“Honey,” he rasped, his voice thick and rough in his throat as his heart began to hammer, “Please, I-”

Without another word, Eleanor turned and left his study, thrusting the door open with so much force that crashed loudly into the wall on the other side, making him flinch.

Not sure what to do, Xander stood completely still. He had always controlled everyone, everything. And now suddenly it was as if he could not control anything at all. Not Richard. Not the blackmail. Not his wife... not his feelings.

“It hurts, does it not?”

Xander brought his head up, a sense of numbness filling him as he saw Richard leaning against the doorframe.

“You will leave if you know what is good for you,” Xander warned.

He had never felt this type of emotion before. It swallowed him whole and suffocated all breath and logical thought. Gone. It was all gone. And he did not trust himself to stop if he got his hands on his Richard.

“An eye for an eye, cousin,” Richard said bitterly, pushing away from the doorframe to leave. “You forced me away from my love. Now I have forced you away from yours.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

“Eleanor? Darling?” Penelope called as she opened the door to the armory.

After her own sister turned her away, Eleanor had been residing with Penelope and Rhysand for less than a week now but she still refused to talk about Xander.

Inside, the armory of Penelope and Rhysand’s home, Eleanor did not turn away from her target. Instead, she chuckled another dagger toward the center. From behind her, she felt Penelope’s eyes on her. Her friend was no doubt worried. She had wanted Eleanor to talk immediately, but when she had first arrived, she could not do so without her voice quaking. Now, though, her pain had turned to anger, and that was something she could deal with.

“How are you feeling?” Penelope asked tentatively. “Are you- are you ready to talk?”

“Yes.” She grit out, picking up another blade, her eyes full of enraged focus. “I knew it could not be real and I fell for it anyway!”

When she had first arrived, Penelope and even Rhysand had corralled her into their parlor, plying her with food and drink and questions. Eleanor had not been able to take it; not ready to just sit and stew, she requested to retire. Once she was shown to her guest room, however, she found herself with nothing to do but pace the floor and contemplate what baubles she could smash without hurting her friends’ feelings.

In her growing frustration, she had flung open the window and screamed with all her might; the rage pouring from her throat. It was then Rhysand had a servant sent up to her, urging her to take her frustrations out in his armory. She had been reluctant at first, thinking that she would be made to box like Xander- a sport she did not much

care for. But instead, Rhysand and Penelope met her by the target. After a quick tutorial on how to throw, Eleanor quickly discovered that not only did the exercise make her feel better physically, but it also untangled the utter mess in her mind.

She hurled the knife again, but this one did not stick. Instead, it clanged sideways into the knives already stuck into the board and brought them all clattering to the ground. A servant, who had been standing well off to the right, walked to the board and began to collect them.

“Eleanor, honey, come have a seat,” Penny implored, heading toward their makeshift tea table, “You have been throwing for hours today. You need to eat something and give your arms a rest.”

“Do not call me honey,” Eleanor implored, sounding more emotional than angry for the first time since she had arrived as she whirled toward Penny. “He called me that.”

Eleanor’s voice broke as she let out the four words, and Penelope was by her side in an instant. She tightly wrapped her in her arms, and though she was thankful Eleanor accepted her hug, she wished her friend would just cry already.

In her friend’s arms, Eleanor felt the rest of her resolve wane. The tears she had choked back since leaving Larsen finally welled their way to the surface and ripped through her eyes and throat with a vengeance. Her first sob felt like a shot to her chest as she finally released it, and she felt herself sag into Penny’s embrace.

“Damn him,” she whispered at first, feeling the tears flood down her cheeks. Then, as she pulled away from Penny’s hug and turned away she screamed “Damn them both!”

It was not just Xander’s fault she was in such a predicament; though his betrayal somehow hurt far worse. It was her father’s too. If he did not need to be better than

anyone else, she would have never been put in such a position. She could have married for love. She could have been truly happy- not whatever facade Xander had given her.

This was all just business from the start.

Eleanor had thought- for a moment, that he truly was falling in love with her. That she was falling in love with him. She had built a fantasy about whatever scheme that tied them together; where it would just fade away one day and they would just be together.

She had been wrong. Very wrong.

Disgusted with how her body heaved its sorrow, Eleanor worked to reign her tears back in. She buried her pain deep, covering it with her rage, and drew in deep, heavy breaths as she went back to the dart board. As he had so many times already, the servant had collected the knives she had thrown and placed them neatly back on her table.

“Darling, wait, do you not want to talk some more?” Penny asked, stilling Eleanor’s hand before she could pick up her first knife. “You were starting to open up.”

Eleanor looked over at her, her eyes full of raw emotion, and Penny’s look of worry disappeared.

“Right then,” Penny agreed, lifting her hand away from Eleanor’s.

Eleanor picked up the knife, palmed it, then took her aim. As the tip buried itself into the top center of the board, Penny began to clap behind her.

“Good throw, darling!” Penny praised eagerly. “That’s it, let him have it!”

“She is not here, Your Grace,” Victor Langley stated, sounding almost bored with Xander’s line of questioning.

Rage pooled in Xander’s heart and he clenched his fists. It would not do to just go around throwing punches and he knew it. At least, not anymore.

“Have you heard from her?” Xander asked, his tone tight and short. “She has been gone for a few days now and I have not received any word.”

Xander knew that he should have never let her leave that day Richard ruined everything. He should have stayed his anger, followed her, and explained that he had fallen in love with her. The problem was, he had not realized such a thing until after she had left him. Now, he was a in fury trying to find her and bring her back.

“I have not,” Victor replied in his bored tone, “Which is a blessing. It seems whatever Eleanor touches is destroyed. Even if you are done with her, I do not want her back in my home.”

Victor waved to his butler to shut the door before Xander could snarl back his reply. His entire body vibrated and begged to slam his fists against the door. But it would not do, and he knew it. The only thing he could do was go on to her sister’s house, in hopes that she was there.

“Your Grace?”

Xander looked wearily up at his valet, and the man’s shoulders sagged. He did not have to say anything for him to understand; Eleanor was not there.

“You will find her, Your Grace,” Jared insisted, letting loose his defeated posture. “I am sure of it.”

“I do not know where else to look,” Xander confessed, pressing his knuckles to his lips as he peered out the carriage window.

He had been everywhere. To her sister’s, to Lady Cordelia’s, Lady Marina’s- even to his grandmother’s house in Bath. He had spoken with Rhysand at the club and the man said he had not seen her. If she was not with them or her family, where could she be?

For a moment, his thoughts briefly flitted to Patrick Hislop. She had affection for the man that was plain, but would she trust him enough to run to? A dark, possessive feeling took over Xander as he thought of Eleanor running to him for protection. Protection from you, you bastard, his conscience seethed. Xander winced inwardly and pulled himself out of thought.

“Have you checked up on Patrick Hislop?” Xander asked Jared.

Jared nodded.

“Our investigator says he left for Ireland two days before Her Grace left and has yet to return,” Jared informed him. “He was able to speak with some of the servants and they have confirmed that no lady of any sort has been to the house for months.”

Xander settled slightly, relieved to hear the information. He would still check on the house personally tomorrow, though, to be sure.

“Pardon, Your Grace,” Jared said as they neared home.

He had not said a word in hours. Neither of them had.

Xander dragged his eyes to the man and saw that his faithful valet looked just as downtrodden as he felt.

“I have never seen you this way,” Jared went on, bowing his head humbly. “It is not my business, but it is most worrying, Your Grace. If there is anything else I can do to help. Anything at all, please tell me.”

Though their relationship could and would never be familial, Xander felt a surge of appreciation for Jared. He was a faithful valet, always had been, and he was grateful for his help more so now than ever.

“I am going to go into the house on the chance that she has returned,” Xander replied, “But if you could get the driver to gather some fresh horses and then head into town, it would be most helpful. Check around the market, the shops. Listen for any gossip that might lead us to her.”

“It is done,” Jared replied solemnly, opening the carriage door for his master.

Inside the manor, Xander paced through the rooms one by one. Mrs. Gaines insisted that Eleanor had not returned home during his absence, but he needed to check for himself. The house was vast, with well over twenty-five rooms. But he checked them all, his heart sinking every time he found each one lacking her presence.

He had been wrong, so wrong about wanting to get out of their marriage. He should have given them a chance. Should have given her a chance. He should not have fought what his mind, body, and heart were telling him. But he had, and now she was gone.

I only hope she is safe. If anything were to happen to her, I...

As Xander's mood grew darker, so did the weather outside. Strong winds were starting to gust against the great house, making the windows creak as thunder and lightning shook the earth. Xander looked wearily to the hallway windows as he closed the door to the final room- empty, like the rest of them. Another flash of

lightning lit up the sky then, and as it did so, heavy raindrops began to splatter against the panes.

The sound of the raindrops ricocheted in his ears loudly, maddeningly. Thunk, thunk, thunk. Gone, gone, gone. She was gone.

“Your Grace!” Mrs. Gaines shouted from the end of the hall, giving him a fright.

“Heaven’s, Mrs. Gaines,” he snapped, whirling on her. “What are you trying to do? Give me a coronary?”

“Apologies, Your Grace, but it is Jared!” Mrs. Gaines exclaimed, waddling toward him as fast as she could.

Xander’s heart pulsed in his ears as he strode toward her.

“He has just sent a rider from town,” Mrs. Gaines went on, thankfully not making him wait any longer, “There was a maid from the Huxton Residence there that claimed that our duchess has been staying there.”

Relief rushed through Xander’s veins, but it was quickly replaced with fury and betrayal. Rhysand had lied to him. They were not really friends, and he knew that. But he had lied. A sin he would surely be punished for that later. For now, though, he had to focus on Eleanor and beg for her forgiveness.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

“What on earth was that?” Eleanor asked, pricking her ears to the air.

The game of cards she and Penelope had been playing- the game of which she had still held cards in her hand for- was forgotten as soon as they had heard it. It could have been the storm. It would make sense. But, Eleanor knew that it was not. It was something- someone else.

“Stay here,” Penny commanded, her voice hollow as she let her cards fall to the table.

“You do not think that would be... There is a storm raging outside!” Eleanor muttered, getting up at once to follow her.

“I am pretty sure that would not be enough to stop him.” Rhysand shrugged.

“Rhysand, you promised not to tell him! Oh, I will deal with you later! For now, I must speak with Eleanor!”

Xander’s loud, pained, deep voice echoed through the hall, becoming much clearer as Penelope and Eleanor opened the door to the parlor. Together they peeked around the corner, and Eleanor’s heart leaped in her throat when she saw her disheveled, soaked husband. He was facing toward her and Penelope, but Rhysand and the butler were blocking him from seeing her or going any farther than the foyer.

He looked pained and wild, more like a beast than a man as his massive chest heaved and his soaked hair covered his silver eyes. Even when he spoke, there was more of a feral undertone than ever before. Despite her anger at him, Eleanor felt longing lace through her blood, and she fought the naive urge to run into his arms.

“Stay here, Eleanor, I will deal with him,” Penelope whispered, tugging at Eleanor’s chin. “You do not have to face him if you do not want to.”

Eleanor felt her gaze be forced away from Xander to one of her dearest friends. Eleanor did not say anything, but she gave a numb nod. Relief broke through Penelope’s tense look, and she nodded back at Eleanor as she let out a breath. She walked around the corner then, and Eleanor shrunk back until she was sure she could not be seen.

“Your Grace,” Penelope said, both sweetly and loudly as she approached Xander. “Pray, do keep your voice down. It is late and though our house is not full, there are still people trying to sleep.”

“Like my wife?” Xander demanded, setting his glare on Penelope as she approached.

Eleanor gripped the wall tighter.

“I believe that she is at odds with that sentiment at the moment,” Penelope went on.

Her voice tone was gentle, yet it held a sharp edge, making Eleanor almost want to smile. Many people underestimated Penny because she was so petite, but the truth was, she had quite a way with both truth and words. Her tongue could be as sharp as a blade and leave deep wounds if she was provoked.

“Please,” Xander said, his tone much calmer now.

He finally pushed the mop of wet hair out his eyes, revealing his molten silver orbs, and Eleanor felt her heart ache. She missed him. There was no denying it.

“I need to speak with her. I need her to know that it was not all a lie,” he went on. “She needs to know that my feelings, though unplanned, are very much real. I need...

I need her to know I love her.”

Xander’s voice was not pleading by any means, but there was a strong emotion that left no room for doubt. Still, he had kept her in the dark about so many things. He had convinced her to believe him before. Is that all he was trying to do now?

“I will deliver your message, Your Grace,” Penelope replied, her chin held high as she clasped her hands together in front of her. “If I should so happen to see her.”

Xander’s expression darkened then, any empathy vanishing in the blink of an eye as he set his mouth into a grim line.

“I know she is here,” he stated, his tone firm but emotionless. “I know that Huxton lied to me about it. Now let me see my wife, or God help me-”

“Careful how you finish that sentence, Larsen,” Rhys threatened, his tone deadly as he stepped protectively in front of his wife.

Not able to take the scene anymore, Eleanor disobeyed her friend’s advice and walked out of her hiding place. Xander noticed her immediately, his head snapping in her direction so quickly, she feared him injured. His eyes grew wide as he saw her walking toward him, and he seemed to sway a little on his feet.

“Honey,” Xander whispered, taking a step toward her.

“Do not call me that,” Eleanor and Penelope stated in unison, with only Penelope changing the word me to her.

“Eleanor, you do not have to do this if you do not want to,” Penelope snapped.

She moved to stand between Eleanor and Xander, Rhys moving with her as if he were

her shadow. Pain flooded through Xander's eyes as his face disappeared behind Rhys's shoulder, and she could not take it anymore. She knew her friends were trying to help and that they were probably right in keeping Xander away from her, but she needed one more moment. She needed one more opportunity to truly see if anything between them at all had been real. And she could not do that with an audience.

"Penny," she said softly, touching her friend's shoulder lightly.

Her friend turned to her, her expressions full of concern as she looked at her.

"Thank you so, so much, for everything you have done for me," Eleanor went on. "But I need to speak to my husband. Alone."

"You may use the parlor," Rhysand said after a moment.

Penelope and Rhysand then moved out of the way, but before Rhys went to stand with his wife, Penny took a couple of steps toward Xander and raised a warning finger at him.

"I find out that she has shed one tear. One. And I will have Rhys take care of you. Are we clear?" She asked, her voice laced with promise.

Eleanor tensed as she thought Xander was about to lash back, but to her surprise, he only raised his hands in the air, looked at Rhys levelly, and replied, "And I shall let him."

Not waiting to see if Xander followed her, Eleanor walked back to the parlor and opened the door wide. Relief poured through her when she soon heard Xander's hurried footsteps, and then the sound of the door shutting behind him. Her heart leaped as she realized that they were alone. Together. For the first in almost a week.

Her body suddenly became aware of his close proximity, and she felt heat rise through her skin again. She needed to turn around. To face him and demand him to talk. But now it was her feet that could not move.

“Hon-” Xander sighed, stopping himself.

It pained him not to call her by her pet name now. The relief that had poured through his body when he saw her appear nearly knocked him off of his feet. But... when she had reacted so viciously to his name for her- when it made her brown eyes practically turn red with rage, it made his very being feel as heavy as lead. Still, he would not push her. He had done that enough.

“Eleanor,” he corrected, pleading to her back, “Please, tell me, are you well? Have you been eating? God, you look so frail. Did you fall ill again?”

Eleanor’s shoulders sagged as if she were in pain, and she lowered her head as a soft sound escaped her throat. Tension filled him as he went to her, unable to keep his hands to himself any longer, and he grasped her shoulders before turning her around. His heart broke as he saw the pained look on her face and the redness of her nose and eyes. Not a tear had fallen but he could tell that it was taking everything within her not to do so.

Her eyes, her beautiful honey eyes, would not meet his. Instead, they stayed focused on the floor, as if God himself could not will her neck up. Her entire body had begun to tremble in his hands the moment he touched her, and he could not be sure if he should release or tighten his hold on her.

“Eleanor, sweetheart, tell me what has happened,” he implored, massaging his hands up and down her arms.

“You.”

She spit the word out so venomously that Xander flinched.

“You are what has happened. You and my father. You used me. You both used me for your own interests.”

Her voice broke as she said the word used , and unable to help himself, Xander pulled her to his chest. She did not fight him, but her arms came up between them instantly, stopping their torsos from touching as her head stayed locked downward.

“I did what I was forced to do,” Xander replied, his chest heavy with emotion as he held her as close as she would allow.

“You were not forced to seduce me!” She bit out, pushing her fists harder into his chest. “You were not forced to take my maidenhood and make me believe that I was loved!”

“You are loved,” Xander grit out, his hands moving to her face in an instant.

Though his voice was gruff his touch was incredibly gentle. He wrapped his palms around her delicate jaw, framing it, and applied the softest of pressure as he then silently begged her to look up. With patience, he waited, refusing to force her movements, and he almost fell to his knees with relief when Eleanor’s honey-brown eyes rose to meet his.

Thank you, he silently praised, pulling in a steadying breath.

“You are loved, Eleanor,” Xander repeated, his thumbs gently stroking her jaw, “I love you so incredibly much, and I tried not to. I tried to keep you away from me because I knew you deserved better and I thought I could not be that for you. I was so focused on trying to get out from under your father’s thumb that I could not see how wrong I was about that.

“But my issue... my issue has always been about control. I have needed to handle things on my own since my parents died, and any time I have leaned on another for aid it has ended poorly. Up until you, life taught me that people could be appreciated but not trusted, ever.”

“Xander,” Eleanor whispered, emotion reflecting in her eyes. Not sympathy or pity, but understanding. It was a tone that spurred him to continue, even though he had never revealed so much about himself to another in his life.

“Our marriage was built on blackmail, Eleanor, you cannot deny that, but you? Your presence? It was healing. Intoxicating. Devilishly annoying, and it made me feel things, realize things that I have never allowed myself before.”

“Do you not understand that you made me feel the same?” She asked, her hand pressing to her chest as her brow furrowed. “I have never felt for a man the way I feel about you. Ever. And I so thought when I started to feel this way about you- and saw that you might feel such a way toward me, I thought that was a sign! A sign that I could finally be with a man that might love me. But you were not. You were just the suitor my father finally succeeded in selling me to.”

“No!” Xander burst out, his silver eyes wide with panic. “No, honey please do not say that. I can be that man for you, Eleanor, I crave to be that man for you,” he added emphatically.

“How am I to be sure that is true?” She burst out, confusion and fear clear on her face.

“Please,” he whispered his voice barely audible to himself as he felt a fist tighten around his heart, “Let me prove it to you.”

Xander’s breath stilled as seconds of silence ticked by. He wanted to say more, so

much more, but he did not want to overwhelm her. So, he waited. Letting the seconds stretch into a minute, his chest growing tighter with each tick of the clock. Then, in a move that shattered his heart, Eleanor shook her head.

His entire body went cold and numb as he saw a single tear escape its prison and roll down her cheek. It was a symbol of defeat. Of failure. And it was all his doing. His lungs screamed at him to breathe, but he could not. He did not deserve to.

“I love you so much.”

The words came out of Eleanor’s lips in a quiet sob as more tears fell, and her brokenhearted expression lifted away from her beautiful features. Gently, she nuzzled her chin into his touch; the smallest show of trust.

Breath slammed in Xander’s lungs so deeply it felt like a kick to the chest, but it was a kick he would accept every damned day if it meant what he thought it meant. Eleanor’s hands unfurled from their fists then and slid from his chest up to his neck. A broken groan of relief and pain broke through Xander’s lips as she then laced her arms around him, and they pulled one another into a kiss.

Emotion tore through him as he felt her lips tentatively brush against his- a feeling he feared he would never experience again- and crushed her to him as he deepened the kiss. Eleanor whimpered as he did so, her body melting, seeping into his as they finally reunited. His knees buckled then, either from emotion or keeping them locked with tension for so long, but he took them down gracefully, sweeping Eleanor into his lap.

“Honey,” he breathed raggedly between their kisses, his hands roaming anywhere and everywhere he could find bare flesh.

“Yes, husband?” She murmured, her tongue sliding teasingly over his bottom lip.

Xander moaned, unable to help it, and continued talking through their kisses.

“Not that I did not deserve it, but please do not ever do that again. The moment you shook your head was the most terrifying moment of my life.”

Eleanor’s arms wrapped tightly around his neck then as she kissed him deeper, so tight she nearly choked him, and when she did release him, there was no laughter in her eyes. He suddenly realized that he was not completely pardoned yet, and while their kiss was a very good sign, there was still much to be resolved. Much for her to forgive.

“I love you,” she repeated, her golden eyes glimmering with affection, “But that does not mean I forgive you. Not yet. There is much you have kept from me. More than just your true feelings. And we will talk about them, all of them, or you will leave this house alone. No matter how much it would break my heart.”

Xander nodded, understanding the brevity of such a conversation. There was no way he was leaving that night without her, and therefore, anything she wanted, he would give her. With care, he rose from his knees with Eleanor still in his arms and carried her over to the nearest couch.

“I will share everything,” he promised, setting her down gently. He then took a seat on the opposite side, close enough to lean in and touch her, but far enough for her to have her own space when she needed it.

“But Eleanor,” he warned, meeting her eyes and feeling that warmth again, “I want you to understand that everything I am about to say is true.”

“Good,” she replied, nodding her head readily. “That is all I want.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

Eleanor had not quite understood what Xander had meant when he commanded that she accept every part as truth, but now she did.

Her father blackmailing someone to gain power made sense. Xander obeying the blackmail to save his cousin Richard made sense. But their feelings, and how they grew for one another despite their situation, did not make sense. And yet, it was as true as everything else he said.

She could see it in his eyes, feel it in his touch that he loved her; but the pain of his secrets kept her from accepting it. Not just his secrets, but his need to control everything by himself. He was a man apart; isolated, in order to keep a firm grip on everything and everyone around him. And Eleanor was not one to allow such a tight hold.

“Eleanor,” Xander pleaded, his hand on hers on the cushion between them, “Love, please, say something.”

Eleanor stirred from her thoughts, pulling her attention back to Xander. Xander, who once stood proud, cruelly handsome, and untouchable, was now wet and bedraggled from the storm, still looking unbelievably handsome despite the look of desperation in his eyes. The desperate need to be touched. Comforted. It was a look she had once given him.

“I will not continue this way,” she replied at last.

She did not move her hand from his, but her soft gaze hardened, so he understood the brevity of her words.

“If you and I are indeed going to have a real marriage, then this- your need for control, especially over me, stops now. I do not care what you think my best interest is, you must be truthful with me at all times so that I may decide for myself. I am not some delicate pet in need of a guided cage,” she went on, her fury resurfacing, “I am a woman capable of action and thought, and I will not stay married to a man who does not wholly believe that.”

She paused, a hint of sadness taking over.

“No matter how much I love you.”

“You are that and so much more,” Xander agreed, his tone vehement as he inched closer, “And you are right, regarding my control issues. I thought I needed a tight grip or else I would fail everyone. I know now that that grip has caused terrible pain. Not just for you, but for my family. It is a flaw I eagerly yearn to correct.”

He came closer, his hand curving around her neck, and Eleanor allowed it. His touch sent sparks into the veins beneath his fingertips, and her pulse quickened with desire.

“I would hope,” he continued, his deep voice level and honest, “that you would be willing to reside with me until such a feat is accomplished. However, if it is not something you wish, I will not fight it. I have homes in London, the countryside in Bath, and an estate in the French countryside, and you are welcome to stay in any of them until you trust me. Or here, anywhere you wish. I only ask that you not go back to your father or your sister. They will hurt you, Eleanor, and you cannot ask me to allow that.”

Appreciation swept through Eleanor as she listened to Xander’s words. He had not given up all control, obviously, but his only demand was that she not take herself back to the people who hurt her in the first place. He was offering her safety as well as space, if that was what she needed, and that spoke volumes to her.

“And your cousin?” She asked, allowing her body to move closer to his.

Xander nodded, almost looking relieved.

“Richard shall be free to do as he wishes,” Xander conceded, “His life is now his own, as are his consequences.”

Eleanor nodded, feeling the tension leave her body as she heard Xander relinquish the responsibility. She did not particularly know or care for Richard, but she knew that some of the spite he harbored toward her was because of Xander’s tight grip on him. Perhaps now, with time, they could find steady ground.

“And you will allow me to take care of my father,” she pressed on, sliding herself into his lap.

Xander’s eyes widened, then narrowed suspiciously as his hands immediately came to her waist, pulling her closer.

“Honey, I do not think-”

Eleanor gave him a threatening look, and his sentence died on his tongue. He appeared to struggle internally for a moment, but then nodded and met her eyes again.

“Please continue,” he said, if not a little begrudgingly.

A sense of power and pleasure rose in Eleanor as she saw her husband bow to her will, and before she said anything else, she pressed her hand to his jaw and kissed him passionately.

“Such a good husband you are,” she crooned, pulling away from the long kiss to feather smaller ones on his lips and jaw.

Xander groaned deeply at her praise, and beneath her, she felt his cock stir to full rigidity. Then, almost embarrassed, his cheeks flushed and he cleared his throat.

“No one has ever spoken to me like that before,” he admitted, his voice thick.

“And?” Eleanor asked, her smile growing as she loosened the sodden cravat at his neck.

“And I am a little unnerved by how much I enjoyed it,” he confessed, his hands going to the ties of her dress.

Eleanor laughed seductively, her heartache and rage melting away as they began peeling one another’s clothes away one piece at a time.

“So, I will handle my father,” Eleanor purred, thrusting her fingers into Xander’s hair as he pressed a hand to her throat once more and ran his tongue down her neck.

“You will handle your father,” Xander replied obediently, his other hand pulling away her undone dress as his mouth continued to worship her neck.

“And you will help me,” Eleanor murmured, dragging Xander’s wet trousers down his hips.

“And I will help you,” he agreed.

He had soaked her through the moment he had first hugged her, but she had been numb to it. Now, she could not wait to get the heavy, drenched fabrics away from them, to free their cold, wet flesh and warm one another in a most feral way. With the last of their clothes gone, Xander picked up Eleanor’s naked body only to lay her down before the fireplace on the fur rug.

“I hope Penelope and Rhysand do not come in,” Eleanor whispered, her voice bright with mischief and laughter.

She then sighed in pleasure as Xander brought his weight down on her, settling over deliciously so that she could still feel all of him but still breathe.

“They already hate me,” Xander chuckled hoarsely, his lips trailing down her chest, “Might as well give them one more reason.”

At that, Xander’s mouth clamped down on her right breast, and Eleanor let out a high-pitched gasp. Her back arched as her head pushed itself back into the pillows, and her hand gripped tufts of his hair tightly; keeping him there.

“I will apologize to Penny later,” Eleanor breathed, then wrenched Xander’s head up to hers and kissed him deeply.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

“ I must say, Honey, your forgery skills would be desired by the most devious criminals in London,” Xander mused, watching his wife put the finishing flourish on her father’s fake invitation.

Like the letter she had penned in his name to White’s, the invitation from Almack’s Assembly Rooms she was replicating now was identical. Her plan was brilliant, simple, and most importantly of all, it would work. Eleanor looked up at him, pausing from her work, and gave him a mischievous smile.

“Remember that should you ever get the notion to lie to me again,” she replied slyly, giving him a wink.

Xander chuckled as he leaned down and bit her neck in response. No, he would never lie to his wife again. Nor would he stand in front of her and keep her in the dark. Instead, he would be by her side, protecting and loving her just as equally as she was protecting and loving him.

“A warning I do not need,” he replied with wit, making her giggle.

They kissed, a shock of passion skittering through them, and then Eleanor handed Xander the finished invitation and envelope; both of which looked to come straight from Almack’s. He carefully slid the invitation into the envelope, and then turned and handed it to Jared.

“You have the jacket?” He asked his valet.

The man nodded, taking his part in the plan very seriously.

“I do, Your Grace,” he agreed. “I paid off one of the servers to loan it to me for the day, as you requested. It has the Almack’s insignia on it as you said.”

“And you are sure my father has never seen your face?” Eleanor asked him, rising from the desk with a tense look.

Jared nodded again.

“I am positive, Your Grace,” he agreed. “I have always waited for His Grace in his carriage during any visits and was not present at any of the parties. He will not know I work for you.”

Eleanor gave him a single nod.

“Good, that is good,” she agreed. “And you know what to say?”

Jared repeated his lines perfectly, and Xander noticed his wife relax a little more as she nodded once again.

“Well done,” she praised.

She looked from Jared to Xander, then smiled as she took a steadying breath and squared her shoulders.

“Well then, let’s get this plan underway.”

As Eleanor had predicted, Victor took one look at the Almack’s invitation and the insignia on Jared’s jacket and confirmed his attendance on the spot. Jared had reported that the man had nearly convulsed with pride before turning up a snobbish nose and demanded Jared run his way back to Almack’s with the reply.

That was days ago, and now it was time to put the rest of Eleanor's plan into play. If it was successful, as Xander believed it would be, then tonight would be the night that they all got their freedom from Victor Langley. Xander looked down at Eleanor and smiled with pride and love as he took her in as they stood inside the doorway of the club.

She had chosen a crimson red gown for the evening, the hue of it offsetting the gold strands of her brunette hair and bringing out the rosiness of her lips. It was a gown fitting for revenge, there was no more perfect evening for it.

She knew now that Rhysand had once attempted to help Xander get the letters written by Richard, and while they had once known the location of them, they had since lost them. It was through Eleanor's dubious planning that they were able to discover another way to get to them; a servant, who, with little more than the promise of new employment at the Larsen Estate, was eager to help Eleanor.

They now knew that Victor had grown suspicious of his failure to be accepted by the Ton, and had taken to carrying the letters with him everywhere he went in his jacket.

"You look absolutely radiant tonight, wife," Xander praised, keeping his eyes on Eleanor.

She smiled at him lovingly, affection and strength pouring from her gaze.

"As do you, husband," she replied, sweeping her eyes up and down his black suit.

"We are a fine match," he went on, using what little time they had left before they were to put their plan to work, "And I want you to know no matter how much I hate your father, I will always be thankful that he brought you to me."

Passion flared in Eleanor's eyes as she nodded, but before either of them could say

anything else, they heard their signal. A look of understanding passed between them as Victor Langley's angry remarks filled their ears, and with a nod, they strolled outside. As predicted, Victor was there, dressed in his finest, with his ruddy face swollen with anger.

"I have an invitation!" He roared, holding up Eleanor's forged card.

"I am afraid that is impossible, sir, as you are not on the list," the footman replied, straining to be polite the pompous noble.

"Papa."

Victor looked up at Eleanor and Xander, blinking in surprise as if he had only then noticed them. The moment his eyes landed on them, he smirked and drew up his nose.

"There," he insisted, not bothering to greet either of them as he looked toward the footman. "That is my daughter and son-in-law, the Duke and Duchess of Larsen," Victor continued, pointing at them.

The footman looked over to them as they stood in the doorway, and bowed to them respectfully.

"Indeed, they are," the footman agreed, "But that makes no difference in your regard, sir."

Victor turned his glare toward Eleanor as his lips curled into a snarl, immediately igniting Xander's anger. He went, instinctively, to step between them, but Eleanor's touch feathered the top of his hand. He stopped, thankful for her furtive intervention, and stepped back into his place.

“Papa, I am sure this is something we can all work out,” Eleanor said sweetly, giving her father a dazzling smile.

“You will make this nasty business go away?” Victor grumbled, his face fading back to its natural pale color as he watched Eleanor walk to him.

“For once and for all,” she promised, opening her arms to him.

Eleanor did not recall ever hugging her father once in the last twelve or so years, but as she opened her arms, she saw a look of affection on her father’s face she had never seen before. Sweetly, she slipped her hands around between his jacket and shirt and embraced him. It was a bittersweet moment, feeling her father return the rare form of physical affection. If only their relationship could have been different...

“I will take care of all of this, Papa,” she promised as her fingers crept around her desired query.

Eleanor hugged her father tighter, mentally whispering goodbye as she pulled her prize away and deftly slipped them behind her back. As planned, Xander’s hands came to her, one at her wrist, the other at the letters. Once he had a firm grasp on both, he pulled Eleanor out of the embrace and walked toward the carriages.

“Where are you going?” Victor asked, his face growing red again in confusion. “You just said you would take care of this! Now you are walking away?”

At this, they turned around, and Xander held up the key to their freedom.

“We just did, Langley,” he replied dryly.

Victor’s eyes grew so wide that there was whiter than iris. His face then turned from crimson to purple as he began to vibrate with fury. With a roar of rage, his eyes

narrowed murderously at Eleanor and bared his teeth in disgust.

“You little wretch,” he growled, stalking toward them, “You will beg me for forgiveness and mercy after I-”

Xander was between them in a heartbeat, staring the man down. This time, Eleanor made no move to stop him, and as Victor drew nearer, Xander raised a dagger from his pocket and lodged the tip to the man’s double chin. It was small, discreet so that anyone in the gathering crowd would think that Xander was just holding his fist to him- but with the proper force... Victor stopped immediately, his face going sheet white.

“If you finish that sentence, it will be your last,” Xander warned. His tone was low. Calm, even. But yet somehow full of menace.

“You would not hurt me here,” Victor tried to argue, but Xander only pressed the dagger in a little more.

“My wife knows you carry a pistol, I am merely defending us,” Xander replied in a calm tone, smirking. “Seeing as how every member of the Ton knows how aggressive you can be, no one will negate me.”

Realizing his options had completely run out, a look of resignation crept across Victor’s face, and he nodded.

“Good,” Xander approved in a sharp tone.

“Now you leave my family alone,” he continued, “and that includes my wife. She does not belong to you any way anymore, do you understand? You, nor anyone else of your household will not come near us ever again.”

“You deserve so much crueler punishment than what I am going to give you,” Eleanor stated, her voice turning cold as she turned her full attention to her father, “But I refuse to be like you.”

She put a gentle hand on Xander’s arm and he lowered his fist. His gaze had filled with hatred as he once more turned to Victor, and he sent her father a silent warning to keep his calm.

“In a few weeks’ time, you will receive a letter from White’s, casting you off their list of members. If you make a fuss, I will make sure to humiliate you in the Ton. As my husband said, you will stay away from us. For if you do not, it will be I that will be blackmailing you, father.”

She took a step closer to him, raising her chin in defiance as she met his hate-filled gaze with a fearless expression.

“I know of many of your misdeeds, Papa,” she said threateningly, his face paling even more, “I will only be too happy to bring them to light.”

“No one would believe you,” he hissed, dark red veins appearing in the whites of his eyes.

“Perhaps not,” Eleanor said with a shrug. “But they will believe my husband. He might be known as a brutish man, but he is still very respected and trusted among many. His words have much weight, Father.”

“Now laugh,” Xander commanded from Eleanor’s side before Victor could muster another reply.

“Then hug your daughter. Say loudly that you are sorry for the confusion, and get in your carriage. Then go home, wait for your letter, and speak of this to no one.”

Victor's face turned various shades of red and purple as he seemed to desperately think of a way out of the trap. Finally, though, he seemed to realize he had no choice but to comply. He drew in a shaky breath, let out a convincing laugh, and said the words verbatim and with gusto as he gave Eleanor the lightest of hugs. They too dawned their own bright smiles, feigning amusement and forgiveness, and let Victor walk toward his carriage. Most of the people gathered frowned as the scene ended with no more drama, and within seconds, it had dispersed.

"To the carriage?" Xander asked, offering Eleanor his arm as they watched Victor drive away.

Eleanor felt dizzy with euphoria as she slipped her arm over his, and hugged herself to his side. Xander leaned down as they walked, brushing a kiss atop her head. She had done it. She had taken control of her life just as she had always wanted, and she had succeeded.

"You did wonderfully, Honey," he praised, his hot breath sending shivers down her neck as he whispered into her ear. "How do you feel?"

"Free," she breathed, then opened her eyes to look at him. "Freer than I have ever felt."

Xander's eyes shined with pure love and admiration as he stood in the rain with her, pulling her into his arms.

"And what do you wish to do with your new freedom?" He asked, grazing his knuckle ever so softly across her cheek.

"Spend it with you," she replied, meeting his gaze with the same intensity.

There, in the rain, on the street, Eleanor and Xander sealed their lips in a passionate

kiss; neither of them caring what anyone thought or saw.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

A Few Days Later

“I am just happy to see that you and Rhys have mended things so quickly,” Eleanor laughed, leaning into Xander fully as he led her through the front door of Larsen Hall.

“He had nothing more to complain about,” Xander replied, giving her a sly smile as he scooped her into his arms. “He did not have to thong me, and I replaced the rug you and I ruined the night we made up.”

“Things did get a little messy, didn’t they?” Eleanor asked mirthfully, her eyes bright.

Visions of that night exploded in Xander’s head, and he smiled wickedly.

“Indeed, they did,” he agreed, his body stirring to life. “Why do we head upstairs and try some more of that?”

Eleanor bit at his neck in response, he walked even more quickly toward the stairs.

“There you are!” the dowager’s voice rang through the foyer, stopping him three steps up.

“Apologies, Grandmother, but can this wait for another time?” He asked absently, taking another step. “We have some... marital matters to discuss.”

Eleanor slapped his chest as his grandmother hissed at him to be serious, and with a sigh, he rolled his eyes and came back down the stairs. It was only then he saw the worry etched in the older woman’s face, and his previous thoughts and feelings

vanished. Carefully, he sat Eleanor back down on her feet, and they both went to the dowager duchess.

“What is wrong?” Eleanor asked quickly, clutching the dowager’s hands. In her left one, Xander could see a letter crinkled up in her tight grip, and his dread grew.

“Grandmother, what is it?” He asked.

“It is Richard,” she explained, her voice tight, “He has left us! Here, look at this. It was found in his room!”

As Xander took the letter, the dowager continued to sob harder and leaned her frail body completely into Eleanor’s. Eleanor embraced the older woman tighter and gave Xander another worried look. Xander met her eyes with the same emotion but did not open the letter.

“How could he do it?” the dowager sobbed. “How could he leave us? For a man? I know what he said about love, but- but this?”

Xander did not need to look at the contents of the letter, not if these were his grandmother’s questions. She understood Richard’s secret now. All of them did.

“Grandmother, I offer my deepest apologies for not handling this better,” he apologized.

He put a gentle hand on her shoulder, but her sobs only grew louder.

“My baby boy,” she wailed into Eleanor’s neck. “Who is going to protect him? He will not survive on his own, he is not capable of it!”

“Hush now,” Eleanor soothed, her voice gentle as she rubbed circles into the

dowager's back, "Richard is a Harrison. This already makes him stronger than most."

"Oh, darling girl," the dowager sighed, pulling away to dab at her tears, "How I do appreciate your comforting words. I so hope that you are right."

"Honey," Xander implored softly, looking toward his wife. She gave him an affectionate look, and he knew she was ready to help. "Please help Grandmother to bed, I believe this is far too much for her nerves."

"Of course," Eleanor replied quickly.

Xander gave her a look of appreciation and Eleanor sent him a look that said she would find him when she was done. He gave a furtive nod. Good. He needed to see her after this.

"Come now, Grandmother," she urged gently, slowly leading the dowager up the stairs, "Let us get you in bed with a cup of warm tea for your nerves, yes?"

"Did you know?" she asked, a fresh wave of sobs pouring from her throat.

Xander's chest tightened as he watched the two women he loved the most descend the stairs.

"It is all right," Eleanor only soothed, keeping the older woman steady, "It is all going to be all right."

Xander waited until they disappeared onto the second floor where his grandmother's compartments were situated, then strode to his study with the letter. Once there, he smoothed out the paper on his desk and read its contents.

Dearest Family,

I have found a forbidden love. One that burns deep and true, but cannot exist in our country. I have tried to keep this love between Marcus and me a secret. To protect not just us, but all of you. Failing to do so has been my greatest defeat, and I cannot bear that I left you to pay for that.

Perhaps it is for the best, though, for I can no longer continue living my life of lies in England. I have taken a small sum, which you will notice in your accounts, and by the time you read this, I will have boarded a ship with Marcus. It is better that you not know where we are for now. All you need to know is that I am your burden no longer.

Richard.

P.S. I will return the funds when possible.

Xander crumpled the letter back up, not bothering to fold it correctly. He was not worried about the funds. Whatever the amount was, he cared little about it. Richard, for all of his faults, was oftentimes an asset to the family business and deserved a payout.

For a moment, he thought about tracking him down. Not for himself, but for his grandmother. Despite finding out about Richard's lifestyle, he knew she still loved him deeply and would want him back where she could keep an eye on him. But... would Richard want that? Or would he want the chance to be free? Xander knew that he would beg his family to stay away if it was the only way to keep Eleanor, and therefore he could not blame his cousin for his choice.

From his desk drawer, he pulled out the letters Victor had used as blackmail and studied them for a moment. There it was, the penned words that had changed his life forever. In the beginning of it all, he had hated Richard for his mistakes; for being the one that forced him into marriage. Now, though, panic rose in him at the thought of

not having Eleanor in his life.

Standing up from his desk, Xander walked the pile of paper and a box of matches over to the fireplace. With care, he stacked three pieces of dry wood onto the grate and then wedged the letters in and around them. A snap of light appeared as he struck three matches against the fireplace, and he tossed them in. The letters worked as tinder, catching immediately and sending embers over the wood. Within seconds, the small sparks billowed into healthy flames, and all proof of scandal was gone.

“Be well, Cousin,” Xander said aloud as he watched the life-changing letters turn black. “I wish you nothing but the best.”

“Please forgive him,” the dowager pled, holding Eleanor’s hand tightly with both of hers.

“There is nothing to forgive,” Eleanor replied honestly, “All of this is my father’s fault and his alone. It is his greed and total lack of respect that has done this to us. It is I who must ask you for forgiveness. Not the other way around.”

“No, my dear,” the dowager replied vehemently, taking Eleanor’s hand. “You have no blame in this. Your father would have found a way to use those letters whether you ran or not.”

The frown on Margaret’s face slowly turned upwards into a serene smile as her blueish-silver eyes brightened- just like Xander’s did when he was overcome with emotion.

“He is changing because of you, my dearest,” she went on, her voice quivering, “He is becoming the man he was always meant to be, and it is your love that has allowed him to do so.”

The two women embraced tightly, holding on to one another for quite some time, then Eleanor gently helped Margaret back down into the pillows. She was relieved to see that she no longer looked as upset as before.

“Richard will be fine,” she sighed, nodding her head as if pushing herself to accept this. “And perhaps this will not be forever. I am in good health, despite my age. It is possible I may see him again. And if he is happy, then I shall be too.”

After bidding goodnight to Margaret, Eleanor quietly closed her door and instructed the other woman’s handmaids to stand by for whatever she may need.

Eleanor stopped a couple of other places before returning to Xander, switching temporarily from wife to duchess. Since returning to Larsen Hall, she had felt a new love and appreciation for her station and now understood why Xander was willing to protect it. First, she went to her quarters and rang for Mrs. Gains.

The housekeeper beamed with happiness when Eleanor gave the orders to start moving some of her things into Xander’s rooms first thing in the morning, and walked out of the room as if she were floating on air. Next, she went to Richard’s quarters for the first time ever. It felt wrong as she stepped into the dark rooms, but as she stepped inside, she suddenly felt it.

The coldness. The loneliness. The sense of conflicting thoughts and possible self-disgust. It all hung heavily in the air of the empty compartments like a dense fog. Eleanor worried her bottom lip as she was filled with sympathy for her husband’s cousin. She was not exactly sure what her purpose was for coming to the room, but as she looked around, she realization welled up in her.

“Wherever you are, wherever you go, I only wish you peace and happiness, cousin,” she whispered aloud in prayer.

Richard had never been kind to her. Had never given her a chance. But, despite that, she still wanted that for them. Perhaps in time, as Margaret had said, they would all be together again.

“There you are.”

Xander’s deep voice sounded from behind Eleanor as she closed Richard’s door. Eleanor smiled and closed her eyes as she felt his hands grasp her waist and pull her back as his lips suckled at her neck.

“Have you been hiding from me? In Richard’s room?” He asked, his tone playful, seductive.

Eleanor leaned her back into his chest as she raised a hand up to cup the back of his neck, pressing his lips closer to her neck.

“I will never hide from you again,” she promised, her lashes fluttering as Xander’s tongue joined his lips.

“Thank heavens,” Xander sighed, then sank his teeth into her flesh.

Eleanor gasped and pressed even further into him, pleasure making her legs tremble. She pouted quickly when he pulled away, but he only winked at her and then threw an inquisitive look toward the door. He still wanted her to answer his question. He could still be rather stubborn when it came to getting what he wanted.

“In truth, I do not know why I came at first,” she confessed, her hands on his waist, “But I found myself saying a prayer for him.”

Surprise glimmered in Xander’s eyes, followed by appreciation.

“And how is grandmother?” He asked then, escorting her down the hall.

“She is much improved,” Eleanor assured him quickly, then laughed, “Though I may have promised a great-grandchild or two in order to make it so.”

Xander let out a laugh, a smirk growing on his lips as he looked down at her.

“Did you now?” He asked, desire gleaming in his eyes.

Right then and there, in the hallway, Eleanor knew that being a father no longer scared her husband. Relief and adoration flooded through her as she looked up at the man she loved, and smiled from ear to ear.

“I did indeed,” she agreed, perking a brow, “And what say you to that, husband?”

Xander’s smirk grew into a devilish grin as his silver eyes darkened. Slowly, they grazed their way down Eleanor’s body, his stare so intent she practically felt it. Hunger took over his eyes as they reached hers again, and he pulled her to his chest with a sudden yank, making her gasp.

“I believe I have an answer for that,” he replied, his voice deepening, “But I would rather show you than tell you.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

“This is not where I thought you were going with this,” Eleanor stated.

Xander chuckled as Eleanor’s look of excitement faded into one of confusion as he led her not to the bedroom, but to the dining room. It was late, he knew, but after setting Richard’s letters on fire, a sense of freedom had washed over him, and he was inspired to celebrate.

“I noticed that you did not get to eat dessert at Penny and Rhysand’s party before we departed.”

He leaned casually against the wall as he nodded toward the dining room door. Eleanor perked an eyebrow and shrugged.

“It is not an issue,” she replied, then smiled wickedly, “And since when do you care about dessert?”

Xander pushed himself away from the wall and took Eleanor into his arms. He kissed her deeply, using his tongue to part her lips and claim a deep possession.

“You will see,” he whispered into their kiss.

He then bit her bottom lip, making her whimper, and unwound one of his arms to open the dining room door. The usual servants who waited to serve their food were gone, but the long dining table was laden with desserts of all kinds.

“Where are the servants?” She asked, taking in the scrumptious treats.

“While you are having your dessert I am going to have mine,” Xander replied, loosening the ties of her dress.

“What are you talking about? You never have dessert...”

Eleanor let out a soft, breathy sigh as he pulled her gown down over her arms, and kissed her neck. He wanted to ravish her, to let the pent-up feral desire pounding inside of him out in the savage way it wanted to- and he would. But first, he was going to take his time.

“Pick one,” he commanded, loosening her corset next.

“W-what?” She breathed, turning to look back at him.

Xander’s fingers gently grasped her jaw and he turned her head back to the table, then kissed her ear. He then returned to her corset and he finished his work. With a tug, he pulled it and the rest of her clothes away; leaving her standing gorgeously bare before him. Xander’s cock strained against his breeches as he trailed his fingertips down the delicate curve of her spine. Pleasure filled him as she responded immediately to his touch, dipping toward him at the slightest pressure.

“Pick one,” he repeated. “Or shall I pick one for you?”

Eleanor gasped as his hands slipped around her hips and down to her small thatch of curls, touching the delicate bundle of nerves there ever so delicately. Her body trembled against his as she first squirmed then spread her legs; a silent plea for more.

“How am I to think when you do this?” She whimpered, leaning into him heavily.

Xander chuckled as he took on her weight easily. With no effort at all, he then scooped her into his arms to carry her to the head of the table. With care, he laid her

against the hard, shining surface, positioning her so that her backside was right up to the edge of the table. Xander then kissed her deeply and moved her hands above her head, laying her wrists over one another.

When he was sure she would not move them, he rose back up, and with a delicate touch, ran his fingertips over her. He started with her palms, stroking each sensitive center and tracing her lifelines. Then he traced down her wrists, her forearms, and underarms with the same gentle touch. Light. Teasing. Promising.

“I shall pick then,” he told her, moving to her breasts.

Eleanor’s eyes fluttered shut as he brushed the sensitive underside of her left breast, and in recourse, he delivered a light slap to her taut nipple. She gasped and writhed as she opened her eyes, and Xander tisked his tongue as he shook his head.

“Eyes open, Honey,” he commanded, going back to his softer touch. “I want to see your eyes at all times tonight.”

He enveloped her breast with his mouth, lapping the sting away with his tongue, and Eleanor relaxed back into the table with a soft sigh. Looking up again, he was greatly pleased to see that not only were his wife’s eyes open, but she was looking directly at him. Her golden honey orbs were full of warmth and need, and he felt flooded with love and passion as he saw them.

His fingertips continued their slow exploration then, trailing down the curve of her waist, the flare of her hips. He traced over her navel; unable to help himself, and leaned down and dipped his tongue into the tiny indentation. Eleanor whimpered at this but stayed still. He continued, moving down until he had one hand holding her ankle and the other cupping her already damp sex. He moved his fingers against her lips in a stroking fashion, and when they parted for him like pink flower petals, he slowly thrust his middle finger into her tight, wet sheath. Warmth and softness

wrapped around his finger and he let loose a groan as she whispered and squirmed again.

With effort, he pulled himself away from her, told her to stay still, and went to choose Eleanor's dessert. It did not take long for him to decide, and he grinned wickedly as he picked it up from its silver tray. It was a pastry, oblong and similar to a small baguette. It dripped with a thick, creamy glaze that smelled sweet and rich. At the tip of the pastry was a small hole that was bursting with vanilla cream. Perfect.

"Lean up on your elbows," Xander instructed, moving back between her legs at the end of the table.

Eleanor did as she was told, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

"Now take this."

He held out the pastry, and she took it from him with her right hand. Her eyes still on his, she started to bring it to her lips, but he stopped her.

"Not yet," he rasped, leaning over her.

The glaze of the pastry had melted onto his fingers the moment he had touched it and was now running in small drops down each of them. He brought his thumb to her mouth first and he did not need to instruct her further. Craning her neck toward his hand eagerly, she parted her lips and extended her tongue, lapping from the base of his thumb all the way to the top, then enveloped it completely. Her cheeks hollowed as she began to suck the glaze greedily, using her tongue and the edges of her teeth at the same time to make sure she got every drop.

Hell, I am never letting her go, Xander thought as she moved slowly from one finger to the next, taking her time and pleasure until they were all clean. When she finished,

she tilted her head back slightly, eyes glimmering with pleasure, and traced her tongue over her lips before drawing the bottom one into her teeth. There was a willingness in that gaze, a yearning to please him that literally brought him to his knees.

“Eat the pastry slow,” Xander instructed, his voice raspy as he grasped her thighs tightly. “Start by licking the cream. Try to coax as much of it with your tongue as you can.”

Eleanor’s eyes moved briefly to the pastry, then flitted directly back to him. Slowly, she brought it to her mouth, and as instructed, narrowed her tongue and scooped out a small taste of the cream. Their eyes locked together, Xander lowered his mouth to her mons and began to feast.

For a moment he struggled, fighting the urge to bury his face and lick with abandon, but he called on his self-control; demanded it, and began to lap at her with long, slow strokes. Eleanor’s delicate eyebrows shot up pleadingly as he did so, and for a moment, held the pastry away from her mouth as her head started to fall backward.

Xander pulled away immediately and delivered a light slap to her sex for her disobedience. Eleanor’s gasp turned into a moan as she struggled to lift her head back up, and he met her shocked gaze with a possessive look.

“Eyes on me,” he commanded, “And I did not tell you to stop eating your dessert yet or I will stop eating mine.”

This time as Xander began to lick and suckle at her center, Eleanor obeyed. No matter how her thighs began to quiver or her breaths broke into moans, she kept her eyes on him and her tongue working at the cream. The sexual tension seemed to grow with each flick of one another’s tongue, and within minutes, Xander found himself unable to go slow.

He did not have to remind her to keep her eyes on him as she found her release, for Eleanor's upper body shot up, spine arched in a backward bow, chin tilted down at him as she grasped at the plates of desserts; desperate to cling to something. His name tumbled from her lips in a moan, followed by a desperate plea to take her.

"Your wish is my command, Honey."

She did not have time to do more than gasp before he was inside her, filling her to the hilt with one thrust.

Her mouth opened as if to moan, but only a sharp inhale could be heard before she completely stilled her breath. Then, as if she suddenly remembered the need for air, she let out a series of shaky breaths that turned to moans as he began to move.

"Breathe for me, princess," Xander commanded, his voice like velvet against Eleanor's mind.

Breathe. Yes. Breathing was necessary, especially now. Although she was initially unsure of her husband's little game, Eleanor quickly discovered her love for it and played along. It had been difficult, to be sure, to focus on a pastry when her devilishly handsome husband was making her tremble, but the benefits of obeying the rules of his game had proven to be extremely rewarding.

Eleanor wrapped her arms around Xander's neck as her legs clamped around his waist. She soon adjusted to his size, and soft sounds of their pleasure joined their chorus of moans as they made love. Then, as if they suddenly shared the same thought, something between them shifted. A look of desperation filled Xander's eyes as Eleanor pulled him onto her, bringing him onto the table entirely so that she could be blanketed by his body.

Plates and trays of the desserts were pushed to the floor, clattering to the stones

loudly as they writhed together passionately. Delicately decorated cakes were smushed in the frenzy, painting parts of them with icing as their need for one another grew more intense. He had her on her back. Her belly. Her knees.

She had him beneath her thighs. Facing him. Turned away from him. And then they were on their sides, her back pressed to his chest as one arm pinned her hips to his and the other his hand was laced around her throat.

Xander let out a growl as his thrusts quickened and his fingers tightened around her neck. The pressure only served to please her more, and soon she began to tremble as she felt herself being hurled over the edge. Eleanor's eyelashes fluttered wildly as her teeth sank down into his neck and her body undulated with release.

"Did I hurt you?" Xander asked, speaking above a whisper this time.

"No," she promised, shifting just enough so that they could meet another's eyes. In fact, she was positive he would never hurt her again.

Xander's silver gaze was pure liquid, and his thick, dark lashes hooded them in the most sultry of disheveled ways. His sleepy smile was tinged with relief as he met her eyes and saw her truth, and leaned down to brush a kiss across her temple. Slowly then, he pulled himself away, both of them moaning in disappointment as they unlocked their bodies, and Xander pulled her on top of his chest.

"Did you like your dessert?" He asked, stroking his fingers over her scalp.

"Mmm," Eleanor murmured, rubbing her cheek against him. "It was the best I ever had."

A rumble of laughter vibrated in Xander's chest, making her own body tremble, and she smiled and giggled.

“The best you say?” He asked, kissing the top of her head, “I shall have to remember that. Perhaps this is how we shall have dessert from now on.”

“I could not fathom fighting you on this particular point, my love,” Eleanor sighed in contentment.

Xander chuckled again, and then pulled her up just enough to kiss her lips.

“And did I... “answer" your earlier question?” He asked, “About children?”

“I think everyone in the manor but your sleeping grandmother heard your answer to my question,” Eleanor responded wickedly.

Xander smiled down at her wolfishly, then kissed her again. Though they might not have had an audience in the dining room, they were both aware of how echoing their cries of pleasure could be. Tonight, in particular, was louder than usual.

“I simply wanted to make sure you heard me,” he replied, his voice dipping into a seductive tone.

He chuckled again as Eleanor shivered at the sound of him, and then eased them both up into a sitting position; Eleanor straddling his lap. She pressed her lips together and stifled a giggle as they finally got a good look at one another. Swatches of icing in various colors and crumbs were stuck to their bodies in random places. They were a mess. The room was a mess.

Seemingly pleased with where a certain swipe of icing was on, Xander leaned her back and dipped his head to right breast, scooping up a small dollop of purple icing from her nipple. Her giggles soon dissolved into whimpers as Xander took his time cleaning the spot. Feeling the heat in her lower belly gather once more, she began to squirm against his still semi-hard shaft, and it quickly stirred to full attention. She

moved to raise her hips up, wanting him again, but Xander's hands gripped her, and he made a tsk tsk tsk with his tongue as he shook his head.

"Now you are being rude," Eleanor pouted, furrowing her brow as she squirmed again.

Laughter, loud and genuine, burst from Xander's mouth as he tilted his head back. It brought immediate joy flooding into Eleanor's heart, and she could not help but laugh with him.

"We need a bath before we continue," Xander chuckled once he had caught his breath and kissed her.

"Do not worry," he promised, walking them to the door, "I shall take very good care of you."

"Eleanor smiled, closing her eyes as she relaxed into her husband's hold and surrendered all control.

"I know you will," she whispered.

The End?

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:01 am

Seven Years Later

“Linus, darling, do be careful with your baby sister,” Eleanor called out to her children.

Linus, their six-year-old son with his father’s eyes and her brown hair, turned from the swing he was pushing three-year-old Margaret on, and smiled wide.

“I will, Mama. Always!” He called back.

“Oh, do leave them play,” Penelope laughed, “they are having fun!”

On the swing, little Margaret, named after her great-grandmother, squirmed up turned to her older brother.

“Push, Linus, push!” Her haughty little voice commanded as her copper brows furrowed. “I want to go up!”

“Not too far,” Linus told her in his patient, protective older brother tone, only giving her a small push. “You shall have to wait a while longer before you go higher.”

“Just you wait,” Eleanor said with a knowing smile toward her friend. “You will know what I am feeling. Gerald will be trying to climb the stairs on his own and tumble off the bed before you know it.”

Penelope beamed at Eleanor, then looked down lovingly at her sleeping nine-month-old son.

“Is that true?” She cooed down at him. “Are you going to give your Mama stress?”

“It is a given,” Eleanor said, laughing, “But it is so worth it.”

“Rhysand should be returning to our home soon. So should yours be returning here,” Penelope said, standing up. “I believe Thomas and I shall head home so as to not give Rhysand an episode. He gets rather fretful about us at times.”

Eleanor rose to give her friend a warm hug goodbye, then leaned down to kiss Gerald’s little nose as his nanny picked him up. The two friends promised to visit again soon, and then as Penelope took her leave, Eleanor turned back to her children. Love radiated through her chest as she watched her little spitfire, Margaret, try to provoke her pillar of strength, Linus.

“You. Look. Delicious.” Xander purred, his hands gently resting on her shoulders.

A slow smile spread across Eleanor’s face as she felt her husband’s lips kiss her ear and neck, and she reached back a hand to lovingly caress his hair. He had been gone four days on business, and she had missed him terribly.

“Am I?” She asked coyly, tilting her neck to give him more access.”

“Mmm,” Xander murmured, tracing his thumb down the back of her neck as he pressed another kiss to her neck. “Most assuredly, Honey.”

Eleanor’s smile deepened as his hand then moved up to hair, and he tugged slightly so she would lean back. He kissed her lips, the tip of her nose, then her forehead, then gently released her before taking a seat in the chair beside her. Xander’s silver eyes met hers as she held out her hand to him, and he looked at her with pure love as he took it and kissed her knuckles.

“How was boxing with Rhysand?” She asked, knowing that was where he was returning from.

Xander mouth turned into an annoyed sneer, and he used his free hand to rub at spot on his shirt.

“The bastard got me with a cheap shot to the ribs,” he grumbled. “I really must find and train an ambassador to attend these meetings for me. ‘Seems that I grow soft when I am away.’”

Eleanor raised an amused brow at him.

“Soft?” She laughed, her voice low so as the children could not hear them, “You were not so soft this morning, Your Grace. In fact, you were quite... feral. You always seem to be when you return to me.”

A hungry grin spread across Xander’s face as he turned Eleanor’s hand over in his and began stroking the delicate flesh of her wrist. Shivers traveled up her arm as she thought of the animalistic way they had torn out each other earlier. He had arrived home early, which meant he had driven through the night to get to her, and when she woke up to him naked and crawling into bed, they began to paw and kiss and bite at one another hungrily. She then blushed, thinking of the deep scratch marks she had left down his shoulders and back. No doubt Rhysand would have teased him mercilessly about them during their row.

“Perhaps that is my issue then,” he teased, “Perhaps next time I should take my frustrations to Rhysand first then come to you.”

“Don’t. You. Dare.” Eleanor retorted quickly her eyes narrowing threateningly despite her smile. “I get you first. Always.”

“Indeed, you do, My Love,” he replied, sincerely, holding her gaze as he brought her hand to his lips. “Always.”

She leaned toward him for a kiss and he readily obliged, making her heart flutter with happiness.

“Papa! Papa!” Margaret squealed happily upon seeing Xander join them.

Her little feet kicked excitedly in the air, and then, when the swing did not stop fast enough, she let go of the ropes and jumped off. Linus and Xander both lunged for her, Xander nearly taking Eleanor with him as he still had her hand, but Margaret landed on her feet with a squeal of pride, and scurried quickly to her father.

“Do not jump like that, it is not safe!” Linus scolded, following quickly behind her.

His brows furrowed with disappointment as Margaret climbed into her father’s lap and then stuck her tongue out at him.

“I am fine, Linus,” Margaret shot back, scrunching her button nose and shaking her head at him.

She then turned to Xander, switching from a growl to an innocent grin so fast it made Eleanor stifle a giggle, and asked “I did good didn’t I, Papa? I did not hurt myself at all when I jumped off of the swing.”

Xander looked to Eleanor, his eyes pleading for help, and she could not keep her laughter contained anymore. While her husband had loosened his grip on many things, he was still a man who preferred control. With Margaret, that was impossible. He could not tell her no, could not disagree with her.

“Linus is right, Darling, you should not be jumping off of the swing,” Eleanor told

Margaret as Linus crawled onto her lap. “Not until you are much older.”

“But I am big enough to do it now!” Margaret huffed, then turned back to Xander. “Aren’t I, Papa?”

Xander’s expression went hopeless as he looked at his little girl, and Linus looked back at Eleanor to roll his eyes.

“For as tiny as you are, you are a very big girl, my darling,” Xander said in resigned agreement.

A satisfied smile spread across Margaret’s face as Linus groaned and Eleanor shook her head at her hopeless husband.

“Xander, you are going to spoil that child rotten,” the eldest Margaret declared, letting her presence known.

Together the family turned, and smiled when they saw the family Matriarch being led down the patio stairs by a handmaid on one side and the children’s nannies on the other. Behind her, Jared slowly followed, an envelope perched in his extended hands. Curiosity rose in Eleanor as she eyed it, wondering what it could be so important to interrupt their day.

“She is already spoiled, I am afraid,” Xander sighed in resignation, not even bothering to deny the accusation. Then to Margaret he said “Come, Darling, let us see what Jared has for us.”

“How are you feeling today, Grandmama?” Linus asked Margaret was helped down into her seat.

The older woman smiled lovingly at the little boy and reached for his hand. The years

had been kind to Margaret, but old age was bitter regardless. She was strong in many ways, especially in spirit; but she could no longer walk freely, or carry the children as she had when they were babies.

“I am well, my boy,” Margaret assured him heartily. “And you, my little Lord? How is it going with your sister?”

“Need you ask?” Linus sighed, sounding more man than child as he rolled his eyes and hiked his thumb toward his father and sister.

Margaret and Eleanor burst into laughter as Xander walked back to the table with baby Margaret. He was smiling from ear to ear as he looked at the letter in his free hand.

“What is it, darling?” Eleanor asked as he took his seat beside her once more.

“It is from Richard,” he replied, his voice full of contentment as his eyes roamed the letter. “He says he and Marcus have found a home in the Italian Countryside. He writes he is safe, secluded, and the happiest he has ever been in his life. There is even mention of us paying a visit, if we were inclined.”

“He is well? Truly?” Margaret asked excitedly, taking the letter.

“Perhaps we should plan a trip,” Eleanor suggested encouragingly. “It would be good for their children to meet their uncle.”

Xander nodded, a far off look in his eye, and Eleanor knew he was lost in thought. For the first two years after they successfully got Richard’s letters back from Victor, not a word was heard from Eleanor’s family. Then, shortly after Linus’s first birthday, Eleanor received notice that her father had died of a coronary. Xander had gone with her to the funeral, of course, but her mother and Edna did not speak a word

to either of them.

It was only through Cordelia, Marina, and Penelope that she picked up occasional gossip about them. The last she had heard, her father's money- what little he actually had left- withered away to nothing after the first year or so, and Laura had moved in with Edna and her husband. Eleanor was also made aware that her sister, like herself also had two children, both girls, and were of sour disposition like their mother and grandmother.

"Oh, this is such wonderful news!" Margaret crowed joyously, shaking the letter in the air, "Wonderful news!"

"Who is Uncle Richard, Papa?" Baby Margaret asked.

She placed a tiny hand on each of his cheeks and turned his head from her mother to her. Eleanor stifled a laugh as Xander's smiled softly down at their daughter, and he thumbed her chin and booped her nose.

"He is a man we owe a great deal to," Xander replied, his answer making Eleanor's heart swell. "Another day, when you are older, I shall tell you his story."

"For now, though, it is nap time!" Eleanor announced.

She could see her daughter rearing up to tell her Papa that she was plenty old enough, and decided to finally help her poor husband out. Linus slid out of her lap and went to kiss his Grandmama on the cheek while let out an obstinate "No!"

"Oh, my grumpy little dove," Eleanor crooned, scooping her daughter out of Xander's arms. "You will feel much better after a rest."

"But I am not tired," Margaret pouted, despite laying her little body over her mother's

shoulder and rested.

“I know, sweetheart, I know,” Eleanor cooed, rubbing her back.

By the time Eleanor walked her youngest child to her nanny she was no longer complaining about a nap, and made no protest as she was passed into another set of trusted arms. Linus appeared by Eleanor’s side a moment later, tugging her skirt so that she would lean down to kiss him, then walked dutifully by his own nanny’s side into the house.

“I am in need of a rest, too,” Margaret sighed, motioning for her handmaid and Jared to come to her side.

“So soon?” Eleanor asked, a trace of worry running through her.

Margaret laughed tiredly as she was helped up.

“These old bones tire so easily anymore,” she replied with a weary smirk, “But I am well. There is still quite a spark left in me.”

“That certainly is true,” Eleanor laughed, her worry dissolving.

She and Xander each placed a kiss on Margaret’s cheek, then Xander pulled Eleanor into his arms as they watched her go back inside.

“She is right, you know,” Xander said softly in her ear. “She may be growing frailer but her spirit is still quite strong. The children will likely have children of their own children before she passes on.”

Eleanor let out a soft laugh, and sent up a silent prayer for it to be so. She turned around in Xander’s arms, facing him, and a sensual smile tugged at his lips as he

looked down at her. The love they had found for one another five years ago had seemed to double each year, and now they both seemed so full of it they could simply bust.

“Walk with me,” Xander urged, nodding his head toward the path below the patio.

“Where are we walking to?” She asked him, falling in step at his side.

Heat simmered in Xander’s eyes as he led her down the small path canopied by wisteria, and Eleanor felt arousal flood her veins. She quickened her pace, making Xander chuckle. He soon took her left off of the path, into the woods, and then turned left once more at a warped and ominous Weeping Willow. The afternoon sun was mostly blocked out by the thick, green canopy of the trees, but every few footsteps or so, a shard of light seemed to break through.

Around them the forest hummed with sounds of life, creating another blanket of security of them in the woods. Finally, Xander took one more turn, this time to the right, and he led her to a large thicket. Eleanor gave him a stubborn look as he tugged her toward the small entrance he had revealed, but he only chuckled.

“You do not know what is in there,” she told him, shaking her head.

“Trust me, I do,” he replied sensually, pulling her back to him, “And you will love it. Will it make you feel better if I go in first?”

“I would feel better if we did not go in at all,” she replied with sass.

Xander shook his head as he tsked his tongue, and removed his jacket. He then threw it into the hole he had created in the thicket, and climbed inside. Eleanor waited breathlessly, awful visions of a bear or wolf or such was somehow already inside and shredding her husband to bits. But then, he popped his head back out, making her

jump, and smiled at her ruthlessly as she jumped and let out a little yelp.

“Come on, Honey,” he chuckled, holding out his hand, “Do you not trust me by now?”

It was then Eleanor noticed that Xander had also taken off his shirt inside the thicket, and the naked flush of his muscular arm teased her. Surely if he was shirtless there would be no danger she decided, and took his hand. Xander beamed with satisfaction as he helped her inside, careful not to let any thorns scratch her anywhere. Inside, Xander helped her stand up, and she gasped in awe at what she saw.

“Do you like it?” Xander asked, pushing her dress away before working on her corset.

“I love it,” she replied, shoving his trousers down before going to his briefs. “Have you been planning this long?”

Xander’s smirk widened as he held eye contact with her, then pulled her corset and underdress away. Eleanor immediately wrapped her legs around his hips, tightening her sex to his rigid shaft.

“I found it the other week during a hunt,” he replied, walking them to the blanket he’d laid on the ground. The subtle movement made his cock rub against her clitoris each time, making her gasp. “I thought it would be a most intriguing little getaway for us when we need a break from the house.”

“I do love the way you think,” Eleanor murmured, tracing her nose playfully along his.

A rumble of approval rose from Xander’s chest before he captured her mouth with his, kissing her deeply. Her mind blanked as pleasure took over completely, and her

need for him grew. Eleanor twisted one hand into his thick, dark hair as the other dragged down his back, and she bucked her hips into him pleadingly.

“Did you miss me, Honey?” He asked, his voice thick with need as he pulled away from their kiss. His liquid silver eyes looked deep into her soul. “Because I missed you.”

“Yes,” she breathed. God yes. She always missed him when he was away on business, no matter how short the trips, and though their reunion earlier had been incredible, neither of them were anywhere near satisfied yet.

“Tell me,” he commanded, a tinge of pleading in his tone as he kissed down her neck, her breasts, her waists.

“I missed you,” she gasped as his tongue dipped between her already dewy folds, “I missed you so much- oh!”

Pleasure roiled through her and her thighs trembled at Xander’s wicked kisses. She thrust her fingernails into the soft grass and clung to it desperately as he licked at her with abandon. His fingers, knowing exactly where to go, massaged her inner walls in a coaxing motion, making her swell and whimper with anticipation.

“I love you so much, Honey,” Xander moaned into her sex between his kisses and flicks.

“I love you,” she breathed, already feeling her body near its first release, “I love you so, so much.”

The End

Chapter 1

“ 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.

Chapter 2

“ 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 the 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.