



# The Baron Takes a Wife

## (Rogues Fall First #1)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** David, Lord Grayston, wakes up in a Crimean War hospital unable to move anything below his waist. Keeping him going through this ordeal is a chance meeting with Elena, a Balkan refugee who has been nursing wounded soldiers. To save her from the battlefield, David impulsively offers Elena a marriage-of-convenience. He promptly weds her, and then leaves her in England while seeking treatment abroad for his condition

After a challenging recovery, David returns to see if they can have a true marriage. Yet he finds Elena is not the woman he left behind; she has forged a life in London despite being an outsider. Although Elena's experiences of war have left her untrusting of men, the two eventually give in to an intense attraction. When the past returns to haunt Elena, they find that their marriage may have grown far beyond a marriage-of-convenience, if only Elena can let him in.

**Total Pages (Source):** 24

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

Outside of Balaclava

Summer, 1855

He caught a soft singing on the edge of his consciousness in a language he had never heard before. A melody somewhere between a lullaby and a funeral dirge, it was light and airy but still tinged with a shade of sorrow. He slowly opened his eye. Something bright and warm filled his line of vision as he took in a figure of gold bathed in light. It was as if the figure was pulling him toward something. As their features grew more defined, he saw it was a woman silhouetted by the light, singing quietly to herself. Heaven, his mind told him, though he felt no jolt of panic or regret. He watched the woman he assumed to be an angel for several moments as she appeared not to notice him. He had never seen a woman like her before, certainly not in England, which only increased his sense that he was no longer of the world. Her hair was in some sort of braided crown, and, while brown, it seemed to be trimmed with gold. Her skin was darker than an English woman's, a hue of rich bronze that complemented her hair. He couldn't see her eyes, but for some reason, he was sure they would be gold of some form as well. Death might not be so bad if he could sit here and watch this golden angel for eternity. He must have made a sound, for the angel suddenly stopped singing and looked over at him.

“You are awake.”

Perhaps he wasn't dead after all. The end of her song made him realize he was in rather substantial pain and that his vision was obscured on his right side. The angel walked over and inspected him carefully, her golden-brown eyes scanning his body. Up close, she was no less angelic, all lush curves and full lips, but he noticed one

flaw to her golden beauty. On her left side, from her hairline through her eyebrow, almost to her eye, ran a jagged white scar against her dark skin. It rippled as she swallowed.

“You want to know where you are, what happened?”

He recognized that she was no angel but some kind of nurse as he registered her plain, faded dress and apron. However, she did not wear the distinct crimson cape of a British military nurse. She also spoke English with a heavy accent, with pauses between words, as if she was thinking through what she was saying next and trying to anticipate how to answer him. He could not place her accent. It could be from anywhere in the Ottoman Empire, as he was not very familiar with the region. He had not thought to come here before... He finally comprehended that he did not know where he was, and then panic really did begin to set in as his heart beat unsteadily. The last thing he remembered was—

“It will be all right. Here, drink this.”

The angel helped lift him from his pillow and pressed a cup to his lips. He was only able to swallow a small bit of the lukewarm liquid before he began to cough. She then took the cup away and helped him settle back down.

“You are in a hospital outside Balaclava. In Kadikoi.”

He remembered being in the trenches, then the charge, and then nothing. He looked at her, tilting his head, as he only now discerned that his vision was limited. He could still talk, even though his voice felt like a croak.

“My eye—”

“Your eye is not damaged. You are bandaged because you have a burn on your face.”

He tried to raise his hand to feel it but was too weak.

“I will go get a doctor.”

“No!” He realized he had almost growled his request. “Sorry. Will you sit with me? For just a moment.”

She looked at him, then gave him half a nod, sitting on the empty bed to the right of his own. He did not want to dwell on why it was empty.

“Would you talk to me?” He felt ridiculous as her eyes widened, and he went on quickly. “I haven’t heard anyone talk for the longest time. I can’t remember the last time.”

“I do not know how long you were asleep. Unconscious, I mean.” She looked away and back to him. “I am not a nurse. My friend, she has a hotel across the way. We come every day to help treat the soldiers.” She gestured around. They seemed to be in a larger room, or maybe a hut, sectioned off by shoddy cloth screens for privacy on his left side, but he could still see two unconscious men through a crack in the screen. He supposed he had been just like them.

“What should I talk of?” she asked. “My English is limited,” she added self-consciously.

“How did you come to know English?” Despite everything, David could not help his curiosity about this woman. As long as he leaned into his curiosity, perhaps he could distract himself from everything else.

“My father is...was a merchant in Dobruja. He wanted his children to learn the languages of trade. The English have been trading in the empire for many years.” She began speaking of her family, especially her merchant father, still pausing between

words as if to think them through.

As she went on, he studied her. He had thought her angelic before, but when she spoke of her family, she lit up with a fire from within, a glow much more powerful than her outward beauty. He regarded the dimples on her cheeks and smiled a little to himself that he had come a long way to see this angel. That thought sent him back to his own painful situation. How long had he been unconscious? As the angel spoke, he tried to remember the last day he could recall. His name, he remembered his name. David Pierce. He was a peer, the fourth Baron of Grayston. Why had he joined the army? He was not a younger son. All of a sudden, the fit of idealism that drove him to purchase a commission washed over him, but then another memory became clearer. He remembered charging, then a cacophony of noise, pain, then nothing. The angel had noticed he was no longer listening to her.

“I went on too long. I really should fetch a doctor to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

He watched as a flash of something passed across her face. She looked at his legs and back to his eyes. She swallowed. Then, it quickly dawned on him. He had been so distracted by the golden angel that he did not realize he could not feel his legs.

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“Is he?”

“He will be fine. He merely lost consciousness. His head wound is superficial, and he should wake up shortly. He’s lucky he’s been out so long he missed the madness after the battle.”

“I think he realized—”

“You should have come to get me right away. I could have explained to him—” In his mind’s eye, he heard a man scolding the angel. Even though he did not know her name, he could not allow the man to speak to her that way. Summoning all his strength, he opened his eye. In his line of vision, he saw an older man with red-gray sideburns and a thick mustache, whose head quickly snapped over to him. The man, whom he could now see was wearing the golden sleeves of the physician’s uniform, walked closer to him.

“You remember your name?”

“David Pierce.”

“The year?”

“The year of our Lord 1855.”

“What monarch sits on the throne of England?”

“Why, that would be the good Queen Bess.”

The man looked simultaneously concerned and unimpressed at David’s weak attempt at diffusing the tension.

“Queen Victoria,” David muttered.

The man appeared to weigh upbraiding him but decided to look stern.

“Lieutenant, you are at a hospital at Kadikoi outside of Balaclava. I was told you received a serious injury, as I was not here when you were brought in. The burns on your face were treated, but I found some injury to your spine and, thus, your legs.”

“Which is why I cannot move them.” He swallowed. He knew this moment might be coming but wasn’t sure he was ready to face it.

The angel looked between them.

“I need to go find Mrs. Raeburn. Excuse me.” She did that half nod again to both of them, as if unsure how to address them, and left, vanishing behind one of the shoddy screens. As she left, David felt as if all the warmth had gone from the room, even though the day was hot.

The doctor cleared his throat. “It is unclear if this will be a lasting injury. Your spine appears to be damaged, but not by a bullet or shrapnel, thankfully. Your body likely landed at an odd angle during the blast or explosion that burned your face. Do you remember anything that might provide me with more information?”

All David could remember was the charge and then nothing. He was fortunate that his head was not otherwise injured from the blast. One small mercy. He shook his head.

“Would you happen to know of my men or Major Rattison?”

“I believe that most of the injured from the assault were transported to Scutari, though some might be at Castle Hospital, and the uninjured are regrouping. I do not know of others from your company still at this hospital. I will need to examine you now that you are awake. Then, I will be able to judge your condition better.”

David nodded absently. He wished he could return to when the angel was telling him about her family less than an hour before. Before he knew what he could never not know.

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The doctor, whom he learned was called Dr. Austin, thoroughly examined David, and his diagnosis was inconclusive and not particularly hopeful—he had heard of other patients with spinal contusions recovering, though not many. Because he would not likely walk any time soon, if ever, David would be invalided out and transported to Plymouth, not Scutari, when transport was available, which was also unclear. Thinking back to what he knew of the geography, Kadikoi was near the railway lines, so he hoped that would eventually take him to Balaclava Harbor and away from this dismal place. Many questions and very few answers just clouded David's already muddled head. Dr. Austin attempted the awkward conversation that David knew might be coming—that if he could not move his lower body, he would not have use of anything below his waist. For a moment, David was in relatively good humor for a gentleman who had just learned that he might never enjoy that particular pastime again. But suddenly, a wave of anger and self-loathing drowned out his rational mind. He was no longer a man if he could not walk, ride, or make love to a woman, a hateful voice in his head goaded him. What good was he to anyone? He warred with himself as the sanguinity that had always gotten him through life and the utter hopelessness of his situation fought a bitter battle, and he drifted off to sleep in a mix of laudanum and self-pity.

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He woke to the same soft humming and a gentle hand leaving his temple. He slowly opened his eye, watching as the angel pulled back the makeshift window curtain, and light again flooded the wing as he faced a ramshackle window much too mucky to see out of. When the muted light shone behind her, it illuminated the gold in her hair and skin. It was funny when he thought of a golden girl before he would have envisioned a shrinking blonde debutante. But this girl, this woman, was golden and warm, like a late afternoon sun, and something about her was keeping him from complete despair. As she turned and saw him watching her, he attempted to school his expression to blankness. She cocked her head.



He couldn't hold it in any longer. He had to talk to someone about it. "I don't know if I shall ever walk again." He hated the self-loathing he heard in his voice, but instead of pity, the angel just nodded solemnly.

"I'm so sorry, I was worried about that. I will pray for you." She seemed to reach to her chest reflexively but checked herself when she realized what she was reaching for wasn't there. A cross, perhaps? Even in his state, he could not ignore the warmth she had worried about him brought to his chest, but grief swiftly overshadowed that pleasure. He could not bring himself to tell her the rest. To say it out loud when he hardly knew her, a gentleman did not discuss such things with a lady. Though, he knew those in the drawing rooms of London might not consider her a lady. Truly, he knew almost nothing about her, just that she helped keep him from delirium.

"What is your name, my lady?"

Her golden-brown eyes widened in surprise as if she was unused to being addressed so formally. "Elena, I am called Elena."

"Elena, a version of Helen. Were you named for Helen of Troy?" He smiled, or at least tried to smile. This kind of conversation was his forte, and he needed familiar ground. "Is this the face that launched a thousand ships..." he began to quote, then stopped himself at the blank look on her face. "Marlowe, he was a playwright, like Shakespeare? Never mind."

"I do not know this Marlowe, but I do know Helen. She ran away with Paris, which started the great war. I always rather pitied her. One bad decision, and all that death and destruction."

He looked up and pressed his lips together. It still hurt to smile, but the familiar story made his lip curl up a fraction. He had always loved stories of the Greeks as a boy. True, the gods were often petty and cruel, but it made the heroics of men all the

better. What an interesting lady she was. While many women might be pleased to be compared to Helen of Troy's beauty, she was concerned about being connected to a wake of death and destruction. For the first time since he had woken up, he felt like his old self for a moment, even as the strangeness of this conversation, discussing the causes of the Trojan War with a foreign woman he had just met, did not escape him.

"I'm not sure Helen had much choice in the matter. In most versions, it resulted from a contest amongst the gods," he offered.

She looked unconvinced. "Well, I do not think I was named for that Helen, but the mother of Constantine. I have—" She seemed to catch herself as something like resignation covered her features. "I used to have a beautiful icon of her. She had a crown and a scepter and the deepest red dress." She looked away.

He realized he had not introduced himself, "I'm Bar—I'm David." Here, his title would not really matter. Here, he felt he could just be himself.

"I know," she said, and he caught a hint of a smile as her eyes returned to meet his own. "Like the Hebrew king?"

"Yes, though I did not hear the call to fight Goliaths until recently. Before I got through life on my silver tongue." Seeing her confusion as she tried to puzzle through the expression, he clarified. "An ease with words. Back before, when I was something of a fribble."

Her brow crinkled in greater confusion still, and her dimples appeared as if she was trying to hold in a laugh. "What kind of word is fribble? Is that a title? Like sultan? Truly, English is so strange!"

"Yes, I do believe it was devised to confuse." It was so wonderful to talk like this with her and forget his horrible reality for a few minutes. He felt himself genuinely

smiling now, however painful. “No, a fribble is not an honorific, more someone of no great worth or import.”

He grimaced, as his face did really hurt now.

“Are you in pain?” She moved toward him. “Your bandage has been changed. It is looking much better.”

He thought to ask her for a mirror but could not muster the courage. In his previous life, he had not thought much of his face, as being relatively handsome was something he had taken for granted. He felt like the worst coward, but he wanted to put off thinking about his face for as long as he could—the possibility of losing the working of the lower half of his body already devastated him. He did not think he could handle learning that he was now a monster. The angel gently touched his bandage. Elena. She had a name now.

“Does it hurt?” she asked softly.

Her hand felt so gentle that he wanted to lean into her palm for her to cup his face. As if sensing his intention, she drew her hand away and straightened.

“I think you must resemble the David who fought Goliath much more than a fribble.” She shook her head while she said the word as if she couldn’t believe she was saying it, as if the words and letters were never meant to blend in such a way. “You have the scars to prove it.”

“Yes.” He suddenly began to feel weary from the day, from everything. “Well, there must be some truth in names.” His eyelid grew heavy. He could barely hear her reply as he drifted away to sleep, but he couldn’t miss the bitterness in her voice.

“Yes, yes, there must be.”

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David did not see Elena for several days. Orderlies and nurses came by, and occasionally Dr. Austin, who would just prescribe more laudanum. The minutes turned into hours, turned into days, but no one compared to her vibrancy. He somehow sensed a great sadness in her, but one that he inherently felt was matched by a great capacity for joy. He longed to see her again. For some reason, he did not feel so completely hopeless in her presence.

He was able to drink a little beef tea, but not much, and he recognized that he was rapidly losing weight. He felt sweaty and restless, waking up from dreams of cannons, from lifeless eyes staring up at him. His perspiration reminded him of the mingled smell of dirt and blood and sweat in the trench, of being cramped, and the waiting and waiting on end. He would try to stretch his legs, but they would not move, and then, in despair, he remembered they would not work at all. He fell into this cycle every time he woke up, unable to decide what was worse, the dreams or the reality. Often he heard distant booms from what he imagined was Sebastopol, and the sounds permeated his nightmares. He would wake up in a frenzy, then realize where he was, far enough from the battlefield to be safe but close enough to hear the reminders of war. Sometimes, the screens were down, and he could see the other cots throughout the ward. Most of the other men were unconscious or sleeping most of the time, but occasionally, he saw movement or others trying to sit up. The worst were the moments when the sounds of someone begging to spare their limb drifted over him, and then he heard the unmistakable sound of cutting bone and flesh. He supposed in some odd way that he had indeed been lucky to be unconscious after the initial battle, as he had likely missed most of the immediate amputations. It was strange to think of himself as lucky in such a place as this.

Finally, after several days, he caught a hint of gold out of the corner of his eye and smelled a faint vanilla and amber. It was an unusual scent for such a clinical place, where the smell of alcohol and ether seemed to war with the overwhelming odors of

injury and sickness, often fighting a losing battle. He knew it was the angel. Elena. She was regarding him with an expression he could not quite name. It was not pity, for he did not think he could have withstood pity. It was a more dispassionate observation, which he appreciated.

"You should try to move your toes," she ordered gently.

"My toes?"

"My bunica, or, uh, grandmother, she has—" Elena paused as something shot across her face and quickly vanished. Her scar rippled as she swallowed and began again. "She had trouble walking, she had pain. Sometimes, her legs would not move. But she knew the old ways, my grandmother, so she had me rub her legs with herbs she made me gather, and she would practice moving her toes, then her feet, then her ankle...and after time, she could move her legs again."

"That does not sound the same."

"No, it is not, but it is worth trying, no?"

He felt his lip curl up, unbidden, at her stern expression, which he realized that she likely had to put on to set down the other officers. In the hours she was gone, he worried about how she was treated both at the hospital and the hotel, as rowdy English soldiers would see her as an exotic woman to cater to their needs, all golden and voluptuous. When he saw her with the doctor, she seemed like she wore a mask of cultivated reserve. But he had seen that reserve crack when he got her to talk about her family or made a joke about himself. It warmed him immensely that she could show him this side, and the melancholy he had been feeling began to ebb away as warmth filled the room, not stifling like the dead summer heat but soothing, like sinking into a bath after a long day. All at once, he felt the need to come up with a reason for her to visit him more often, to have her nearby.

“Do you read?” he asked, quickly changing the subject.

“Read?”

“Yes, read, you know, letters, words?” He did not want to insult her, but he had been surprised that she spoke English at all. He knew so little about where she was from.

“Yes, of course I read. My father made sure we could all read.” She looked as if she wanted to roll her eyes at him but restrained herself.

“In English?”

“I am learning.” She crossed her arms warily. “It’s entirely different letters. My friend is teaching me.”

"I'll make you a deal. I will practice moving my toes...and you will practice reading to me in English."

Her gaze darted around. "I cannot now. I have others to tend to." He was about to kick himself and nod in defeat, but she spoke again. "However, later, it might be possible."

“Only if you can. I know there are a lot of...” With some effort, he gestured around. He did feel rather ridiculous asking her to read to him in the middle of a war, but he needed something to look forward to if he was going to survive.

“No, it is all right. Mrs. Raeburn, my friend, she wants her hotel to be a space of comfort, so she keeps as many books as she can find. As much as there is a need to heal the body, she says we must also start healing the spirit, so she started a book collection. There are some books I can bring. I’ll see what she recommends.” She

paused for a moment, then continued. "I am not one of the British nurses, so no one looks over my shoulder. Mrs. Raeburn will not mind as long as I am doing something of value."

She went to leave when he suddenly asked, "And you did say you rubbed your grandmother's legs, you could do that as well?"

She slowly turned back to look at him, her expression stricken. A spasm of something like fear flashed across her face, and then her features went blank. He realized his mistake instantly.

"Only if you wanted to." He quickly followed, "Not if it makes you uncomfortable."

She nodded impassively, the warmth gone from the room and from her face.

"You will return later today?" he asked with some uncertainty. She nodded again with some distraction, then hurried away.

Idiot, he thought. He had only wanted to see her, hear her again, because when she was around, he felt he could pull away from his legs and his thoughts and his memories. He had to make her understand that she was safe with him. He slammed his head back in frustration. This really was the most damned existence.

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He stared at the ceiling for the rest of the day. Did she know he had previously been a much-in-demand man about London? And here he was, waiting on a woman for the time of day. He grimaced, suddenly overcome with a deep shame with himself. This young woman did not owe him anything. Hadn't the battlefield taught him how little distinctions of class or circumstance ought to matter? And besides, he was hardly the handsome young man of London anymore. Summoning all his energy, he reached up

and touched the bandages on his face. Most of the time, he almost forgot his face in his anxiety over the lower half of his body. He still had not yet looked in a mirror. He was not a vain man, but he now recognized certain privileges that life created when one was relatively pleasing of face and form. He felt another pang of fear that he was now a monster.

"I can return tomorrow if you wish." Elena walked in hesitantly, pulling back a curtain, which had been put up again. His face must have shown his thoughts as she watched him with a furrow on her brow. He shook his head, trying to release some of the fear and anxiety he had been caught in.

"No, I was lost in my thoughts. I would much prefer your company."

She gave a small smile and brought with her a chair. "I brought a book from the small library Mrs. Raeburn put together. She recommended it. She runs the hotel across the way." She waved her hand toward the window, which as ever, was much too muddy to see anything out of. "Have you heard of her? She has many friends among the British officers. That is how she came to be here." He thought the name sounded familiar but could not recall where he had heard it before, so he shook his head.

"She gave me a French novel, but she said it is translated into English." She held it up to read stiltedly. "It says it is called The Hunchback of No-Notre Dame. "

She shrugged. "Those words do not make sense to me."

"Notre Dame is a cathedral or church in Paris. A hunchback is a man or woman who is somewhat deformed."

"Oh." Her eyes widened briefly as she tripped over her words. "I did not bring, that is—she gave it to me."



Her reaction only exacerbated his fear. He took a breath. He needed to do this first.

"Before you begin, could you bring me a looking glass?"

She regarded him and nodded with purpose. His pulse began to race as a pounding began in his ears. She left for several moments, then returned with a small mirror. She gently held it up for him to see. He closed his eye and then opened it. It had been so long since he had seen his face that he hardly recognized it. His jaw was covered in a beard, growing scratchy in the heat. Uneven bandages covered his right eye and that side of his face. He pointed to the bandages.

"Could you?"

Leaning toward him, she gave him the mirror to hold, and then she carefully peeled back the bandage that ran from his temple down his cheek. Beneath the bandage, his skin was red and smarting, with a clear burn from his hairline to the top of his cheekbone. He supposed he was lucky not to lose his eye. He wished he could remember how he had gotten this burn, but he only remembered the charge. He took a moment to look at his whole face. While he was not a monster exactly, he could not reconcile the face in the mirror with the man he had seen the last time he had looked into one. However, he did not want her to think him weak or vain, so he swallowed and looked up.

"Well, it's not as if I was Adonis before."

She did not smile but seemed to touch her own scar absentmindedly.

He stilled. "You know what it is to look in the mirror and see a different face."

She froze, her hand in midair as if unaware of her actions. "Yes, I suppose I do."

They stared at each other for a moment. In that instant, he began to feel a thread of something stronger than admiration take hold in his chest and weave through the heavy air. He did not know what it was, but he knew that she understood something about him that not even his oldest friends would comprehend, and that was not insignificant. Even though she knew nothing of his life, and he knew almost nothing of hers.

He felt drained from the revelation of his face and set the hand mirror down. She turned back to the book.

“My reading is very slow.” She bit her lip. If he wasn’t so distracted by his own misery, he noted that he would have appreciated the fullness of her lips. “My apologies.”

He shook his head and gestured with his hand as if to brush the thought away as she began to read.

“The good people of Paris were awakened by a grand peal from all the bells in the three districts of the city,” she began to read, then stopped. “So Paris is a large city with different sections, like Constantinople?” she asked, looking up at him.

He nodded, not really registering what she was saying, and she went back to her reading, which was, admittedly, a bit slow. He tried to watch her and listen to the words, but the pain and dread of his future, of his face, his legs, everything, kept creeping back. Fortunately, sleep overtook him before the panic could completely take hold.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

She did not return the next day. Or the next. David had promised her he would try to move his toes, but he found he could not bring himself to put forth the effort. He would spend hours convincing himself she did not return because he was a monster because she was afraid of him. Somehow, the power in his life had swung off its axis. In London, he had never had to seek out female companionship. It was only in the past year or two that he had begun to feel something missing, this void that led him to run off to war and purchase himself a commission in a haze of idealism and gallantry. And now, here he was, desperately waiting for one woman to whom he was only one of many wounded men. He sighed. Mayhap this would be good for him, humble him. He needed to make sense of everything that had happened. Here he was, alive when so many had died needlessly. He had to find some good, something to walk away with. Because if he couldn't, what had it all been for?

The doctor gave him more laudanum for the pain, and he felt that yearning to find something good begin to slip away. That night, he thought, if only I could take just a little more. Or he could ask the angel.

She came back on the third day. The screens were up again, and the sky was dark, so he could not tell what time of day it was. His joy at her appearance quickly gave way to an inexplicable anger. He looked away when she entered.

"I brought the book."

"I thought you were coming ages ago." He had barely used his own voice in days, and it came out in a harsh whisper. He realized he hated the sound of his voice.

"I'm sorry, I was delayed. There was an outbreak of cholera, so Mrs. Raeburn and I

went around the camps to help. She knows how to treat cholera better than almost anyone here.”

He knew he had no right to be angry, no claim to her, but he couldn’t control the melancholy that was swallowing him, that made him discontented when he had only ever been even-tempered before. He saw she had a satchel with her this time. It looked to him to be filled with bottles.

“Do you have any laudanum?”

“Laudanum? But I spoke with the doctor...you have had enough already.”

He still looked away. “Well, yes, but I could always use some more.”

“You need to take only what is given to you. If you take too much, it could kill you.” He was still looking away, but he could hear strength and conviction in her tone, even through her heavy accent.

“Would that be so bad?” He despised the note of self-pity in his voice, but there it was.

“Yes! Will you look at me, David?” It was the first time she had ever used his Christian name. The shock of it alone made him turn toward her slowly.

“Do you have any family?” she asked him, her gaze not leaving his. He had thought them warm before, but now they gleamed molten. He nodded, fixated on her glowing irises.

“Yes, my sister and my aunt.”

“Do you love them?” He thought of his little sister, Irene, and how much she looked

like his mother, how her face lit up as she played the piano. His aunt Sophie, brave and funny, unwilling to suffer fools. He nodded again. Elena knelt to look at him, eyes at his level.

“I would kill to have my family back. I am no soldier, and I do not say that lightly. Your family, you would be leaving them alone in this life. This world...you men have it set up so you leave your women unprotected. The things we must do to survive.” She shuddered, her golden-brown eyes losing some of their luster. “Yes, we suffer, and horrible things happen.” She appeared to touch her scar inadvertently. “But we must think of the other people who depend on us. We must think of ourselves that we deserve to survive. So yes, it would be so bad.”

He had never heard her speak like this, and he couldn't tear his gaze away from her face. It was the most she had ever spoken to him at a time, and unlike before, her words did not have the usual pauses in between but came out in fiery benediction. His first reaction, anger, slowly gave way to a greater sense of awe. She straightened and sat on his bed, which she had also never done before, as if her speech had drained her of energy. He summoned his strength, reached up, and gently stroked her scar. She froze.

“How did this happen to you, Elena?” He had never used her Christian name either, but it seemed they were crossing many boundaries that day.

She was silent for a long time as she stared at her hands, then she began to speak very quietly.

“I suppose I owe you that much since I yelled at you.” She sighed, still staring at her hands, spreading her fingers across her lap. He wasn't sure if she would continue when she began. “I had a match with another merchant's son in my village. It would have united both our families. I did not love him, but I would have tried to be a good wife for the sake of my family.” She cleared her throat and continued. “But then I met

a new man who came to my village from Russia. I thought myself in love. That finally, I was having the adventure I had always dreamed of. I forgot my duty to my family. All I could think of was him. Us. I was so selfish.” Even though she spoke rather evenly, as if recounting a story that happened to someone else, she couldn’t hide the bitterness in her voice. “He convinced me to run away with him. We tried to leave the day the Imperial Russian army invaded Dobruja. I see now he thought we could take shelter with the Russians, maybe go on to Moscow. I did not realize the invasion was to happen later that day. I suppose it does not matter now.” She was speaking almost to herself now as if she had forgotten David was even there.

“But after a few hours, I changed my mind. I begged him that we should return to my family to receive their blessing. Whatever happened, I did not want to part with them like that, to bring them dishonor or never see them again.” She added the last part quietly, and with such sadness, he felt a pang in his chest for her. He saw her tighten her hands in her lap as she brought them back together.

“But he went crazy. He said that if he couldn’t have my love, he would make it so no one else would. So he pulled out a knife to carve up my face.” David was both chilled by how matter-of-fact she was in her retelling of this event and enraged that this had happened to her. “If I hadn’t turned my head, hadn’t run...” She touched her scar again, running a finger from the top to bottom. “He almost took my eye. But I got away. I ran for hours back to my family’s home to beg for forgiveness. But when I got there, they were all gone. They had fled. Or worse.” Her hands in her lap turned white from how tightly she gripped them. He wanted to reach out and touch her again, but he felt like she would break apart and dissolve into the air if he did. She shuddered and paused for a moment but then went on—

“I asked around for days, but no one knew whether they were dead or alive. Most of our neighbors had fled as well. I stayed until the Russians left Dobruja, then I fled to Varna. Eventually, I made it to üsküdar, what you call Scutari, where I finally found work. Mrs. Raeburn found me as a washerwoman in üsküdar. She helped treat my

wound and took me with her when she came here. I started doing what I could to help her build the hotel, to organize and run it. I translated for her to deal with merchants, builders.” She stared out the muddy window in what he assumed might be the direction of the hotel, then glanced over at him. “She applied to be a nurse, you understand? But she was denied. She is not from England originally, but she didn’t let that stop her. If it wasn’t for her...I don’t know what would have become of me. But she never let me fall into my sadness. She always gave me something to do to keep me from despair.” She looked over at him, so brave and so sad. “You see, I know what it is to lose everything. It is not the same as you, no, but if I had people counting on me, people who loved me, I would give anything, anything, to get back to them.” Her mouth twisted ruefully. “So, find something that keeps you safe from your sadness. For them.”

He thought she might cry then, but she just bowed her head and stared at her hands again. He had never felt so humbled in his life. His self-pity and anger had slowly melted away in the presence of her honest grief and remorse, this sad, wounded angel. Warrior angel, more like, with her warm glinting eyes and her inability to give up, even in impossible odds. He couldn’t believe that she had made it all the way to Balaclava. He had not considered how she had gotten here, which he realized now had been from his own selfishness and focus on his own predicament.

Before, he had felt a thread beginning to weave in his chest, but he hadn’t known what it was. He now recognized the feeling, but the sudden realization crashed desperately into the despair of knowing he might never be able to act on it. To be able to express it. To know her as deeply as a man could know a woman. With that thread, she had pulled him back from the precipice, from the brink of something he might never have returned from. She seemed to snap out of her reverie, and he tried to pretend he hadn’t been staring at her. She pulled out a thick book from her satchel and looked over at him with her eyebrow raised in question. He swallowed and bobbed his head in response as she opened to a page she had marked, moving gingerly off the bed.

She read to him quietly until he fell asleep. Other than her slow reading, they spoke no more that evening, both lost in their own worlds. What an old chestnut this was, a wounded soldier falling for his nurse that he could never have. Would never have. Ah, well, she wasn't technically a nurse, and he would likely forget her when he left, but somehow, he doubted that he ever would.

The following morning, he stared at his feet until finally, after several hours, he thought he could see a slight movement. It might have been nothing, just a trick of his eye or imagination, but it kept him from despair. He could do this. He could give himself small tasks to keep going. He had to. He had promised Elena he would. He grinned internally, knowing he should be excited to tell the doctor, but her smile was the first he wanted to see.

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At this point, David had been there well over three weeks, though Dr. Austin conveyed to him that they would soon need the bed and he would be transported shortly. The scant few possessions he had brought to war had been collected from the hut in the camps that he had previously inhabited. He had a feeling that being here was different from the main army hospitals in Scutari. From what he had read in the newspapers before he left, the army had not been ready for the medical needs of the war. While chaotic, he was grateful for the informality of the space. Otherwise, he doubted Elena would have been able to visit him.

Elena came almost every other afternoon. He felt selfish for taking her away from her work or her time for herself, but the hours he spent with her got him through long, lonely days and the nights he spent anticipating talking to her and listening to her slowly read. She always read everything carefully, as if she wanted to absorb every word and every letter. It was slow going for the story, but he enjoyed her occasional comments or insights.



“These names do not make sense to me,” she muttered to herself one afternoon.

“The rest of the words are translated, but the names are mostly French,” he offered.

“Some make sense. You say it how it is spelled, Es-mer-eld-a. Quas-i-mo-do.” She pointed out the syllables on the page as she spoke them. “That I understand.”

“And Frolo? Is that too difficult?” He couldn’t quite keep the teasing out of his voice.

She gave him a look he had seen on his aunt’s and sister’s faces many times when he had vexed them, but it quickly passed. “Do you often read books like this? Novels?”

“I haven’t had much time for stories, really.” He had spent all the years since his father’s death wrapped up in his dual roles of gentleman and man of business. “When I was young, I liked hero stories. When I was older, there was a Classics scholar who often met with me and my friends. We used to call ourselves the Round Table.”

Elena’s clear confusion at this statement almost caused him to bark out a rough laugh, but he reined it in so as not to hurt her feelings.

“It’s from a story,” he explained, grasping in his mind for some way to describe something that seemed like common knowledge but would not be to her. “About a long-ago king of Britain, King Arthur. They tell stories about him and the knights of the Round Table.”

“They tell stories of the table?”

“No, they sat at a table. Look, the table isn’t important!” he sputtered at her bemused expression.

“And yet it’s what you called yourselves?” There was a mischievous glint in her eyes he didn’t see very often, but he definitely wanted to see more of.

David was halfway between irritation and amusement. “They sat at the table, and they discussed important matters of the day.”

“Sounds very exciting,” she said, though her tone implied the opposite.

“No. Yes,” he corrected, as amused as she was but trying to keep a straight face. “Yes, it was exciting. It was about justice and what was right, but also magic...it’s, why is it so hard to explain?” He looked at her in frustration but could tell from the appearance of her dimples that she was close to smiling.

“I do not understand this table, though I can understand having a hero to tell stories of. But I do not like your knights so much. My father always said that the Sack of Constantinople was the beginning of the end for the Byzantine Empire.”

He racked his brain for what he knew of the Crusades. “Well, I’m not sure how many Britons participated in the Fourth Crusade.”

She shrugged as if it made no difference. Likely, many Western Europeans were all the same to her, much as those who lived in the Ottoman Empire were all the same to him before he went to war. He hoped he knew a little bit better now.

“And the Ottomans did not take control until four hundred years ago when the Crusaders sacked Constantinople over six hundred years ago.” His good friend, Lord Michael Northam, was a human encyclopedia, so to keep up with conversations, it often benefitted David to stay abreast of his history.

“But the Crusaders still betrayed the Orthodox church, the Byzantine empire.” She then shook her head as if to clear it. “But I do not suppose it matters now. The

Russians are supposed to be Orthodox, but they invaded my homeland. My religion and my home are now at war. I do not know what to think.” They lapsed into silence. He opened his mouth and closed it, wanting to say something profound or pithy about war, but nothing came out. It didn’t matter, as she suddenly stood and spoke.

“I ought to tell you. I will be gone for a few weeks, if not longer. I will not be able to read to you anymore. I am sorry we did not finish the story.” She gave him a small, sad smile. “You will likely be gone when I return.”

The warmth that David felt from their playful banter withered and died in his chest.

“A few weeks? But why will you be gone?”

She took a breath and reached to her throat, which he had noticed she did rather a lot. “It seems the allied forces are launching a new offensive. We were finishing the hotel the last time when you were fighting. But now Mrs. Raeburn is going to the battlefield to tend the wounded and help bring some back here. I should be of some help there.” While she still spoke with the usual pauses, as if thinking through what she was going to say, she stood tall and proud, and he was rocked again by the strength of her. Though his first impression had been soft and angelic, she had a spine and a will to survive, which he greatly admired. Even so, he had to talk her out of this. The battlefield was hell. It stank of blood and burning flesh, with the cries of the wounded ringing in your ears. Look what had happened to him, and his regiment had only arrived in the Crimea as reinforcements in the Spring. No, he must stop her at all costs. He better put his silver tongue to good use.

“Elena...you can’t go. The battlefield is no place for you.”

“Because I am a woman?”

“No, no, it’s not that,” He was going about this all wrong. “I wish I could describe it

to you. It is worse than hell, Elena. You don't belong in that. Don't you see?"

She was shaking her head, about to say something else, so he cut her off.

"You can't go. I won't let you."

Her eyes flashed. "I will never let any man tell me what to do ever again."

He wanted to howl. He felt vulnerable and raw, but something within him whispered that he owed her honesty, especially if it would save her. "I didn't mean it like that, but...I care about you, Elena. You helped me come back to myself. How could I let you go off to a place worse than hell? Didn't you tell me we needed to live for other people?" As if to accentuate his point, a distant cannon went off.

Elena started at the sound, then softened a little. Her shoulders fell, and she hung her head for a moment, then looked up at him. "You don't understand. It is not the same for me. I have nothing and no one to live for anymore. I had nothing but for what Mrs. Raeburn gave me. If she goes to the battlefield, I will follow her to whatever end. I do not know what to do if she isn't here, what the hotel will be like."

He saw how she always left the hospital before dark, as it was still relatively new to have women tending to wounded men. He remembered the articles in the paper about the supposed impropriety of nurses staying among so many men overnight. David also understood what she was saying under her words: That she didn't feel completely safe at the hotel without Mrs. Raeburn's protection. But he could do that. He could give her protection. Certainty surged through him, and the rightness of it sank into his bones.

"Marry me then."

She stared at him in what he would not like to think was horror.

“What?”

“Marry me. I can protect you. I’m a peer of the realm. Well, not this realm, but a realm. Relatively recent peerage, I’m afraid, my great uncle was in the Peninsular wars, and he was awarded a barony...” He recognized he was rambling and changed tactics. Trying to explain the British peerage system would not convince her. “My mother’s family was in trade, and we have done very well. You would want for nothing in your life. My sister and aunt would adore you. You could keep doing good work. In England. Away from the battlefield.”

Elena kept staring. Then she shook her head. “You are delirious. That must be it. You know that I would be considered fallen, ruined. I ran from an elopement.”

She put the back of her hand to his forehead. He shivered from the contact but sought to hide it by taking her hand with his.

“I am in deadly earnest. Let me do this for you. I don’t care that—” He tried to snap with his fingers but did not quite have the energy or panache he had before his injury. “That you eloped. And who in my world would know such a thing anyway? For all they know, you are a beautiful foreign merchant’s daughter.” He saw something briefly cross her face, and realizing it was fear that he found her beautiful, he decided to change tactics again. “Look, I may never be able to be a husband to you in truth.” He dropped her hand as he gestured to his legs. He knew she understood enough of his condition to hear what he was saying. She had seen many wounded and sick men. She was no sheltered innocent. “But I can give you protection. Safety. Please, Elena, my life...it’s been such a waste. Let me do this one good thing for you. I will be officially invalided from the army for obvious reasons. I’m leaving shortly, and I’m sure I can pull some strings and take you with me. I plan to travel to Switzerland after I return to England to see some doctors about my condition.” He had not yet articulated his plan, but after several conversations with Dr. Austin, he had been considering travel to meet with doctors in Switzerland who had been studying spinal

injuries in miners. “I will likely stay there indefinitely. You could live in wealth with my aunt and my sister. You can have as much freedom as you wish. What do you say?”

She was no longer staring at him in horror, which he took as a good sign. “This is almost too much to consider. But what if you recover? What if you want a child or another wife someday?”

“If you desired it, I would grant you an annulment and make sure you were well settled. Or if we find your family, you could return to them. But if I was able to recover, and you wanted a child...maybe someday that would be agreeable to you.”

He let his words hang in the air, much more a question than a statement. She seemed as if she was carefully rolling the idea about in her head. He wasn’t a complete idiot. He saw how she recoiled when a man was near, as she occasionally jumped if a doctor or orderly accidentally brushed against her. He had realized several days earlier that she probably felt so comfortable in his presence because she had judged him not to be a physical threat to her. He would never press her for anything or pressure her, but if someday he could recover in body, maybe she could recover in spirit.

Finally, she nodded and looked him in the eye. “Maybe someday.”

Warmth, a soft golden warmth that started from somewhere deep, seemed to suddenly spill over from his chest to his entire being. For some reason, that warmth made him feel tethered to the earth, to her. He didn’t care that his face ached from smiling or that with his beard and bandage, he likely looked a fright. He didn’t care one whit.

“I need to discuss this with Mrs. Raeburn.”

He kept smiling. “Of course.”

She gave a nervous laugh and looked away from him. "I'll return later today."

"Of course." He could feel his smile grow even bigger.

"You have to stop smiling at me like that."

He couldn't stop. "Of course."

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When he next awoke, a new woman was standing in the sunshine. She was taller than Elena, but not by much, and she looked like she might be around fifty years old. She was also darker than Elena, her skin more a light brown than golden bronze. She wore a blue dress with an apron like Elena, though hers had a little dried blood on the corner of her sleeve. As her satchel was twice the size of Elena's, he felt he knew who this was.

"Lord Grayston." When she spoke, she had a slight lilt to her voice, likely somewhere in the Caribbean, he couldn't quite place.

"Mrs. Raeburn." He tried to stand and then remembered he could not do that.

She held up a hand to excuse him. "As no family can speak for her, I am here to represent Elena."

He made a small bow, and, with a sharp glance, she strode over to stand next to him.

He gestured as well as he could. "She said you come almost every day. You supply what the army cannot from your hotel?"

The woman softened before him. "Elena helped me, you know. She could translate

and knew a little about healing from her grandmother. My mother was a healer, so I understand learning it from your elders.” She paused as if uncertain if she should elaborate, then appeared to make a decision. “My mother was free, but she treated those who were enslaved on the plantations in Jamaica. Like me, she had her own hotel, too. If you can imagine, the disease there was sometimes worse than here with the heat, so I’m not unfamiliar. Thanks to my friendships with officers at that hotel, we were able to come here, as we have a decent supply of medicine, which the army--” She glanced around, then finished. “Does not always have at the ready.”

David thought back to reading the scathing articles about the lack of readiness for this war in the papers, but even more, her statement made him realize how small his world had been of late. He tried to make a joke and gestured to his legs. “I haven’t seen much of the world to tell lately.”

“It’s been better here than Scutari, I think. They are losing many to disease. Every day. As I said, I am no stranger to disease, but still.” She sighed a long, heavy sigh as if the weight of the world pressed on her shoulders, then squared her jaw and looked at him. “Let’s return to why I’m here.”

“When I found Elena, she had nothing, no one,” she began. “Thank goodness she wasn’t cut to the eye, and I was able to fix what I could. I have Elena to thank for communicating with local laborers to help us. We built the hotel from almost nothing.” Like Elena often did, Mrs. Raeburn looked out the window in the direction of the hotel. “She has some remarkable gifts, but...” She stopped for a moment, something he got the impression she did not do very often. She looked as if she was trying to find the right words. She turned her head sharply and looked him directly in the eye.

“Life had made her small. I will not let you make her small.”

“I would never dream of making her small. I do not think she would ever let herself



be made small.”

“I know English society. I know how they can treat those on the outside. Those they consider inferior.” A flash in her brown eyes betrayed nothing else in her tone, but he got the deep and agonizing sense she spoke from experience. He remembered Elena said that her request to be a nurse had been rejected. How extraordinary that she still came into a war and built a place of refuge. He tried to find the words.

“I seek only to protect her. I know what the battlefield is like. I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy, let alone the woman that I--well, one who has seen me through my worst times.”

The look Mrs. Raeburn gave him was a little too knowing, but she seemed to let the moment pass.

“You will honor her terms?”

“Every one of them.”

“Even if your circumstances change? Don’t most aristocrats want an heir?”

He swallowed. He had been prepared for this question and knew his answer needed to be worded carefully but honestly.

“I’m not most aristocrats. I knew the risks when I went to war. If I do not have any offspring, a distant cousin will inherit the title, but my business and fortune will stay with my family. If my circumstances change I would only attempt to change my marriage if that were what Elena wished and desired. If she wanted an annulment, I would not object.”

“I have your word.”

“Yes, my lady.”

She scoffed at the honorific. “I think behind that bandage, you may be a charmer.”

He grimaced a little, remembering his old self. “Mostly a fribble.” He felt his mouth twitch slightly as he recalled his earlier conversation with Elena. “I imagined myself doing something good but never actually did good.” He shrugged, not knowing why he had shared so much with a stranger, then looked up at her. “Let me do this one good thing. Let me see her safe. Let my waste of a life mean something to someone of worth.”

Mrs. Raeburn regarded him slowly. “So poetic,” She gave a small huff and then looked up as if in thought, and he got the sense she was reasoning this with herself more than him. “I know we’re not quite so formal here as in Scutari, where they would discourage a union between an officer and a nurse. But I suppose Elena is not quite a nurse. And besides, the superintendent of the nurses has been after me about her, as, according to her, Elena is a distraction.” She muttered the last part more to herself, then turned back to David. “I would see her safe. She doesn’t need to add the battlefield to the horrors she has seen.”

She took a deep breath as if coming to a decision. “Never make her feel indebted to you. In a better world, she wouldn’t have to do this.”

David saw the wheels turning behind Mrs. Raeburn’s eyes and started to smile.

“You give me your blessing, don’t you?”

“You wipe that smirk off your face, or so help me, I will take it back.” She looked much younger when she smiled, as if that weight of the world slipped from her shoulders just a little, but she turned serious again. “I will likely go back to London when this war is over, and if I am still on two feet, I will seek her out and make sure

she is happy.”

“I hope you do. I will see her situated, and then I want to travel. To find...” He felt foolish but didn’t know how to finish his sentence.

“A cure?” she offered.

“Something like that.” He grimaced. He loathed talking about his condition, as it made it a more concrete reality, but Mrs. Raeburn saw too much. She was too sharp for him to deny it.

“Well, there’s nothing more to be said then. That girl. Life has taken too many of her choices away. I just want her to have something back.”

“She will. I swear it.” He knew he couldn’t control the future or his recovery, but this was one thing he could do, one small thing he could make right.

Mrs. Raeburn regarded him, seeming to understand he was not the kind of man who would make a vow lightly and straightened. “I’ll talk to her and send her in.”

As if by Providence, Elena tentatively walked down the ward, then stopped and looked at Mrs. Raeburn. Something looked to pass between them as Mrs. Raeburn gave her a slight tilt of her head, and Elena threw her arms around the woman, desperately holding on.

“I don’t want to leave you, but I think I have to take this chance,” he heard Elena whisper.

“I’ll come find you, Elena. I’ll make sure you are taken care of,” Mrs. Raeburn whispered back. “If I survive this war, we’ll build something else. We’ll have our own hospital.”

“You will,” Elena murmured. “You must.” Elena brought her head up and noticed David watching them. “I’ll let you sleep and come talk to you later this afternoon.”

He smiled in agreement and looked at the ceiling. This felt like the largest hurdle, he thought, as he stared up at the makeshift ceiling and began to drift into sleep.

When he awoke, Elena was sitting by him, sewing. She was humming softly to herself. It was that same song she always sang, the song too sad to be a lullaby. He watched her while her eyes were down, her golden-brown hair glistening in the early evening sun, again braided on top of her head like a crown. Even her eyelashes, which were a deep, sooty black, reflected the gold of her hair and skin in the fading sun. The warmth he always felt when he looked at her overlapped with a feeling of great tenderness and responsibility. He might never be a real husband to her, but she would want for nothing. They would likely have no children and may never live together as man and wife, but he could do this one thing with his life and take her out of the hell of war. England might not be heaven, but there should be no cannons or explosions that could blow her to bits or break her body.

He must have moved, for she looked up guiltily. “They’re dolls,” she said, misunderstanding the scrutiny of his gaze. “For the children here. I used to make them for my sisters, but...” She looked slightly shame-faced, “My mother would help me with the pattern, and they looked more like dolls. These look like...”

He eyed the fabric in her lap, which more resembled a rag pile than a doll.

“Like?” He bit his lip to keep from grinning at her embarrassment.

“Well, I bet you have never made a doll before.”

“No, but my sister used to make me play with her and her dolls and have tea parties.”

Elena seemed to find this amusing because she spent a good minute trying to catch her breath. “My apologies, but the thought of you sitting with your sister and playing with her dolls. I cannot imagine it.” After a few more chuckles, she caught her breath. She looked up at him thoughtfully.

“I am supposed to answer your question.”

“Yes,” he answered softly. He felt his heart pounding as if his life were on the verge of foundational change. He knew he ought to be shouting caution, but this felt right and true. He couldn’t remember the last time he had felt so sure about anything. She looked at her so-called doll carefully, then back up at him.

“I think, if you hold to your word, what you said to Mrs. Raeburn, then...yes. Yes.” He released the breath he did not realize he had been holding. He took her hand and kissed it lightly. He saw her brief recoil at the contact, but when he glanced back again, she looked like something important had just occurred to her.

“But we are not of the same faith!”

He had his response ready. He had thought he would have to use it earlier. “Marriage amongst different denominations is tricky but not impossible. The English have been marrying Russians for centuries, and Russians are Orthodox, yes? I’m sure I can figure something out. I am a peer. After all, that must be good for something.” He realized how pompous he sounded and attempted to change his tone. “We’ll marry here, and I’ll work out the legal and spiritual issues when we reach London.”

She nodded, and her hand seemed to go unconsciously to her chest for a second. She caught herself and looked up at him, and he was struck, like he always was, by the mix of warmth and sorrow in her eyes.

“Mrs. Raeburn said I can stay with you until it gets dark. Would you like me to read

to you?”

Now that he had accomplished his goal, he felt like all his energy was sapped from the events of the afternoon.

“No, I’m too tired today. Could you just sit with me? You can keep working on your, uh, dolls.” He couldn’t keep his mouth from twisting up as he said the last word, even though it caused him a twinge of pain. He closed his eyes and felt the tiny sting of a doll being launched at him. His smile deepened. His last conscious thought was that he hoped she got better at making “dolls” for their children, then he remembered there would be no children.

London

1858

It had been almost three years since Elena had come to England, and it was still much too cold for her taste, even in summer. Despite the chill and dampness in the air, she found living there quiet and relatively peaceful, especially compared to her years of wandering and war. Elena could only be grateful that her husband's sister and aunt had welcomed her with such friendliness and grace. David's aunt Sophie had come from trade and was happy to have a merchant's daughter in the family, even if she was strange and foreign. Irene, David's sister, seemed a lonely girl and was delighted to have someone closer to her age around. They would never replace her family, but Elena enjoyed spending time with Irene and Sophie, and they made her transition to life in England as seamless as possible, particularly Irene, who helped her read and write in English.

Elena had lately realized that many of her thoughts and dreams were in English, too, which was new and a little unsettling. This made her feel even farther away from her home and everyone she loved. Even though her life was in England and she was finding ways to enjoy it, she often imagined that she was living an elaborate dream that she would someday wake up from. Everything felt like it could slip away in a heartbeat, like a fog of breath on a glass. She supposed that because her previous world had changed in a day, she could never feel settled or entirely at peace.

When Mrs. Raeburn returned to England after the war, she was asked to be matron of St. Helena's, a voluntary hospital, within the year, recommended by one of the many officers she had treated in the Crimea. Elena found it a bit disconcerting to see her

beloved friend, who had saved so many lives in the Crimea, only in charge of the domestic arrangements of the hospital rather than healing. But Mrs. Raeburn reminded her that the sick needed cleanliness and good food to recover and that being a matron was a respectable position. Because of her constant presence in town, Elena and Irene stayed in London most of the year rather than go to the family estate. Although Irene insisted the London townhouse on the outskirts of Mayfair was relatively modest, it all felt very grand to Elena and furthered her conviction that one day she would wake up from this strange dream back in her tiny bed in Dobruja. Elena started to go weekly to St. Helena's to see Mrs. Raeburn and volunteer where she could, eventually bringing Irene with her as well, which gave her some stability and purpose in the strange new world that was England. Apparently, volunteering in hospitals had been cause for scandal in the past, as proper English ladies were not supposed to see such things. Still, Irene pressed Elena to go with her, and Elena eventually acquiesced, as it appeared any scandal around ladies in hospitals had dissipated a bit since the war.

Elena rarely went out in the highest echelons of society, but she knew she would soon have to with Irene's approaching Season when young English aristocratic women went out in society to look for husbands. As a married woman, she was to be Irene's chaperone, although she felt there was still so much she did not know of the English aristocracy. She was not afraid of what Irene called Polite Society exactly. She merely did not care for their prying eyes and judgment. She knew they thought her strange and foreign from her limited exposure, likely that she had married far above herself. She did not care and purposefully made her accent even stronger among those they called "the ton." Her scar likely helped lend her an air of mystery and intimidation for once, as she had never been particularly intimidating to her younger sisters. Fortunately, Irene's preparation for her come out helped Elena learn what would be expected of her and how she ought to act when out in society.

Once the war ended and diplomatic relations resumed, she went to the Russian embassy church at least once a month under the guise of a dark veil. It was not a



secret, but she did not want to draw attention to her foreign religion in the eyes of the ton. It was not the same as home, as the services were in Russian, but she kissed the icons and said the prayers. While she hated how the Russians invaded her homeland, she did not feel angry at the church or Russia. Her anger at herself and her selfishness often boiled over, but she did not ask for a forgiveness she did not feel she deserved. She just prayed for her family, for her village. She lit a candle for her father, mother, sisters, and grandmother. At times, she lit a candle for David, too. She did not want him to return and disturb the quiet life she had fashioned for herself, but she was eternally grateful to him and wanted him to find some measure of peace and healing.

At night, she read. She had long since finished *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, which admittedly was an ambitious start for her first novel, and had moved on to other works. She had improved her reading in English thanks to Mrs. Raeburn, David, and now Irene. It was the first time in her life that she had ever read for pleasure, as before her father had taught her to read so, she could understand notes and numbers, but beyond that, Elena hadn't read many books, least of all novels or serials. Irene had insisted she read her favorite, Jane Austen, which helped Elena understand English society a little better, though she did not yet grasp all the rules and expectations. She often read so late that Sophie had given her a pair of spectacles to read in the night. She had heard that ladies were not supposed to read like this, but she did not quite consider herself a lady. She would always be a merchant's daughter, even though now she was a baroness.

While she cared for Mrs. Raeburn, Irene, and Sophie, they could never replace the family she had loved and lost. Every night, after she would close her book, that moment between when she got into bed and when she fell asleep was the only time she allowed herself to grieve. When she would curse herself and her own stupidity. If only she hadn't run away. If only she had known the price she would pay. She just wished she knew what had happened to her family. The not knowing was a unique form of torture, and one she only let herself feel fully during those minutes before sleep. As Elena thought about all this, she exhaled, said a prayer for each of them,

and shut her eyes, then locked her heart and troubles away until the next night.

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One afternoon, Elena took Irene with her to St. Helena's, which was not far from their townhouse, though the neighborhood changed quite quickly. As they stepped inside from the great doors, Elena inhaled the scent of the hospital, which was both the smell of illness and death mixed with cleanliness and order. She was told this hospital was newer, built in a pavilion style, allowing greater ventilation for patients to breathe. After the ramshackle huts that functioned as wards in the Crimea, Elena could see how this building style was far superior as it was intentional and much less makeshift in design. Elena realized her mind was wandering many miles away, and she strove to refocus on Irene as they came into the great ward, which led off into several smaller wards.

"I wish I didn't have to do frivolous things like go to the modiste or tea. They all seem so useless compared to this." Irene sighed as they walked up the stairs at the entrance of the west ward.

"Well." Elena paused, considering how to respond, but knew she could be somewhat honest with Irene. "They are, I suppose. But your brother and aunt think it will open more doors for you if you make some connections in society. Besides, tea is not to be taken lightly." Elena had become begrudgingly fond of how the British took their tea, but she would never admit it.

"I have little desire to make the further acquaintance of most of society. Except Annie, I don't think I would do it if Annie weren't having her first Season too." Irene's dearest friend Annie, or Antigone Sprague, the only child of David's mentor, Lord Gaius, was also having her come out this Season. Annie, who was as passionate about the hospital as Irene, took a more romantic view of the situation, while Irene did not seem to be looking forward to the Season at all.

“You know, no one will force you if you truly do not want to do it. I do not know your brother very well.” Elena paused as she realized this was a strange thing to say about one’s husband. However, she felt he would agree with her on this point. “But I believe he would listen to you.” Elena stole a sidelong glance at Irene.

“Yes, he is an excellent brother, even if he has been gone these years. And he did bring me the best and most understanding sister I could ask for.”

Elena sought to cover the bittersweet reaction that Irene’s words created in her. While she was touched, she could not yet think of Irene as a sister in her heart. Not until she knew what had happened to the sisters of her birth.

Irene ignored Elena’s pause and quickly moved on. “I suppose I must do it, though. It is expected of me, and I’ve known it was coming my whole life.” Irene smiled, but it did not seem to reach her eyes. Elena squeezed her hand, not knowing what to say.

As several orderlies greeted them, they approached the women’s ward, where they usually spent most of their visits, and found Magnolia Green, or Maggie to most people, Mrs. Raeburn’s grown daughter, who was pacing incessantly. Elena had a sense that even though Maggie was a very competent nurse, as she was competent in everything she did, she thrived more on organization and administration. While Mrs. Raeburn had the vision, Maggie did the hard work in the background to make things possible. Despite her great beauty, Elena guessed that Maggie preferred things this way, with little fanfare for herself, as Elena noticed she often tried to blend into a room, unlike her mother. Elena sometimes wondered what it must be like to have a mother like Mrs. Raeburn, but she didn’t dare ask. Her own mother had always been held up as the village beauty, which was intimidating, but she was a quiet, dutiful wife in contrast with Elena’s outgoing, storytelling father. Elena now wondered what her mother had held back now that she had met women like Mrs. Raeburn. Returning her thoughts to the present, Elena moved to greet her, but Maggie looked to be in a state of exasperation, so she shrank back. Maggie had a unique position at the

hospital. She had explained to Elena that now that nursing was becoming more professionalized since the war, nurses were not supposed to be young or married. However, after she had married Dr. Green, he threatened to withdraw his consulting services if his wife lost her position, and the hospital acquiesced. This not only told Elena that he was a singularly talented surgeon to be so in demand but also that he was a good man who wanted Maggie to fulfill her life's purpose.

"She wants to see her," Maggie muttered after Elena had greeted her.

"Who?" Elena asked, dumbfounded.

"Her."

"Who?" Elena held up a hand as if diagramming the sentence, a method Irene had taught her when she was working to write in English. "Who wants to see Her?"

Shaking her head, Maggie turned her hazel eyes heavenward. Taking a deep breath, she whispered, "The queen."

Elena and Irene looked at each other, and then Irene asked, "Who wants to see the queen?"

"The queen wants to meet my mother."

"Well, that's wonderful!" Irene exclaimed. "Isn't it?" she asked tentatively as she looked between the two older women.

Elena had an idea what this was about, as she had known Suzanne Raeburn much longer than Irene. "You are afraid she is going to tell the queen to, how the English say, 'Go to the devil'?" Elena stopped to cross herself at the mention of the devil. There were still certain habits she would never be rid of.

“Not exactly, but she’s never been one not to speak her mind, you know that,” Maggie spoke quietly and quickly, her gaze darting around the room as if making sure no one would overhear them. “She wasn’t born here. My late father was. She doesn’t know all the standing upon ceremony that goes on with the monarchy and the aristocracy. I don’t want her to be a laughingstock.”

“Your mother has never cared what anyone else thought of her. However, I suppose that if she had,” Elena scoured her mind for the correct English word before landing on one. “An eventful meeting with the queen, that the hospital could lose funding, or your mother might lose her position, so I do see your worry. But outside of Balaclava, your mother talked to many officers who grace the House of Lords. She will know, uh, what is the phrase, which battles to choose, yes?”

“I live in hope.” Maggie sighed and glanced again at the ceiling. “You know I love her more than anything, but sometimes I wish for someone, something different.”

Elena did not say anything. Mrs. Raeburn was all the saints rolled into one for her, and she would gladly follow her to the end of the world. But she knew the relationship between mothers and daughters could be fraught. If only she had made peace with her own mother before she had so stupidly left.

“I never knew mine,” Irene said quietly. “All I hear is how much I look like her, but I never hear how she actually was.”

Elena felt a rush of affection for Irene, saying softly, “Perhaps you can write David to tell you.”

“Oh, Elena, I completely forgot. He just wrote that he is coming back for my Season!”

“What?” Elena felt all the air leave her lungs but sought to cover it with a polite

cough as Maggie seemed to be watching Elena surreptitiously. Elena was aware that Maggie knew more about her marriage than Irene did. As her mind raced, she forced herself to catch her breath. David was good, she reminded herself. David was kind. She liked David. But she liked her life as it was, and he had not mentioned returning for the Season before. What could that mean? She did not know what she meant when she vaguely promised to think of “maybe someday” all those years ago, and she still had not considered that someday to be the near future. At the time, “maybe someday” was a faraway hope that she could be the girl she once was with no scar. The girl whose heart was still whole and unbroken. Which she would never be after Anatole’s betrayal and her fateful journey to Üsküdar. With that last thought, she unconsciously shuddered.

Perhaps he was just coming for this Season, she reasoned with herself. She knew that Irene would be delighted to see her brother, especially for her come out that she was so dreading, so she pasted on a smile and squeezed Irene’s hand. “How lovely. How is he feeling? And how long did he say he was staying?” Elena tried to ask casually.

“He didn’t say exactly. He said he would arrive in a fortnight.”

Elena tried to remember what a fortnight was in her head. Was it two weeks or four? Irene noticed her silence. “He’ll be here in fourteen days.”

Covering her embarrassment, Elena nodded. “Yes, well, we must get you to the modiste after this, so when your brother comes, you will have time to spend with him. I am sure he will want to see his favorite sister.”

“I’m his only sister.” Irene rolled her eyes and gave Elena a begrudging grin.

“Yes, but you must do me the courtesy of laughing because I rarely make jokes in English, even if they are bad.” Elena felt a twinge as she thought of her father’s jokes and how she missed them, even if they, too, were bad, and then grasped Maggie’s

arm. "Come, I want to hear how this royal visit came about in the first place. "

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

David felt his heart pound in anticipation as his carriage drew nearer and nearer to his London townhouse. They knew he was coming. He reminded himself that he had written Irene that he would be arriving that day and a little of his improved condition. He knew that his sister read his letters to his wife, as Elena had started adding small notes at the bottom of Irene's letters this past year. Clearly, she had picked up writing in English, and with each letter, he found himself skipping forward to her notes. They were written as she spoke, earnest and quietly funny. Using only the necessary number of words to convey her meaning. One of these notes had led him back here, though ostensibly he was returning for his sister's first Season. In one of her notes, Elena had used the phrase "maybe someday." While it was not in the same context they had discussed outside Balaclava, that phrase and another discovery began to give him hope. As he read the letter, he caught that smell of faint amber that always reminded him of her, and for the first time since he was wounded, he began to feel the stirrings of desire. Nothing full-fledged, no raw passion, but something tentative and new. Different than before he was injured. The doctors in Bern believed he had sustained a severe bruise to his spine and through treatments, exercise, and will, but most likely, sheer luck at where his injury was located, his ability to walk returned, though he would probably have to use a cane for the rest of his life. How odd that walking sticks seemed to be back in fashion among the ton when he couldn't care less about the current fashion. While he had written that he was coming back for Irene, and he was, he really was. He was also coming back to know what "maybe someday" meant. He wanted to see if he could have a true marriage with Elena, if "maybe someday" meant someday soon or someday never.

As he handed his hat to the butler, Fields, when he came in, he saw the man's gaze go straight to his right temple. He had grown so used to his scars that he had almost forgotten how jarring he must look to those who had known him most of his life. He



allowed the older man a moment to avert his eyes.

“My sister?”

“With your wife, sir, in the music room,” Fields seemed to recover, respectable English butler that he was. “It’s good to have you back, my lord.” He heard faint chords and bursts of laughter, and something settled inside him.

“It’s good to be back, Fields.” He grinned, which barely hurt at all these days, and then started a quick pace with his cane toward the music room. He was surprised. His sister was a dab hand at the piano, but Elena? They had not talked much about music. Then he stopped in his tracks, recognizing the familiar melody as the notes crept down the hall. It was the song . The tune too sad to be a lullaby that she often sang softly to herself. But now, with the piano accompaniment, it sounded both like a memory of his childhood and something new and unfamiliar. He slowed when he came to the doorway, catching sight of his sister, Irene, seated at the piano, glancing warmly at Elena, who sat next to her humming. Irene looked so much like their mother, with her dark brown hair, almost black, and olive-green eyes like his that he had to stop a second and blink to remind himself it was his sister sitting there and not his long-gone mother. And Elena, although her forest green morning gown was utterly different from the drab gray gowns of Balaclava, seeing her again warmed him precisely like before. He felt his heart clench and beat as it had not since he had seen her last. He had come back with an off-hand hope, but at this moment, he knew his ultimate goal was to make it a reality. He just hoped she might eventually feel the same way, too.

They just needed to be reacquainted.

Lost in his thoughts, he did not hear as the music stopped.

“David!”

His sister rose quickly from the piano bench, throwing her arms around him. Behind her, Elena stood slowly, her features unreadable.

“We did not expect you until much later, my lord.”

Her “my lord” hung strangely in the air, as she had rarely, if ever, had called him that before.

“Please call me David like you used to, Elena. We need not stand on formality.” We are married, after all, he held himself back from adding.

She ducked her head, quirking her mouth slightly. He could tell she did not quite know how to act around him, standing back closer to the piano. He understood as he didn’t quite know how to act around her either. Their acquaintance had been so intense and so brief, then he had been gone these past three years. She was a woman with whom he had shared his darkest secrets, as well as a stranger from a faraway land.

“You adapted the song?”

“Yes, Irene heard me singing it one night—”

“David, you should have been there,” Irene jumped in, seeming oblivious to the tension and uncertainty in the room. “I had never heard anything like it before. It was like a Chopin, so sad and full of longing and—”

“Yes, I’ve heard it before,” he said softly, sharing a secret smile with Elena. “A long time ago.”

Elena shook her head as if to clear it from the moment before, then gestured toward the bellpull. “May I offer you refreshment? I do not quite know how to act in your

house, though I have lived in it these past few years.”

He was grateful she had acknowledged the tension. “Yes, let’s ring for tea.”

“You British and your tea, it means everything. At home, when we had tea, we just drank tea.” She walked over to join them, a little more confidence imbued in her step.

“Yes, but then you missed out on biscuits,” he offered.

“And tea cakes,” his sister cut in

“And scones with clotted cream,” he added.

“But they are all too dry for my taste.” Elena had wrapped her arm with Irene’s as they walked out. “Someday, Irene, I will teach you to make baklava with layers upon layers of honey inside.” Swallowing, she turned back to him. It still felt as though she was looking past him, not quite at him. “Husband, would you like to refresh yourself before tea?”

He tried to cover the small thrill that shot through him from the funny way she said “husband” with her accent. He would save reflection on that for later. He figured husband was a good middle ground between his Christian name and “my lord.”

“Yes, it’s been a while, but I think I shall find my way.”

Elena looked torn between apprehension and pleasure that things were going so smoothly. She gave a small fraction of a nod again.

As he walked away from them toward his chambers, he replayed her words in his head. Husband . He liked that. Husband. He could work with that.

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Tea was more formal than usual. Elena wondered how she was supposed to act now that David had returned. It was his house, after all. Elena knew she was being too quiet, staring at her tea, but she did not know quite what to say. Given Elena's silence, Irene filled the natural lull in the conversation with updates and questions for her brother. Elena knew she was supposed to pour, but Irene gave her a knowing look and did the honors herself. Elena couldn't help but be grateful, as Irene seemed to know how her brother took his tea.

While Irene chattered, Elena studied her husband from beneath her eyelashes. His walk only had a minor limp here and there. He did not use the cane as much as she would have thought from his letters. And his face, his face was definitely different than in Balaclava. For one, he had a beard covering much of his face for most of their acquaintance.

And on top of that, half of his face had been wrapped in bandages. Because of his injury, he had been rather thin, and she had never seen him stand at full height. He now appeared much taller than her and rather broad of shoulder. All in all, a very well-formed man. Like Irene, he had the same dark brown hair and olive-green eyes. Both had much paler skin than Elena's, though David looked tanned from travel. The siblings shared rather defined cheekbones and full lips. Not as full as Elena's, but unlike most Englishman she had met. She realized he must have been rather handsome before his injury and that even with the scarring, he was rather attractive still. This should have been a pleasant surprise to any wife, but this worried Elena as she did not trust handsome men. When David had been wounded and covered in bandages, he seemed so trustworthy, as he had no way to hurt her or lead her down the wrong path. But the polished and handsome lord sitting before her frightened her deeply. Even though she knew from his eyes and scars that he was the same man, she did not feel that easy trust and friendship she had felt in Balaclava. He wasn't a stranger exactly, but she had to be wary.

But then again, even though a handsome man had betrayed her most deeply, ugly men had also hurt her. She had almost completely blocked out the memory of the time between coming back to her family home and when Mrs. Raeburn had found her, but now and then, she felt and saw flashes of moments that made her cold to the bone. She tried to push the thought from her head.

Back to David. His burns had healed into scars, and he was still missing a small part of the end of his eyebrow. She could see that maybe he would not be considered as handsome as before he was injured, but the scars gave him a certain rugged aura. They crept down his face on the right side of his temple, almost a mirror of her own scarring, though they reached deeper down the side of his face. They both had been lucky they had not lost their eyes, she thought suddenly and strove to prevent herself from compulsively touching her scar. He looked over at her, seeming to notice her perusal, and smiled. His smile was something to behold, a little cocky and quirked to the right side. It made her feel warm and uncomfortable. And yet, for all the warmth of his smile, she could not tell for the life of her what he wanted.

“So, we shall all go to the Amesbury ball tomorrow?” Irene asked, looking over at Elena.

Elena snapped back to the moment. “Of course. I wonder when Aunt Sophie might grace us with her presence.” Elena and Sophie had both discussed attending events of the season. Sophie had decided she would let Elena handle the majority as she was not very fond of aristocratic functions, and Elena was better at holding her tongue. Sophie tended to the business from the merchant side of the family and helped manage some of the properties. While she usually lived with the family, she also traveled extensively to oversee the family business or visit with friends. Elena admired that David had entrusted so much to his immensely capable aunt, though she suspected many of the men Sophie corresponded with for business did not suspect that she was a woman.

“We will all be there to support you, Renie.” Elena looked up. She had never heard David’s pet name for his sister. Surely, a man who was so good to his sister and aunt would not ask too much of her. Surely, he would go back to Switzerland and leave her be.

“Well, I’ll need all the help I can get.” Irene looked pained.

“Irene, you don’t have to do this if you do not want to. And you do not have to marry anyone this year,” David said flatly. “I can hardly fathom my little sister talking to a man, so let me adjust my thinking first.”

“Take all the time you need, David.” Irene leaned back and finished her tea. “Take all the time you need.”

Elena had a feeling that with Irene’s looks and wealth, she might do very well in the London Season. Even so, she wanted Irene to have a choice in her life and her place in the world.

“Elena, might I have a word after tea?” Her husband’s expression was unreadable. She looked back down at her tea. “Yes, my lord.”

“David.” She glanced up to find him watching her.

“Yes, Husband.”

Maybe now she would find out how long he was staying. Irene excused herself, and Elena waited, her heart pounding loudly as she set down her tea. She schooled her nerves and turned her body toward David, waiting for him to speak.

“I have returned,” he said awkwardly.

“Indeed, you have.” She would not look away. She would be direct. “How long do you intend to stay, my lord?”

He started to correct her, but she gave him a look. She wanted to keep the formality to have this discussion.

He let out a breath. “That is a good question. I should like, that is, perhaps indefinitely.” She gripped her hands together in her lap. She could not let fear take over. She knew this day might come. She had always known it.

“I made a promise to you. To Mrs. Raeburn. I will never do anything you do not want.”

“Yes, I remember.”

He suddenly moved to sit by her. Her heart was pounding so loud in her ears it could have been a drum. She jutted out her chin, forcing herself to meet his gaze.

“Elena, a long time ago, you said, ‘Maybe someday. Maybe someday we could have a real marriage.’ I need to know, what did that mean?”

She swallowed, unsure of how to go forward, what to say.

He went on. “Elena, my circumstances have changed. There is a chance I could be a real husband to you. And if it’s possible, I’d like to take that chance. But I’d like to know what you want.”

She longed to look away, but his green gaze held her frozen in place. She felt roiled by a tangle of emotions, an awareness of him she had not felt before, but this awareness was mixed with a bitter memory written across her body, memories of the journey to üsküdar. She did not know if she could bear being with a man again. And

yet...and yet, she knew she wanted to feel pleasure again someday. She had to admit that deep down in her soul, her first experience with Anatole had felt good, even if it was a sin, even with everything that came afterward. And that, to her shame, she had never said no to the men on the road to üsküdar. But she hadn't said yes.

"I do not know. I will need some time."

"Of course." He paused for a minute, his expression patient, and yet Elena still felt her pulse jump. "Elena, I think we should spend time together. I want you to know me outside of war. I have to say again, just so you absolutely understand, I will never do anything you do not want. I will not enter your chambers unless you grant me permission. And you still have the power. If you wish for an annulment," he said the word quietly, "then I will respect your wishes."

"I do not yet know what to decide. I need some time to think and become acquainted with you again. Because right now, you feel like a stranger." Her words came out suddenly before she could think them through. She looked up at him, afraid he was angry, but his gaze became inexplicably warm.

"Well." He gave a long, slow smile. "That I think I can fix."

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As she sat at her vanity the following evening, Elena considered how her husband had never seen her in such a dress. Inspecting herself in the mirror, she noted she would have filled the gown out much better when she was younger. Before the war, she had been rather plump, but hunger had changed her, and though she had gained some weight back, she was much thinner than she used to be. She missed her fuller figure and the looser clothing of home, but her body seemed to have been permanently changed by the war in so many ways. She stared at herself in the mirror for a second, at her bare shoulders, the low dip of the neckline. The dresses she wore



outside Balaclava had been borrowed from Mrs. Raeburn, as she had to sell her beautiful embroidery for food when she arrived in üsküdar. Strangely, this grand gown felt borrowed as well.

Borrowed clothes do not keep you warm. She remembered her grandmother's saying, though she never quite understood what she meant until now. Elena took a moment and studied her hair, which had been pinned so the curls spilled down her back. Fortunately, her hair took to curls rather well, and she liked how it highlighted the gold in her brown hair. Almost elegant, she thought. Imagine that, a girl from a village in Dobruja, now an elegant lady of the English ton.

If only she did not have that ugly scar. But she knew she deserved it. Like a mark of Cain, it kept her vanity in check and reminded her of her foolishness. Still, she wished her hair could be styled to cover her temple fully, but that was not the current fashion. She rose and put on her gloves.

"You have outdone yourself, Simmons." She beamed at the other woman as she regarded her hair.

"If you don't mind me saying so, my lady, you almost look like an English lady."

Elena did not know how to respond to that, so she continued to smile.

Descending the grand stairs, she caught sight of her husband and registered that her earlier assessment was not entirely accurate. He was not just pleasant to look at. He was very handsome in his formal attire, with the gray of his waistcoat somehow setting off the green of his eyes. She had never seen him clean-shaven with his hair brushed back, as he had looked weary from travel when he arrived. Elena may have had the same effect on him, as she heard his breath catch when she reached him. She was simultaneously flattered and alarmed by this realization, so she covered her tumult with a deep curtsy. Elena was thankful she had learned so much while Irene

was preparing for her season. She hoped she would not embarrass either of them.

“My lord.”

Her husband apparently recovered because he caught her eye, bowed, and broke into a brilliant smile. She would never have married him if she had known he had such a smile. She hoped he did not notice the hairs on her arm stand on end. What did the English call that? Gooseflesh? What a strange phrase...

“My lady.”

He took her gloved hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckle. She forced herself to keep her hand steady.

“Ready to face the ton?” he asked conspiratorially.

“I’m ready not to embarrass you or Irene.” She retrieved her hand, grateful he did not notice the slight tremor that ran through her at that kiss.

“I know you won’t, my lady. You couldn’t, you know. I couldn’t care less about the ton other than to benefit Irene. And that they keep purchasing our sherry and wines.” He smirked. “Yours is one of the few opinions I value.”

She was temporarily stunned. She looked into his eyes, going back and forth between them as if trying to catch them in a lie. She had not known she was important to him. They had developed a great friendship in Balaclava, but she thought it was mostly pity for her circumstance and hopelessness in his own that had moved him to marry her. Perhaps that was not all there was. But his words sounded like they could have come from Anatole, who had seduced her with his handsomeness, his flippant wit, and how he had ingratiated himself with everyone in the village. But as she looked into her husband’s eyes, she saw no easy lie but something she could not name. Was

it yearning? She had agreed to marry him because she believed him incapable of desire, of desiring her. But did he feel desire for her now? She had assumed he wanted to procreate to have an heir, but his eyes told a different story. Thank goodness she could be a good actress. She retreated into the persona she would be that evening, the good English wife.

“You are too generous, my lord.”

He looked confused by her response and shift in demeanor, but fortunately, Irene interrupted their conversation by coming down the stairs. They both turned to look at her at the top of the staircase. Irene wore white silk trimmed with pink rosettes that should have washed out her pale skin but instead gave her an unearthly glow.

“She looks so grown up,” Elena fought the embarrassing urge to cry. Irene was not her sister. Why was she acting like a watering pot?

“She looks like our mother,” David said quietly.

Elena noticed him grip his cane tighter and felt a great wave of compassion for her husband, who had lost both of his parents so young. She smiled up at him, their formality gone. “She must have been very lovely.”

He nodded, then seemed to compose himself for Irene, holding out his arm for his sister.

“I shall be the envy of the ton tonight, with the two most beautiful ladies on each arm.”

Irene playfully smacked him with her reticule. “Forth unto battle, comrades.”

Forth into battle indeed, thought Elena.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

He may have faked a rather convincing proper English gentleman for his wife and sister, but David had felt increasingly apprehensive about the ball all day. Even though the war had cost him very much, his regiment had not suffered quite like others who had stayed through the winter, and he was afraid he would have to field questions about battles he had not been part of. Fortunately, since he had sold his commission when he was invalided out, he was no longer expected to wear the uniform, which would likely divert some of the questions and prying eyes. He looked around as they exited the carriage and felt his heart sink. There were so many stairs leading to the doorway as the two staircases fanned out to the entrance. While he felt comfortable with his cane, it was still exhausting. Before the war, he would have never noticed the number of stairs or considered how unnecessary and limiting they were.

As they entered, he felt he was looking at a distorted mirror of his former life. As they passed through the receiving line, to his horror, he noticed several women scowling at Elena and several men giving her lascivious looks. He felt a sudden pang of what marriage to him had meant for her. While it had saved her from the battlefields of the Crimea, this was another battle one had to fight over and over again, though instead of cannons and gunpowder, rumor and scandal ran amok. As he watched her, smiling serenely and greeting those she knew, he vowed to shield her from any barbs of the ton. She looked so elegant in a navy silk gown that bore her shoulders and her décolletage, the shine of the deep blue highlighting the contrast with her golden skin. His heart had stopped and started again when he saw her descending the stairs, reminding him of the first time he had seen her, even though she had been wearing a plain gray dress that day.

He watched her out of the corner of his eye as she walked past those who scowled. It

was their loss that they couldn't see past her foreignness, accent, or background to know the magnificent being that she was. But then he supposed they didn't deserve to know her, which made him feel slightly better. He wondered if he would have appreciated her in his previous life, in that distorted mirror that it was, though logically, he would never have even met her had he not gone to war. He realized that sharing that time with her outside Balaclava had bonded him to her in some way he could never undo, even if he tried. And he did not want to undo it.

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Later in the evening, David watched Irene dancing with one of the many young men who had sought her out. He was somewhat concerned with the false smile she had worn in almost every dance, but he did not want to interfere with her night. He wondered if he should have found Irene a sponsor or chaperone, as between him, Sophie, and Elena, they all had little experience with the ton. He ought to, but he had been so busy with the business since he had inherited the title that he had spent little time at social events. Observing Irene's dour expression, he decided that a companion or chaperone wouldn't have made her happier here. He stifled a sigh. He understood how Irene was feeling, how far away this stuffy ballroom was from his life the past few years. The crush of people reminded him of waiting in the trenches with no space to breathe. He suddenly felt the intense need to leave, to get out. Without thinking, he reached out and grabbed Elena's arm. He felt her small shock.

"Are you quite well, my lord?" She covered his gloved hand with her own.

"I'm all right." David took a deep breathe. "Would you like to get some air?"

She looked at him quizzically.

"Step outside with me," he explained. He forgot she did not know all the English euphemisms for things they did not actually want to say. He removed his hand and

offered her his arm, which she tentatively took. They spoke briefly with a matron he had long known to keep an eye on Irene for a moment.

The courtyard was silver in the moonlight. He looked around to see if anyone else was out there, then when he saw no one as his eyes adjusted to the moonlight, he inhaled and exhaled. She led him to a small bench.

“Is it so bad?”

“Most of the time, I’m fine, but every now and then,” He shook his head as if to clear it. “And to be here, to see everything I took for granted all those years. It feels wrong to be here when others can’t.”

“Yes,” she said softly. He felt the wind change, giving the night an unseasonable chill, and then remembered he was a gentleman.

“You must be cold.” He removed his coat, then hung it across her bare shoulders, letting his gloved hand linger across her bare skin for a moment. She did not seem to notice his pulse race as she accepted it and pulled it tighter. She was looking at him with great concern, her brows furrowing, and he realized he needed to shift the atmosphere.

“What do you think of them?”

“Who?”

“Them.” He gestured back toward the ballroom. “The ton.”

“Oh, I suppose they think me an oddity.”

“The scar might help.”

“Yes.” She winced and touched her scar. “Whenever I feel particularly vulnerable, I make sure my scar is most visible, and I try to look intimidating and mysterious so no one will actually speak with me.”

She seemed to weigh telling him something and then looked up at him with a somewhat embarrassed expression. “You should know, they think I seduced you with my brazen foreign wiles. That I trapped you into marriage somehow.” She exaggerated her accent a bit at the end of her statement as if also striving to keep things light.

“How dare they say such a thing—” He moved as if to return to the ballroom, but she held up a gloved hand.

“No, please do not concern yourself. Most of the time, it does not bother me. It keeps them at a distance. And what’s more, I feel compassion or maybe pity for many of them. To have all this wealth, yet many do not seem truly happy.”

She saw so much, quietly watching in the background, making polite small talk as she had done all night. But, of course, it made sense. She was used to adjusting to new circumstances, whether in Scutari, Balaclava, or the drawing rooms of London. She observed other people and learned how they worked, adapting to the environment. She probably had to do that to survive as long as she had. David wished he had that skill. When he was younger, he just did what he liked and thought about other people later. The world was made for people like him and he had not had to think of any alternative. Though he hoped he was no longer that person.

When Elena spoke of the ton, she captured that feeling of the futility in his life that had driven him to enlist all those years before. The day he looked up and realized how little the endless events of the Season meant to him, how little he was engaged with the people around him. He desperately wanted his life to have meaning beyond going through the motions, something to make his parents proud. He wished he could

express that kinship to her, but he couldn't find the words. Instead, he gently let his fingers brush her hand. He felt her initial jolt—he didn't flatter himself that it was from desire. He had seen her flinch enough to realize she had some unease with men. He knew, had always sensed deep down, that something had happened to her, but he never wanted to push her to talk about it. He wanted her to tell him in her own time. He carefully took her gloved hand so she could pull away if she wanted, and drew it to his lips. He wished they weren't wearing gloves so that he could feel her smooth skin against his own rough hand. Outside Balaclava, he had always marveled that despite her work as a washerwoman and tending to the wounded, her hands were still soft and smooth. He pressed his lips to her fingers for a too-brief moment, then released her hand back to her. Elena looked at her hand for a moment, then cleared her throat.

“We were speaking of...” She gestured back to the ballroom as he had earlier.

“Yes, I'm sorry I cannot offer to dance with you, my lady.” He nodded toward his cane.

“Oh, I do not consider this dancing.”

“Blasphemy, Wife. If you keep on like this, the very fabric of English society will unravel,” he said, affecting his most imperious dowager voice, and rattled his cane at her.

She laughed, the first true laugh he may have heard from her since he had returned. It hit him square in the chest.

“You found out my evil plan, my long-awaited scheme to tear British society apart, thread by thread, and hail the glory of my empire.” She again exaggerated her accent, and he noted that she tended to do that when feeling vulnerable. He couldn't remember her doing that before.



“Which empire? Ottoman, British, Russian?” he asked, genuinely curious. He was delighted they could joke like this, even if it was stilted, and they both were trying a little too hard to cut the tension by making the other laugh.

“Men will not run my empire, thank you, but a council of women. I think Mrs. Raeburn would make a good queen.”

“Elena.” He felt his lip curling up. “You know you really ought to be the ruler in your own fantasy. But yes, Mrs. Raeburn would make an excellent queen. She almost had me bowing in Balaclava, and I didn’t have working legs at the time.”

They lapsed into silence. Elena cleared her throat and said quietly, “I did want to say, however we decide whatever happens, I am so happy you have mostly recovered, even if it still keeps you from this dancing .” She said the last word with a sniff of superiority.

“What’s wrong with English dancing?”

“It’s not like ours. It’s very...” She looked to be searching for a word. “Formal? I cannot find the word in English.”

“Then show me your kind of dancing.” He smirked. “I dare you.”

“Out here?” She looked around. “Someone will see!”

“Come now, the woman who walked out of a war and crossed oceans should not be afraid of these old biddies.”

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That comment raised her ire.

“I am not afraid of them. I do not want to cause your sister embarrassment.”

She hissed, then caught the laugh in his eye. “Ah, you are mocking me.”

“There are no jokes in where you are from?” he asked, the corner of his lips slowly curving upward. She had a feeling he had been trying not to laugh these past few minutes. But was he laughing at her or with her?

“Of course we have jokes, Husband. Not that I was ever very good at them. But to dance out here?”

“We will have to work on the jokes later. But go on. I dare you. No one will see, and if they do, they will think it another one of my eccentricities.”

“You were so eccentric when you were younger?” she asked, and for some reason, that thought warmed her.

“Hopeless fribble, me.” He shrugged. She smiled as she remembered the word and sighed, wrapping her arms around herself and pulling the coat closer. Now that she knew him outside the hospital, she realized that it smelled of him, like a forest right after the rain. What had Irene called that word? Petrichor? She wasn’t sure how she felt about this realization, so she turned her attention back to dancing.

“Well, it would be nice to dance again.”

She had never thought to enjoy an evening like this with him. She had been so worried about the events of the Season, as before, she had only attended limited social engagements since Irene was not yet “out.” But David had been such a good partner, almost as uncomfortable with the crowd as she was. The only strange moment came when he kissed her hand. She still did not know quite what to do about him, but the moment passed without him making demands on her. He really appeared

to be a kind man. No, he was a kind man. She had seen his pride, love, and worry as he gazed at his sister. She had understood that look, for she longed to see her sisters again. Elena supposed she could be with them again now, if only in a fantasy. She breathed in and unlocked the memories she kept hidden away most of the time.

She conjured her sisters and her mother from these memories and held up her hands, palms facing inward as if in supplication, to lock imaginary hands with them. She saw her sister's young faces, one serious and one mischievous, saw her beautiful mother throw her head back in joy in her mind's eye, and her heart pinged in a way she had not allowed it for a very long time. She began to hum softly, then brushed her back foot against the ground. Her feet remembered the steps, just as her heart knew the rhythm. Somehow, she knew in her soul that David would understand, that he would give her this moment and not laugh at her, silly as she probably looked dancing by herself in his coat that dwarfed her. She had no great love for the pageantry and formality of this stuffy English setting, but in this moment, she could see her family again, if only in her imagination.

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He smiled as his wife closed her eyes and started to hum softly. She began to move unlike any English dancer he had ever seen, singing a soft melody he had never heard before but had occasionally caught traces of at the edge of his consciousness in the hospital. It was almost the lullaby but had a more joyous cadence, even though it still seemed to be in a minor key. She moved as if dancing in a large circle, hands up and locked with other imaginary dancers. While this had started as a joke, a provocation, as he could never resist lightly thumbing his nose at the ton, he couldn't look away. The silver moonlight caught glints of gold in her hair and skin, warming him in the chill night air. As he watched her, he began to feel that overwhelming sense of peace that had occasionally come to him outside Balaclava when he was in her presence. In Bern, he had started to feel desire again when he read her letter and caught a trace of her familiar scent of amber. But tonight, he was sure, sure that he desired her and

wanted her, and only her. Not just as a faraway angel but as a woman he could joke and laugh with. A true partner. Perhaps he had idealized her in the hospital and in his memory, but he found this woman dancing in front of him fascinating and couldn't take his eyes off her. He would never push her to do anything she did not want, but "maybe someday" rang in his ears and gave him hope as he had not had hope in a long time.

Even if they could never be married in truth, he had to give thanks to her for helping him feel this way again since just being around her made him feel alive. He felt as if the thread that stretched between them, which had started to spin outside Balaclava, was now gilded in gold, binding him inextricably to her. Her dancing began to slow, and she looked over at him and caught his eye. She raised her right eyebrow as if in question, though he was starting to suspect she could no longer lift her left eyebrow because of her scar. Thus, he could never tell if she was surprised or laughing at him. He returned her look with his own quizzical eyebrow, then gestured with a circle of the finger as if to say, "Keep going." He saw something in her eyes that told him she was far away from this courtyard, across the sea, dancing with ghosts. Up to this moment, he had never truly understood the unique pain of not knowing whether one's family was alive or dead. Even if the news was the worst, one could grieve and possibly move on with life. But not knowing...he suddenly felt the heavy, impossible weight that must be on her shoulders. His heart began to ache for her, but as she turned, he caught the smile that lit her face, and he concluded that the ghosts must be better company than the ton inside.

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A few days later, Elena walked into the music room, sat carefully, and then stretched her fingers across the keys, some on white, some on black. Then, with all her might, she brought them down. The result was certainly not music. Elena sighed. Irene made it look so easy. Elena wondered why it did not come naturally to her. She had always loved music, loved dancing and singing. Her mind wandered to her dancing in the

courtyard the other night. She supposed she should feel silly about it, but it had been rather lovely. She did enjoy talking with David, but she now saw that the power in their relationship had changed. Outside Balaclava, he was dependent on her for companionship, for help. Not that she relished this position. She knew the hospital was full of convalescing men of rank from another society, but there they had merely been sick and wounded men who needed her. It had been a strange sense of power to be able to care for them on her own time when she had been at the mercy of men for so long. But last night, she felt the power her husband held in society. The power he could wield if she displeased him. But he wouldn't use it, would he? He had promised her, and she would like to believe the man she had known outside Balaclava wouldn't break his promise to her. She pushed her fingers down again on the keys to emphasize her conviction. The result was, sadly, still not music.

"I imagine you will hit a chord if you try enough times."

The object of her thoughts strolled into the music room. Even with his cane, he had confidence in his stride, in his position and place in the world. She felt embarrassed, caught at the piano like a child, and could feel heat rush to her cheeks.

"Did you wish to learn?" David asked.

She started to reply and stopped herself. She thought playing the piano was a woman's role, as she had only ever seen women play.

"Do you play, my lord?"

"David," he corrected. "Did you wish to learn?" he repeated gently.

"I did not think gentlemen played."

He considered her for a moment and then sat next to her, playing a few stray notes.

She noticed he must have regained most of the weight he had lost during the war. His arms looked muscular and strong as his fingers graced the keys. He was so close that Elena had to force herself not to move away.

“My mother taught me as a child. She wasn’t the most conventional lady, I suppose. Her father had bought her lessons as a girl, and she took to it quickly. So, she played with me when I was a boy.”

Elena smiled, imagining a small boy playing piano with his mother. It was so different from her own childhood, but she could feel the love there. “What was she like?” she asked.

“Kind, spirited. She looked just like Irene but taller. The ton looked down on her because her family was in trade, but my father came to love her and never regretted his marriage. Rich in wife and wealth, he’d say.”

“She sounds lovely.” Elena had to crane her head to look up at him. “I’m sorry she is gone.”

“She died giving birth to Irene. My father lived for a while after, but he never really recovered from her death.”

David played idle notes with his left hand while his right was on the bench beside her. Elena impulsively put her hand on David’s.

The notes stopped abruptly.

She froze.

It was the first time she had willingly touched him since he had been back, and now it was with bare skin. She didn’t know what she meant by the touch. She had initially

just meant to offer comfort, but she sensed an energy she could not name, an energy that had not been there before. Even though she was only touching him with her hand, she felt a warmth humming throughout her body, through her blood, as if something long dormant had just come to life. She did not know what to make of it, so she pulled her hand back to her lap. David stared at the space where her hand had been, then shook his head as if to clear it.

“Would you like to learn?” David repeated.

She nodded, still a little embarrassed.

“You can put your hands on top of mine. It won’t be the same because it’s your left and my right, but it’s a start to gaining confidence. That’s how my mother first taught me.”

She reached her hand out, then hesitated, unsettled by that energy she felt when she touched his hand just then.

“May I?” He gently took her hovering left hand and placed it over his right hand on the keys.

“We can start with one hand if you like.” He began to play something at a measured pace, then began to speed up. Elena could feel the vibrations of the notes, how the keys worked together to produce something more than a single note, something she could feel up and down her arms, throughout her body, thrumming like the energy just a moment ago. She knew she wasn’t playing the music herself, but there was something exhilarating about making music on the piano for the first time. And there was something indefinably lovely about her hand on top of his. She closed her eyes to savor the moment.

“Normally, you must keep them open to read the music.” She opened her eyes to find

that he was smiling down at her. She smiled back for a second. She had never noticed the way his eyes hinted toward brown on the edges. Like the leaves on the trees when the season changed. She blinked and came back to herself, lifting her hand from his.

“Thank you, my lord, that was quite illuminating. I must go prepare for this evening.”

He nodded. “I really can help teach you if you like. What are you doing tomorrow?”  
“I’m going to the hospital.”

“The hospital? Would you like me to accompany you?”

She shook her head. “I go every week, if not more.”

“Then I should like to come and see what you do every week, if not more.”

He seemed set on this course, and she could not find any reason to disagree. But she was still so confused as to why she enjoyed a man’s touch so much. She would need to take a little space from him to consider her response.

“Yes, my l—yes, David.” She could see the satisfaction in his eyes from what she had said. Dratted man. She would have to avoid him until after the ball that evening.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

Another ball, another crush. Elena was always a bit overwhelmed by the large skirts on the gowns in fashion in London these days. And the corsets! She never wore such restrictive garments at home. But she must stop thinking of home right now. As she fanned herself, her eyes sought out Irene again. Irene had a full dance card, but as far as Elena could see, Irene looked like a waxen doll. She hardly smiled at her suitors, and when she did, it was a tepid, cold thing. Nothing like what she looked like at the hospital, or with her brother, or even the way she lit up when laughing with Elena. Elena felt a brief sting of guilt at how much Irene wanted to be a sister of her heart and how many barriers she had erected out of fear that Irene would replace her own sisters. Couldn't she make more room in her heart for Irene, who had so few family members as it was?

Elena accidentally bumped into her husband in her distraction, who caught her before they both fell. She looked up to apologize and saw the same concern for Irene written across his features. She also saw the same anxiety she had seen the last time they had been at a ball as he gripped his cane tightly.

“Husband, would you like to, as you say, get some air?” Following his gaze, she noted, “Irene will not feel better if we are over here worrying over her.”

He nodded, his hand still gripped tightly to his cane, then offered her his arm as they made their way outside to a courtyard. She found a bench outside for them to sit quietly for a few moments before he spoke.

“Thank you,” he rasped. “For noticing. I suppose I need—”

“I know.” She hadn't realized she had set her hand on his again. This time, she didn't

remove it. He looked to be in need of something, maybe comfort. He turned his palm over and gripped her hand tightly, glove to glove.

“You know, it should be quite a success that Irene has had a full dance card everywhere we go.” He had put his casually light voice on, but Elena did not protest or delve deeper into his discomfort. She understood not wanting to talk about things that were too painful. “As my mother was in trade, and my father’s family, our title is less than half a century old, our blood is not very blue.”

“Blue?” she asked, puzzled by this turn in the conversation.

“Oh, it means some of the older families look down upon us.”

“But what does that have to do with the color of blood? I have unfortunately seen your blood, and it is indeed very red.” She felt a strange intimacy discussing the color of his blood, but the British truly said the strangest things.

“I feel I have a lifetime of explaining British turns of phrase to you, my dear. You ought to keep notes.” She blanched slightly at the endearment but hoped he did not notice. “Peerage and nobility are often referred to by the quality of blood, in other words, how blue their blood is, meaning how old their family or title dates back. I don’t know where the phrase comes from exactly, but you hear it here and there. I think it might have come from Spanish nobility...”

“But, no one’s blood is special or different. I’ve seen many men’s blood.” He stared at her, his humor evaporating a little in the confession that she had seen the blood of many men. She often forgot that being at the officer’s hotel and visiting hospitals, she had likely seen things many women would never have imagined.

She let the odd moment pass and went on. “And it all runs red. It just looks blue sometimes. But truly, no one’s blood is any different color as far as I’ve seen. That’s

silly. In my homeland, we have a saying that essentially means we all have the same blood under our skin.” That wasn’t quite the expression, but she struggled to translate it into English.

“Yes, well, it’s the British peerage, darling. It’s not supposed to make sense,” he drawled.

“So very peculiar.” She shook her head. While she had intended to banter to take his mind off his reaction to the crowd, she truly did not understand much of the logic of the British aristocracy. But then, she supposed most societies, like hers, had unspoken rules and hierarchies. For the sake of future social interactions, she ought to write these things down.

“Truer words were never spoken.” He lifted her hand, which she forgot he was still holding, and gently kissed her knuckles. That strange energy from before roared back and caused her heart to stumble slightly. But was that panic? Or something on top of the panic? Looking up at him, she recognized it did not matter. She had offered her hand and conversation in comfort, and now he was smiling, so her goal was complete. She tentatively smiled back. He paused momentarily as if he had forgotten what they had been talking about, then cleared his throat and continued.

“But as I said, at least half of them likely look down on us because the title is so recent. Before fifty years ago, we were merely merchant stock on my father’s side. But I must be polite to everyone even if they are rude because we need their clubs and households to purchase our sherry.”

They slipped into silence again. She noticed he was still holding her hand.

“May I ask you something?”

Elena cocked her head to the side and nodded slowly. Suddenly, his tone had turned

serious, and she was curious as to why.

“The song you used to sing. What did it mean?”

She thought for a moment. Half the song did not translate into English words. It was merely soothing sounds to comfort children. “It was just a lullaby. Something we sang to children to get them to sleep at night.”

She started to withdraw her hand as something heavy constricted her chest. Something she did not want to face at the moment, but he caught her hand.

“If it was for children, why did it sound so sad?”

“Because,” she began, struggling for an answer when the truth hit her. “We try to tell children they are safe, that nothing will ever harm them. I think the sadness comes from knowing we cannot promise it. That it can all be torn away.”

David looked into her eyes as if he could see why the weight had fallen on her chest at that moment, but he did not press. Still, his scrutiny made Elena feel uncomfortably vulnerable, so she quickly changed the subject.

“Irene.” He loosened his hold on her hand. “I’ll speak with her. ”

“You noticed it too.”

“I don’t want her to feel like she needs to marry anyone. She’s so young. I just wanted to give her a Season if that’s what she desired. I wanted to be there for her in a way I haven’t in the last few years. The way you have been. I don’t know what we—she would have done without you.”

“She loves the hospital. She loves to go with me. There, she looks determined,

purposeful. Tonight, she just looked—”

“Empty,” he finished for her. “You know, at first, I was worried about what she would see going to the hospital with you. She isn’t like you. She’s never seen...” He looked at her for a second, then shook his head. “Well, I suppose you had never seen war. War came to you, but you met the circumstance. I’ve never known anyone like you, Elena.”

Elena felt caught, unable to look away from the intensity of his gaze again, but also uncomfortable with his directness. Fortunately, he looked away and continued.

“But Irene, she grew up sheltered here. You know, when she first wrote to me of going with you, I almost wrote back forbidding her.”

Elena raised her eyebrows. She realized that this only raised one eyebrow since the scar damaged the other, but she hoped this would have a more substantial effect.

“Yes, I know. I cannot forbid my sister anything. But then, she started to write to me of the things she saw and how grateful she was to see more of the world, to be useful, and I remembered how I felt when I enlisted. Why I felt that way.”

“You did not want to be a fribble,” Elena offered. She could see the corners of his mouth turn up as if fighting a smile.

“Something like that. But now I’m glad she has been visiting St. Helena’s with you. I’m looking forward to seeing it myself. Getting to see Mrs. Raeburn again.”

“Yes, I think Irene would like that.”

There was a pause, and then—

“Irene,” they both said at the same time.

“Great minds,” David whispered under his breath, offering his arm after he reached for his cane.

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As they made their way back inside, David caught sight of one of his oldest friends, Lord Michael Northram, and their old mentor, Lord Gaius Sprague, a Classics scholar. Though born of the aristocracy, Lord Gaius often appeared as if he had just stumbled out of his library with his slightly bent spectacles and very academic lack of sense of what was in fashion. Lord Gaius had been a godsend for him and his friends, as David had floundered when he lost both parents and inherited the title and family business.

Lord Gaius’s daughter Antigone, or Annie, was Irene’s dearest friend and also in her first Season, although from what David could see, she was enjoying her debut much more than Irene. Unlike her father, Annie was elegant and fashionable, but she was also sharp and thoughtful like him. David was grateful that Irene’s dearest friend had a good head on her shoulders.

As he saw them, Michael’s eyes briefly flashed with something like joy at seeing his old friend, but he covered this rare emotional reaction quickly.

“I was just telling Lord Gaius that they would allow anyone into the army these days,” Michael drawled.

“Not you, surely.”

“Heaven forbid I upstage the hero of the Crimea.” Even though Michael’s tone was biting, David knew there was no venom behind it.

“Lord Gaius.” David bowed, ignoring Michael, who could go on and on. “Let me introduce my wife, Lady Grayston.”

Elena curtsied as if she was born into the role. “My lord.” The older man ignored the formality and took her hands in his own. Michael also bowed, but he had been introduced to her before.

“Yes.” Lord Gaius peered over his spectacles. “How delightful to meet you. I have heard so much about you from my daughter, Annie.”

“Antigone,” Michael muttered, though Lord Gaius did not seem to hear him.

“She has told me about your wonderful work at the hospital. And to tend to wounded soldiers in the Crimea, how gallant, my lady.”

Elena gave Lord Gaius her first real smile of the night, and all the golden radiance beamed off her. Not for the first time, David was reminded of icons or paintings he had seen of the Byzantine Empire, whose dark and tan figures were often surrounded by wide golden halos that gave them a luminescent aura. Even Michael blinked rapidly for a moment.

“I am not as brave as my husband, but I have my moments. Please, Lord Gaius, tell me more about your Round Table. My husband could not adequately explain.” She took his arm and began to stroll away with the man, leaving Michael and David.

“Well, you see, it really is a misnomer. I began to meet with a small group of young men to discuss the ethics and philosophy of the Ancient Greeks, and somehow, one of them, your husband I think, wanted to talk about knights. My lady, you have no idea the challenges of being a student of the Classics in a Romantic era.”

As they walked away, Elena cast a questioning look back at him. David shrugged and

quirked his lips, delighted in the fast friendship between his wife and mentor.

“You shouldn’t look quite so besotted. It is not fashionable.”

David turned back to his old friend. He was all sharp edges, tall and lean, with sandy blond hair and brown eyes that were so dark they were impossible to tell what he was thinking or feeling. He often wore spectacles, which only further obscured his expression, though he had left them off tonight.

“I meant to call on you when I returned, but—” David began before Michael cut him off.

“I understand. You have a life to ease back into.” Michael looked him over, then gave him a small, rare smile. “It is good to see you do so well, old chap. You had me worried there that I would have to be your nursemaid in your dotage.”

David shrugged, then remembered. “I meant to thank you. For looking out for Elena and Irene, and for writing me. It was much appreciated.”

Michael gave a clipped nod. “I knew you had some idea in your head of saving her from a bad circumstance. But she does seem to be very much worth saving.” Rare praise from Michael, especially for a woman. He wondered what Elena had done to earn his good opinion. Just then, David heard a change in the music and decided he should probably look again for Irene.

“I was surprised to see you at one of these events,” he muttered, his gaze on the crowd. “You are not looking for a wife?”

“Not exactly.” David noticed Michael scanning the crowd as well. His expression, as ever, was impossible to read.



“It is good that you got out of there in one piece.” Michael went on, “You don’t know how close we came to a drawn-out world war.” That was about the closest Michael would probably come to saying he was glad David wasn’t dead.

“I only got out of there, if you mean the Crimea, because my spine was so bruised, the doctors weren’t sure I would walk again.”

“Even so.” Michael tilted his head, seemingly preoccupied with the crowd, and they lapsed into a few moments of silence. David caught eyes identical to his own, eyes that looked blank and empty. He knew he had to talk to Irene. He felt horrid that he might have forced her to have a Season if she did not want one. But he had asked, hadn’t he? He thought back to their correspondence for a moment and couldn’t remember. He resolved to consult with Elena on all decisions involving Irene in the future. And Irene, of course. Next to him, Michael gave a start as if he had found whomever he was looking for. His unreadable eyes widened slightly when they landed on Lord Gaius’s daughter, Annie, who seemed to be enjoying herself dancing with a young man that David did not recognize. He did not know what to make of Michael’s reaction, but he doubted Michael would tell him if he asked.

“Your sister is enjoying herself?” Michael asked distractedly.

David frowned and squinted at Irene. “I can’t say. I ought to remedy that if you’ll excuse me. Will you call on us later this week?”

“Of course. I always make room in my schedule for war heroes. Aren’t they composing poetry for you these days?” Was Michael always this prickly? David didn’t think so but saved his worry about that topic for later.

“I wasn’t in the Light Brigade, Michael. I wasn’t even there at the time.” Michael always liked to talk about a topic ad nauseam, which David usually didn’t mind, but he was growing tired of discussing the war.

“It was quite a miracle we won in the end.” Michael went on. “The Russian Army vastly outnumbered us, but then again, the Russian Army, there’s not any bigger, is there? Two million strong, at least.”

David thought for a moment. “Possibly the Chinese army?”

He knew he had gotten Michael in that moment, as he knew his friend well enough to know his mind was whirring behind his unreadable eyes. David was pretty sure that the Russian army was larger, as far as he knew, but it would bother Michael to distraction if he did not have the exact numbers in front of him.

“I would have to look at the precise numbers. I’m sure the Foreign Office has them.” David held back a grin. This was his opportunity to change the subject.

“But certainly, they are the largest army in Europe. You must grant me that.”

David sighed. Michael really hadn’t changed much. Before Michael could go on, David asked the question that had been at the forefront of his mind.

“That reminds me, could you introduce me to the ambassador to Constantinople?”

Michael had extensive connections in the Foreign Office. Having a rather hedonistic father, Michael and his older brother seemed committed to being useful to society. In Michael’s case, perhaps too committed.

“I’d like to make inquiries about Elena’s family. I should have tried more before I left, but I was rather preoccupied at the time.”

“Of course. I shall make the introduction. It is still Redcliffe, though he has been speaking of retirement. He is in London currently.”

“Thank you.”

David was about to take his leave when Michael suddenly spoke, his gaze not moving from the crush.

“Have you heard from Lennix recently?”

Henry Lennix, brother and heir presumptive of Viscount Strathall, was another of their old friends. He and David did tend to get into spots of trouble here and there, but nothing too serious. David tried to remember the last time he had heard from him. “I received the odd letter on occasion, but nothing substantial. I haven’t seen him since I’ve been back. I was going to call--”

“But you have a life to settle back into,” Michael finished. “He’s been different these last few years. I can’t say what it is.” He paused, and David appreciated that this was a rare moment when even Michael did not have the words.

“He was always a bit of a hellion, but I never worried for him.” David tried to remember that time before the Crimea. He had been a bit of a hellion himself before he went to war, angry at the world for the loss of his parents, frustrated that he had inherited so much responsibility so young. His frustration had given way to a carelessness and an easygoing façade that he used to cover this anger. Fortunately, he had grown out of most of the anger.

Michael’s lips thinned. “He’s been more than a hellion. He’s been profligate these recent years. Nearly always in his cups when I see him. He’ll drink himself to death at this rate.”

David felt like he had been punched in the chest, and he struggled to draw breath for a moment. Had he been so tied up in his own pain these past few years that he had ignored his sister or the burden of the world he had brought Elena into? Ignored one

of his oldest and dearest friends? He feared the answer was yes.

“Have you spoken with him?” he asked.

Michael’s mouth went even thinner. “You know he never listens to me.” Henry always had teased Michael, who had been so serious, even when he was young. David was often the peacemaker of the group.

David nodded. “I’ll see him. This week, if I can.”

“See who?”

He hadn’t realized that Lord Gaius and Elena had returned. He feared his smile was as besotted as Michael accused him of, but he couldn’t help it. His wife was so lovely to look at, and he was grateful for the reprieve from a difficult subject.

“Henry Lennix.” He looked down, unsure if Lord Gaius knew about Henry’s circumstances.

“What a coincidence. I told your wife I would like to host the old Round Table sometime soon. She wanted to see my library. Apparently, she is an avid reader.”

“Is that so?” He hadn’t asked her about reading yet. There had been too much else to think of.

“Yes, I cultivated a love of reading in English in the Crimea. I had a most excellent teacher.” Her eyes danced as she turned back to Lord Gaius. “I think I can answer for both of us that we would be honored to attend, Lord Gaius. Yes, Husband?”

He tried very hard to keep a detached, casual expression, as the way she said “husband” sent an electric shiver up his spine. Even though “my lord” was more

appropriate in society, “husband” in Elena’s accent had the most charming ring to it.

“Anything, Wife.” He could swear he heard Michael mutter “besotted” under his breath as they walked away, but Lord Gaius appeared not to hear him again.

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David found Irene the next day while she was playing piano in the music room. She really was a prodigy, even better than their mother had been. He stood to listen for several moments before Irene noticed he was in the room. He hadn’t registered he had closed his eyes until the music stopped.

“You’re going to come with us today?”

His eyes snapped open, and he saw Irene regarding him with trepidation and affection. He reckoned it was their age difference that made them so close. Often, among his friends, those who had siblings close in age quarreled and fought, but since Irene was so much younger than him, he doted on her, and she, in turn, looked up to him. They were all each other had after their father died when she was still a child. He still couldn’t believe she was in her first Season when all he could remember was having tea parties with her dolls.

He blinked out of his reverie. “Yes, if you and Elena will have me.”

The corner of Irene’s mouth turned up. “We could be in need of a footman.”

“Ever your servant.” He struggled to broach the subject he needed to discuss with her. “Last night you seemed a great success.”

The light dimmed in Irene’s eyes. “Yes, it was rather diverting.”

This was going to be harder than he thought. He had no idea how to talk to his eighteen-year-old sister about her suitors. Perhaps he should have left this to Elena or Sophie.

“Irene, I noticed, that is, Elena and I agree that you, well, you didn’t seem to be enjoying yourself very much.

She gave him a look. Now that he was back in the company of women, he was getting used to receiving that particular look.

“Should I have been?”

David didn’t know how to answer. He knew that as the sister and daughter of a peer, Irene ought to have a Season. But he realized he had never really asked her what she wanted.

“Irene.” He sighed. “I’m not very good at this. Elena’s not from England, and Aunt Sophie grew up in trade, so I don’t know anyone who could have helped you. Lord Gaius had a sister-in-law, but she died before Antigone was to have a season. I should have spoken to you before assuming—”

“It’s all right, David.” Irene took pity on him. “I’m just not the same girl I used to be. I’m unsure if I ever want to marry, and I feel too young to do so at this point. And the purpose of the Season is to essentially find a husband.”

“Why don’t you try to enjoy yourself, and that will be your purpose. And if you meet someone you wouldn’t mind...” His discomfort with discussing this subject with his little sister rose substantially. “Spending time with, then, that would be capital.”

Irene sighed. “It’s hard to enjoy oneself in that environment. So much waste and excess.”

David smiled, remembering his own younger self. “Yes, but you can enjoy it and still feel superior.”

Irene swatted him. She then turned serious. “I should so like to do something with my life, David. I couldn’t stand it if this was all there was. I just haven’t figured it out yet.”

He remembered coming to the same conclusion several years earlier in this very room. They were indeed strangely alike despite their age difference.

“I’m still figuring that out as well, Irene.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

David had not seen Suzanne Raeburn since their conversation outside Balaclava, as she had departed for the north days later, and he and Elena had left shortly after. Fortunately, he had enough connections in the army and shipping that their exit was swift. They made the journey back to Portsmouth, and then he'd left for Bern upon reaching London after he sorted out the issue of a license.

Time had not dulled Suzanne Raeburn, though she looked like she had carried things back from Balaclava. Whether it was illness or weariness, he could not tell.

"Mrs. Raeburn, you look as radiant as last I saw you." He felt somewhat unsteady from climbing the stairs to the hospital and sought to cover his fatigue with good humor. Elena started to say something but stopped and remained silent. Something warmed in him as he gave thanks that she understood he did not want attention drawn to his difficulty with stairs.

"He's such a charmer. I shouldn't have let you marry him, Elena. You know how I told you not to trust handsome, charming men."

He often forgot about his face, but he couldn't think of himself as handsome anymore. Not compared to what he used to be. "Well, good thing I'm no longer handsome."

Elena gently swatted his arm. She reached up to adjust his hair, then let her fingertips lightly graze the left side of his face. He froze. This was her second time touching him in the past few days. This had to be progress.

"You're still rather handsome, my lord."



Even though he'd rather not think about his looks, he was delighted she found him handsome, and he forgot all about the stairs. It must have shown on his face because Elena looked as though she wanted to roll her eyes at him.

"Do not look so pleased, my lord. I am unsure of how I feel about handsome men." She lowered her hand. "I am not inclined to trust them."

He didn't know what to make of that, so he looked to the other woman.

"I might look a bit different from the last time I saw you." He couldn't keep the grin from his voice as he handed his cane to Elena to show how he could stand without it. Mrs. Raeburn looked genuinely happy for him, and Elena was beaming. As proud as he was of himself, of his own determination, he was struck by the realization that these two women were as much to thank for his life as all the doctors he saw abroad. If they hadn't built the hotel, if Elena hadn't been there when he woke up, he might not be here today. He looked at both of them, lost for words at how to thank them. For an English gentleman, he was better than most at recognizing and expressing his feelings, but that wasn't saying very much.

Mrs. Raeburn did not seem to mind his lapse as she went on. "While I am no doctor, I'm guessing that your body did much of the work, as your paralysis was temporary and not permanent. Though I suppose the doctors in Switzerland showed you exercises to help you relearn how to walk essentially?"

David nodded, not surprised that she was familiar with the workings of the clinic.

They spent the remainder of the day touring the various hospital wards. He was impressed by everything but particularly moved by the adjacent convalescent home for veterans of the Crimean War. He felt oddly humbled that he could walk about with his beautiful wife while many men lay in beds, missing limbs, or, he shuddered to think, so mentally anguished they could not return to their former lives.

At one point, when he had lingered in the convalescent home while Elena and Mrs. Raeburn had moved on, he dropped his cane. It landed with a sudden and loud clang that seemed to disturb one of the men from a bed, who looked around, shaking uncontrollably. David, who felt guilty for making the noise, grabbed the man by the forearm.

“Breathe,” he commanded quietly. “Count backward from ten,” he said, remembering one of the practices from the clinic. The man settled, took a deep breath, and then looked up. He was sweaty and pallid, but he glanced at David gratefully.

“Thanks, milord.”

David was embarrassed by the distance the man put between them, but he did not know how to overcome it. Perhaps if he shared a small amount of himself...

“It helps me,” he admitted. “When I lose my breath, I count backward from ten. Usually, before I get to one, I remember where I am.”

The man looked uncertain but grunted in agreement after a moment. David pointed to an empty bed next to him with his cane. “May I?”

The man swallowed, then grunted again, and David sat. He saw the man’s gaze go to his scars and his cane and judge him to be a fellow veteran as his wary eyes softened marginally.

“Hector McDaniel,” the man muttered, “invalided out after friendly fire at Kersch.”

David quickly decided not to give his title or military rank. It might make the man more comfortable. “David, uh, David Pierce. Got this.” He rubbed his scarred temple. “Battle of the Great Redan.” There was a pause as David tried to think of what to say, so he went with the first thing that came to mind. “Are you a good shot?” he asked.

Sometimes, David felt self-conscious as he had only arrived in Crimea in early 1855 when his regiment was sent as reinforcements, then he was wounded and invalided out by the end of the summer. He knew that the first fall and winter before that had been hell on earth, and McDaniel was fortunate to have survived his injury and disease. At the same time, David had spent that winter training with foreign mercenaries in Greece.

“I was.” McDaniel looked uncomfortable. He gestured to his left arm, which David realized he had not moved this entire time. “But you need a working arm to aim. Even worse, my nerves are shot. If I hear a loud noise...I can barely get through the day.”

David nodded. “I saw many men like that.”

They sat in silence for a few more moments. David wanted to keep the man talking, as he appeared to stop shaking when he spoke.

“If I may ask,” David started slowly. “Why did you join the army?”

“Military family,” the man obliged him with a response. “Long line in the Black Watch. ” The man looked at the ceiling above as if weighing his choice of words, then came to a decision. “I haven’t written them that I was back. I write with the left, unnatural as it is. I can’t hold anything in my right hand for long, either.” He swallowed. “I don’t want them to see me like this.”

David remembered his dread in seeing Irene, that his scars and injuries might scare her, one of her few living family members. “I was afraid to see my sister again. But her joy in my being alive outweighed her discomfort at my injuries.”

“But you don’t shake as I do.”

He had a point. “True. But I can’t be in crowds anymore. I’m always scanning the crush of people, looking for ways out.” He could see in the man’s expression that it wasn’t the same. “I know it’s not equivalent. But if you ever change your mind, I’d happily write them for you.”

McDaniel studied him for a moment. “All right, I’ll return the question, why did you join?”

No one had really asked him that. His friends had tried to talk him out of it, but they never really asked him why he was purchasing a commission when he had a title and a business. He might as well be honest since he had never had the opportunity to say it aloud.

“When my father died, I was overwhelmed by the responsibility he left, even more than the grief. I suppose I wanted to escape.” Many peers inherited a title when the previous one died, but few also inherited a business. Even though he had Aunt Sophie to help with the business side, shouldering the title and business responsibilities crushed him as a young man. He found himself acting rashly, living a libertine lifestyle. He engaged in drinking, casual love affairs, and carousing without a thought to the consequences, all in need of an escape from the suffocating responsibility he inherited with his father’s death. Then, one morning, when recovering from a terrible hangover, he felt such an overwhelming disgust with himself that he knew he needed to get away.

“Good man, your father?” McDaniel asked.

“The very best. But he spent most of the end missing my mother.”

McDaniel smiled sadly. “I always wanted to be a father like mine. But now...I don’t know if I’ll ever be one.”

David had been in that position only too recently. It was not something one would often admit to a stranger, but being veterans of the Crimea inducted them into a unique brotherhood that was difficult to put into words.

McDaniel blinked momentarily, his eyes shuttering again as though he believed he had revealed too much to a virtual stranger. “I think I need to rest if you’ll excuse me.”

“Of course, I’ll take my leave. If you ever change your mind about the letters, I’ll be back.”

David thought about offering his card, but for some reason, he felt that would put more social distance between them, so he just gave the man a nod and turned to leave. As he picked up his cane and walked away, he felt a new lightness he couldn’t explain. Now, to find his wife...

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Elena smiled and wandered away as her husband conversed with the shaking man. She had confidence that he did not need her at that moment. She wondered where Irene had gone off to since they first arrived. They usually stuck to the women’s ward, as there was still a great stigma of women being alone in a room full of men, but with David’s presence, it was different. Things were much more regulated here than in the Crimea, which was chaotic and a bit disorganized. As she enjoyed the peace of walking through a quiet hallway, she became aware of someone else in the hallway with her.

“Elena?”

Antigone, or Annie, Sprague was tall enough that Elena had to look up to talk to her. She was a striking girl, elegant and statuesque, with gleaming black hair and high

cheekbones. In some ways, she looked less like an Englishwoman than Elena, as both their skin was much darker than what was fashionable, but Elena thought Annie looked much more beautiful than most pale Englishwomen she saw in ballrooms. Annie often visited with Irene, her dearest friend, once Irene had started accompanying Elena to the hospital. She had a strong constitution, able to calm the most belligerent patient in a soothing tone as if gentling a bucking horse. She was also frighteningly idealistic in a way Elena wasn't sure she had ever been, even when she was so young. But she had such a serenity about her that she almost convinced you to see the world as she did.

"I hear you met my father last night. I hope he didn't bore you with his studies." Annie took Elena's arm as they turned into a long hallway.

"No, but he did explain the origin of your name."

Annie made a face. "Yes, it is from a Greek tragedy. About a girl who dies for the honor of her family." Annie's face cleared, and she looked at Elena with curiosity. "Greece is not that far from your homeland. You did not learn the Greeks?"

"Some stories were passed on, but I don't remember many tragedies."

"Ah, I see." She paused as if absorbing the information, then went on, "No one ever calls me Antigone but for Lord Michael for some reason." Her cross expression gave away her thoughts on that particular gentleman, though Elena could not blame her. Whenever she saw them together, Lord Michael did seem to always try to pick at Annie's idealism. Elena would have to ask David about that.

"I always say there is truth in names, but in your case, I hope there is not. Though I could not imagine you acting without honor." Annie was so strong and calm. Elena could see her in a different life as one of those knights David liked so well.

As Annie blushed slightly at the compliment, Elena realized she could ask her about the Season.

“How are you enjoying your Season?”

Annie paused again as if she needed to weigh her words. “On some level, I am enjoying it, but in some ways, it is frustrating.”

Elena looked up at her for an explanation. Annie sighed.

“I’ve never been out in society before. I’ve mostly been around my father and his friends. They are interesting people who study or travel. Nothing like the ton...” Annie stopped walking for a moment as if she had to steel herself before she went on. “I recently became aware of rumors regarding my birth, which may have changed how some gentlemen treat me.”

Elena kept her eyes down to conceal her shock. Annie was the granddaughter of a marquess, had a large dowry, and was striking in her beauty. Elena had seen gentlemen fawning over Annie at several events. But then she thought back to the few occasions before David returned where gentlemen had propositioned her when she made the mistake of wandering into a secluded corner. Those gentlemen appeared to make certain assumptions about her marriage, likely deeming her a foreign trollop who had seduced her way to a title. She had been embarrassed and pretended not to understand what they were asking. She hoped Annie wasn’t receiving the same kind of treatment, as she always sought to protect Irene and Annie at any event.

“Ah, yes, I understand how those kinds of gentlemen can be.”

“It’s so unfair. They can do whatever they want, and I must be above all reproach at all times.” Elena glanced up at her and saw a faint redness on her high cheekbones that was no blush. “Apparently, someone started a rumor that my late mother had an

affair with a peddler, cuckolding my father.” She practically spat the last word. “And I was the result of that union. Because I’m so dark.”

Elena wished she could take this pain away from her friend. “I’m sorry, Annie. I did not grow up in this society. I did not know how cruel they can be.”

Annie bit her lower lip. “I hate it. I hate how many of them look at me. I might as well marry quickly to avoid society as soon as possible.”

Annie looked so detached and sad as she spoke the words that Elena grabbed her hand. “I hope it is a good man you choose.”

“I always wanted a hero who would slay dragons and right wrongs.” She gave a small shrug. “I will just have to find him quickly.”

Elena squeezed her friend’s hand. “I hope you do.” She thought this might be an opportunity to broach the subject of Irene.

“What about Irene? Has anyone started rumors about her?”

“Irene? I don’t think so. I know the oldest families look down on her because the family is in trade, and Lord Grayston’s marriage to—” Annie cut herself off as a look of guilt crossed her face.

“To me?” Elena asked, scared to hear the answer. “Have I brought her shame?”

“No!” Annie said fervently. “You have been above reproach. I suppose it was all so mysterious and sudden. People are curious about you. You’re very...un-English. I think you’re wonderful.”

Elena looked away at the compliment. “The feeling is mutual.” She frowned,



thinking. “Then forgive me, I would not ask you to betray a confidence, but why does Irene look so sad?”

Annie looked to be deep in thought again, and she took a moment before she spoke. “She has not shared any confidences with me. But I noticed it, too. Knowing her these years, the most I can say is that this was never her dream. She never fantasized about a lord she would marry. She admired her brother or her aunt Sophie and wanted to take after them. She seems happiest when she is here or when she is making music.”

Elena nodded absentmindedly as she shared that exact thought. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone walking swiftly by. Maggie, who was wiping her hands, stopped and waved at her friends.

“I haven’t seen both of you together in a while. Where is Irene?”

“I think she was near David last I checked. He was talking to a soldier.”

Maggie nodded solemnly. “I didn’t know he was coming.”

Elena smiled. “He wanted to see your mother. I forgot to ask her, when will she meet the queen?”

Maggie’s expression darkened. “The date was postponed indefinitely. Apparently, some of the queen’s advisors were concerned with the...optics of the meeting.”

Elena’s grim expression seemed to mirror Annie’s face as she thought she understood the deeper meaning of what Maggie was saying.

“Are you relieved?” Elena asked. “You had been concerned about the meeting.”

“Yes and no. I hate that she was denied greater recognition for her work, likely due to the color of her skin. I can’t forgive them for that. But I am glad our funding and her position are not in jeopardy.” Her jaw tightened. For a moment, Elena was struck by the intense hazel of her eyes, almost like amber. They weren’t quite brown but not quite green. Unlike David’s eyes, which were brown along the edge, but the center was green, like a changing leaf. She felt her heart stir as she thought of her husband’s eyes, then wondered why she knew their color so intimately. Because he followed her with his eyes, a voice inside said, eyes that were both warm and searingly hot, that brought her comfort but also profoundly unnerved her when she thought of the hum in her blood when he gazed at her. Could she take a chance on desire again? Or had it been seared out of her by betrayal, by crude men who pawed at her late at night? She did not know. But she was afraid that she might owe it to herself to find out.

As Elena came out of her thoughts, Maggie continued. “I was on my way to set a young woman’s bone. She came in bruised and bloody last night. Do you think you could help?”

Maggie’s husband was an experienced consulting surgeon often called into emergencies. Maggie, like her mother, had grown up around healing, so she was often entrusted with tasks like setting bones. Elena knew she was asking Annie more than her, with her soothing, steady presence, but Elena felt great compassion for the young woman. “Why don’t you go find Irene?” she said to Annie. “I’ll help set the bone.” Fortunately, even though she was now a baroness, she remembered her nursing skills from her time outside Balaclava.

Annie squeezed Elena’s hand as she left, and Elena returned the squeeze. She could do this. Though why she had decided to was still a mystery to her. She was not one to volunteer to talk to new people. She often stuck to those she felt comfortable with. She could often hide her shyness under many layers, but it was there. Had always been there. Even in her village, she loved talking to those she was familiar with, but most of the people she had known her entire life. Anatole was the first person she’d

ever taken a chance on, the first stranger she'd opened herself up to. And look how well that turned out.

She and Maggie walked toward the women's ward, which, like most of the other wards, did not offer patients much privacy to help the staff with sight lines. She had not thought of these things in Balaclava, as most of where she went, even the hospital, had been somewhat makeshift. Only now that she was in London did she see the full extent of what a hospital could be, although Mrs. Raeburn explained theirs was different from a specialist hospital or a hospital only for women. Often, women who came to the women's ward were escaping jealous husbands or lovers who had hurt them. Elena knew that bad things had happened to her, but she felt truly humbled when she spoke to some of these women, not daring to share or name her own unfortunate history.

"Who is she, Maggie?"

"She wouldn't say. She wouldn't say who hurt her either. Maybe you could talk to her while I look at her arm?"

Maggie led Elena to a young woman who couldn't be much older than Irene lying with her eyes closed. She had warm skin similar to Elena's, but instead of golden-brown hair, she had dark brown hair that was matted with dried blood. While much of her had been cleaned up, the blood had stayed in her hair. Elena had a sudden flash of the way to üsküdar, how her wound wouldn't heal. What the dried blood did to her hair, the smell of it. She had a moment where she almost cast up her accounts, as she had heard the British say. She steeled herself and looked for a chair to pull next to the cot.

"How'd you get that scar?"

The woman, who had just moments before looked to be asleep, spoke in a rasp.

Maggie blinked, then quickly recovered and looked at Elena apprehensively. Elena wanted to talk to the woman to distract her from Maggie's inspection, but she hadn't been prepared to discuss her scar. But if it could help this woman...

"It was a man. He cut me."

"Why?"

From any other person, this would have been a great impertinence. Usually composed, Maggie looked offended for Elena's sake, but Elena felt compelled to answer. She gave Maggie a slight shake of the head. Why indeed.

"He said he loved me. But I disobeyed him. So, he said he would cut my face so that no one would ever want me again." Elena swallowed. "But I pushed him and ran, so he only got part of my face."

Elena took some perverse satisfaction in knowing she had beaten Anatole in this small way. And besides, if love meant jealousy, pain, and heartbreak, she did not know if she wanted anyone to love her ever again.

It had all happened so quickly, the glint of the knife, that feeling that time had slowed down and she had precious few seconds to save herself. She had been lucky that he stumbled and fell, off-balance from her pushing back. That gave her enough time. There were multiple ways back to her village, and fortunately, he did not follow her path, or if he did, it was after he had tried a different route. Or he had merely gotten caught up in the chaos that followed. But then again, Elena had never looked back.

The woman looked her over, not moving a muscle but examining her with her flat, gray eyes. Slowly, she uncurled a fist on her uninjured arm, stretching out her fingers. She studied her hand as she spoke. Elena could not place it, but like her, she did not talk like an Englishwoman.

“I know about that. I said no to a man last night, and he damn well broke my arm. He said no one would want a woman who can’t use her hands.”

Elena didn’t know what to say to that, so she kept silent.

“You’re not from around here, are you?”

Elena shook her head.

“Me either. My grandfather came from Naples. And my mother’s father. My other grandfather, I suppose. They all put me out when I ran off with an Irishman.”

Elena opened her mouth and closed it. Once the woman started, the floodgates of speech opened.

“I know, we’re all papists, aren’t we? That’s what I thought, too, but my family disagreed. Then, my Irishman had to get himself transported and...well, I’ve got to provide for the little one, don’t I?”

Elena did understand. With no one in the world, there were few choices left for women who had been abandoned. She felt an odd, unexplainable connection with this woman, even though she did not know her name. She pulled up the chair she had found nearby and sat.

“My name is Elena. What is yours?” She had decided against giving her title since it meant very little in this instance.

“Annamaria O’Donnell.” The woman’s voice cracked slightly on her surname.

“Annamaria, this is my friend, Nurse Green. She wants to look at your arm. Would that be all right?”

Annamaria nodded and shifted gingerly so Maggie had access to her side. “Are you a lady doctor?”

Maggie shook her head, and she gently tested Annamaria’s arm. “I’m a nurse. My mother and grandmother are healers, and my husband is a doctor. So, they trust me to set bones.”

Annamaria seemed to accept this and turned her attention back to Elena. “You look like a fancy lady,” she noted as her gray eyes took in Elena’s dress, which was a plain lavender walking gown but well-made and of fine material. “I probably shouldn’t even be talking to you this way. But you’ve been in my shoes. I can see it in your eyes. There was something worse than that fellow who cut you.” Elena dropped her gaze, shocked that this stranger could tell that about her. “Forgive my bluntness, but when you live from day to day, it dims your social niceties.”

Elena stared at her hands, her throat completely dry. Annamaria didn’t ask a question—she just stated. In her candor, Annamaria had set something in motion for Elena. She had named something for her, and there was no going back.

“It wasn’t as bad as what has happened to others,” Elena felt her voice crack as she spoke, unable to look anywhere but her hands.

“That doesn’t make it less terrible. Or easier to live with,” Annamaria said gently.

Those words hung heavy in the air as Elena drank them in and let them slide around her soul. It slowly dawned on her that she had been surrounded by a fog for years, constantly feeling great sadness and anger about what had happened to her but unable to name it or acknowledge it, knowing that worse things happened to women every day. But she saw in that moment that minimizing what had happened to her didn’t make it go away. In fact, it left it to fester, much like the wound above her eye had begun to fester until Mrs. Raeburn had found her and treated her eye. She suddenly

felt close to tears.

“And I didn’t say no.” Her voice was barely audible in the ward, which was unusually quiet for the time of day.

“But you didn’t say yes, did you?” Annamaria’s voice made her glance up.

Elena shook her head.

Maggie, who had been quietly trying to fade into the background, touched Elena’s shoulder. “May I speak to you for a moment?” They stepped away from Annamaria, promising they would be right back. Maggie continued, “Her arm is not broken, but her shoulder is dislocated. I need to pop her shoulder back into place, but it will be very painful. I hate to ask you to keep talking to distract her, but--”

“No, I like talking to her. It is lifting my spirit in some way.” Elena hadn’t realized how sick she had been in spirit, in how she thought of herself until she named it. But now she could say it and talk to this woman, who had done so much for her in just a few minutes to distract her from pain. They walked back to Annamaria, with Elena returning to her chair beside her, pulling back her long pagoda sleeve to hold the young woman’s hand. Annamaria, whose jaw was slightly swollen, widened her lips, and Elena realized she was trying to smile. Maggie went to her left side.

“Do you, have you ever gone outside of yourself when...something bad happens to you?” Elena couldn’t quite bring herself to say it out loud. It was improper for a lady to discuss, but Elena had to know. She had to understand what had happened to her.

“It’s the only way to get through it sometimes.” Annamaria gritted her teeth, her fingers tightening around Elena’s hand.

“Yes. As if you’re outside of your body and yourself. Like you’re watching from

afar, like a ghost.”

The understanding in Annamaria’s eyes brought Elena great sorrow but also a kind of kinship she had never felt before. She felt overwhelmed and strove to change the subject.

“You have a child?”

“I have a neighbor watch her most of the time. I don’t know what I would do without her.”

Elena smiled and squeezed her hand. “Tell me about her.”

“Where to begin? She has her father’s eyes, blue as the sky. And his singing voice, oh, that man could make the angels—”

Suddenly, there was a great crack, and Annamaria gave a yell.

“It seemed like the right moment,” Maggie said unapologetically.

Annamaria put her other arm to her shoulder and tentatively moved it around.

“I don’t know if there is a right moment for that,” she muttered.

“Do you wish to go to the police about the man who hurt your arm?” Elena asked gently.

“No point. They’d take one look at me and show me the door. I’ve tried getting help before, and it’s been useless.”

An idea suddenly occurred to Elena. She had to check with Sophie, who was due to



arrive any day now, but as it took root, Elena felt in her bones that it was the right course of action.

“Annamaria, can you read and write?”

“Yes, my brother went to a school that a gentleman was running in our old neighborhood. I watched him practice during the day, then stole his books at night and taught myself.” A flash of pride shot across Annamaria’s face, but it left as quickly as it came. What a remarkable woman, Elena thought.

“When you recover, would you have any interest in working as a secretary?” Elena asked her. “I think it would pay well and might be less dangerous.”

“Me? But my family threw me out when I eloped. I’m ruined.”

Elena was taken back almost three years earlier when she tried to use the same excuse on David, how her life had changed since then. “Most women are if they are in the wrong circumstance. It will not matter, I believe.”

“I don’t know what to say...”

“I need to check, and I will bring your employer to see you in a few days, but if she says yes, would you like that?”

“Yes, yes, grazie my lady, grazie.” Annamaria kissed Elena’s gloved hand. It was an unfamiliar gesture here in London, but it took Elena back to her home for a moment.

Now Elena just had to talk to Sophie, but if Sophie had accepted her with open arms, she could accept this tough, funny woman, wouldn’t she? Elena prayed she had not just made an empty promise and vowed to do whatever she could to bring her plan to fruition.

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*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

On the way back, they were stopped in the carriage for so long that David got out to see what was causing the delay.

Irene and Elena sat in silence for several moments, but then curiosity overtook them when David did not return. As she descended from the carriage, Elena saw David talking with a man over something bloody on the ground.

“We really ought to shoot it, guv, put it out of its misery,” she heard a young man tell her husband.

As she stepped closer, mindful of the busy street, Elena realized it was not a person but a dog whose back legs had been trampled by a wheel or a horse’s hooves. While she did not grow up with dogs in the home, as that was not the way of her people, dogs ran freely through the streets of her village. Her heart went out to this large, wolf-like animal that still wagged its tail and looked longingly at David despite its obvious pain.

“Oh, David.” He looked up as she touched his shoulder. “Let us take him home.”

“Yes, please, Davie, please,” Irene had joined them. She had never heard her call him that, but it seemed to work to some effect as David’s gaze was torn between the two women.

“Irene, he’ll probably die. Leaving him to, uh, this young man might be kinder...”

Irene shook her head. “Elena’s a nurse. She can fix him.”

David looked at Elena, cocking his head to one side. “Can you?”

She studied the dog, which she could tell was golden and black, even with the grease and matted blood in his fur. She looked over his legs. One looked like it might heal fully. It was just broken. She wasn’t sure about the other as it lay beneath him. But still, this dog deserved a chance. And they could give it to him.

“I think so.” David still looked undecided, so she added, “I seem to remember someone else with a serious injury who kept fighting against tall odds.”

David shrugged. “I never thought of that part as the fighting. But I suppose it was.” He sighed and ran his hands through his hair. “All right.” He stripped off his coat and began to make a sling of it to carry the dog, who was quite large. Once they had him in the carriage, Irene and Elena fussed over the dog to make him comfortable. At one point, Elena looked up and saw David shaking his head at the two of them.

“What is it?”

He crossed his arms in front of himself. “I’m not convinced this old chap didn’t know exactly what he was doing when he dodged in front of that horse today. He wound up with two ladies fawning all over him.”

Irene looked up. “He’s just jealous,” she told Elena, turning her attention back to the dog.

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David carried the blasted animal into the townhouse. It was challenging without his cane, but he knew Irene and Elena couldn’t manage it on their own. Fields looked appalled as he approached.

“The ladies decided to save a trampled street dog this afternoon. Have the maids bring some hot water and clean cloth. Would Mrs. Jenkins be bothered if we take him downstairs?”

Fields recovered quickly. “Mrs. Jenkins can handle anything, sir.”

“Just so,” he said. He carried the animal downstairs as Elena cleared off a table. She looked down at her lavender gown, which, while not as elaborate as an evening gown, was surely not ideal clothing for treating a bleeding animal. As if reading his thoughts, she shrugged and immediately got to work.

Elena cleaned and set the animal’s wounds, speaking to him soothingly. He was rather a handsome fellow now that Elena had cleaned up some of the blood and grime, quite large for a street dog, with a coat of tan and black. He was reminded of Alsatian dogs he had seen on the Continent. David hated himself, but he rather envied the animal in those moments when she gently tended to him, though he was still moved to pity for the poor beast. Even greater than his envy was his pride in how efficient she was, how competent. He knew she treated men outside Balaclava but rarely saw her do it. He also knew that she might not be considered a proper or trained nurse in the eyes of the world, but he couldn’t have been prouder if she had treated the queen herself instead of some poor animal on a table. In his observation of her, he didn’t notice a coldness on his hand. The animal had moved his nose into David’s palm as if to force him to pet his nose. He looked up at David longingly.

David sighed, finally resigned to this new addition to the household. “I suppose if he is to stay here, he ought to have a name.”

Elena pondered for a moment. “What about Goliath?”

David looked again at the beast as he gave in and scratched his ears and head. “Well, he is rather a large, strapping fellow.”

“Not because he is large. Because he challenges you. I think it will benefit both of you.” David raised an eyebrow at her. “But yes, also because he is very large,” she admitted, flashing him a mischievous smile that he hadn’t seen before. “There is some truth in names, you know.” She looked up at him, clearly testing if he remembered their conversation from years before.

“Yes,” he echoed her words. “Yes, I suppose there is.”

David went to change his shirt, which was unfortunately covered in the dog’s blood. His new valet would have a challenge saving the shirt and his coat. He had not come to know the man very well yet, as his old valet had fallen in love and married a girl in Switzerland. But, hell, he would ruin all his shirts if it would make his wife look at him that way again. As if he were her hero...Damnation, he had things to do, but instead, he was going to go find her again.

After he changed, he found Elena was having footmen bring a tub and water down to the kitchen.

When he made a face, she said matter-of-factly, “He needs a proper bath. Mrs. Raeburn always says cleanliness helps prevent infection.”

He followed her downstairs, and she looked up at him beseechingly. “Could you pick him up and place him in the tub?” Since he could probably never deny her anything, David began to remove his coat. “Wait, what are you doing?” Elena was looking at him in a strange way.

“If I’m going to get soaked, I’d rather not ruin my clothing again,” he said while rolling his shirt sleeves. He saw her eyeing his forearms with alarm and something else in her golden-brown eyes. That look caused the hair on the back of his neck to stand up. As well as other things.

The dog, Goliath, he supposed, was far too lethargic from pain to object to being lifted into a tub of water. As Elena picked a bar of soap and began scrubbing the dog, carefully avoiding the bandages she had just set, David had a flash of her gentle hands bathing him. Suddenly, his collar felt too tight. Sod it, all his clothes felt too tight. Attempting to tamp down this jolt of lust, he swallowed.

She looked up at him as she had almost forgotten his presence once she set herself to the task at hand. “Are you quite all right?”

He hadn’t noticed he had been standing there frozen for several moments.

“I-I forgot I had to...keep up with my correspondence. In my study. Upstairs.”

She crooked her head. “Well, don’t let me keep you.”

He stared for a moment longer, then nearly sprinted up the stairs with his cane. Did he have correspondence to keep up on? He supposed he could write a line to Henry, anything to take his mind off his wife and her gentle hands.

As he entered his study, he decided he could probably find Henry if he wanted to speak with him. He might find Henry at the Garrick, the gentleman’s club they frequented as younger men. Young Henry had fancied himself a rebel and an artist, eschewing the traditional aristocratic Boodle’s or White’s. However, a new club, Pratt’s, had just opened off of St. James, which seemed a more likely option for Henry since David had been away. As David turned and walked to the front door, Fields asked if he should summon the carriage as the club was within walking distance.

“I’ll walk instead, Fields.” Walking would help rid him of this arousal. Yes, proper exercise ought to be effective.

However, after he was halfway there, he admitted to himself that he hadn't thought through how difficult walking all the way to the club with a cane would be. But he had almost made it and wasn't going to stop. Just another few blocks. Just...

There were too many people. He couldn't catch his breath. It felt as if someone was stepping on his chest and wouldn't let up, no matter how he begged. What had he done before? As he was being treated for his spine, one of the doctors suggested deep breaths when he felt crowded in. He tried to remember. Breathe. What had he told McDaniel today? Count backward from ten.

Ten. Nine. He gasped. Eight. Seven. He thought of Elena working quietly, bathing that poor dog. Six. Five. Four. Three. The gold in her eyes when he first saw her and the sun shining behind her braided hair creating a sort of halo. Two. One. He could breathe again. He could make it. He had stopped by a lamppost, which he grabbed as if to remind himself that he was real, that he was on this sidewalk and needed to keep walking. He wasn't going to dissolve into the air. He was going to see his friend. He had resolved to be a better friend and a better brother. He had been too wrapped up in his own problems for too long.

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The porter's eyes went wide when David entered and enquired about Henry. Fortunately, even though David didn't have membership at Pratt's, he was recognized as they bought his sherry and wine. As expected, Henry was at the club, and when David found him, in his cups.

"King David!" When he drank, Henry was always excited to see everyone.

"Hotspur." David bowed his head. He had no idea how long they had called each other these silly nicknames. Henry's mother had been a lover of the Romantic poets, so she gave him the middle name Percy, and at some point, David had arrived at

Hotspur from Henry Percy.

“My liege, you have deigned to grace us mere mortals with your presence.”

David did not know what to say, so he gestured to join him.

“Please.” Henry seemed to recover himself slightly. “Sit. Join me.”

David started to say something, then stopped. This was one of his oldest friends. Why was he having so much trouble talking to him?

Finally, he said, “I haven’t heard from you in a long time. I wasn’t sure I would be welcome.”

“Well, yes, I’ve been busy.”

“Busy?” David had never heard his friend live anything but the life of an idle gentleman. It had been part of what he wanted to get away from. He wasn’t like Henry, who was from a very old, very blue-blooded family and title. David, whose title was much more recent and whose family was in trade, felt the grating nature of indolence and had tried to escape it.

“Yes, just so.” Henry gestured around as if indicating this was what he had been doing. Henry glanced at his drink.

“Is this one of yours?”

David could tell by the color and smell that it was not. War had not burned out the palate his father had helped him build from a young age.

“We’re mostly sherry. You know we don’t import brandy.”



“It must have slipped my mind. It has been some time. And wine still, yes?”

“And wine, yes,” David echoed. Henry had to know this. He was on the wine committee at the Garrick club, or at least he had been.

“You may have heard the happy news that I am neither the heir nor the spare anymore.”

“Your brother?” David had been away for a while, for when he left, the viscount was childless after many years of marriage.

“Remember him? Charming fellow who would likely disapprove of your presence here today. That I would dare associate with someone in trade is simply unacceptable. Yet, while I live to earn my brother’s disapproval, I raise my glass to his offspring. Happy miracles. The wonders of procreation.”

Henry raised his glass as if to toast David, but David did not raise his. He was studying his friend. He was still handsome, even as his friend David could see that. Henry had always gone through life with such ease. He could charm any woman, challenge any man, and yet wind up sharing a drink and a laugh with everyone before the night's end. David used to have that same relative ease, but he had a seriousness, a weight that his parents’ deaths and his title had dropped on him, that Henry never had. Perhaps it was because of his background in the merchant class, but he had always felt that their shared hedonism was only a temporary state, not a way of life, as it seemed to Henry. One had to be born completely into wealth and privilege to believe that that sort of excess did not come without a price. Looking closely at Henry, he was reminded of a cheap pocket watch whose shine was wearing off, as he had deep lines around his eyes and looked markedly thinner than David remembered. He thought of the gold automata watch that beat in his pocket, a Swiss creation of exquisite craftsmanship he had inherited from his father. The opposite of the gentleman sitting in front of him now.

Although David thought he dressed relatively well, he was nothing compared to what Henry used to be. As a young man about town, Henry Lennix rivaled the legendary Beaux Brummel from years past, always impeccably dressed in the height of style. But now his clothes hung limply on his frame, his four-in-one tie loose, and his waistcoat unbuttoned. His hair looked lank, and the blue eyes that ladies had once loved had lost their depth.

“Is that what this is about? We used to have some fun, but we did not spend our days at the bottom of a glass. Not like this.”

Henry’s face tightened briefly, then resettled into the same unimpressed expression. David was starting to see the strain and effort maintaining the facade of a callow drunk cost him.

“What would you know? You’ve been off fighting wars and wooing wantons,” Henry sneered.

“If you are referring to my wife, I recommend you hold your tongue.” David gripped his cane. He knew Henry was hurting for some unknown reason, but insulting Elena was untoward.

“Or what? You’ll call me out?”

David cocked his eyebrow and felt his blood chill in his veins.

“My wife is above reproach. She has done nothing but good in this world and does not deserve your disrespect. Or I will meet you at dawn, friend or no friend.”

Henry finally looked up at him for longer than two seconds. David saw a flicker of fire in his eyes, a glimmer of his old friend.

“Ah, I see. I wasn’t sure if you just had some mad idealistic notion like you do. But I see you’ve fallen.”

David did not say anything. Henry looked down at his glass and raised it.

“To the beautiful fall.”

David halfheartedly raised his glass to his friend. “Not that you would know anything about it,” David said under his breath.

Finally, Henry’s façade of nonchalance cracked, and a genuinely bitter look crossed his face as he brought his glass down hard on the table.

“Little would you know.” His words were so quiet that David hardly heard him.

The penny dropped. David sat back and regarded his friend for several moments.

“Ahh, I’m sorry, Hotspur. What was her name?”

Henry swirled his glass, the tan liquid reflecting and refracting light across the table.

“It doesn’t matter. She won’t have me. She’ll never have me. I did something unforgivable.”

David frowned. That didn’t sound like Henry. He could be immature, but he wasn’t cruel.

“I’m sure—”

“No!” His voice was a harsh rasp. “There is no hope. She married someone else anyway.”

David had never seen Henry like this. He had never been a bitter man, given to moping. He did not know what to say. He could not conceive of betraying Elena, having her leave him. Just imagining it made him feel empty and cold.

They sat silent for several moments when Henry finally spoke.

“My apologies for insulting your wife,” Henry began softly. “I...haven’t been myself lately. For quite some time, in fact. I have seen her a few times, your wife. She is quite striking. You say she has solid character as well? ”

David relaxed for the first time since he arrived and nodded fondly.

“The best.” They still felt oddly formal.

“And a man could never say no to those breasts.”

“Don’t make me hit you.”

Henry laughed, finally cracking a real expression that lit his eyes.

“I suppose I have been rather cross with you.”

“Is that so?”

“Without you, Michael and I had nothing to talk about. I imagined you off like Byron, dying in the Near East in some unmarked grave, and here, Michael and I would just keep drifting apart from the lodestone that brought us together.”

“Byron died in Greece. And at least he died for something.”

Henry raised his eyebrows. David had not meant the last part to come out so bitterly.

“I know you think me an indolent aristocrat, but I did keep up with the Times and William Howard Russell. I didn’t envy you, old friend. What level of hell would you rate warfare?”

David remembered his inability to walk down the street just then. “Indescribable,” he said sharply.

Henry gave a brief nod, acknowledging that he would take the subject no further.

“Still, it sounds like you found a veritable angel on this earth. Those are quite rare, so take care of that one.”

David couldn’t tell if Henry was being serious or not. He hated that they had been apart so long. He couldn’t read him like he used to.

“I did try to watch out for her at first as you asked us to. I visited the hospital several times and looked for her at events.”

David hadn’t known this. He had assumed only Michael had listened to his request to watch out for Elena and Irene, as he received no correspondence from Henry on the subject. He was moved that Henry had taken his request to heart, and he put his hand on Henry’s shoulder. As Henry stared at David’s hand for a moment, there was that flicker of depth to his blue eyes again, and he covered David’s hand with his own. Then, the moment passed, and he went back to his drink. They did not talk about that moment but spent the remainder of the hour discussing the news of the day.

As David gripped his cane to rise to leave, he suddenly remembered. “Lord Gaius wants to have a dinner with the old Round Table soon.”

“We really do have too many nicknames amongst us, don’t we?” Henry grimaced comically.

David shrugged. "I suppose we do. Hard to keep track of, isn't it?"

Henry saluted with his drink.

"Will you attend?" David needed him to come to keep an eye on this new version of his friend.

"I suppose. If I'm free."

"Since you're always free, that settles it."

Henry rolled his eyes and bid David good day. He found walking home easier, as the streets were less crowded at this time of day. Or maybe it was his renewed friendship and the promise of his wife at home that added a spring and lightness to his step.

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Instead of finding his wife, David found his sister alone at the piano, her favorite room in the house. He sat and listened to her go through Beethoven and Chopin. Then, she seemed particularly stuck on Mozart. As her playing slowed, he worked up the nerve to ask.

"Was I wrong to leave you, Irene?"

She looked up from the piano, her eyes so like his but wider and younger. Had he ever been so young?

"I was certainly sad when you left, David. I won't lie to you. I felt terribly abandoned. I know I had Sophie, but she is so busy. I was so happy when you returned with Elena, but then you left straight away."

“I—”

“I know why you had to go. I do. And I was grateful for Elena. I think she was as hungry for family as I was, even if she would never admit it.”

“I’m sorry I left, Irene, particularly the first time. I was only thinking of myself and what I needed. I didn’t think of you. I ensured you would be taken care of should anything have happened to me, but that’s not the same, is it?”

“No, it is not.” Irene looked back at the keys, playing several stray notes.

“You know I can always tell your mood by how minor the song you are playing is.”

“Am I so easy to read?” She played a minor scale very dramatically with a slight smirk.

“Just by me, Renie.” He ran a hand through his hair. There was one more thing he had to do. “I’m also sorry that I assumed you would want a Season without asking you. I just charged ahead, as I do. Forgive me, Irene?”

“I understand why you did. Most brothers would, too. And I know you had good intentions. But good intentions are not enough.”

“I’ve learned that lesson a very hard way.”

“The war?”

He nodded. He wanted to shrug casually, but he found his shoulders locked.

“Do you...ever want to talk about it?” She stopped playing straying notes, her hands stilling.

“Perhaps someday.” He gave her a small smile.

“You and Elena have seen so much of the world. I often feel like a maiden in a tower.” She put her fingers back on the keys and pressed down dramatically.

“In some ways, I’m glad you haven’t seen parts of the world. There are some real monsters out there. But I am glad you are going to the hospital with Elena. I hope that allows you more perspective than your average lady.”

“Well, I’m not your average lady.”

“No, you’re not.” He chuckled.

“Join me?” She gestured to the bench.

“My skill is nothing to yours.”

“Yes, but it makes me feel superior.” She smirked again. Somehow, she made a smirk rather endearing.

He shook his head and rose to join her at the bench as Irene slid over and positioned her hands.

“In the future, David, please ask me before you make choices that will impact my future.”

“Such as my marriage?”

“No, I love Elena! I mean, me having a Season. Just ask me first.”

She looked him straight in the eye, and he gave her a slight nod. He did not feel quite



settled in this new equilibrium, but it was a start.

“What shall we play?”

“More Mozart? The opera is The Magic Flute .”

As if she hadn’t reminded him every other day. “Won’t you be sick of Mozart by the end of the week?”

“Never,” she said definitively and began a Mozart sonata.

He took a moment to remember the bottom part and then joined her in the music. It was only partway through that he remembered his promised lessons to his wife and resolved to convince her to join him in the music room sometime soon.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

Several days later, Elena once again found herself at the piano, sitting next to her husband. She had agreed to a music lesson, as he had asked her several times, but she had an ulterior motive to question him about his desires.

“My lord.”

“David.”

“Husband.” He weighed this response and nodded in concession. She decided to forge ahead. She had thought continuously about this subject since they left the hospital and decided to tackle it head-on.

“I must ask a blunt and uncomfortable question, but I think it will make our way forward easier.” She paused, trying to get the wording right. “Do you desire to accelerate ‘maybe someday’ out of a need for an heir? Or do you perhaps desire me?”

She looked up, not realizing how nervous she was until that moment, as her heart fluttered like a moth seeking the light. She was not sure what she wanted his answer to be.

He again appeared to be weighing his words as he glanced at the keys. “There is the answer that is more truthful and the answer that would frighten you less.”

“I think the truth is preferable, however difficult,” she said solemnly. “ Mai bine pu?in cu dreptate decat mult cu stramb?tate.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Telling the truth is always the wisest course of action.”

“Then you would be correct in your deduction of the latter case. I always cared for you, you must know, but it was without desire, as I was unable to feel that for the longest time. But one day, I smelled amber on your letter—”

“The amber? My grandmother mixed scents.”

He nodded, then smiled fondly. “I wondered where that came from. It seemed...sensual for such a sterile medical space.”

She blushed. It had been her vanity in those days, one of the few things she had on her person when she had to make the journey to üsküdar. She had tried to sell it for food, but it had been half gone, and no one wanted it when they needed money for food and safe passage themselves.

“I smelled that amber on the letter,” he said, then paused. She saw a flush climb up his neck, as he had left off a cravat, being at home. “And then I felt something again. And then I saw you, and it came back tenfold.”

She couldn't help but gasp, delighted but also anxious in equal measure. She looked at his eyes, gazing at her full of heat. But not necessarily predatory, like she had known in the past. The heat had a warmth to it as well, like the glow of a fire rather than the flame that would burn. She inhaled a deep breath and tried to remember her conversation from the hospital. She must have appeared pained because David looked at her sympathetically.

“Do you want to talk about it? You told me about what happened before we met but did not...go into great detail.”

Everything within her resisted speaking out loud about her greatest shame. She had

only told David as much as she had because she thought he might purposefully take too much laudanum, and her emotions had been heightened. David must have noticed her tense.

“You do not have to. It’s just ever since I started talking about my own...pain, for lack of a better word, some of the grief and stress has lessened. It hasn’t completely gone away, but it’s less heavy. It’s as if my grief was a satchel full of stones. The stones are still there, but I gave some away, and now it’s easier to walk forward.”

Elena swallowed. She made a great show of taking her hands off the piano keys, flexing them, and resting them in her lap.

“But it is more than grief for me. It is also shame.” David covered her knee with his hand in a gesture of comfort. She took another deep breath and continued. “But mayhap you are right. I found some release in speaking with a woman at the hospital. It may help in bearing the burden, I suppose.”

She sighed and began. “When the Russians first began to invade Dobruja, I did not understand what the fighting was for. I later read in the English papers that the tsar believed that the Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire would rise up and fight for them when the army invaded. But they did not. I think that maybe, it is possible that Anatole, the man I ran away with, was...not a spy, but a scout maybe, someone to report back to the Russian army on the Orthodox in the empire. While there were many people in our village from different backgrounds, we rarely had new parishioners. I should have noticed it was strange that a young Russian man began to attend our church services. But I was so infatuated, I could not see.”

She began to play stray keys on the piano, as she had seen David and Irene do before.

“I left a note for my family, but it was purposefully vague. Looking back, I do not know what I was thinking. I imagined he would take me to Russia with him. How

silly that seems now.” She hit a sour note and stopped pressing the keys. “I see now how he knew the timing of everything. When I changed my mind and ran away from him, I think that was part of why he was so angry, because that messed up his plan. But I just wanted to see my family again, to beg their forgiveness. I didn’t know the army would come through our village that day. I did not know much of anything, I suppose.”

She began to shake, thinking of the carnage and utter chaos of leaving her beloved home to find everything completely upside down in a matter of hours. She had always longed for adventure and romance but quickly found that all she wanted was the home she could never have again. David put his arm around her shoulders, and some of the shaking subsided.

“I had only been away half a day, but I didn’t know what to do. So, after the army left, I joined a caravan of refugees headed to Varna and eventually üsküdar, what you call Scutari. My family had planned to go there if they were forced out, so I thought...”

She exhaled, wondering how to express this shame. Perhaps if he heard it, he wouldn’t want her anymore. It was worth finding out.

“I thought, if I made it to üsküdar, my father knew merchants there. But I had no directions or a full name. I had thought I could find something, someone. But there was a price.” She paused, uncertain of how to go forward. Holding her gaze, David slowly laid his hand across the hand in her lap, stroking it gently.

She distanced herself from herself, as she talked about with Annamaria, but not completely. She just needed a little space so that she could go on.

“I had almost nothing of value after I sold my grandmother’s cross.” Her hand involuntarily went to her neck, but it was bare like it had been the past three years. “I

was starving and exhausted, so when some men in the caravan started to touch me at night, I couldn't say no. I didn't have the fight left in me. I had no one and nothing to protect me and nothing to offer them to get them to stop, nothing for them to eat, to steal but my body. I didn't ask for it, but I couldn't stop it once it started. They were too weak from disease and starvation to...finish the act, but their hands, they used their hands to..." She could not finish. It was too much. It was all too much. "I was afraid they would hurt me or leave me behind to die, so I just lay there, frozen."

She said the last few words so quietly she wasn't sure he had heard. She felt her heart pound throughout her body as she remembered that feeling of utter fear and shame but also anger that they would do such a thing to her, well up in her heart. Yet she had kept that anger in check, as the fear overrode everything else, the fear that if they were already committing such an affront to her, what would stop them from killing her? It was a blend of emotions she had never felt before those nights, and she prayed she would never have to feel again. She hoped no one else would ever have to feel that way again, but she knew that was unlikely, given the world they lived in.

David was silent for a long moment. She was waiting for him to remove his hands from hers in disgust, but he tightened his grip.

"They touched you against your will. Their actions were utterly reprehensible. What happened is not your fault."

"But I didn't say no to them!" she whispered, staring at her hands.

"But did you say yes?" he asked slowly.

She shook her head as she returned to herself, fighting the urge to cry.

"Elena, what happened to you, what was done to you, was beyond the pale. I promise. I swear to you I will never touch you unless you ask. Unless you want me to. Do you

understand?”

She finally looked into his eyes, the green turning into brown on the edges. Honest eyes, she thought. Eyes that had never lied to her, even as she glanced from one to the other, looking for a sign of deceit. She did not trust herself or her judgment, but she looked into his eyes and only saw truth. Maybe even though she could not trust herself, she could, in this moment, trust him.

She nodded as her gaze crept down his face to his straight, solid nose and surprisingly full lips. Suddenly, all the energy and attraction she had felt since he had returned began to well up inside her body, fighting to explode out of her. It was as if finally telling someone the story had unlocked some kind of permission to feel inside herself. How could she feel so safe and yet in danger all at the same time?

“Do you want me to kiss you?” he asked quietly as he regarded her attention to his lips.

“No.” She shook her head. He tried to hide it, but his eyes were crestfallen for a moment.

“I understand. We—”

“No, you misunderstand, Husband. I want to kiss you .”

He pulled back, started to say something, and stopped. He started and stopped again. He really was rather adorable. Tentatively, she reached out and stroked his cheek, carefully running her fingers along the ends of his burn scars. He leaned into her palm, and she shifted her hand to run through his hair, which was soft and smooth against her fingers. She felt his arms go around her with great pause as if giving her time to stop or pull away. Drawing his head down to hers, she turned her face up and pressed her lips against his in a kiss that immediately stole her breath away. He kissed

her back softly at first, then melted into her with a fire she had never felt from another human before. She did not know how long they sat there until she felt his tongue lightly graze her lips, then she opened her mouth to receive him and experienced a shot of pleasure that traveled down to her toes and back up to the top of her head then out to the tips of her fingers.

Why had they never kissed before? What had it taken so long? Their hands were all over each other now, hers sliding up his muscled arm until she reached his broad shoulders, his trailing down her back, then around, and then up across her chest. He pulled back and looked her in the eye, and she recognized he was asking permission. Permission to touch her. No one had ever asked her permission before. She sensed something unlocking within her again as she mouthed the word yes. She felt one hand stroke her breast, then tenderly cup it as his eyes still sought hers as if to see if his actions were still welcome. She wished she could remove both of their clothing and feel the full sensations against her bare skin. His fingers traced around her breast, circling closer and closer to her nipple, which he caressed lightly with the pad of his thumbs. She gasped. His lips trailed down to her neck, suddenly finding her pulse. He nestled there, gently exploring the spot with his tongue, which sent tremors of pleasure through her entire being. The combination of sensations was overwhelming, and she could hardly draw breath in her corset, in the tightness of her morning dress. She felt she was near a peak but did not know whether to draw back or leap over it.

“Stay with me, Elena. Let me see you.” She hadn’t even noticed her eyes were closed and her head back until she heard David murmur against her ear. She opened her eyes.

“Do you wish me to stop?” he asked. His breathing was as heavy as hers, but she knew that if they kept going, he wanted it to be her decision.

She straightened up. “For now. I-I need to think. Perhaps some time to recover.” She needed to breathe.



He found her gaze, his eyes warm but understanding. “Of course.”

As she met his gaze, she felt like she wasn't entirely there, though not like before when she had stepped outside her body to remove herself from a horrible situation. In this, she enjoyed the closeness, the trust that was building there, but there were too many sensations at once. She needed to step back and regain her balance. She needed to make sure she felt safe in what was next.

As she disentangled herself and began to walk away, she was overwhelmed by a sudden and intense wave of desire, and she turned and grabbed his arm. Pulling her against him again, as if giving her time to stop him, he slowly possessed her mouth. Then, she was being lifted onto the piano, and she wrapped her legs around his torso. This wouldn't be possible if she had been wearing a more formal gown but thank goodness her morning dress was lighter than a heavy ballgown.

It had never been like this before, the need to be as close to another person as possible, the need to possess and be possessed. Was this how it should be? Ought to be?

Remembering her resolve, she drew back. She was too much in her thoughts to be fully present. David rested his head against hers, panting, just as she was.

“I know, you need time to think.”

She made a sound of agreement, and he kissed her neck, trailing his lips against her skin. Finally, he pulled his lips away.

“I'm sorry. I just couldn't resist.” He leaned his head against her face and smiled against her skin. It was strange that she could feel that sensation so clearly.

“There were two of us here, David. I clearly could not resist either. But I need some

time to myself.”

He helped her down from the piano, his hands molding onto her body. She imagined again what it would be like without their clothes between them. But first, she needed time and space to think.

He caught her hand this time as she moved to go. “Elena. My door is always open.”

She bobbed her head, overcome with a sudden shyness, and turned to leave, feeling his gaze on her back, caressing her skin. Now that this door was open, how would she ever close it? And did she even want to?

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That evening as she sat at her vanity, Elena realized that she desperately wanted to follow that wild, reckless voice inside her as it whispered to her to open that door. She considered that voice as she dismissed her maid and finished brushing and braiding her hair. She felt guilty that she hardly used her maid other than for formal hairstyles or dresses, but she had taken care of herself most of her life, and she didn’t need much help now. She regarded herself in the mirror. She no longer thought herself beautiful like the vain girl she once had been, partly because she felt so out of place in London, partly because of her scar. But mostly because she felt ugly to her soul for what she had wrought, that somehow, she had deserved all that had happened to her for her foolishness and selfishness. But maybe, said a small voice, maybe it wasn’t all her fault. Maybe a small part of her deserved to feel beautiful, to feel pleasure again. Heart pounding, she set the brush down, pulled on her wrapper, and walked slowly to her husband’s adjoining door. She knocked on David’s door, and when she heard no answer, she knew she had to keep going, or her courage would leave her. He had said his door was always open, hadn’t he? Mayhap he had not thought she would take his meaning so literally, but she always had the excuse of not knowing English turns of phrase. She opened the door and walked in as if she had

done a hundred times before, head held high. She noticed the next chamber door was ajar, and a light came from behind. She kept walking. As she pushed that door, she saw him rising out of the bath, water dripping from his tall, bare form and froze.

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His wife stood there unmoving before him, her expression, as well as her body, frozen. He couldn't read from her eyes if she felt shock or embarrassment. He looked at Parsons, his new valet, who, ever the professional, nodded and exited, setting the towels he held down.

It was not the most scandalous thing for a wife to come upon her husband in the bath. However, for him, this wife was a different story. He knew she may have seen him without clothes before in the hospital, but that felt a world away. He had been injured, and he was not quite the man he was today, with clear evidence of his regard for her visible to her eyes. He had never before felt so vulnerable and bare, watching, waiting for her to move. He did not know whether to step out and take a towel or let her make the next move. She blinked for a long moment, and he could tell she was weighing her decision.

She wore a plain white nightgown and a wrapper that covered most of her skin, yet he had never seen a more tempting being in his life. Slowly, she took one deliberate step forward. His blood was pounding in his ears. He felt stuck forever in this moment, in this uncertainty of what she would do. He had wanted her to have the power to choose, but this moment was killing him. If only she would touch him. She took another step. Suddenly, he realized her intent as she shrugged out of her wrapper and stepped carefully into the tub.

Still, she did not touch him.

She reached out, finally placing her fingertips just above his hip, still lightly scarred

from the explosion that caused his injury. She cocked her head and met his eyes. He could barely make himself move, but he gave her the slightest jerk of his head in assent. She bent down, wetting her nightgown in the process, and kissed the scar above his hip. He felt himself twitch. She then reached out one fingertip and, with great tenderness, ran it from his hipbone, up across his torso, to his collarbone, then his neck, until her finger rested on his lips. He could not speak if Wellington himself had risen from the dead and commanded it. His chest rose and fell as he stood, naked and wet and mesmerized by his golden wife.

She looked in his eyes again as if she were surprised her fingertip was on his mouth. Carefully, she eased her hips and then her breasts up against his body. He could feel his damp skin wetting her crisp white nightgown, his arousal cradled against her abdomen. She took her hand away, placing both her hands on his shoulders, and carefully stood on her toes and reached her lips to his. He took a moment to first recover from his shock and second to make sure that this was what she wanted. Then he wrapped his arms around her, nightgowns be damned, fiercely returning her kiss. He wasn't sure how long they stood there together, but then suddenly, they were both in the water, kissing each other madly as drops splashed onto the chamber floor. Her nightgown was now completely soaked, and he could see her luscious body through every clinging inch as he stroked her beautiful breasts, running his hand over the spectacular fullness of them. Eventually, they broke apart, each breathing heavily, eyes locked. He felt as if he had stepped into some kind of myth or spell, cocooned in this moment with her, and the outside world felt a million miles away as the drips of water echoed his pounding heart.

She looked away, briefly breaking the spell. He swallowed, unsure of what to do next, as he did not want to lose this moment with her. He was reminded of Orpheus turning around to see Eurydice disappear into the ether. He had to save the moment before she slipped away.

“Elena, I ruined your nightgown.”

He was an absolute idiot. He had broken the moment and offered her the most basic, obvious information possible. But it was the only thing his brain could make himself say. She looked down as if only now aware of where she was and what she was wearing.

“It’s only a nightgown.”

She then stood and slowly pulled the garment over her head. Every golden part of her, glistening with water, was now revealed before him. He felt almost blinded by the gold of her skin and hair, the reflection of the copper tub, and the water. Carefully, he rose and wrapped her in one of the soft towels Parsons had left, then stepped out of the tub and picked her up. Normally, he needed a cane to walk for longer than a few steps, but he figured he could make it to the bed this one time. He carried her back to his bedchamber and laid her out on his bed. Looking down at her, he thought he had never seen anything or anyone so lovely in all his life. He suddenly became very aware of the scars on his face and body, of his difficulty walking for long periods. As if she could read his thoughts, Elena slowly drew his head to hers, kissing his temple softly. He felt such awe, such luck that in all the world, this woman had stumbled upon his sickbed and read to him and made him laugh. That she was showing him he was more than his looks, more than his title. He had never felt this mix of desire and tenderness together before in his life. He wanted to do something for her.

“You know,” he said, breaking the spell of silence that had entwined them. “I’ve never seen your hair down before.”

He stroked her braid, a long mix of brown and gold that felt like silk in his hands. His fingers reached the end of her braid, knotted with purple ribbon, which seemed sensual for bedtime but somehow fit his wife. He looked up at her with a question in his eyes, and she gave a small nod of assent. He needed her to know, that even with taking down her hair, she had control. He pulled on the ribbon gently, spilling her

hair onto the bedclothes. It felt as if he were unwrapping a present, as intimate as undressing her, as though they were not lying naked together already. Her hair spilled onto her shoulders and into the valley of her breasts. He gathered a handful of her hair and inhaled deeply.

Amber and honey, the heart of his desire. He gently nestled the golden-brown strands and kissed the silkiness. He felt her watching him, and he lay her hair back against her breasts, letting his fingers linger there. He worshipped her beautiful breasts, still damp from the water, cupping and stroking them, filling his hands. He then replaced his fingers with his lips, his tongue. The sound of her moans inflamed him, and he soon found the space in between her breasts and claimed it with his mouth. After he used his lips and tongue to trace around both of her breasts, teasingly reaching the center as she arched into him, he then began to kiss his way down her body as she responded even more to his touch. When he reached the apex of her thighs, he looked up at her.

She was watching him, waiting. He gestured at her sex with a nod. She looked dazed, her golden-brown eyes shining in the dark. He nodded again, and he could see understanding dawn in her eyes. She gave a small, almost indiscernible dip of her head in assent, and he grinned against the inside of her thigh. He wondered if she had ever done this before. A small part of him hoped he was the first to bring her this kind of pleasure. He blew cool air on the apex of her thighs, and she shivered. Then he slowly spread her legs wider and kissed her lightly on her sex. She moaned again, deeper and more urgent. He gently used his tongue to stroke the essence of her, and he saw her hands clutch the bedclothes for purchase. He had one hand spreading her sex, and he pushed the other up between her breasts to that spot, his spot really, where he could feel her heart beat rapidly against his palm. Now that she was laid out before him, he began to use a steady rhythm with his tongue. He heard her breathing change into shorter gasps, which kindled his desire, and he increased his speed as she moaned in response. When he began to feel her body arch, he looked up as he wanted to watch her climax. With her head back and eyes closed, she opened her mouth as if

to cry out, but instead, she gave a whisper of a gasp full of joy and sweet release. Then, the corner of her lips began to turn upward as she came back down, and he thought he had never seen anything so beautiful in his life as that smile. That he had brought her that smile made him feel ten feet tall. As she opened her eyes, he moved beside her, brushing her hair behind her ear. Her lazy, well-pleasured smile gave way to a confused expression.

“Did you want to, um?” It seemed his wife had not quite recovered the power of speech. That thought brought David a not unsubstantial amount of pride.

“Not tonight. Tonight was about your pleasure. Tonight was about what you wanted, how you felt. Did you like that?”

He ran his hand through her hair, which ran in waves past her breasts, and let his hand rest in that spot between them that he liked so well.

“Yes, but—” She bit her full bottom lip. He had a feeling of what she was afraid to say.

“Elena, I’ve had a lot of time to think about pleasure and sex. It isn’t just about penetration. There are many different ways to enjoy marital relations. This is one of them.” When he first sustained his injury, it had made him feel like less of a man. Even though he was able to feel desire again, the experience opened him up to reconsidering what made him a man and what made sex, well, sex.

She pulled back to look at him, and she must have liked what she saw because she laid her head on his chest and nestled against him. He kissed the top of her head and drew the bedclothes over them, carefully tucking them around her body. He was so grateful that she gave him the chance to touch her body, to bring her pleasure. He wanted to say so much, but he heard her breathing change, and he could feel her fall asleep against his chest. There was a strange intimacy in listening to another person

fall asleep, he decided. He felt like she had entrusted something precious to his keeping. He wrapped his arms around her, and promised himself he would protect her, protect that trust with his life, then he joined his wife in sleep.



*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

When Elena awoke at the light of dawn, it took her a moment to realize that she was not in her own bed. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she became aware that she was on her side in a strange room, with her husband's arm spread across her chest.

"How do you feel?" She had not noticed David was awake as well.

She had almost just said "happy," but something within her held back, so instead, she answered, "Warm." She did not think she could put into words how something had both unlocked and started to heal inside her.

He pushed the bedclothes down to her waist.

"I can help with that."

She smiled as the cool air hit her skin and turned toward him.

"I-I enjoyed what we did last night. I should like to do it again sometime."

"Me too." He brushed a lock of her hair behind her ear.

They lay in silence for a moment, drinking that in. Then Elena remembered why this day was important and sat up suddenly, clutching the bedclothes to her chest.

"Aunt Sophie is coming today!"

She grabbed the nearest item of clothing she saw and put it on, which happened to be a sizeable blue robe that went past her feet. She heard a small puff of air behind her

and then turned to see her husband watching her with a bemused expression.

“There’s so much to do!” she exclaimed.

“Nothing more important than a few more hours of sleep.” He grabbed her hand and playfully tugged. “Come back to bed. Aunt Sophie does not stand upon formality.”

“But—” He began kissing up the inside of her arm, and Elena felt pleasure and warmth overtake her again, and she did fall back into bed for several hours in the most pleasant of distractions.

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As David correctly predicted, Aunt Sophie never stood on formality. She arrived promptly and sat for tea, though she didn’t seem too pleased with the practice.

“Tea is for aristocrats. They are the only ones with time to spare for sitting around.”

“Aunt Sophie,” David said, with a touch of affectionate exasperation, like they had had this conversation many times before. “With all due respect, I know many outside the aristocracy who stop for tea. It’s what is done in this country.”

They went on like this for a few minutes, then turned the discussion toward the business. From what Elena could gather, things ebbed and flowed with the popularity of temperance movements and the kinds of tariffs or taxes they might face. Elena understood some of this, as her own father was a textile merchant, but she had never paid much attention to how any disruption to the trade route might impact the price of things until the early days of the war.

She had not seen her husband interact much with his aunt, having gotten to know both separately. They appeared to have a deep respect and easy comradery she rarely

saw between people her age and their elders back home. She always treated her grandmother or village elders with respect and reverence. Not that David was disrespectful, just more casual than she would have been. After having been to more aristocratic functions since the Season began, she was coming to realize that David's family was different from most in that they all truly cared for each other. She had rarely seen the deep love she held for her family among the ton, or at least not openly, though she supposed David's family were not quite of the ton, with their merchant background. Upon reflection, she recognized family was so important where she was from because it was how they withstood all the changes over the years. If the family stood firm in a deep bond of love, they could weather wars, hunger, and invasions. Empires could crumble, but they would remain strong together. Maybe this was why the loss of hers hung so heavily on her, why she blamed herself so severely for not realizing what they meant to her until they were gone. Why she so stubbornly refused to let anything or anyone replace them in her heart, she thought, feeling a stab of guilt. Elena inwardly recoiled at the dark direction of her thoughts and mentally shook herself to pay attention to the conversation.

She noticed that Irene was unusually quiet around Sophie, but Elena put it down to wanting to give David time to see his aunt. When Elena looked back from Irene, Sophie had turned her direct gaze toward her.

"Elena, you look well. How are you finding the Season as a foreigner?"

Elena weighed how to respond. Sophie despised the ton and valued honesty above all, but she didn't want David or Irene to think she was ungrateful.

"I know I am a bit of an oddity to them, but I am grateful to my husband and Irene for paving my way."

"Hmmpff," replied Sophie, which seemed to be her final thought on the topic. "Now, where is this dog you wrote to me about? He sounds like a handsome fellow,

and I should like to meet him.”

Elena smiled, thinking of Goliath, whom she had left in the kitchen with the remains of a hambone.

“He is resting right now, but he is walking again. One of his hind legs was broken, so it will take a little while to heal, but he uses the other three legs to compensate.”

“Yes, that’s right, you were some sort of a nurse, weren’t you? I’ve always been thankful David married a useful lass like you and not one of those simpering twits they put on the Marriage Mart. No offense meant, Irene.”

Irene crinkled her nose affectionately. “None taken, Aunt Sophie. Though, in truth, I think you are becoming a bit of a reverse snob.”

“I think there is enough snobbery on their end that I am owed some.” Sophie’s lips were tight, and her face suddenly looked drawn. “I’ll never forgive the ton for how they treated your mother for coming from trade and daring to marry one of them.”

David shook his head. “It’s not like we’re an ancient blue-blooded line. My father’s family were also merchant stock.”

“Well, we’re the ones standing tall now as their ancient estates fall to ruin.” Sophie went on as if she hadn’t heard David. “Thank goodness I never married one of those bores.”

Irene chuckled. “Aunt Sophie, I cannot see you taking orders from any man.”

“Not something I plan to do anytime soon,” Sophie replied dryly.

Elena remembered her conversation from the previous day with Annamaria.

Annamaria deserved that same independence, to be free of fear and hunger.

“Aunt Sophie, I met a young woman at the hospital the other day. Her family is from Naples, and she seemed to have a good head on her shoulders, even though she has had many misfortunes.” Elena prayed that was a polite way to summarize why Annamaria was in the hospital. “Would you consider meeting with her to see if you could take her on as a secretary?”

Sophie considered this, her sharp eyes narrowing as if she could see bills and ledgers before her the others could not. “I could use a secretary, actually. Business has been picking up, and we have added several more Italian wines. She could help with the communication and invoices... yes, I should like to see your hospital, Elena. It’s good for Irene to see life outside of the aristocracy.”

“Oh, it’s not my hospital.” Elena felt warm as she noticed everyone’s gazes were on her, so she rapidly changed the subject.

“We are also going to the opera Saturday, Aunt Sophie. Would you care to join us?”

“No, my dear, that is not my crowd, as they say. I’ll stay in, I should think.” “Oh, but Aunt Sophie, it’s not about the crowd. It’s about the music,” Irene interjected.

Sophie looked at Irene sadly. “For you, sweet girl, it likely is about the music. For almost everyone else there, unfortunately, it is not.”

Irene sat back, clearly disappointed, but she recovered with alacrity.

“Shall I play for you, Aunt Sophie?”

Sophie gave a clipped head bob, and Irene rose to open the French doors to the adjoining music room. As she began, Elena closed her eyes to enjoy the music. When

she opened them, Sophie was right beside her. The way she leaned forward made Elena envision a cat enjoying itself in the sun, happy in the moment but ready to lash out if annoyed.

“How has her Season been?” Sophie asked quietly, cocking her head toward Irene.

Elena reminded herself of Sophie’s love of blunt honesty. She struggled to find the words to describe Irene these past few weeks.

“It seems as though the Season does not entirely agree with Irene.”

“She lacks beaux?”

“No, she is very sought after. But she doesn’t seem to be very happy.” Elena hoped she wasn’t being too forward in her opinion, but it was the truth as far as she could see. Sophie sat back, folding her hands together.

“I questioned whether she should have a Season at all. She doesn’t need to marry some idle aristocrat at eighteen. My sister married one to raise our family status, but it didn’t change much in the end. Thank goodness he was kind to her.” Sophie looked wistfully at Irene, and Elena was reminded that Irene was supposed to be the very image of her mother. Sophie seemed to catch herself and turned back to Elena. “A girl with money needn’t marry young. Not ever, if she doesn’t want to.” Elena nodded as she understood what Sophie was trying to say. Irene ought to be able to decide her future for herself. Sophie went on, “I’m going to make sure she is taken care of. Just so she knows that she has even more choices if she should want them.” Sophie looked back at her. “Do you intend to stay the entire Season?”

“That depends on Irene, I suppose. David is eager to check on the estate and meet his steward.” She glanced at her husband, who was engrossed in his sister’s playing. Even then, with his eyes toward the piano, she felt like he had an awareness of her

across the room that she could feel down to her bones. She didn't know what to make of that awareness, but it made her skin prickle and her muscles tense.

"And how is my nephew?" Elena almost smiled. Sophie acted the part of the curmudgeon, but she clearly cared deeply about her niece and nephew. They were each other's only family, after all.

"He has some trouble with crowds, but he is greatly improved. There are times he doesn't even need his cane." She thought of him carrying her to bed the previous night and felt a small shiver down her spine. She hoped Sophie didn't notice.

"You're good for him, you know. Mind you, I don't think I would have ever dreamed you up in my wildest imagination." Sophie chuckled. "But he was lost for a while after his father died. I didn't want him to go off to war, but when he sets his mind on something, it's difficult to change it. But now, he looks whole. He looks like he's found his purpose in life."

Elena had not known David before the war, so she could not see all the differences. He certainly looked much more robust than when she met him outside Balaclava. She wondered what purpose he had found in life.

"So, you will accompany us to the hospital but not the opera?"

"Yes, I think I'll prefer the company at the hospital."

"You might be a reverse snob, Aunt Sophie, but I'm not sure there is anything wrong with that." Elena almost reached out and touched Sophie's hand in affection but immediately thought better of it and kept her hands in her lap.

They ended up dining and talking so late with Sophie that Elena was exhausted by the night's end. Her husband guided her to her chambers and kissed the top of her head,

promising they would talk more the next day. She was both relieved and disappointed as she fell asleep, only realizing in that second, right before sleep took over, that she hadn't mourned for her family once in the past week.



“Husband.”

“Yes, Wife.” She could hear the smile in his voice, as if he already knew her tone when she had a request. Even though she was married and apparently married English ladies could take breakfast in bed, Elena often came down for breakfast. It was one of her favorite times she spent with Irene while David had been gone.

“Would you mind if we brought Goliath to the hospital with us? I want to have Maggie’s husband, Dr. Green, look at his leg. Or Maggie if he is unavailable. She is skilled at setting bones.”

Her husband was still smiling at her but narrowed his eyes as he buttered his toast.

“I’m sensing another reason to bring him.”

“Well, I have noticed he has an influence on you.”

David glanced down at Goliath, who was looking up at him beseechingly.

“Elena, he just wants my toast.”

“Yes, that is his dearest wish at the moment, but at other times.” She stopped abruptly, unsure of how to describe what she had seen. She had noticed something unusual the past few days—whenever David seemed to tense up, Goliath appeared to notice and came to David’s side or lay his head in his lap. She wasn’t sure if David was even aware of this, and she didn’t want to point it out if it was a sore subject. But she figured this afternoon, she could kill two birds with one stone, though she loathed

that expression: first, she could have Goliath looked at by someone more experienced and knowledgeable than herself. And second, she could test her theory about the dog.

“Is it even hygienic? Bringing a dog to a hospital? Will Mrs. Raeburn have me shot?”

As he bit into his toast, a piece of the crust fell to the ground, which Goliath quickly snapped up. David, fortunately, did not seem to notice.

“Cleanliness is next to dogliness, Brother.” Irene innocently took a sip of tea, but before the cup hid her expression, Elena could see that Irene was delighted with herself.

“Irene, if you weren’t my sister, I would cast you out for such horrible abuse of the English language,” David groaned. “Aunt Sophie, you are the most practical of all of us. What say you?”

At that moment, as they all looked over at her, Sophie was slipping the dog some bacon off her plate. She paused, then looked up at David as if he was interrupting an important conversation between herself and Goliath.

“Did you say something, Nephew?”

“What say you to this idea? Bringing the dog to the hospital?”

Aunt Sophie looked Goliath over. Goliath, seeming to notice that he was being judged, sat very straight and lifted his head high.

“Well, he seems to be a handsome, well-behaved creature. If Elena wants a doctor to look him over, it makes sense to bring him.”

“You are overruled, Brother.”

“Irene, you are just ganging up on me because I didn’t take time to appreciate your dogliness line.”

“It was brilliant wordplay. I’d like to see you do better.” Irene set her cup in its saucer, crossed her arms, and looked up at her brother.

“Right now?” he asked.

Irene nodded.

David looked around the room for help, then seemed to give up. “Canine humor is not at the top of my immediate vocabulary at the moment,” he muttered. Elena and Irene smiled conspiratorially at each other.

“And you!” He came back to Elena, gesturing with his bacon. “I see through you, Wife. You have some ulterior motive for bringing him. I see it in your eyes. I just haven’t worked it out yet. But just you wait. I’m on to you.” As he pointed to her with his bacon, the end broke off and fell to the floor again, to be quickly snatched up by Goliath. Elena slowly raised her head to meet her husband’s comically agitated gaze and willed herself with all her might not to laugh.

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He did not mind the dog accompanying them. Yes, the carriage was more crowded than usual, and despite his cane, he usually ended up carrying the beast if someone needed to. It was more that he often found himself playing the role of curmudgeon whenever Aunt Sophie showed her secret soft underside and abdicated the role, however briefly. He realized they had been like this, the three of them, since his father had died. Aunt Sophie had always been a part of his life, having been very close with his mother, her sister. He was grateful that she never blamed Irene for causing her death, as he sometimes feared that his father did. Sophie became a

constant presence in his life once his father died. She understood without asking that David felt too young to take on all the business responsibilities alone and that he needed help managing everything. Looking around the carriage, he tried to figure out what role Elena now played in their family. Mostly, she was a peacemaker, a glue that didn't just hold them together, for they had already been rather close, but someone who helped them see and hear each other more clearly. He felt a rush of affection and something more for the woman sitting to his left with the dog's head in her lap. He wove his fingers with hers and drew her hand to his lips. He could smell the faint traces of amber he always associated with her on her short kid glove. At first, she looked up at him with a slight uncertainty, but after a moment, her face broke into a radiant smile that knocked him right in the chest. He wanted to lean over and kiss her dimples, her nose, her lips, but it would have been terribly inappropriate with his sister and aunt there. As if sensing his lascivious intent, Goliath raised his head and gave him a look.

As they arrived and he had helped everyone, including Goliath, out of the carriage, he was briefly overwhelmed by the number of people around them. The hospital was not in the busiest part of London, but it was still a well-traveled street full of people, carriages, and horses. Going through the list of things around him in his mind, he suddenly felt terribly crowded, as if he would never be able to take a deep breath again. Would this feeling never abate?

His mind began to race, but then he felt a steady presence on both sides of his body. On his left, Elena had taken his hand and massaged his knuckles. On his right, Goliath had positioned his body to block people from jostling against David, as if he had sensed what was wrong without being told. David felt his thoughts begin to slow down, and his breathing eased. He hadn't even had to count backward from ten. David looked down at the animal, feeling something shift between them just then. He realized the dog had done this several times before, but he had been too preoccupied to notice.

Elena was observing both of them, and he was starting to realize why she had brought the dog that day beyond asking for the Greens' medical advice. He smiled to himself as they walked in, the anxiety slipping away like a breeze on their backs. Clever woman, his wife. Clever and kind and caring. If only they could sneak off to some empty ward, he would show her all his appreciation. He tugged at his collar, which had begun to feel tight as they climbed the steps to the hospital. As it had been built in one of the newer styles, there were steps up to a large central area that opened up into wings. Usually, the steps felt overwhelming, but he felt a renewed vigor that day that he couldn't quite explain.

As they entered, they walked by Mrs. Raeburn, who seemed to be reading through some papers near the entrance. She looked up to see Elena and gave her a slow smile.

"Elena! But who is this fine fellow?" Mrs. Raeburn looked Goliath over with a decidedly neutral expression. He had never seen Elena look so timid as she brought Goliath forward.

"You don't mind, do you? We found him on the way home the last time we were here. I wanted to have someone check his hind legs. Also, he is a wonderful, brave dog, and we thought, well, I thought, perhaps some of the soldiers and other patients might like to see him..." While she explained confidently, David knew her well enough to sense her nervousness, as she used her hands more than usual as she spoke, then smoothed her gown and hair as she waited while Mrs. Raeburn regarded the dog.

"He is well-behaved?"

"I vouch for him completely." Elena gave Goliath a look out of the corner of her eye, and he sat and held his head up straight.

Mrs. Raeburn inspected Goliath for a long moment, then sighed. "He may do some good. Of course, some doctors will complain that I had a dog at my hospital when the

cleanliness here is better than most private hospitals.” She stopped and looked to the heavens for a moment before going on. “I suppose I do not much care for what my critics say. Let them complain to the board that a peer of the realm brought a well-behaved dog.” She waved toward Goliath. “Show him around.”

Elena gave that radiant smile again, and David felt his knees go weak. He realized that one of the benefits of walking with a cane was that his legs didn’t go out from under him every time she smiled.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something he had rarely ever seen in his entire life. His aunt had not yet said anything, her expression intent and focused. He couldn’t remember the last time she had held her tongue on any matter.

“Mrs. Raeburn, please let me introduce my aunt, Miss Sophie Plemmons.”

The women considered each other. Mrs. Raeburn gave a slight nod.

“Please, you must call me Suzanne.”

Again, his aunt seemed struck mute. David could count the occasions he had seen her without anything to say on one hand. Finally, when she realized everyone was looking at her, Sophie said quickly, “Is there a Mister Raeburn?”

“Alas, no, my husband left us over ten years ago.”

Again, another long pause.

“And you have not remarried?”

This was horribly impersonal for someone she had just met, but Sophie rarely followed social niceties, and Mrs. Raeburn did not seem to mind, though she looked a

little perplexed at this new person as if unable to read her intentions.

“There was so much to do.” She gestured around.

The corner of Sophie’s mouth ticked up slightly.

“Naturally.”

Mrs. Raeburn nodded again, then turned her attention to Elena.

“Come, let’s see if your notion about this dog is correct.”

As David, Irene, and Sophie began to follow the two women and the dog, David heard his aunt murmur, “What a singular woman.”

Irene and David looked at each other in surprise. That was the highest praise they had ever heard their aunt bestow upon anyone, let alone a virtual stranger.

As they neared the adjacent convalescent home, David looked down at Goliath. He really was a rather exceptional dog, staying with the group instead of racing off. Stepping into the convalescent ward, David scanned the large room. McDaniel wasn’t there. His heart began to pound. He had just spoken to the man. He must be here. Goliath nudged him in the leg, and he turned to see Elena’s worried expression mirror his own anxiety.

“The man I spoke to last time. Where is he?”

Mrs. Raeburn’s face was drawn.

“There was an incident.”

That fear and dread he felt every time one of his regiment did not come back crept into his chest. He steeled himself for the worst.

“Last night, he shook so hard that he fell from the bed. He broke his other wrist, so one of the doctors is with him right now. He should be back shortly.”

David felt as if his blood began to flow again, his heartbeat returning to normal.

“I’m sorry,” Mrs. Raeburn began. “I should have told you straight away. I did not realize you had become friends of a sort.”

David was about to respond when he saw McDaniel walking back in, his arm in a sling. The man stopped and registered the women and Goliath.

“Who have you got there?”

“My wife, Lady Grayston. And this is Goliath.” He nodded toward Elena, then cocked his head toward Goliath. “Found him the last time we came here. We thought he might like to see the place.”

“My lady.” McDaniel gave a slight bow to Elena, then turned to Goliath. For the first time since David had known him, his craggy face cracked into something of a smile. He suddenly looked years younger, and David recognized they might be around the same age. “He is quite the large fellow. I’d pet him, but...” He indicated his arm. David noted he had broken his wrist on his working arm.

“We could walk if you like.”

“We are very close to a small park.” Mrs. Raeburn pointed to the window. David caught Elena’s eye as she gave him a strange look. Something possibly like pride. Before he could analyze that, she clasped his hand.



“I need to go introduce Sophie to someone. I will see you later, yes? Take Goliath with you.”

“Yes, General.”

She shook her head but shooed him off fondly.

He and McDaniel made their way to the park, enjoying some green after the very gray space that was the hospital. They walked for a few minutes, with Goliath running ahead before McDaniel spoke.

“So, you’re a peer.”

David had forgotten that he would be revealing himself by introducing his wife as such. He couldn’t quite articulate why it had been important that he not tell McDaniel.

“I figured it out the moment I saw you.” McDaniel went on before David could speak.

“Ah. What gave it away?”

“The way you carry yourself. Clothes. Manner of speech.”

“If it makes you feel any better, it’s a very recent title.”

McDaniel shrugged and kicked a rock as though that distinction meant little to him.

“Your wife is lovely. She seemed kind.”

“She is both.”

There was a pause. Then—

“How do you talk about it with her?”

David looked over at him. McDaniel’s pale blue eyes were watching Goliath chasing a squirrel.

“Do you mind if we sit?” David asked. He suddenly felt very old and worn down but continued cheerfully. “I sometimes have a weakness in my legs.”

They sat on a bench in the center of the garden, giving David more time to think about what he was going to say.

“I don’t most of the time, honestly,” he admitted. “She has her own private horrors from the war that she does not talk much about either.” McDaniel could likely tell from her accent she was no Englishwoman.

“There’s not much else to think about, especially here.” McDaniel gestured with his sling to his other arm. “The men I killed. The absolute madness of it all. The smell.”

“No one ever tells you about the smell.” Even thinking of it now brought back memories of the bodies that hadn’t been recovered yet in the summer heat, something he had tried to bury deep in the corners of his mind. “I’m not sure if it is better not to think about it. I have it in my mind that if I pull it out slowly and occasionally, I’ll sort it all out.”

McDaniel nodded, still watching Goliath, who approached him and nudged his knee.

“I can’t pet you, old son. I’m sorry.” Goliath just laid his head on the man’s knee and looked up at him. “I tell you, he would have been good in the war.”

“Goliath?”

“He’s got a whole soldier’s constitution.” McDaniel’s mouth quirked slightly, and David noted that despite his skepticism earlier, they should always bring Goliath with them.

“Well, if we ever go back, we can take him.”

David’s words hung in the air, as the two of them would likely never go back. Probably for the best, David thought, and besides, the war was over. He didn’t quite know how to ask what he wanted to ask next, but he tried anyway.

“Do you think if you had something to do, you might think on it less? When I first met my wife, right after I had been injured, she said that to keep herself from sorrow, she always found something to do. I tried at the clinic where I went after the war to give myself small goals and tasks every day so that I didn’t lose my mind. Maybe if you had something or someone?”

McDaniel twisted his mouth. “My family?”

“I know not all families are loving, supportive units.” He thought of Michael and Henry, who had both been distant from their fathers. “But surely, someone in your family would support you. Help you find something to occupy your time? If I didn’t have Elena and my sister and my aunt to think of, I don’t know what I would have done.”

McDaniel’s mouth was a straight line, his jaw tight. But his eyes told a different story. David could see the yearning in his pale blue irises.

“If you dictated something today, I could frank it for you next week, and then they probably wouldn’t receive your post immediately and come see you right away,

perhaps not even until your wrist was better. That would give you some time to prepare yourself.”

McDaniel looked at Goliath as if they were in some silent communication.

“The Laughing Lass,” McDaniel muttered.

“Pardon?”

“I said, you can write my sister for me. She and her husband run a pub in Glasgow. The Laughing Lass. When we go back inside, I’ll dictate something for you.”

David tried not to smile, so he looked up at the sky and leaned back on the bench. Suddenly, the park felt greener and warmer, and the sun shined clearer. Sometimes, he realized, he was rather the incurable optimist his friends often accused him of being.

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Elena had hoped she was not being presumptuous in assuming that Sophie would automatically take on Annamaria. She also did not want to crowd the poor woman, so she ensured it was just her and Sophie approaching the ward.

“Now, last time I saw her,” Elena began, “she had sustained an injury, so she might not want to talk about that—”

“Elena, I will ask her all that I need to know. You may calm down.”

“Yes, Aunt Sophie.” Elena sighed.

However, when she reached the part of the ward where she had met Annamaria, her

bed was empty, and she wasn't there. Elena felt the same panic she had seen cross David's face when his friend wasn't where he had been before. But Annamaria did not walk back into the room with a sling on her arm. Elena tried to quell her anxiety until she found a nurse on duty, Sister Mary Ellen, a small, bespectacled woman, and inquired after Annamaria.

"She was discharged a day after her arm was treated. She had no reason to stay here longer."

Of course, Annamaria had been discharged, Elena scolded herself. If she had a daughter at home, she could not have stayed at the hospital for a long period of time.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Sophie, I feel like a fool. I hope this wasn't a waste of your time."

"Not a waste, never a waste. Why don't you ask for a forwarding address?"

The thought had not occurred to Elena, but when she asked Sister Mary Ellen, Annamaria had left her address for when Elena returned. Her heart felt a little lighter.

"I'll send her a note to see if we can call on her sometime this week, yes?"

"That would be acceptable." Sophie's face was placid, giving away nothing of her thoughts on this turn of events.

Elena was eager to see how her husband fared now that she had done all she could do for Annamaria that day. They resumed their tour with Mrs. Raeburn, who appeared to fascinate Sophie. Elena had never seen her so complementary with anyone. Maggie did look at Goliath's leg and put on a much better splint than what Elena had fashioned. She agreed with Elena's assessment that he would compensate with the other three legs until it healed and that he needed rest and time to lie down.

David was quiet as they rode home, but Elena decided not to push him. He could come to her in time. Later that evening, he knocked on her door as she braided her hair at her vanity, and she called for him to enter. He wore a deep blue robe that looked crisp and clean on his broad shoulders. With a small jolt, she realized it was the robe she had been wearing in his bedchamber.

He set his cane down and sat on her bed, watching her as she finished braiding the ends of her hair. He had never come to her room like this before, and Elena felt a rush of awareness take hold of her body. As she finished her hair, she turned and looked at him.

“So?”

“So?”

“How did Goliath do today?”

“I think you were correct. He was, what did you say, a ‘calming influence’?”

“I am indeed very wise.” She tentatively stood and walked over to join him on her bed.

“And modest,” he added. She playfully smacked his arm, and he responded with that boyish grin she liked so very much, but then his expression sobered.

“McDaniel wanted me to bring him back soon. I think he rather liked him. And...” He looked reluctantly pleased with himself. “And he agreed to let me write his sister for him. When we went back inside, he dictated a letter for me.”

“Oh, David, that is wonderful!” She grabbed his hand, which he entwined in his own.

Looking down at their joined hands, he went on. “He was all alone, Elena. He’s been living in his own mind all these years, with nothing, no loved ones to support him. No profession or industry to distract him. I don’t know how he hasn’t gone mad.” He pressed his lips to her knuckles and held them there. While she felt the thrill of the contact between them, this moment did not feel erotically charged. It felt like he was trying to tell her something important.

“I found myself telling him about that day, that day you yelled at me—”

“It wasn’t yelling so much—”

“Where you gave me a stern talking to and told me to find something to occupy myself. I hadn’t realized how much I had taken it to heart, even in the clinic. How much giving myself small tasks and goals helped keep me from despair, especially in the early days when I was so frustrated with my body and with myself.”

She swallowed and nodded. She did not remember everything she had said to him that day. In truth, she had been somewhat embarrassed for her outburst, but she was moved that he had taken her words to heart. He wrapped his other arm around her and pulled both of them back on the bed, not in heat, but in warmth and comfort.

“I don’t know where I would be without you,” he whispered as his head found the space between her breasts he seemed to like so well. She stroked his hair until she heard his breathing change, then lightly kissed the top of his head and joined him in sleep.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

Elena had written to Annamaria, who responded that she and Sophie could visit the next day. Of course, Elena had not been prepared for her husband to balk at the neighborhood.

“Elena, you can’t go there.” He looked up from the desk in his study as she stood in front of him.

“I did not take you for a snob.” Her husband glanced down at her words, but she saw the tick in his jaw.

“It isn’t that I’m a snob. St. Giles is dangerous.”

“I’ll be with Aunt Sophie.”

“Aunt Sophie, while formidable, is small enough that someone could easily throw her over their shoulder.”

“I would like to hear you say that in Sophie’s presence. I’m sure Sophie has some kind of protection.” Elena would not be surprised to discover Sophie carried a pistol. For some reason, she imagined a small, dainty pistol that could fit into a reticule, even though dainty was at odds with everything she knew about Sophie.

“Even so, you do not know London that well, Elena. Yes,” he went on as she opened her mouth to speak. “I know you have been here the last few years, but how many neighborhoods have you gone to? Are you familiar with?”

She realized she did not know London all that well, but she still felt like he was being



something of a snob and a worrier.

“David, what if we take Goliath? And a footman? Would that make you feel better? Because we are going with or without your blessing. You realize a woman sits on the throne of your country, and yet women can go nowhere by themselves? You know, I made it across borders on my own. I am very capable of taking care of myself.”

“Yes, and look what—” He stopped himself, though Elena felt the words he did not say in her bones. Look what happened to you. She couldn’t believe he would bring that up right now when it had taken so much to tell him in the first place. He seemed to realize he had gone too far as his face eased, and he rested a hand on the side of his head.

“You have crossed borders, haven’t you? I suppose that’s more than I can say.” He sighed, rubbing his temple on the uninjured side. “I’m sorry, Elena. I just don’t want anything to happen to you.” He looked strained and earnest. Elena felt herself melt just a little.

“With two such companions, what more could I ask for?”

He gave her a small smile, and she knew she had won this round.

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As they drew closer to Annamaria’s, Elena reflected that she had not been to this part of London before, just north of Covent Garden. It was close to the hospital, so she had likely seen and met many from this part of town, but she had never actually been there before. She was grateful to get to see a different side of life from the glittering ton, though some of those in the streets begging for coin broke her heart, reminding her of her time without home or food.

Elena's heart twisted further as they slowed after rounding a bend. This street was dirtier than the ones before, with a squalid smell that filled the air. David had told her how the smell from the Thames was now and had been dubbed "The Great Stink" by papers like the Illustrated London News . Elena could certainly understand the epitaph as she tried to breathe through her mouth to keep from casting up her accounts. She was closer to the Thames than she usually was, and the smell in the summer heat made the air feel heavy and unmovable. She hated that people had to live like this. David had mentioned that they had coated Parliament in a certain chemical to protect themselves from the stench, but it seems the leaders of the country had forgotten the people of St. Giles.

As they stopped, Elena squinted at the building in front of her, which looked to be slowly crumbling apart. They exited the carriage, leaving Goliath, and followed Annamaria's directions to her flat. Annamaria poked her head out from behind a ramshackle door.

"Oh, I, um, I should have probably just met you at the hospital."

She opened her door to invite them into the smallest drawing room Elena had seen, smaller than the rooms of many of the poorest families in her village in Dobruja, and unfortunately, Dobruja knew its share of poverty. As she took in the parameters of the room, Elena realized that it was not a drawing room but Annamaria's entire living space. Because of her daughter and the change in circumstance, she likely could not live in one of the women's boardinghouses Elena had heard about, which might have been safer.

Annamaria nodded to the crib. "I'm sorry, I think we'll have to whisper."

Elena glanced at Sophie, whose expression was unreadable.

"Please have a seat. W-would you like some tea?"

“Do not trouble yourself. We are quite well without it,” Elena said quickly. She did not want to have Annamaria go through the bother, and she knew how Sophie felt about tea.

“This is my aunt by marriage, Miss Sophie Plemmons.”

Annamaria gave a small curtsy.

“Ma’am. I’m Annamaria.” Elena sensed something odd about how Annamaria said her name without her surname. It was not how the English introduced themselves.

“How did you come to live here, Annamaria?” Sophie finally asked as she looked around the room. As Elena expected, Annamaria responded with her usual blunt honesty. Mayhap she and Sophie were well-matched.

“My family put me out. I fell in love with the wrong kind of man.”

“Which is?”

“According to them, an Irishman, ma’am.” Sophie sat on the too-small loveseat. Elena squeezed in next to her.

“And where is this Irishman now, may I ask?”

“Transported, ma’am. Australia, I think, but I don’t know.”

A flash of something, possibly pity, crossed Sophie’s face. They sat in silence for a moment until Elena felt compelled to move the conversation along.

“Annamaria speaks and writes in multiple languages. My aunt,” she turned to Annamaria, “manages part of the family business, which is mostly importing wine

and spirits.”

“Oh, how, uh, in-industrious.” Annamaria stumbled over her words briefly as if unsure how to respond.

“Can you do mathematics, Annamaria?” Sophie asked.

“I can add and subtract and do some basic arithmetic. I’ve had to manage my own finances all alone these last few years.”

Sophie looked reluctantly impressed.

“And if I were to take you on as a secretary, what would you do with the child during the day?”

“Well, my neighbor—”

“But surely you would want to move from here.” Coming from Sophie, it was a statement, not a question.

“Well—”

“I will help her,” Elena said firmly. “If she cannot leave her daughter with a neighbor, I will hire her help. And we will find a new place for her to live. On some occasions, she could leave her with myself and Irene.”

Sophie looked over at Elena. She had not realized how badly she wanted this for Annamaria until this moment, but she had to make this work. She did not want Annamaria to be in danger of any more broken bones or dislocated shoulders.

“You are very quick to offer Irene’s services.” Sophie’s expression was stern, but

Elena sensed she was reluctantly impressed with Annamaria.

“When she is old enough, she could teach her daughter how to play. Irene would like that.”

“If you’re sure, Elena, that was my biggest concern,” Sophie conceded.

“Not my background?” Annamaria whispered.

“I could not give a tuppence for your background. Do you think you could do the work?”

“Yes.” Annamaria set her jaw firmly.

“And Elena or you will see to your child. Then I think we can come to an arrangement.” Elena tried to hold in the smile that was building inside her, as she knew Sophie detested big displays of emotion. Annamaria’s eyes filled with tears, but she also seemed to have understood this about Sophie and merely bobbed her head.

“Thank you.” Sophie rummaged in her reticule, pulling something out.

“Let us discuss when you can begin.”

Elena felt like she could leave the two women to negotiate, knowing she ought to go check on Goliath. As she walked back to the carriage, she felt as though something lurked in the corner of her eye, just outside her vision. As she picked up her pace, she did the old trick she had taught herself when she had been alone and watched her shadow, searching for anyone or anything behind or around her. Just as she looked down, Goliath burst forth from the carriage, snarling and barking at something Elena could not see. She looked around, standing behind Goliath, her back to the building. For a moment, she was sure something or someone was there, a presence waiting for

her and her alone. Suddenly, Goliath's barking died down as if he seemed satisfied that whatever had been watching them was gone, and he turned back to the carriage with a huff. Elena looked down at Goliath and carefully helped him get back into the carriage to wait for Sophie.

While she and Sophie rode back to Grayston House, Elena stroked Goliath's fur absentmindedly. She wondered if it had been a real threat or if Goliath was being his overprotective self. Even though she was half convinced she had imagined everything, she could not shake the strange yet familiar sense of dread that had swept over her before Goliath leaped down to defend her. She weighed mentioning it to David, but since nothing really happened, she decided to keep it to herself and sat listening to Sophie discuss her new plans, satisfied with the day's results.

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After they had returned, Elena left to change for the opera, but David was able to find Sophie before she retired to her rooms.

"You are satisfied with this young woman?"

"Do you doubt your wife's judgment?" Sophie looked up at him from her favorite chair with an implacable expression. Why did this feel like a test?

"No, never. I just know that you can be particular."

"I am. But Elena understands me. Despite her good heart, she would not have tried to bring us together unless she thought we would be a good fit. And I think it will be. Not only does the girl speak Italian, but I found she also knows some Sicilian."

"That will be helpful with the Marsala accounts."

“That’s what I thought. You did yourself a service marrying Elena.”

“I know.” He paused, wanting to say something he had never had the chance to articulate to his aunt before. “I appreciate how welcoming you both were to her. Many among the ton might not have approved of my marriage. While I have no regrets, I hope it did not hurt the business.”

“Nephew, do you realize that most people who purchase alcohol for their households, gentry or aristocrat, are women?”

“I had not, no.” He felt his skin heat in shame for a moment. He probably should have been aware of this, as it was his business, too.

“Either these women care more for the quality of their wine and sherry than the marriage of the wine merchant, or they think you were terribly romantic. It has not diminished our sales, rather the opposite in fact.” Sophie paused and pulled out a pair of spectacles that she began to clean. “But the times are changing, and we need to change with them. New laws will come soon, and we need to understand how it will impact the business.”

David was struck by Sophie’s skills, not only in business but also in understanding how outside forces would impact the business in finding new markets and buyers. They all would have been lost without her. Of course, he could never directly tell her that, for Sophie had that wonderfully English allergy to compliments.

“Thank you, Aunt Sophie. For everything while I was gone. I know you despise the aristocracy.”

“Oh, I may think myself vastly superior, but that does not mean I mind taking money from them.” Sophie wore a self-satisfied smile as she set the spectacles on the bridge of her nose.

“Good sport, you are.” He felt his lips quirk and looked away.

“Yes, well, now you have returned, I’ll have you know you are taking over the accounts at the gentlemen’s clubs. Aside from you, I only want to correspond with women for a while. And I’m still not sure about you. Though we should probably go over the accounts together at some point.”

He smirked inwardly. She was never one to mince words. “Yes, we should rather. Do you have time now?”

As the opera was not until much later in the evening, he spent the rest of his afternoon with Sophie, who, he was quite sure, would someday rule them all.



*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

Finally, a social engagement Elena and Irene were actually excited about. Elena had never been to the opera and had trouble imagining what Irene described to her with the sets, singers, and musicians. She had been to a few musicales, but they were not in a grand theater like this one was supposed to be.

As she regarded herself in her mirror, now her ritual before facing the world, she saw a woman in a silk gown of deep purple trimmed with a darker lace. Irene had pronounced it “aubergine,” which seemed like a mouthful to Elena. Her hair was pinned and curled into a very sophisticated hairstyle Elena could not have recreated if she tried. Her fingers brushed her eyebrow as she ran her hand across her hair.

The scar was still there and would always be there. Sometimes, she would forget about it for long periods, but then she would look in the mirror and remember again. It had made her feel so wretched for so long, a constant reminder of the foolish girl she had been and what she had lost. And yet, lately, it was becoming part of her. She would likely always despise it, but she was coming to accept it more these days. She lightly ran her finger down the white line etched permanently across her temple and felt a slight push against her leg.

Goliath really ought not to be in her room, but she couldn’t help herself from spoiling the great beast.

“Will I do, Goliath?” she asked.

“You’ll more than do. You’ll outshine everyone else there.”

She hadn’t heard her husband enter. In her mirror, she could see him in the doorway,

though her body had an awareness of him that didn't require sight. He gestured as if asking permission to come past the door, and she gave a slight, nervous nod in the mirror.

"All this flattery can't be good for my disposition." As she turned to face him, she was grateful her skin did not give away much of a blush as she felt heat creep up her neck.

"It's not flattery if it's true." She saw his gaze start at her hem and travel up her body, lingering at every curve. She took a deep, shivering breath as his eyes met hers.

"I have something for you this evening. Well, two things. First this." He pulled out a small plate from behind his back. On that plate sat a small triangle-shaped pastry that Elena thought she would never see again.

"Baklava! Wherever did you find it?"

"After meeting with the ambassador, I asked him where to locate some. I remembered you had mentioned it on my first day back."

Elena was too moved to speak. She rose, picked up the triangle, and broke it in half. Carefully, she lifted one-half to her husband, who took the piece. She then lifted the other half to her lips, and even before it brushed against her tongue, the smell brought back a hundred different memories. Suddenly, she was breaking fast on Pa?tel e with her sisters, trying to cut the smallest piece so they could make it last longer. The taste was so familiar yet bittersweet despite the layers of honey.

"I cannot find the words in English to thank you. It has been so long since I have had anything of home. Sometimes, I fear I will lose it. The memory, the sense of it, the little things we did. And then one day it will all be gone, like a candle being snuffed out." Something caught in her throat, and she coughed. "Forgive me. Sometimes the

words get away from me in your language.”

“You have, um.”

David ran his finger along the top of Elena’s lips, then slowly drew it to his mouth, licking and then sucking his fingertip. Elena’s breath caught.

“Honey.”

She nodded, touching her finger to her upper lip, unable to put into words what this meant to her. Then she remembered something he had said.

“You met with the ambassador?”

His light expression grew heavy as he wiped the corner of his mouth with his thumb. “I made several inquiries about your family. I should have done so years ago. I’m sorry, Elena.”

She shook her head. “David, there is nothing to be sorry about. You had other things you had to deal with.”

“I should have thought of it then.”

She looked at him, searching his expression for good news or bad news. She could feel her heart swell with hope, even as she tried to quash it down.

“And?”

“And he doesn’t have any news yet, but he will contact me immediately if he discovers anything.” His face fell. “He said it was like finding a needle in a haystack.” He must have noticed her confused expression because his lip curled up

ruefully. “It’s an expression. It means it will be rather difficult.”

“No, you don’t need to explain. That one makes sense.” She put on a brave face to hide her dashed hopes, though she felt silly for setting herself up for disappointment again after all this time.

“Was I right to tell you? I didn’t want you to get your hopes up.”

Elena took hold of his hand. “I would rather know. I think honesty is usually best, yes?”

“Yes.” He started massaging her fingers with his thumb, sending shivers up her arms, when the pad of his thumb grazed over her wedding band.

“That reminds me, I also have something for you to wear tonight.” He set the plate on her vanity, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a small box. David opened the lid of the box and produced the most beautiful necklace Elena had ever seen. If she was correct in the name of the gem, the dangling amethysts would go perfectly with her gown.

“How did you know?” she asked when she recovered her breath.

“That you liked the color? I am slightly observant, Elena.” He waggled his eyebrows devilishly.

She was usually a little jealous that he could move both eyebrows while she could only manage the one, but in that moment, she was so touched that she launched herself at him, almost knocking the box, him, and his cane over. He caught them all and returned her embrace, enveloping her in his strong arms as he sat them down on her bed.

“Oh, David, no one has ever given me anything so beautiful before. Or found me baklava in London. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“I should hope no one has brought you baklava in London,” he grumbled, but he could feel him smile against her skin, a smile she knew by heart. “At first, I wanted to give you something of my mother’s. I also thought about replacing your grandmother’s cross you had to sell, but then I decided you ought to have something distinctly you. Not your common diamond, something more mysterious, but still infinitely precious.”

She wanted to sit in his embrace for the rest of the evening, but she knew they were running behind, and Irene was anxious to go. She pulled back and looked up at him.

“Tell me about the opera. I have only heard of it from Irene.” She turned so he could place the necklace around her neck. She closed her eyes briefly, feeling his rough fingers brush against her skin.

“Then you’ve heard more than you would want to know about it.”

“I want to know it from you.”

“Well, it is a bit of a social event for the ton.” After he clasped the necklace, he ran his hands along the space where her shoulders met, which was bare due to the low cut of her dress, sending a shiver down her spine.

“They love music so much?” She tried to focus back on her question.

“No, more for the purpose to see and be seen.”

“Ahhhh.” The sound was one of understanding and of pleasure, as he had begun to knead her shoulders gently.

“Honestly, I would rather stay in and spend all night with you,” he murmured against her ear.

“We must go. Irene has been dying to go, and it’s the only thing she is excited about.”

“Then we’ll go, but I get to spend the rest of the evening afterward with you.”

Elena rose to put her gloves on, then turned back to face him and pretended to think this through as she adjusted her glove, even though she had already planned to do just that. She could viscerally feel his gaze on her as the fabric covered her bare skin.

“I suppose that seems like a fair deal.” She started to smile, then remembered something that had worried her. “Husband?”

He paused for a moment as his lip seemed to quirk up involuntarily.

“Yes?” he asked quietly.

“What language is the opera in?”

“This is the Magic Flute by Mozart, so I believe the libretto is in German. Though he may have written a few in Italian. You would have to ask Irene. ”

“Oh.” Elena felt rather disappointed. She struggled so much with English already, and she had so wanted to understand what they were saying. Some Germans came through Dobruja, but not many, and she had never learned more than hello and goodbye. Before she arrived at her next thought, he had taken her gloved hand.

“I can translate any part you wish. But I think you will enjoy much of it without understanding the language. Beautiful music has the power to do that.”

She smiled up at him, grateful for all he did and was doing for her. She still didn't think she deserved such kindness, but David had a way of talking one into accepting help, and later, she would come to reflect, accepting happiness.

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The building itself was large and imposing, but inside, it was beautiful beyond imagination, with its deep reds and burnished golds. They sat in what David called a box with a few other friends of his, including Lord Gaius and Annie, who sat next to Irene. Irene was practically buzzing with suppressed excitement, and Elena saw Annie lay a hand on top of her friend's as if to calm her. That left Elena to sit next to her husband. Leaning on his cane, he gave his arm to help her sit. When their gloved hands touched, there was that spark of combustible energy that Elena was coming to expect and understand better. After so many sparks, she ought to be used to it by now.

Once she sat, she quickly became aware of all the people sitting about the theater, the murmur of the crowd. Even though she had liked the cut of her dress, she did feel a little exposed. She would never have worn anything so revealing at home, where modesty was much more the fashion. She could feel the eyes all around her burning into her skin, branding her a fraud, a foreign whore, a peasant. While no doubt some of them thought that way, the voice she heard in her head was Anatole's, not the ton's. She reminded herself that on her own, she had crossed borders and survived war, poverty, and hunger. If she could survive that, she could survive anything. She would not let Anatole or anyone here stop her from enjoying something she had so looked forward to.

Elena noticed she had been stuck in her thoughts, ignoring David, who did not like crowds. She looked over at him to find him watching her with concern instead of glancing at the rest of the theater.

“Does the crowd bother you?” she asked, hoping to deflect his concern.

“In this case, they are far enough away. I despise being jostled between people, so I am trying to avoid spaces where people are packed close around me. Here, I’m close to the only person I want to be near.”

She bit back a grin and shook her head, recalling one of the expressions he had used when they first met. “Silver tongue,” she muttered.

“It’s gotten me this far, hasn’t it?”

At that moment, she heard several instruments playing at once, and she looked inquiringly at David, who gave her an enigmatic look and turned forward.

As the musicians began to play, Elena felt every chord resonating throughout her being, as if the tempo created by the strings was a heartbeat that ebbed and flowed through her. She had never heard anyone or anything play like this before, in perfect harmony and accordance. It made her want to cry for the sheer beauty of it, for the soaring high notes that made her feel as she had that night with David, as if she were more attuned to the world, like she was hearing music or feeling pleasure in a new, more wondrous way. She was struck by what this form of art offered: a feeling of being alive brought on by the fleeting nature of beauty, which was sad in its brevity but joyous for having been at all. For a moment, she wished she could live like that, appreciating life in the moment, without her head and heart stuck in the past. But the past had made her, shaped her into who she was. How could she completely forget it? Just then, the music ended, and she felt a sudden inexplicable loss, but then the red and gold curtain rose. A specular forest scene was laid before her, and she noted that Irene had not exaggerated the merits of the scenery. A man entered in an elaborate costume and began to sing. Elena was caught off guard by the beauty of his voice, and she felt tears start to well up, not quite spilling over. During the scene, in which a giant serpent appeared to attack the man, Elena was so enraptured that she did not



realize that David had taken her gloved hand. She looked up and found him watching her, and she smiled, again unable to express in words everything she was feeling.

“What are they saying?” she mouthed to him. He leaned over so his lips were almost kissing her ear, his breath a caress, as Elena kept her eyes on the stage.

“Tamino, the prince, has just seen a portrait of the Queen of Night’s daughter and lost his heart to her. He is saying...” David paused momentarily as if he had to think it through. “This image is enchantingly lovely. Like no eye has ever beheld. I feel it as this divine picture fills my heart with new emotion.”

Elena felt as if every inch of her exposed flesh was a canvas of sensation, the notes and his words curling softly against her bare skin. She was acutely aware of every touch, every caress of his voice against her ear. She felt her chest rise and fall as she inhaled and exhaled slowly.

He went on. “I cannot name my feeling, though I feel it burn like fire within me.” He paused again, and Elena felt her body will him to go on. “Could this feeling be love?” He waited so long that she wasn’t sure he would continue, but then she heard him go on. “Yes...yes, it is love alone.”

The intensity of his words and the way he said them against her skin both thrilled and alarmed her. She pulled back and looked up at him, mesmerized but apprehensive of what she would see there. His eyes looked almost black in the dark, full of fire and barely repressed passion. He was staring at her lips, and she heard him draw a ragged breath. Elena was filled with an all-consuming desire to meet his lips, to give in to the passion he had stoked in her through his words and through the music. It was as if it was just the two of them, wrapped up in this moment, in the beautiful, sensual haze of this faraway forest. However, the song ended, and she was suddenly reminded that they were in a room of hundreds of other people, including the judgmental eyes of the ton. She glanced around, which seemed to break the spell that had encompassed the

two of them. David looked back to the stage but did not release her hand. Elena turned her attention back to the music, but despite its beauty, it did not distract her from the words she felt were now written across her skin.

While David translated a few more arias for her, he had been correct that she would understand the music without knowing the language. As they walked out at the end of the evening, she felt as though she were floating on air.

“You see now why I was so excited?” Irene hadn’t stopped beaming since they had left their box.

“I wish we could do that every night.” Elena linked her arm with Irene’s. “Though...I suppose if we went to the opera every night, we might not appreciate quite so much.”

“I would,” Irene insisted.

“Only you, Renie. The rest of us might grow a little weary of the same thing night after night.” David rolled his eyes indulgently at his sister, and Elena felt a pang in the region of her heart. How she missed the teasing and comradery of her sisters. She wished she could tell them about the opera, but she struggled to think of how to explain it.

As they sat in the carriage, Elena did something she had never done before and set her head on her husband’s shoulder. She did not know what moved her to do so, but after he whispered those words, she felt a new closeness to him she hadn’t felt before, as if she were compelled just to be near him, to physically touch him. Leaning further against his broad chest, she heard his heart speed up, then gradually ease back to a steady beat. That was an apt description of the man sitting next to her, steady. For all his charm and silver tongue, he was solid and real, and part of her wanted to reach out and grab onto him and never let go. And yet, the other part of her cautioned not to grow too attached to anyone, that her life could be ripped apart again in a moment.

But, oh, how she wanted to silence that side of herself as she was lulled to sleep by the steadiness of his heartbeat.

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The next thing Elena knew, they had arrived home, and her husband was carrying her inside, speaking quietly to Fields so as not to wake her.

“Husband?” She could not miss the sweet, small smile that graced his face this time.

“Yes, Wife?

“How can you carry me with your cane? I do not want you to hurt yourself.”

“Sometimes a man wants to know that he can still be a hero to a beautiful lady, even in a small way.”

“But my skirts.” She was mortified to think that the heavy crinoline weighed him down.

“Are of no concern.” She looked around and saw that they had arrived in her bedchamber. He set her down on the end of her bed, then sat himself. For a moment, they did not speak, the air thick with the spell that had woven around them that evening. She was so curious as to what they could be together, but she was still so afraid. She had conquered so many of her fears, but she was unsure she was ready to take the next step. But at the same time, she did not want him to leave. Slowly, he removed a glove, then reached out his finger and stroked her bottom lip, causing her heart to beat wildly.

“The moment I realized you weren’t a dream or figment of my imagination, that I wasn’t actually dead, I wanted so badly to kiss you. Even when I felt such muted

desire. You had the fullest lips I'd ever seen."

She could feel a blush heat her face and neck and gave thanks again that blushing did not always show on her skin. His finger traced the line of her jaw, and then he brought her chin up so she could look at him.

"I would offer to help you remove your gown, but I must admit, all the buttons and laces might defeat me. But I would very much like to see you tonight."

"Well, it was in our agreement." She tried hard not to smile.

"Is that the only reason you will see me, our agreement?" He began to trace his fingers down her neck to her collarbone, the rough skin of his hands creating sensations of pleasure against the contours of her skin. He then brought his hands to the back of her neck and unclasped the necklace, and the beads skittered down Elena's chest, to the tops of her breasts, and into her lap. Putting his finger back to the pulse of her neck, he replaced his hand with his lips.

"Am I so mysterious?" She was barely able to get the words out.

"There are times I would give anything to know what is happening inside of that head of yours," he murmured against her skin.

At that moment, all that went through her mind was pleasure, just endless, endless pleasure. Her senses were full of the things he could do with his mouth and tongue, the way he could find these points on her body...

"Should I come to your bedchamber, my lord?"

"David," he corrected.

“Husband.”

She could feel him smile against her skin.

“If you give me leave tonight, I will come to you, Wife.”

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After she had dismissed her maid and sat braiding her own hair, Elena reflected on how she had been sitting here at her vanity just a few nights before when she had decided to go to see her husband in his bedchamber. That night, he had shown her pleasure she had never known before, not even with Anatole. Would it be like that again? Could it always be like that?

As she called for him to enter and saw his broad, strong body wrapped in that blue robe in her mirror, an erotic chill ran down her spine, and she felt with strange surety that together, they could always feel passion like that.

As her husband’s tall form appeared behind her, she noticed he wasn’t using his cane. Something else was also missing.

“Where is Goliath?” She felt terrible she hadn’t noticed the dog had not been there to greet her that evening. Her mind, as well as her body, had been wrapped up in other things.

“I sent him to Irene tonight. She doesn’t mind.”

Coming up behind her, her husband’s hands reached for her collarbone, which he traced with reverence. His fingertips skirted the tops of her breasts, then coasted down between them, grasping them through the silk night rail she wore just for that night. She heard his intake of breath and began to turn her head, but at that moment,

he knelt down and caught her mouth with his.

Their kiss began like a wildfire, barely controlled and devouring, as his hands crept along the silk to cup and massage her breasts. His thumb gently circled her nipples, the silk making them more sensitive to his touch as she arched forward against his hands. There was something unbearably erotic about being caught in an embrace like this, unable to move but also unable to let go. Tentatively, she used her tongue to explore his mouth, and he met hers with reckless abandon.

Suddenly, he scooped her up and carried her to the bed, just as he had days earlier. Elena briefly worried that he did not have his cane, but the thought quickly left her mind as he threw her down and straddled her on the bed with palpable urgency. He interlocked their fingers together, kissing her hands, then pushed both arms over her head, holding them there with one hand. Her initial alarm at being trapped gave way to the pleasure this position provided her, and she arched her breasts against him when he claimed her mouth. She felt desirable and powerful all at once and decided she wanted to feel his skin against hers. Breaking the kiss, she pushed him up, stripped off his robe, and then switched positions so she was on top, holding his arms over his head. She saw him look up and then look at her for a moment, as they both knew he could break her grip in an instant. She put her hand up as if to say, “Stay.” His breathing turned harsh, but he left his hands above his head, and she removed hers. She wanted to enjoy his body, to bring him the same pleasure he had brought to her. She ran her fingers down his arms, lightly scoring her fingernails across his skin. She used her lips to further appreciate his chest, then his abdomen, until she reached the length of him. She looked up at him to find him watching her with something like awe. She dipped her head toward him, and he gave a small, swift grunt of consent. She proceeded to stroke one finger from the base down his shaft. She then took her tongue and ran it along the underside of him, feeling the tremor throughout his body before completely taking him in her mouth.

“Elena,” he growled.

Her name sounded like a prayer, and she used her mouth and tongue to almost bring him to the brink, but he caught her and drew her against him before he reached a climax. He cupped her face, leaning his head against hers, breathing deeply. Elena realized that though she had lost her wrapper somewhere along the way, she was still wearing her night rail, which she sat up and forcibly removed. Her husband stared as she lay back down beside him on her side. His hands again found that space between her breasts, which he stroked with infinite slowness, making a circle with his fingertips as if moving through honey. He ran a hand down all the contours of her body, lingering around the curve of her hips. Gently, he pushed her hip, easing her onto her back.

As his hands began to move between her legs, she had a flash of those men, with their rough, large hands, tearing at her body, using their fingers to enter her, hurt her. She stared for a moment at David's hands, which were also rough and large but tender and warm. Even though they were journeying into new territory, she recognized she felt safe in his battle-scarred hands as he looked in her eyes, and she gave her consent with surety. His fingertips found her sex, stroking with the lightness of wings, and she spread her legs wider to give him greater access. She hadn't understood how wet she was, how ready for his hands, for him. The ache that had been building in her was turning into a fire as the gentleness of his touch fed the intensity of her desire. His thumb found that spot at the top of her sex—she did not know the word in English—and she almost peaked, arching against his hand as he gently circled his thumb around that spot. She began to hear the music from that evening building around them, almost cresting, almost there, but then dying back down, increasing the ache.

“Husband, Husband, please,” she moaned.

“Yes, Elena?”

“Now, yes, now!”

He positioned himself on top of her, the length of him against her sex.

“Yes?”

“Yes, David.”

The sound of his name seemed to enrapture him, and he entered her with a groan. He began tentatively filling her, and she raised her hips to meet him. She felt the music die down again, but there was something in the air, a quiet anticipation of when the momentum would pick up again. Just as she raised her hips, he slammed into her, then looked up to check with her. She gasped in assent, then increased her speed, raising her hips to meet him in time. She felt the music inside begin to build, wilder and faster. She was closer and closer to something, then she felt the word as she heard the music— crescendo. He found her eyes for a brief moment, and she wondered if he could hear the music too, if he was also reaching for that faraway peak. As their eyes locked, she felt that ache turn into a wonderful, all-consuming pleasure that gripped her entire body. She gasped and wrapped her arms around him, feeling the muscles and the sweat and the beautiful movement of his body as he cried out as well. Their breathing seemed in tandem as he dropped his head to her chest, to the space between her breasts.

When she had recovered her ability to speak, she murmured, “You like that spot.”

“I think it’s my favorite place in the world. I ought to claim it.” He let out a breath, then turned his head to kiss her there, pausing to kiss both of her breasts as well. “Grayston’s Valley, what do you think of that?”

She had been lightly stroking his hair, which she gave a playful tug.

“Valley? My breasts are not so big.”



He glanced up and gave her a look. She looked down.

“Well, perhaps they are.”

They laughed together until both their breathing slowed. He looked as exhausted and sated as she felt. As she began to drift off to sleep, she heard him softly repeat the words of the opera that evening.

“Could this feeling be love? Yes, yes, it is love alone.”

Despite her fatigue just moments before, she felt wide awake as the icy hand of panic gripped her heart. While the two halves of her had warred, her passionate, impulsive side had won out for most of the night. But now the fearful side, the side that warned her away from any happiness for fear it would be snatched away, had awakened and would not grant her reprieve. She thought of one of the stories she had read from a book of Greek myths in the library, of Prometheus, who was punished for stealing fire from the gods with an eagle ripping out his insides every day. Was this her punishment? Was there always a price? Because of her foolishness, was she cursed to always be afraid of happiness and love? She imagined a bird swooping down to tear open her chest and feast upon her. But once it reached her heart, it spat it back out, as the organ was frozen and worthless. She didn't want to have a frozen heart, but Anatole's betrayal and the cost of not knowing what had happened to her family, the numerous times when she had gotten her hopes up only to be bitterly let down, had caused her heart to freeze in place.

She cursed herself a fool for not foreseeing that love might complicate her marriage. For not realizing how much she feared love before she ended up in a situation that she did not know she could escape from. Or want to escape from. While the voices in her head warred, she realized her husband had fallen asleep. She wondered if he would even remember what he said or if he meant it. What if she couldn't love him back? Would he cast her out? Love had made Anatole so angry and volatile that he had hurt

her, tried to disfigure her. She stroked David's hair, which looked black in the dark of night. No, here lay a much better man than Anatole. Yet, no matter how she tried she could not drive out the panic from her heart, nor the fear of the future, which she would likely have to deal with sooner rather than later.

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Honey and amber. David awoke in a cocoon of bedclothes and a delicious warmth throughout his entire body. He had moved to a pillow at some point in the night, but his arm was draped across his wife's full breasts.

Lucky arm.

He watched her for a few minutes as she slept. She looked young in sleep, with all the troubles of the world gone temporarily. Her lips were full and pillowy, her golden-brown hair covering her scar. He wondered if she dreamed in English and what she dreamed of. He would have to ask her someday. He had so many questions, he realized, he could talk to her every day for the rest of his life, and he would still think of more. She shifted in her sleep, and he had a sudden recollection of the previous night. Had he told her he loved her as he drifted off to sleep? He felt a slow trickle of dread build in his heart. While they were making love, he had never felt so close to another person before in his life, and several times, he had to stop himself from expressing all he felt for her. Something told him deep in his bones that she was not ready to hear such things, and he did not want to drive her away. But as he lay listening to her heartbeat, the words from the opera, which had been the most erotic moment of his life, came back to him, and he feared he had spoken them out loud. He had never said it before, even to himself, but in that moment, he knew it for truth. Maybe he had always known deep down. Since he had returned, his love had only grown deeper, surer, and clearer because of the thousand ways she was exactly herself, with no ulterior motives or artifice. How she pushed him to go beyond what he thought were his limits without actually pushing him, and how she always seemed

to know when he needed to breathe. How she took care of his family when he was away, even if she claimed they took care of her. How she trusted him with her well-being and with her body, a trust that meant more to him than he could ever put into words.

In the morning light, he heard her breathing change and watched as she slowly opened her eyes, and her body immediately stiffened. There was fear there, fear he felt in his soul. He had not dreamed what he had said, he now remembered saying it. He knew he had to address this head-on, so he stroked her face as gently as possible and prayed for the right thing to say.

“Elena.”

“My lord.”

Ah, the formality.

“My lady. Could you do me a favor?”

She searched his eyes. She clearly wanted to hear him out before she agreed to anything.

He had to get this right.

As he stroked down her face, he began, “I think that I might have told you that I loved you last night.” Her intake of breath confirmed his fears, but he quickly went on. “It’s the truth, and I can’t take it back. I always have, and I always will.”

She bit her lip, and he noticed her clench and unclench her hand on the bedclothes. He remembered her doing that their first night together, but those had been very different circumstances. He put that thought aside for later as he pressed on.

“I know you might not be ready to love me back.” He swallowed. “Or you might not ever love me back.” He hoped with all his heart that was not the case. “But can you try to just let me love you? Just try it on like a coat.” He hadn’t planned on that last part, but he was desperate to regain some semblance of control of the situation, and that was where his mind went.

“You-you’re not angry with me?”

His heart ached for all she had been through, for the question in her voice. His old self might have been angry that she thought he would have hurt her, but he knew what devastation war and grief could bring. What being scarred and betrayed by someone who was supposed to love you would do to you. His fingers reached her scar, still the same mark as when he had first seen her three years ago.

“Elena, how can I say I love you and not try to understand you? You are the most wonderful, fascinating subject I have ever had the privilege to study, and I feel lucky you give me the time of day. I know that when you loved before, you were left with literal scars.” He stroked down her scar with reverent tenderness. “It would be the thrill of my life if you loved me back, but I love you so much I want to give you the time and space to do it. To see if I’m worthy of it.”

“Oh, David, it’s not a matter of worth.”

He kissed her scar, trying to convey everything he couldn’t quite say.

She closed her eyes briefly, and her next words nearly broke his heart.

“I do not deserve such kindness or love. I have done such horrible things.”

He lifted her chin so she would look at him. “Elena, you made one rash choice in a lifetime of thinking of your family first. You even tried to go back and do it

differently. It wasn't your fault you were in the middle of a war not of your making." He had often thought of himself and other soldiers as victims of the war, but much more so were the innocent people whose lives were destroyed and displaced by the whims of empires.

"I have one more request." He paused, not sure quite how to phrase what he wanted to say. "Elena, could you also work on forgiving yourself? Just try. Because if you could only see what you mean to your friends, to Irene. To me." He added that last part quietly. "If you could see what you mean to all of us, you would see yourself as we do. Someone worthy of love and admiration. Someone brave and sometimes unintentionally funny and—"

She swatted him gently in the shoulder. He knew he was succeeding if she found him amusing.

"So, will you take my requests into consideration?"

"You want me to try on your love like a coat?"

Bizarrely, this just made him love her more.

"I never said I was poetic."

Her mouth, which had been in a pained straight line, gave a small twitch in the corner.

"I will try to...try it on then. I want our marriage to work, David, I do. I wish I were different. I wish I could know. I wish I could grieve. Do you understand? If I knew what happened, either way, even if it was the worst, then I could move on, I could mourn. But not knowing, it feels like the worst kind of punishment. What is the English word? Purgatory. Like my heart is stuck, not knowing which way to go."

He thought for a moment. “Is that why you always wear dark colors but never black? You don’t know if you are meant to mourn, but you don’t want to be too joyful?”

Elena gave a small, humorless laugh. “I don’t think I noticed I was doing so, but I suppose without thinking, yes, that is true.”

He thought of his parents’ deaths and tried to imagine not knowing whether they were dead or alive for years. Would he be able to trust in anything without it being snatched away?

“Elena, I promise you, we will find out. And I will be here for you, whatever the truth is.”

She looked up at him, her golden-brown eyes wide and sad.

“I do not deserve you.” She laid her head against his.

He saw now that he was in his own kind of divine punishment. In the wild days of his youth, just after his father’s death, he had been known as something of a heartbreaker. While he had never purposefully hurt anyone or set out to break hearts, he had given little thought to those he left behind. Now to be so in the thrall of a woman who might never love him back, this must be some kind of retribution for his reprobate past. For the carelessness with which he had breezed through life when he was younger.

“Elena, I know you think I have a silver tongue, but please believe me when I say that we are exactly what the other deserves.”

She sighed and looked down. Her expression was still shuttered, but there was a new lightness to her sigh that gave him hope.

“Husband.”

She had moved on from “my lord.” This was good. This was progress.

“Husband, will we continue to sleep in each other’s beds? Is that what is done?”

If she was thinking about sleeping in his bed in the future or possibilities in addition to sleeping, he couldn’t have messed up so badly.

“Oh, it isn’t fashionable, but it can be done. I can make certain of it.”

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

The next day, Irene entered the drawing room as Elena, David, Sophie, and Goliath all sat enjoying the late afternoon sun. She walked in purposefully, opened her mouth, closed it, then turned around and exited the room. About two seconds later, she entered the room again, her jaw set. She looked around at everyone, then bit down on both lips, which, Elena had to admit, had a rather comic effect.

Sophie deigned to take pity on her. “Do these entrances have a point, dear?”

“Yes.” Irene cleared her throat, then looked around the room as if she were telling a story to a young child, speaking in a slower-than-normal voice. “Yes. As some of you may have noticed, I have not particularly enjoyed the Season.”

“From what I hear, that is an understatement.” Sophie looked over at David and Elena, who looked at each other in shared guilt, then looked back at Irene, whose gaze was cast down as if studying the carpet

“We”—David nodded at Elena—“just noticed that Irene did not look as happy as she does, say, playing piano.”

“As she should. Better to be making music than breaking bread with that pack of wolves,” Sophie said with a sniff.

Irene looked up and glanced over at Sophie. “Do you mean that, Aunt Sophie?” she asked quietly.

“Why wouldn’t I mean that? I always say what I mean.”



“I can vouch for that.” David chuckled.

Sophie shot David a look, clearly communicating that it was Irene’s time to speak. He sat back and gestured for Irene to go on. Elena nodded at her, trying to look encouraging. Finally, they might discover why she had been so miserable all Season. Elena wracked her mind. It didn’t seem to be a young man. Irene wasn’t acting lovelorn and moping around all day. And Annie had told her no rumors were going around about Irene. Other than that some looked down on the family’s background in trade and, of course, their marriage. Elena still felt guilty that she had brought any notoriety to Irene or David, but then, she couldn’t control how people thought or what they said.

Irene took a seat and straightened out her skirts. Goliath rose from the carpet and put his head on Irene’s lap as if giving her a little nudge of encouragement.

Irene paused to take a breath, then went on. “It’s just funny you should say that, Aunt Sophie, because I think that is what I desire.”

“Which is what?” asked David.

Irene answered slowly but held her head up, looking directly at her brother. “I’ve come to the conclusion that my dearest wish is to open a music school.”

They sat in silence for several moments when finally David spoke.

“But, Irene,” David began kindly. “You’ve never taught music before, not for a sustained period. And most tutors are male.” He shifted as three pairs of female eyes found him, and his attention just happened to be drawn to something off in the distance to avoid their gazes.

“I don’t plan to do much teaching. I can likely hire music teachers and tutors, and I

would only plan to teach when I have time. Otherwise, my time would be spent running the school.”

“But—”

“I’ve never run a school. I know, but I have to start somewhere, don’t I? I am a quick learner. And I was hoping that, Aunt Sophie, you might help show me how to manage business affairs.”

Sophie finally looked up. Her expression was unreadable. “How would you afford this, Irene?” she asked. “The Royal Academy has trouble enough, and they were chartered by the Crown.”

“When I am at majority, I will gain access to some of what I inherited from Mama’s family. And since the will did not specify it must go to a dowry, I would rather it go to this. And what is not coming from my inheritance, to start, I was hoping it could be an investment from family.” She rushed to add, “While I hope to provide many scholarships, I would also charge those who could afford the lessons so that I would make something of a profit, I believe.”

The corner of Sophie’s mouth ticked up for a brief moment, but Elena blinked, and her face was stone again.

“If only I could spend the time until my majority learning from you, Aunt Sophie. And then, if I came up with a good plan, a plan that could really work, then I might borrow, or you might invest in the school. I want to have a mix of students of different ages and walks of life. It’s difficult for women or anyone below the gentry or merchant class to access music lessons. Most gentlewomen and merchant-class women must learn from private tutors as I did. I want people who would not be able to learn how to play music to have the opportunity to learn.” She looked over at Elena, who beamed back at her. Irene was changing her entire life so other people

like Elena could learn how to play music. Elena felt something like a sob well up in her throat, but she swallowed and quickly covered it.

“I know I can’t teach everyone for free. The Royal Academy had a similar issue, but perhaps, with your help, Aunt Sophie, I can figure out a plan that would work. There is still a great deal to think about, but I wanted to tell you what I’ve been thinking. I know you worried for me.” Irene looked at David again, who seemed not to know what to say.

“I’ll help you,” Elena suddenly blurted out. The others looked at her sharply, and she lowered her head sheepishly. “After you have sorted this out with your aunt and brother, that is,” she mumbled.

Sophie leaned forward, looking at Irene intently. “Irene. This will not be easy. You would likely need a board. You would need a very strong plan to account for expenditures. There is a chance this could fail and lose a great deal of money. You don’t know if you have a head for business or organization.”

“But don’t you think it’s time I found out?”

David and Elena looked over at Sophie, whose face finally cracked into a rare smile.

“I suppose there is no better way than to try. All right, Irene, if we work out a satisfactory plan, there is a chance I will invest or lend you the rest of the funds to start your school. Nephew, your thoughts?”

David took a deep breath. “Irene, this is not what I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

David put his hand to his unscarred temple. “Not this. Look, this is a great deal to

think through. Do you mind if I have a moment to talk to Elena?"

Irene and Sophie glanced at each other. "Why don't you play me something in the music room?" Sophie suggested.

Once the adjoining French doors closed and the sounds of notes began to drift in, Elena stood and moved over to her husband, running her hand down his back. She sat beside him, and he put his hand on her knee.

"Did you know she was thinking about this?"

Elena thought back over the past few weeks. "No, but we knew something was distracting her. Isn't this better than her being heartbroken or having some horrible rumor circulating about her?"

"I suppose it is, but this, this could change all our lives. She could fail. She might never marry."

"Would that be so bad? She would always have a place with us."

He looked up and found her eyes. Elena felt she was promising something at that moment but wasn't sure what, so she added: "Or she could live like Aunt Sophie. I know it will not always be easy, but she could do so much, David. And we could help her. What is the harm in having her make a plan to see if it is possible?"

He began to nod slowly, then with more enthusiasm. "You're right, of course. By St. George, you're right. No one ever did anything of worth without taking a chance."

Elena grabbed his hand, and while she felt the usual spark, she also felt the spark of possibility, the excitement that they could be a part of something bigger than themselves.

“It is a good idea,” she said. “To help people who want to play music, young people. People who can’t afford to or who have never had the opportunity.” David’s look was a little too knowing as she continued. “Could you, could we, help her financially? Would it be possible?”

“If Sophie is satisfied with the plan, then yes, we can afford to help her.”

Elena threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. He hugged her back, moving her to his lap. He angled his head in her hair, which she wore only partly pulled back as they were at home, and she could feel him sigh deeply against her hair. Suddenly, she became very aware of where she was and how their bodies were entwined.

Their happiness was beginning to shift into something darker when David murmured, “Let me go talk to Irene before I lose myself completely.”

“Good idea.” Elena grinned guiltily. David quickly kissed one of her dimples, and then she moved off his lap onto the settee as he rose using his cane. “I can’t wait to see her face after you tell her.”

“Oh, she’s going to be smiling and smug for weeks. It will be terribly annoying.”

Elena gave him a playful nudge, then shooed him off to talk to Irene. She felt such a happiness and pride in Irene, in this dream of the future. But, like so many of her feelings, it was tinged with sadness. How could she make plans here to help Irene when her family might still be out there? She was growing so weary of the cycle of hope and disappointment she had gone through these past few years. She wanted so badly just to be completely happy for Irene, to revel in the joy of someone discovering their life’s calling, and to have that calling help others. Yet, she reasoned with herself, even the most blissful moments were always shaded with a little sorrow, for even at our happiest, a small voice always reminds us that happiness, like life, is

fleeting.

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David found his sister alone at the piano, as Sophie had already gone on to her rooms. He sat beside her at the piano bench, feeling Irene purposely not looking at him. After a moment, he began to play the top part of a song his mother had made up, a child's song he had taught Irene when she was little. Eventually, he heard the bottom part come in as Irene joined him. Even in this silly song, her advanced skill shone through. It was clear she far exceeded him as a pianist.

After they finished the song, he turned to her as she looked up at him, hopeful. "Renie, you realize if you take this path, you might never be able to marry amongst the ton?"

Irene answered him like she had practiced this part of what she was going to say.

"First, David, people, such as yourself, do get married outside of the ton and the Season. If Polite Society decides someone is too old or too inappropriate for the ton, that doesn't mean they have lost all value as a person. Second." She sighed and seemed to take a breath. "Second, this Season has convinced me of something. I am not sure I ever want to marry. And I don't say that as a naive girl or in missish indignation or anything. I never grew up wanting to be a wife or mother."

"You might feel differently if you fell in love."

Irene shrugged, tracing her fingers along the keys. "Maybe. But I would expect them to love me as I am and with what I do, or they are not worth loving back, are they?"

"Well said, Irene," he conceded with a dip of his head.

“Until Annie, Aunt Sophie was the only female I knew growing up. I would rather be like her than any fine lady of the ton.”

“She is a rather unique individual.”

“Well, not exactly like her, but I want her freedom and fearlessness. Aunt Sophie doesn’t care what other people think. She travels, she knows the price of things, and she negotiates them. Because she is unmarried, all of her property, everything belongs to her.” She played a short string of notes, then turned, looking him straight in the eye. “I think it could really help people, David, people like Elena who want to learn to play music but never would have had the opportunity.”

While initially, this plan caused him a panic, he was coming to see more and more what a vision his sister had. He felt almost envious of her for that dream.

“Elena does so long to play the piano. I am trying to teach her, but--” He stopped abruptly as the erotic memories of their lessons took over his imagination. He ought to have another lesson with his wife very soon.

“She wants to help me, David. Please let her help me.”

“Irene, I couldn’t stop Elena if I tried. Wouldn’t stop her. I don’t have that right. I can’t stop you either, so I suppose I’ll have to help you. ”

Irene linked her arm around his, laying her head on his shoulder for a moment, then returned her hands to the piano. She began to play the bottom part of their mother’s song but sped up in tempo to a pace David could hardly keep. They played together, increasing the tempo at the end of each refrain until the notes were coming too fast for both of them. Irene laughed and then grew silent for a moment as she gave a fleeting look to the music room door as if looking past it.

“How lucky we were that she was by your sick bed when you woke up.”

“I remind myself of that every day.”

“You ought to thank me as well.” Irene turned her gaze back to the keys, a mischievous smile upon her lips.

“You?”

“I’ve been your Joshua with the walls of Jericho.”

“My Joshua?” David looked at her as if she was speaking in tongues. “Whatever can you mean?”

Irene looked at her hands as she played the melody of their mother’s song using bass notes. She seemed satisfied by the outcome of that afternoon’s conversations as she appeared relaxed and playful now that she had made her announcement.

“All those walls Elena has around her heart? I’ve been knocking them down for years, so now you only have a few remaining. You’re welcome, Brother.”

Irene shut the keyboard and gave a cryptic smile as she walked out of the room, leaving him in stunned silence.



*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

When he found his wife in the library to tell her about his conversation with Irene, she gave him that same radiant look that nearly knocked his knees out from under him, and he again gave thanks that he had a cane. As they sat together the rest of the afternoon, Elena, rather adorably reading in her spectacles and him looking over several business notes Sophie had given him, David could not keep the warmth out of his chest. Goliath was resting on a rug, though David was sure the beast had one eye open as if constantly on the lookout for danger. It reminded him of someone, but he couldn't quite pinpoint who. Even with Goliath's wariness, the scene was so cozy and idyllic that he sighed in spite of himself, knowing full well that both Michael and Henry would be sick at his domestic bliss. It was as if he had found a piece of himself he never knew he had been missing, but now that it belonged to him, he would treasure it forever.

“What are you reading there?” he asked Elena, who seemed like she hadn't turned a page in almost an hour.

She held up a large book for him to see. It was old and a little decrepit like the binding might give way any second. “Le Morte d'Arthur.”

“Oh?”

“I wanted to understand more about this Round Table before we attend Lord Gaius's dinner, but I cannot make much sense of this.”

David didn't even know his library had a copy of that particular work. He was touched that she was trying to understand a story he had told her, one that had bound them when they first met, but also terribly amused at her choice of text.

“Elena, I don’t know how to tell you, but depending on the edition you are reading, it is likely in Middle English. If you are interested in the Round Table, you might want to try Wordsworth or Tennyson. Or even Morris.”

“There’s a Middle English?” she asked, the look on her face saying quite clearly that she was fed up with the entire language.

His lips quirked up as he thought about how to explain it. “Well, it’s an earlier version of the language.”

“So we are speaking Late English?”

He had to bite his cheek to keep from smiling. They never had a dull day. “I don’t really know. I ought to ask Michael or Lord Gaius.”

Her dimples were showing, which he knew meant she was trying not to laugh. “I did think something looked different about the writing.”

They stared at each other in a silent and mutual competition to maintain a serious composure, which was interrupted when Fields entered with the afternoon post. Mostly business, though David was intrigued by a letter crudely addressed to “The Baroness” and nothing more.

He handed it to his wife, who raised an eyebrow and opened it slowly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her read the letter over twice, hands shaking as she removed her spectacles.

“Elena?”

He took the letter as it fell out of her hands. He hated breaking her confidence by reading it but picked it up and glanced it over. Of course, he could make neither

heads nor tails of what it said, as it appeared to be written in Russian.

Elena looked as if she had seen a ghost. He grabbed her shaking hands and began to massage them in his own. Goliath had risen and laid his head in her lap.

“It...it is from Anatole. He says he has information about my family. He says I need to meet with him to obtain it.” She was breathing in deep gasps and put a hand to her chest as if to steel herself. She straightened suddenly and stood. “It says tonight. This letter must have taken some time to get here. I must go.”

David tightened his grip on her hands, which he was still holding. “Elena, stop. Think. Why did he write to you?”

Her eyes looked unfocused, and she shook her head as if in a trance. “I don’t know. Perhaps he felt guilty for separating me from them. I don’t...”

“Well, then I’ll go with you.”

“No!” she exclaimed, then drew a long breath before she spoke again, and her words sent a chill through him. “He said to come alone.” Her eyes seemed to refocus, and he noticed her pupils were dilated. David knew this look. He had seen it on his men when they were on a singular mission. Usually, one that led to death...

“Elena,” he repeated her name as if saying it would calm the rising panic in the air. Even Goliath was not immune as he began frantically pacing the room. “Think, please. Why does he want you alone? There is no good reason for that. Why didn’t he write the government? Why—”

“It doesn’t matter why. I need to know!” She tore her hands away and made for the doorway. David grabbed her hand again and pulled her back.

“Please, Elena, listen, there is no reason he would need you to go by yourself.”

“I’ll take Goliath—”

“Goliath can do nothing against a gun.” The words came out harsher than he meant them to, but he was truly afraid now.

“You don’t understand!” She pulled on her hand, but he didn’t let go. “You don’t want me to find them. You don’t want me to have to choose between them and you because you fear I will choose them.” Her next words were clipped and quiet as if saying them softly would take away the sting. “Anatole said he loved me, but he tried to control me. And because I thought I loved him, I let him. Aren’t you doing the same thing, claiming that you love me and not giving me a choice?” Her composure began to break, and he could hear the pain and panic in her voice. “This is why I can’t love anymore because it muddies everything!” She broke away and disappeared through the door, leaving David standing, gutted, in front of Goliath.

He looked down at Goliath and rasped, “Go after her!”

Goliath moved as quickly as a dog with three working legs could go, gone in a black and tan blur. David sat back in his armchair, his shoulders sagging in despair.

While he knew he was right about how suspicious the circumstances were, he had to admit there was some truth in her words. He had given her an out to this marriage if she desired it, and he was a man of his word. He knew how much she longed to be with her family again, and no scandal nor distance would stop her from being with them if she could. Alone now, he could admit that in his heart of hearts, he was afraid she would choose her family over him and leave him forever. How empty his life would be without her, just like those days in Balaclava when he would wake up and remember his legs didn’t work, and he would cycle through long days and endless nightmares until she would come read to him again. But he would have no hope of

ever seeing her again if she left. He knew with the same absolute clarity that had moved him to ask her to marry him that there would never be anyone else for him. This was it. His heart was inextricably tethered to her. But what would happen to that tether if she put thousands of miles between them? His mind went to a newspaper article he had read about the telegraph wire laid across the ocean that was almost completed. Could that tether survive across seas and oceans like the telegraph wire? He stood and began to pace the hall with his cane.

He thought she was coming to care for him, but he knew her heart was still closed off. He had thought loving her would be enough, but a small voice inside reminded him that loving her meant listening to what she wanted. To working toward her happiness, even if it came at the cost of his own.

As he arrived at this conclusion, he was still convinced that the note was suspicious and that she should not go alone or at all. How did Anatole know she was looking for her family? Did he speak to the ambassador? That was unlikely. Perhaps he actually had news, but that seemed doubtful as well. The most probable case was that he had heard Elena talk about her family and wanted to lure her out, which meant he had gotten close enough to her in London to eavesdrop. That thought chilled David's blood to ice. He would protect her, even if she hated him for it, he vowed to himself.

By this point, he had walked to her bedchamber and found her face down at her vanity, Goliath's head in her lap. He was reminded of statues of weeping angels in graveyards, so still and sad she sat. He stood in the doorway, unsure of what to say or do.

"I'm sorry."

Her voice was soft, but it carried across the room. He walked in, set down his cane, and sat on her bed. He had to put some distance between them. He didn't think he could touch her, or he would fall apart.

Slowly, she lifted her head. She didn't look like she had been crying, but she looked hollow and defeated, the light gone out from behind her eyes. He hated to see that look on her face.

"You are right. There is no reason he should ask me to come alone. It...it would likely not be wise to go." Her chest shook as if she were crying, but no tears spilled. He realized he had never seen her cry before.

As his need to hold her trumped his self-preservation, he moved so that he was kneeling at her vanity and took her trembling body in his arms.

She was still shaking, but she managed to get the words out. "My family, they are a powder keg for me. I am sorry I could not see reason. I saw it as you trying to control me. I became afraid, and that fear made me lash out."

"I just wanted you to be safe, Elena. I don't want him to hurt you again. I don't think you can trust him."

"I know. Sitting here, I remembered he had come to my village and lied to everyone. He lied to me. He did this." She gestured to her face. She spoke distantly as if she were outside herself.

"He didn't deserve you." He nestled his head in the crook of her neck, inhaling that sweet scent of honey and amber. He knew he hated this man as he had never hated anyone from the first time she told him what he had done, but suddenly, that hate felt real and tangible.

They sat in silence for a moment. Elena seemed numb and devoid of emotion, so he wrapped himself around her more deeply, trying to ground her, to bring back the light in her eyes. He had an idea but wasn't sure how she would take it.

“Elena, I am going to make a suggestion. You may not like it, but I hope you’ll hear me out.” She turned her head to look at him. Some of the warmth was returning to her eyes, which he took as a good sign.

“I think we should leave London.”

She seemed to drink this in and took a breath. He continued quickly. “Irene wants to get away from the Season, and you, I want to get away from Anatole. This letter makes me think he wants to hurt you. To enact some kind of revenge. Otherwise, why couldn’t he have written you from Russia or the Ottoman Empire or wherever he ended up with information about your family? There was no reason to see you in person. It chills me to the bone that he found you and wanted to get you into the open.” David could not put into words how terrifying the thought of her being hurt was to him. “I will send something to the Foreign Office immediately to see if they can apprehend him where he was supposed to meet you if he is here as a spy or otherwise.”

“They can do that?” David pulled back a little and regarded her, still struggling with what to do or say next. He knew he had to do something productive with all his hate and fear, as his primal side wanted to rip Anatole to shreds. He did not think Elena or Irene would appreciate it if he were found guilty of murder.

He noticed her hair had come down and pushed a lock behind her ear. He kept his hand there and was struck as he once was by the steel of her. Even sad and shaking in his arms, she was so resilient, this beautiful warrior angel.

Finally, she met his gaze. “I suppose I wouldn’t mind getting away from the Season either. But the hospital—”

“It should be safe in Mrs. Raeburn’s very capable hands for a while. We still have a few more events, like dinner at Lord Gaius’s, but after that, we should be able to

leave town.”

She hummed in agreement and laid her head against his shoulder. “I have only been to the estate but once. It would be nice to go for a little longer, I suppose. Give Goliath some room to run once his legs recover.”

He grasped that same lock of her hair and let it run through his fingers. He had won this round.

“I love you.” It felt so good to say it, even if he didn’t hear it back. “But I am trying not to control you. I’m trying to listen, Elena. It’s a work in progress. Like a coat.”

He had really just added that last part to try to make her smile again. She nodded, seeming beyond words at the moment. He wished he could take some of the grief and longing from her, the torture that not knowing wrought on her soul. He hoped the country air and the beauty of the estate could help convince her to stay, to put down roots. He felt a small burst of hope as he felt her turn her head as if to hide a smile against his shoulder.

“Like a coat again?”

“Elena, please, I have already admitted to my lack of poetic inclination.”

She nodded again, and as he pulled back to look at her, he saw a faraway look still in her eye. He didn’t think she would speak again, but she looked back up at him after a few moments.

“I thought about what you said. But I-I don’t know how to forgive myself.” “I don’t think anyone does exactly.”

“How can I possibly be a confessor to myself? Give myself forgiveness? It



sometimes feels impossible.” She said the last word quietly, and he felt her swallow.

David thought for a long time before he began. “Did you come across the story of the Fisher King in your perusal of *Le Morte D’Arthur* ?”

Elena pulled back and shook her head. “In truth, I couldn’t follow the story, so I probably sat there for an hour staring at the same page. I was just embarrassed that you might think I could not read in English.”

She looked up so earnestly that something pulled at his heart in that moment, even as the corner of his mouth twitched.

“You sweet, beautiful madwoman. I will never think you are lacking because you cannot read Middle English. I don’t know if I can read Middle English.”

She ducked her head as if still embarrassed and leaned back against his shoulder.

“The Fisher King,” he went on, “in some versions of the story, was a king tasked with protecting the Holy Grail. You know the story of the Grail and Joseph of Arimathea?”

He felt her nod against his shoulder.

“The Fisher King also had a mortal wound. It’s always different who gave him the wound, depending on the story.” He didn’t think explaining all of the different versions of the story would help, so he quickly continued. “But the wound made his kingdom fall to wreck and ruin all around him as shame and pain consumed him.” As he went on, he began to play with the end of her hair, twirling one strand around his finger.

“When his grandson, Galahad, first saw him, it was said he had one question for the

king, but he was afraid to ask it, and he lost his chance. It was only later that Galahad learned that if he had asked one question at the right moment, it would have healed the king and saved the kingdom.” He paused for a moment and reached for her hand before he continued.

“In most of the myths, the question was what was paramount, but I always thought it was the timing that was so important, almost equal to the question.” She leaned back to look at him, and he noticed a glimmer in her eye as the gold that rimmed her irises watered for a second, but her eyes stayed dry. Someday, she would trust him enough to cry in front of him. When the time was right.

“S o ?” sh e began softly.

So, he thought as he drew a breath and prayed that he would have the strength to let her go if that was what she wanted. “So, when the time is right, you will ask the question when it comes to you, and the answer will help heal your soul.”

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

Even though she knew almost everyone they were dining with, Elena was nervous about her attire for the evening. She wore a new gown that she could not quite name the color of. It was a deep, warm orange silk, unlike anything she had worn before. The word was more than orange, but she did not know all the different names for shades of color in English. With this gown, she was trying to say something to David, to herself, that she was looking for the answer, even if she couldn't quite find the question yet.

She had been shaken by their argument several days earlier. Upon further reflection, she now saw she had been so hungry for information about her family, so stuck in her not knowing that she would have done anything Anatole had asked. That scared her deeply, and she was grateful to her husband for his help in pulling her back to herself. And yet, it felt like a chasm had opened between them since that afternoon, and she did not know how to close it. While they still shared a bed, they had not been intimate, nor had they conversed or laughed like they used to. He wasn't cold or cruel, just more distant than before, as if the curtains were closed behind his eyes. Even more than his touch, she hadn't understood how much she loved just talking to him until the past few days without their usual conversations. Shaking herself from her thoughts, she turned to Goliath, who was sitting at her feet.

"What do you think, Goliath?" she asked the dog.

"Spectacular."

She saw her husband approaching in her mirror, but she did not turn around. "You have a bad habit of answering for Goliath."

“Yes, but I am always very complimentary. Goliath is a bit of a critic. May I enter?”

At that, she had to agree and turned around to nod, but at that moment, her breath caught. David was wearing a dark gray tailcoat over an olive-green waistcoat that somehow matched his eyes. The overall effect was so arresting that Elena felt her heart flutter, and she reached her hand to her chest as if to stop the traitorous organ. She was so struck that she had not noticed he was carrying two glasses in his hands, his cane balanced precariously against his chest.

“Dutch courage,” he answered her unspoken question, handed her a glass, and sat on her bed.

“Is this one of yours?” she guessed.

“Indeed. Have you ever had sherry?”

Elena shook her head as she considered the dark liquid in the glass. It smelled almost medicinal. She did not quite understand the appeal, but she recognized that this strong-smelling liquid helped them afford this townhouse, so she gathered herself and took a sip. The taste made her want to gag, but she forced herself to swallow it out of politeness. She could tell from his expression as he watched her that David was fighting a grin at her internal struggle.

When she recovered her ability to speak, she gasped out, “It is...refreshing.”

“It may be an acquired taste. I was raised on it, so I had to grow up tasting sherry, though I think the first time I tried it as a lad, I might have spit it out behind my father’s back.” He took a sip, then added, “Imagine my disappointment when we had to turn more to sherry and other fortified wines after the Médoc Classification in 1855.” He trailed off as he took in the blank look on Elena’s face. “But I am disappointed. I brought you the sweetest one, Dulce.”

That made her smile, though she couldn't quite call this sweet as her tastes were overwhelmed by the bitter. Her mind returned to something he had said.

“Why did you say courage? Why do I need courage tonight?”

“Oh, the courage is for me, for fear my friends will do something so embarrassing that it would drive you away.”

“I am not worried about that. I have met them before.” She gestured, waving off his concern as she braved taking another very, very small sip.

“Be careful. It is a fortified wine, so there is more alcohol than the wine you may be used to.”

“Ah, that explains the smell,” she murmured.

“Pardon?”

“You know,” she offered as she attempted to change the subject, “there is a wine from Cyprus that my father used to drink. He let me try it once, and it tasted much like this. But I do not remember what it is called.”

“Most wines and spirits are named for their region, so it may have been named after the specific location in Cyprus. Sherry comes from a place called Jerez in Spain. Champagne comes from Champagne, in France. There is an Italian fortified wine called Marsala we recently began importing from—” He waved his free hand dramatically. “Marsala in Sicily. It seems you were prescient in your intuition that your friend would make an excellent assistant, as she knows Sicilian.”

“It is all her own merit. She is a force to be reckoned with.”

“True. But you do tend to bring out people’s strengths. To see something others might not see, even in themselves.” He paused awkwardly as he finished, as if he had just said too much, then seemed to abruptly jump to his next question. “You say her husband was transported?” His brow furrowed as Elena nodded. “That is odd. Men are rarely transported these days. She’s sure he’s not in prison somewhere here?”

Elena shook her head and braved another sip of sherry, but it was much too large and almost made her choke. While she tried to cover her coughing, she saw David’s gaze travel to the skirt of her gown as if suddenly caught by something.

“My lady,” he said softly, all thoughts of prison seeming to evaporate. “You’re wearing something bright.”

“Yes, well, I can’t stay hovering between mourning and not mourning forever.” She tried to keep her tone light, but her heart warmed that he had noticed.

“There is something called half mourning, but I suppose it doesn’t apply to the case.”

Taking in his expression, she frowned. He looked concerned when she thought he would be pleased.

Noticing her scrutiny, he sat on her bed, head bowed. After a moment, he looked up at her. “Elena, I don’t want you to push yourself if you’re not ready,” he explained. “You’re in an impossible position with no good solution. If you want your clothing to reflect that...” He held his hand up as he trailed off.

She considered her words as she eyed the remaining sherry, then set her glass down at her vanity.

“Husband, this does not mean I have moved on or am trying to force myself. ” She looked back at the sherry as she strove to find the words. Perhaps it did offer some

kind of courage. “Sometimes when it feels like the world is ending, if you just breathe and smile, and think to yourself, ‘Someday, I will wake up, and I will enjoy the sun and the sky and the air again, though not today,’ well it’s a little like putting on that smile, even if you don’t mean it yet. Do you understand? I’m not saying I’m whole, but it’s more the hope that someday I will be.”

“I’ve felt that way before,” he said after a moment. “When my father died, the first few days, I hardly bathed or changed my clothing. But after a week, my valet forced me to shave, bathe, and obtain a mourning wardrobe. I wasn’t ready to stop grieving. But it was the start of a new phase. I felt the same outside Balaclava after the incident with the laudanum.”

Elena nodded and stroked Goliath’s nose, glad they were speaking again like they used to. She was suddenly struck by how well-matched they were. Looking over at her husband, she was not sure she would have ever created him in her wildest imagination, would have ever dreamed she would end up here with this tall, striking Englishman.

He noticed her heated gaze and returned it with a smoldering look of such force that she felt down to her toes, then he appeared to catch himself and glanced away. “That being said, you do look breathtaking in that gown,” he said politely.

She was embarrassed by how pleased she was by his compliment. “Husband, you must stop this flattery. My vanity will not take kindly to it.”

“You’re not vain, Elena.”

“I was, once.” She turned and looked back in the mirror, trying to remember that girl she had been. She realized that she tended to idealize that time, the time she always called before, and that she had grown, possibly in some good ways since then. “When I was younger, I was rather vain. I led several boys in my village on a merry dance.”

“I can’t fault you for that. Most young people are vain. I think I was rather vain before I went to war. Fate had different things in store for both of us.” They both absentmindedly touched their scarred temples. She caught his eye in her mirror, and he gave her a small smile and continued. “Except your scar only makes you more beautiful, as it always makes me think of your determination to survive. A determination that led you here.”

Elena turned around again and stared at him. This time, he did not catch himself but met her gaze with an intensity of his own. She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. She wanted to say something in return. That he was beautiful both because of and in spite of his scars as well.

But instead, she said, “Not all young people are vain. Irene isn’t.”

He snapped out of the moment they had been in and smirked. “Irene is a unique case. She takes after Sophie.”

“She would put her hand in the fire for those she loves.” Elena’s heart squeezed as she thought of her grandmother’s saying, and how it applied to her new sister, then she caught herself. When had she started to think of Irene as a sister? This conversation was getting out of hand when she should focus on the evening ahead of them.

“What color would you say this gown is, Husband?” She tried to return the conversation back to her dress. “I do not know the names for all the shades of color in English.”

He gestured for her to stand and turn around. As she acquiesced, Goliath gave a short bark at the motion.

“It’s all right, little one.”



“Little?” David snorted. Goliath gave him a look, then laid his head back down. David ignored this, putting his hand to his chin as if deep in thought.

“Sunset,” he said after she had slowly turned around. “I think the color is sunset.”

Elena hadn’t thought of that word as a color before, but she found herself deeply pleased by it and felt a slow smile creep across her face. Perhaps this gown would not compare with the diamonds of the ton, but it would do for a dinner with old friends. She went back to her vanity to put on her gloves.

“I am glad we will be among friends tonight. Not quite so many people.”

“True, though with you and this chap, I think I’ve become better equipped to handle crowds than I used to be.”

“Still.”

“Still.” He stood, set down his glass, and traced the line of her jaw with his gloved hand, the feeling of the glove simultaneously rough and smooth against her skin. She was overcome for a moment by how much she had missed his touch, how exhilarating but deeply comforting it was all at the same time. As he pulled his hand away, Elena felt her heartbeat change, then drew a breath to settle herself as she bid Goliath goodnight.

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David had now been to several social events with his wife, but none with only his friends. He prayed that everyone behaved, though he doubted Elena would cast judgment if they did not. She had that wonderful gift of accepting everyone as they were and seeing the best in them, no matter what. He had meant what he said earlier, she might not know it, but Elena’s gift was to draw out the strengths of others,

particularly when they didn't see it themselves. Hell, she had seen something in him when he was little more than a stranger and in Goliath when anyone else would have left him to die.

Regarding his friends as they entered, he was struck by how aristocratic they appeared, which made him feel uncomfortable in his own skin. In spite of his title, he did not always think of himself as an aristocrat. With one foot in trade and the other in the peerage, he often felt like a strange outsider with no clearly defined role. And yet his unique social position had been oddly welcoming for Elena, as he was sure that neither Henry's nor Michael's ancient, titled families would have been pleased if they had brought home a foreign bride from the war. As he formally introduced her to Henry, Elena met Henry's irreverence with amusement, and he was glad to see his old friend looking more animated, more human than he had before. Sophie, who had deigned to join them, appeared both entertained and annoyed by the mostly aristocratic guests, though she had been uncharacteristically quiet ever since they had returned from the hospital several days prior. But she had always gotten along well with Lord Gaius who, for a scholar and gentlemen, had the ability to talk to people of all walks of life. Sophie always mentioned how she enjoyed his lack of sense of what was fashionable and his slightly eccentric household.

Michael was also there and even more his typical self than usual, droning on about the war and their recent conversation regarding various armies. Michael was generally not one to surrender a point until it had been thoroughly dissected, so David groaned internally when Michael decided to return to the issue of the size of the Russian army at dinner.

As he spoke, David saw Elena begin to fidget in the corner of his eye, first with her napkin, then with the folds of her gown. Those who did not know her well or who were generally unobservant, like Michael, might not notice she was distressed, but David now knew her better than he knew himself, and he shot Michael a look full of daggers. Michael, the fool, was belaboring an academic point, not once stopping to

think that details of the Russian military might be a sore spot for someone like Elena, whose whole life was overturned by a Russian invasion. Or himself, for that matter. Fortunately, Lord Gaius's daughter, Antigone, noticed Elena and David's discomfort.

With her eyes wide, she turned to Michael, who was sitting to her right, and, apropos of nothing, asked, "Lord Michael, if there is a war in the United States, will Britain fight against slavery?"

Michael quickly turned his head toward her, not seeming to mind the change in subject as long as he could have an opinion about it.

"Antigone, there won't be a war."

David saw a small line cross her brow. He remembered that both Elena and Irene had told him she did not like to be called by her full name. It was also rather inappropriate for Michael to use her Christian name when she had politely called him Lord Michael, even if he had been given leave to do so before.

"Father says that John Brown has been raising money among abolitionists in New England, and in Canada, they had a congress—"

"And very few people attended."

"Still, if there is a war, shouldn't Britain fight against slavery?"

"Even if there is a war, Britain will mind its own affairs."

"But Britain profited from the slave trade—"

"And made it illegal in 1807. Abolished slavery completely in 1833."

“But the illegal trade went on much longer, and certainly Britain has purchased cotton. There are some mills here that are refusing to process cotton purchased from slave owners. If the mill workers can take such a stand, surely the government can as well.”

It had reached a point where everyone had ceased conversation and was watching the two of them spar. While politics and foreign affairs were typically forbidden topics for ladies of the ton, Lord Gaius had always encouraged anyone at his table toward open dialogue and opinions, including his daughter, and his table had always felt like a respite from the stuffy nothingness of ton discourse. Irene and Lord Gaius were watching Miss Sprague with pride while Sophie and Henry looked vaguely bored and distracted. But David had eyes only for his wife, who looked engrossed with their rapid rapport when Michael suddenly changed the subject.

“What does Sir Trevathan think of this matter?”

Miss Sprague looked up, seemingly unprepared for this swift change in the conversation. “What does he have to do with anything?”

“Are you not betrothed to him?”

Miss Sprague’s gaze darted to her father, then back to Michael, whose expression was, as ever, unreadable. “That is no business of yours, my lord.” She glanced around the table as if in hope of reprieve.

Michael opened his mouth to respond, but David knew he had to do something. The conversation had moved from politics into the personal and Miss Sprague did not deserve to have her private affairs dissected at the dinner table. After all, she had saved him moments earlier.

“Lord Gaius, I should like to try that new port you were speaking of,” David said

loudly, giving Michael a sharp look. “We have no imports from Portugal, though we’ve been thinking of expanding, haven’t we, Aunt Sophie?”

“I make it a habit not to discuss business amongst the aristocracy. They say it’s crass.” Sophie raised an eyebrow at David and crossed her arms, seeming unaware of what he was trying to do.

“Have you ever had safir, Aunt Sophie?” Elena, ever the savior, had seen that the conversation needed to be rescued. Elena had not spoken much at dinner. Thinking back, David realized that when he had seen her in a large group, she was often very quiet. But her soft voice had a strength and sweetness, so much so that he saw even Michael was paying attention.

“No, I can’t say I’ve heard of it before.” Sophie’s posture relaxed ever so slightly.

“I do not know enough about spirits to compare it to anything else, though I am becoming more familiar with fortified wine.” Elena gave David a conspiratorial glance and went on. “But it is very sweet, much sweeter than sherry. It tastes like honey and oranges. I have only had it a few times in my life when my father had a bottle. Many in the empire are haram, so it can be hard to find.” She looked around at several confused faces. “They do not imbibe spirits as part of their faith,” she explained.

Sophie had softened her gaze, but she had not moved or uncrossed her arms. “We’ll have to look into importing it, won’t we, Nephew?”

“Lady Grayston, I hope I have the good fortune to try some one day, I have not had the privilege to travel to that region of the world yet in my lifetime.” Lord Gaius rose and bowed toward Elena as he politely closed the subject. “Gentleman, I think that is our cue to move on from the ladies for our port.” As they adjourned, Lennix leaned over and drawled under his breath.

“Always an entertaining lot, aren’t we, Grayston?”

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Later that evening, Elena and David sat with Henry as he regaled them with tales of his exploits with his friends in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of artists Elena had never heard of before. Irene, Annie, and Sophie sat around the piano while Michael and Lord Gaius were deep in conversation across the room, though Elena saw Michael look over at the piano ever so often. Henry glanced over at Michael and frowned.

“What was that about at dinner?”

“Damned if I know,” David muttered. “Sorry, my love.”

Elena shook her head, she did not much mind if he cursed. “You truly do not know?” she asked. Both men looked at her with such clueless expressions that she wanted to laugh. “Is he not one of your oldest friends?”

“Spare us the reprimand and let us know, Lady Grayston, I am on tenterhooks.” Henry Lennix’s relaxed repose was the very opposite of on tenterhooks, but she obliged him with a nod. She crooked her finger for them to look at the scene from her perspective.

“He”—she pointed toward Michael—“is enamored with her.” She signaled for them to look at Annie, sitting with Irene over at the piano. “And he is furious about it.”

“No,” Henry scoffed. “He is always trying to rile her up.”

“Have you never been put out because a young woman you were interested in did not pay attention to you?”

Henry began to speak, then looked to think the better of it. He glanced at David beseechingly. David shrugged. "I just never imagined Michael having particularly romantic feelings. He's so logical."

"Hence why he is furious about it." Elena was secretly pleased that she was getting rather good at reading these things.

"He's not a romantic hero like you, Grayston. Just because he doesn't act doesn't mean he doesn't feel." Even though he was still sitting back in his chair, Henry Lennix looked tense.

"Well, I have good reason to be romantic." David gave Elena that same smoldering look he had given her earlier, and the world fell away, and it was just the two of them. After a polite cough from Henry, David appeared to realize there were other people around, for he turned to his friend. "And what of you, Lennix?" The other man suddenly seemed preoccupied with his glass.

"We are not speaking of that dangerous subject. I know many women who I will never give my heart to." Elena saw David narrow his eyes at his friend and was about to speak when Lennix continued. "Poor devil. Michael, that is. She won't have him."

"How would you know that?" David asked.

"She's one of those white knight types. Michael is too, well, Michael for her taste. Think about it."

Elena did have to admit that Annie had an inclination toward big, idealistic notions. Lord Michael was perhaps too stuck in the particulars for her.

David made a face at his friend. "You know, you're more observant than people give you credit for, Lennix."

“I’m the oracle no one listens to. What was that, Delphi? No, wait, I think people listened to Delphi.”

Elena regarded the scene on the other side of the room as she tried to remember the correct oracle. “He just needs to show her his heroic side,” she said as she studied Lord Michael. “You know, in my village, we have a story of a Mihai Bravu .”

“Bless you.”

Elena gave Henry a look, and he grinned devilishly back. He did seem to be quite good at that. She ignored him and went on, “It means Michael the Brave. He was a hero for independence, a great unifier.”

“Elena believes names are destiny,” David explained, the corner of his lips creeping upward.

“Well, I have many a different Henry to model myself after, and yet I choose to waste my life in excess. Eight English kings, multiple saints, you name it. I happen to do an excellent St. Crispin’s speech.” As David rolled his eyes, Henry looked over at Michael sympathetically and sighed. “Honestly, I am not sure he has a heroic side, my lady. Mind you, he’s one of my oldest friends, but if you want someone heroic, look no further than your own husband.”

David shook his head as if to brush away the praise. “I have trouble thinking of him as a romantic hero, but I think he can be brave. He has that potential.”

Lennix lifted an eyebrow, leaning back in his chair. “I’ll believe it when I see it. He’s not a wastrel like me, but I can’t see him charging off to the Crimea like you.”

“That doesn’t make me a hero.”



“I didn’t say it did. It was heroic. An annoying quality you have in spades.”

Elena could tell her husband was growing uncomfortable with the praise, however reluctantly given, and sought to change the subject for him.

“We’ll have to see how it all plays out. Why don’t you check on Lord Michael, Husband? I want to hear more stories of your youth from Mr. Lennix.”

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Having been ordered over to the corner by his wife, David marveled that she had only met Michael on a few occasions yet seemed to know more of what was in his heart than David ever had. He felt that shame rise in him again. Shame that he had not paid enough attention, not listened enough to those around him. He doubled down on his resolution to do better and approached the two men as Lord Gaius rose.

“Excuse me, my lords, I want to speak with your aunt, Grayston, about a few matters before the evening ends.” Lord Gaius walked toward the piano, leaving just him and Michael in an awkward silence.

“I shouldn’t have spoken of the Russian army at dinner,” Michael said quietly after a few minutes.

“No.” David sighed. Michael meant well, so David went on. “The Russian army invaded Elena’s village when they occupied Dobruja. Near the Danubian—”

“I know where Dobruja is. And they almost cost you your legs. My apologies, not appropriate dinner conversation.”

“Michael, you’re amongst friends. You ought to be able to speak freely, but there are some sensitive subjects.”

“I know. Amongst the ton, I’m usually able to hold my tongue, but here, sometimes I forget myself.” He glanced over at the piano again. David realized they had not been together since that ball, even though he had asked him to call. There were lines of worry and stress around Michael’s eyes that had not been there before.

Before he could inquire after him, Michael began, “I meant to tell you, I was just discussing with Lord Gaius, there is talk that Lyons will be named the ambassador to the United States. He has asked me if I would like to join him if he is.”

“You would go to Washington?” David asked slowly.

“It is a possibility, yes.”

“Is there any particular reason you are suddenly thinking about taking up this post?”

“Restlessness,” Michael answered, almost defiantly.

That was likely all David was going to get in response. He supposed he should try to dissuade him. From across the room, David caught Elena’s eye. Try harder, he almost heard her think. He knew he ought to, but reasoning with Michael was like trying to talk to a brick wall.

“Well, perhaps before you reached a decision, you could consider addressing this restlessness.”

“There is no cause. In this case, a man just finds himself at a crossroads and must act accordingly.” Michael squared his shoulders and his jaw, apparently more for himself than David. “I’m just letting you know. I’m sorry that our reunion was so brief.”

“Michael.” Michael glanced up and finally looked him directly in the eyes. “You’re a better man than you let the world see, you know.”

Michael looked unsure of what to do with this. He glanced down for a moment. "I knew it. Marriage has made you soft," he muttered.

David caught Elena's eye again and gave a small shrug. She gave him a half smile. Michael, who had been watching this exchange, rolled his eyes in only the way a curmudgeonly gentleman can.

"I know what you're going to say. Besot—"

"Besotted," they both said at the same time. They sat in silence for a moment, in which both of them realized how brief their reunion might be. David knew he would miss him if he went to Washington. He only hoped that going to America might loosen him up a bit. Michael had always been so straitlaced and restrained, even as a young man. Thinking of memories of when they first met, he looked up at his old friend and smiled. The corner of Michael's mouth ticked up a fraction, and he nodded, his glance returning to the piano as if compelled. He hoped Michael wouldn't become the patron saint of lost causes, but if he wasn't accepting help, there wasn't much more that David could do.

Across the room, Henry had just made Elena laugh, and she threw back her head, the warm light catching the golden strands of her brown hair. He wasn't exaggerating when he said she looked spectacular earlier in the evening, as again, his eyes drank in how the sunset silk lovingly caressed all the lush curves of her body. The dress and the fact that she was wearing bright colors gave him hope tinged with melancholy. He felt wretched that his hope came at the expense of her belief that she would find her family one day. He had yet to hear back from the ambassador any news on their whereabouts. He wasn't even sure that he would be granted an annulment if she decided to leave after three years, but he wouldn't stop her if she wanted to go. He had promised her that. He had also written to the Foreign Office about the suspicious note from Anatole and further inquired about Elena's family, but perhaps he ought to go in person. He suddenly thought of Orpheus and Eurydice again. Like Orpheus, he

knew he would do anything to save her from her own personal hell. Even if it meant that once he had gone through every outlet he could, he would turn around, and she would disappear into the air like Eurydice. But Orpheus had his lute and his musical gift from the gods. What did he have? A title, small fortune, some amount of power. That should do something. He resolved that he would go to the Foreign Office in person before they left for Grayston Park. He could do that much for her.

What a damnable situation they were in. He had been keeping his distance these past few days because the thought of her leaving was too painful. But he found distance painful as well, as he longed to make love to her or just talk and laugh with her like they used to. He wondered if he should just give in and enjoy the time he had with her, whether it was forever or just a few more months, for anything seemed better than this lonely longing. His gaze fell on Michael, who was determinedly not looking over at the piano. Maybe it was better to be like Michael and never confront or admit one's feelings. At that moment, Elena noticed him looking over at her, and she gave him that half smile, the one where she pursed her lips together, but both of her dimples appeared on her cheeks. It shot straight to his heart. No, he was glad he could and did acknowledge everything he felt, but he did not know where fate would lead them next. He hoped the peace and beauty of Grayston Park could be a new beginning, but right now, he felt tired and defeated.

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David was quiet all the way home. As they climbed up the stairs of the townhouse that evening, he sighed and looked down at his wife.

"I tried, with Michael, I really tried."

"I know. Some people have trouble accepting help."

"I suppose." He seemed to be leaning on his cane more than usual. She looped her

arm through his other arm to support him without being obvious about it.

“Husband, no one is a better friend than you. No one tries harder to watch out for the people they care about.”

“If I’m such a good friend, why was I away for so long? What use was I?” She hadn’t heard him sound so despondent since Balaclava as he went on. “Michael is leaving anyway. He might go to Washington.”

Elena’s heart went out to her husband and the sorrow in his voice. Here was someone who tried so hard to take care of everyone, to take care of her. She had to do something for him.

“Irene, can you take Goliath tonight?” Irene, who had been walking in front of them, stopped.

“Of course.” Irene peered back at them with a raised eyebrow. “I have been taking him a lot lately.”

“He just prefers you, I think.” Irene gave them a suspicious look but ushered the dog, who had just come to greet them, down the hall with her.

As they reached his chambers, Elena led her husband by the hand to his bed.

“I’m going to take care of you. I’m going to be your valet tonight.”

“Elena,” he growled.

“No, you take care of everyone else, of me. Sometimes, someone must take care of you.”

He held her gaze for a moment, seeming at war with himself. Then, finally, something broke in his eyes, and he sank to the bed, accepting her touch. She knelt to remove his tongue boots, running her hand down the inside of his leg and the blended texture of his trousers. She felt great satisfaction at the shiver she felt in turn.

“Elena, you’ll ruin your dress.”

“Well, we can do something about that.” Thank goodness this dress was relatively easy to unlace compared to others. The garment was quite simple in its elegance, with the material and the draping doing the work of drawing the eye. She turned around as she removed her gloves, and set them down.

“Help me so I can help you.” She could feel his hands tremble as he carefully unlaced her gown, and the thrill of anticipation coursed through her as he began to stroke her shoulder blades, lightly trailing a finger down her back.

She turned back around, letting the gown fall from her shoulders, then crept down her body to the ground. She stood there under her husband’s hungry observation, bare in her chemise, corset, and layers of petticoats. She felt his gaze start at the base of her throat, then brazenly trail down to her breasts, cupping and caressing them with his gaze. As David stood and lifted her dress to hang it over a chair, she held out a hand and had him help her step out of her heavy crinoline. She then came to him and pushed off his unbuttoned tailcoat and waistcoat, then she stopped to admire him, taking a deep breath in. She had never realized it until that moment, but she so dearly loved the way he smelled. She couldn’t quite name the scent, but it reminded her of a forest she had gotten lost in as a child. And yet, she hadn’t been frightened as she wandered deeper and deeper into the woods. The scent of the trees made her feel safe but still intrigued, pressing her to go farther. That was the eternal lure of the woods, she mused as she began to unravel his cravat. It was both familiar and dangerous all at once. As her hand brushed his chest, she could feel his pounding heart against the heel of her hand, matching her own. As they both pulled his shirt over his head, she

put her face against his chest, feeling warm and safe but also rather unbearably aroused. His arms went around her tightly as he dropped his head to her ear, his breath warm against her skin.

“I know you intended to take this at a slow pace, but I have another idea.” He sought her eyes. “Trust me?”

She pursed her lips together and nodded, feeling giddy with anticipation. Suddenly, his trousers fell to the floor. He stepped out of them, then used his arms to cage her against the wall, at the same time meeting her mouth and kissing her deeply. As he held her against the wall, he stroked down her leg and wrapped it around him, and Elena put her arms around his neck as she drank in his kiss. It had never been like this before, raw and rough, with a bone-deep need to be filled completely and utterly. He pushed her remaining petticoats out of the way, and she felt his hand along the slit of her drawers, parting them as he sought her eyes again.

Yes? he mouthed.

Yes, she answered, more than ready for him, and he entered her with a deep thrust and a groan low in his throat, filling her and, at the same time, pushing her against the wall. This position felt different than before. Even though she was trapped against his body, she felt like they were racing together, running wild and free into oblivion. The pleasure was so exquisite it was almost unbearable. His lips went to her neck, and he found that spot, the spot that sent her into rapture as they moved together with greater speed and intensity. His hands then went to her chest as he pushed down her loosened corset and tore the top of her chemise, freeing her breasts.

His hands were rougher than usual, but she loved the raw adoration he gave her breasts, the animal need with which he massaged and grasped them as he pumped into her. Suddenly, she felt like she was reaching toward something, an even greater joy and longing. She began to feel her entire body shake as wave after wave crashed

into her. She cried out at the same time he did, dropping her head to his shoulder. Slowly, he withdrew, and she lowered her leg to the ground. They stayed against the wall, wrapped up in each other for several moments. Elena pushed off her corset, drawers, and remaining petticoats and stood there in her sheer chemise, now torn so that it revealed that spot David liked so well, right between her breasts. He traced his finger from her collarbone down to that spot, and she saw his lips form a soundless word.

Mine.

She led her husband to the bedpost, then took a cloth and poured a small basin of water. She wrung out the cloth and then began to bathe his body. She moved the cloth carefully from his broad shoulders down his back to his well-muscled backside and legs, which were strong from all the exercises he did to regain his walking. She guided his arm to lean against the bedpost so he did not have to stand on his own for so long. Strangely, of all the things they had done together, this felt the most intimate. She could tell he felt the same. As she came to his front, she could see color flushing his face, spilling down his neck

“Elena, you don’t have to do this.” He put out his free hand as if to stop her.

She caught his wrist. “I want to. Tonight, I’m taking care of you, yes?”

“But—”

As she wrang out the cloth, she carefully brought it down the length of him, and he seemed to lose the power of speech. She smiled as his arousal was clearly returning. She wrang out the cloth again, then worked her way up his body. She had to look up as he was at least a head taller than her, and what she saw in his eyes floored her. She dropped the cloth and found herself in his arms again, his skin hot and damp.



“I love you, Elena,” he whispered against her ear, “I love you so much. Stay with me.”

In response, she kissed him deeply, saying everything with her body she couldn't yet say in words. She used her tongue to tease open his mouth, but going slowly, gently, unlike their rough and raw coupling moments before. She could feel the heat of his body through her thin chemise. She ought to take it off, but she liked the rough sensations it made against her skin. As they broke apart, he sat on the bed, looking away from her.

“I did not withdraw in time.”

She stared at him for a moment, then thought back to their coupling. She hummed in understanding.

“Nothing would please me more than having a child with you. But I want you to be able to go back to your family if...” He sighed deeply, running a hand through his hair, then went on. “If that is what you decide to do. I wanted to stay away from you until we found out, but I don't think it is possible for me to do so. In that case, perhaps it would be wise if, in the future, I try to withdraw before completion. Or we could use French letters. You know what those are?”

“Yes.” She dipped her head. Anatole had used what David called French letters, and she had heard them talked about in the hospital among women before. She understood what he was saying and why he was saying it, but her heart and body rebelled. She loved their intimacy, their skin against each other's skin. It didn't make all the horrible moments from her past completely go away, but the memories were fewer and far between. She was so happy to feel pleasure and desire again with him that she didn't want to change a thing. But if she found out her family was alive, could she bear to have a child she might have to leave behind? Could she bear to leave him behind? She had longed for her family for so long that she had not stopped

to consider what her life would actually be like if she were to go back. Those were questions for another day, and so she brushed them aside for now.

“You are wise, Husband.” She pulled her chemise over her head, leaving her only in her stockings, and she pushed him back onto the bed, angling herself over him as his gaze hungrily roamed her body.

For some reason, she felt lighthearted, and playfully emphasized her accent as she said, “Let us try, how do you say, withdrawal this time, yes?”

His expression changed, and he broke into a wicked smile. And no more was spoken that night.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

Before she left London, Elena wanted to see Annamaria one more time, so she suggested that they take a walk in the park with Annamaria's daughter and Goliath, who David insisted go with them. She chose to meet her in Bloomsbury Square. It was not considered a particularly fashionable area by Polite Society, but she hoped Annamaria would feel more comfortable there. David had also insisted she bring a footman, Gerald, who was waiting at the carriage and looked to possibly be resting his eyes. Elena turned from Gerald with a grin on her face and vowed she would not tell on him.

It was a hot day, but the sun had gone behind the clouds, and there was a mild breeze, so Elena did not need her parasol to shield her eyes from the sun as she watched the little girl chase the dog. She glanced at Annamaria, whose wardrobe was very different from the threadbare gown and shawl she had seen before. In fact, Elena was reminded of Sophie, as Annamaria's blue and gray striped walking dress and jacket looked both practical and quietly elegant. She looked nothing like the woman with the matted blood in her hair and the swollen jaw she had first met. Elena looked down at her own floral yellow dress and bonnet with matching ribbon and marked to herself that she was finally wearing bright colors without guilt. As they sat on a bench, both of their gazes followed Evangelina, or Eva, chasing Goliath around a tree. He really was recovering quickly, and while Elena knew he was still compensating for his back leg, he moved with speed and strength. It must be all that food that mysteriously fell off her plate onto the floor for him. Suddenly, the little girl stumbled and pulled on Goliath's tail as the dog gave a short yelp.

"Will he hurt her? He looks like he could fell a grown man." Annamaria moved to rise.

“He will not hurt her.” Elena could not explain her certainty, but somehow, she knew as she drew breath that Goliath would never ever hurt anyone who wasn’t a threat to Elena. She and David hadn’t even provided Goliath much guidance. There was something instinctual about his protectiveness. Just as this thought crossed her mind, Goliath had braced himself so the little girl, old enough to walk but not much more than a babe, could lean against him for support. Annamaria sat back down, hand over her chest.

“You found him on the street?” she asked.

“The very day I met you.”

“My mama would say that was fate,” Annamaria said with a faraway look in her eye.

Elena smiled as she thought of her village. “My grandmother was a firm believer in fate. In the Orthodox church, fate and forgiveness are paramount. I suppose that’s part of why we have confession.”

“Catholics, too.” Elena could see Annamaria turn toward her out of the corner of her eye.

Elena had thought a great deal about forgiveness since her conversations with David after Anatole’s message. Sometimes, she felt like she didn’t know where to start, but then there would be days when she would find herself looking at her past actions in a different light, as something gone and far away. What that forgiveness?

“I wish forgiveness was paramount to my family,” Annamaria murmured, her voice tinged with bitterness.

“Do they know about Eva?”

“My brother does. He came to see me once. After Dan was transported and I was on my own. I think he meant to take me back, but then he saw my figure. He called me a whore and left. I don’t know if he told the rest of the family.”

Elena took the young woman’s hand. She felt the same fear that her family would reject her, but that fear faded more and more with time. Now, she would be happy just to know they were alive, even if they considered her fallen. Somehow, she felt in her bones that they would forgive her. Maybe she was coming to forgive herself if she could imagine that.

“Would it help if I wrote them? That we are friends and that you have a respectable position? I know some look down on me, but I am a baroness by some twist of fate.”

“You would do that?”

“It’s the least I can do.” Elena shrugged, embarrassed by the difference in the current social statuses.

Annamaria turned her hand and squeezed Elena’s. Despite her new position, Annamaria’s hand was still skeletal, and her skin rough. Elena hoped, in a couple of months, now that Annamaria had a new place to stay and a new position, her fingers would be less bony and maybe covered in a bit of ink. The thought of ink-speckled hands, like David’s when he sat all day in his study, suddenly warmed Elena. They eased into a comfortable silence for several minutes.

Watching Eva and Goliath play, Elena was struck by a sudden vision of a small child chasing Goliath. A child with her golden-brown hair and David’s green eyes. She had not thought about children before David mentioned French letters the other night. She had started her courses a day or two later, so she had not thought much of it since then. Before, she had only considered children in the abstract, as to whether David wanted an heir, but never their actual child. Their family. She had agreed she wanted

to wait until she heard news of her family's fate, but in this small park, she felt such a longing for that scene of a small child chasing a dog, with David sitting with his arm around her on the bench, laughing with them. What if it took years to hear anything about her family? Could she bear leaving this future for that one? That would not be fair to David to keep him in purgatory while she waited. And maybe it would not be fair to herself either. She loved the passion between them but had to admit that anything more still scared her. And yet, that romantic, reckless side of her was coming to care for him. She heard his words whispered in her ear. I love you, Elena. I love you so much. Stay with me. That reckless, romantic side wanted so badly to trust in such words. To believe in a possible future, in a life here with him. But she had such trouble trusting that side of herself. She had made castles in the air before, only to find they were smoke and ash. She would have to work on forgiving herself, to reconcile those two sides together, before she was ready to make any decisions.

"Do you regret it? Running away with a man?" Elena asked the other woman.

Annamaria took a long time to respond, continuing to watch her child as she spoke. "Yes and no. I suppose that is not an answer, but it is the best I have. I would never trade my time with Eva. I would do anything for her. She is my life and my blood. But I wish she could know her family. I wish they had not cast me out. That has been the very devil."

They both unconsciously crossed themselves.

"And the man, would you trade the time with him?"

Annamaria shifted, staring off at her daughter. "I don't know. It was the greatest and most passionate love I've ever known. But was it really love if he left when things got hard?"

"He did not leave, though. You said he was transported."

“Same difference. I told him not to go out that night, but he said we needed the money. He always said we needed the money.”

“Would you like me to ask my husband to find out where he was sent? He might be able to find out through shipping or his friend in the Foreign Office—” Annamaria’s body snapped rigidly, and Elena went quiet.

“I ought to know as his wife, but we never had the chance to marry before he was transported. We were supposed to elope that night, but I never saw him again. He always said we needed more money before we could marry. My last name isn’t even O’Donnell. It’s Marinetti.” She turned away. “I shouldn’t have told you that. Now I’m even more fallen in your eyes.”

“My eyes try not to judge too harshly. We all do impulsive things when we are young and think ourselves in love. It can cost us a great many things.” She tapped her scar gently, which drew Annamaria’s eyes. Elena noticed that some of the rigidity left the young woman’s face and shoulders. She wished Annamaria hadn’t had to lie to her, but she understood why she did. Better to be the wife or widow of a transported man than an unwed mother in the eyes of society.

“Thank you for your offer, but I’d have to think about it.” Annamaria sighed. “I have not yet decided what to tell Eva about her father. But you may write to my family if you so wish. My parents cannot read in English, but my brother can. The Marinettis of Clerkenwell. I can find the address somewhere, I’m sure.”

Elena nodded. She decided she would write to them as soon as possible. Even if she could not put her own family back together, she could at least try to help Annamaria. They settled into another comfortable silence as Elena basked in her renewed purpose.

Suddenly, the light shifted, and Elena was overwhelmed by the sensation of being

stuck in a bad dream, but she could not quite put her finger on what exactly made her feel that way. The scene around her was idyllic, the laughter and barking, the warm day. And yet she felt a whisper of something on the edge of her senses. She looked at the ground, at the grass. When she was alone in the world, shadows had always been her friend, telling her who or what was behind her without having to look around. The sun had returned, but the shadow on the ground in front of her was too large and too tall to be made by just herself and Annamaria sitting on the bench. As she gazed at the ground before her, Elena slowly realized that there was no longer a breeze, as if something was blocking the air behind her, and she froze, not daring to turn around. She willed Annamaria to look at her so she could catch her eye, but Annamaria was still watching Eva and Goliath. Goliath, who was running rapidly from a distance. Running toward them. Turn around. She felt the words as if someone had whispered them in a language she used to know. Her senses reeled from the eerily familiar scent of cloves she had never known in England. Turn around and face me. Goliath was barreling toward her at full speed, the child trying to keep up. Elena dared to look again at the shadow, but it receded. She turned slowly, and there was nothing behind them but air. Then she saw it. On the bench to her left were four daisies that looked freshly plucked. Her breath caught in her chest as she heard her grandmother's voice on the subject of flowers: an odd number of flowers are for the living. An even number are for the dead . There were likely very few in all of England who would know that superstition. It must be a coincidence. But it was a coincidence that she could not stop thinking about all the way home.



*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

A few days before they were planning to leave London, Elena found herself sitting at the piano once more. She tried to remember the lessons she'd had with David, but all she could recall was a searing heat, and somehow ending up on top of the piano. They could never tell Irene about what they had done on her sacred piano, Elena decided, or they would all surely die of mortification. Irene was extremely fond of the Broadwood, and Elena had to admit, it was a beautiful instrument, though she did not have many to compare it to.

Sitting at the piano, she could feel Goliath looking at her while he sat on the floor with one eye open. Sometimes, he reminded her of herself, always looking out for danger, for that moment everything would slip away. She had thought he might be a good companion for David, with their wounded legs and bodies, but she was beginning to wonder if he might be even more of a kindred spirit to her.

Giving him a small nod, she set her fingers on the keys. She pictured in her mind what David had her do before, the feel of her hands on his...and she pressed down. Goliath howled. Like before, she was reminded of the small but powerful difference between noise and music. Perhaps she could convince Irene to take her on as a student if the school got off the ground. When it got off the ground, she corrected herself.

“Are you trying to teach Goliath how to sing?”

She looked up to see her husband casually leaning against the doorframe and felt the heat of the memories of the room pulse in her veins. She ought to be embarrassed by her horrible playing, but he knew the extent of her musical abilities. He was supposed to be her teacher, after all.

“I thought my teacher would help me develop my skills, but alas...” she trailed off dramatically.

He walked over and sat on the bench beside her, setting down his cane and pausing to scratch Goliath on the head. “I suppose we did get rather...distracted in our previous lessons. But I have to admit, I live for those kinds of distractions.”

Elena bit her lip to keep from smiling. “I do, too, Husband. But I would still like to learn to play.”

“I think I have a solution. What if, when I successfully teach you a song, we reward ourselves with a distraction?”

“So if I can play one song, then we will reward ourselves?”

He nodded, his lips curving into a wicked grin.

“But what about Goliath?”

David leaned back to look at the dog. “He’s quite the prude. He’ll give us our privacy.”

She shook her head, but the anticipation of both of their previous distractions and the excitement of learning a song coursed through her, and she felt young and free in a way she hadn’t felt in a long time.

As he started to put his hands on the keys, she put a hand on his arm. His small shiver only increased the heat in her own blood. “I want to try it on my own this time. Not with my hands on top of yours. Not that I don’t enjoy my hands on yours,” she added, “but Irene says that is not the best way to learn.”

“She is correct. That’s the way I learned, but it was very informal. A proper teacher would not have you do that. But I happen to be very improper. And I wanted an excuse to touch you.” He ran a finger down her arm, and she tried to ignore the gooseflesh erupting along her skin.

“Husband, remember, our reward.”

“Right, right, yes.” He took a deep breath, then cracked his neck from side to side, flexing his fingers. “I’m going to teach you a song my mother made up when I was a child. First, I’m going to play it on the lower notes. I will show you where to put your hands, but I want you to copy my movements. Again, this may not be proper, but unlike Irene, I never learned from a teacher other than my mother.”

He played a series of notes several times through, making sure Elena was familiar with the melody, which was short and airy. He then positioned her hands on the keys and had her imitate his movements on higher notes. It was difficult at first, and she made many mistakes. When she first began, Goliath seemed so indignant at the affront to his ears, which, in fairness, were large and upright, that he left the room. However, David was a patient and encouraging teacher, and soon, Elena was able to master the simple melody.

“I am going to play a different part on the lower notes. Try to keep playing what you learned, and don’t focus too much on what I am doing. It will make sense eventually.”

She kept playing, and she noticed him playing something different than her. At first, it threw her off, and she was afraid she would make a mistake, but she pushed through, and all of a sudden, what she was playing felt entwined and supported by his notes. She recognized with a burst of delight that they were making music. And then that delight morphed into a deeper realization: they were building something together based on trust, passion, and something more. They played the song several times

through, then simultaneously, their hands stopped, both of them panting. They turned to look at each other, and Elena was struck as she always was by how their scarring was a strange mirror of the other as they each reached up at the same time to caress the other's scarred skin. Then, somehow, both of their arms went around each other, and they came together in a frenzy of joy and eagerness.

After some time, David rose and adjusted the latch on the French doors adjoining the drawing room. Then, she found him kneeling in front of her as she sat on the bench, her skirts pushed up and his hand roving up her legs, peeling down her stockings and kissing each inch of revealed flesh. Elena reclined on her elbows, hitting the keys, which clanked loudly. He pulled the tapes of her drawers and eased them down her legs, again kissing all the skin newly exposed to the light and air. She shuddered as she felt him kiss his way up her thigh and began to arch her body in anticipation. He reached her sex and took a deep, luxurious lick, then looked up at her. As she felt a pulse of sensation throughout her body, she gave him a small nod, dipping her head back to enjoy his dedicated ministrations as she continued to rest on the keys. Her elbows began to ache, but the pain was worth it for this beautiful pleasure. She had never done this before that first night together. She wondered if she ought to feel ashamed, but instead, as all that energy that had welled up inside her body centered at the apex of her thighs, she just felt release. He licked longer and deeper, finding a steady rhythm, and she felt herself closer and closer to a peak as a wave of feeling and intensity crashed over her entire body. In her mind, she thought, crescendo, and cried out, though she tried to cover her mouth with her hand.

As she recovered herself, David pulled her to the nearby settee and looked questioningly at her as he unbuttoned the placket of his trousers.

“Yes?”

“Yes, darling.”

He entered her with great force, rocking into her, and she met him, this time chasing that climax, that crescendo, moving her body in harmony with his. They joined together until they both cried out, and he quickly left her, covering himself with his hand. She felt his absence but understood why he did what he did. Once more he was trying to respect her wishes, her future. After he had wiped his hand with a handkerchief and sat next to her, he adjusted her skirts and petticoats to cover her thighs, but she sat so that her legs below her knee were still bare, dangling off the side of the settee.

“That was the most pleasant distraction I have ever had in a music room,” he said, sounding a bit breathless.

“Likewise.” Was all she had the power to say. She was trying to catch her breath when a thought struck her. “Husband?”

“Wife?”

“Do you have a music room at your estate?”

“With Irene as my sister? She would disown me if I did not have a music room.”

“With a piano?”

“Naturally.”

She let out a breath. She was looking forward to going to the country, but she felt a small seed of fear and doubt in her heart that she couldn’t quite extinguish. Knowing there was a piano eased some of that fear.

“Good. Then I can learn more songs.”

“And we can reward ourselves with future distractions.”

She gave him a long, slow smile.

“Naturally.”

## Chapter Nineteen

By the day before they were to leave, Elena’s seed of fear had sprouted into a whole garden of doubt. That morning, she woke with the dawn and sat at her vanity, staring out the window at her view of London. She knew it was a limited view, but with its busy, crowded streets, this city had been hers for the past three years. She knew David was correct that they ought to leave, but she could not rid herself of the worry in her chest.

“Elena?”

She looked back at her husband, whose eyes were still closed but who was reaching his arm for her on the bed.

“I’m over here. I just rose to watch the sunrise.”

“We’re not farmers, Elena,” he grumbled, “we don’t rise with the sun. Especially during the Season.”

She walked back to the bed, pausing to stand above him and stroke his hair gently as he seemed to return to sleep. Suddenly, he grabbed her arm and pulled her back into bed, wrapping his arms around her in a tight cage.

“Well done, my lord, you had me fooled.”

“The old eyes closed trick. Works like a charm.”

She clicked her tongue but still nestled into his arms, willing the warmth to help rid her of her fears. David rolled her to her back, loosened his grip, and stayed on his side. His green eyes searched her face as his playful expression shifted toward something more serious.

“Why did you rise so early, my love?”

She weighed telling him, but she shook her head. “You will think it is silly.”

He continued to search her eyes, waiting for her to go on. She realized she did want to tell him, but she did not know quite what to say. She stroked his hair as she weighed her options. “This, for the most part, has been my home these last few years.”

David blew out a long breath. “This has been the only stable home you have known since you saw your childhood home ransacked and abandoned.”

“I suppose, yes.” It did feel good to get off her chest, and she went on quickly. “I know that leaving right now is the best course of action, but I cannot help but be sad to leave. And a little afraid of your estate.”

He pushed himself up on an elbow, his gaze raking her over with concern. “You’re afraid of the estate?”

“Not of the estate itself, but of how people will see me, view me. I hear some of what the worst in the ton say about me, how some gentlemen treat me.”

“Not since—”

“No, not since you returned. Truly, it did not bother me very much. But, in a new place, in your home? I don’t want to embarrass you or Irene.”

David entwined his hand with Elena’s and brought their joined hands between them as she shifted to her side.

“I cannot promise that everything will be perfect, and I understand your fears, Elena. I do. However, most people around the estate like our family but consider me a bit eccentric.”

“You? Don’t most gentlemen marry strange foreign women or have their aunts run a business because they are skilled at that work?”

He acknowledged her sarcasm with a roll of his eyes and went on. “I do not think they will be all that surprised that I brought a foreign woman back from the war. And once they get to know you, they will all fall in love with you, and Goliath will be terribly jealous.”

“I think you are optimistic.”

“I have been told it is one of my more annoying qualities.”

“That is true. Even outside Balaclava, there were only a few days where I saw true darkness upon you.”

“Yes, thank goodness I had you to pull me out of that.”

She looked away, humbled by his admission. They sat like that in silence for a moment when David asked, “Elena, did I do you a disservice when I married you?”

“What?” She was so surprised by his question that she sat up and looked down at



him. “What moved you to ask that?”

David half sat up, leaning back against the headboard. “I can’t quite say.” He shrugged. “But it has been gnawing at me since the first night we went out in Society. I had not realized what I had invited you into. I wonder if I had, well, taken you out of the frying pan and into another fire. It means—”

“Yes, I have heard that one. Sophie says it a great deal when Parliament passes a new law she disagrees with.” She was suddenly afraid he was asking something else. “Do you...regret marrying me? I know now how cruel the ton can be. I do not wish to bring shame to your family or business.” She waited with bated breath, afraid the answer was yes.

“What?” He froze as if horrified by her question. “Absolutely not. It was the best decision I’ve made in this life. I suppose I’m just concerned you might regret your decision. I know the ton. I grew up around Society. I didn’t realize in the moment that you would have to learn entirely new rules, that some would never accept you. I thought I was doing a noble thing, doing something that would protect you, but I hadn’t thought it all the way through, what it would mean for you. And perhaps, selfishly, I wanted a reason to keep you in my life.” As she began to respond, he held up a hand.

“But I am most afraid that you might have found your family. That you would have been more likely to have located them after the war had you stayed.”

Elena turned her body so that she looked down at him more fully. She could not think how they had gotten here. She had never thought about the choice to marry him since she had made the decision. Once he had suggested it and convinced her, it seemed the only course of action. She had not considered what would have happened if he had not asked or if she had said no.

“My lord,” she began, holding up her hand as he started to correct her. “Husband.” He looked up, his green gaze catching hers. “I have never regretted my choice, truly. I am very glad I married you. Very grateful.”

“But I don’t want you to be grateful, Elena. I’m the lucky one.”

“Then let us say that we are both lucky.” She took his hand, which still bore some of the scars of war.

“You don’t speak of it very often.”

He cocked an eyebrow.

“The war.”

“I know.” He swallowed. “I cannot tell if always looking forward is a virtue or a sin.”

“Possibly neither.” She gave him a small smile.

“Mayhap, you are correct.” He sighed. “I think about it, but not all the time. Most of the time, I can keep that door shut. I’m afraid that if I always keep it open, I’ll remember all those who did not survive. I’ll think about the men I killed and their families living without them. I’m afraid if I look too deeply, I’ll never come back.”

She understood what he was saying, even though she hadn’t fought in a war. There were some days and moments it became impossible to look too deeply into. The what-ifs could drive a person in circles in their mind.

“Would you like to go back someday? To see their final resting place, to say goodbye to your fellow soldiers?” She stroked his knuckles. She hadn’t realized it before, but she had come to love his hands, not just for the wicked things they did to her body

but for their strength and roughness. She loved the feel and texture of them. They were rough for gentleman's hands, but she supposed that war had likely changed his body for the rest of his life. And perhaps his soul a bit too.

"I suppose I might." They sat again in silence as she stroked his hands, the sounds of the city beginning to wake up around them.

"Would you like to go back to look for them? Your family?" he asked softly.

"We could do that? You would bring me?"

"Of course I would bring you. Who else knows their way around or speaks the language?"

Elena shifted slightly and studied him. He was smiling, but a tinge of sadness shaded his eyes as if there was deep pain behind his words that he did not want her to see. At that moment, she truly did believe that he loved her. Not in the selfish, possessive way that Anatole had but in a steady, giving way, where he would always put her happiness above his own. She felt like a giant weight had landed on her chest, shattering most of the ice around her heart.

"You would do that for me?" was all she was able to say.

"Anything." He gave her a small, rueful smile. "Let me see what the Foreign Office says, and we can decide. I'm only sorry we didn't go look sooner, but..."

"No, you had to take care of yourself. I understand why you needed to do that." She turned away again, feeling unsteady at how this realization affected her. "You do not speak of that very often either."

"I don't speak of the clinic because it was monotonous." He lay back, and some of

the rigidity seemed to leave as his voice took on a more casual tone. “Again, if I thought too much about my situation, I might have gone mad. But I also came to accept myself over time, I suppose. I know my body will never be the same, but I am...at peace with that. Sometimes, I think I would have been all right if I had never recovered my ability to walk. For so long, I thought I couldn’t be a man if I couldn’t use my body below the waist, but I could have used a chair. I knew several men in Bern who did. I have means, and I have you and Sophie and Irene. I’m not saying it would have been easy, but I lost years with the three of you I could have had back if I had accepted myself as I was. The experience helped me see that the world is designed for people who can walk. I had to endure excruciating exercises and pain just to do it again. And what if I had been a working man? I wouldn’t have had that luxury of money and time.” He paused and let out a sigh. “My legs will have weakness, likely for the rest of my life, and, again, I am at peace with that. It doesn’t make me any less. It doesn’t mean I’m not a man. Does that make sense?”

“Yes, I think it does. I pity any man who mistakes your strength for weakness, for I think you are the very best man I know.” As she said the words, she knew them for truth. The revelation rocked her, and she felt further shaken by how long it had taken her to realize this. She wanted to tell him more, to communicate to him how important what they shared was to her.

“I would have supported you if you had lived in a chair. I would still have wanted to be your...” She trailed off as her cheeks heated.

“My lover?” He glanced over at her with both heat and laughter in his eyes.

She nodded shyly. “I know it is not the same, but I used to be much heavier. Before the war, before I knew hunger. It was fashionable in the village where I grew up. But I wonder if you would have desired to be my lover quite as much.” The word lover almost stuck in her throat again, but she felt it needed to be said.

He turned his head to regard her, and she felt his gaze run along her entire body. Even though she wore a nightgown, she felt bare, as if he could see through the plain cotton.

“My darling wife, I love your body at any size. There is nothing in the universe that can change that.”

As she looked at him, she felt that weight on her chest pinch, and the pain was both beautiful and terrifying. Feeling undone, she quickly changed the subject.

“Did you come to this acceptance of yourself at the clinic or since you have been back?”

“Mostly since I have been back, even though I often find I am trying to make myself fit into this world like pushing a square peg through a round hole. But I also realized all of you would support me however I am.” He swallowed. “No, I just gave myself small tasks at the clinic to keep from boredom and despair. I had time to appreciate all that Mrs. Raeburn did outside of Balaclava. I had to remind myself how lucky I was to end up there, across from the hotel. So many died in the hospital barracks in Scutari. If I hadn’t lost my ability to walk, I would have likely been sent there instead of waiting for transport to Portsmouth.”

“I heard about the barracks in Scutari. We were lucky we did not have as many outbreaks.”

“Lucky, but I also think Mrs. Raeburn has knowledge and skill that others do not have.”

“She does, doesn’t she? Too bad she isn’t appreciated by most men of science.”

They sat in silence for a moment as they thought about that, and she lay back

alongside him.

“So, Elena, just to hear you say it, I did not ruin your life?” Even though he asked the question casually, she had heard a grain of doubt in his voice. Apparently, even this tall, handsome lord needed assurances sometimes.

“No, Husband, no. While I have sorrow and am still working on asking myself the right question, as you suggested, I have had opportunities I would never have had. I still love my village and the life I had there, but this life is different. If I had never married you, I never would have gone to the opera. And you would never have translated it for me, and we wouldn’t—”

“Be here now,” he finished for her, turning his head toward hers. Even if she had to leave him, she would never forget that moment, that crescendo, even when she was old and gray. But right now, the thought of growing old and gray without the man beside her left a hollowness in her chest.

“You have enriched my life, Husband. Being married to you is a privilege. Friendly as you are, I feel you do not let many people truly know you.”

“I suppose I do not.” Turning away from him, she wrapped his arm around herself, feeling his rough hands against her skin.

“But it’s not enough for you to stay,” he said quietly.

Elena loosened her grip on his hand as she felt some of the shattered ice begin to reconstitute as she tried to erect some of her old defenses. How could she leave the best man she knew? But how could she not return if there was word of her family? That was all she had longed for all these years, yet that dream was becoming more distant lately. She did not know what to hope for anymore. All she knew was that hope was exhausting.

She felt his hand tighten in hers and then relax as he let the moment pass, and his voice was much lighter as he spoke. “What a clod I am, here I was meaning to give you comfort, and here you are comforting me.”

“I think we are comforting each other, Husband.”

“I supposed that’s to be tolerated.” His hand began to trace the outline of her breast, then slowly crept to the top of her nightgown.

“Well, Wife, how do you feel about marital duties since we have several hours until the rest of the world is awake?”

“Marital duties make them sound like a chore.” He slid the nightgown off her shoulder, revealing her left breast.

“Oh, they may be considered a duty, but for us, they are all pleasure,” he said, cupping her breast, and for a few more hours, they were engaged in much more than duty.

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Later that day, Sophie was preparing to depart to stay with a recently widowed friend in town. As they bid her goodbye, David overheard her speaking to Irene. “Now I want to see improvements on our initial drafting. I know you have it in you to think this through to the fullest. Send me your revisions, and I will look them over.”

“Yes, Aunt Sophie.”

“We may build you a school yet.”

“We won’t need to build it if we purchase a property.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Make a plan first.”

“Yes, Aunt Sophie,” Irene responded dutifully.

“And you, Nephew? What of you? Will you take your seat in the House of Lords?”

“Next session, most likely.”

“You better. I don’t much like the direction this country is going in.”

“Yes, Aunt Sophie,” he said, parroting Irene.

“I will be in touch about the business.”

“You have handled it marvelously since I have been gone.” During her visit, they discussed how they would manage things in the future. Now that David had returned, he wanted to take a more active role but did not want to take anything away from Sophie, who had a keen mind for business.

“How do you like your new secretary?” Elena asked.

“Oh yes, I’ve been meaning to thank you, Elena. She has been a find. Writes wonderfully in Italian. Fiery little thing, too, not afraid to stand up for herself. I don’t mind having her around.” Which was very high praise coming from Sophie.

“And her past, it does not bother you?”

“Why should it? It’s not her fault this world is run by terrible men.”

Elena, who was usually so restrained, threw her arms around Sophie as if overcome by the moment. Sophie, rarely caught off guard, looked stunned, then gingerly patted



Elena's back.

"Oh, I do love you, Aunt Sophie," Elena exclaimed.

At that utterance, David and Irene were the ones caught off guard, and he saw his own shock mirrored on his sister's face. He had never heard Elena express love for anyone in the present tense before, not even Goliath. Even though he knew he shouldn't get his hopes up, the sentiment still blossomed traitorously in his heart, and as Irene looked over at him in surprise, he gave a bemused shrug. He could only trust that this new part of their marriage, of going to the estate, would help open up her heart more fully. David had returned to the Foreign Office the previous day to learn there was no news of Anatole. However, the man he spoke to mentioned that he had heard of several families who had fled Dobruja and stayed in Constantinople after the invasion but had no names or contacts. He had promised to write immediately if he heard anything, and David believed him, the solemn civil servant he seemed to be.

He was torn on whether to tell Elena—even though they had agreed to honesty, he sensed every time she got her hopes up just to be dashed again that something died a little inside her, and he hated to cause her that kind of pain. He wondered if his hesitation in telling her was also tied to his belief that she would fall in love with the estate and never want to leave, but he swallowed that down. He would tell her if he heard more, he resolved.

Elena pulled back from Sophie, looking a little embarrassed. Sophie caught her hand, again, not what one would expect from his aunt.

"Elena? Are you afraid to leave?"

Elena looked down.

"Don't let the estate intimidate you, girl. You've been to battlefields, for goodness

sake! The English countryside should not scare you.”

That was not precisely true, as the hotel and hospital had been away from the battlefield, but David knew better than to correct his aunt in this moment.

“My sister had the same look on her face over thirty years ago when she left to become the previous Lady Grayston, the title you now hold. And I’ll tell you what I said to her then: Hold your head high when you walk through that door, and fear no man.”

Elena, whose gaze was riveted on Sophie, nodded slowly, lifting her head as if to stick out her chin.

“There you are.” Sophie reached to tap her under the chin but withdrew her hand and paused, a fleeting sadness crossing her face. “I don’t think my sister could have ever imagined you, my girl, but she would have liked you. I know it in my bones. “

He watched Elena swallow and offer a small smile. As he glanced to his side, he saw Irene’s eyes were full of tears, and his own felt in danger of going the same way. He gripped his cane and made his way closer to the two women.

“Well, I ought to be off. One more thing, Elena.” Sophie turned back.

“Anything.”

Sophie looked down, and he saw something he had never seen in his entire life. Was she blushing? David looked away, stunned and a little embarrassed, as if he had seen something he shouldn’t.

“Could you send me Mrs. Raeburn’s address? I should like to start a correspondence with her.”

Elena blinked and swiftly recovered. "Of course, Aunt Sophie."

"You will give Goliath my best."

"We can send for him," David began, but Sophie cut him off.

"No, you know how I hate drawn-out goodbyes. I will come to the estate when I can. I can see him then."

"Yes, Aunt Sophie."

And with that, she turned with the same determination and economy with which she did everything else and walked out of the door with a swift nod to Fields. Just as she left, Goliath came bounding in.

"You just missed her, old boy," David told the dog, who cocked his head as if sensing a change but unsure of what it was.

"How do you think Goliath will take to the estate?" Irene asked as they began to walk back toward the drawing room.

"Lots of grass and land, all the rabbits to chase, what's not to like?"

"Yes, but London is likely the only home he's never known," Elena interjected.

"He is strong and good at surviving. I am sure he will adapt and find himself quite at home."

Irene had gone on, but Elena lingered, looking unconvinced. He took her hand and drew it to his lips, trying to convey all the hopefulness this new journey gave him. She sighed and gave a small smile, and they both joined Irene and Goliath.

### Chapter Eighteen

A few days before they were planning to leave London, Elena found herself sitting at the piano once more. She tried to remember the lessons she'd had with David, but all she could recall was a searing heat, and somehow ending up on top of the piano. They could never tell Irene about what they had done on her sacred piano, Elena decided, or they would all surely die of mortification. Irene was extremely fond of the Broadwood, and Elena had to admit, it was a beautiful instrument, though she did not have many to compare it to.

Sitting at the piano, she could feel Goliath looking at her while he sat on the floor with one eye open. Sometimes, he reminded her of herself, always looking out for danger, for that moment everything would slip away. She had thought he might be a good companion for David, with their wounded legs and bodies, but she was beginning to wonder if he might be even more of a kindred spirit to her.

Giving him a small nod, she set her fingers on the keys. She pictured in her mind what David had her do before, the feel of her hands on his...and she pressed down. Goliath howled. Like before, she was reminded of the small but powerful difference between noise and music. Perhaps she could convince Irene to take her on as a student if the school got off the ground. When it got off the ground, she corrected herself.

“Are you trying to teach Goliath how to sing?”

She looked up to see her husband casually leaning against the doorframe and felt the heat of the memories of the room pulse in her veins. She ought to be embarrassed by

her horrible playing, but he knew the extent of her musical abilities. He was supposed to be her teacher, after all.

“I thought my teacher would help me develop my skills, but alas...” she trailed off dramatically.

He walked over and sat on the bench beside her, setting down his cane and pausing to scratch Goliath on the head. “I suppose we did get rather...distracted in our previous lessons. But I have to admit, I live for those kinds of distractions.”

Elena bit her lip to keep from smiling. “I do, too, Husband. But I would still like to learn to play.”

“I think I have a solution. What if, when I successfully teach you a song, we reward ourselves with a distraction?”

“So if I can play one song, then we will reward ourselves?”

He nodded, his lips curving into a wicked grin.

“But what about Goliath?”

David leaned back to look at the dog. “He’s quite the prude. He’ll give us our privacy.”

She shook her head, but the anticipation of both of their previous distractions and the excitement of learning a song coursed through her, and she felt young and free in a way she hadn’t felt in a long time.

As he started to put his hands on the keys, she put a hand on his arm. His small shiver only increased the heat in her own blood. “I want to try it on my own this time. Not

with my hands on top of yours. Not that I don't enjoy my hands on yours," she added, "but Irene says that is not the best way to learn."

"She is correct. That's the way I learned, but it was very informal. A proper teacher would not have you do that. But I happen to be very improper. And I wanted an excuse to touch you." He ran a finger down her arm, and she tried to ignore the gooseflesh erupting along her skin.

"Husband, remember, our reward."

"Right, right, yes." He took a deep breath, then cracked his neck from side to side, flexing his fingers. "I'm going to teach you a song my mother made up when I was a child. First, I'm going to play it on the lower notes. I will show you where to put your hands, but I want you to copy my movements. Again, this may not be proper, but unlike Irene, I never learned from a teacher other than my mother."

He played a series of notes several times through, making sure Elena was familiar with the melody, which was short and airy. He then positioned her hands on the keys and had her imitate his movements on higher notes. It was difficult at first, and she made many mistakes. When she first began, Goliath seemed so indignant at the affront to his ears, which, in fairness, were large and upright, that he left the room. However, David was a patient and encouraging teacher, and soon, Elena was able to master the simple melody.

"I am going to play a different part on the lower notes. Try to keep playing what you learned, and don't focus too much on what I am doing. It will make sense eventually."

She kept playing, and she noticed him playing something different than her. At first, it threw her off, and she was afraid she would make a mistake, but she pushed through, and all of a sudden, what she was playing felt entwined and supported by his

notes. She recognized with a burst of delight that they were making music. And then that delight morphed into a deeper realization: they were building something together based on trust, passion, and something more. They played the song several times through, then simultaneously, their hands stopped, both of them panting. They turned to look at each other, and Elena was struck as she always was by how their scarring was a strange mirror of the other as they each reached up at the same time to caress the other's scarred skin. Then, somehow, both of their arms went around each other, and they came together in a frenzy of joy and eagerness.

After some time, David rose and adjusted the latch on the French doors adjoining the drawing room. Then, she found him kneeling in front of her as she sat on the bench, her skirts pushed up and his hand roving up her legs, peeling down her stockings and kissing each inch of revealed flesh. Elena reclined on her elbows, hitting the keys, which clanked loudly. He pulled the tapes of her drawers and eased them down her legs, again kissing all the skin newly exposed to the light and air. She shuddered as she felt him kiss his way up her thigh and began to arch her body in anticipation. He reached her sex and took a deep, luxurious lick, then looked up at her. As she felt a pulse of sensation throughout her body, she gave him a small nod, dipping her head back to enjoy his dedicated ministrations as she continued to rest on the keys. Her elbows began to ache, but the pain was worth it for this beautiful pleasure. She had never done this before that first night together. She wondered if she ought to feel ashamed, but instead, as all that energy that had welled up inside her body centered at the apex of her thighs, she just felt release. He licked longer and deeper, finding a steady rhythm, and she felt herself closer and closer to a peak as a wave of feeling and intensity crashed over her entire body. In her mind, she thought, *crescendo*, and cried out, though she tried to cover her mouth with her hand.

As she recovered herself, David pulled her to the nearby settee and looked questioningly at her as he unbuttoned the placket of his trousers.

“Yes?”

“Yes, darling.”

He entered her with great force, rocking into her, and she met him, this time chasing that climax, that crescendo, moving her body in harmony with his. They joined together until they both cried out, and he quickly left her, covering himself with his hand. She felt his absence but understood why he did what he did. Once more he was trying to respect her wishes, her future. After he had wiped his hand with a handkerchief and sat next to her, he adjusted her skirts and petticoats to cover her thighs, but she sat so that her legs below her knee were still bare, dangling off the side of the settee.

“That was the most pleasant distraction I have ever had in a music room,” he said, sounding a bit breathless.

“Likewise.” Was all she had the power to say. She was trying to catch her breath when a thought struck her. “Husband?”

“Wife?”

“Do you have a music room at your estate?”

“With Irene as my sister? She would disown me if I did not have a music room.”

“With a piano?”

“Naturally.”

She let out a breath. She was looking forward to going to the country, but she felt a small seed of fear and doubt in her heart that she couldn’t quite extinguish. Knowing there was a piano eased some of that fear.



“Good. Then I can learn more songs.”

“And we can reward ourselves with future distractions.”

She gave him a long, slow smile.

“Naturally.”

By the day before they were to leave, Elena’s seed of fear had sprouted into a whole garden of doubt. That morning, she woke with the dawn and sat at her vanity, staring out the window at her view of London. She knew it was a limited view, but with its busy, crowded streets, this city had been hers for the past three years. She knew David was correct that they ought to leave, but she could not rid herself of the worry in her chest.

“Elena?”

She looked back at her husband, whose eyes were still closed but who was reaching his arm for her on the bed.

“I’m over here. I just rose to watch the sunrise.”

“We’re not farmers, Elena,” he grumbled, “we don’t rise with the sun. Especially during the Season.”

She walked back to the bed, pausing to stand above him and stroke his hair gently as he seemed to return to sleep. Suddenly, he grabbed her arm and pulled her back into bed, wrapping his arms around her in a tight cage.

“Well done, my lord, you had me fooled.”

“The old eyes closed trick. Works like a charm.”

She clicked her tongue but still nestled into his arms, willing the warmth to help rid her of her fears. David rolled her to her back, loosened his grip, and stayed on his side. His green eyes searched her face as his playful expression shifted toward something more serious.

“Why did you rise so early, my love?”

She weighed telling him, but she shook her head. “You will think it is silly.”

He continued to search her eyes, waiting for her to go on. She realized she did want to tell him, but she did not know quite what to say. She stroked his hair as she weighed her options. “This, for the most part, has been my home these last few years.”

David blew out a long breath. “This has been the only stable home you have known since you saw your childhood home ransacked and abandoned.”

“I suppose, yes.” It did feel good to get off her chest, and she went on quickly. “I know that leaving right now is the best course of action, but I cannot help but be sad to leave. And a little afraid of your estate.”

He pushed himself up on an elbow, his gaze raking her over with concern. “You’re afraid of the estate?”

“Not of the estate itself, but of how people will see me, view me. I hear some of what the worst in the ton say about me, how some gentlemen treat me.”

“Not since—”

“No, not since you returned. Truly, it did not bother me very much. But, in a new place, in your home? I don’t want to embarrass you or Irene.”

David entwined his hand with Elena’s and brought their joined hands between them as she shifted to her side.

“I cannot promise that everything will be perfect, and I understand your fears, Elena. I do. However, most people around the estate like our family but consider me a bit eccentric.”

“You? Don’t most gentlemen marry strange foreign women or have their aunts run a business because they are skilled at that work?”

He acknowledged her sarcasm with a roll of his eyes and went on. “I do not think they will be all that surprised that I brought a foreign woman back from the war. And once they get to know you, they will all fall in love with you, and Goliath will be terribly jealous.”

“I think you are optimistic.”

“I have been told it is one of my more annoying qualities.”

“That is true. Even outside Balaclava, there were only a few days where I saw true darkness upon you.”

“Yes, thank goodness I had you to pull me out of that.”

She looked away, humbled by his admission. They sat like that in silence for a moment when David asked, “Elena, did I do you a disservice when I married you?”

“What?” She was so surprised by his question that she sat up and looked down at

him. “What moved you to ask that?”

David half sat up, leaning back against the headboard. “I can’t quite say.” He shrugged. “But it has been gnawing at me since the first night we went out in Society. I had not realized what I had invited you into. I wonder if I had, well, taken you out of the frying pan and into another fire. It means—”

“Yes, I have heard that one. Sophie says it a great deal when Parliament passes a new law she disagrees with.” She was suddenly afraid he was asking something else. “Do you...regret marrying me? I know now how cruel the ton can be. I do not wish to bring shame to your family or business.” She waited with bated breath, afraid the answer was yes.

“What?” He froze as if horrified by her question. “Absolutely not. It was the best decision I’ve made in this life. I suppose I’m just concerned you might regret your decision. I know the ton. I grew up around Society. I didn’t realize in the moment that you would have to learn entirely new rules, that some would never accept you. I thought I was doing a noble thing, doing something that would protect you, but I hadn’t thought it all the way through, what it would mean for you. And perhaps, selfishly, I wanted a reason to keep you in my life.” As she began to respond, he held up a hand.

“But I am most afraid that you might have found your family. That you would have been more likely to have located them after the war had you stayed.”

Elena turned her body so that she looked down at him more fully. She could not think how they had gotten here. She had never thought about the choice to marry him since she had made the decision. Once he had suggested it and convinced her, it seemed the only course of action. She had not considered what would have happened if he had not asked or if she had said no.

“My lord,” she began, holding up her hand as he started to correct her. “Husband.” He looked up, his green gaze catching hers. “I have never regretted my choice, truly. I am very glad I married you. Very grateful.”

“But I don’t want you to be grateful, Elena. I’m the lucky one.”

“Then let us say that we are both lucky.” She took his hand, which still bore some of the scars of war.

“You don’t speak of it very often.”

He cocked an eyebrow.

“The war.”

“I know.” He swallowed. “I cannot tell if always looking forward is a virtue or a sin.”

“Possibly neither.” She gave him a small smile.

“Mayhap, you are correct.” He sighed. “I think about it, but not all the time. Most of the time, I can keep that door shut. I’m afraid that if I always keep it open, I’ll remember all those who did not survive. I’ll think about the men I killed and their families living without them. I’m afraid if I look too deeply, I’ll never come back.”

She understood what he was saying, even though she hadn’t fought in a war. There were some days and moments it became impossible to look too deeply into. The what-ifs could drive a person in circles in their mind.

“Would you like to go back someday? To see their final resting place, to say goodbye to your fellow soldiers?” She stroked his knuckles. She hadn’t realized it before, but she had come to love his hands, not just for the wicked things they did to her body

but for their strength and roughness. She loved the feel and texture of them. They were rough for gentleman's hands, but she supposed that war had likely changed his body for the rest of his life. And perhaps his soul a bit too.

"I suppose I might." They sat again in silence as she stroked his hands, the sounds of the city beginning to wake up around them.

"Would you like to go back to look for them? Your family?" he asked softly.

"We could do that? You would bring me?"

"Of course I would bring you. Who else knows their way around or speaks the language?"

Elena shifted slightly and studied him. He was smiling, but a tinge of sadness shaded his eyes as if there was deep pain behind his words that he did not want her to see. At that moment, she truly did believe that he loved her. Not in the selfish, possessive way that Anatole had but in a steady, giving way, where he would always put her happiness above his own. She felt like a giant weight had landed on her chest, shattering most of the ice around her heart.

"You would do that for me?" was all she was able to say.

"Anything." He gave her a small, rueful smile. "Let me see what the Foreign Office says, and we can decide. I'm only sorry we didn't go look sooner, but..."

"No, you had to take care of yourself. I understand why you needed to do that." She turned away again, feeling unsteady at how this realization affected her. "You do not speak of that very often either."

"I don't speak of the clinic because it was monotonous." He lay back, and some of

the rigidity seemed to leave as his voice took on a more casual tone. “Again, if I thought too much about my situation, I might have gone mad. But I also came to accept myself over time, I suppose. I know my body will never be the same, but I am...at peace with that. Sometimes, I think I would have been all right if I had never recovered my ability to walk. For so long, I thought I couldn’t be a man if I couldn’t use my body below the waist, but I could have used a chair. I knew several men in Bern who did. I have means, and I have you and Sophie and Irene. I’m not saying it would have been easy, but I lost years with the three of you I could have had back if I had accepted myself as I was. The experience helped me see that the world is designed for people who can walk. I had to endure excruciating exercises and pain just to do it again. And what if I had been a working man? I wouldn’t have had that luxury of money and time.” He paused and let out a sigh. “My legs will have weakness, likely for the rest of my life, and, again, I am at peace with that. It doesn’t make me any less. It doesn’t mean I’m not a man. Does that make sense?”

“Yes, I think it does. I pity any man who mistakes your strength for weakness, for I think you are the very best man I know.” As she said the words, she knew them for truth. The revelation rocked her, and she felt further shaken by how long it had taken her to realize this. She wanted to tell him more, to communicate to him how important what they shared was to her.

“I would have supported you if you had lived in a chair. I would still have wanted to be your...” She trailed off as her cheeks heated.

“My lover?” He glanced over at her with both heat and laughter in his eyes.

She nodded shyly. “I know it is not the same, but I used to be much heavier. Before the war, before I knew hunger. It was fashionable in the village where I grew up. But I wonder if you would have desired to be my lover quite as much.” The word lover almost stuck in her throat again, but she felt it needed to be said.

He turned his head to regard her, and she felt his gaze run along her entire body. Even though she wore a nightgown, she felt bare, as if he could see through the plain cotton.

“My darling wife, I love your body at any size. There is nothing in the universe that can change that.”

As she looked at him, she felt that weight on her chest pinch, and the pain was both beautiful and terrifying. Feeling undone, she quickly changed the subject.

“Did you come to this acceptance of yourself at the clinic or since you have been back?”

“Mostly since I have been back, even though I often find I am trying to make myself fit into this world like pushing a square peg through a round hole. But I also realized all of you would support me however I am.” He swallowed. “No, I just gave myself small tasks at the clinic to keep from boredom and despair. I had time to appreciate all that Mrs. Raeburn did outside of Balaclava. I had to remind myself how lucky I was to end up there, across from the hotel. So many died in the hospital barracks in Scutari. If I hadn’t lost my ability to walk, I would have likely been sent there instead of waiting for transport to Portsmouth.”

“I heard about the barracks in Scutari. We were lucky we did not have as many outbreaks.”

“Lucky, but I also think Mrs. Raeburn has knowledge and skill that others do not have.”

“She does, doesn’t she? Too bad she isn’t appreciated by most men of science.”

They sat in silence for a moment as they thought about that, and she lay back



alongside him.

“So, Elena, just to hear you say it, I did not ruin your life?” Even though he asked the question casually, she had heard a grain of doubt in his voice. Apparently, even this tall, handsome lord needed assurances sometimes.

“No, Husband, no. While I have sorrow and am still working on asking myself the right question, as you suggested, I have had opportunities I would never have had. I still love my village and the life I had there, but this life is different. If I had never married you, I never would have gone to the opera. And you would never have translated it for me, and we wouldn’t—”

“Be here now,” he finished for her, turning his head toward hers. Even if she had to leave him, she would never forget that moment, that crescendo, even when she was old and gray. But right now, the thought of growing old and gray without the man beside her left a hollowness in her chest.

“You have enriched my life, Husband. Being married to you is a privilege. Friendly as you are, I feel you do not let many people truly know you.”

“I suppose I do not.” Turning away from him, she wrapped his arm around herself, feeling his rough hands against her skin.

“But it’s not enough for you to stay,” he said quietly.

Elena loosened her grip on his hand as she felt some of the shattered ice begin to reconstitute as she tried to erect some of her old defenses. How could she leave the best man she knew? But how could she not return if there was word of her family? That was all she had longed for all these years, yet that dream was becoming more distant lately. She did not know what to hope for anymore. All she knew was that hope was exhausting.

She felt his hand tighten in hers and then relax as he let the moment pass, and his voice was much lighter as he spoke. “What a clod I am, here I was meaning to give you comfort, and here you are comforting me.”

“I think we are comforting each other, Husband.”

“I supposed that’s to be tolerated.” His hand began to trace the outline of her breast, then slowly crept to the top of her nightgown.

“Well, Wife, how do you feel about marital duties since we have several hours until the rest of the world is awake?”

“Marital duties make them sound like a chore.” He slid the nightgown off her shoulder, revealing her left breast.

“Oh, they may be considered a duty, but for us, they are all pleasure,” he said, cupping her breast, and for a few more hours, they were engaged in much more than duty.

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Later that day, Sophie was preparing to depart to stay with a recently widowed friend in town. As they bid her goodbye, David overheard her speaking to Irene. “Now I want to see improvements on our initial drafting. I know you have it in you to think this through to the fullest. Send me your revisions, and I will look them over.”

“Yes, Aunt Sophie.”

“We may build you a school yet.”

“We won’t need to build it if we purchase a property.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Make a plan first.”

“Yes, Aunt Sophie,” Irene responded dutifully.

“And you, Nephew? What of you? Will you take your seat in the House of Lords?”

“Next session, most likely.”

“You better. I don’t much like the direction this country is going in.”

“Yes, Aunt Sophie,” he said, parroting Irene.

“I will be in touch about the business.”

“You have handled it marvelously since I have been gone.” During her visit, they discussed how they would manage things in the future. Now that David had returned, he wanted to take a more active role but did not want to take anything away from Sophie, who had a keen mind for business.

“How do you like your new secretary?” Elena asked.

“Oh yes, I’ve been meaning to thank you, Elena. She has been a find. Writes wonderfully in Italian. Fiery little thing, too, not afraid to stand up for herself. I don’t mind having her around.” Which was very high praise coming from Sophie.

“And her past, it does not bother you?”

“Why should it? It’s not her fault this world is run by terrible men.”

Elena, who was usually so restrained, threw her arms around Sophie as if overcome by the moment. Sophie, rarely caught off guard, looked stunned, then gingerly patted

Elena's back.

"Oh, I do love you, Aunt Sophie," Elena exclaimed.

At that utterance, David and Irene were the ones caught off guard, and he saw his own shock mirrored on his sister's face. He had never heard Elena express love for anyone in the present tense before, not even Goliath. Even though he knew he shouldn't get his hopes up, the sentiment still blossomed traitorously in his heart, and as Irene looked over at him in surprise, he gave a bemused shrug. He could only trust that this new part of their marriage, of going to the estate, would help open up her heart more fully. David had returned to the Foreign Office the previous day to learn there was no news of Anatole. However, the man he spoke to mentioned that he had heard of several families who had fled Dobruja and stayed in Constantinople after the invasion but had no names or contacts. He had promised to write immediately if he heard anything, and David believed him, the solemn civil servant he seemed to be.

He was torn on whether to tell Elena—even though they had agreed to honesty, he sensed every time she got her hopes up just to be dashed again that something died a little inside her, and he hated to cause her that kind of pain. He wondered if his hesitation in telling her was also tied to his belief that she would fall in love with the estate and never want to leave, but he swallowed that down. He would tell her if he heard more, he resolved.

Elena pulled back from Sophie, looking a little embarrassed. Sophie caught her hand, again, not what one would expect from his aunt.

"Elena? Are you afraid to leave?"

Elena looked down.

"Don't let the estate intimidate you, girl. You've been to battlefields, for goodness

sake! The English countryside should not scare you.”

That was not precisely true, as the hotel and hospital had been away from the battlefield, but David knew better than to correct his aunt in this moment.

“My sister had the same look on her face over thirty years ago when she left to become the previous Lady Grayston, the title you now hold. And I’ll tell you what I said to her then: Hold your head high when you walk through that door, and fear no man.”

Elena, whose gaze was riveted on Sophie, nodded slowly, lifting her head as if to stick out her chin.

“There you are.” Sophie reached to tap her under the chin but withdrew her hand and paused, a fleeting sadness crossing her face. “I don’t think my sister could have ever imagined you, my girl, but she would have liked you. I know it in my bones. “

He watched Elena swallow and offer a small smile. As he glanced to his side, he saw Irene’s eyes were full of tears, and his own felt in danger of going the same way. He gripped his cane and made his way closer to the two women.

“Well, I ought to be off. One more thing, Elena.” Sophie turned back.

“Anything.”

Sophie looked down, and he saw something he had never seen in his entire life. Was she blushing? David looked away, stunned and a little embarrassed, as if he had seen something he shouldn’t.

“Could you send me Mrs. Raeburn’s address? I should like to start a correspondence with her.”

Elena blinked and swiftly recovered. “Of course, Aunt Sophie.”

“You will give Goliath my best.”

“We can send for him,” David began, but Sophie cut him off.

“No, you know how I hate drawn-out goodbyes. I will come to the estate when I can. I can see him then.”

“Yes, Aunt Sophie.”

And with that, she turned with the same determination and economy with which she did everything else and walked out of the door with a swift nod to Fields. Just as she left, Goliath came bounding in.

“You just missed her, old boy,” David told the dog, who cocked his head as if sensing a change but unsure of what it was.

“How do you think Goliath will take to the estate?” Irene asked as they began to walk back toward the drawing room.

“Lots of grass and land, all the rabbits to chase, what’s not to like?”

“Yes, but London is likely the only home he’s never known,” Elena interjected.

“He is strong and good at surviving. I am sure he will adapt and find himself quite at home.”

Irene had gone on, but Elena lingered, looking unconvinced. He took her hand and drew it to his lips, trying to convey all the hopefulness this new journey gave him. She sighed and gave a small smile, and they both joined Irene and Goliath.

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Elena turned to look at the townhouse as it began to fade from view among the hustle and bustle of the streets.

David lifted her chin to look at him. “Remember what Sophie said. Chin up.”

Elena gave a slight nod and turned around to face forward. Irene was sitting across from them, helping Goliath get arranged. He was such a large dog that he did not always fit easily inside a carriage.

“You will like it. I promise, Elena.” Irene twisted so that Goliath could sit next to her without falling. “The only reason I didn’t insist we go sooner was because you seemed so attached to Mrs. Raeburn and the hospital. But you’ve been before.”

“But not for very long. And the weather wasn’t very nice. And I didn’t have to meet very many people.” Elena heard how much she was complaining, so she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from going on.

“Ohhh.” David put a hand to his chest.

“David? Are you all right? Is it your leg?” Elena leaned forward, heart pounding.

“I’ve just understood something about you. Even after all these years, I’ve discovered something new about you.” Elena let out the breath she hadn’t noticed she had been holding as it became clear his exclamation wasn’t about his leg.

“We weren’t in the same place for the last three years. I think that hardly counts—”

“You’re shy,” David stated. There was no question in his voice, and a very self-satisfied grin began to cross his face.

“What? No.” Irene sat back, accidentally knocking into Goliath, who gave a small yelp and readjusted. “Is that true? I assumed you didn’t speak to many people because you did not want to make waves in society.”

“Oh, that may be true.” David went on, “But if it comes down to it, between meeting new people and, say, reading a book, what would you prefer, Wife?” David put his hand back below Elena’s chin so she would have to meet his eyes.

Elena sighed, realizing her secret was out. “Reading a book, of course. I talk to people I feel comfortable with or when I feel confident in a place like the hospital. In truth, you were one of the only officers I talked to regularly. Aside from Mrs. Raeburn, I was rather lonely in the Crimea.”

“I didn’t know that. So, I was special to you, too, then?” He was smiling down at her with that boyish smile. She should have been annoyed with his cockiness, but she found it rather charming.

“I suppose you were.” Elena looked down. “I still thought you were a mad Englishman.”

“I suppose I was.” He put his arm around her and stroked down her arm. Goliath shifted loudly next to Irene, breaking their moment as David turned his head toward the dog.

“Poor beast. It will get better once we get out of London.”

“How long is the trip?” Elena asked.



“It will take most of the day, but we should be there before it grows dark. We can take the train someday, and it will only be a few hours.”

Elena couldn't imagine as she had never been on a locomotive before. She leaned her head against David's shoulder and began to let the rhythm of the carriage lull her to sleep.

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David woke to find Elena curled up against him. A few stray golden-brown waves had made their way out of her smart chignon. He stroked them tenderly, trying not to wake her. He looked up to see Irene watching him.

“Are we close?” he mouthed.

Irene nodded and pointed out the window. There was Devil's Hill, named not for its steepness but for some ancient associations with witchcraft. He had fallen and broken his arm running down that hill when he was younger, and he remembered Cook saying it must have been the spirits that pushed him. He always teased Elena for the many otherworldly stories she had of home, but maybe the English put more stock in spirits than they liked to admit.

Looking at the hill, he realized he likely couldn't approach the outdoors with the same energy he had as a youth. Still, he was glad to return to his childhood home for the first time since his injury, as he had only gone to Portsmouth and London when he briefly returned to England three years earlier. Like he had told Elena, he was coming to accept himself as he was. This meant no longer comparing himself to how he was before. He ought to trust his body to know its limits, not worry about what he could or couldn't do. The hill grew more prominent as they approached, and his heart swelled in anticipation of his childhood home. He was suddenly struck by the thought that Elena did not have the privilege of that feeling of home. Whatever nostalgic

ideas she had of childhood were tied up in finding her childhood home abandoned amidst the chaos of war. As horrible as his memories of the war were, and many were awful, at least his weren't tied to his memories of childhood.

Thinking of the war reminded him that he had not met up with the survivors from his regiment in the years since. Still, it was as he told Elena. He felt that if he looked too much into the past, he would get stuck in thoughts of the brutality of war when he had joined in the pursuit of some sort of chivalry and glory. Once he had gotten to know other men in his regiment, he had realized what a charmed life he had led, how many of them had had to join the army out of necessity or opportunity, not on an idealistic whim. How expensive a commission could be to some when it was nothing to him. When he looked too hard, he felt the guilt of almost leaving Irene alone in the world. If he had died, Grayston Park and the title would have gone to a distant cousin. While Irene would have been taken care of because of the business, she would not have been able to return to her childhood home if it had passed to someone else.

His sister's voice shook him from his thoughts. "You should wake her so she can see it as we approach. Here, you can make Goliath do it. She won't blame him." Irene started to scoot against the dog.

"No, I will." Stroking her back tenderly, he leaned to speak softly in her ear. "Wake up, my love."

If there was an intimacy in listening to someone fall asleep, there was also one in watching someone wake up. Elena blinked rapidly for several moments as if she had to remind her brain where she was and who she was with, and he was struck again by his curiosity about her dreams. Some day he would remember to ask her what language she dreamt in and what she dreamt of.

"Are we there?" she rasped.

“Almost, look.”

As if perfectly timed, they rounded the last bend, and Grayston Park came into view, the late afternoon sun perfectly illuminating it with golden light. It wasn't the largest estate in England by any stretch of the imagination. Still, it was sunny, airy, and undeniably home, with its Palladian exterior that brought villas of Italy to mind. His gaze scanned the columns to land on the stairs, which he had never had to think of before. Fortunately, there were only a few leading up to the main entrance, which eased his heart.

He watched Elena's eyes widen as the estate came into view. “I know I have been here before, but it was not in this light or at this time of year. This is your home?”

“This is our home,” he corrected.

He saw the light dim in her eyes, but only briefly, and then golden warmth returned.

“Yes. I think there is much we will do.”

He glanced at Irene, but she merely shrugged and scratched Goliath's head. Elena looked over at the dog.

“This is your new home, Goliath. What do you think?” Upon hearing his name, the dog cocked his head, and David was struck by his resemblance to a large, tame wolf. Even though he could be a regal creature at times, when he was squeezed into the carriage and partially spilling onto Irene's lap, he looked a bit silly.

“I think he needs to run around before he can offer a verdict.” David reached across and scratched the dog's head.

As they arrived and he helped her down, Elena's eyes were wide and almost fearful,

and he was reminded of doe lost in the forest. But she was confident and warm when she entered and met the staff in the entrance hall. He couldn't believe it had taken him so long to realize she was shy, but he hoped that she would come to feel comfortable here, and then, as she said, she would no longer feel shy. As he led her upstairs, they passed a portrait of his mother.

"Stop." Elena looked at the portrait, holding out a hand as if to trace the face in the air. "This is your mother."

"Yes," he answered quietly, touched that she could recognize her without having been told.

"And this, this is your father." She pointed to the portrait of his father, looking statelier and more distinguished than David remembered him in life. He nodded.

"Irene does look a great deal like your mother. But I can see her in you as well. You both have that sparkle of mischief in your eye."

"A sparkle of mischief?" He chortled.

She furrowed her brow and looked up at him. "Do you think Aunt Sophie was right? That your mother would have approved of me?"

"My darling Elena." He kissed the top of her head and inhaled that hint of amber in her hair. "You helped keep our family together. Quite simply, both of my parents would have adored you." You make me happy beyond anything I could have hoped for, he wanted to add, but he held back as Elena gave a small bow to both portraits. He remembered her telling him about icons in her village and the power and reverence they held in her community. She glanced back at him, and he could have sworn he saw her eyes water, but as they turned to go up the stairs, her eyes were dry and curious again.

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Unfortunately, the weather turned sour almost immediately and prevented David from showing his wife the estate with its rolling hills and lush trees, so over the next few days, he gave her a tour of the rooms. As expected, Elena loved the music room, but even more, she was impressed by the library, and he would find himself spending hours in there reading with her.

One afternoon, as the rain pounded the windows outside, they sat in the library together, and he felt that familiar warmth of domesticity take hold in his chest again. He looked up at his wife in his childhood home, reading with her spectacles perched on the edge of her nose, and finally asked the question he had meant to ask for ages.

“Elena, what do you dream?”

She peered over her book at him, adjusting her spectacles. “As in, what do I dream of when I sleep? Or what are my desires or wishes?”

“Both.”

Elena seemed to deliberate momentarily, then said, “I do not remember my dreams.”

“As in, you don’t remember what you dream at night or what you wished for one day?”

“Both.”

He raised an eyebrow. She sighed, running her finger down a page of the book. “When I was a girl, I know I had dreams, but I do not remember anymore. Having

dreams has been a luxury that I could not afford. Not that I begrudge Irene the right to dream. I want her to have that.” She closed her book and looked at him with a wistful smile. “Perhaps I should start to dream again.” She gave a small sniff, then looked at him directly. “What do you dream, Husband?”

He glanced around the room, a space of happiness in his childhood, and had to admit that when he was younger, his dream was just to have his family and his old life back.

“Before the war, I just hoped that everything would work out, that I’d wake up and my father would be back, and all the responsibilities would take care of themselves. Then it was just to walk again. But now...” He shrugged casually. He couldn’t tell her his dream now was that she would stay with him forever. That wouldn’t be fair to her.

“Sophie said that you seemed like you had found purpose in your life as you had not before.” Elena folded her hands and looked at him.

He thought about it for a moment. “You know, when I was younger, I felt so overwhelmed with responsibility, but now I welcome it. I’m ready now. I suppose I have several purposes.” He held up his fingers to list what he was saying: “To be a good friend to the Round Table. To support my sister and my aunt. To make sure the business is profitable, that I am good to my tenants, and have people working for me that are good to my tenants. To look after you and ensure you know you are cared for all your days.” He looked away as if saying the rest was painful. “If that is what you choose.” He looked back at her. “Yes, I’d say all of those are my purpose.”

“You forgot Goliath.”

He held up his thumb. “To make sure that Goliath has enough choice slices of meat for the rest of his days.”

“You forgot someone else.”

“Oh?”

“Who is going to take care of you? You forgot yourself again.”

As she spoke, she rose and walked over to where he was sitting, then began slowly unbuttoning his waistcoat, as he had foregone a coat and cravat or tie in his own library. She moved her way into his lap, delightfully lifting her skirts to straddle him. As she began to push back his braces, running her fingers down the intricate Berlin woolwork, she suddenly stopped as if an idea had struck her.

“Husband.”

“Yes, Wife?” Blast, he could never hide the smile in his voice.

“You must know that you have rather a great deal of land.”

“Yes, you often remind me that I am an indolent, land-owning aristocrat.” She scrunched her nose adorably, so he quickly added, “As you should.”

“As I should,” she echoed.

She began to push his braces off his shoulders again. Her hands traced his shoulder blades as she did, sending chills up and down his spine. His body began to respond to her closeness.

“What would you think, Husband, if we were to build a hospital or clinic on some of that land? One of the maids told me there wasn’t one for many miles. What of the cost?”

He pulled back to look at her. That pride in her capability and ingenuity swelled in his chest, but there was something else there, too. Hope. Hope that she was putting down roots and really choosing to be here with him.

“Don’t worry about the cost. If it would benefit everyone, we can make it work. Is that your dream, Elena?”

“I don’t know.” She paused and adjusted her spectacles, but he saw that she was really giving herself a moment to think through her response. “I never thought to be a nurse or a healer. That was what my circumstance dictated. In truth, neither was what I could have imagined my life would be. But like you, I like to take care of people. I want them to be well. I want to see things like land put to good use. And maybe we could train other dogs to comfort soldiers in the hospital like Goliath. That might be getting ahead of myself.” She bit her lip, which made David’s blood heat further, but he tried to focus on what she was saying. “But I don’t want to take away from Irene’s dream, from her school.”

“I don’t think you would, my love.” He cupped her face, skimming her dimples with his thumbs. She was so beautiful, so precious to him. He hoped this meant she wanted to stay. He didn’t know what he would do if she did not. As a gentleman and a merchant, he was not used to patience in claiming what he wanted. But this would have to be her choice, her decision. “You would not need to be here all year. You could appoint some kind of administrator to run the hospital, and you can also help Irene or Mrs. Raeburn in London. Of course, I hope you still have some time for me amidst all this work.”

“Yes, who else would remind you to stop and take care of yourself?”

They slowly grinned at each other, and he longingly wished she wasn’t wearing such a high-necked gown that day. Why was women’s fashion lowcut in the ballroom, but high necklines were popular at home? There were so many blasted buttons. Elena



looked down at her gown as if reading his mind.

“I think you might be the only one undressing as we celebrate.”

She removed her reading spectacles and, at the same time, began to pull the pins from her hair. As the golden-brown waves fell past her shoulders to her waist, his breath caught. This felt like a fantasy he did not even know that he had. He had thought their repertoire only extended to music rooms and bedchambers. How delightful to find a new fantasy in the library. She pulled his shirt over his head and began to nuzzle his neck. The chills up and down his spine began to spread to his entire body as she ran her hands down his torso. Then, she sat on the desk, skirts and petticoats still hiked up, and pulled him to stand.

“Celebrate?” He barely got the word out.

“Yes. A new hospital. Irene’s school. Finding your purpose. Let’s celebrate right here, on the desk.”

“You naughty girl, I’ve corrupted you. Or perhaps you’ve corrupted me.” As she pushed down his trousers, and they fell to the floor with a light thud, she ran her hands appreciatively down his back, then slowly over his buttocks, and he felt himself grow hard.

“Elena,” he warned. “I can’t wait.”

“Patience, Husband, patience.” Beginning at the center of his chest, she began to kiss her way down his body. “Some celebrations must be long and drawn out...”

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Now that it was sunny, David had taken to showing Elena new parts of the estate every day, which meant lots of walking for him and Goliath, who often joined them. At first, she protested that it was too much for both of them, but David could be stubborn when he wanted to be. And he was more energetic and full of life in the country air, so how could she deny him? He said he was accepting his body as it was now, so she ought to trust him to know himself and his abilities.

One afternoon, she found herself out walking with the both of them. David had promised her some kind of a surprise, but he was being very intentionally mysterious about it.

“What is this plant? I have never seen it before.” She bent to examine a bright yellow flower that opened before her eyes, briefly distracting her from this so-called mystery.

“That’s the evening primrose. They usually only open at twilight, so either it’s a little early today or later than I thought.” David looked up at the sun in the sky and checked the shadows on the ground. Once he looked to be satisfied, he went on, “It’s not native to the area. It was brought here from the Americas several hundred years ago. It took some time, but eventually, it put down roots, and now it thrives across the countryside.” He plucked one flower and placed it behind her ear as she rose.

Elena touched the flower at her ear and looked up at him. “And how did that happen?”

“Good soil, nutrients, sun. A safe and welcoming environment allowed it to put down roots, stay, and thrive.”

“An environment can do that, I suppose,” she conceded, then went on. “But it’s difficult to know if the environment will reject a plant, whether it will be ripped out by the roots again.”

“I’m no horticulturist, but I’ve noticed that strong and resilient plants thrive in most places.”

“You think I’m strong and resilient?”

“Ahh, you noticed my obvious metaphor.” He chuckled.

She swatted him gently on the arm. “I always spot your metaphors, Husband. But you did not answer my question.”

They had been strolling leisurely, but he rounded on her just then, forcing her to stop. “Of course I think you are strong and resilient.” He brushed the flower lightly with his thumb. “Honestly, it was part of what drew me to you. You didn’t give up on yourself despite everything that happened to you. And you didn’t give up on me, even though I had given up on myself.”

Elena’s throat went dry, and she felt unsure what to say next. Fortunately, Goliath chose that moment to speed past them, clearly on the hunt for his quarry. David looked after him, a worried expression on his face. Against her will, Elena’s heart melted. Her shields were growing perilously low these days. With David, she was finally realizing that perhaps she did not need any shields at all.

“He will come back when I call. I know he will,” she reassured him, biting the inside of her cheek to keep from giving away how much his concern for Goliath touched her heart.

“That’s because I trained him so well.” David’s worried expression quickly morphed

into something like smug satisfaction.

“You? I was the one that saved him,” Elena squeaked in mock indignation.

“I carried his mangled body back to our townhouse.”

“This is silly. We both saved him. And Irene. And I know he will save us, too, in his own way.”

“Well, he won’t save that rabbit.” He put his hand around her shoulders, and they slowly began walking again.

“He is just giving chase. He won’t kill it. He doesn’t kill for sport.”

“He is a dog, Elena. I don’t think he is that philosophical.”

She hadn’t been paying attention to where they were walking when she saw something in the distance she knew she had seen before, but she could not quite place it.

“What are those structures?”

“Ah, the surprise. Those house the skeps for bees.”

“Bees?”

“You know, small insects? Tend to sting when provoked?”

“I know what a bee is, but why are you keeping bees?”

“For honey, of course. I don’t much fancy being stung.”

He grabbed her hand and pulled her to him, twirling her around. The reckless energy that their bantering had spun was infectious, and she found herself laughing for the sheer joy of it, as if all those heavy things, all those thoughts that weighed her down all the time, just dissipated in the clear, crisp air. As the spinning slowed, she tried to catch her breath and listen to what he was saying.

“I’m keeping bees to make honey so you can make baklava and teach us to make it.” He seemed almost as breathless as she felt. “Then we can have it out here anytime you want.” He looked down as if he was thinking through what he would say next but then looked back up at her and said simply. “We can’t let the candle be snuffed out.”

Something in Elena’s heart cracked open at that moment, possibly the last shards of ice. That feeling that everything would slip through her fingers in a second fell away. She suddenly saw her husband more clearly than ever before, even as they were twirling in a very undignified fashion on this country lane. She drew him to her, hugging him tightly, and held on for dear life. He brought his head down and kissed her for several moments. Thank you, she tried to say with the kiss. Thank you for not letting me forget my home and proving that not all memories must have sorrow. I see you, you wonderful man, and I never want to let you go. As their kiss intensified, his hands roamed to her backside, and he lifted her up to kiss her more deeply while keeping his hands in place.

“David, not here, the bees!”

“Hmmm, should we risk it? I think it would be worth getting stung.” He found that spot on her neck that somehow drove out all rational thought, but again, they were interrupted by Goliath, who had come running back to bark at the bees.

“I’m not worried about us so much, but him.”

David looked up to regard the dog. “That is true. Poor beast has not yet learned the

wisdom of self-preservation.” He turned his gaze from Goliath back to her. “Now that we have discovered the music room and the library, mayhap we ought to sample the outdoors?” He nuzzled her neck, sending jolts of pleasure straight through her entire being.

“How about somewhere away from stinging insects?”

“Where is your sense of adventure, my lady?” He set her down but held her hand in his as they began to walk again, with Goliath running just ahead of them.

“I have had enough adventure for one lifetime. I think I am ready for a quiet life,” she grumbled.

“Not too quiet, not so quiet that you can’t be slightly scandalous with me.”

“No, not quite that quiet,” she admitted. He looked rather pleased with himself at her response and glanced over toward the bees.

“You know, my mother used to tell me that, in olden days, the bees were seen as sacred. To some, bees were the link between our world and the spirits. So, if you had a message for the dead, you could also tell the bees. I like it much more than sitting at a gravestone, actually.”

Elena thought about what she would want to say to her family, then, with a pang, realized deep down that she was starting to think of them as truly dead and gone. A profound sorrow tinged with a lightness that made her feel guilty gripped her heart.

To distance herself from her turbulent thoughts, she turned her head up to look at her husband. “What would you tell them, your parents?”

“I think I would tell them how much Irene has grown. That I’m trying to do my best.”

He looked down, and she could see he was really considering this, that despite his light tone, their loss weighed heavily on him.

She tightened her hold on his hand. “The Orthodox have a saying at funerals: may their memory be eternal.”

“I like that. Very much.” He paused again as if to collect his thoughts. “I think I would also tell them that I went to war rather recklessly, but thankfully, I came back mostly one in piece. And I might mention the strange foreign woman I brought back, who cast some kind of spell on me, making me her eternal servant.”

“She sounds quite demanding, this foreign mistress,” Elena offered, holding back a smile. “Oh, she can be a cruel taskmaster, making me save stray dogs, and—”

“Husband, Goliath will hear you!” She playfully tried to grab her hand away from his. He grasped her hand more firmly and drew it up to his lips. She felt the customary spark this action brought on and started to count the hours until they could be together that evening in her head. Lost in her counting, she saw Goliath headbutt David out of the corner of her eye.

“Steady on, old boy.”

David held her hand up to Goliath, allowing him to sniff it. “I’m trying to watch over her, same as you.” He leaned his cane against his side to ruffle Goliath’s fur. “He’s very protective of you. That might be a good thing, but I don’t fancy him attacking me whenever we’re feeling amorous.”

She considered Goliath, who had come to sit in front of them. “I think we can train him not to headbutt you, yes? Although he might have just heard you complaining about him.” She gave him a mischievous grin.

As they bantered and walked along in the fading sunshine, Elena reflected that the countryside might not be so bad if she could spend more days like this. However, she couldn't shake an unease, a sense that she was just missing something in the corner of her eye that she had first felt in London. She tried to convince herself that the eyes she felt watching her belonged to the animals that Goliath chased, but she could not rid herself of an inexplicable chill entirely at odds with the warmth of the late afternoon sun.

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Over time, she came to see that the tenants respected David's family because they saw them as not so far from them, perhaps because of their roots in the merchant class. His family was known throughout the area as generous and attentive landlords. This general goodwill eventually extended to Elena, negating her fears that she would be reviled as a foreign witch. They still stared occasionally, but almost everyone she met with was friendly, and Elena's worries eventually disappeared. As David predicted, most regarded him as good-natured but slightly eccentric, so marrying a strange, foreign woman was not so surprising. They seemed excited that the hospital would create new jobs, as well as new places to sell food and goods. Elena was happy she could help to contribute to David's community, perhaps in a way she would not have had the power to do so in her life before.



*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

Elena awoke one morning with a new lightness in her soul. With all her might, she tried to hold on to the dream she was having, but as much as she tried, it faded away from her, like trying to grab a fistful of air. Opening her eyes, she regarded her husband as he came into view, sleeping with his hand behind his head. His hair had grown rather long, covering much of the scarred flesh on his temple and eyebrow. She gently brushed his hair out of his face, trying not to wake him. She knew he still disliked his scarring, likely much as she still despised her own scars, but she found him beautiful, scars and all. Elena felt the overwhelming need to rouse him and tell him something, but what was it? What had her dream told her? This one had been different, solid and real, and hopeful in a way she wouldn't dare to be hopeful outside of dreams. She remembered Annie once told her that she sometimes woke up and wrote down her dreams so she could remember them later, but Elena was not in the habit of doing so, nor did she have paper at hand. Instead, she leaned over and lightly pressed her lips to David's forehead, trying to say many things she was not yet ready to closely examine in that kiss. She felt his hand come up to her hair, twisting the locks between his fingers.

“Wife.”

“Husband.”

“Whatever shall we do today?” His hand began to travel leisurely from her hair down her back.

She relaxed into his touch. “I was going to meet with some of the builders about plans for the hospital, but that was moved until next week.”

He pushed himself up on his elbow and began playing with her braid. “I would like to attend that meeting to ensure they give you a fair price.”

“I do not need that. I’m a merchant’s daughter,” she scoffed.

He tucked a piece of hair behind her ear and tapped her chin. “Yes, but you do not know the price of materials or labor in England.”

She had to admit he had a point, but she was not ready to concede, still wanting to tease him awake. “True, but I am still the better negotiator.” She hopped up out of bed as he tried to catch her.

“Elena, this isn’t fair. I don’t have my cane.”

“Oh right, I am sorry.” She picked up his cane and walked back toward the bed, reaching it out to him.

“Not fair for you!” He pulled on the other end of the cane, then caught her around the waist and threw her back on the bed as she shrieked with laughter. The lightness in her soul bubbled up, and she cupped his face and kissed him, pulling him to her so she could wrap her arms and legs around him. In that kiss, she tried to share that lightness, to show him how happy she was here.

As they broke apart, he set his forehead against hers. “What were we saying?”

“You were asking me what we were doing today.”

“Ah, yes. I unfortunately have a great deal of business and correspondence, but I hope I can join you later today.”

“Yes, Irene was going to show me the wishing well this afternoon.”

He eased onto his back. “What do you need a wishing well for when you have the bees?”

“True,” she conceded, “but do the bees grant wishes?”

He appeared to think on that for a minute. “I’m not sure I dare get close enough to ask.”

“I’ll tell my secrets to the bees and my dreams to the wishing well. How is that?” Elena offered.

“I’m just glad that you’re dreaming again.” He pulled back and looked down at her, flashing that grin she loved so well. Maybe that was what the new lightness was from. She returned the smile with one of her own.

“Me too, amorul meu , me too.”

He gave her a quizzical look, but she just shook her head. She needed to understand and explore this lightness first before she was ready to make any grand statements or decisions. She enjoyed the lightness, with its infinite possibility, and let it spread through her entire body as they spent several more hours in bed that morning before they both rose for the day.

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“Irene, this is much farther than the bees. I’m glad we did not bring Goliath. It would be very taxing for him.” Elena shaded her eyes as she looked in the distance for this mythical wishing well, dearly regretting that neither of them had brought a parasol.

“He was very interested in that bone by the stables anyway. Don’t worry. It’s just a little further, Elena. I promise it’s worth it.”

“All right, I—” At that moment, as the woods came into sight, Elena could swear she heard the hum of bees, but that didn’t make any sense. The bees were some way off in the other direction. Then she realized the hum was in her own blood, and suddenly, she was reminded of the times she had seen Goliath with his hackles up as she stood rigid, the skin on the back of her neck tingling.

Elena felt something fly by her ear, so close it almost sliced the side of her face. A knife? The next thing she knew, she had been tackled to the ground, and Irene was screaming. She smelled cloves and tobacco and something else—Anatole. He’d always had a way with knives.

Elena struggled against Anatole, who had always been wiry but was now fighting her with the energy of a rabid animal. However, in his focus, he did not seem to notice Irene. Of course, a small woman would be inconsequential to him. She briefly wondered if that had been him in London when she was with Annamaria or with Sophie. He only seemed to dare approach her if she was alone or with another woman.

“Irene, you have to get help. You have to go!” she shouted, her voice much harsher than she had ever spoken to Irene before.

Anatole’s hands found her neck to silence her. Before he could, she hit him in the center of his chest, and though he gasped, he did not move his weight off her. Instead, his hands went straight to her wrists to pin her down.

Irene stared at Elena helplessly, seeming unable to step in for fear she might hurt Elena or get hurt in the process. Anatole was so wholly focused that he still did not seem to register Irene. She realized that sending her away would save her even if Irene couldn’t get help in time. Anatole always had multiple knives, and they were both unarmed.

It didn't matter what happened to her now, Elena thought. She needed to save David's little sister. Her sister in her heart. She could see Irene's torn expression over Anatole's shoulder as Elena drew on her last ounce of strength to get the words out.

"Irene. Go. You need to get help. I can hold him, little sister."

Irene's eyes widened for a moment as something passed between them, and then she turned and took off running. Oblivious to Irene's departure, Anatole twisted Elena's wrist, then used his forearms to brace against her chest. He brought his head down and pushed her bonnet aside so that he could whisper in her ear. Up close, he smelled even worse than she could have imagined, as a burnt, rotting scent filled her nose and left a metallic taste in her mouth.

He spoke in Russian, his voice harsh and guttural. "You think your English lord will save you? He will thank me for ridding him of his peasant whore. I can't believe I let filth like you convince me to run away."

Elena knew that if she could keep him talking, she could wait until help came. They would come. She just hoped in time.

"I seem to remember it was your idea, Anatole. You begged me," she responded in Russian.

He raised his hand as if to strike her. She flinched but couldn't move him off her.

"I've never begged a woman before. You seduced me to take your innocence like the filthy peasant slut you are." He used the back of his hand to hit her across the face.

The anvil fears no blow. His hand felt like nothing. His words felt like nothing. She felt nothing. She only saw her goal: she had to keep him talking. She thought she heard a dog bark in the distance, but Anatole was still so focused on her that he did

not seem to notice. She struggled against his arms but could not break free.

“You don’t even know where my family is, do you? You lied like you always do!”

“What do I care for filthy traitors to the patriarch, to the tsar? They should have fought for us,” he spat. “But you, you deserve to suffer. You’ll pay for abandoning me. For everything that followed.”

“How did you find me?” It was all she could think to ask to keep him talking. She was still so shocked to see him. She couldn’t believe she had thought herself in love with this cruel, wiry man. She had been so young and naïve then. How could she have known his first response to crisis would be violence?

“Did you doubt I would? There were rumors that an English lord married a girl who looked like you. One with a scar. Of course I remembered my own handiwork.”

As he spoke, he ran his finger across her temple, and Elena recoiled as if burned. She didn’t mind when David ran his fingers down her scar, as his hands always had a gentleness to them despite their rough texture. But Anatole’s grimy touch felt like a violation of her very soul. She recognized that smell now from his hands as they lingered at her cheek. It was the smell of dried blood.

“When you didn’t respond to my letter, I found out you left town and followed you to the estate. I’ve been living in the woods, waiting for a glimpse of you alone.”

“Why? Why would you do all of this? Why come after me?”

He grabbed her face with one hand, turning her jaw toward him, and he looked directly into her eyes. For a moment, he seemed calm, almost rational, and she thought she saw a glimpse of that boy she thought she knew. Then he spoke, and his voice was so unsettling that Elena felt fear unlike any she had known.

“Because you had to pay, Elena. You couldn’t do what you did to me and then live a life of luxury as a fine lady. Blood for blood.”

“I took no blood from you! I did nothing to you, Anatole.”

“You bewitched me. You used your lures to make me leave my mission. The Imperial army turned back at Sillistra. The Orthodox in the Ottoman Empire did not fight for the tsar as they should have. My information was not good enough.”

She looked at the hands and arms that gripped her under ragged, torn clothes. Nothing but skin and bone, covered in scars. Torture. She suddenly understood. He had likely been harshly punished for the information he brought back or for leaving his post and had to blame someone for what happened to him.

“I am sorry for what happened to you, Anatole.”

“I wouldn’t have left but for you! And then you left me,” he hissed.

“I just wanted my family’s blessing, not to run off like thieves in the night. I tried to explain—”

“Oh, you explained enough. You made me love you, and you left me.” By this point, he had both of her wrists in a vise grip. However, if he held her wrists, he would have to move his hands to do anything else.

“We weren’t in love, Anatole. We were in lust and infatuation. Obsession. If you loved me, you never would have cut me.”

In that moment, he drew back as if momentarily stunned, and she was able to use the ground to leverage her body against him and throw him off her. She began to get up off the ground, but he grabbed her and pulled her back down, pushing one bony

elbow against her throat to choke her, as the other arm went to his pocket. He hovered above her, pulling out another, larger knife. She remembered sitting with him under a tree as he carved their names into the bark, and he told her how his father had given him that particular knife on his deathbed, showing her the engraving. Young Elena had been entranced by this sad, tragic boy, but now she wondered if any of what he had told her had been true. Elena's blood ran cold as the silver of the knife caught the sun, the inscription gleaming in the light.

As she struggled for air, she began to feel her will to fight leave as sick resignation washed over her. He wasn't just going to cut her face this time. He was going to end her life. Odd for the living, even for the dead . With this realization came a raw, aching pain in her chest. If only she could have seen David one last time. To thank him for everything. To tell him. To tell him... She felt consciousness begin to slip away as she gasped for air. Anatole started to mutter as if in prayer, but in that moment, he didn't hear the bark had grown closer.

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“David!”

David had not heard his sister so distressed since their father died, and she had found his body in his study. Oddly the very same study where he now sat with a letter that could change his entire life.

Irene ran in with her bonnet askew and her pale walking gown stained at the bottom with grass, panting and sobbing. This was not a good sign, as his sister was not one to give in to tears easily. She threw herself into his arms as he rose, and he could tell she was trying to say something but couldn't catch her breath.

He held her tight as he felt a cold fist clamp on his chest, making it difficult to get enough air as he ground out the words, “Irene, where is Elena?”



Irene pulled back and looked up at him, gasping but trying to steady herself. “There was a man. A man attacked us. She told me to run, to get help. But I left her David. I left her! What if he hurts her?”

Elena hadn’t sent Irene away just to get help, he thought. She had sent Irene away to protect her, leaving Elena alone with this man. He felt a surge of love for his wife, whom he didn’t think he could love any more if he tried. But that surge was quickly replaced by a cold jolt of fear. David had a feeling he knew who this man was, and he cursed himself for not realizing he would follow her outside London. Dread began to set in, but he could best help Elena if he kept a level head and shut down his emotions. If he let the soldier take over.

“Irene, think carefully. Where was this?”

“By the wishing well. Please hurry, David!”

The panic started to set back in, more bone-deep this time. He willed it to go away. He needed to hold on for just a bit longer. “You did well, Irene. I’m going to get her. Now, I want you to rest. I’ll ring for —”

“I’m going back with you!”

“Irene—”

“No, David, she’s my sister, and I won’t abandon her. Besides, I know exactly where she is.”

He pulled back to look at Irene. “She said that? That you’re her sister?”

Irene nodded, finally seeming to catch her breath. He didn’t know what that meant for him, but it didn’t matter right now. Elena didn’t have to love him back. She didn’t

have to stay. She just needed to survive. He could not live in a world where she did not walk this earth.

“Fine. There is no arguing with you. I’ll send someone for the law, and we’ll be away.”

He grabbed his sister’s arm, leaving his cane behind. Fear he had never known before, not even on the battlefield, threatened to flood his body and soul, but he prayed Elena could hold on. She had to hold on.

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Elena had never really appreciated the size of Goliath’s jaw until she saw it bearing down on a grown man’s forearm. A strong man like David might have been able to throw him off, but Anatole looked sickly and weak. He had been living in the forest, Elena remembered. Anatole cried out and tried to shake off Goliath, attempting to stab him, but Goliath held firm. As blood trickled down Anatole’s arm, he cursed and dropped his knife. Somehow, using his back paws as leverage, Goliath was able to pull Anatole to the ground. He let go of Anatole’s arm and put his giant paws on the man’s chest, immediately placing his jaw around Anatole’s throat. Elena flinched. Goliath had Anatole trapped against the ground with the weight of his paws, his jaw caging Anatole’s neck but not bearing down. He seemed like...he was waiting on her. Goliath was waiting for her to give the command. To kill. From the way his body froze and his eyes widened, Anatole realized this too.

She had never seen Goliath like this before. The gentle giant she had known was gone, his features twisted into a vicious snarl, his teeth poised to carry out her order. She was reminded for a second of the wolves in stories her grandmother told, vengeful remnants on this earth who stopped at nothing to obtain their justice. Elena slowly, shakily, got to her feet. Was this her chance for vengeance? Here lay the man who had taken her love, her innocence, her beauty and turned her against her family.

He wasn't the reason they were gone, but he was the reason she wasn't with them when they fled, or whatever happened to them that day. He had scouted her village, gotten to know them, and then given their secrets to the Russian army. Like a judge, she weighed the case against him, and all the evidence told her he deserved to die. But there was one more thing, one last chance. She put a hand to Goliath's back and knelt down to Anatole's ear.

"Where is my family?" she asked, again in Russian. She felt a last, final sliver of hope swell in her heart, as perhaps with the looming threat of Goliath's teeth, Anatole would finally tell the truth.

Anatole could barely speak from Goliath's grip on his throat, his voice coming out in a rasp. "I don't know. I just wrote that to draw you out," he spat, his momentary vulnerability disappearing into a snarl. "How pathetic when you know they probably perished in the war."

That hope that had swelled in her chest rapidly deflated, leaving a harsh, bitter taste in her mouth. That bitterness made her heart hard, made her hate in a way that she had never allowed herself in all her life. And that hate made her utter words she never thought she would say. She put her mouth back to his ear and spoke in a hushed tone as if saying it quietly would make it less vile.

"Give me a reason why I shouldn't."

Anatole eyed Goliath fearfully but remained silent, letting her make the decision.

In that moment, all she wanted to do was hurt him as much as she hurt, to punish him for killing that last, final sliver of hope. But the rush left as swiftly as it came, and she felt empty instead, the bitter taste giving way to a nothingness.

Just then, a cool breeze of mercy spilled over her, and with it came the clarity of what

it would cost her to kill him. She had always felt herself dirty before, stained by the sins of the past, but she finally understood that most of the things she had done, while perhaps thoughtless, were not cruel. As David said, she was punishing herself over and over for one bad decision. Letting Goliath kill Anatole would truly tarnish her soul in a way from which she might never recover. She recognized that as angry as she was with herself, with Anatole, hurting him wouldn't bring her family back. It wouldn't make up for anything he had done to her. And he had already suffered so much.

Finally, she knew the answer to the question, that forgiveness for herself and mercy for Anatole were the most powerful weapons she had in her arsenal. Even if she could never forgive him for what he had done, she could spare his life today.

"I give you your life, Anatole," she whispered, though there was no reason to whisper anymore. "You are monstrous, but you won't make a monster of me."

Now, if Goliath could just hold him until help came.

She looked up as she felt the ground rumble. She had been so concentrated on Anatole that she hadn't seen or heard David and Irene riding toward them with several men. David dismounted and strode over toward them, gun drawn. He looked so beautiful and strong, and she had never been so happy to see anyone in her life.

"Elena!"

David's voice was harder than she'd ever heard it before, and he seemed unable to look at her. The relief she felt in seeing him was quickly replaced with fear that he was angry with her, that he thought she had sought Anatole out on her own, that he might have hurt himself riding out to save her. She stood, feeling dazed as if it had been years since she had seen her husband instead of hours.

“Goliath has him pinned,” she murmured. She could scarcely recognize her own voice. It sounded so faint.

David nodded. “Call Goliath off, and we’ll take him to the constable,” David addressed Anatole, his jaw clenched. “The Foreign Office will be particularly interested in why a Russian spy is here in the English countryside. You will be enjoying the pleasures of the local jail until the Foreign Office sends someone to collect you.”

She turned to glance at Anatole and could tell from his expression that he did not understand what David had said, so she translated for him. Anatole’s eyes went even wider, giving his face a carved-out, skeletal look. Out of nowhere, men appeared on either side of him.

Finally, David looked at her. She watched his gaze go to her face, which she realized was still smarting, and she put her hand on her cheek where Anatole had hit her. Elena saw an uncontrollable rage, which she had never seen before, flash across David’s face as he rounded on Anatole.

“You came to her home, and you laid your hands on her,” David ground out and began to advance on Anatole. Irene, who had dismounted by then, put a hand on her brother’s arm, stilling him.

“Goliath,” Elena said gently. “Come here.”

Goliath slowly walked over to her. He was limping slightly, and she felt great sorrow at what saving her had cost him. As he came to nuzzle her hand, she felt a lump rise in her throat.

“Irene!” she called, her voice shaking. “Can you take Goliath back home and take care of his back leg?”

As the men began to drag Anatole away, never one to take defeat gracefully, he started to shout in Russian. “Whore! I’ll tell them you betrayed your town! I’ll tell them how you seduced me and your English lord, Elena.”

Elena was grateful David could not comprehend Anatole’s words, but she could tell he understood the general idea of what Anatole was yelling at her. David pulled back his fist.

Smack.

Irene had beaten him to it, striking Anatole full across the face. Being so thoroughly smacked by so small a person seemed to stun Anatole momentarily, and he slumped against the men dragging him away.

“You will never speak her name again. You will never touch my sister again, or we will kill you!”

Both David and Elena turned to stare at Irene, suddenly so far away from the timid, waxen doll of the London ballrooms. She looked so spectacular that Elena knew she didn’t have the heart to tell Irene that Anatole did not understand what she was saying.

“Irene, I’m supposed to say that.” David looked both frustrated and impressed with his little sister.

“Well, I took care of it for you.” She shook her hand, wincing in pain. “I didn’t know hitting someone would hurt so much. I suppose I won’t be playing piano for a few days.”

“Why don’t you go back and get a compress on your hand?” David gave her a rueful smile. “You were quite the hero today.”

“I was, wasn’t I?” Irene gave them an impish grin, then hugged Elena, pulling back to look at her. “Are you all right?”

Elena looked over at David, who stood tense and rigid. She still felt as if he was avoiding looking at her.

“I’ll be all right.” She only hoped her marriage would be all right. Elena looked down and saw a silver glint among the lush green of the grass. She bent to pick up the knife handle, turning it over in her hands. She felt David observing her out of the corner of her eye. Suddenly, she realized that this was the knife that had scarred her. She was seized by a need to destroy it, to throw it as far away from her as she could, but she let the moment pass and instead held out the hilt to David. She hadn’t noticed they were now alone.

He walked over to her, took the knife, and tossed it back to the ground. In a blur, she found herself crushed in his arms.

I’m home, she thought. In those moments before Goliath seized Anatole, she had been ready to die and only wished she could have seen David one last time. She had something important to tell him, but first, she needed to know that he didn’t hate her, that he didn’t think she had devised this situation. She pulled back to look up at him.

“You’re not angry with me?” She knew better now than to shirk back from him, but she couldn’t hide the quiver in her voice.

“No, of course I wasn’t angry—I just let the soldier take over until I knew you were safe. Hard to step back out of it.” He pushed a strand of hair that had come out of her chignon behind her ear. Somewhere along the way, she had lost her bonnet. “I was worried,” he said softly. “Terrified, more like. I thought I’d lost you, Elena.”

He dragged her to him, kissed her hard, and then tightly wrapped his arms around her.

She knew, she had always known deep down, that he would always believe and trust in her. That he would never try to control her or seek vengeance. Even if he were angry with her, the man who had laughed at her dolls and listened to her read would never hurt her in that way. Love didn't have to hurt like that. Love didn't have to be possessive, like a scourge devouring all in sight. It could be warm and generous, like a golden thread that tethered one's heart to another, giving and taking light and strength from the other. And suddenly, she realized that between them, that golden thread was there, had woven all along, but she had been too afraid and too weary to see it, to feel it all. It had probably started weaving all those years ago, but she had been so wrapped up in pain and guilt and grief that she hadn't noticed. But David, bless him, had seen it all along.

"Amorul meu," she murmured. My love.

"Elena, I have something to tell you." He released her briefly but still held her hands. "When I contacted the Foreign Office about Anatole's claims, someone had heard of your family, but I didn't want to get your hopes up before it was verified. It seems the Foreign Office and the ambassador are not always on the same page." He reached into his pocket. "I just received a letter. I was about to come find you, but then Irene came in." Elena felt time stop as if she were on the precipice of either great heartbreak or great joy. She tried to prepare herself as she waited, her heart in her throat. He went on. "Your family, they survived that day. They fled to Constantinople for a few years, but now they're settled in Bucharest."

"They-they were there when I was there?" She felt a jolt as if her heart couldn't contain all this information and everything that had happened in the past hour. And yet, that golden thread felt as if it was patching and fixing that part of her heart that had died that day. It would never be the same, as she had grown and changed, but it was finally whole again. Tears that she had not shed welled up behind her eyes until her vision was blurry. Even so, she could still see David clearly, though he now looked profoundly sad.



“I’d understand if you wanted to go back to them. I will let you go if that is what you want.”

The light of the golden thread flickered for a moment. “Is that what you want?” she asked, searching his eyes, the green fading into brown. “To be rid of your strange, foreign wife?”

“No!” He looked down at her with such intensity that she physically felt it throughout her entire body. “I happen to be madly in love with my beautiful, brave wife.” He took a breath and looked away, some of the intensity receding. “You were quite the hero today. I can’t believe you headed him off like that. Though I’ll likely have nightmares about it for years to come.”

She felt herself flush. “I just held him until Goliath came,” she muttered.

“I knew you were an avenging angel in those first weeks I met you. Avenging but merciful angel, I suppose. It’s something to be proud of.” He smiled, but not with his whole face and eyes. “I just want you to be happy, Elena. I know how much you’ve missed your family and your home. I want to fight for you, to stay with you for the next fifty years, but...I think the best thing I could do is set you free to go back to them. If that is what you wanted.”

Standing before him, she could never have imagined such a future for herself, all these miles away from the only home she had known, looking up at this man. But she saw now that as much as she had fought it, she had started to think of this as home. Knowing her family was alive and she could possibly see them again had helped restore her heart, but this, this was home. This place, London, Goliath, Sophie, Irene, the hospital. David. Especially David. She understood now that her heart was whole again. It irrevocably belonged to him. It had probably always belonged to him. It was as if every time she had called him husband, she had been making a promise, conjuring an infinite future for them together. It had just taken her some time to see

that future for what it was. All those years ago, when she lost her home and family in the same day, she had realized how deeply she loved what she had all along only when it was gone. She wouldn't make that mistake again.

“The thing is, David.” She gathered herself and glanced back up at him, overwhelmed with this sudden and fierce happiness. “I want to stay if you'll have me.” She swallowed as a tear began to fall down her cheek. “I've come to realize that you are my home. And my love.”

He wiped the tear before it reached her dimple gently with the pad of his thumb. “Am I, Elena? Am I your love?”

His sadness seemed to ebb away as he gripped her shoulders and searched her eyes, hopeful. She laughed, and tears began to fall more freely. She pushed gently against his chest.

“I tried on that coat and found that I rather liked it. And that I was rather madly in love with you in return.”

His hopeful expression suddenly turned into the most incandescent grin she had ever seen. It slowly spread across his face like a sunrise, matching hers in joy. When she looked at him, she felt as if she saw a mirror of herself. Beautiful, scars and all. It took her breath away.

“I'm so sorry it took me so long—” she began to say, but he cut her off with a kiss.

“Remember the question?” he murmured as he pulled away. “The answer comes just at the right time.”

Elena swallowed and stared up at him, so grateful that he understood how difficult it had been for her to trust in happiness, how hard-won this moment was for her.

Recovering herself slightly, she looked away to wipe her eyes.

“Now we have to think of how we will thank Goliath for saving my life. And you ought to admit I was right in keeping him.”

“You’re always right, Elena.”

She shook her head, the tears still falling, “You’re just lovestruck. You’ll recover.”

“I suppose, on very rare occasions, you could possibly, in very, very seldom cases...be wrong. But Goliath was worth saving. I’ll always trust your instincts. I can promise you that.”

He grabbed both of her hands, entwining them in his, and slowly turned them to kiss her knuckles. Suddenly, their playful mood shifted. Elena felt they were promising something sacred, something more than the rushed vows they had made on the way out of Balaclava or the quick service in England.

“I’ll always trust your patience, David. And your love. I know that now.” She clenched her throat to hold back a sob.

“Elena.” He tried to crush her in his arms, but she pushed him back so she could look up at him.

“But I want more than fifty years. I want forever.”

“Fifty years was just a starting point. I figured I would have to talk you into forever.”

“You are terribly good at talking people your way. It’s one of your most annoying qualities.”

He put his arm around her and began to steer them back home. “I started with a few hours a week, and somehow, I’m talking my way to forever, so I rather like my odds.”

“Don’t the bees ever tire of your silver tongue?”

“My love, the bees were behind me all along.”

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:18 am*

He looked up at the thousands and thousands of graves, both marked and unmarked. Be at peace. He raised his hand to give a salute but cut it off as his hand shook. For a moment, he was overcome with grief, with pangs of guilt for his luck in surviving when they did not. Then he sensed Elena taking his hand and felt the golden warmth that gave meaning to his existence run up his arm and fill his entire chest, and he didn't regret surviving. He was only sorry that so many had died, and so many not even in battle but from disease. He silently thanked Mrs. Raeburn, Elena, and even old Dr. Austin for doing all they could to ensure fellows like him survived.

The air felt heavy, and David wondered if death was in the air or if it was from the humidity of being near a body of water. Likely both.

They stood there for what could have been a minute or what could have been an hour, Elena understanding without speaking that he was too overcome to say anything. Eventually, he felt a small squeeze of her hand, and they began to walk along the river.

They had arrived in Scutari the previous day after a lengthy stay in Bucharest with Elena's family. The entire family had burst into tears upon seeing each other, and they discovered her family had not disowned her but had thought her killed in the chaos of the invasion. The family had taken what they could and fled, staying with distant relatives of neighbors in Constantinople. Elena's father had eventually been able to reestablish himself as a textile merchant in Bucharest, again thanks to some of their former neighbors. He and Elena's oldest sister were the only ones who spoke or understood any English, so he and Elena translated for the rest of the family. During their stay, her father often regaled David with tales of his many adventures and exploits of his youth, which Elena later explained, and David guessed, were greatly

exaggerated. While her father told his stories in English, Elena's mother and grandmother looked David over with judgmental but ultimately accepting scowls. Elena was only too happy to hear her father's old stories again, encouraging him in his tales well into the night.

They left Bucharest with the promise of many future visits. David had invited the family to visit or stay in England, but Elena's father had gestured to his decidedly non-English clothing and hat and shook his head, saying it was too far, and he knew too little of life there. Elena was disappointed because she had wanted them to see the hospital, but she said she understood and accepted her father's position.

Over the days he spent with them, David came to realize that Elena's family was more interested in his being in trade than his title, as her father had made him explain in great detail how he imported wine and spirits into England. He smiled to himself, thinking of all the title hunters who had pestered him when his father died and he was grieving. Somehow, life had led him here, to someone who valued him for himself alone, to the point that his title was essentially meaningless to her and her family. Who were now his family, he supposed. For so long it had only been him and Irene and Sophie. It was rather nice to add more family members to the equation.

As he left her with Sophie to work on plans for her school, David had promised Irene that she could come on future visits, though he did not know when that would be. From Elena's father, he had heard that the political tides were turning and that Wallachia, Moldavia, and maybe even Dobruja might soon gain independence. He hoped that the changes wouldn't prevent them from visiting, but with any luck, things would work out. Hell, he would personally sail down the Danube for Elena to see her family if that was what it took.

Coming out of his reverie, he noticed Elena looking around guardedly as they walked along the water. "Bad memories?" he asked over the distant sounds of prayer and carts rolling through the streets.

“Some.” She sighed. “But this is not far from where Mrs. Raeburn found me. And that was a good memory. Honestly, I was so hungry and tired. I do not remember most of the time I spent here.”

They had agreed to come to Scutari to put away demons and say goodbye to former lives. But David wanted to ensure she didn’t come just for his sake. “I have something for you,” he said. As she cocked her head, he shifted his cane and pulled out a small velvet pouch from his pocket, which he slipped into her hands. Furrowing her brow, she carefully opened the purse, drawing out a golden chain.

“My grandmother’s necklace? How did you find this?”

“A gentleman never tells his ways.”

“I thought that was a lady.” He saw her swallow hard as she brushed her fingers over the faded engraving on the golden cross with its two extra bars. “It was in the family for ages. I received it as the oldest daughter. When I had to part with it, it compounded my grief and shame. But you found it for me. I can’t imagine all you had to go through to track it down.”

“Elena, at this point in our marriage, you must know there is very little I wouldn’t do just to see you smile.”

She clutched the necklace to her chest, and her lips quivered for a moment. Then she took his hand, entwined it in her own, and laid it against her cheek, looking up at him.

“I do love you so, you know.”

Whatever would he have done without her? Still, he couldn’t help teasing her a bit. “Yes, but I love you more.”

“Husband.”

His heart always raced when he heard that word on her lips, and even after all this time, he still felt a perfect mix of adoration and amusement at the endearment. However, Elena looked solemn, so he tried to put on an equally serious expression.

“Yes, amora meu .”

She sighed as if torn by appreciation at his attempt at her home language and annoyance at his butchering of it. “Amorul meu ,” she corrected.

He repeated the phrase, putting the emphasis where she did. “It’s like Latin. I can only understand the possessives.”

She tilted her head. “It may be, I do not know. But I had a request, my love.” She paused as if weighing her words. “If something ever happened to my father, could my family stay with us? The world can be so cruel to women alone in this world, and I don’t want my sisters to have to marry strangers.”

“Like you did?” He grinned at her devilishly. Or what he hoped was devilish.

“I suppose eventually it turned out well for me.”

“Eventually?” he exclaimed in mock outrage.

“You went away for years.”

“I was recovering from a war wound.” He brought her hand to his lips and just held it there, smiling into her skin. He would never tire of this, not if he lived to be one hundred.

“I think we are an exception. Most marriages based on a few weeks' acquaintance do not work out so well as ours. And you have not answered my question.”



He could see his response weighed heavily on her soul. Elena who had been prepared to marry someone she did not love for her family's sake. Elena who would always do anything for those she loved. Which, by some miracle he never stopped thanking the universe for, now included him.

“Of course, my love. They are always welcome.”

She looked up at him with such warmth and love he felt as if he could take on an army at that moment. With this trip, it was as if they had added another strand to that golden thread between them, a new piece that further entwined them and illuminated the future they were forging together. Even though they were beside a graveyard and Elena was endlessly superstitious, he took her in his arms.

“Has forever started yet?” he whispered against her skin.

“Forever isn't just a time. It has no limit. It is now and, in this moment, but is also unto ages and ages. It's all the people we've been and the promise of all the people we will become together. It's us, it's this—” She wasn't quite making sense in English, and he could tell she was growing frustrated with the limitations of translation as she sometimes did. Still, as she spoke, she began to gesture to her chest, then to his chest, as if indicating some kind of tether existed between them. His heart felt so full he couldn't speak for several moments. He hadn't imagined that golden thread between them. She had felt it, too. He was reminded of something her father had said as a blessing unto them, that love understands all languages. He took her hands, placed them over his chest, and said the two most beautiful words in any tongue.

“I understand.”

The End