



The Curious Countess (Cloaks and Countesses)

Author: *Judith Lynne*

Category: Historical

Description: Alara has one night to find the love of her life.

Shes as British as bluebells and rain. But now the Continental wars are over, her mother plans a life for Alara in the Ottoman Empire where shell never see Britain again.

With one night of freedom, Alaras future depends on finding a British hu ?Band and forgetting the curious boy shes waited for all her life.

Lord Harman is heir to a political dynasty.

But hates intrigue and compromise. Hed trade it all for one more lazy summer day with the girl who inspired his mind and his heart.

At a wild Christmas revel he meets her again, still challenging him every step of the way and now very much a woman. When a dangerous mission falls into his lap, he must make an absolute choice: spend his last night with her playing pirate or fulfill his destiny.

The Curious Countess is a standalone novella of about 100 pages, but readers of The Clandestine Countess may rejoice to see Lord Harman have a love story of his own.

Total Pages (Source): 10

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:27 pm

Chapter One

A lara's aunt had a plan.

That was clear from the way her eyebrows waggled as she ushered herself into the blue salon, where only women were allowed.

Even Sir Theodore Trace, retired from diplomacy these twenty years, respected the boundaries established by his Ottoman wife.

His sister, Mrs. Griffiths, adapted to such requirements her own way. She treated the restriction as a personal quirk, and expected her own personal quirks to be respected in turn. For instance, in her youth Mrs. Griffiths had taken up the habit of replacing her pale eyebrows with ones made of dark fur. She preferred that others not mention this.

She waggled those eyebrows meaningfully now. As was often the case, one was askew.

Alara's life had been spent in a family full of differences, many of them inexplicable at first glance, and she loved to ask questions. But she never asked where her aunt had got the fur.

"I apologize for my unexpected call," said her aunt, plumping her skirts around her as if she still wore the voluminous fashions of her youth. "But I wanted both your opinions of this styling of my hair. I don't wish to look like I'm yearning for attention!"

Alara welcomed any interruption to yet another slow afternoon of needlework and verses. Her mother read aloud every day in Arabic, Turkish, Italian, or French. She wouldn't stoop to English poetry.

Alara had heard every book in her mother's library several times. Some days all she hoped for in life was a new book.

In years past, the verses were followed by tidbits of law. What was required for a marriage contract, mostly. Fortunately, Alara asked too many questions; the law lectures had stopped.

"You needn't yearn for attention, looking that pretty," Alara complimented her aunt's fetching heap of light gray curls, topped with a delicate lace cap. The eyebrows might be disastrous but Alara envied the curls.

Not that it mattered, as Alara seldom went out.

"Thank you, dear." Her aunt accepted the compliment with aplomb before flicking a look toward the door as if trying to shove Alara out of it. "I wonder if you'd fetch me some tea. No one makes it so well as you."

Alara's mother kept her attention on her needlework, sparing only a few disapproving glances for Mrs. Griffiths' entire ensemble. Her own hair was sleek and topped with a little cap that trailed ribbons, echoing her coat's long split sleeves and sides, all edged with gold braid against the striped gown beneath. Without rising from her low crimson couch, she waved toward a bell rope. "Servants can bring tea."

"Alara's tastes best," insisted Mrs. Griffiths, motioning Alara to go.

Confused, she did.

Then stopped outside to lean her ear against the door and unabashedly eavesdrop.

“Her calling me pretty when she is a rose. It’s not fair Alara never had a proper season. Honestly, Zehra!”

“It would serve no purpose,” came the answer, flat as an iron.

In her own home, Lady Trace was styled Zehra Chaush, as she preferred. Nor did she hold back her criticism of English weather, food, or customs. She measured her motherly love by how firmly she intended her children to have the advantages of life in Ottoman lands, even as she herself never traveled far from her English husband’s side.

All through the years of war, Zehra insisted that next year they’d be over, next year Alara would be on her way home. She’d have a proper education, a proper house, and most importantly, a proper marriage.

Alara wished she could have at least read different books in the meantime.

“Mrs. Griffiths, I have been quite liberal. Alara has attended several social affairs with you, and in English dress! I’ve been too liberal, if you even imagine her making an English match.”

Flattened against the door, Alara’s face grew hot.

Her mother added, “Your fashions are not modest, and I cannot bear to think of the sorts of women who attend a public affair.”

Alara would love to be the sort of woman who attended a public affair. It would be heavenly to be—not someone else, she quite liked herself, but a different version of herself. Someone easy in company, with the prospect of marrying?—

Well, in her dreams, the marriage was quite specific.

Mrs. Griffiths was adamant. “The fashions suit well enough, and my modiste has Alara’s measurements. You might not mind this appalling confinement, but Alara should stir about a little. She’s like a rock in the mud here.”

That didn’t feel quite fair, or perhaps like an underhand comment about how much Alara had eaten last week during Eid. Alara would have opened the door to challenge it, but Mrs. Griffiths went on.

“Alara needs fresh air.”

Her mother’s voice came again. “If you had proper weather, you could build proper houses that let in the air. And you can’t fool me; the air at an assembly won’t be fine at all. In Sultanahmet, Alara’s very fine house will admit warm sea air all the time. My cousin seeks her match right now. I won’t risk her future by marrying her in Britain! Women cannot even own their homes here. It is barbaric. How will she ever feel safe?”

That made Alara’s eyes drop to the floor. The trouble was, she agreed with her mother. She didn’t take risks, and she preferred to feel safe. And yes, it unsettled her that a life in Britain would always be a life under someone else’s roof.

But surely if she married the right man, she could trust him.

British women managed, after all.

Mrs. Griffiths did not yield. “Zehra. You abandoned your own family’s plans for you and chose a British husband. Why do you expect an arranged marriage to make Alara happy?”

Listening on tiptoe, Alara hoped her mother would say something about the one forbidden topic of conversation: her own marriage.

Zehra talked a great deal of marriage contracts, but not of marrying outside her faith.

Nor did she now. “Alara isn’t me. She doesn’t care much.”

Alara nearly sank down to the floor where she stood.

She didn’t care about marriage? Or about whom she would marry? How could her mother think that?

Her mother went on, “I had to fight for the marriage I wanted. I managed precisely because I had my own wealth and knew how to persuade. Alara prefers to take life as it comes, but if she should ever need it, she ought to have the means.”

“She isn’t you,” said Mrs. Griffiths, clearly disgruntled, and it was too much for Alara. She slumped against the door, heedless of whether they heard.

Her mother was more than a parent. She was a tutor, and a constant companion. Her assessment was not just hard to ignore; it had the weight of received truth. But Zehra Chaush had mixed up her truths.

She disliked English winters and the constant parade of slabs of meat. Fine. Understandable. Alara preferred Turkish cooking too.

But her mother ignored that, food aside, Alara was as English as the rain. She loved London cobblestones and her summer country garden. Loving England didn’t make her passive. Or wrong.

Her mother constantly spoke of Alara’s departure as a voyage home, but Alara had

never been to Istanbul. After a lifetime of her mother's stories she ought to find appealing the prospect of its ancient monuments, palaces of cool blue tile, and all the fruits and fish her mother still missed.

Alara did like the prospect, as somewhere to visit. But not to live.

That didn't make her timid.

Indeed, others might think her ghoulish if they knew how she'd followed every turn of the war, selfishly glad for every new delay to her journey. Every minute she stayed was another chance for Lord Harman to remember she existed.

For Britain wasn't just her home, it was his; and of the few men she'd met, none were as gently kind as the boy of her childhood summers.

Lord and Lady Ayles' ancient home ruled the valley where Sir Theodore's hunting lodge stood. In the summer, no one hunted. The two couples cooed over their younger sons together.

That left Alara and little Lord Harman, whom she'd called John, to roam the countryside among gentle breezes. He'd built bridges of sticks over the tiny stream and named them all after her.

The last time they'd seen each other, he'd been a gangly boy. Together, walking as far along the stream as they'd ever dared before, they'd discovered a new kind of rock.

By then they knew others found their discoveries boring. And perhaps they both recognized how time had changed them, would change them yet more. They wouldn't be allowed to wander the countryside together much longer.

Alara had seen it first, and John—Lord Harman—had freed it from the stream bed. He'd offered it to her.

She smoothed a finger over its pink and gray striations. "I wonder if it's the same inside?"

"Of course it is," he'd said, all legs and confidence.

"Are you sure?" she'd asked with a little smile, as always trying to rock his constant easy assumptions. He'd never seemed torn the way Alara was between two futures, two worlds. He'd been as certain of his place as he was of how to crack apart the rock.

Which he did, snapping it open against a boulder with strong hands, brown after so much time in the summer sun. Then handed it to her gently the next instant.

It was the way he'd looked at her as he'd presented his gift that had made her heart swoop. He'd looked like she'd given him something.

That had been so long ago. Since he'd come of age, Mrs. Griffiths rarely mentioned him; he moved in higher circles, she said, and spent most of his time with the gentlemen in Parliament.

No doubt he'd forgotten her. She so seldom ventured out, and he, according to scraps of gossip she gleaned from the marketplace and the servants, did nothing but. Assemblies, musicales, even desperately immoral masquerades—Lord Harman was everywhere.

Alara expected every day, every year, to hear that he was betrothed.

She'd hear it third-hand, of course; he'd never appear at the events Alara attended.

Those were mostly charitable affairs involving knitting or sheet-sewing, with older ladies of London society. Zehra Chaush was as suspicious of London men as she was of the weather, which was to say very.

Mrs. Griffiths' disapproving silence moved Zehra to speak again. "Alara has a great destiny. Her marriage will bring Britain and the Sublime State closer together. She will do what I could not." Her mother's voice quavered a little behind the closed door.

That made Alara straighten. She'd never heard her mother say any such thing.

But Mrs. Griffiths wasn't finished. "Pish, Zehra. You cannot blame yourself for that war, or expect Alara to prevent one. Don't say another word. Destiny or not, she deserves to enjoy herself, and one night won't hurt. I had to apply for a ticket this morning to the dowager Duchess of Talbourne, and it was not pleasant work. Either you trust me to guard her for one evening, or you don't. That's the end of it, Zehra."

It was an admirable tactic. That was exactly how her mother ended arguments.

Clearly Zehra wasn't sure how to defend her position against her own tactics. "If you feel so strongly, Mrs. Griffiths, of course I will indulge you." As if she were doing her sister-in-law a favor. "For one night."

A little spark of something, maybe hope, ignited in Alara's chest.

"Excellent. I'll tell her now, it will be such a selfish pleasure."

Mrs. Griffiths moved so fast that Alara had barely jumped back from the salon door before it opened.

And she seized Alara's arm, completely unsurprised that Alara was not on the errand

for tea.

“All right, darling, I suppose you heard everything,” she whispered, sailing away with Alara into the depths of the house.

Alara forbore to deny that she was timid, or destined, faced with more important information. “A sponsored affair!”

“ Ssh. It is a masquerade.”

A masquerade .

Her aunt went on. “You have one night. No time to dally. You do wish to stay in Britain, don’t you?”

“You know I do! Do you think I’m timid too?”

Mrs. Griffiths patted her hand with sympathy. “We shall find out tonight. You have one night to find a British husband. No, don’t gasp, she’ll hear. A woman in desperate straits may take desperate measures. Will you trust me?”

Alara’s heart pounded.

There was nothing more wild, barbarica, than a masquerade. All the traits her mother least liked in the English gentry.

Mrs. Griffiths nodded with a challenge in her eye. “You’re a bit quiet, dear, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But if you want to catch a British husband, you don’t have much time. At a masquerade, you might well do it in one night. I’ve arranged a gown that will practically do it for you. You must just be brave. Will you do it?”

Alara's blood raced. She had no idea what to expect, or what might even happen. Her mother might well be right, that English parties were no place for a lady.

But her mother had also given her an adventurer's blood. Zehra Chaush had sailed to foreign lands for love; and she was quite wrong in thinking Alara would simply accept whatever came her way.

She might even see that sweet English boy again.

"Of course I will," she whispered back.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:27 pm

Chapter Two

“Y ou’re not a rakehell, Harman.”

“Zach, no one asked for your opinion. Go draw it. Somewhere else.”

Zach missed the point of a masquerade. No one expected to see respectable Lord Harman, heir to his father’s political legacy, in a pirate’s ragged waistcoat. Much less a waistcoat hanging open to show a black shirt collared with tarnished-silver lace.

He didn’t look respectable; he looked like he charged up and down ship riggings and dispensed death at the point of a sword.

For one night, he wanted to look dangerous, unexpected. That was the point.

He’d never found the women of London worth raking. He found most of their conversation vapid. That didn’t mean he wanted London to think him harmless.

Months before the prospect of Christmas masquerades, he’d started collecting the costume’s pieces.

When he’d displayed himself in his father’s library that evening, sweeping off his tricorn hat with a flourish, the gentleman had only grinned. “Who loaned you that lace? It must be seventy years old. Hope he trusts you the same way with his district. Perhaps it’s time to stand for member of Parliament.”

It drained off all Harman’s good humor. “I’ll inherit your seat in the Lords, you

know.”

“Not for quite a few years, you vulture!” His father swatted his arm with a folded-up gazette, as if Harman had still been a boy. “No, it’s time you stood for the Commons. It shows you’re serious about serving. People admire that in a man with a title.”

The moment crystallized a realization Harman had not yet articulated. He didn’t want people to admire him.

He didn’t know what he wanted, but not that.

If he didn’t say so soon, he’d find himself on a ballot.

His mother’s reaction had been more subdued but just as unsettling. She’d straightened his hat, kissed him on the cheek like when he was a little boy.

“Our younger dreams don’t always matter so much as we get older,” she said, for no reason at all.

“I’d still like to have a few,” he’d said with half a grin, leaving her in the foyer to their London townhouse, believing, apparently, that he secretly longed to be a pirate.

Well, to a certain extent, he did.

After all these years in his parents’ shadow, no one expected Harman to do anything shocking. No broken engagements, no duels—he’d barely convinced the Duke of Gravenshire’s dizzy daughter to dance with him, and that only once.

It was as if all of London had already cast him in the role of his father, a steadfast minister of Parliament whose conversation even at assemblies was all politics.

Harman had never liked persuading others to take his position. Agreement was boring. He preferred a little opposition. Questions sharpened his mind.

Against his will, his thoughts turned back to the country estate where he'd spent his younger summers playing with a baronet's daughter. A stunning little girl, with black hair that shone like silk and bright eyes that saw straight into his soul.

She'd never been to school, yet she asked cleverer questions than anyone else he knew. No one would have imagined the sweet, soft-spoken child could be stubborn, but Alara had never once agreed with him just to agree. Are you sure? she would ask when he made the most outrageous guesses about what made the sky blue, or why gold was used to mint money.

Maybe someday she would stop haunting—he couldn't say his dreams, for he seldom dreamed. The world, and his role in it, felt stolid both waking and sleeping. He'd think he'd dreamed her but for that; their time together was that magical, and that difficult to remember.

After every one of those summers, his parents had reminded him she had her own role to play: sail away to her mother's Empire, marry a prince, live a charmed life. They'd prepared him for the break; they'd warned him.

He'd been an eager boy ready to travel as much as the constant wars would let him; when he'd returned, a grown man, he saw no signs of her, nor did anyone in society know her.

No black-haired beauty would be ignored in London for long; ergo, she wasn't in London.

He could have visited her parents, but he didn't want to hear about her life in Istanbul, even though he still kept its map in his room. He could barely admit it to

himself, but if he heard she was anything other than alive and well across the sea—that her ship had sunk, or she’d fallen prey to some other calamity—he didn’t think he’d be able to bear it.

Still, he thought of that quiet little girl every time he walked into a room like this, wondering what she was doing, wishing she were here. Looking for eyes that spoke sonnets.

Looking for something else that interested him as much.

Lord Zachary clung to his distaste for Harman’s pirate costume. “You’re wearing a false label. Someone will take you for a rakehell and you’ll wake up in Berkshire, snuggling sheep.”

“You’re only proving you have no idea what a rakehell is or does.” Since Lord Zachary cared for nothing but his art, disappearing for weeks at a time to his secret garret in Leicester Square to contemplate colors and lines that only artists cared about, he was in no position to judge whether Harman might pass for a rakehell.

Which he definitely could. At least for tonight.

Everyone in London had come to the same party. The freezing cold weather had kept everyone within doors through autumn and into winter, and clearly Lady Gadbury’s masquerade had given them all a reason to burst out. The larger their mask, the less chance they’d be recognized, and that was an excellent opportunity to kick up anyone’s heels, their own or someone else’s.

Harman’s own mask was the kind worn at Italian festivals, barely more than a strip of silk tied around his head. It was enough, along with his coat, a ragged alley-market thing that smelled of cannonball smoke. Together they achieved much of his desired effect, the cavalier air of a pirate.

He was too young for London to be as boring and predictable as he found it. It seemed like in mere minutes he'd be as old as his father but far less satisfied, a pallid copy of the better man.

Tonight he'd be someone different.

A knot of young men clustered around a pillar; someone in its center had apparently established a defensible position. All Harman could see was a fluttering scrap of black lace. The men crowded round, bowing and trying to look more interesting than their neighbor.

It was a young lady in the middle, and she was about to be crushed.

Charging into the jolly fray, he could just see a fold of the lace through the crowd of legs. It wasn't antique and tarnished like his, but fresh as the day it was made. It lay so cleverly above the golden silk underneath that it gave the effect of being transparent, as if one glimpsed golden skin through the lace.

Well. It was a gown that demanded attention, but that didn't mean she wanted to be trampled.

He thought of Lady Trace's strict rules about Alara's dress, insisting she be covered up to the neck and down to wrists. When he saw a crush like this, he sympathized with it.

"Now men, if you smother the lady before the dancing even begins, none of you will?—"

He froze in the middle of his speech, heedless of other young swells who shot him dirty looks as he pulled them away to give the young woman some space.

It was her.

Alara. She was here. That was her. All of her. Under that sensual, suggestive, revealing black lace.

Alara, with the same black brows and rose-petal lips, with a figure he'd never dare attribute to a lady.

He rasped out words stuck in his very dry throat. "Miss Trace?"

Alara turned readily, as if toward the sunshine.

"Lord Harman!" She could not, did not hide her excitement, and all around her came groans of dismay.

"Shove off, Harman, give a man a chance."

"He's not so much."

"Get stuffed." That one muffled quickly as the fellow's neighbor squashed down his hat.

"Miss Trace." Harman reached through the disgruntled crowd to draw her out.

The view got better, his concern worse.

Every inch of her was swathed in perfect, delicate lace. Black lace. All lined with the same golden silk.

It gave the effect of a teasing veil draped over a lush goddess carved out of gold, even as Harman had the uncomfortable notion that if he could actually see Alara's skin, the

hue would be pinker.

The illusion was arresting, to say the least, lace floating over the silk clinging to her curves and causing words like grateful to bounce through his mind.

Her hair, glossy black as night, had been artfully braided over one shoulder, and at her ears glittered a fortune in rubies.

She was here. She was stunningly beautiful. And every man in the room had his eyes on her daring, imagination-sparking, blood-firing dress.

Alara had almost abandoned her newfound determination to be brave when her aunt produced the dress.

“I cannot wear that in public!”

“My dear, when times are desperate, desperate action must be taken,” said Mrs. Griffiths, entirely without apology.

Its chemise was a silk so light Alara could see through it, and since all her stays were short, the whole affair slid over her skin in a way that felt constantly distracting. And terrifying. And delicious.

All the way to the barouche, all the way along the street, there’d been a dozen times Alara had nearly turned back. Right up to the moment inside the fashionable Argyll Room Alara had taken off her cloak.

The raucous party pulled her attention away from the gown slipping against her skin.

Above her, private galleries were lit with flickering candles, full of shadows and smoke. She only saw a few silhouettes in the seats, only heard a few giggles from that

direction.

The main floor already spilled over with fascinating characters—harlequins, horses (what cunning velvet trousers!), Roman emperors, and some well-painted ladies whose brazen confidence inspired her.

“The dowager Duchess of Talbourne sponsored this party?”

“Well,” her aunt said, squirming a little as she gave up her own cloak to the waiting footman. “Not exactly.”

It was a marvelous chance to learn a great many things. It was truly kind. Alara needed to learn a great deal very quickly if she were to find her own destiny, and this was the time. This was the place.

But the more men crowded round her, the more she found herself searching for the one face that wasn't there.

Could she really marry a British man who wasn't Lord Harman? It seemed like all of them were here. She saw the cleverness to Mrs. Griffiths' plan. The masquerade was a chance to see into their minds, see what they dreamed about day by day hidden by the rote actions of practical life.

None of them seemed as innocently adventurous, as sweetly kind, as the Lord Harman she'd known.

And that realization felt pathetic. For he had never once thought of her, never called on her, never even written. Had he been at all interested, she would already know. She would already be betrothed, because she couldn't imagine refusing him anything.

She was faced with a much tougher decision than she'd realized, and very little time

to make it.

The musicians, gathered on stage at one end of the room, had limbered their instruments and were playing a most peculiar song about marching in a boar's head. Alara felt as if she had left Britain already, the sights and sounds were so strange.

Colors whirled everywhere, along with the thousand voices talking, laughing, singing, and the smell of warm skin and rich perfumes. Over everything hung the bitter tangs of liquor and spilled beer.

Her aunt retired to a card table with friends of hers, pointedly leaving Alara free to be anyone, or do anything, that she liked.

And men crowded around her, hoping she would be what they liked. Hoping they knew her dreams just from this dress.

Which perhaps they did. Dreams she didn't know she had. The idea was rather lowering.

"Care to dance, miss?"

"May I bring you some punch?"

"You look simply fetching tonight."

None of them properly introduced, all of them quite forward, and none, from what she could tell of their manners, the sort of man she'd consider for marriage.

Not that she expected them to propose it.

They did propose dancing, and drinking, and one whispered something near her ear

that she didn't understand and didn't wish to.

The whole affair was rapidly degenerating into discouraging chaos.

Then that voice.

The timbre was different—older, deeper—but she knew that voice as well as she knew the verses said to inspire happiness.

She hadn't expected his voice to make her shiver, just saying her name. They'd called each other Alara and John when they were little. He used to like how she said his name.

She was dying to say it again.

But as the crowd parted, she saw that the man who went with the voice was broad in the chest and tall, much taller than anyone Alara remembered. His dark head bent down with a regal, threatening sort of hook to its shape; his billowing hat shaded his face, and so did his mask.

Quickly he seized her round the waist and hauled her out of the crowd. He left behind loud groans and a few curses.

Alara found herself leaning into him, one hand on his chest. "It is you, isn't it?"

She saw his lips press tightly shut. A muscle jumped in his clenched jaw. He didn't look kind, or sweet. "That depends what you mean."

How? Alara knew it was him. But she wanted him to say something—to introduce himself, or to remind her of something they'd found together. He was so forbidding and grim, and nothing like the boy she remembered.

Against her will, she asked, “Aren’t you my old friend?”

He looked over her shoulder as if back at the crowd of disappointed young roughs. “We’ve met,” he said briefly, and all Alara’s dreams shattered and fell on the floor, a thousand shards of cutting glass.

Harman had somehow offended fate. That was the only reason he was standing here, at a Christmas masquerade, with a fully grown, fully rounded Alara Trace in his arms...

...seeing a face over her shoulder that he knew all too well. The face of trouble.

Tonight she had bright gingery hair and a tinsel crown. Her lacy shepherdess dress and blousy chemise recalled Marie Antoinette in her fashionable days, a reference in poor taste at best, as they’d just passed the twentieth anniversary of that lady’s execution.

That probably amused the lady scoundrel.

He had no choice. “Miss Trace, you’ll excuse me, won’t you?”

“Of course.” Alara looked confused, as well she might; they’d just met again for the first time in more than ten years, and he was running from her.

But the last thing he wanted was for her to meet, or get entangled with, the tiny woman in the tinsel crown.

He looked back over his shoulder. The disgruntled youths were still there; he did not want to leave her alone in this party. For a man who never dreamed, his imagination was suddenly bursting with possibilities, all bad. Where was her mother? Why wasn’t she chaperoned?

Had he more time, he'd retrieve Lord Zachary and require him to watch after Alara; but Zachary had a fair face and golden hair, and he was far from blind. He could all too easily take an interest in Alara himself. Disappointing a crowd of masked bandits was one thing; dissuading an old friend was another.

After the disastrous bonfire night in the country they'd just had, Harman was short an old friend, and unready to lose one more.

The little crowned shepherdess waved hello, beckoning him.

"Your pardon," Harman bowed abruptly to Alara, feeling his jaw jump with tension, and against every inclination in his body, left her there.

He resolved to keep her in sight, but even so, every step he took away from her felt difficult, as if the very air pulled him back.

Brusquely he snapped to the small executed French queen, "Madame. What are you doing here? I feel I should remind you, you disappeared."

Chapter Three

The petite redhead fluttered her eyelashes at him. “Yet here I am. I’m sorry, have we met? I am a maid in my lady’s costume; please don’t tell, as I am using her ticket. My name is Ninette.”

Harman didn’t believe that story more than any others he knew about this woman. He turned to keep Alara in sight. “Why?” He hadn’t time to be more polite, and he didn’t owe it anyway. So-called Ninette had never been his guest, and the last time he’d seen her had been, to put it mildly, a mess. “Never mind why. I advise you to leave.”

“I’m very good at staying out of sight.” The twinkle in her eye gave that the lie, as well as the way her feet moved restlessly to the music, as if longing to dance. “I’m here to right a wrong.”

“To me?”

“Mercy Bennett, of course not. No one’s ever wronged you, you’re as upright as a plank.”

He didn’t want to hear that tonight. Actually, he never wanted to hear that. “What can I do for you... Ninette?”

“Put more feeling in the name. It’s ever so much more fun.”

“You look more like a naughty queen, which you know perfectly well. Shall I call you Your Majesty?”

“I do like the sound of it. Truly, sir, I only greet you because you saw me. I am not here to visit with you.”

Welcome news, but too late; he'd already turned Alara loose. There she was, joining a group of young ladies near the stage. He relaxed a moment, then saw the young ladies glancing about, clearly plotting to accept invitations to dance. Men drew near them like waves in the ocean.

“I wish I were here to visit.” The tiny woman's eyes traveled over Harman's black linen and lace with appreciation. “The costume suits you, though I'm not sure I believe you as a?—”

Her words chopped themselves off.

Turning to see what she saw, Harman's own blood turned cold, making his limbs too heavy to move for a second.

It was Waresham. His no-longer friend. Far worse than a rake, Harman knew him to be a villain, and violent; he suspected the man of worse.

The tiny woman's face did not blanch, but her eyes grew hard.

“Well,” she said in a cold, calm voice, “that complicates matters.”

It would be too pathetic to stare after Lord Harman after he abandoned her in the middle of the assembly floor.

The sights and sounds all around threatened to wash over her and bear her down. Alara thought she might drown.

Then: no.

Alara did not wish to accept the whims of fate. She had one night to investigate the society she'd so long dreamed about.

This was the one place in London where she might literally meet anyone at all, from a street juggler to the Prince Regent. She would not miss the chance.

She might lack genius; she might lack red hair, she told herself bitterly. But she trusted herself to ask good questions, and here she could ask anyone anything.

"I beg your pardon," she said, as brazen as she could be, tapping her fan against the shoulder of a tall young man in a judge's robes. Surely they were not earned. His old-fashioned white wig flapped as he whipped round; then he grinned.

She said, "I'd like to meet the men here who are not married."

"My lady," he said, eyes sweeping up and down her gown, "I'd be a fool to help you."

Despite the ache in her chest, where the shattered dreams hurt most, Alara laughed. "How can I persuade you?"

"Are you serious?"

"Quite."

"Well, then." He made a show of tapping a finger against his jaw. His smile was welcoming, where Harman had none. Only a grim expression. As if seeing her again were something awful!

Alara had never concerned herself much with pride, but she found she wasn't devoid of it.

The stupid dreams she'd spun about that boy. She'd like to blame her mother. Had she been part of London society, she would have seen years ago what a horrid man he'd become. She wouldn't have longed for him, or built up in her imagination that he might hand her a future.

Then, shoving her bitter thoughts down where no one would see, she blamed only herself.

Life was a series of passages, and she was no longer that little girl in the country. She had to choose between living a life in an Ottoman palace, likely in purdah, where new interests would be difficult to come by; or living a life in Britain, owned by some man who, as Lord Harman clearly demonstrated, could become cold and distant with time.

Neither appealed.

But the night had barely begun.

The judge disappeared. If he intended to help, he had a peculiar way of showing it. Alara would have to make decisions for herself.

Wasn't that what tonight was all about?

"I have a prior engagement," she told a wide man asking for the next quadrille, a man dressed, oddly enough, as a Turk. Or at least what he imagined a Turk to be; he might as well be dressed in curtains, for all his clothing resembled the fashions her father had brought home from the Sultan's court.

Even a quarter century later those silks were scintillating, beautifully made, with wide fur lapels that extended all around. This man wore what looked like a dressing gown. Likely it was. She dismissed him from her list of people to meet.

It might not be fair to Lord Harman, but as angry as she was with herself, she was angrier with him. Angry that he wasn't the sweet boy she remembered. Angry that he didn't care.

Or only cared enough to send her disapproving glances over the head of another woman.

If he hated her gown, he could ride his disapproval to hell. Yes, it was daring; but there were many ladies here showing far more skin. Alara was covered all the way up to her throat and down to her wrists. And he didn't know her well enough to disapprove of anything else about her.

The petite figure who had seized his attention wore a confection of lace and ruffles that scandalously recalled the executed French queen. Lord Harman paid her close attention. All Alara could see of him was his hat.

She said yes to the next expensive-looking Spanish explorer who asked her to dance.

"I must go," Harman muttered. Some fellow who fancied himself a Spaniard was leading Alara out onto the dance floor. She blazed like a lantern, barely containing her flame.

"I'm going to need your help."

"For what?" This so-called Ninette had far more skills to get into mischief and out again without his help. He might not be sure of everything about her, but he knew that.

"I'm here to return something I borrowed, and I can't cross paths with Waresham." She was deadly serious now. "Not without killing him, and I can't kill him tonight."

Her blood-chilling calm was the thing that convinced him she meant what she said.

Her eyes, following Waresham through the dancers, convinced him more as she added, "Though maybe I should."

Harman shook off the chill. "What did you borrow?"

She drew closer, resting a hand on his waistcoat and smiling flirtatiously up at him. He felt a finger dip into his pocket. "Just a ring," she said, as if it meant less than a few grains of salt. "It belongs to the sad young lady there, do you see her?"

Only her eyes flicked in that direction, but Harman saw who she meant. The girl looked forlorn, standing on the sidelines in a plain blue gown, her domino mask her only real acknowledgement of the festivities.

"She's had a sorry time of it. Please return the ring with apologies. I should keep my distance. Don't let Waresham get that ring. She's miserable now, but if he realizes it's important to her, he'll destroy what's left of her life."

"Ninette," Harman said with the last of his patience, "I would like to oblige you, but I have problems of my own. An old friend is in the clutches of a rake who is even now trying to stare down her dress, and she does not have your aplomb for such situations."

His little interruptor looked unerringly across the room at Alara, her lace gown sweeping arcs around her as she danced.

When had she learned to dance like that? She moved like water, like inevitable air.

"You have excellent taste." Ninette looked up at him again. "And you're a good man. I know I can count on you."

He shook his head to explain that she couldn't, but it was too late; she'd already disappeared into the crush.

"You'll dance?" Lord Zachary appeared again as Harman shoved his way back through the crowd. "I mean in the reel; some people are waltzing, even without music." A flash of brightly colored skirts erupted within a circle of clapping, whooping revelers, and Zach winced. "Christ, there goes my grandmother."

Apparently Zach hadn't seen the tiny redhead they both knew. Harman cursed his luck. Why burden him with this damnable ring? Why tonight?

The dancers preparing for the reel faced each other in two lines, loud whoops nearly drowning out the music.

A bewildering army of women had joined the dance. A few wore Greek-inspired, diaphanous gowns that recalled the Revolution; Harman wondered if they'd seen the erstwhile Ninette. One woman wore massive red shoes that contrasted horribly with her green dress; one wore a low-cut gown and a hat topped with a vast bouquet of feathers. A number wore daring gowns as Alara did, though with carnival masks added; and one woman wore the garb of one of Queen Elizabeth's knights. Sir Walter Raleigh, unless he missed his guess.

Alara lined up to dance as well, smiled at the Spaniard facing her; when they drew together and marched in a circle, his hand dropped to her rear, and she returned it to her waist, expression never faltering.

Harman felt a first-in-his-life urge to flatten the man.

Her aplomb didn't fool him. Alara had always been calm, still was. That didn't mean she wasn't shaken.

This was the wrong place for her, and the wrong way to see her again.

Next she danced with the white-haired lady beside her who was clearly having almost as much fun as Zach's grandmother.

While the ladies matched arms, in a chassé forward and back, Harman spun the Spaniard by his shoulders, twirling him paces away and leaving him facing the wall.

Harman took his place.

It pierced something in him, the way Alara's smile faltered when she saw him there instead of the Spaniard.

"What are you doing here?" He couldn't help how blunt it sounded.

"Dancing," she pointed out, as if his question was stupid given the obvious facts.

True, it was.

He took her hand, black glove in black glove. Even through his rough gauntlet, her hand was warm, alive. It stirred him more even than the sight of her in that gown.

"Where have you been? What are you doing? Why are you wearing that dress? "

"Must I answer your questions all at once? Or may I breathe in between?"

"Truly," he said, unable to focus on anything besides her figure, "what is that you're wearing?"

"A dress. As you just said." She blinked. "I have no imagination at all. I never imagined you'd grow so tall, or so foolish."

They stepped towards each other. Then apart. Again he felt that pull, that hollow feeling as the space between them increased.

He wanted to pull her closer; instead he spoke fast and urgent, pitched for only her to hear. “Thank God you lack imagination. I’d hate for you to imagine what every man in this room is thinking, seeing you in that.”

“It’s a very clever dress,” said Alara, light and careless as if they were simply conversing through the dance. Harman had an urge to throw her over his shoulder and carry her off. “It’s Heathcoat’s lace.”

“Who is Heathcoat? Why are you wearing his lace? Is he here?” Harman peered through the surrounding watchers; it seemed like every one was a man staring at Alara.

She parted from him again, waited for the other two dancers in their set to promenade through, then rejoined him with something like pity in her eyes.

“Mr. Heathcoat is the man who devised the machine that makes this lace. I’m surprised you don’t know him. I suppose Loughborough does not need a minister in Parliament?”

Harman was grateful for the mask; it should hide some of his flush. They’d been young, but she’d still known his parents’ plans for their oldest son and heir. Assumed, the way everyone else did, that he’d follow them.

Well, his parents still assumed that.

Alara went on. “It’s surprisingly sturdy lace. One can cut it anywhere, and it will not unravel.”

The vision of someone cutting her out of that lace gown was too much.

“You’re through,” said Harman, sweeping his arm against her waist and ushering her out of the dance.

“Lord Harman! How terribly rude!” Making apologetic faces over her shoulder toward the rest of her set, left dancing alone, Alara shoved his arm away far more fiercely than she had the wandering Spaniard’s.

“Miss Trace.” The closer he leaned, the more of her scent he smelled. It was oil of roses, decadent, freshly beautiful, suiting her more than he could have imagined; and below that, he caught something luxurious, dark, and mysterious. Rich. Like the heart of a dark tree. He had to work to remember what he was going to say. “You must go home.”

He ought to have known. She’d never meekly followed orders, and she still didn’t. As she drew herself to her full height, the swell of her bosom stretched the front of the black lace, making Harman hold his breath. “Sir, I am aware that you enjoy entertainments like this every day. I, however, do not. I have very little time to make some momentous decisions, in which you play no part. So please excuse me.”

She pulled away from him, and he immediately missed her warmth.

“I’m sorry.” Why couldn’t they have met by that little stream where he used to build bridges for her? “Sorry I cannot claim more of your time. I never expected—” He looked around. The place was like a battlefield full of enemies. “You don’t have a husband?” he blurted out, unable to think of a more clever way to put it under such pressure.

“No.”

Why couldn't he read her look when she said that? He used to be able to. They used to know each other very well, and now he felt like a stranger, but she didn't.

A flash of blue crossed his path ahead, and he saw the sad girl moving, the one to whom the ring now in his pocket belonged.

He searched the crowd. There was no sign of Ninette; but she was so short, she might be difficult to see among the revelers.

When he looked back at Alara, he saw that she'd watched him study every woman here but her. She looked, above all else, unimpressed.

Trying to recover his pirate swagger, he murmured, "I'm sorry, Miss Trace, that this is our reunion. But there are dangerous people here, even if you were not wearing—" He wouldn't look down. "—that. I'm shocked at Sir Theodore's judgment, and must urge you to leave at once. I will engage you a cab, if you have no carriage."

"Oh, you will? You'll engage me a cab? Are you sure?"

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:27 pm

Chapter Four

Those three little words reached into him like they never had before, pulling at everything inside him that could fill with blood.

He was lost in memories of the little girl he'd once known, perhaps his best friend, as he watched the movements of Alara's lips as if they were narcotic, lulling him into a haze. As a girl she'd challenged him; now he felt captured.

She was still talking, her bright eyes fixed on him, serious as ever, and unyielding in her conviction that she had a right to her own position.

"You obviously don't remember me very well. My family does not adhere to these absurd British practices of treating women like cattle. I have a reason to be here, and I will not simply leave at your order. Indeed, I can't imagine why you would try to give me orders at all. We have not seen each other since we were children."

He leaned his head as close to hers as he dared. That rich scent threatened to carry away his reason; it was a fight not to close the distance between them and touch her. Not just her hand; her cheek. Her lips.

"I'm giving you orders for a reason, Alara. You truly don't seem to grasp how dangerous it is for you to be here unescorted. Even without... other considerations."

Other considerations were looming by the punchbowl. Waresham, disheveled hair and a torn military coat speaking to the man's burst aspirations.

Not a month ago the man had expected to be a rewarded officer by Napoleon's side. Now he was no doubt finding society had little room for traitors.

Where had the girl in blue fled?

Alara's eyes swept the room right after his, like a queen surveying her subjects. "I suppose your other considerations are the young woman with red hair? Or perhaps the one in blue? You have so many considerations to manage, Lord Harman. You'll excuse me if I tend to myself."

"You can't stay in this bedlam."

Alara would rather melt through the floor than let this man see her cry.

"I am fully aware of the leers," she told him, holding her head as high as she could. "I suppose other British women have practice in ignoring them; so will I. They are not half so mortifying as you presuming to know me after all this time..." She would not cry. "...so much time without a word between us."

"Damn." With the size of his body he hustled her towards a more quiet spot. There was nowhere to be alone, not down here among the dancers and drinkers, but as they drew closer to a pillar below the galleries, and his masked eyes fixed on her in their shade, the rest of the room faded away. "Alara, I had no idea you had not sailed to Istanbul. I'm sorry."

Surely he didn't think that was kinder. "Why be sorry? We had no reason to exchange news."

That made something flare in his dark eyes that was hot, and from a tarnished-lace pirate who had nothing in common with the boy she'd known, it was alarming.

“Yes, we did.” His voice grew faster, urgent. “We had reasons. My childhood is a blur except for those afternoons in the valley, tracing tree roots and trying to calculate the volume of clouds. Those were the best moments. Weren’t they for you?”

She couldn’t slow her breathing. What did he want her to admit? That she had thought about him all this time? Wondered where he was? Why he hadn’t come to call?

He didn’t wait for her to decide. “We still have reasons to speak, and that’s why I can’t let you stay. You’re too sweet for this kind of party. You can’t imagine what will happen as the night wears on and more liquor flows and...” He growled at himself and clenched a fist. It was so large. “You’re far wiser than I, you always have been, but this isn’t a place for the wise.”

“How can I be too sweet when all these other ladies are here?”

“They’re not ladies.”

“Nonsense. My aunt is at the card table over—Well, I can’t see her, but she’s here. Her ticket came from the dowager Duchess of Talbourne; the lady’s reputation is impeccable. And surely the sponsors?—”

He crowded closer so he could say what he had to say without too many people overhearing. There was still the faint possibility, horrible as it felt, that one day he’d need a vote from someone whose secrets he was about to reveal. “This is Lady Gadbury’s party. She is holding it partly to snub her old lover, who recently dropped her to be married. That’s her on the dais, dressed as Victory.” He pointed to a beautiful woman with high-piled curls, wearing a daring Greek chiton; Alara wondered if her chemise really matched the color of her skin, or if she truly was bare underneath. “I promise you at some point this evening, somewhere in this building, perhaps in one of the private galleries over our heads, her dress is coming off.”

Alara put a hand over her mouth.

“There’s a fellow here with two young lovers he’ll likely entertain in another gallery. They never speak in public, for fear of slander of the younger two—both men, and heirs to titles. That fat old rumpot there is trying to convince young women to go behind the stage curtains with him, telling them that if they are nice to him, he might make them his mistress. There’s an heiress just married, with her husband; looks like they might not even make it to the galleries.” He gestured slightly toward a couple wrapped around each other in obvious, oblivious passion. “And over there are two ladies—I believe they are both ladies—kissing each other.”

It was like Binbir Gece , the Thousand and One Nights. She saw nothing, while he saw licentious stories everywhere. She wanted him to explain them all, and had no words to express such a thing. She felt her face grow hot as she only asked, “There are three gentlemen?”

“ Alara. ”

“Very well, I do see that there is... more here than meets the eye, but none of that has anything to do with me.” She had to appeal to his childhood feeling for her, if any remained. “Truly, Lord Harman, I must meet more of the men here. I have no other option.”

His growl of frustration had a very curious effect on her. Under the silk of her gown, against her stays, she felt her nipples tighten. More humiliating evidence that betrayed her real interest in him.

“It has everything to do with you. I’m only telling you what I know will happen. If you keep wandering about in that gown?—”

“Those stories don’t affect?—”

“—you stay here, and they will. ”

All at once the size of him blocked out the rest of the room, his rough black coat, his wide hat, and Alara found herself pressed into the pillar at her back by a tall, hard length of man. He groaned as he pressed into her softness, groaned the very last quarter inch of air between them before his lips captured hers in a kiss that destroyed the rest of her words.

All those years dreaming of this man, and she'd never imagined his taste, his smell. He smelled of dried lavender and gunpowder, and it surrounded her along with the hard strength of his arms as he pulled her from the pillar into him, his body, his breath.

She didn't know how her mouth had opened for him, how he had convinced her instantly without words to let him taste her lips, her tongue, the slow motion of him holding her in a grip as sure as his relentless arms, which had wrapped around her now and pulled her so close she couldn't have breathed if she wanted to.

She only knew how she melted against him, feeling softer than ever before against his muscle, his heat.

When she could think again, his lips moved against hers as he said, very softly, “Every love story has to do with you.”

And just when Alara was prepared to listen to him explain, for as long as he wanted, what that meant, she saw his eyes flick away.

Turning her head, she saw the woman in blue coming back toward the dancing.

He could do that, say that , and then look for someone else.

“I would rather remember the way you used to be,” she said, trying to keep her voice from shaking, “than learn any more about you now.”

She stepped back, forcing him to open his arms, just as her aunt appeared through the crush carrying two porcelain cups.

“There you are!” Mrs. Griffiths’ voice was high and cheery, and Alara hoped she hadn’t seen what had just happened. “I brought you some punch.”

Finding an offer of alcohol nearly as startling as Harman’s kiss, Alara took it. She’d never tasted it; doing so would feel like a declaration, a break.

Like having to decide between the future her mother had picked for her, and her own.

“Mrs. Griffiths.” The man who’d once been her dearest heart’s desire and was now a complete stranger rounded on her aunt as if prepared to fight. “You must take Alara out of here at once.”

“Nonsense,” said the woman stoutly, moving to stand next to her. “Alara deserves a bit of fun before she sails.”

“Sails?”

“Yes,” Alara managed to say. It was as though his kiss had stolen all the breath from her and left her heart pounding, desperate for air. Her legs felt as though she might drop, and there was a liquid heat in her belly that was unfamiliar. She felt hungry.

She didn’t want food.

Gathering what she could of her wits, she finished the thought. “Yes, I’ll be sailing soon for Istanbul. I don’t expect—” The reality choked her. “I don’t expect to return.”

“That can’t be true.”

Why should he doubt it? He knew nothing about her life, nothing about her. He’d stolen her breath, taken control of her body, and now he wanted to send her home while he pursued the various women in whom he had a real interest.

Was he going to kiss them the way he’d kissed her?

Would he do more?

To distract herself from the thought, she sipped from the cup in her hand.

It was sweet and acrid at the same time. The flavor on her tongue was complicated. It didn’t feel like sin, any more than had Lord Harman’s kiss; and that alone was enough to make her wary.

This was a perfect, an only opportunity to sail through London society without chains. She couldn’t do everything she wished tonight if she fell into any traps.

That kiss had been a trap. Perhaps the punch was too.

She didn’t intend to drink any more. “Madame,” she said to her aunt, “perhaps you’d introduce me to some gentlemen you know.”

“Of course,” said Mrs. Griffiths, and Alara followed her away from the stranger she used to know.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:27 pm

Chapter Five

There was too much happening at this party, none of it fun.

Harman stalked through the crowd, looking for the girl in blue, for Ninette, and definitely for Waresham; though the last only to avoid him.

Why had it felt like a blow to the ribs, Alara saying she wouldn't return? Hadn't he thought for years she was already gone?

But she wasn't. She was here, and warmer than any dream, soft in his arms, for his kiss. She'd pulled him to her instantly, without a word; that kiss had been just as inevitable.

She couldn't sail off to Ottoman lands, or anywhere, after a kiss like that. He could still feel it in his bones.

He should have sought her out years ago. He would have but for—

But for the reports from his parents.

Something snapped into place inside him, and then, something else broke.

Why would his parents have told him so many times Alara was intended for someone else? He'd been a boy when last they met. Hadn't they seen how he looked at her? How he felt?

They must have realized things he'd been too young to realize for himself.

And instead of helping him realize his dreams, they'd led him to put those dreams away. To believe she couldn't be his. He could only think of one reason they'd do that, and it wasn't pleasant.

Now she was here, close enough to touch; he'd had her in his arms. Already they felt empty without her. He felt hollow, as if half of himself had been torn away.

Had been torn away long ago and just returned to him, only for a moment.

It was apparent he had very little time to woo Alara and repair the feelings between them. If she felt them. If he could.

He wasn't a boy anymore. He didn't assume he had all the answers. Not alone.

"Miss Trace."

She turned, obviously annoyed, and earned him hoots from the little crowd of men hanging on her every word. Not that words could be heard in this cacophony; Harman suspected the men cared more about staring. One was a fellow Harman knew, wearing a judge's robes and shooing him away like a buzzing fly.

But Alara gave him a chilly answer. "Lord Harman."

"I wonder if I could beg your assistance."

The catcalls from their audience were immediate. "G'wan with you!"

"You had a chance, gov'nor. Push off."

“Truthfully, Harman, you’re being a wet blanket.”

His look stifled that last, from the faux judge. “Later, Shale. I must speak with Miss Trace.”

“I doubt you do,” she said, dismissing him with a turn of her back.

Well. He might never be a politician, but if he couldn’t plead his case in public now, he’d always regret not trying.

“Miss Trace, I have some pressing matters in which your assistance would be invaluable. I understand you are here to enjoy yourself, and I promise to return you to the revelry afterwards, if only you will give me a little more of your precious time.”

She gave him a suspicious look out of one eye. It made him want to kiss her again. “You’re very tall, sir. You can manage on your own.”

He couldn’t help his smile. Softly he asked her, “Are you sure?”

That turned her toward him as surely as if he’d used his hands. Her mouth dropped open a little, reminding him of its luscious sweetness.

She didn’t need to answer. Those words belonged to the two of them. She remembered, as well as he did.

“Very well, Lord Harman,” she said, her voice quiet too. “I will help, if I can.”

“Honestly,” objected the judge, over the groans of his compatriots. “This is a party, Harman. What can you possibly need to do?”

Convince Alara to marry me.

More than his future, his calling, even more than his own name, that much was clear. He'd wanted her all his life; he still did.

They were no longer children, and while that made the world more complicated, it also made for real possibility.

"Let me show you Argyll Hall," he said, to more hoots from the vulgar men he was depriving of Alara's company.

She could have said thank you, I've seen it. Instead, she put her hand in his.

Still so sweetly giving. The way she'd always been.

As soon as there was enough distance that at least the men behind them wouldn't hear, he said, "Miss Trace. I'm sorry."

This time her smile was genuine, though brief. "No need, sir. Apparently, you have a secret need to be very rude. A leopard can't change his spots."

She made him smile too. He couldn't help it, though it wouldn't serve to keep the men away. "Apparently. You must know what a shock it was to see you again."

"I can't see why." She waved her free hand; he kept the other firmly tucked in the crook of his elbow. "Here I am."

"I've never seen you in London before."

"Yes, I know." She said it lightly, but he felt like it pained her a little. "I assume you have been occupied elsewhere."

Her occupied elsewhere hinted at redheads and brunettes.

“In truth, I haven’t.” What had he done with the last decade of his life? Time at Oxford, and Edinburgh. A stint in Ireland his father had said would prepare him to better serve a united Britain. He’d seen appalling poverty; heard a lecture on Newton’s methods that he’d remember for the rest of his life; and met Catholics studying with Protestants, something no one in London ever mentioned at all.

Then he remembered the journey where he’d most wished Alara were there to ask questions. “I did meet the most extraordinary man of science; Humphry Davy is his name, or I should say Sir Humphry, as he is now a knight. He and his colleagues in Bristol have done astonishing things. He can harness lightning in a box, and by forcing it through a vessel of salts, separate them into their most elemental constituents.”

She stopped, so he stopped too. “Not really! Imagine! Controlling the power of lightning!”

His grin was boyish now, as if they were back on the banks of the stream. “It does amaze. He is a most amusing fellow. You must meet him. He tells terrible jokes—” not suitable for a lady’s ears, Harman recalled to himself, but pressed on, “—and entertains parties all night with tales from One Thousand and One Nights. Do you know it? I should not presume, a lady may not wish to read such things, but Sir Humphrey owned M. Galland’s volumes and I lost myself in them.”

Alara wondered if she might injure her neck, this evening kept spinning her round so hard.

The Lord Harman who led her away from her last group of admirers (and truly, Mr. Shale was very interesting) was very much her John, the same boy she’d known as a child in the form of a large, grinning man. Curious; kind; sharing.

Where had he been all evening?

Alara was not a fool. Her mother's diatribes against roast beef and rain had trained her in some skepticism, not just toward what people said, but what they did. Her mother didn't care for England, yet chose to live there; her feeling for her husband was manifest.

John had some reason to act like this, both earlier and now; and he still seemed to watch the faces of the crowd, for what reason she couldn't fathom.

Still, it was impossible to simply abandon him. He had all the electric interest of their childhood, drawing her into his orbit the way a piece of amber, when rubbed, would attract a wisp of straw.

"I am quite familiar with the Thousand and One Nights," she said, trying not to laugh. "My mother loves to remind me it was translated into Turkish from Arabic first."

"Not really!" He had that open astonishment on his face, open pleasure, that she remembered from years ago. "You must meet Sir Humphry. He is at the Royal Institute now. No, actually he is in France, receiving a medal from Bonaparte himself."

Now he had astonished her. "Imagine!" She couldn't. Though her journey would be much farther, she would not sail into hostile lands. She was too timid for that.

They moved on, side by side, their steps naturally matching in length because Lord Harman adjusted his long stride to hers as they contemplated, together, the very wide world and all that was amazing in it.

"Well," Alara finally said, "I see why you have been far too busy to call upon me."

That sobered him. "I would have. I should have. I thought—I was given the impression that you had sailed long ago."

Oh. That made everything inside her feel lighter. He'd thought she'd gone. No wonder he had never been to see her.

And yet.

"I knew you were here," she told him softly, not wanting to admit it, the words escaping before she could think them through.

"Damn." There were volumes in his curse. Of course she could not have called upon him; not in the eyes of society, and certainly not in the eyes of her mother. "I should have cornered Sir Theodore. Asked after you. He is so seldom in the offices of Parliament now he has retired."

"I wish I had sent you a note." That was as brazen as she could manage to be, and now Alara wondered why she hadn't done just that.

Because she was braver when he was near was the honest answer, though it pained her to realize.

After all, wasn't it too late?

She wasn't sure what gave her that impression, as she'd come explicitly with the idea of finding a British husband all in one night.

So why did that now feel so impossible?

His massive presence, his kiss, made marriage far more tangible. It would be something real; and if it were to be with him, she stood in a fair way to lose far more than a house.

She was still drawn to him, while he busied himself chasing redheads. And if they

were married under British law, what could she do about it then?

The prospect was even more daunting than that of marrying a stranger.

A young man approached, handsome as a Greek statue. His blond hair flopped over one eye; he pushed it away. "My grandmother," he announced, "is very drunk."

"Good God, Zachary," Lord Harman muttered beside her. "You can see there's a lady present."

"Apologies, my lady." The fellow shrugged and gave her a wry grin, oblivious to the wild party growing louder around them.

The little orchestra tooted a new round of noise, and all around her people piped up singing, "On Christmas night, all Christians sing..."

Lord Zachary leaned closer. "Don't let us stop you if you wish to sing too. It's some people's favorite part of the night."

"I don't know the song, I'm afraid."

To the young man's climbing eyebrows, Harman snapped, "She is not Christian, idiot."

"Never say so! How fascinating. Do say more."

To her, Lord Harman said, "Ignore him. He's an oaf and has no skill with women except to draw them."

"Gad. Apologies again," Lord Zachary admitted immediately with a short bow. "I do spend too much time with... varying sorts of women, and have become far too

informal.”

“Nightbirds?” Lord Harman said, unnecessarily harshly, Alara thought.

“Friends,” Lord Zachary answered without hesitation, giving him a questioning look.

Lord Harman didn’t look interested in giving his friend more chances to explain. “Miss Trace,” he said instead, “we must find somewhere quieter to speak. It is very important.”

The way he said important made her blood pound in her veins.

Lord Zachary just looked suspicious. “See here, Harman. The lady is clearly gentle; I won’t let you?—”

“I am far more inclined to protect the young lady than you will ever know,” the pirate cut him off, sending her pulse racing. How she wanted that to be true. “Never fear for her safety; if I harm her, call me out.”

“I will.” His light eyes looked serious as he bowed again, this time more deeply, to Alara. “Lord Zachary Vane, at your service. I have a residence at number seventeen, Leicester Square; never hesitate to call upon my service.”

“Thank you, sir.” She wanted to be gracious, as he was; but really she just wanted him gone.

Her John had grown up to be dangerous in many ways, but she’d gladly risk following him for one true, uninterrupted, conversation.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:27 pm

Chapter Six

The air in the galleries put the lie to her aunt's promise of unfettered breathing.

But the din of the party muted a little, even though it continued only yards away. The curtains lining the dim gallery muffled the noise, and surrounded them with a quieter dark.

As much as she'd longed to be alone with him, standing next to him now, she felt shy. "So democratic of the gentry, to allow so many kinds of people into their revels."

"They don't," he said shortly. "The tickets are not supposed to travel, but people play jokes. Alara."

It was too private a name in too private a place.

"John." She couldn't help the way it came out, softly released air.

"I am the world's biggest fool. I've thought of you—I cannot say how many times, because I have not counted them. If I had, I could have occupied all the years since we last saw each other."

That was too much. He was overwhelmingly large, and with his hat on, she could not see his face.

Perhaps his face was no badge of truth; but she'd once found it reassuring. "I'd rather see you than listen to useless protests. The years are gone."

That paused him, picking his way between the gilt chairs in the smoky red space to make a space for her. She heard him stop. “See me? Don’t say that unless you mean it.”

“I always say what I mean.” She managed to toss him a little smile, even though the urgency of his words made her shiver.

He was so large, so rough with that worn coat hanging open and the faintest glint of silver from the lace at his throat.

Then he took off his hat, and his mask too.

The faint glow of the candelabras hanging in the middle of the vast room outlined a profile that seemed entirely new, yet at the same time familiar. Welcome.

Dear.

And he drew closer. “Then tell me you won’t sail for Istanbul.”

Could he see the way he made her heart stutter? Did it show through her skin? The closer he came, the more Alara felt soft, obvious, transparent.

And the heat in her body pooled in ways she didn’t expect, and seemed to pull her toward him.

“That would be a promise,” she said as gently as she could, “and one I cannot make.”

“But why?” His voice was low, rough as nails. “Why go? You are of age. Surely your parents will not force you if you do not wish.”

He was the first, the only person who had asked her that question.

He made it possible for her to answer.

“I am of age,” she said, letting him draw so close she could see the scar on his chin from when he was eight and decided he could fly. “Old enough to make choices. My mother has arranged a house I can buy in Istanbul, and will no doubt find me a husband with a good place at court.”

“And is that what you want?” His voice seemed deeper the closer he got. “You wish to be at the Sultan’s court? A diplomat at heart, like your parents?”

“No.” She could only whisper when he was this close. Even in the warm room, the heat that radiated from him made her want to press against him like she had below, like when he had kissed her. She licked her lips. “I want to be free to make my own choices. If I have money of my own, I have some control over my life. If I marry a Muslim man, the religious law would guarantee me the right to divorce.”

“Interesting.” The way he said the word flowed over her skin. The curious little boy had powers as a grown man that she could not have imagined. “And what would make you divorce a man, Alara?”

“If he hurt me.” His growl might have been objection, might have been agreement; she went on. “If he did not let me have friends. If he did not let me have children.” She kept talking to distract herself from touching. “If he stopped loving me.”

“How could any man not love you?” he said, and his mouth captured hers again.

This kiss had no boundaries. His lips toyed with hers, touching her, tasting, from her mouth to the tip of her nose to her eyelids, each spot delicately adored. His hands, however, grasped her roughly, pulling her against him with no restraint. She might have felt caged with his hard arms holding her so tight; instead she felt like she was flying.

She pushed up on her toes, trying to get closer; he made that growling noise again. “I’m sure we should stop,” he rasped, not sounding like he believed it at all.

“I’m sure that’s true,” she agreed, ignoring his words, ignoring everything but the feel of his coat buckles pressing into her skin, the heat of him, his muscled torso imprinting her with patterns she hoped would never fade.

One buckle caught a little on the lace; she ignored it.

“Alara,” he said, reverently, and buried his face in her hair.

Everything in her tightened in anticipation of his touch. Everything in her melted as the warmth of his lips traced the outside of her ear, a tiny place to release so much heat, so much emotion.

The noise he made was one of pure animal triumph when she let her head fall back, let him see the length of her throat. The touch of his lips there weakened much more than her knees. It burned away any resolve she might have had to stop him.

Let him lay her back in the air and worship her. Let him touch all the places he made gold. As broad as the sky he was, and she would be the earth, welcoming his embrace.

A great deal of poetry she had heard in her life made sense for the first time, and the little explosions of pleasure in her mind only heightened the way he was playing her body like an instrument from the orchestra below.

“Alara,” he said as one hand slid up over the swell of her hip through the dip at her waist and over her ribs to cup one aching breast.

He sounded as hungry as she felt, seemed to welcome her fingers tangling in his hair,

pulling him closer. The gentle nips of his teeth trailed down over her neck to the lace-clad sensitive place it joined her shoulder, and she waited for his touch, his bite.

With a deceptively gentle touch, his teeth caught the lace, and she felt it gently tear.

He could strip this gown from her and do anything at all, she realized, with a tremor of emotions too complicated to untangle that traveled from her toes all the way up her body to pound in her chest. Standing still for him was an act of trust, one she'd never imagined before.

But she wasn't afraid.

After what seemed like a lifetime of waiting to see what he would do next, his mouth closed again—this time over the hard nub of her eager nipple.

She couldn't prevent the little cry she made, and it seemed to urge him on. His hot breath excited the skin as if the silk were not there, as if only lace brushed her with an unpredictable sensation of highs and lows.

"Please," she said, not knowing why, and he groaned for her as he pulled off a gauntlet with his teeth and dipped his knees enough to catch the hem of her gown, gathering it up so he could slide his hand below it, shocking, thrilling, till his heavy touch spread over the soft skin at the top of her thigh.

"I have learned a few things," he murmured into the lace over her breast, and it might have been a jest but he sounded deadly serious. "Let me show you."

"Anything you like," ignoring the little voice in the back of her head that said to be wiser, to think beyond the moment, to remember what she'd just said about control of her own life.

She didn't want that. She didn't want control of anything. She wanted him to do everything he pleased, to take her higher and higher to a place she was just beginning to imagine existed.

"Are you sure?" He sounded pained, rough. "I don't mean it as a joke, my angel, it could be?—"

She grasped his hand through the lace and moved it lower.

"Show me," she said, trusting again that he would take pleasure in giving her gifts.

The breath he let out, gasping, shaking, as his hand cupped her, gave her faith in herself, that she had done the right thing. He cared. He would never risk her.

He hungered for her, and as she knew she gave away by arching as he slid a thick finger inside a hot, slippery place in a way she had never imagined, she needed this too.

She was so soft, so slick, so trusting, so gentle. Even the way she pulled his head closer, urging him to feast on the curves she offered, was sweetly desperate.

He'd be a villain to take everything she offered. He might well be that much of a villain, he dimly realized as the pull of her slick folds drew him in, his hand closer, the swollen center of her pleasure against the heel of his hand begging him to press it.

He ought to be begging her now: to give up sailing away, stop saying she would marry someone else, abandon the right to divorce this nameless, faceless man who didn't deserve her. He would beg, once he could tear himself away from her lusciousness.

She ought to stay right here and let him adore her for the rest of her life.

What his parents wanted receded, disappeared in the faraway, popped like a bubble. What he wanted took precedence, and what he wanted was whatever she wanted, this beautiful woman who lit up his mind and his body and his life.

“I want you to have this,” he whispered in the delicate shell of her ear, making her shudder in his arms, thrilling him, tightening his own pleasure till it strained against the rough trousers he wore. “Have you touched yourself like this?”

She was already flushed, blushing, the color on her cheeks high and red; now she flushed darker. “A little,” she gasped, unable to catch a breath, the hitch in her voice matching the way his finger slid inside her, against her.

It was a feeling of unimaginable power.

She grasped his coat lapels. His honest Alara, always seeking what was new.

He pulled her more tightly against him, preparing to have her shake. “Was it this good?” he rasped into the hair at the nape of her neck.

“No!” She flung her head back, pulling at him, at his shoulders, trying to keep herself from flying apart as he pressed more deeply into her, against her.

Her hips rose to meet his thrusts, greedily, mindlessly, and he reveled in everything he could do for her.

“You are going to reach the peak,” he told her, feeling her inside clutching at him, shivering.

“Are you sure?” and that was no jest either. She sounded anxious, rattled by the depth of her pleasure, truly balanced on the edge of a shocking discovery.

“Oh yes.”

The sound of his voice, deep, sure, seemed to push her over the edge and she shuddered apart in his arms, barely balanced on her own toes, letting his strength hold her up as she reached farther, higher, the pleasure wringing through her from the inside out, her gasping, catching breath starting and stopping, her eyes closed as she surrendered everything to pleasure, to him.

Her arms fell limp as she fought for every breath, slowly returning to herself, and this close he could see the pulse fluttering at the base of her throat. He kissed her there.

Nothing in her life had prepared her for so much sheer sensation tearing through her all at the same time, threatening to take off her skin, her head, her very toes. The searing heat from his touch still concentrated in her core, where his hand still held her, and Alara realized with shocked horror that she would very much like to do that again.

There were sins one could easily abandon, and then there was pure greed.

Still, nothing felt as important in this moment than honesty. “I would like that again,” she said simply, feeling his muscles clench as she said it.

“Alara,” he groaned, taking a moment to clutch her to him with the arm around her back.

These were the pleasures husbands and wives owed to each other, Alara supposed, dimly realizing that she had crossed some boundary that she was not supposed to cross. It had felt too natural, too necessary, for her to feel worried. Whatever happened now, she had known this, and with him.

“If I take this any farther,” he muttered against the lace over her chest, “I will lose all

restraint.”

“I’m very impressed by your restraint,” she said, and meant it.

For some reason, that made him chuckle.

She felt it too, the bubbling joy that must necessarily follow pleasure so pure. She chuckled back, turning her cheek against his shoulder, content to let him hold her. Her feet were back on the ground—how poetic—but her weight was all against him.

She was unprepared for the intimate, startling sensation of his fingers sliding away from her. Instantly she felt that she’d lost something and wanted it back.

He only scraped his hand against his rough trousers, drying, she realized a little shyly, and pulled her to him again to kiss her with both arms around her back. She heard another little tear in her lace from his coat buckles.

The damp silk pulled across one nipple, and Alara did feel a slight horror that it might show.

“I want everything,” he admitted with a raw vulnerability that tugged at her heart. “You know what that means?”

She didn’t. “All I can think of is a poem about the kingdom of joy I never understood before. It says Do not go in the direction of darkness ,” she whispered to him, cradling his head in her hands. “Suns exist .”

The way his arms closed around her felt more certain than words.

She let him lower them together, till he could sit with her on his lap. The hard proof of his desire under her thigh did not frighten her; rather, she wanted to give him what

he'd given her.

But for now, she was content to rest with him, wondering when, or even if, they would find the words to say what they both now knew.

For herself, it was that she could not hold another man the way she held him now. Her Lord Harman, her John, was still the same person he'd been as a boy. This was where she felt safe. And if she never felt this way again, at least she'd had it in her grasp once.

And he would know she could not resist him.

"I shouldn't have let them keep us apart," he said, raggedly, as if the admission came out of its own will.

"Who?" she asked, nestling her head on his shoulder, feeling the coming chill of his words, not caring.

"My parents. They told me so many times when I was young that you'd soon be gone that I never looked for you."

"Why?" She didn't want to know; still, revelations tonight seemed as inevitable as breathing.

He sounded wounded, as if his chest hurt. "I think they imagined it would ruin my political chances if I married a woman who wasn't Christian."

A part of her broke and cried at that thought, but she put it aside, leaving only a tiny part of her mind and soul to grieve.

The rest of her examined the thought carefully, quietly, the way she was always wont

to do.

“I suppose that’s true,” she said with calmness, only admitting something they both must know. If his work depended on popular opinion, popular opinion was swayed by such things. It was something fundamental to most people’s notions of themselves.

Alara was not particular in her religious observations; she followed the footsteps of her mother. And though her mother prayed five times a day, reciting her own prayers, and had for twenty-five years, there were other observances she’d failed.

Zehra had never planned her journey to the holy lands; she gave alms and fasted when necessary, but she made no frequent profession of her faith.

And most importantly, she had married a man who was not Muslim.

Alara wasn’t even sure how she knew that was forbidden. Her mother’s lectures about marriage contracts had not said as much. Alara suspected, knew it was; and she knew that by hoping her daughter would return to the city of her birth, Zehra Chaush hoped Alara would do what she had not, and marry within her faith.

If John would have her, Alara could easily disappoint her mother in that goal.

But Britain, England, were different. The laws were different here, and the opinions.

And Lord Harman had been raised all his life not only to rule his lands, but to help rule Britain.

“It isn’t right.” There was a touch of petulance in his tone, angry, refusing, that she recognized from long ago.

“Perhaps it isn’t right,” she admitted, in the way of their old gentle arguments, “but it

is likely true.”

He held her so tightly against him she found it hard to breathe, or perhaps that was the pleasure still thrumming in her veins.

It wasn't timid to pause and think. If there was a solution, she couldn't find it by herself. And John had not asked her to stay since the heated moment had passed.

Surely it would take a little time to find out if he meant what he said, or had only offered it with a moment's thought, the way he'd once been sure the sky was blue because it was painted that way.

In this quiet moment, time slipped by them both, running into the river of forever, until someone else's voice broke through their silent, joint, contemplation.

A harsh voice from the shadows of their gallery. “An old friend would like a word.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:27 pm

Chapter Seven

“Be gone.” Now John’s voice under her chest made Alara feel small. Even fragile.

She was glad he was so big now. Her calm did not extend to strangers disturbing their peace.

The man did not go. “He’s waitin’,” he insisted, unperturbed.

And then her John metamorphosed back into that distant creature she’d met earlier that night.

“Fine.” With the barest squeeze of her waist, he stood, setting her on her feet in the same fluid motion, belying how much strength he had in his body.

“Her too.” The man had a square, blunt head, tipped with stray locks of greasy hair tousled by the action of his hat. When he jerked his chin for Alara to go first, she could see one gnarled ear.

“No,” said Lord Harman, apparently now unable to say large words. “She can go.”

“Why, who is she?” The man’s eyes scraped her up and down.

Alara felt Lord Harman tense beside her.

“Nobody. A tart from the revels.”

“Really? She can tart on me.” His square head split with a horrible grin.

“Do you need my attention, or not?” Brusque and brutish Harman.

The man seemed to respond to a nature like his own. “Come on.”

The sounds of the revelry below poured up and over the edge of the balcony, horrifying Alara with just how close they were to everyone else at the party. Had been, all during their interlude.

Yet so far away no one saw as the coarse man waved Harman into the next gallery and left Alara behind.

Had he looked back, she might have mouthed to him, Are you sure? One word from him, one gesture, and she’d have stayed with him.

His coolness, she felt close to sure, was only an act put on for the benefit of their solitary audience.

Still, she keenly felt the ease with which he had put her aside, body and heart. For this was the truth of his destiny: to be needed by others. To serve. Perhaps he didn’t even know that.

Alara well remembered the kindly Lord and Lady Ayles. They were two halves of one whole, determined in their pursuits, entertaining visitors of all sorts to the exclusion of everything else, even, sometimes, their oldest son.

Perhaps they grasped what her mother had grasped, what Alara had not. That marriage was more than feeling, more than passion. It was a life jointly lived, with more at stake than love.

Even if they were right, Alara wasn't about to let her English boy disappear all by himself.

The pounding in Harman's chest had everything to do with how near Alara was to danger and nothing to do with the passion they'd just shared.

It was his fault she was alone up here.

He had no old friends at this party who would send him such a messenger. Lord Zachary was the closest to that description, and he was downstairs trying to prevent his grandmother from reviving her terrible reputation from the previous century.

Ninette would have come herself.

It could only be Waresham, and there was nothing he could say that Alara should hear. Indeed, the more distance between them, the easier his heart would beat.

No wonder women had always bored him. They were snacks, while Alara was a feast.

He'd never lost himself that way in a woman's pleasure before. He could have spent all night feeling, seeing, tasting her pleasure, trying to find the limits of it the way they used to try to find the source of the stream that bubbled through their valley.

In fact, just the vision of her, exhausted by his attentions, flushed and limp and quietly saying she'd like more, nearly made him spend in his trousers.

Or it had, before the unwelcome interruption, and he keenly felt the responsibility of ensuring that Alara got away safe. More than her reputation, it was her whole self that was valuable, worth shiploads of treasure, and though every step he took away from her pulled at him, he breathed easier knowing she was behind him as long as

Waresham was in front.

He took care to close the door between the two private gallery boxes.

“Waresham,” he said, swinging carelessly forward, trying to look as if he hadn’t been interrupted in one of the crucial moments of his life.

His erstwhile friend looked worn and ragged. His military coat, which Harman had noted below, had a bloodstain under its arm. Perhaps the death wound of its previous owner. Inwardly Harman winced, wondering where Waresham had got the thing.

His hair was long, his eyes wild, and he wore a pistol in his belt.

It would be just like the man to prime it and nestle it close to his prick like that.

“Harman,” came the response. “I believe you’ve seen a mutual acquaintance of ours tonight.”

“I have.” If Harman could keep his right side toward Waresham, he might dive over the chairs between them and knock that pistol out of the way before it did any damage. “Lord Zachary is below. Likely trying to persuade Lady Gadbury to pose for him. He’s become obsessed with the idea of portraiture, did you know?”

“I am referring to a female cur we both know never gave us a true name.”

Harman pretended confusion. “You can’t still be thinking about that little miss from the country house? She’s well gone, Waresham, surely you know that.”

“Gone from Gravesend, but not London,” the man said, grim as a gunshot.

His brawler settled into a chair between them, unfortunately on the same side as

Harman's right hand.

"How do you know?" Harman needed to find another angle of attack. His start-and-stop studies hadn't included much brawling.

"I tracked her here, same as I would any wild animal." Waresham stepped to the edge of the box, looked over its rail to the churning chaos of the party below. "I lost sight of her. But she wouldn't come for no reason. The only person besides Zachary who knows her is you. And Zachary's wool-headed, with balls smaller than shillings and his brain smaller yet."

"I say." Giving up on the right-handed approach, Harman moved to get beside him. If he could get a shoulder under his ribs, he might heave the man over the edge before his worrisome companion did anything difficult. "I'd like to hear you tell him that."

"I don't have the time."

As if divining some of Harman's intention, Waresham pulled the pistol from his belt and waved it in his direction. "You'll keep your distance, if you don't mind."

"Happy to."

Damn the man to hell. How was he living? His father had disowned him, and no one in polite society received him any more. He was as cut off as a man could be without dropping him from a noose. Who was giving him money?

None of the possibilities were pleasant.

Waresham wagged his pistol barrel. "I'd swear on the King's own Bible I saw you talking to her. What did she say? She got close. Did she give you something?"

Harman spread his hands. “What would she give me?”

That sparked something in Waresham’s cold eyes. “True,” he acknowledged. “What would she?”

Silently cursing himself, Harman watched warily as Waresham nodded to his companion. “Search him.”

If they found the ring in his pocket, Ninette’s effort would be for nothing, with no salvation for the sad woman in blue.

But more difficult, Waresham would consider Harman to be an enemy. A danger.

And he might do something that would make it impossible for Harman to get back to the most important conversation in his life.

Creeping silently as she could to the edge of the box, Alara listened long enough to know the old friend was no friend at all. The way he said You’ll keep your distance if you don’t mind was far from friendly.

Looking down, she could not spot Lord Zachary’s golden head anywhere. He could have gone. Perhaps his grandmother had needed his attention.

The swirl of color and noise was beyond anything she’d ever known in her life. She wished someone else would sort it out for her, give her time to grasp all the random motion and the crowds of people doing goodness-knew-what.

She couldn’t wait.

The feeling she had was of her stomach dropping. It was the feeling of jumping off a boulder into a pond without knowing how deep it was. It was the opposite of flying;

more like falling.

Why hadn't she sought out Lord Harman years ago? She could have sent him a note. She could have insisted on attending some affair where he was likely to be. She could have called on him.

What were the dictates of propriety when measured against a lifetime alone?

Her mother was right. She'd been timid, and she'd been waiting. She knew that now, and it shamed her. She'd been waiting for someone else to tell her how her life would be. Her mother, letters from Istanbul, or even Lord Harman himself.

Waiting had its place, was one way to be sure of things, but there was also a place for quick decisions, and this was it.

Even if she hadn't had a growing conviction that she and her John could find a common ground free of other brunettes, redheads, and—for good measure—blondes too; even if she hadn't had the inescapable feeling that she'd found her destiny here under a wide hat and tarnished lace; even without those, she must still do something, right now, for her boyish John who had built her so many bridges.

She had waited a lifetime to find him again; she could not lose him now. Not like this.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she slipped downstairs as quickly and quietly as she could, and twisted through the crowd. Mrs. Griffiths was nowhere in sight, but Alara didn't stop just because she was alone.

Her dancing judge had disappeared, along with several other would-be dance partners. But the Spaniard was absorbed in watching a juggler with a cascade of apples.

She didn't want the whole troupe of them following her upstairs. Who knew what the angry man would do if he heard a crowd approaching? Alara was sure he had some weapon.

The Spaniard had a weapon; he'd had a rapier. Now it was gone. Fighting down panic, Alara searched the walls. There it was, leaning against the wallpaper, ignored by the throng.

Too quick for thought, she darted over and grabbed it, and, holding it ahead of her, dashed back up the stairs.

The rapier was awkward on its belt; Alara took it out of its scabbard. Its edge gleamed.

Hiding it among her skirts, she hurried toward the door between gallery boxes. It felt awkward to hold the tip high enough not to drag on the ground; but her muscles had clenched so tight, she managed.

"Lord Harman?" She tapped on the thin panel of a door, then moved in without waiting for his answer.

Chapter Eight

Harman was gaining insight into the life of a pirate he did not want.

It made him curiously angry to have a pistol waved in his direction.

Perhaps that was the life of a pirate, he thought, one part of him as calm as Alara while the rest thundered on ahead, wondering where she was, whether she was all right, and, dimly, whether Waresham truly intended to put a lead ball in his heart.

“You insult me, sir,” he said to his erstwhile friend, noticing that the gnarled-ear fellow evidenced no desire to wrestle a lord. He wasn’t drawing any closer.

“You’ll survive it.” Waresham didn’t care about crossing a peer of the realm, but he didn’t get closer either. Perhaps he was wary of Harman based on sheer size.

That was fine with him.

“Isn’t it enough that you’ve betrayed your king and your country? Haven’t you mortified yourself enough? Why risk even more public humiliation?”

“London knows nothing,” but the man cast a look over the edge of the box that betrayed some worry.

Harman could use that. “Someone will see you up here, and me. Some musician, or Lady Gadbury. Even someone on the floor with decent eyesight could tell that it’s you, and me.”

Waresham's snort was half-hearted. "A man in a military coat? Do you have any idea how many of those are here tonight?"

"With a bloodstain under the arm? Your ghastly adoption of some real hero's covering will be your undoing."

He thought for a moment that Waresham would see the wisdom of the point, and yield. Certainly the man wavered.

Then his pistol steadied—towards Harman's heart. "If I'm ghastly, I have a few more people to haunt, and that includes that little wench from Gravesend. What did she give you? If I put my shot through your leg, you'll still be able to talk."

"In the time it takes people to get here?" scoffed Harman.

Then he felt his heart stop at a gentle sound he wished he could block from Waresham's ears.

"Lord Harman?" murmured Alara's gentle voice, just loud enough to carry over the noise of the party below.

Noise that certainly wouldn't hide a gunshot, but the party might very well ignore one.

She came into the box.

"You didn't follow," she said, still softly, but with her eyes trying to tell him something much more meaningful.

He still couldn't read her face the way he had when they were children. He had things to say to her; a lifetime of things, which he feared now he'd never get to say.

Perhaps he'd never find his own path, but he'd found his perfect woman, and he should have fought his way to her side even if she'd sailed off to the other side of the world.

"I told you to leave." It was hard to make his voice that harsh, to her; he did it because he had to.

"But I promised you help."

Waresham laughed, a sneering sound. "I thought you too upright for lightskirts, Harman! Or do you only enjoy them standing up?"

His fellow seeker of knowledge, his other half, his heart's desire stole toward him on silent slippered feet, her lace skirts swirling about her.

"I'd enjoy her anywhere," and the street ruffian reached for her as she passed.

Harman lunged toward him, Alara drew away, and Waresham shouted, forcing all of them to pause.

No one below took the least notice.

Reaching out to catch her hand, Harman drew Alara into the shelter of his arm, desperately wondering how to get her out of here.

Clearly annoyed, the ruffian himself pulled a short-barrelled flintlock from his boot.

"Uh uh." The sight of that flintlock pointing at Alara changed Harman inside in a way he'd never imagined. Oddly, it clarified his thinking drastically. That thing needed to be pointed at him, not Alara. "Not at her."

Then he turned his back on both attackers to look only at her. “Stay behind me.”

Quickly Alara shook her head. “I’m fine,” was her only rushed whisper, and she showed him the rapier hidden in her hand.

There was too much to say, and no time.

There is only you, he shaped the silent words, hoping she understood everything he’d never said, everything he wanted to say.

Then before two armed men, he bent down and quickly kissed her lips.

His hand touched her face, tracing the path his mouth had taken earlier.

And when he reached the small tear he’d made in the lace, he dropped in the ring from his pocket.

“Oy, sailor,” called Waresham in disgust, turning Harman around.

With the rapier hidden behind his back.

He had to get Alara out of here. She’d handle the ring; she’d take care of everything he’d failed. He knew that like he knew his own name. She just needed the chance.

“I said search him,” Waresham told his minion, and Harman stepped forward.

Alara followed.

“I don’t have anything you want,” he said, trying to move away from Alara, to take both men’s eyes with him.

She stayed close as a shadow.

“Just relax and do as I say,” Waresham said, drawing another pace closer and waving his pistol to encourage the other fellow to start searching. “You’re good at that. Pretend I’m your father.”

He would not stop.

Harman had one choice left. He whipped up the rapier and pointed it straight at Waresham’s heart.

He could see, as time slowed down to its tiniest increments, he could see Waresham’s finger tighten upon the trigger.

He made a guttural noise, then, “Loosen your grip. Or this blade goes through your heart.”

Waresham’s head tossed like an angry horse. “You’re not a killer.”

“Let’s find out,” Harman said calmly.

Waresham measured the distance between them with a look. Harman had only to extend his arm with a force clearly within his capability.

The villain’s conviction visibly wavered. They were all much closer than they had been only seconds before, the chandelier above them scattering light along the rapier blade with its guttering candles. “You can’t slash my throat before that bullet kills you.”

Still holding Alara behind him, trusting as much as he could to the thickness of his body to stop any lead before it reached her, Harman faced Waresham with all the

confidence he'd had as a boy. Unearned, and beyond reason.

"Are you sure?" he asked softly, turning the blade in his hand.

One corner of his mouth twitching upward, like a dog about to snarl, Waresham snapped at his colleague. "Put yours down."

"Slowly," clarified Harman, "and push it away. I'd like to hear it slide a good long way, sir. You too," he thrust the point of his sword another inch closer to Waresham, bringing to bear just how long his arms were and how easy it would be to spit the other man upon the metal.

The feel of Alara's hands on his waist kept him upright, stable. As long as she was well, this would all end well.

He kept thinking that, even as both men slid their pistols away along the gallery floor.

"What now?" Being deprived of his pistol made Waresham sound a bit lost, but he frosted it with bravado. "You can hardly run me through in full view of half of London. The second you drop that blade I'll be on you—and my colleague will take care of your bird of paradise."

"No thank you," said Harman and, whirling to catch Alara tightly against him, stepped up on the rail at the gallery's edge.

Dropping the sword and swinging his arm up all in one motion, he caught the curve of the chandelier and, pulling on it, swung himself over the edge.

The pin holding the chandelier's rope broke immediately, but the rapidly unwinding rope still slowed their descent slightly. As they reached the floor too close below, he wrapped himself around Alara and rolled.

The blow on his shoulder made him grunt; something there may have separated, or broken. Likewise his ribs as they cushioned her weight. But it was perfectly possible to roll with her and not crush her, making sure she was whole and with him, even as the chandelier itself crashed into the floor, its candle-globes shattering.

The screams and shouts were deafening, but he only pointed at the balcony. “Thieves,” he shouted. “Lord Waresham tried to rob me at gunpoint. Careful, he’s still armed.”

And then in the mad gyrations of the crowd, as people ran every which way, some of them covering their head with their hands, some of them charging for the stairs, he led Alara to the receiving room that held their cloaks.

“We’ll send a footman for your aunt. I think it’s time to leave,” said Harman under cover of shrieks, interrupted musicians, and shouting men.

“It happens every year,” Lady Gadbury shrugged philosophically on the dais as half the crowd ran screaming in circles and the other half carried on dancing. She sipped at her punch.

Alara found herself on the pavement in an icy English December, feeling Lord Harman for wounds.

“I’m fine,” he murmured, over and over, as she shamelessly grasped the muscles of his arms, his belly, his chest, his shoulders, and then finally his neck as she pulled him down to her.

“Very well,” she said, calm as ever, then drew in her breath suddenly and let it out on a long shaking sob.

“I’m fine too,” she said between sobs, dimly realizing he too was ensuring her limbs

were sound and whole.

Around them a few revelers had clearly decided they'd had enough. In ones and twos, cloaks wafting around them, the rich ones staggered toward Mayfair, the poorer ones toward Covent Garden.

"I'm v-very glad I don't attend London p-parties," Alara gasped between sobs.

Harman gathered her into his chest, and soon she could breathe a little more slowly. The pounding of his heart assured her she wasn't foolish, and she wasn't alone.

She did, however, have a few things to say.

"Why did you go see him in the first place?"

"I gave you a chance to leave. "

"I wasn't about to leave you a prisoner of some armed madman!"

"I wasn't about to let them hurt you!"

"You thought that through? Was that really the best possible answer?" She drew in a deeper breath. The cold, and his warm arms, were clearing her head, and what occurred to her was that Lord Harman needed a care-taker to track him and all his various feminine interests.

Or a wife.

"Sometimes one must act." He pulled her up against him with one arm, this time off her feet, crushing her to him. Far from making it harder to breathe, it made things easier. "As you did. How clever you were, seizing that sword."

“Oh, I hope that man gets it back!”

“It’s in the gallery. He’ll fetch it,” Lord Harman said carelessly.

Alara wrapped her arms around the back of his head and pulled him closer. She needed to kiss him, right at that minute.

It wouldn’t wait for destiny or a sailing ship, either.

So she did.

His breath hitched as she held him tightly, and instantly she let go.

“Never stop,” he said, “it’s only some bruises.”

“You must lie down! How close is your home?” London, Istanbul, it all seemed pointless; the only question was how soon she could tend to his hurts.

“It’s right here,” he said, and kissed her again.

A long, long time after, when they parted to breathe separately again, she said, “I can’t tell if you are an intimidating lord, a little boy with too much confidence, or my friend John who helped me look into the center of rocks.”

“You’re a bewitching seductress, the world’s cleverest angel, and a dear long-lost friend all at once, so why can’t it be all three?” Eyes closed, he buried his face against the side of her hair.

“But John,” she whispered, hands against his ears to keep them warm, “what will we do?”

“Alara,” he said, half-teasingly copying her surprised wonder, “will you marry me? I think that’s what we should do next.”

“Oh no, next we must find Mrs. Griffiths, and then we ought to locate the girl who needs that ring, and—what is it?”

His face had grown somber and shadowed again, even without the hat. “No?”

“Oh gracious, I didn’t mean that! I’d love to marry you, John, I’ve been waiting to marry you all my life.”

Now it was his turn to take a deep breath and release it slowly. “What a scare you gave me! Far worse than a cad with a gun. I won’t forget it, you know.”

“Though before I say yes, I should ask.” She wiggled in his arms, feeling around her bosom, an utterly fascinating process. Finally she located the small bump against her skin, pressed it with her hand. “Whose ring did you drop down my dress?”

This was a moment that called for thinking it through.

And complete, immediate honesty.

“It belongs to the young lady in blue. I don’t know her name. We are in no way connected. Another young lady?—”

Alara was looking at him, calm as ever. “The shepherdess.”

“Indeed, with whom I am slightly acquainted, asked me to return the ring, I suspect so she wouldn’t be seen.”

“And why wouldn’t she wish the young lady in blue to see her?”

“She said she borrowed the ring...” Complete honesty, while being as circumspect about another’s secrets as he could. “Which I am sure means she stole it.”

“Never say so.” Alara looked impressed by this.

Harman felt a twinge of anxiety, hoping so-called Ninette and his Alara never met.

Not because they would compare notes on his taste for clever women, but because he could just picture his beloved investigating the strengths and weaknesses of a life of crime.

“She said she was sorry, that taking the ring had hurt the girl, and asked me to return it with her apologies. In truth, I didn’t even have time to agree.”

“And why did you drop it down my dress?” Alara asked, still holding one lush breast, which was extremely distracting.

“I knew you’d take care of it if I couldn’t.”

“I didn’t even know the little you know!”

“You’d solve its puzzle. You always do.”

Thankfully, she didn’t seem angry. “No, I don’t. I ask questions of people who know more, and look closely at things, and?—”

He cut off whatever she was about to say with a kiss.

It was the kind of kiss where souls talk to each other. No words were needed, only long moments of his touch and hers, softly melting into one another, over and over until both of them sighed. Neither knew why.

Alara laid a hand against his shadowed pirate's cheek. His festival mask had come off during the rolling descent. "But what will we do?"

She'd meant about the ring, which she'd released in her eagerness to put her arms around him again. He took her to mean their lives. "We will find our place." His confidence was that of a grown man now, and it felt reassuring, right down to Alara's toes. "We know the important thing, which is that we must do it together. Too much time already wasted. We will find something useful to do, and we will apply ourselves to it."

"What will my mother say?"

He studied her intently, stroking the soft edge of her cheek with one thumb. "Does it matter?"

Alara's worries didn't just fade away. But they did become very small, and slotted into a place that was reasonable, expected, in a larger pattern that she was just beginning to see.

She might well have a fate, but it was here. Not in Britain; in Lord Harman's arms.

"No," she said, borrowing a touch of his confidence; or perhaps she had found her own. "It doesn't matter, because I love you."

"Thank you," he said sincerely, his face shifting under her hands into a grin that was both sincere and deliriously happy. "As I think I've loved you since I was a boy. It will fascinate me to spend my life learning about everything in your head, and seeing all that goes on in your life."

Alara faltered for a second as she imagined the dull women's parlor, all the needlework, all the verse. She didn't feel as fascinating as this evening seemed to

indicate. “Are you sure?” she asked him, looking up at him as he set her again on her feet.

“Utterly,” he said, and kissed her again.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:27 pm

Chapter Nine

The world was made of dreams again.

Bruised bones and all, Lord Harman would rather be here than anywhere else in the world. Far from flat and boring, London seemed full of possibilities. Life seemed full.

“Waresham escaped.” The thought startled her.

Whereas Harman had already thought it. “I won’t give him such quarter next time.”

“I’m sorry.” Her sympathy, her understanding was palpable. He was not a man of violence, but...

“I’ll never let him harm you.”

“I know.”

It changed things for him, in him, all that confidence from her.

And it made him kiss her again.

A flutter of blue caught the edge of his vision.

Reluctantly, he parted from Alara, just enough to speak. “Don’t take it amiss, but I think I see our lady in blue.”

Instantly she looked round. “She’s not my lady in blue,” Alara said with great certainty, but he saw her spot the woman.

She was walking down the pavement toward a waiting phaeton too light for the weather. Its horse looked as tired as she did.

“How shall I stop her?” His new betrothal felt delicate; Harman would do nothing to damage it.

“How shall I fetch the ring?” whispered Alara, and he realized she was wiggling and twisting in order to try to reach the thing.

“Do you still have it?”

She wrapped her arms under her bosom. “Yes.”

He wanted to talk a great deal more about the location of the ring and how they might best retrieve it, but if the woman in blue disappeared, he had no way of tracing her.

“Stay with me,” he told her, then more loudly, “Madame,” he called as she reached the phaeton’s side.

Her jerk and wince made him realize how unnerved she was. Either from this night, or whatever series of events in her life had made it so necessary to return her ring.

“I don’t know you,” she said without turning, loudly enough for others to notice if they cared to hear, and mounted into the phaeton before Harman and Alara drew close.

He’d no idea what to say.

Fortunately, Alara did. “Have you lost something?”

Her voice, feminine, no doubt less alarming, caused the young lady to pause. “Several things,” she said with palpable bitterness. “Why do you ask?”

It gave them time to draw near the phaeton.

The driver, round-faced and suspicious, glared down. “Get away.”

“It’s all right, Bill, let them talk.” The woman studied Alara, not him. “Do we know each other?”

“I’m sad that we don’t,” said Alara with her customary sweetness. She was far more charming than she knew. “We don’t wish to seem forward, or frighten you. But we’ve been entrusted with something of yours that we—this gentleman, rather—needs to return.”

The girl looked warily, hopelessly, in Harman’s direction.

Alara spoke for him again. “He’s not a bad man.”

“Why would she think I was a bad man?” Harman couldn’t help asking. He wasn’t intimidating in the least.

Though he had lost his hat and smelled of gunpowder.

He supposed Alara had a point.

A footman approached them, perhaps to ensure the carriage-rider was well, or see if he could be of service.

“We await Mrs. Griffiths,” Harman told him, “perhaps you would find her and ask if she is ready to leave.”

“More people?” The lady in blue shrank back into the phaeton’s shadows. “I am overtaxed, my apologies?—”

“Just wait! If you’ll just wait a moment, this gentleman would like to return your ring.”

The young lady fell still as death.

“You don’t really have it?” she whispered, sounding far too old for her age and like a desperately hopeful child at the same time.

“I do, but—” He could see Alara’s flush even in the dark. “You must let me fetch it. It’s—it’s caught in my stays.”

Harman could see the girl’s faith wavering, break. “You are teasing me,” she said with a flash of fury. “If you knew what hell it’s been. My grandfather trusted it to me, and only thinks the worst of me now it’s gone.”

Horried, Alara turned his way.

Hoping, trusting he’d know what to do.

He did. Holding up the front of her cloak, holding it closed, he said, “Fetch it out.”

She looked up and down the street, clearly shy.

He just nodded. “Go ahead. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

That decided her. Delicately, the way she did everything, she bent a little, reaching under her own dress the way he had not an hour before; the sight made him hard, just remembering.

Then she ducked lower, and he winced as he ducked with her, feeling pulls in his side.

It would be a gentle honeymoon, but then after all, he had the rest of his life to be rough.

If Alara wished it.

Finally she had hitched up the skirts high enough to get her small hand past the waist of her gown, over the top of the stays and down to where she'd wiggled up the ring.

He'd have to ask her later to show him exactly the path she'd taken.

"Here it is," she said, dropping it in the lady's hand before Harman even had a decent look at it.

It was gold, with a blue stone; that was all he saw.

The girl's face changed. "You have no idea..." Her face beamed with open emotion now, and it was gratitude, aimed toward Alara. "You have no idea."

"I don't need an idea," said Alara, giving the young lady a little curtsy, still swathed in her cloak. "Perhaps we'll meet again, under better circumstances. Till then you needn't say a thing."

The girl said nothing to Harman; but then again, Harman realized, he himself had done very little.

Not that anyone would have known it from the way Alara moved against his good side as the young woman in blue departed, her tired horse pulling into the street.

Before he could say anything to Alara, their footman reappeared. “Mrs. Griffiths’ compliments, and she is very comfortable playing cards, she says.”

Harman dropped a guinea in his hands. “Keep an eye on her, see that she gets home safely. And here’s another; find some friend to help. Two of you is better.”

The boy’s eyes widened and he nodded so violently Harman only hoped he kept his head on for the rest of the night.

“What about Lord Zachary?” Alara didn’t move from his side, only eyed the hall behind them warily. Light and noise still spilled from its windows.

“He’s a grown man; he can deal with his grandmother himself.”

“I shan’t go to the blue parlor. My mother will have to come out here.”

Alara might still be timid about sailing across the sea, but she no longer had to be timid about Lord Harman. He had asked to marry her; she had accepted. Her mother might not make it easy, but Alara was about to put to use all those hours of instruction.

Not the poetry or the needlework; the marriage law.

“It will take her some time to dress,” Harman observed. “It’s nearly morning.” He slumped with exhaustion in the receiving room chair, looking tired, and in pain. She needed to see to his hurts.

Well, she was about to arrange that.

“My mother won’t be slow.”

And truly in less than ten minutes Zehra arrived in the west receiving room, her husband trailing behind.

She greeted her daughter with horrified silence. Alara shored up her courage by reaching out for Harman’s hand. It was right there, large, warm and strong; its strength and heat flowed into her with his touch. She found it very reassuring indeed.

“What has happened?” Zehra wore a thin veil over her dressing gowns, two stacked atop one another. “Where is Mrs. Griffiths? Why is he here? What have you done?”

“I’ve promised to marry Lord Harman, madame,” said Alara, standing up to give her mother a very proper English curtsy.

Her mother stood, gaping. It was visible through the veil. “You haven’t.”

Alara fixed her mother with an oddly meaningful look. “I have,” she said, “and I am of age. We have not agreed on the mahr, but the contract is made.”

“No!” Zehra’s hands clutched in midair. “A verbal contract? Like a hill peasant? Tell me you did no such thing.”

Her father simply sat down in a large winged chair opposite Lord Harman. “Good man,” he said laconically, and felt in the drawer of the teak table next to him, likely for some snuff.

“Your guardian was not there,” Zehra parried swiftly.

“My father? He is not Muslim,” Alara said, holding on to her calm. It was easier than she had expected.

“Me, then.”

“I am of age.” She turned to Harman. “Ask again.”

“Gladly.” Tired as he was, warmth came back to his face. “Will you marry me, Miss Trace?”

“Yes, Lord Harman. I will.” Then she turned back to her gasping mother. “That is a contract.”

“No! Alara! Without anything written? How much for the mahr?”

“How much can you give me for my widow’s portion, sir?” Alara asked her sprawling beloved.

“Bit early for that,” he grumbled, “but as much as you like.”

She wondered fleetingly how much money he did have. Not that it mattered; her own portion of her mother’s money would sustain them if they needed it.

She doubted they’d need it.

“No!” Zehra Chaush stomped one slippered foot; it was silent. “You need witnesses.”

This had gone on long enough. “Muslim men,” agreed Alara. “As the groom should be.”

At that, her mother paused. One graceful hand gleaming with jewels under the thin silk veil she wore. Alara thought she was looking. Listening. Watching for a trap.

How alike they were , Alara thought with a burst of tenderness for her mother.

“My marriage may not be legal under our law,” Alara said softly, and even her father had perked up with attention. “But then neither is yours.”

She held her mother’s gaze, unwavering.

And when Zehra did not speak, Alara said, “Without an ambassador here to care for our interests, who is to dictate the law, madame? Apparently you. And if you can, so can I.” She spread her hands. “Even if answers are impossible, decisions must be made.”

For the first time, she saw her mother watch her like an equal.

“You don’t mean to behave as if you are married,” Zehra questioned her evenly.

“I certainly do.” She still wanted to feel safe; and that meant staying close to her John. Nothing else mattered half as much; not money, or contracts, or governments or laws.

For better or worse, Alara was as British as the rain; but she found she didn’t care about a church wedding, not when Harman sprawled painfully in his seat, waiting for her to sort out her family and go with him.

That was all she needed. All she wanted.

“It’s shocking.”

“The best thing about being out of society, Mother,” Alara said lightly, shrugging one shoulder. “No one will see what I do.”

They all just sat there till the tragedy leaked out of the thing for Alara’s mother. She sank into one of the low red chairs.

“But I don’t want that,” Zehra finally said, sounding like a pouting little girl. “Without a nikahnama? I don’t want that for you!”

Alara was pleased to discover it didn’t cause her a moment’s wavering. She didn’t feel timid now. “That’s all right, mother,” she said calmly, “I do.”

“No, this can’t be right. You had your chance. I’ve written to so many matchmakers. My cousin! A house on the Bosphorus! You can see Ayasofya from the roof! This can’t be happening. Sir Theodore, what do you intend to do?”

“Nothing,” said her husband, sensibly, offering Harman some snuff. Which he declined.

“But I—” She turned to her daughter again. “You denied his suit! You had your chance! What are you doing now, changing your mind?”

“Denied his suit?” Alara wondered if she so often craved calm and explanations because her mother was so confusing. “I never denied Lord Harman’s suit, madame. He never offered for my hand before tonight.”

“No, of course not. That’s not the way it’s done. You were introduced as children, and you had plenty of time to get to know one another. Lord and Lady Ayles agreed with me. If you had shown any inclination toward one another?”

“Mother, we were children. People don’t marry when they’re children. ”

“Of course they do! That’s how it’s done. If two families wish to draw closer by arranging a marriage for their children, they make sure they meet and see how they like each other.” Zehra threw her hands in the air under her long, sweeping veil. “You seemed to like one another well enough, then when you were separated, nothing! I thought you might ask after one another over the years, but no. We accepted— I

accepted that there was nothing between you.”

“Nothing between us? What about when we grew older? Oh, mother, that was a very bad plan.”

Lord Harman cleared his throat. “I think my family is going to have to take some blame.”

Zehra flung a hand gratefully towards him. “Thank you!”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Alara reserved judgment.

“I think my parents might have given you the idea that an arranged marriage would be acceptable,” he said, ducking his head as if it pained him to admit it, “but they also told me often that Alara would soon be sailing back to the Ottoman Empire. Essentially, that marrying her was impossible.”

“We were children! ” Alara couldn’t stop saying it.

Under her veil, Zehra had grown dangerously still. “And why would they do that?”

“I haven’t yet asked them, madame,” said Harman, leaning forward over his knees. “But trust me, I will.”

“I’ll be very interested in the answer. Still, you could have had such a spectacular match,” she insisted again in her daughter’s direction. “Wouldn’t you have preferred a warm house? No, I see you wouldn’t.” One hand dangled a little wistfully over the arm of the chair, the jewels winking through her veil. “I suppose I should have expected it. Just like me. A debilitating taste for an Englishman derails the best possible intentions, I suppose.”

Her father just folded his hands over his belly, hooking one ankle over the other.

He looked smug.

The four of them stared at each other in the flickering candlelight.

“Mother,” Alara couldn’t help saying again. “You do realize we were children. ”

Chapter Ten

Harman was deeply confused when Alara bundled him back into the cab they'd hired, then climbed in after. He hadn't understood everything that had just transpired, clearly.

"What are you doing? "

"We're married," she said simply, arranging her black lace skirts over her lap.

That made him feel dizzy. He didn't even remember her exactly telling him yes. "You don't mean it."

"I do. It's agreed. I am entitled to accept on my own behalf, at my age. I should have waited to find out the amount of the mahr, but..." She looked up at him with her bright eyes, leaned into his good side. He felt instantly warmer. "I trust you."

"But... why would you do that?"

"You said it yourself," she said with the perfect calm he so adored. He simply wasn't like that, and he loved it in her. "Too much time wasted. And I feel safest with you. I'd still like a nikah, and a nikahnama. But after all, the Crown would not recognize them."

"So why claim marriage?"

"Because I am going home with you," said Alara, filling him with a peaceful joy

despite his aches and bruises. “I wanted her to understand. I would drag her all the way back to the Sublime State on a boat and take the case before a court if necessary. The contract is made. I have agreed. We are married. And I want to see that you sleep comfortably.” She reached over him, gently probing his bruised side. He grunted.

Then held her tightly against him so she couldn’t move.

“You know the English side of things won’t be so simple,” he told her.

“That’s because we are in England,” she said with her ineluctable logic, settling in to the spot where she most wanted to be.

“Harman, you haven’t considered your future.”

Oddly, both Harman and Alara had imagined Zehra Chaush to be their most unpleasant hurdle ahead.

But as it turned out, Lord Ayles was the most difficult to sway.

When Harman announced their betrothal, his mother ran to him and hugged him, and he saw tears in her eyes. She must want grandchildren, the thought came to him out of nowhere, and it made him glad to hope that she’d get many.

He had younger brothers, as Alara did; they’d played together at the house in the country, babies when he and Alara were half-grown. His parents loved each other, and they loved their children. Now Harman and Alara had a chance to make their family even larger.

He imagined how he would talk it over with Alara later, and what kinds of questions they would ask each other, and he smiled secretly to himself. Then at his betrothed. Who smiled back, her sweet, gentle smile.

“The banns will take two weeks,” his father said obstinately. With Alara next to him, and a great deal more clarity in his head about what was truly important, Harman wasn’t interested in fighting his father. He wondered what dreams Lord Ayles had once had and lost. He couldn’t make this easier for his father, but he could at least understand. Many dreams died, and Harman knew how painful that could be.

He offered an olive branch. “You could get us a special license if you wished.”

“I’m not asking the Archbishop for a favor.”

“Then let them post the banns.” Harman shrugged. His worse shoulder was stiffening quickly. He’d waited for Alara for years; two more weeks meant nothing.

Though it was a little tricky, since Alara clearly considered them already married, and had no intention of budging from his side.

A point his father brought up now. “You can’t fulfill the obligations of her faith,” he said solemnly. “Or her family.”

Harman had recovered his habit of asking questions. It was as though it had stayed with Alara, waiting for him all these years, along with her heart. “Why is that, sir? Have you asked yourself why the Crown allows legal marriage following their own traditions for Jews and Quakers, but not followers of Islam? At some point, if Britain is to be the worldwide beacon of justice you would like it to be, oughtn’t they recognize marriage among the people who live in its borders, no matter the faith?”

“This is what we get from sending you to school with Catholics,” Lord Ayles bristled, and Lady Ayles waved him down with her hands, shushing him.

They always formed a pair, Harman thought to himself, but it might be his mother who was the actual diplomat.

“What the country should or shouldn’t do isn’t at issue,” his father said, shooting a resentful glance his mother’s way.

“Are you sure?” Alara’s quiet voice filled the silence with meaning, and seized everyone’s attention. “What is more important than an experiment that tests the question? Here we are. What the country does matters to us, therefore it matters.”

“With more Turks living in London every day,” Harman pointed out. “Wasn’t that why the Sultan sent Britain an ambassador in the first place? Or so he claimed?”

“I can’t tell if you know too much or too little,” his father grouched, dropping down into a wooden chair, making it clatter.

“In any event. Sir, the main matter is one from which we won’t be distracted. We will perform a ceremony—all ceremonies—and be wed. I’d like your blessing, and at a later time we can even discuss forgiveness.”

“Forgiveness?” That made the older man’s back straighten. “For you?”

“For you.” And Harman gave him a look to indicate he meant every word.

Proving his parents’ separate roles, his father admitted nothing, while his mother broached the topic more delicately. “If you are angry that we did not encourage you to pursue Alara?—”

“Didn’t encourage me?” Harman’s tone made clear he wasn’t interested in the diplomatic version.

His mother went on, seasoned negotiator that she was. “—we weren’t sure what was best for you. You deserved a chance to make your own decisions, and that’s just what we gave you. Just what you’ve done.”

“He hasn’t.” His father was quick to interject. “He hasn’t even tried to stand for a place in Parliament. If he tried?—”

“Lord Ayles,” his son said firmly, “I don’t want a seat in Parliament, and never have.”

His father fell back as if someone had struck him in the chest.

Harman wanted to laugh. Not because he’d disappointed his father—that hurt, though the hurt would fade, and wasn’t half as important as making Alara happy—but because he’d regained his own tendency, his right to ask questions.

Alara was going to love Sir Humphrey too, and his electrical decomposition of elements, and his versions of the Thousand and One Nights.

All at once an idea struck him that was so good, he wanted to think it over much more before bringing it up. He wanted to talk it over with Alara, slowly, looking at it from all points of view. It was an excellent idea, and perfect for a world in which the wars were ending, and in which soon, perhaps, Britain would finally be at peace.

A perfect idea for him and his beloved.

In the meantime, Alara seemed possessed by the stubborn streak he knew she had. It was rather taking his parents aback. “So you will post the banns, and that will take two weeks.”

“Yes,” said Harman’s father, with a stony look.

“Very well. Loan us your traveling coach, and fill it with as many cushions and coverlets as you can spare. Lady Ayles, perhaps you would help me pack for my husband.”

My husband. Those words ran through him like lightning, grounding him to the floor.

Lady Ayles didn't look as put out as his lordship. "Happily," she said softly, "but where will you go? Not all the way to Scotland." She accepted the possibility of an elopement with sad grace.

"Not at all." Alara stood, about to begin a journey in her black lace dress. "If you'll lend us your country house, we'll gladly take use of it for the two weeks; or we may stay at my father's hunting lodge."

It was beyond shocking; it was unbelievable. Lord Ayles went red, sputtering a bit as if he couldn't find words. "I'll talk to the archbishop."

"Please do," Alara curtsied to him. "But we shan't wait. We need a quieter place for Lord Harman to recuperate."

"You two can't travel alone together!"

"Yes, we can," said Harman. He'd do whatever Alara wanted. Whatever made her happy. "There, and back."

But Lady Ayles just nodded. "Of course, dear," she said, and Harman wondered how long she had been waiting for him to find her daughter-in-law.

He'd never before been able to imagine quiet Alara sailing away around the globe.

It was his own failure of imagination, he now saw, as she calmly loaded the carriage in the early dawn light with cold provisions for the trip and built a soft bed on the bench seat.

"You should sleep," she told him, lifting his feet and putting them under a rug. The daylight had come, but it was still bitterly cold.

“I’ll sleep when you do,” he told her, closing her little hand in his. Something about it all felt wrong, off. He should be protecting her, not letting her nursemaid him into a carriage on the first day of the rest of their life together.

But he finally could read some of her thoughts in her face. She wanted their married life to begin this second, and not in her parents’ house, or his either.

Also, she was right. He could use a little peace and quiet.

“I will sleep,” she said serenely, lounging on cushions at his feet while the carriage rocked on its way down the road. “I will sleep when we are together, cocooned in warm coverlets, perhaps with coals at your feet, and I have rubbed the soreness out of your muscles with rose oil and perfumed the air with rare wood.”

“Good God,” muttered Harman. That sounded delicious; anything about sleep and together sounded delicious to him. “But you’re taking an awful chance. A decent gentleman should leave you with your parents till the banns are read. What if I compromise you and leave you?”

“You wouldn’t do that,” said his confident little questioner, pulling another wool cloak over her own shoulders. “But if you did, I would drag you to court in the Sublime State to prove we were legally wed.” She gave him a sharp look. “What, did you think I would let you wander around being drawn into intrigue by dangerous redheads?”

“You’re taking advantage of me,” he murmured, the slow gentle rocking already urging him off to much-needed sleep.

“How so?” She was not too tired to ask a question. Never that.

“I’m not strong enough to refuse your advances. Help. Ruffian. Cad.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” she said, laying her head next to his arm on the cushioned bench. “I promise, as soon as possible, I’ll marry you as many times as you like.”

“That’s what I was waiting to hear,” said Lord Harman, raising her hand to his lips to kiss. “I promise to love you and cherish you always, forever.”

“And I’ll do the same for you, my sweet man,” she said as he drifted away to sleep.

It took two days of slow, cold traveling to reach the little valley where the Ayles country home still stood.

Alara had managed his comfort wonderfully, leaving Harman to think of details such as sending a rider ahead to warn the servants. Its pantry might not be full, but there would be firewood, and a cook.

By dark on the twenty-seventh, wisps of fog drew close around the carriage as they rolled down the drive.

But there were cheerful candles in some of the lower windows, and when they went inside, they were, finally, blissfully warm.

“I’ll send up a coal pan, Lord Harman, Lady Harman,” said the cook, grinning at them. She’d known them both since they were children.

“What did you tell her?” Alara whispered as she helped Harman up the stairs, grateful they’d sleep in a bed that stayed still. She looked a little shy now.

“Just what my wife told me,” he said in all seriousness. “That we are married.”

It might be a poor excuse for a honeymoon, but both of them slept wrapped in warmth all that long dark night.

And when they woke in the morning, it was very easy to turn it into an excellent honeymoon indeed.

The fog closed in around the house for the third day. The delicious smells of Mrs. Jacobs' stew floated up the stairs, and there was no reason to regret how impossible it was to go anywhere or do anything but stay bundled in bed.

The green grounds, the distant hills, even the trees nearby were all swallowed up with fog; yet the new Lord and Lady Harman were grateful for every quiet second, as it gave them more time to investigate each other, and some truly gripping questions.

It was quiet under the velvet bed-curtains, quiet enough for serious contemplation, for touches and dreams. Even the lick of the fire was a soft, distant crackle.

"Can we do it?" Alara whispered it into Harman's shoulder as he rolled her back into his arms. She'd been gone all of five minutes, and that was too much.

"Go down for breakfast? I don't see the point." He pulled her softness back against him. His bruises were spectacular, black and blue against the crisp white linens; but they were already healing, and there was no touch more restorative, more gentle, than his wife's.

"I'm talking about your plan," she giggled. "Can we do it?"

He'd given it to her as a question. A present, for their honeymoon. And here she was giving it right back. It was a splendid idea, but could they do it?

"I think we can," said Harman. "Not right away; it will take tremendous planning. And then as much diplomacy as my father ever dreamed of."

They'd made plans for a townhouse of their own, and investments in Alara's name. She'd confided in him her fears of British marriage, and Harman was not just grateful

to do anything that would make her feel safer; he was dying to do it.

But this dream, this was bigger than a house, or money. It was a dream for centuries, and it was theirs.

“Won’t the old schools petition against it? Won’t there be a fight?” Shy Alara seemed quite excited by the prospect, tilting her head so he could kiss her neck. The sleek black fall of her hair shone against her skin and his.

So odd that he’d never suspected how far her determination could go. Perhaps he’d get her a sword of her own.

Harman shrugged against his pillow. “If Britain is to lead the world into a peaceful age, it should have a college that espouses no religious creed at all. Only investigation into the truth of things. Measurable, confirmable truth. To such an extent it exists.”

“A whole college!” Alara seemed dazzled by the possibility. “Chemistry! Mathematics! Philosophy! Literature!”

“You name them like presents to put in your pockets,” he teased, sliding his hands around her hips as if to steady her against the marvelous wave of dreams.

“They are! Just imagine! Lord and Lady Harman’s College!”

“Lord and Lady Ayles, perhaps, by the time we finish it,” Harman said with practical realism, “or Lord Ayles and Alara Lala, founders. Do you like the ring of it?”

“Oh, John. I can’t consider myself a tutor of princes.”

“Why not?” He stroked his cheek against her hair while reveling in the feel of her next to him, against him, with him. In a week or two they’d wander back to London and be married in a church; it wouldn’t change a thing. He was completely married

right now. Perhaps he had been so for a long, long time. “That’s exactly what you are.”

Visit judithlynnne.com for a bonus scene with a bit more of Lord Harman and his long-lost love’s ongoing wedding!

Lord Harman appears (briefly) in *The Caped Countess* , and more extensively in *The Clandestine Countess* , so it is a delight to give him a love story, even a short one, all his own.