



The Mad Duke of Walendale (Scandalous Courtships #5)

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Category: Historical

Description: In a world that calls me mad, will you dare to stand by my side and prove them wrong?

Miss Lillian Balfour, a quick-witted and compassionate young lady with a talent for arithmetic, finds herself drawn to the enigmatic Duke of Walendale. Intrigued by his brilliant mind and unconventional interests, Lillian sees beyond the facade of The Mad Duke that society has branded him with. But as whispers of scandal and madness swirl around them, Lillian must decide if she is willing to risk her reputation and her heart for a chance at true love.

Edmund Wallace, the misunderstood Duke of Walendale, seeks solace in his scientific experiments. When he encounters the captivating Miss Balfour, Edmund discovers a kindred spirit who appreciates his intellect and ignites a spark within his soul. However, dark forces conspire against him, threatening to tear them apart and destroy any hope of happiness.

As gossip and betrayal close in, Lillian and Edmund must defy the unforgiving grip of London society to protect their fragile love. With every stolen glance and whispered word, their bond deepens. But when a dark conspiracy threatens to shatter their future, they must summon the courage to fight for a love that could defy all odds—their greatest experiment yet, one of the heart.

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“I hardly think that you need to worry, my dear.”

Edmund smiled to himself as he watched his mother pat Dinah’s arm reassuringly while they were in the carriage.

“There are going to be many gentlemen present, all eager to make your acquaintance. The only trouble will be that you will, thereafter, have to choose only one to court!”

“My mother is quite right,” Edmund told his cousin, firmly. “You will find an exceptional husband very soon, I am sure.”

Dinah smiled though Edmund could still see concern written in her eyes. “You are both very kind in taking me to London for the Season,” she said, softly. “If only my brother had returned from his Great Adventure, then I might now be under his care rather than being forced upon you!”

“Nonsense,” Edmund told her as his mother smiled warmly. “We are both delighted at this arrangement, I must say. Besides, I have a requirement to make my way to London this Season and it is no trouble to take you with me.”

“Indeed.” His mother shot Edmund a glance though Edmund only smiled back at her, despite the curl of doubt in his stomach. Upon his father’s death, Edmund had been informed that, within the will, there was a strong desire from his father that Edmund wed a Lady Vivianne, daughter of the Marquess of Kent who had been his father’s friend for decades. It had not been a directive, however, had not been absolutely required of him but all the same, Edmund felt the pressure of it upon his shoulders. Whether the young lady herself knew that this was hoped for between his family and

hers, he did not know but hearing that she would be present in London and making her debut, he had chosen to make his way to London simply to meet with her. There might, thereafter, come a discussion with her father or mayhap, Lord Kent would speak to him about such an engagement, Edmund did not know. All the same, when he had informed his mother of this, though she had seemed pleased he could tell that there was an uncertainty about it all as well... which was just as he himself felt. Edmund had always expected to decide for himself which young lady he was to wed but now, in many ways, it felt as though that choice had been taken away from him.

“You will be present with me, yes?” Dinah glanced from Edmund to his mother before looking back to him again, a clear nervousness trembling through her voice though she tried to hide it with a smile. “I confess that I fear that society will find me to be a failure in some way and I shall be beyond mortified!”

The Duchess smiled and patted Dinah’s hand. “Have no fear, I shall be present at every moment and I will make certain that my son does the same. That is half the reason I am coming to London!” she continued, a twinkle in her eye and a note of teasing in her voice. “It is to make certain that my son does not hide himself away from society as I fear he might wish to do!”

Edmund chuckled, though he caught the gleam in his mother’s eyes, knowing all too well that his mother truly did fear that he might hide himself from society despite the fact that he had spoken about Lady Vivianne on many an occasion. Clearly, his mother knew him better than Edmund had anticipated. “Mother, given that both of us are now responsible for Dinah, I hardly think that you can have any fears as regards my absence from society. I will do all that I can and all that I must, I assure you.”

His mother tilted her head, the edge of her lip curving upwards. “That is good to hear from you. Does that mean that you shall do all that you must with your own responsibilities and considerations also?”

Before Edmund could answer, Dinah's eyes rounded and she leaned forward in her seat. "Goodness, dear cousin, are you in pursuit of a suitable match as well? I should never have presumed to come to London knowing that you were to seek such a prospect, too! I feel myself quite embarrassed now, I confess it."

"No, no, please do not," Edmund reassured her, quickly. "There is no need for concern. Yes, I am to be considering it but I am not to take it with any great seriousness, I assure you. There is no great urgency on my part."

"Except that you must produce the heir," came his mother's quick response, though Dinah looked away as Edmund's mother spoke, her gaze going to the window rather than looking back at him. "Your father and I only ever produced daughters after you, and that means that you alone can carry on the title to your sons, should you be blessed with them. That does require a wife, does it not?"

"I suppose that it does, yes," Edmund answered, mildly, "but I have a good many other things preoccupying me, do I not? While I will consider it – as I have already told you – I must also consider whether this year and at this time would be best. Part of me fears that to take a bride at this time would not be fair on the lady herself, for I would have no time to devote to her and would struggle to bring her any sort of happiness." That did not mean, of course, that Edmund would ignore Lady Vivianne and refuse to even consider her. It might be that, after becoming acquainted, he would thereafter decide if he would engage himself to her the following Season rather than this year. However, he would ensure to communicate his intentions to her and ascertain that her father would find such an arrangement agreeable. Edmund told himself repeatedly that he wanted to have a little more time for freedom to pursue his own interests, to make and to create and to test and yet, in considering that, he recognized that it might very well be an excuse. The truth was, in his heart, he did not want to marry.

His mother clicked her tongue in obvious disapproval, pulling Edmund away from his

own thoughts.. “While you are most considerate, my son, I can assure you that a wife can find herself contented in many things, none of which involve a husband. Her duty is to provide you with children. Your duty is to provide for your wife and any subsequent children, as well as to care for the estate.”

Edmund caught the way that his cousin frowned and felt his own brows drop low. He did not want his mother to give the impression to Dinah that the only thing that was required of her was to produce the children her husband required for that would make her view the gentlemen of London in a very different way from how they truly were. He frowned, wondering if he ought to say anything more. After all, the only thing he had talked about with his mother as regarded Lady Vivianne was his intention to acquaint himself with her and yet, perhaps in his mother’s mind, the courtship and engagement were already set. “I am not certain I would be contented with a match that is only for convenience,” he began, seeing his mother’s brows knit together. “Whomever I marry, I should like to know them well, to find their company enjoyable and to look forward to being with them. To have a wife who is almost a stranger to me is not an idea that I feel at all comfortable with and certainly would not delight in.”

“Nor would I, I do not think,” Dinah interjected, though she spoke quietly as if afraid of what the Duchess’ reaction would be. “I do not want to make a match simply for the sake of making it. I should like to find a husband that truly cares for me.”

Edmund smiled warmly, in what he hoped was an encouraging manner. “I quite understand.” he said, as his mother’s eyes flashed.

“Though that caring can come after your acquaintance and subsequent companionship,” the Duchess put in, a heavy emphasis in her words as she looked long at Edmund though, after a moment when he did not respond, she simply shrugged to herself and then smiled at Dinah. “Of course you must find a gentleman who cares for you. You must make whatever match you wish, Dinah. Neither my

mother nor I will force that upon you.”

“No, indeed not,” his mother said, a good amount of fervency in each word. “I would not have you think that you would ever be forced into any match you did not desire. I would not be as cruel-hearted as that.”

Dinah smiled, relief evident. “That is good for me to hear, I am glad to know you both understand.”

“Of course we do.” The Duchess reached and took Dinah’s hand, squeezing her fingers for a moment. “Goodness, I am looking forward to the Season!” She laughed and the faint tension which had been in the carriage for only a few seconds quickly dissipated. “It is almost as though I am a debutante, all over again!”

Edmund smiled and turned his gaze to the window, letting the two ladies talk about the London Season, of society and what Lady Dinah might expect. His own thoughts roved around the Season also, reminding himself that he was there solely for Dinah’s benefit and not for his own purposes – purposes which would have pulled him away from society and into his own company instead.

There is still so much I must learn.

A memory came to him and he let it catch a hold of him as his mother and Dinah continued to talk. It was a pleasant memory, one where he and his uncle had been discussing all manner of things, where they had been talking together in his uncle’s study and, even though he had only been a young man at the time, he had understood a great deal of what his uncle had spoken of. His uncle, the Earl of Fullerton – who had been Dinah’s father also – had always been thinking of ways to improve the situation either at his estate or for his tenants and he had done it by either inventing new things or trying out experiments, simply to see what might work. They had been talking about the difficulty they faced at present with the rains causing floods in the

field and his uncle had shown him detailed drawings of his plans to stop that from happening in the future.

Edmund smiled to himself as he recalled those drawings, remembering very clearly just how astonished he had been at the invention his uncle had come up with, something which had combined both a defense against the floods and what had appeared to be multiple metal troughs with which to carry away the water to a nearby reservoir. He had found it terribly interesting, had studied it over and over again as his uncle had described all that he would have to do in order to make it work... and that had been the very moment that the Duke of Wrexham had walked in.

A frown replaced Edmund's smile as he remembered his father's expression darkening as he had taken in all that had been going on. There had been a weight in his father's expression that Edmund had not seen before, almost an anger which he had recoiled from – and which his uncle had seen also. There had come a terse conversation, one where Edmund's father had thrown up his hands, demanded that his foolish brother stop his inventions and, thereafter, had demanded that Edmund step away from all that his uncle was showing him. 'You are mad!' the Duke had shouted, while Edmund had watched his uncle hang his head, as though he were suddenly ashamed. 'You spend your time inventing ridiculous things, experimenting with all manner of things and, in doing so, neglect society and fail to protect your reputation. You are nothing but a fool, Fullerton and the sooner you realise that, the better it shall be for all of us.'

Wincing, Edmund rubbed one hand over his eyes, feeling a grittiness there. That memory had started off pleasantly enough but had ended in sadness and frustration, for Edmund had longed to spend more time with his uncle and had been ashamed of hearing all that his father had shouted at him. He himself had not believed a word of it, of course, had never once thought that his uncle was a madman. Instead, he had been pleased to see all that his uncle had invented, had even tried to tell his father that the troughs and the defenses which his uncle had built had, in fact, done all that he

had intended – but his father had not listened.

That had not put Edmund off such things, however. Instead, he had begun his own inventions, looking into natural philosophy and hiding all that he engaged in from his father so that the Duke would not know of it. Once his father had died, however, such a thing did not have to be hidden any longer and Edmund had thrown himself into it... much to his mother's chagrin.

“Do not think that you will be able to continue your experiments in London, my dear,” he heard his mother say, looking back at her and pulling himself out of his own thoughts. “You must concentrate on society and on Dinah... and on your own considerations!”

Edmund managed a smile. “I do not need much other than a desk, parchment and ink in order to continue with my inventions and considerations,” he said, making his mother wince. “I shall not pretend that I will not do any, Mother, for that would be an untruth and I have no intention of lying to you. However, I can assure you that I will be devoted to Dinah's come out and her progress into society. I shall also give time to my own requirements though whether anything shall come from that, I do not know.”

His mother only sighed and tutted lightly but Edmund did not respond to this, knowing within himself that he would continue on with his study regardless of what his mother and even his cousin might think while, at the same time, doing all that Dinah needed from him and making his introductions to Lady Vivianne. His experiments and inventions were much too important to him and, even if they looked down upon him or claimed that he was a fool for pursuing such things, Edmund was determined. Natural philosophy had become his passion and he was not about to hide from it now, especially after he had spent years doing so.

“Goodness, the heavens have truly opened!”

“Hmm?” Edmund looked out of the window, only for his eyes to flare wide in astonishment as he realized just how heavily it was raining. He had been so lost in his thoughts that he had not noticed the change in the weather.

“I am sure we will be quite all right,” he murmured, as his mother shared an anxious glance with Dinah. “The roads have not seen a lot of rain given that it is so close to summer and I am sure that all will be well.”

“Of course it shall be,” Dinah murmured, though her voice was soft and quiet now. “It will not take too long for us to reach the inn, will it?”

Edmund shook his head. “I do not think it will be too much longer before we get there.” With a quick calculation, he grimaced. “Actually, now that I think about it, it will be almost early evening by the time we arrive there. So mayhap a little longer than I had first anticipated.”

His mother clasped her hands in her lap, worrying her lip just a little. Edmund tried to smile to calm her, knowing that the heavy rain and the muddy road was a concern to her. It was to him also but he prayed that the rain would soon stop, the road would not grow muddy and sticky and they would be given safe travel to the inn.

“Oh!” The Duchess grabbed Edmund’s hand as a heavy clunk brought the carriage to a stop. “What is that?”

“I do not know, Mother,” Edmund answered, calmly. “Let me go and see what it is that has brought us to a stop and I will be able to return to you with an answer.”

“It is so dark and so wild!” Dinah exclaimed, as the Duchess clung to Edmund’s hand, refusing to let him quit the carriage. “It is as though the summer has forgotten

about us entirely!”

Edmund tried to pull his hand away from his mother’s, though he struggled to do so given how tightly she grasped it. “Mother, I will be quite all right. It is only a thunderstorm.” He saw her eyes widen – for it was not as dark as she had proclaimed it to be – and felt his heart soften with sympathy. It was clear that his mother was afraid, scared of what might be, of what could happen to him if he stepped out into the storm and he could not blame her for that. His own father had been lost in a storm, found in a field with his horse already back at the stables and had never recovered. Evidently, his mother was afraid that the same would happen to him.

“I will be quite all right. All I am doing is stepping out so that I can speak with the driver,” Edmund assured her, managing to pull his hand away. “I will not be a moment.”

Opening the door, he held it tightly so that the wind would not yank it out of his hand. Stepping out, he winced against the wind and the rain as he closed the door again, and walked over to where his driver and footman were standing together.

“What has happened?”

“Oh, Your Grace!” The driver turned quickly, his hair already dripping wet such was the storm. “Forgive us. There is a problem with the wheel and I don’t think that we can keep going without damaging it severely.”

“What is it?”

Gesturing to the back wheel, the driver shrugged. “This wheel is stuck so deep into the mud, I am not certain how we can get it out easily and if I have the horses pull it, there is a chance that it could crack. To my eyes – though I can see nothing but mud – there could be something else there holding the wheel back.”

Edmund turned and walked to the back of the carriage, feeling dampness sink through his clothing already. Heedless to the rain and the mud, he bent down and looked at the wheel, a heavy frown falling over his expression. The wheel was half hidden, buried in mud which was now not only that but also a quick forming puddle. He could put his hand into it and try to see what else was there, but that would leave him covered in dirt and wet and, until he had his mother and cousin safely at the inn, he would not do that. With a long breath, he got to his feet and came back to his driver. “Tell me, how far are we from the inn?”

The driver looked around. “I would say less than half a mile.”

“Then my mother and cousin can walk there,” Edmund said, firmly. “You, Benton, you will take them both there and stand guard over them. Do you understand?”

His footman nodded, pushing his thick, dark hair out of his eyes though it was now in dark strands around his face. “Yes, Your Grace.”

Edmund nodded and then turned to his driver. “I will help you with the wheel.”

The driver and the footman exchanged a look and Edmund could tell at once what both were thinking – but which neither of them said aloud for they would never dare to question a Duke. He let himself smile, despite the rain and the whipping wind around them. No doubt most Dukes and gentlemen of high title would have gone to the inn and left their servants to make sure that all was well and that the issue was resolved without involving them in any way – but that was not Edmund’s way. If there was a problem, then he wanted to be involved in solving it and this certainly, was a problem.

“I will speak with them now,” Edmund stated, gesturing to the carriage door. “Be ready. My mother will need to be well cared for when you make it to the inn. She will not only need to be warm and dry soon after her arrival but she will also need to be

reassured that I will be quite all right. Whether that comes from you or from Lady Dinah, she will need it. Do you understand?"

The footman nodded and with a nod of his own, Edmund made his way back to the carriage door, pulling it open and informing his mother and cousin of what had happened and what they would have to do now. As expected, his mother made a great deal of protest but Edmund stood firm.

"This is what I enjoy, Mother, and what I am well used to doing," he said, as his mother closed her eyes tightly, as if to hide him from her view. "I can solve this problem and have the carriage at the inn very soon."

"Then can we not sit in the carriage?" his mother asked, gesturing to the weather outside, weather which was still battering Edmund furiously. "Why must we resign ourselves to a half a mile walk when we could simply sit here until it is dry?"

"Because the carriage must have as little weight as possible," Dinah interrupted, before Edmund could say anything. "Is that right?"

Edmund nodded. "Yes, my dear cousin, that is quite correct. I will have to have the footman carry one or two smaller pieces of luggage also, and the rest might have to be placed at the side of the road until I have the wheel free." He looked back to his mother. "I am sorry that this is inconvenient but it must be done."

His mother leaned forward in her seat and touched his hand, her face drawn. "Are you sure this is what must be?"

Edmund nodded. "It is."

"And I cannot convince you to leave this to your driver and footman to resolve?"

“I am afraid you cannot,” Edmund answered, as gently as he could. “You know that I am going to be wherever the problem is, Mother. Now, pull your bonnet as tight as you can and step out of the carriage. The footman will take you to the inn and you can wait for me there.”

With a sigh – though much to Edmund’s relief – both she and Dinah did as he asked, tying their bonnet ribbons and thereafter, getting up out of their seat. With a few more encouraging words, Edmund urged them along the path, watching as the footman led the way before turning back to the driver.

“Now, let us get to the wheel,” he said, rubbing his hands together and grinning, despite the atrocious weather, the wet seeping into his clothing and the clap of thunder overhead. “Somehow, we will find a solution. I am determined to do it.”

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“Wait a moment.” Drumming her fingers on the table for a few moments, Lillian let her gaze drift across the page, taking in every single transaction which had been written there for the last month. “Something here is wrong.” With a frown, Lillian rubbed at her eyes and then replaced her gaze back upon the ledger. Her father had asked her to look over the estate ledgers to make certain there were no discrepancies or the like. Arithmetic was something that she loved a great deal and therefore, since she enjoyed such a thing, her father had asked her to do this every single year without fail, ever since he had learned of her enjoyment and her skill.

“Have you found something?” Her father, the Earl of Galesbury, came over to her from where he had been standing at the window. “Something that no-one else has thus far?”

“It is only a small amount.”

“But small amounts are just as important,” he told her, coming to stand by the desk and, leaning over it, looking at the ledger. “What is it?”

“Here.” Lillian pointed to the first line of money. “You said you received a bill for six meters of one particular fabric – for new gowns, I believe, for Mama?”

Lord Galesbury nodded slowly. “Yes, that sounds right.”

“But you have here that one meter costs this much, which means that six meters should not cost this, but this.” She pointed to her arithmetic, then looked up to see her father scrutinizing her work.

After a few moments, he nodded slowly, rubbing at his grey beard. "This is quite right, Lillian. Well done."

"Thank you, Papa."

He patted her shoulder and Lillian almost glowed with happiness. "You have such an exceptional mind. It is quite remarkable, truly. Are you able to look at the rest of the ledger?"

Lillian smiled. "Of course."

"But you must hurry. Your mother wishes for you to make certain that you have everything prepared for when we make our way to London tomorrow." He looked at her steadily, pausing for a moment. "Are you quite prepared for that?"

With a small smile, Lillian shrugged her shoulders. "I am to make my debut, just as every other young lady must do. I cannot see that it is a dreadful thing to behold! It is something that simply must be done if I am to find a future in this world."

"Though you know that I would be glad to keep you here and make use of you at the estate," her father grinned, his eyes twinkling. "You have as sharp and as learned a mind as any gentleman." His smile faded. "You must promise me, Lillian, that, you will not accept the courtship or the engagement from any gentleman who does not value you as I do. I will not give my permission to any gentleman that I think is unworthy of you, of course, but if you find yourself drawn to one particular gentleman, I will not stand in your way. But I must beg you to be careful and considerate in all your thinking, for it is very easy to be swept up in one's emotions."

A little surprised at her father's concern, Lillian reached up and set her hand on her father's. "I will, Father. In truth, I have never had any real interest in marriage, for I find reading and arithmetic in particular to be more than satisfactory!"

Her father laughed and squeezed her shoulder. "I understand but I can assure you, there are a good many things that come from matrimony. That is why it is vital that you find a suitable gentleman, one who will see your brilliant mind and your capacity for arithmetic as blessings, not something to be hidden. Do you understand me?"

Lillian nodded, seeing the concern in her father's eyes. "I do, Papa, yes."

"Good." With a smile, he took his hand from her shoulder and walked to the other side of the room. "Now, let me ring the bell and have some tea and buns brought to you. No doubt you will be needing it by the end of this!"

Lillian laughed and thanked him before turning her attention back to the ledger. She was happy and contented here, glad to be of aid to her father and all the more happy that he valued her in this regard. To have him ask her for her help, to have him thank her for what she did made her feel valued and contented and that, Lillian realized, was something that she certainly did want to have when it came to who she married. Her brows furrowed in concentration as she continued on with her calculations, pushing all thoughts of London and husbands to one side... for the time being, at least.

"I do fear we shall never get to London!"

"It is just as well that we are not going to London, then." Lord Galesbury winked at Lillian as she reached to pat her mother's hand. "You recall, my dear, that we are to go to the inn first?"

"Yes, yes, I know that." Lady Galesbury let out a long sigh and directed a sharp gaze to her husband, who was smiling at her. "You are always trying to tease me, are you not?"

Lillian, who had seen this interplay many a time, could not help but laugh softly, despite the wind and rain which rocked the carriage side to side and pelted hard at the windows. Her father had always been jovial, light in his spirits and, oftentimes, teasing. Her mother, on the other hand, had been a little more severe and less inclined to smile but Lord Galesbury seemed to make it his daily intention to have his wife laughing and smiling as much as he could manage – and Lillian had delighted to see the love and kindness shared between her parents. That, she determined, as her mother begrudgingly offered her husband a smile, was the kind of marriage she herself wished to have. One where there was genuine care and affection, one where the years spent together were happy rather than difficult or cold.

“Speaking of cold,” she murmured aloud, shivering lightly as another gust of wind threatened to break through the carriage door and come whistling around her. “It is a summer storm, yes?”

Her father nodded, his expression a little difficult to make out given the dark skies which surrounded them. “It is, though it is a very severe one. The road will be muddy very soon, I fear though the inn cannot be more than a mile away, given how long we have been travelling for.”

Lillian nodded and clasped her hands in her lap, her fingers tightening as she fought worry. They had come to London many a time given that her elder brother had come to make his match here before her – though, much to her parents frustration, he had not chosen a bride even now – and thus, the inn that they always stayed at was a familiar one to them all, but all the same, with the storm surrounding them, Lillian could not help but feel a little uneasy.

“Whoa there!”

Catching her breath, Lillian reached up to grab a hold of the strap as the carriage began to slow, hearing the driver’s exclamation as he pulled the horses back.

“What has happened?” her father called, rapping on the roof. “Are we in difficulty?”

“An accident, my lord!” the driver shouted back, his voice carried away by the wind so that Lillian had to strain to hear him. “There’s a carriage here.”

“Stop, then. We might be able to assist.”

“No, my love!” Lady Galesbury put one hand to her husband’s knee, fear in her voice. “What if it is armed men? What if they have come to steal and kill? We will be next!”

Lord Galesbury put his hand on top of his wife’s one, smiling gently. “My dear, if it is highwaymen, then be assured that they have already left by now and will have robbed the people in the carriage before us. Though I feel quite certain that it is because of the weather that they have stopped. It is, no doubt, an accident with the roads being as bad as they are. Now, stay here and wait for me to return. I will not be long.”

Lillian took her mother’s hand and watched as her father stepped out of the carriage, the wind and the rain pouring in as he opened and then shut the door. Lillian shivered again and pulled her coat around her all the more tightly, glad that she had chosen to wear it rather than have it packed away. “I am sure he will be quite all right, Mama,” she said, quietly. “It is good that he wants to help.”

“He is always very good,” came the soft reply. “Too willing to help, no matter the cost to himself.” She sighed and then looked to Lillian, a small smile on her face. “I am blessed to have him as a husband. My prayer is that you will be able to find someone just as wonderful as he.”

Smiling, Lillian squeezed her mother’s hand and waited, hearing a few exclamations carrying towards them from outside. Eventually, her father opened the door and came

to sit back inside, his face wet with the rain, his hair dripping. Running one hand over his face, he picked up one of the blankets and wiped it over his eyes, before smiling reassuringly at his wife.

“You see? I am not captured by highwaymen, nor am I injured in any way.”

“Yes, I can see that. Though you are soaked to the skin and will, no doubt, catch a cold and be most unwell with it.”

Lord Galesbury chuckled and shook his head. “My dear, we are less than a mile away from the inn. The Duke of Wrexham – for that is who is at the carriage – has sent his mother and cousin there and they have had to walk in the wind and the rain, for his carriage is quite stuck!”

“His mother and cousin?” Lillian repeated, turning to look out of the window, horrified at the thought of how cold and wet they would both be. “Can we go and find them and take them in the carriage with us?”

Her father shook his head. “I think that they will be there by now. However, I have said that I will stay and assist them in releasing the carriage wheel from whatever it is stuck in and, thereafter, return with them to the inn.”

“No! You are to stay with us! I could not bear to leave you here, not when it is so wild outside.” Lady Galesbury shook her head, her face going a little pale. “I am scared, Galesbury. It is so very fierce and the thought of going to the inn alone – ”

“You would have Lillian,” Lord Galesbury said, gently, though Lady Galesbury shook her head fervently. “Come now, my dear, do not be unreasonable.”

“I do not mind waiting here with Mama until the carriage is freed,” Lillian said quickly not wanting her mother to be distressed and, at the same time, ignoring the

desire deep within her heart to get to the inn and, thereafter, rest in a soft bed instead of sitting upright in an uncomfortable carriage seat. “What is wrong with the carriage, Papa?”

The Earl scowled. “One of the carriage wheels is stuck. It appears to be wedged between two very heavy stones which have been revealed by the rain - but cannot be dug up either, given the weight and the size of them.”

“Might I be able to help?” Lillian asked, though her father immediately shook his head no.

“I do not think that is wise, Lillian, though I am grateful for your willingness to help. The carriage wheel is at a slight angle which is making it difficult and the horses are cold and wet, meaning that they are tugging and pulling at the reins, desperate to get to the inn which is making it all the more difficult.”

Lillian lifted her chin, an idea coming to her. “Papa, I can help. First, the drivers should swap the horses. That way, this carriage and the Duke’s horses can get to the inn and recover. Mama, you will have to go to the inn alone but you could make certain that the Duchess is quite well? She is going to be just as you are, concerned and worried over what has happened and fearful about the storm and what a blessing it would be to her to have you speak with her, reassuring her that all is well.”

“Lillian,” her father began, but Lillian waved one hand, telling him with the gesture that she was not yet finished.

“I am sure that I could help,” she insisted. “If it is stuck and it is at an angle, then there are certain calculations which must be made in order to move the wheel. Please, Papa. You know that I am good at this and even if I cannot help, I would like to have the opportunity to try, at least.”

Her father hesitated. “I – I do not know, Lillian. You will get soaked to the skin and –”

“It is less than a mile to the inn, as you said, and Mama could have everything prepared for my arrival,” Lillian said, trying to ignore the way her mother shook her head in obvious disagreement. “The Duke must be very cold indeed already, if he has been trying for some time.”

Lord Galesbury bit his lip, then shrugged. “I can see the determination in your eyes and I know better than to refuse you.”

“Galesbury! You cannot think of permitting her this! You have already heard that I am afraid of going to the inn alone and now you are stating that you will do so regardless!”

“It is the Duke of Wrexham in need of our aid, my dear.” Lord Galesbury patted his wife’s hand. “Now, you know as well as I that our daughter has an exceptional mind and, if she can be of aid to him then why should we hold her back? You have your part to play also, my dear, for the Duchess of Wrexham, his mother, and another young lady whose name I forget, are already at the inn. They will need reassurance and the promise that all will be well. No doubt they will be frantic with worry for I believe it has been some time since they set off to the inn. Can you do as Lillian has suggested? Can you go to the inn?”

Lillian waited for her mother’s consent, seeing how she closed her eyes and trembled just a little. Then, with another sigh, she nodded and looked to Lillian. “But you will stay in here until the horses have been changed,” she said, firmly. “I will not have you standing in the rain and the wind until it is absolutely necessary.”

“Very well,” Lillian agreed, as her father quickly stepped out of the carriage. “It may be, Mama, that I am no help at all and will have to sit in the Duke’s carriage until

someone else comes up with a solution!”

Lady Galesbury nodded slowly, her eyes searching Lillian’s face. “You are not worried about the Duke’s consideration of you? It is not often that young ladies have as sharp a mind as you.”

Lillian shrugged. “Not in the least.” Remembering how her father had spoken to her the day prior, when she had been doing the ledger, she offered her mother a small smile. “I am not going to hide any part of myself away from society and certainly not from a Duke either. Besides, if I can help him, he shall be in my debt and that is a good thing, is it not?”

She laughed as a gleam came into her mother’s eye but there came no time for the conversation to continue. Her father stuck his head back into the carriage, windswept and drenched. “Are you quite prepared for this, Lillian? It is furious out here. Are you certain you wish to do this?”

“Yes, I am quite certain.” Lillian took a deep breath, mentally preparing herself to enter the storm. Her mother grasped her hand again but Lillian only squeezed it and then let it go, making her way to the door of the carriage, grasping her father’s helping and stepping out.

The response of the storm was immediate. The wind whipped at its new victim, trying mercilessly to blow her in whichever direction it pleased while the rain did its best to seek every tiny hole where it might push through towards her skin. Lillian shivered violently and instinctively lowered her head, though her bonnet was next to useless in keeping her protected.

“This way.” Her father took her hand and guided her to the other carriage, coming around to the other side of it. The sky was dark and gloomy but not dark enough for it to hide the figures there, though each got to their feet the moment Lillian and her

father appeared. One kept his head low and that, Lillian presumed, was the driver, which meant her gaze instinctively went to the other fellow.

“This is my daughter, Lillian, Your Grace.” Lord Galesbury released Lillian’s hand.
“This is the Duke of Wrexham, Lillian.”

Lillian looked up as best she could, taking in the gentleman before her. His coat was absent, his white shirt and waistcoat soaked through though the smile on his face showed no concern whatsoever as regarded his sodden state. Rivulets of rain ran from his temples to his chin, his sleeves were rolled up and his arms and hands were dirty with the mud from the road but all the same, he did not appear to be in the least bit concerned.

“Lady Lillian, I think you are very brave indeed to have stepped out into the storm. Your father thinks you can help us here?”

Lillian offered him a nod, having no desire to prolong the conversation. “Might I see the difficulty?”

“Of course. This way.”

Within a few minutes, Lillian’s mind was working furiously, taking in everything that she could see and listening hard to everything she was being told. She considered the angles of certain things, seeing them almost light up in front of her eyes. The weight of the carriage and the strength of the horses added to her thinking until, finally, with a small smile despite the wind and the rain, Lillian finally set to work.

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“Remarkable.”

“That is the fourth time you have said that.” Edmund’s mother sniffed as she reached for the teapot. “I do not think that a young lady such as she ought to have been permitted to be out in the storm.”

“That young lady helped us free the carriage wheel,” Edmund answered, as his mother poured a little milk into her tea. “I do not think I have ever seen the like before!”

Again, his mother sniffed. “Young ladies do not need to be as learned as gentlemen. There is simply no need!”

“And yet, we must be grateful that her intelligence brought the Duke back to us, must we not?” Dinah glanced at Edmund, offered him a small smile of obvious support and then looked to the Duchess. “I would be very glad to make her acquaintance, I think.”

After a moment, the Duchess sagged a little in her chair and her expression softened. “Her mother was very kind, I must say. She came to find us directly, told us all that had happened and reassured me when my nerves were already terribly fraught.”

Edmund smiled. “A very genteel lady, then.”

His mother finally smiled. “Yes, my dear, she was very genteel indeed. I should not have been so averse to the young lady coming to help you, it is only that I am very fatigued after yesterday and, I confess, a little out of sorts.”

Edmund smiled at her sympathetically. “Given that you had to walk a long distance in the rain and the wind and, thereafter, wait for some time to hear news, I can understand that you are weary today. We do not have to continue our travels to London today, if you do not wish. We could wait until tomorrow.”

The Duchess shook her head and Dinah looked relieved, glad, it seemed, that they were not to delay.

“We cannot delay,” his mother told him, firmly. “Dinah must make her introductions to the royal family and there is much to be done before that time comes. Now, do not be so foolish as to suggest such a thing again. Tired though I am, I am still able to make my way to London today. Though,” she continued, her brow furrowing, “are you quite certain that the carriage is prepared?”

“Yes, and it is more than able to take us to London,” Edmund answered, with a smile as he recalled how Lady Lillian had assisted them the previous evening. He had managed to come up with a way for the carriage wheel to be released but had been unable to ascertain the angle at which it ought to be done. He had feared, in addition, that doing so incorrectly would result in the wheel being broken and thus, had been unable to move forward with his idea. At the time of Lord and Lady Galesbury’s arrival, he had been thinking hard, attempting to come up with another solution that would help sort out the situation. When Lord Galesbury had suggested that his daughter might be able to assist, Edmund had immediately frowned at the idea, struggling to imagine what a young lady might be able to offer though he had not refused the gentleman outright. What a blessing she had been to them all! With amazement, Edmund had watched as she had not only listened but understood the problem he faced as well as his attempts to fix it thus far. When she had been able to come up with the answer, assuring him that her calculations had been correct, Edmund had only been able to stare at her for some moments in utter astonishment. Lord Galesbury had nothing but belief in his daughter’s recommendations and had encouraged both Edmund and his driver to do as Lady Lillian had suggested – and the

wheel had come free without too great a difficulty and had not suffered any real damage either.

How thankful he had been for her – and how glad they had all been to make their way to the inn, cold and shivering and yet delighted in how it had all turned out.

“Have you seen Lord Galesbury this morning?”

His mother’s question interrupted Edmund’s considerations and he shook his head.

“No, not as yet. I assume they are in the other private parlor, however, as we are.”

His mother nodded slowly. “All the same, I should like to be introduced to Lord Galesbury and his daughter, I think. I wish to convey my heartfelt gratitude to them both.”

“Of course.” Edmund’s heart lifted as he thought of speaking to Lady Lillian again. “I will send one of the footmen to enquire as to whether or not they have time to take tea with us before they set out for London. And if we cannot meet them here, then I will make certain that we have dinner together once we all return to London.”

“Very good.” His mother smiled and even Dinah looked contented. Settling back in his chair, Edmund picked up his own cup and sipped from it, delighted in how everything had turned out and, on top of all of that, how intrigued he was by the remarkable Lady Lillian.

“I must express my gratitude to each and every one of you.”

Edmund watched as his mother grasped Lord Galesbury’s hand for a moment and then turned to Lady Galesbury to do the very same. The family were due to make their way to London within the hour but as the carriage was being prepared for them, they had been able to come together in the dining room of the inn, which had been set

aside just for their own use for a time. Lady Lillian, as yet, had not arrived but Edmund had been assured that she would be ready to join them very soon.

“But of course.” Lady Galesbury smiled warmly and then looked to Edmund. “I am simply glad that you all returned safely to the inn. My heart was filled with a great deal of concern, I can assure you.” Her gaze returned to the Duchess. “Though it would have been nothing compared to yours, I am sure.”

Edmund’s mother sighed and put one hand to her heart. “I was greatly frightened when the wheel became stuck. I was quite sure that something dreadful was going to happen! Though I confess that when I was told I would have to walk to the inn in the midst of that storm, I found myself all the more upset! It was bitterly cold in the wind, though the footman was very good and walked in front of me so that I was shielded from it as best he could.”

Edmund, who had not known this, silently reminded himself to give his servant an extra few coins by way of gratitude for being so considerate. The young man had not been instructed to do such a thing but had shown consideration without any sort of directive and Edmund appreciated that loyalty and concern.

“The inn was warm, at least,” his mother continued, just as the door to Edmund’s left opened. “And we had fires stoked within a few minutes, warm clothes – though they were not mine, of course, but did for a time – and piping hot tea served to us which did warm me through very quickly. But yes, as you yourself said, Lady Galesbury, I was deeply concerned for my son and what was happening with the carriage. To know that he had others with him was a great relief to me so I do thank you for coming to inform me of it rather than waiting at the carriage.”

“But of course,” Lady Galesbury murmured, turning just as the young lady came to join her. “Your Grace, might I present my daughter, Lady Lillian?”

Edmund tilted his head just a fraction, taking in the young lady as she curtsied to his mother. She was willowy in her figure, her brown chestnut curls bouncing gently as she rose from her curtsy. Her lips were curved into a small, seemingly genuine smile and when she looked to him, her brown eyes were warm.

“I am delighted to make your acquaintance formally, Lady Lillian,” he found himself saying, before his mother had a chance to even speak. “We do owe you a great deal, of course, for without your help, the carriage might never have made it to the inn.”

Lady Lillian did not blush nor look away as he might have expected. Instead, her smile grew just a little and, after a moment, her gaze went to Dinah, curiosity coming into her expression instead.

“Forgive me, I have not introduced my cousin,” Edmund said, quickly. “Lady Lillian, Lord and Lady Galesbury, this is my cousin, Lady Dinah. Her father was the Earl of Fullerton and her brother is, at present, out on his Great Adventure! Though I am more than contented to be her chaperone for the Season – both my mother and I, you understand.” Feeling a little flustered and wondering why he had said as much, Edmund clamped his mouth shut and let the bows, curtsies and other formalities continue on without his interference. Some kind words were shared between them all, with both his mother and Dinah thanking Lady Lillian for her assistance though, Edmund noted, she did not say much about that in any way whatsoever. Instead, Lady Lillian only smiled and inclined her head a little, as though somehow, she was a little embarrassed by what she had done.

Though there is no need for that, Edmund considered, remembering what his mother had said earlier when they were in private. I do not consider a learned young lady to be in any way improper, even though my mother might think so. “I think it remarkable how quickly you were able to calculate all that was required for me to free the wheel,” he said, as Lady Lillian’s gaze went quickly to his. “I know we did not say much last evening as we travelled to the inn – ”

“We were all much too cold for conversation, were we not?” Lord Galesbury interrupted, as Lady Lillian laughed and then winced as if the memory of how they had all shivered had quickly come back to her.

“Yes, indeed!” Edmund agreed, his smile warming as Lady Lillian looked back at him. “But I should like you to be aware, Lady Lillian, that I found your work to be of the highest standard and, indeed, I find myself a little jealous that I cannot think through such things as quickly as you can!”

Lady Lillian did not immediately smile and nor did she respond. Instead, she looked back at him for a few moments, her eyes a little sharper than before, only for her expression to then change into one of happiness rather than of scrutiny.

“You are very kind,” she said, making Edmund believe that the silence and the searching of his expression had been to ascertain whether or not he spoke genuinely or not. “I was glad to be able to help you, Your Grace. I presume that your carriage is quite able to take you all to London without difficulty or concern?”

“You are quite right. There is nothing that worries me and the driver has also assured me that all will be well. We shall be in London by this evening, I think and I shall be very glad indeed to be there!”

Lady Lillian looked away but said nothing more, her hands clasped lightly in front of her but her gaze on the floor ahead of her. It was not as though she were being rude but simply that she had nothing further to add to the conversation which, Edmund considered, might be just what a young lady was taught to do in such situations as this.

“I presume that you are also making your way to London for the Season?” he asked, directing his question towards Lady Lillian who, after a moment, glanced at him and then nodded. “To make your debut?”

“Yes, that is quite right.”

“Then it is all the more wonderful that we have met, for Dinah is due to make her come out also and I know is rather concerned about it all.” He gestured to his cousin whilst inwardly delighting in the chance to further their acquaintance. “Is that not so, Dinah?”

“It is,” Dinah said quietly, though she smiled at Lady Lillian. “Might I hope that we could be close to one another during our first ball? I confess that my nervousness is stealing some of the excitement from my heart!”

“But of course! I should be delighted,” Lady Lillian answered, as the Duchess moved forward to speak to Lord and Lady Galesbury, leaving the young ladies to chat together. Edmund himself said nothing, taking in the conversations and quietly contented in how it had all come about. Lady Lillian was certainly intriguing and if she and Dinah could strike up a friendship, then all the better!

Though you first have a responsibility to Lady Vivianne, his conscience suddenly reminded him. You cannot let yourself start thinking about another young lady when matters have not yet been clarified with her.

Recognizing that, Edmund kept his smile in place but then moved to speak to Lord and Lady Galesbury instead. All the same, however, his thoughts and his interest continued to linger on Lady Lillian and, when it came time to take their leave, Edmund’s heart quickened with a sudden sense of concern.

“Might you wish to come to dinner with us once we are all settled in London?” he asked Lord Galesbury, knowing full well that his interest in such a thing came solely from his desire to see Lady Lillian again. “And, of course, if Lady Lillian would be willing to draw near Dinah during the first ball of the Season, I know that my cousin would appreciate it.”

“But of course.” Lord Galesbury beamed at Edmund, clearly delighted at the connection the two families were building. “I know that Lillian would be very glad to do such a thing. She is a very amiable young lady and always willing to be of help where she can.”

“Capital.” Edmund inclined his head, his concerns fading away. “Then might I wish you safe travels to London, Lord Galesbury, and I look forward to seeing you and your family there again very soon.”

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One week later

“Are you quite ready?”

Lillian lifted her chin and looked out at the gathered crowd. She was wearing the same gown, the same ivory gown that every young lady wore during their introduction to the royal family and thus, with a nod, she stepped forward and made her way down to the very front of the room where the royal couple sat.

And then, it was over.

Lillian’s nervousness, which had risen into a crescendo, fell and broke apart as she stepped out of the room again and was quickly congratulated by her mother. “That was all that I had to do?” she asked, as her mother laughed and squeezed her hands.

“Yes, my dear, that was all you had to do and you did it very well! The Queen took note of you, I am sure, for I saw her eyes linger on you as you curtsied and she does not often observe in such a way.” Lady Galesbury, seemingly now quite satisfied, gestured to Lillian to step out back towards the hallway. “Now, we must linger for a little longer and then we can take our leave.”

“I should like to see Lady Dinah,” Lillian answered, as she made her way back, going to stand with the crowd within the room, now watching the other debutantes make their way towards the royal couple. “I know that she was also very anxious about this moment.”

Her mother nodded, her voice dropping to a whisper as they stepped in together. “I

think it an excellent thing that you have both become better acquainted already.”

“As do I.” Lillian smiled to her mother and then turned her attention back to watching the debutantes. In the last sennight, she and Lady Dinah had taken tea together twice and had written various notes to each other, their friendship blossoming in a way that Lillian had not anticipated. They had both felt a great deal of nervousness about their come out and to be able to share that without fear had brought a great relief.

“There she is.” Lillian clasped her hands tightly as Lady Dinah walked into the room, her hand clasping tight to the Duke of Wrexham’s arm. Lillian’s gaze, however, was not on her new friend but rather on the Duke himself, taking him in, studying him in a way she had not been able to do before now. It was the first time she had seen him since that day at the inn, for whenever she had come to take tea, he had not been at home. That had not been a disappointment to her, of course, for she had been there to speak with Lady Dinah rather than with the Duke himself, but now that she saw him again, now that she was able to let her gaze linger on him, Lillian felt a flicker of interest within her heart.

The Duke of Wrexham was broad shouldered, with a robust frame and a sense of strength about him as he walked. His presence commanded the room and Lillian was quite certain that every eye was on him rather than on Lady Dinah. His gaze was fixed to the royal couple but there was a light smile on his lips, his chin lifted as though he knew his place in society and was not about to hide from that. There was with it, a sense of pride about him and Lillian smiled at that. Clearly, the Duke of Wrexham was pleased to have Lady Dinah by his side, glad to be the one to present her to society. In all that Lady Dinah had said this last week, she had never spoken one word of sadness or upset about him. Instead, every single word on her lips had been of gratitude and happiness over her situation. That spoke well of the Duke’s character.

Though he is a Duke and you only the daughter of an earl, Lillian reminded herself,

as the Duke and Lady Dinah passed her. It would be foolishness to let myself get caught up in any sort of feelings as regarded him. No doubt someone like him will marry the daughter of a Duke or mayhap, a Marquess. To think that he might look to me would be more than a little ridiculous.

All the same, she could not quite remove from her mind the way he had grinned at her, light in his eyes despite the pouring rain and the mud which had splattered its way up his arms. Nor could she forget all that he had spoken of as regarded his own attempts to free the wheel, finding his quick and intelligent mind to be of great interest to her. Though, she considered, most gentlemen were highly educated so she ought not to be surprised by that.

“Have you spoken to the Duke of Wrexham as yet?”

Lillian glanced up at her mother. “No, not yet, Mama.”

A slight disappointment spread across Lady Galesbury’s face. “He was never present when you went to take tea with Lady Dinah?”

Lillian shook her head no.

“Ah, well. Let us hope that this proposed dinner happens very soon though we are also meant to be meeting this evening, are we not?” The disappointment faded, leaving a smile now on Lady Galesbury’s face. “You will be with him again at the ball, since you are to walk with Lady Dinah. Mayhap he will dance with you, Lillian, would that not be a good thing to be so singled out?”

“Though, I am sure that the Duke will dance with many a young lady,” Lillian answered, softly, as Lady Dinah curtsied before the royal couple. “There will be no special notice given to me and that is just as ought to be expected.” She shot her mother a quick glance. “Pray, do not think that just because I am acquainted with

Lady Dinah that there might be some special connection between the Duke and myself, Mama. That is not a thought that I am permitting myself to entertain.” She kept her gaze steady as she looked back at her mother who, sighing, then shrugged lightly.

“I understand what you mean, Lillian,” she said, quietly. “Though a connection to a Duke, no matter whether or not anything comes from it, is always a good thing.

Lillian said nothing, simply watching the next debutante make her way to the front of the room, and then the next one. Over and over, her thoughts returned to the Duke of Wrexham but repeatedly, Lillian pushed each and every one away. She was not about to let her mother fill her head with all manner of hope or expectation when she herself knew that it would be foolish to do so. Yes, she was here to make a match and yes, the Duke of Wrexham had not rejected her assistance when it had come to the carriage but that did not mean that she had to, thereafter, pursue him. What if he had come to London solely to care for his cousin and make certain that her future was settled before he began to look at his own? She was not about to push herself forward, demand that he take notice of her and ruin their acquaintance by doing so!

“We should take our leave soon,” her mother whispered, as Lillian glanced back at her. “There is much still to prepare for this evening and we cannot linger here for too long.”

“Whenever you wish to take your leave, I shall be ready,” Lillian answered, finding that she had no real desire to stay any longer, now that Lady Dinah had been presented. “Are we to go to the milliner’s still?”

Her mother nodded and after a few more moments, led her from the room.

“Might I go to the bookshop for a short time?”

Lady Galesbury smiled as she and Lillian made their way to the carriage. “Mayhap. Though I do have a small surprise for you.”

Lillian looked back at her, a sudden kick to her heart. “A surprise?”

“Indeed.” Lady Galesbury gestured to the carriage and, as Lillian turned to look, the door opened and a familiar face revealed itself to her. Her heart leapt and she rushed forward, her hands outstretched. “Weatherly!”

Her brother grinned at her as he jumped down from the carriage. “My dear sister, you did not think that I would not be present for your come out, did you?”

“I thought you were to be in Bath for the Season!” Lillian exclaimed, as her brother chuckled. “Father informed me that you had a good deal to do at your estate, also and he did not expect to see you here in London.” Her brother had, for the time being, inherited a smaller estate and, some months ago, had moved to reside there permanently. Lillian knew that her mother and father were both hopeful that the new responsibility would encourage him to take a wife but, as yet, Harry had shown no real interest.

“My estate is doing very well and Bath did not have as many delights as I had hoped.” Harry tilted his head just a little. “I do hope that you are not upset at my arrival?”

“Upset?” Lillian exclaimed, only to laugh and then embrace him again. “My dear brother, how could I be in the least bit upset? I am delighted to see you. Thank you for coming to be with me this Season, I am truly glad that you are here.”

“That is good, then.” Her brother caught her hands and squeezed them gently. “Now,

I presume that all went well with your presentation to the royal family?"

"Very well," their mother put in, as Harry leaned in to kiss her cheek. "I am sure that the Queen took a little more notice of Lillian than she might have done other young ladies."

"That is because you are the most remarkable, the most beautiful and the most elegant young lady she has seen this Season – if not in all Seasons," Harry said, making Lillian flush with pleasure at his kindness. "Now, Mama, I should like to take my sister for a jaunt around London. I can take a hackney and you can have the carriage."

"No, no. I shall call a hackney and you and your sister may take the carriage," Lady Galesbury answered, smiling warmly at them both. "I am afraid that our visit to the milliner's will have to wait, Lillian, unless your brother wishes to take you there?" She cast an arched eyebrow in Harry's direction but the way he wrinkled his nose made both Lillian and their mother laugh. Within a few minutes, Lady Galesbury was on her way back to the townhouse – with strict warnings that they had to be back home well in time for dinner given the come out ball was this evening – and Lillian and Harry were in the carriage, with Harry rapping on the roof to tell the carriage driver to go.

"But where are we to go, brother?" Lillian asked, as her brother grinned. "I presume it is not to be the milliner's, then?"

Harry chuckled. "Now, do not tell me that you are disappointed I am not to take you there?"

"No, not in the least!"

Again, her brother laughed, clearly well aware of what caught Lillian's interest and

what did not.

“Then shall we visit the museum? I know that you will be just as intrigued as I, though I do not think there shall be very many young ladies there.”

Lillian beamed at her brother, delight flooding her. “I should love to visit the museum! I have not been there yet this Season, though we have only been here for one sennight thus far.”

“Then the museum it shall be!” her brother declared, with a broad smile. “I am truly delighted to be here with you, Lillian. I am certain you shall have success this Season.”

“Mayhap I shall,” Lillian answered, with a soft smile. “But our father has made it quite clear that I am only to accept the interest of a gentleman that I truly care for – and who truly cares for me, just as I see in our parents and their marriage.”

Harry’s face grew suddenly serious, his eyes searching hers. “And that means that they will have to know all about your curious mind, your love of numbers and the skills you possess... skills that are a good deal more useful than embroidery or painting, I might add.”

Understanding what her brother meant, Lillian nodded quickly. “Yes, of course. The ton might wish to consider me a bluestocking but I do not care. If I am to find a gentleman to marry me, he must not have any concern with such a thing. I am a learned young lady and I want very much for any gentleman with an interest in me to accept that.” She spoke without pride, without conceit but instead, with a simple understanding of who she was and what she wanted. “And if he does not, then I will have no interest in him!”

At this, Harry grinned back at her, the light coming back into his eyes. “Excellent! I

am glad that, not only have you come to such a decision yourself but you have also had father's guidance and blessing. That means a great deal."

"Indeed it does." Lillian sat back in her chair, folding her hands gently in her lap. "Let us see how the gentlemen of London react to having a young lady in the museum with them!"

At this, her brother chuckled rather ruefully but Lillian only smiled, knowing that there would be some in the ton who would think poorly of her for even being present in such a place but Lillian did not care. Those who thought she should not be present in a museum were not the sort of gentlemen she would be interested either so, in that regard, this visit to the museum might prove more useful to her than any ball she might attend! Smiling to herself, Lillian looked out of the window and let out a small, contented sigh. Thus far, the day had gone very well indeed and this visit to the museum was going to be the best part of her day, she was sure.

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“You do not mind if I take a short respite before I meet you back at the townhouse for dinner, do you?” Edmund looked from his mother to Dinah and back again. “Though of course, Dinah, you did very well and it is not because I want to rush away from this afternoon but only because – ”

“My dear, you do not have to make excuses.” His mother laughed softly and put one hand to Edmund’s arm. “You have stayed through Lady Dinah’s presentation and sometime afterwards also, so I can understand why you might wish now to step away for a while. I will take Dinah home and we will make certain that all is prepared for this evening.”

Edmund smiled and then took his cousin’s hand, bowing over it. “It was my honour to present you to the King and Queen,” he said, quietly. “I was truly delighted to be able to do so and, as has been said to you before, you did marvelously well. I am sure that the Queen took notice of you.”

Dinah nodded, though the smile she offered was a little lacking in happiness.

“Are you quite all right?” Edmund asked, a little afraid now that the reason for her absence of smiles was because of him. “I can linger here with you, if you wish it. I quite understand that this has been a very overwhelming time and – ”

“I am a little overcome with it all,” his cousin said, interrupting him just as his mother had done a moment ago, “and would be glad to go home to rest. Thank you for all that you have done for me and continue to do, Wrexham. I am truly grateful.”

Seeing something that looked like tears in her eyes, Edmund held back his questions,

thinking silently to himself that the lady was not quite herself but at the same time, clearly did not want to explain why that might be. “Very well. We can all return home.”

“Oh, no. You must stay and do as you please!” Dinah exclaimed, blinking quickly so that the hint of tears in her eyes quickly fled. “I quite understand. I am ready to return to the townhouse with your mother but you must not feel obliged.”

“And we have two carriages,” his mother reminded him, who had insisted that they each take a carriage simply to make certain that society knew of the Duke of Wrexham’s arrival into society. “I will take Dinah and you can do as you please... though do recall the ball this evening.”

Edmund put one hand to his heart, ignoring the niggle of annoyance that came with his mother’s words. “I would hardly forget Dinah’s first ball,” he said, quietly. “I shall return home in plenty of time, I assure you.” With a smile, he nodded and then took his leave, though his smile quickly fell away. Why was Dinah upset? The presentation to the King and Queen had gone very well indeed and though Dinah had been nervous, she had not betrayed a hint of that to anyone. Why, then, had she had tears in her eyes?

With a sigh, Edmund made his way to the carriage and climbed in. This was a great responsibility, taking Dinah to London and chaperoning her, though he was grateful that his cousin – and Dinah’s brother – Lord Fullerton had asked him to do so. That had come as something of a surprise, for Fullerton had always been somewhat cold and unwelcoming towards Edmund though he knew full well where that had come from. The many hours that Edmund had spent with the late Earl of Fullerton, poring over notes and trying out different things, the late nights in deep discussion and in reading, that had all been most beneficial for him but Edmund had always known that his cousin had felt himself jealous over Edmund’s closeness with his father. It had not been Edmund’s intention to come between father and son but given that his own

father had despised all that Edmund set his hand to, there had been a great deal of solace in spending time with his uncle.

Though, Edmund considered, mayhap now the difficulties between them were healing since Lord Fullerton had asked him to take care of Dinah. That spoke of a trust, at the very least.

Though I do wish I could understand why Dinah appeared so upset. That has troubled me.

Edmund sat there for a moment, knowing that the driver was waiting for him to say where he wished to go and yet, for the moment, Edmund remained a little uncertain. He had thought to go for a drive through London, simply to take in the scenes and the people and let himself consider but now, he found himself thinking of the London museum. It offered him so much to engage his mind and, he considered, might offer him some insight into his current inventions.

“The museum!” he cried, rapping on the roof. “And be quick about it!”

The urge to step into the museum and to lose himself in the artefacts and the history pushed through him so that, had the carriage not already been moving, Edmund might have considered climbing out and running for it instead. The ton would have something to say about that, if they saw me, Edmund thought, chuckling to himself before closing his eyes and resting his head back against the squabs. This was going to turn out to be a very pleasant day indeed.

The museum was fairly quiet, with only a few gentlemen wandering around and looking at the various things which were placed for their viewing interest. Edmund relished the quiet, glad to be away from the crush of the crowd as they all stood to

survey their daughter, sister or niece making their presentation to the King and Queen.

Lady Vivianne was not present, he thought to himself, an uncomfortable kick coming into stomach at the thought. This first sennight, his mother had not once mentioned the lady and Edmund himself had barely given her any thought either. They had been much too busy making certain that Dinah had everything that she required and that her introduction to society would go well. Now that the first presentation was over, however, Edmund was all too aware that he would soon have to think about what his obligations were to the lady. He would have to find her, make certain that he was acquainted with her family and thereafter, attempt to find a way to broach the subject of any expectations that she or her family might have of him.

What would become of that thereafter, Edmund did not know.

“It is quite fascinating!”

A quiet voice caught his attention and, hearing it more like a lady’s voice than a gentleman’s, Edmund turned his head to see which young lady might be present in the museum, only for his gaze to fall upon a familiar face.

Lady Lillian.

Edmund smiled to himself, remembering just how quickly her mind had worked when they had the difficulty with the carriage and silently thinking that, out of all of his acquaintances, she was the one he might have expected to be present in a museum! His smile quickly fell as he saw her arm in arm with another gentleman who was nodding, smiling and gesturing to whatever artefact it was that they were looking at.

Edmund’s stomach dropped but he shook his head to himself, turning his head away

and looking ahead of him instead. He had not given much thought to Lady Lillian either these last few days, though that was not because he had lost his interest in her but simply because of how busy he had been. Neither did he have any right to let himself feel irritated at seeing Lady Lillian with another gentleman, for they were barely acquainted! And yet, all the same, despite his reasoned discussion in his own mind, Edmund could not help but feel a twinge of jealousy, looking back over his shoulder at the two of them walking together.

“This has always been something that you have been good at,” he heard the gentleman say, as Lady Lillian murmured something in response that Edmund could not hear. When he dared another glance, Lady Lillian was smiling brightly up into the gentleman’s face – and that kick of jealousy came again. Irritated with himself, Edmund made to turn and walk away entirely, only for Lady Lillian’s voice to catch his attention.

“Your Grace? Is that you?”

He turned towards her fully then, forcing a smile and bowing low as Lady Lillian curtsied. “Yes, it is. How pleasant it is to see you again.” He cast a glance towards the gentleman who was looking at him rather curiously, before turning to Lady Lillian, clearly eager for an introduction.

Lady Lillian was quick to do as was needed. “Your Grace,” she began, gesturing to the gentleman who still had her arm in his. “Might I present my brother, Lord Weatherly? Harry, this is the Duke of Wrexham. He and I were acquainted recently, as were mother and father. I was also introduced to Lady Dinah, the Duke’s cousin, who has just been presented to the King and Queen.”

“Ah, of course!” Lord Weatherly bowed as a wave of relief washed over Edmund, realizing now that the lady was with her brother rather than with any gentleman of note. “I did think to myself that I recognised you, though I was also certain that we

had not been acquainted beforehand, Your Grace. Now I realise that it was only because I saw you taking your cousin to be introduced.”

Lady Lillian blinked and then looked in surprise to her brother. “You were in the room during my presentation?”

“Of course I was, little sister,” came the reply, the camaraderie between them making Edmund smile. He turned to Edmund, spreading out one hand and lifting his shoulders lightly. “I surprised my sister by my arrival, Your Grace, only a short while before coming to the museum.”

“Ah, now I understand,” Edmund answered, seeing how Lady Lillian smiled. “I did not think that there had been mention of you when I was first acquainted with your family, Lord Weatherly. Your sister will not have had time to tell you as to how our acquaintance came about, then? It was the most extraordinary circumstance and, had your sister not given us the aid we required, I am sure that we would still be stuck in the mud by the inn!”

Lord Weatherly’s eyebrows lifted and he looked to his sister, who had begun to blush furiously. “A story I shall look forward to hearing, I think.” He smiled at her, then looked back to Edmund. “Might you wish to walk with my sister for a time? You will find that the museum holds a great many interests for her, as it does for me. I do believe it has been one of our favourite places to visit in London these last few years!”

“I should be glad to,” Edmund answered, offering Lady Lillian his arm without hesitation and, with a sharp look to her brother, she did accept it. “You have been to London before this year, Lady Lillian?”

She nodded, as Edmund began to move to the right of the room, though Lord Weatherly remained where he was. “My brother came to London for two Seasons in

order to search for a bride and I was permitted to come with him and my parents, though I was not out in society, of course.”

“I see. And you enjoy parading around the museum?”

“Oh, I find it the most wonderful place!” she exclaimed, enthusiasm flooding her voice. “Do not you? To know that so many remarkable things have been created before we even walked this earth is quite astonishing. And I do very much like to hear of the latest inventions and the like, for the process such people go through in order to achieve their goal is remarkable and is, to my mind, worth applauding.”

“I quite agree,” Edmund murmured, half wondering if he ought to reveal to her that he himself was something of an inventor. The moment that thought came, however, he recalled how his father had broken into the room when he had been speaking with his uncle and that thought snapped in half and broke away. No, he could not say such a thing, not as yet. He did not know the lady well enough to do so for, even if she did admire inventions and the like, he did not know what she might think of a gentleman being involved in such things.

“Is Lady Dinah glad that her presentation is over?” Lady Lillian asked, changing the topic of conversation and looking up at him as she did so, her honey brown eyes softening. “I know that she was dreadfully nervous.”

Edmund’s heart warmed at her consideration. “She is quite relieved, yes.” His light smile faded as he recalled the tears that had come into her eyes. “Though... ” With a slight frown, he glanced away. “I do think she was a little upset over some thing, but it may just have been relief.”

“Upset?” Lady Lillian’s hand tightened on his arm and Edmund kicked himself for speaking so plainly. The lady did not need to know that Dinah had been upset. There had been no reason for him to say anything at all and, indeed, Dinah might well have

wished for that to remain quiet, given that she had told him that she was quite all right.

“I did not mean to say that,” he said, hastily. “It was only that she appeared a little sorrowful but assured me that she was quite well. She did not want to speak of whatever troubled her.”

“I see.” Lady Lillian let out a soft sigh. “No doubt she will be sorrowful over the fact that her brother was absent from such a momentous occasion. Her father has passed away, yes? But her mother?”

“Her mother is a little unwell and taking sea air,” Edmund answered slowly, realizing the wisdom in what Lady Lillian had said, “though I think she is recovering. She did want to come to London but Dinah insisted that she did not, that she remain and continue her recovery.”

“And though I am sure that she is grateful for both yourself and your mother’s care of her, there must still be some pain there.” Lady Lillian glanced up at him again, then flushed. “Forgive me, I do not mean to speak out of turn. I do care for Lady Dinah and we have become friends rather quickly, I will say, though I have only been surmising as to her pain. She has not said anything specific to me, you understand.”

“I do.” Edmund smiled at her. “You are quite right, I think. I had not thought of that before but now that you have spoken of it, I can see the wisdom in what you are saying. Yes, no doubt she will be feeling a little sad that her brother nor her mother are present with her at her presentation to the King and Queen.”

“And the reason she did not want to say anything to you is to make certain she does not hurt you nor injure you, fearing that her sadness could make you feel as though what you have provided is not enough.” With a small shrug, Lady Lillian smiled briefly. “Though, again, I am only surmising.”

“But you are considerate in ways that I am not,” Edmund told her, thinking all the more highly of the lady. “Of course that all makes perfect sense to me now that you have said it! I will return home and have my mother speak to her about it all.”

Alarm jumped into Lady Lillian’s expression. “Please, do not say that I was the one who suggested it! I do not want her to think that I have been talking ill of her.”

Edmund smiled. “I do not think that she would even imagine that for a moment though I shall do as you ask. My mother will speak gently about the absence of her brother and mother, simply in the hope of comforting her before the ball this evening.” A sudden idea came to him and he paused in his walk, looking down at Lady Lillian. “I must hope that you are to be dancing this evening, Lady Lillian?”

Her eyes widened just a little. “Yes, I am.”

“Then might you be willing to save me one of your dances? It can be whichever one is your favourite and I shall come in search of you this evening to discover which one it is.”

She looked at him for a few moments before agreeing, a small hint of a smile at her lips though it did not spread all the way up to her eyes. Had he surprised her by his request? Had he astonished her by his forwardness that she was now a little taken aback? A flush of heat began to inch its way up Edmund’s spine but he refused to let it take a hold of him, telling himself inwardly that he had done nothing wrong by asking her such a thing. It was an expression of gratitude, of consideration given what she had offered him in advising about his cousin. “Wonderful. I look forward to the ball this evening all the more.” Seeing Lord Weatherly return, Edmund stepped back and released Lady Lillian’s arm, a little relieved that he was able to step away before he embarrassed himself by attempting to explain his reasons for asking her to dance.

“I should take my sister back home.” Lord Weatherly inclined his head. “But I

presume you are attending the ball this evening?"

"Yes, I am."

Lord Weatherly smiled. "Then I look forward to being introduced to your mother and to your niece. Good afternoon, Your Grace."

"Good afternoon," Edmund murmured, before smiling at Lady Lillian. "A pleasure to speak with you again, Lady Lillian. Good afternoon to you too."

She smiled and Edmund's heart leapt though he quietened it immediately. "Good afternoon, Your Grace. Please do tell Lady Dinah that I am ready to step beside her the moment she enters the ballroom, so she has nothing to worry about."

"I shall." Still touched by her consideration, Edmund bowed again. "In fact, I shall return home and do so this very moment. Thank you, Lady Lillian, for everything."

"It was just as you had suggested, my dear."

Edmund looked up as his mother came back into the drawing room, her face one of sympathy. "Oh?"

"I have just finished speaking with Dinah and yes, her upset is over the absence of both her brother and her mother. I can quite understand that and reassured her that we did not and would not think badly of such an expression of sorrow."

"No, indeed not," Edmund murmured, rubbing one hand over his chin. "Though I should confess that it was not I who had that thought, Mother. I was speaking to someone else and mentioned how sorrowful Dinah had appeared after her

introduction to the King and Queen – though I did not mean to, I will admit – and that suggestion was made.”

Alarm jumped into the Duchess’ expression. “I do hope that this person can be trusted and that they will not think badly of Dinah!”

Edmund smiled. “There is no concern there, Mother, I can assure you. It was spoken out of concern and I am glad that it was shared, for it has meant an excellent conversation between Dinah and yourself.”

The Duchess nodded and sank down into a chair, looking rather fatigued. “It has been a very long day for her and there is yet more to come!”

A little concerned for his mother and her lack of strength, Edmund frowned and sat forward in his chair. “Mother, if you would prefer to rest this evening, then I would be content to take Dinah to the ball.”

His mother smiled and shook her head. “I will be quite all right, once I have had some time to rest. Dinah is being prepared now for the ball and I shall sit here for a time until I must go to change also.” With a sigh, she rested her head back against the chair and closed her eyes. “The start of the Season is always a busy time.” Her head lifted suddenly as she pointed one finger at Edmund’s chest. “And are you going to seek out Lady Vivianne?”

A scowl darkened Edmund’s face. “That is not something that I have any desire to discuss, Mother. I have already informed you that my intention is to do so but I want to first see Dinah through her first ball.”

“I know that she is present here in London,” his mother replied quickly, as though she had not heard him. “It was told to me by Lady Denfield, whom I saw only this morning. She stated that Lord and Lady Kent had come to London with their

daughter for her Season, though she could not recall whether the lady had made her debut last Season or if this was to be her come out. I fully expect them to be present this evening.”

“Indeed.” Edmund said nothing more than that, his stomach clenching and his heart thudding rather furiously as he thought about what it would be like to meet the young lady his father had so eagerly wanted him to marry. Mayhap she nor her family would be aware of that hope, however, in which case, Edmund would have to decide whether or not he would follow what his father had desired for him. But if she was aware of it, then Edmund felt himself obliged to consider very strongly engaging himself to the lady. It would be nothing more than an obligation, doing as his late father had wanted and not because he himself desired it, but given that he was a gentleman of purpose and understanding of responsibility, Edmund shouldered that burden regardless of his own feelings.

Though, he admitted silently, he had been avoiding even thinking of Lady Vivianne these last few days, doing his best to push away what he knew he would have to do.

“You will speak to her if she is there, will you not?”

Edmund let out a huff of breath and turned, glaring at his mother. “Mother, please. I told you of what was in father’s will so that you would know of it, not because I wanted you to push me to do as he asked. Believe me when I tell you that I understand the responsibility I have here, it is only that I do not want to be pushed into it.”

His mother looked away, a slight pinch in her lips.

“I do not intend to upset you, but please understand how big a decision this is for me,” Edmund continued, when she continued to look away. “You must know that there is a heavy weight upon my shoulders with this. I had always presumed to find

my own bride and never once did I imagine that father would encourage me to marry one particular lady. Indeed, I am surprised that he never mentioned her to me before, for though I knew that Lord Kent and he were very close friends, Lady Vivianne was never mentioned. Neither did we ever meet and I am astonished by that also.”

“It may be that something happened to make your father consider such a thing,” the Duchess answered, looking back at him. “I do not think that he determined that you ought to marry the lady, otherwise he would have made that very clear in his will, I imagine.” She shook her head and sighed. “He did not mention it to me either, so I cannot be of any aid to you there. Though what I will say is that I would encourage you to carefully consider, once you meet the lady. Even if there is an expectation, recall that you are not forced to wed her.”

Edmund blew out a frustrated breath, pushing one hand through his hair as he shook his head. “Mother, I do not understand you. One moment, you tell me that I must do all that I can as regards Lady Vivianne and the next, you state that I must consider carefully and have no requirement to marry her! I do not know what I should trust!”

With a small smile, his mother tilted her head. “I want you only to fulfill your responsibilities, that is all and, by going to see the lady and hearing if there is any sort of expectation there, you shall be doing that. Whether you fulfill that expectation, however, is not required.”

Trying to understand, Edmund shook his head again. “I see.”

“She may be very beautiful and you might find yourself quite in love with her after a moment’s glance,” the Duchess suggested, lifting her shoulders and offering Edmund a twinkling smile. “Then all shall be well and you will find yourself quite contented.”

For whatever reason, Edmund’s thoughts immediately returned to Lady Lillian and, though he smiled, inwardly he found himself rebelling against that particular idea.

Lady Vivianne might be the most beautiful lady in all of London, he considered, but if she did not have a sharp mind such as Lady Lillian had, then Edmund would not be drawn to her in the same way. Of that, he was quite certain.

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“Mama? Might I ask you something?”

Lillian caught the way that concern ripped through her mother’s expression and smiled quickly so as to reassure her.

“You can, though might I ask if it is to be about the ball? You are prepared, are you not? Is there anything troubling you?”

“No, there is nothing troubling me and yes, I am quite prepared, as you can see.” She twirled around once and then spread out her hands, looking to her mother for her approval and Lady Galesbury was quick to give it.

“Forgive me, my dear, I ought to have told you how very fine you look.” Lady Galesbury hurried towards Lillian, grasping her hands in her own. “This is to be your first ball of the Season and I am sure that you will capture the attention of many a gentleman.”

Lillian smiled. “I thank you, Mama.”

“Now.” Lady Galesbury’s smile wobbled. “What was it you wished to ask me?”

Lillian pressed her lips together for a moment, then took in a breath. “The Duke of Wrexham has asked me to save him a dance this evening, by way of thanking me for... well, for some insight I gave him when we met unexpectedly today at the museum.” She watched her mother’s eyes widen slightly, before a smile spread right across her face. “I do not know what I should do. He has suggested that I save my favourite dance from the evening and keep it for him but I do not know what I ought

to do in that regard.”

“My goodness, but that is quite wonderful!” her mother exclaimed, pressing Lillian’s hands tightly again. “You have been singled out by the Duke of Wrexham! How wonderful! You must, of course, choose the waltz.”

“The waltz?” Lillian exclaimed, her hands pulling from her mother’s and pressing them to her cheeks instead as she recoiled, shaking her head fervently. “No, I cannot. It is much too forward, much too impolite! Besides, not every debutante will have been given permission to waltz.”

“But you have been.” Her mother smiled warmly, clearly not in the least bit perturbed by Lillian’s concern. “My dear, you must grasp a hold of this opportunity! It is the Duke of Wrexham, is it not? You must take a hold of every chance offered to you, for if he has taken notice of you already for your kind words or your advice or whatever it was, then he might now take notice of you as a beautiful young lady whom he then goes on to hold in his arms for a time. Would that not be pleasant?”

Lillian could not deny that the thought of that was a very delightful one indeed, though she did not let a single word of acknowledgement come out of her mouth. “But he might also think that I was much too forward for a young lady,” Lillian answered, seeing how her mother’s smile faded. “What then? What if he should never wish to dance with me again because he thinks poorly of me for asking for that particular dance.”

At this, Lady Galesbury frowned. “Yes, I suppose that is a consideration. I had not given that a thought before now but yes... yes, I can see that it might be a concern.” She took in a deep breath and then sighed. “Perhaps you are right. Shall you ask him, mayhap, for the country dance? Then mayhap, in a few days or weeks, the waltz will be offered to you by the Duke himself rather than you demanding it of him.”

“Precisely.” Lillian smiled with relief. “Then you think that the country dance would suit me well?” That had been the question she had been eager to ask her mother from the very beginning and now to get the answer brought her a good deal of comfort.

“Yes, I think that would do very well. Though you will need to write his name on your dance card before you arrive, so that the other gentlemen who will be sure to ask you to dance do not steal it from him.” Lady Galesbury smiled again, pressing Lillian’s hand. “How wonderful it is to think that you will be dancing with a Duke! And he who knows how quickly your mind works and the interest you have in numbers and the like. That is a good thing, for it means that he is not dissuaded by it.”

Lillian’s lips curved gently. “Yes, I suppose that it does,” she said, softly. “Thank you, Mama. I am looking forward to the ball a great deal.” Ignoring the kick of nervousness in her stomach, she took in a deep breath and, with a nod from her mother, turned towards the door.

“Thank you, Lady Greenock.” Lillian curtsied and then stepped away from the receiving line, following after her mother into the ballroom. Lord and Lady Greenock’s ball was one of the most notable events of the Season, for their ball always drew the greatest number of debutantes and, therefore, as many as were invited, came to join the party. The ballroom swelled with noise, the heat catching Lillian’s throat as she took in the scene. This was nothing more than a crush of bodies and from where she was standing, Lillian could not see even the smallest amount of space for dancing.

Her stomach twisted and she took in a slow breath in an attempt to push away her anxiety. However was she to be seen or noticed by any gentleman in a place like this?

“Oh, Lady Lillian, I have been looking for your arrival!”

An eager voice caught Lillian’s attention and she turned, only for Lady Dinah to grasp her hands, her eyes wide with the same concern that Lillian felt deep within her own heart.

“Good evening, Lady Dinah. Goodness, I do not think that I have ever seen such a great number of people present!”

Lady Dinah laughed but it was a tight, harsh sound that betrayed her fears. “I feel lost already and I have not even stepped out any further into the ballroom! The Duke and his mother are, of course, caught up with people eager to greet them though I have been glad to stay back. It is quite overwhelming, is it not?”

Lillian nodded. “It is.” She made to say more, only for the Duke to turn his head and catch her eye and, after a moment, came to join them, his eyes never leaving hers.

A flurry of anticipation wound itself around Lillian’s heart. “Good evening, Your Grace.” She dropped into a curtsy as the gentleman bowed. “I was just telling Lady Dinah that I did not think that I had ever seen the like before!”

The Duke chuckled. “I have seen a little more than this in one ballroom – such as in Almacks – but yes, this is very busy indeed. But it is also the first ball of the Season and it is expected to be very busy. A good many debutantes will be here and all of the gentlemen are present simply to see the debutantes!”

Lillian flushed, looking away as a sudden heat rushed through her, though she did not know why. “I suppose that is true,” she murmured, letting her gaze rove over the room. “I do not think that I can see even where we are to dance!”

“Ah yes, of course,” the Duke said quickly, making Lillian’s face burn with heat all

the more as she saw his grin. "I had not forgotten about our dance, Lady Lillian. What dance is it that you have saved for me?"

Lillian forced her gaze back towards him. "I did not mean to remind you of it. My comment was only to – "

"No, no I quite understand." The Duke's kind smile reassured her. "But I should like to know, all the same. I have been looking forward to stepping out with you."

"Then, the country dance?" Lillian asked, a little surprised at how timid she felt. "If that is not too much trouble, of course."

A broad smile spread right across the Duke's face. "I very much enjoy the country dance so that is an excellent choice. I shall write it down at this very moment." He pulled out his own piece of paper and wrote down her name in that space and Lillian's nervousness, much to her surprise, began to grow with a great strength rather than fading. "I am sure that you will have the rest of your dance card filled very soon."

Lillian managed to smile and nod, wondering why she suddenly felt so ill at ease. Was she truly that nervous about stepping out to dance with the Duke? Or was this simply because this was her first ball of the Season?

"I am sure you shall both have your dance cards full," the Duke continued, his voice a little softer now as he looked to his cousin. "Dinah is a little anxious, Lady Lillian, and I am sure she will not mind me informing you of that."

"Because I am already aware of it," Lillian answered, linking arms with Lady Dinah again, "and you know that I feel much the same!"

Lady Dinah smiled though her eyes held a little sadness. "Indeed, though with it

comes some sadness that my own brother and my mother are not present with me this evening. I felt it after I made my presentation to the royal family very strongly – and the Duchess talked to me about it thereafter – so I am afraid that you may find me a little melancholy this evening.”

Lillian offered her a sympathetic smile, aware of the Duke’s gaze resting on her. “I can understand why you might be feeling so, though I am glad that you have been able to share those feelings with the Duke and his mother. I shall also do my very best to make certain that you have a most enjoyable evening and smile a great deal.”

This made Lady Dinah smile and Lillian looked back to the Duke. “Mayhap your cousin and I could take a short walk about the room together?”

“Of course.” The Duke nodded to his cousin. “And do try not to worry, my dear. I am sure that you will have a wonderful evening, regardless of whether or not you dance every dance!”

“I quite agree,” Lillian murmured, turning and leading her friend away. “I am sorry to hear that you are a little sad about missing your brother and your mother. That must be a great trial for you.”

Lady Dinah sighed as they walked through the growing crowd, their steps slow and careful. “My mother is taking the sea air to recover from a malady and though she made it very clear that she desired to come to London, I would not accept it. Not when she has just begun to recover!”

“And your brother?” Lillian asked, hoping that her friend would not think her too forward. “I think you told me that he has gone to France?”

Her friend nodded. “One of the many countries he has visited, I think. It is the Great Adventure, you see, so he will be going to various places and exploring a good many

things and I would not want to pull him away from that.”

“Though he knew that this was the Season for you to make your debut?”

Lady Dinah nodded but Lillian frowned, wondering why Lord Fullerton had thought not to return to London to make certain he was present for his sister’s come out instead of lingering in France or whatever other country he was in. Surely Lady Dinah was worth the trouble! To her mind, this did not make her think particularly well of the gentleman, for though he was on the Great Adventure, did he not also have a responsibility towards Dinah? Instead, it seemed, he had pushed her onto the arm of the Duke of Wrexham and his mother, evidently quite contented to give his responsibilities to another. But, Lillian considered, as she walked, that does make me think all the better of the Duke of Wrexham himself.

“ Lillian, there you are.” A hand tapped her shoulder and, hearing her brother’s familiar voice, Lillian turned to see him frowning hard, though he did come to stand beside her.

“Yes, as you see,” she said, slowly, wondering why her brother appeared to be so distressed. “What is wrong?”

Her brother shook his head. “Nothing, nothing at all. It is only that I have come to find the ballroom so filled with people, I do not think that I will be able to dance with a single young lady for they are all too packed together and, even if I was to write my name on a dance card, it would take me all of my time to go and find the lady again. I – ” He stopped dead, his eyes now lingering in Lady Dinah who, Lillian realized, had said and done nothing since her brother’s unexpected arrival.

“Oh, forgive me!” she exclaimed, gesturing to Lady Dinah. “This is my brother, Lord Weatherly. Harry, this is my dear friend, Lady Dinah, daughter to the late Lord Fullerton. The Duke of Wrexham, whom you met this afternoon, is her chaperone for

the Season.”

“An honour to meet you.” Harry bowed low, then took a step closer to Lady Dinah as she rose from her curtsy. “So you must be the young lady that my sister has been talking about so often! I have not been present to hear it but my parents inform me that she is often talking about you. How pleasant to hear that you have both struck up a friendship!”

“Indeed.” Lady Dinah smiled warmly and, much to Lillian’s surprise, took a small step closer to her brother. “Have you often been in London? This cannot be your first Season since I know that your sister has only just made her debut.”

“You are quite correct. I have been in London for some Seasons before this one but this Season has been the first where I have been able to be out in society with my sister.”

“How lovely.” Lady Dinah smiled only for Harry’s eyes to light up.

“I am to dance with my sister this evening, of course, given that it is customary to do so. Might I enquire as to whether or not you intend to dance this evening, Lady Dinah? I should like very much to ask for your dance card also.”

Lillian watched with interest as Lady Dinah took her dance card from her wrist with great haste and then offered it to Harry, who took it with a smile of his own. Thus far, Harry had not spoken a word to her about dancing together though she was glad to hear that he would do so. All the same, Lillian could not help but wonder if the reason for her brother’s statement that they would do so had come about simply because of his desire to dance with Lady Dinah. She hid a smile as her brother handed the dance card back to Dinah and then looked back at her, her eyebrows lifting in question.

Her brother cleared his throat. "What dance did we settle on, Lillian?"

The smile she had been trying to hide spread right across her face. "Dance, brother?"

From the flare of his eyes and the way his lips pressed together, Lillian could tell that he was silently begging her not to embarrass him and, with a chuckle, she spread out her hands, choosing not to torture him. "Was it not the quadrille?"

"Yes, yes, the quadrille." Harry let out a breath, then grinned at her, though his face was flushed. "And you and I have the country dance, Lady Dinah."

"Oh." Lillian's exclamation caught both her brother and Lady Dinah's attention. "It seems that I shall be dancing with your cousin, Lady Dinah, while you dance with my brother!"

Lady Dinah's eyes twinkled. "A very happy coincidence indeed."

For whatever reason, the nervousness which Lillian had felt in seeing the Duke sign her dance card had only increased as the time drew near. The ball had been going well thus far, with her dance card slowly filling and many new introductions and acquaintances made, but now, knowing that the announcement was soon to be made for the country dance, Lillian felt as though every part of her was trembling. Why ever should she feel this way? She had already danced with Harry, thereafter with Lord Montague and after that, Lord Darlington and she had not felt in the least bit concerned then, so why was she so anxious now? She swallowed at the lump in her throat, praying that the Duke would not notice her nervousness, only for her brother to come alongside her and nudge her lightly.

"Are you quite all right?"

“Yes.” Lillian looked at him. “If you are looking for Lady Dinah, she is standing only a short distance away.” Her eyes flickered as she saw her brother smile. “You seemed to be quite taken with her when you were first introduced.”

Her brother’s gaze instantly pulled away from Lady Dinah and instead returned to Lillian. “Taken with her?”

“Yes.” Lillian smiled. “It is quite all right to state that you find a young lady of quality to be both beautiful and intriguing, brother. I do not think that I have seen you look at anyone with such an interest before! And Lady Dinah is quite lovely... though she is a friend of mine now and I must insist that you take the greatest care.”

Harry frowned. “I am not about to ask her to court, Lillian.”

“I am not suggesting that you are,” Lillian laughed, “but only to say that if you find yourself interested in her, you must be very cautious and careful in your thoughts for I do not want to see her upset. She is upset enough already.” Her smile faded as she spoke though Harry took a step closer, his brows furrowing.

“She is upset?” he asked, as Lillian looked back at him. “What is the source of her distress?”

Her heart softened. “The Duke is her chaperone, because her father has passed away, her brother – the new Lord Fullerton – is absent due to being on the Great Adventure and her mother has been unwell and is taking sea air. I believe that she is recovering and did want to come to London, though Lady Dinah begged her not to do so, so that she might recover completely. I know that she misses her, however.”

Harry nodded slowly, his gaze returning to Lady Dinah. “A most considerate young lady, then.”

“I think so, yes.”

“And the Duke?” Harry asked, turning his attention back to Lillian, his eyes twinkling suddenly. “He walked with you at the museum and now he is to dance with you?”

Despite her determination not to give in to her brother’s teasing, heat wound its way up Lillian’s spine and rushed into her neck and cheeks. “The Duke of Wrexham is simply a gentleman, that is all,” she said, though her brother chuckled. “Pray, do not jest with me, Weatherly. I am already a little nervous about dancing with him.”

All laughter left her brother’s face. “But why should you be?”

“Because he is a Duke! And because everyone will be watching me and I am afraid I shall either put a foot wrong or speak to the Duke so foolishly due to my nervousness, that he will think me utterly ridiculous.”

Harry smiled and caught her hand for a moment. “Do not fear, I am sure you will do very well indeed. Father told me about what you did to help the Duke’s carriage and it is clear to me that the Duke thinks highly of you. I would not ignore his interest, Lillian.” His head tipped and he scrutinized her. “I should say that you are a little interested in the Duke in return, are you not?”

“Do not speak foolishness,” Lillian hissed, squeezing her brother’s hand in order to silence him, fearful that others nearby would hear him. “I have only just become acquainted with him and – ”

“And yet, all the same, one can feel a connection to another that one did not expect, is that not so?” her brother interrupted quietly, though his eyes darted to where Lady Dinah stood, giving Lillian pause. “Do not be afraid of what you might feel, Lillian.” He smiled and took his hand from hers. “It might be the happiest Season you have

ever known... mayhap for the both of us. One can never tell!"

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Edmund smiled at Lady Lillian as she came back towards him, the dance having taken them away from each other for a short time. He had been looking forward to this dance all evening, though he had made certain to dance with others also. It would not be right for him to only dance with Dinah and with Lady Lillian for that would bring both her – and him – unwelcome attention from the ton . After a few more steps, the dance came to a close and, aware of the slight disappointment which drifted over him, Edmund bowed and then offered his arm to Lady Lillian so he might lead her from the floor.

“A very pleasant dance, I thank you,” he said, smiling down at her and delighting in the happiness which sparkled in her eyes. “Now, shall we take a turn about the room before I return you to your brother? Look, he strolls with Dinah, thus we may pursue their path, and all shall be well.” His heart leapt when she nodded, finding himself thrilled to be able to spend a little more time in her company.

“Do you enjoy balls and the like?” Lady Lillian asked, looking around her. “I have not attended many, I confess, though I did come along to some that my brother went to when we were here during his London Seasons. That was before he took on his estate, however.”

Edmund hesitated, wondering if he ought to be honest with her or give her the answer that she might otherwise expect. “I – I find that I am not always enamoured with the idea of being in company,” he said, after a few moments. “There are times where I very much enjoy my own company and my own thoughts.”

She smiled and Edmund’s worry that she would think badly of him because of such a remark quickly fled. “I can understand that. My brother would often jest with me

because I would prefer to work through my father's ledger rather than go into the village and look at ribbons with the other young ladies." Her smile shattered in a moment, her eyes rounding as she looked up at him again, then dragged her gaze away. "I know that is not what you might expect from a young lady such as myself but – "

"I think that a fine thing," Edmund said quickly, seeing now that her concern came from worrying that he would think her love of such a thing to be improper for a young lady. "Your father must have had a great trust in you to permit you to do such a precious thing as that. You say he gave you his ledger?"

Another darting glance from the lady came towards him, followed by a small nod.

"What did he ask of you?"

She blinked, pressed her lips together and then spoke. "He had me go through the ledgers to see if there were any errors. If there were, then I would correct them."

"Goodness!" Surprise lifted his voice. "That is extraordinary! And you enjoyed this?"

Lady Lillian smiled for the first time since they had begun this part of the conversation. "I was delighted that he asked me the first time and, since then, I have done the ledgers regularly. I greatly enjoy arithmetic especially, though I am interested in all learned things."

"You must be a great boon to your father and mother," Edmund answered, seeing how her smile grew just a little. "That is a gift, Lady Lillian, a gift that I do not possess in the same way. Often times, when I am struggling to find a solution to a problem, I cannot do so because my calculations are wrong. It is only when I have corrected them, through much checking and considering, that I am then able to find the right answer."

“I see.” Lady Lillian caught the edge of her lip in between her teeth as though she wanted to ask something but was holding it back. Edmund waited in silence, praying that she would do so for this growing intimacy between them, this trust which he felt improving with every moment, was thrilling him. “Might I ask what sort of calculations you do and for what purpose you do them, Your Grace?”

The smile on Edmund’s face crashed to the floor as he frowned. Did he dare tell her about his inventions? About the times that he sat in his study and considered, the experiments and tests that he had undertaken? He did not know what she would make of a gentleman such as he being involved in such things... but, he reminded himself, she had been considerate enough to speak with him about her interest in arithmetic and mathematics, so why could he not do the same also?

“I delight in natural philosophy,” he told her, his words coming out in a bit of a rush. “I enjoy trying to find solutions to different problems. It came from my uncle, Lady Dinah’s father, who was forever doing such things and, though not everything he did was successful, what he did achieve made a great difference to others. For example, he was able to prevent fields from flooding. He was involved in the improvement of the mines and those who work within them and he also was looking into the preservation of food, particularly for those who struggle with poverty.”

Lady Lillian’s eyes rounded at the edges. “That is remarkable,” she said, making Edmund smile warmly at her, relieved that he had not only chosen to speak honestly but that her response had been so kind. “And you say that you are continuing in that same interest? What are you thinking on at present?”

Edmund considered. “Well, my mother has insisted that I set aside such thoughts for the time being given that I am in London but I have not promised her that I shall give it up entirely,” he told the lady, seeing her smile. “At present, I am considering which plants might bring the best to the crops during the harvest, using crop rotation. I do not know if you are aware of that practice – many are not – but I have studied the

evidence and think it might well be an excellent idea.”

“I do know of it, yes,” Lady Lillian answered. “It is a four year system instead of a three year system.”

“Yes, that is exactly right!” Edmund exclaimed, thinking to himself just how remarkable the young lady was. “I am also considering whether planting crops in a particular fashion might provide better results rather than simply flinging the seeds out into the field. There are many others who are involved in these things but we are writing to one another and considering the findings that each of us come up with.” He laughed a little wryly, shaking his head. “To some, it may not have any real interest but for me, I can assure you that I find it utterly fascinating.”

Lady Lillian laughed along with him, her eyes dancing. “I can assure you that I understand that feeling entirely, for it is exactly as I feel as regards my interests.”

“Though you, mayhap, all the more so given that you are a lady and such interests are generally not tolerated within our society,” Edmund said, as she nodded. “I can assure you that I do not think lesser of you for such a thing, Lady Lillian. Instead, I positively encourage it!”

She smiled at him and opened her mouth to say more, only for someone to touch Edmund’s elbow and, with a murmur of apology, he turned to see a gentleman he did not recognize standing to one side, a lady on his arm. Edmund blinked, looking to the lady and then to the gentleman again, waiting for something to come to him, something which would remind him of the gentleman’s name but nothing did.

“Your Grace?”

Edmund nodded, Lady Lillian still on his arm.

“You do not recall being acquainted,” the gentleman said, inclining his head. “That does not matter, it was some time ago.”

“I must apologise for that, then,” Edmund answered, quickly, not wanting to be in the least bit rude. “I am introduced to so many people within society, it can be rather difficult to recall everyone.” He smiled at the lady but her blue eyes were cold, her thin lips flattened and her fair hair adding to the sense of cold which emanated from her.

Edmund frowned. Had he done something wrong to this family and was now upsetting them all the more by his forgetfulness?

“I am Lord Kent,” the gentleman said, bowing low. “Formally Lord Jedburgh. We were known to each other at Eton for a time.”

At that name, Edmund’s heart slammed hard into his chest just as his stomach lurched, making him feel a little nauseated. He wanted to drop Lady Lillian’s arm and tell her to take her leave of him but he could not, not without appearing to be dreadfully rude.

“Lord Jedburgh,” he said, a little hoarsely, bowing now. “Of course. It has been many years and I must apologise for forgetting you.”

“It is quite understandable,” the gentleman answered, gesturing to the lady next to him – the one that Edmund presumed was his sister. “Now, might I present to you my sister, Lady Vivianne?”

Edmund bowed again, his heart pounding now, his mouth going dry as he wondered as to the purpose of their eagerness to come in search of him. “Lady Vivianne. A pleasure to be introduced to you. Might I also introduce my acquaintance, Lady Lillian?” As the introductions and pleasantries were exchanged, Edmund took a

moment to gather himself, his whole body burning with a nervous energy. Again, he wondered if he could step away from Lady Lillian or ask her brother to, somehow, take her from his arm but there was no feasible way for him to do so. Whatever Lord Jedburgh had come to say, Lady Lillian was going to hear it also. Edmund could only pray that the gentleman was going to be discreet.

“Your Grace.” Lord Jedburgh cleared his throat and lifted his chin a notch, being a little shorter than Edmund. “I do hope that you will ask my sister to dance? There is a connection between our families which I pray that you are already aware of?”

“I know that my father was close friends with yours,” Edmund answered, quickly. “In that regard, I should be very glad to dance with you, Lady Vivianne.”

“No, not only in that.” Lord Jedburgh stepped closer and looked directly at Edmund, his determination to speak clearly blazing in his eyes. “Your Grace, it was expected – both by my father and now by me – that you will, very soon, engage yourself to my sister and, in doing so, connect our families forever.”

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Lillian shook her head as she walked through Hyde Park, trying to rid herself of the memory of what had happened the previous evening. It had come as a great astonishment to her to learn that the Duke of Wrexham was all but betrothed to the young lady to whom he had only recently been introduced, though it had seemed to her discerning gaze that the Duke himself had been somewhat taken aback by the declarations made in his presence – which could very well be attributed to the temerity displayed by Lord Kent in addressing him with such audacity. Lillian had looked at Lady Vivianne as those words had been spoken, seeing neither delight or concern in her eyes, simply an acceptance that this was what was now to happen and Lillian had found her heart softening in sympathy, despite the shock which had run over her at the same time. Clearly, Lady Vivianne had been told that she had no other choice but to accept this and therefore, that was what she was doing whereas Lillian could not think of a life without freedom to choose her own path.

“It does not matter to me what the Duke of Wrexham does,” she told herself aloud, a few steps behind her mother and father, who were walking arm and arm through the park. That did not quite ring true, however, and Lillian scowled to herself, disliking the fact that she had been so quickly pulled towards the Duke of Wrexham. She had always thought that she would be sensible and considerate and yet, somehow, she had found herself in a position where after only a few conversations and one single dance, she was already thinking about him almost continually – and was, she admitted, deeply disappointed to learn that he was to become engaged. It was not a single moment of disappointment either but rather a long, pronounced feeling which would not remove itself from her no matter what she did. Thus far, she had taken tea with her parents in the morning after breaking her fast, had accepted some invitations to various events, had caught up with her correspondence, enjoyed luncheon with Harry and had then taken some morning calls before going out to the park with her parents

and, through all of that, she had not forgotten the Duke's engagement. Her heart had twisted this way and that every time she thought of it, just as it was doing now.

"Lillian?"

Lillian blinked and turned her head, looking into Harry's face. "Harry, I – I am sorry, I did not know you were coming to the park."

"I came in my own carriage," came the reply, though her brother's expression was a little concerned. "I have summoned you thrice, and yet you have not deigned to turn your gaze in my direction. Are you faring well?"

"Lost in thought only," Lillian answered, with a smile so as to put his mind at ease. "Have you come to the park in the hope of seeing anyone during the fashionable hour?"

Harry grinned at her, his eyes twinkling. "Mayhap."

Lillian paused, her eyebrows lifting. "Might it be that you hope to see Lady Dinah present?" she asked, thinking to herself that her brother appeared to be quite taken with the lady already, much as she was taken with the Duke of Wrexham so she certainly could not judge him for that. "You enjoyed your dance and your walk with her about the ballroom yesterday, I presume?"

"I did indeed." Harry's smile grew all the wider as he took Lillian's arm in his. "I confess that I thought Lady Dinah to be gracious, beautiful and kind-hearted and, what was all the more delightful was that she expressed a little of her sadness as regarded the absence of her brother."

Lillian frowned. "Delightful?"

“I mean, in that she felt willing to share that with me,” her brother replied, hastily. “Not that it was delightful that she felt herself so sorrowful, of course.”

“Of course,” Lillian agreed, laughing at him. “Brother, might I ask you a question?” Her smile faded as Harry nodded. “Do you think that you might consider courting Lady Dinah? That your feelings could become a good deal more serious?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because... because you have only just been introduced and you have only danced on one occasion,” Lillian answered, knowing that her question was more about her own feelings than that of her brother’s. “Could it be that feelings could develop so quickly and with genuine strength?”

Harry shrugged. “I do not know. I have never felt such a way before so I cannot tell you whether or not they are long lasting. But, for my part, I intend to call on Lady Dinah a good deal these next few weeks and, should my feelings sustain themselves, then I will ask to court her. I can see no reason why I should not do such a thing.” He looked at her for a long moment as they continued to walk together. “Can I ask you why you are enquiring about such a thing?”

Lillian shook her head. “There is no real reason, aside from the fact that I have never found myself in a position before where my emotions could be so easily pulled from one place to another. It is hard for me to distinguish what could be and what could not be real.”

“I see.” Harry did not sound convinced but much to Lillian’s relief, he did not say anything. Instead, they continued to walk in silence for some minutes and Lillian, her thoughts still heavy and swirling around her, let out a small sigh which seemed to course through her. Again, her brother looked at her but said nothing, letting her consider her thoughts without interruption.

I must be able to free myself from all that I feel, Lillian told herself, sternly. I cannot let my emotions linger, especially if he is engaged. That would be wrong, I think, so I must fight all that I feel and push it aside. Surely, after such a short acquaintance, it will not take me long to remove it from myself?

“Look!” Harry stopped suddenly, making Lillian jump in surprise. “Is that not Lady Dinah there?”

Lillian blinked, only to see the Duke of Wrexham looking back at them both, Lady Dinah on his arm. She went hot all over, then very cold indeed as she pulled her gaze away, wondering if he would soon have Lady Vivianne on his other arm.

“We must go and speak with them!” her brother exclaimed, half walking, half pulling Lillian towards them both. “Come now, Lillian. There is no need for tardiness!”

The reluctance that Lillian felt was mortifying and she lifted her chin, determined not to give into any angst or upset that might come to her simply from being in the Duke’s company. If he was not to be for her, then she would find another and there were plenty of gentlemen in London! There was bound to be someone who would catch her attention. All the same, despite her inward warring with herself, Lillian had to force a smile and, the closer she came to the Duke, the less she found herself able to look directly up at him.

“Your Grace, Lady Dinah, good afternoon!” Harry’s enthusiasm made up for her lacking and Lillian quickly bobbed a curtsy before smiling warmly at Dinah. “How pleasant to see you out this afternoon.”

“It is Dinah’s first fashionable hour,” the Duke said, glancing to his niece who nodded.

“And do you find it a little overwhelming?” Harry asked, before Lillian could say a

word. “There are not too many people here as yet but there are enough to make the park feel crowded. Just wait until there are so many carriages, the park cannot take any more and the crowd so vast, you could easily become lost should you take even one step away from the Duke!”

Lillian caught the flash of concern in Lady Dinah’s eyes and nudged her brother gently, who then cleared his throat and dropped his head for a moment.

“Though mayhap you might like to take a turn about the park before it becomes too crowded?” she asked, putting a smile on her face to reassure her friend. “You can always take your leave if you find it a little overwhelming.”

Lady Dinah nodded. “I should like that. Have you been to the fashionable hour before?”

“I have,” Lillian answered, gesturing to Harry. “We came to the London Season with my brother, prior to his taking on of his own estate. I was not out then, of course, though I was taken to the fashionable hour on occasion.” She dropped her hand back to her side. “If you should like to walk, then – ”

“I should like to take a short walk with you, Lady Dinah,” Harry interrupted, dropping Lillian’s arm and coming closer to Lady Dinah instead. “That is, if you consent – and if that is all right with your chaperone?” He looked to the Duke of Wrexham with obvious hope burning in his eyes but Lillian frowned, her own stomach lurching from one side to the other. Her brother had not only interrupted her but had also taken away her opportunity to spend some time with her friend, which she had been hoping for.

“I shall walk a little behind you both,” the Duke said, smiling a little ruefully. “It is not because I do not trust you, Lord Weatherly, but rather because I do not want to lose my cousin in the ever-growing crowd!” He turned to Lillian, his smile light but

his eyes a little shadowed. “Lady Lillian, might you wish to walk with me while your brother walks with my cousin?”

What was she to say? Was she to refuse him? To say that no, she would prefer to walk alone? Her heart quickened but the words that came out of her mouth were ones of consent and soon, despite her own uncertainty, she found herself arm in arm with the Duke of Wrexham.

She did not know what to say. Her mouth went dry and every time she dared a glance up at him, the Duke was frowning slightly, his brow furrowed and his mouth in a thin line. The easy conversation they had shared before and the ease of connection was gone, lost now in the strain of what had happened at the ball.

“Lady Lillian.” The Duke let out a sigh and clicked his tongue, his brow still in a heavy frown. “I should like to express my regret that you were present during that conversation with Lord Jedburgh and his sister, Lady Vivianne.”

“There is no need to apologise.” Lillian offered him a brief smile but then pulled her gaze away just as quickly. “It was not something that you could have been aware of.”

“No, indeed!” The exclamation from the Duke made Lillian’s eyebrows lift though she quickly forced all sense of surprise out of her expression. The Duke let out another breath and then ran one hand over his eyes before turning to her, his steps slowing to a stop. When his eyes found hers, Lillian snatched in a breath, seeing them now more vivid and intense than ever before.

“I am truly sorry for it was a strange conversation – even for myself – and to hear that, to be involved in that, must have been very unsettling indeed.”

“I will not pretend! I have to admit that I found it a little awkward,” Lillian told him, choosing to be truthful rather than pretend all was well. “I do hope that you did not

mind me stepping away as I did? I thought it best to leave you to discuss matters with Lord Jedburgh alone.”

The Duke shook his head. “No, of course not. I quite understand. I – I am only sorry that it happened.”

Lillian let herself study him, seeing how he looked away, how his jaw tightened and how his shoulders dropped. Was he displeased at what had happened? Was his supposed engagement to Lady Vivianne nothing more than an expectation put on him by another, something that he was entirely unaware of? If that was true, then did she have a little hope still? Hope that he might not be attached after all?

“I do not mean to pry but are you quite all right?” she asked, a little tentatively. “You do not appear to be quite yourself, Your Grace.”

He looked at her and then closed his eyes. “Forgive me, Lady Lillian. I am not very good company. Last evening startled me, though I knew that...” He trailed off, looking at her as though he was not certain that he could tell her what he desired to speak of. Lillian swallowed but said nothing, making certain to keep her gaze steady so that he knew that she was willing to listen but, at the same time, quite willing to end the conversation if he desired it.

“I knew that there might be a connection between Lady Vivianne and myself,” he said, eventually. “My father stated it in his will, though the decision will be mine.” He winced. “Mayhap I ought not to be sharing with you in such an open fashion, Lady Lillian. Pray, tell me to cease speaking if you desire it.”

“I am quite willing to listen to you, Your Grace,” she answered quickly, as they began walking again. “Though do not feel that you are obliged to.”

He chuckled though it sounded a little dark. “It is a strange connection we have, Lady

Lillian. We are not very well acquainted as yet but still, I sense a strength of intimacy between us. Mayhap it is because your mind works in the same way as mine, what with your love of arithmetic and the like, but I do feel as though I can speak openly with you.” He glanced at her and then shrugged. “My father suggested in his will that I might consider marriage to Lady Vivianne for she is the daughter of his very dear friend. I came to London knowing that I would have to seek out the lady and speak with her and her family to ascertain what, if anything, was the expectation there but I certainly did not expect there to be any sort of demands, such as I found from Lord Jedburgh!”

“I see.” A slight tremor ran through Lillian’s frame though she prayed that the Duke himself had not felt it. “Then you must decide if you are to pursue the connection.”

“Yes, though my first priority is to Dinah, of course.” The Duke smiled, his gaze going to where Dinah and Harry were walking, seeing Dinah laugh up into Harry’s face. “But that may not be as long a concern as I first thought.”

Lillian’s heart softened. “My brother is genuine in his consideration of your cousin, Your Grace,” she said, hoping that the Duke did not think that Harry might be some sort of rake. “He and I were speaking of such things shortly before we joined you and I know that his intentions are to call upon her very often before considering the future. I believe he wishes to make certain that his interest and his feelings are genuine given that there has only been a very short acquaintance between the two of them.”

“A very wise consideration though I do believe that sometimes, a brief connection can be all that is required.” The Duke cleared his throat a little gruffly and then looked away, as Lillian’s face flushed, wondering if he spoke of her or if she was simply hopeful that he was. “Thank you for your understanding as regarded Lord Jedburgh and Lady Vivianne, Lady Lillian. Any other young lady might have been deeply shocked at being included in part of such a conversation and might have gone

on to demand an apology from either myself or from Lord Jedburgh! I am relieved that you have not required that for while I would not have been in the least bit concerned in apologising to you profusely, I do not think that Lord Jedburgh would have been as amenable.”

“You do not know him well, then?” Seeing how the gentleman frowned, Lillian searched his face for a moment as he looked back at her, taking in the way his blue eyes darkened a little.

“No, I am not. It seems a little strange, does it not? My father was a very close friend of Lord Kent and has encouraged a match between us in his will but, while he was alive, the family did not often spend much time with us. I believe I was acquainted with Lady Vivianne at one point but I do not recall it. Lord Jedburgh stated that we have been introduced but I confess that I do not recall it. So, in answer to your question, Lady Lillian, I do not know the family very well at all and certainly know very little of the lady herself.”

“Though that may come,” Lillian said quietly, though she hated those words as she spoke them. “It will not take long to acquaint yourself with her if that is what you wish to do.”

Lord Wrexham looked at her for a long moment but said nothing, even though his mouth opened and then closed again. He gave a small shake of his head as though he was reconsidering what he had been about to say but, in the end, stayed silent. Lillian herself fought for some sort of response, finding the silence almost a little unbearable as she looked back at the gentleman, wondering what it was he was thinking about, what it was he was considering. How much she longed to know whether or not he was going to pursue a connection with Lady Vivianne for then, at least, she would know what to do with her foolish heart. Could she let herself continue to feel this interest, this drawing near him which she almost continually longed for? Or would it be best for her to push that aside, to push him away and find, instead, another

gentleman who might see her and value her as she was?

“I should take Dinah on my arm now.” The Duke cleared his throat and then dropped her arm gently, inclining his head and bowing. “I thank you, Lady Lillian. I look forward to talking with you at another time.”

“As do I,” Lillian murmured, watching as the Duke walked quickly away from her and, upon reaching Dinah and Harry, bowed to Harry and then took his cousin away. When Harry turned back towards Lillian, however, the broad smile on his face made her chuckle.

“I presume that all went very well with Lady Dinah, then?” she asked, managing to push away her own confusion and frustrations for the moment. “You appear to be quite contented, brother, which is not at all like you!”

Harry laughed and slung his arm around Lillian for a moment. “My dear sister, you know very well that I am always easily contented,” he said, making Lillian laugh aloud. “But when it comes to Lady Dinah, I find myself more than a little contented. She is quite remarkable and, much to my delight, has agreed to let me come to call on her very soon.” He sent her a sidelong glance. “Now, I know very well that I do not need to have a young lady’s permission to call upon her but all the same, I should like to know that she is eager to have me present, at least.”

Lillian grinned. “I am glad to hear it though I do hope you did not have to persuade her too much in order to gain her consent?”

Harry let out an exclamation but, seeing Lillian’s grin, began to chuckle and shook his head. “Goodness, you are quite ridiculous, my dear. Though I must ask whether the Duke and you are – ”

“The Duke and I are acquainted and that is all,” Lillian interrupted, refusing to let her

brother continue his sentence, her smile fading. "I should not like to discuss the Duke, Harry, please."

Her brother blinked in surprise, a gravity descending on his expression. "Very well, if that is what you wish," he said, gently. "I quite understand. Now, shall we go in search of mother and father? I think that we have lost them entirely and no doubt, they shall be wondering where you are!"

"Yes, we should." Lillian lifted her chin, forced a smile and walked alongside her brother through the park again, hoping beyond hope that she might be able to leave all thought, all memory of the Duke behind her... at the very least, until she knew what it was that he was going to do as regards Lady Vivianne. Until then, she had no other choice but to protect her heart.

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“Now, if I tried this here, then... ” Edmund stuck his tongue out of the side of his mouth as he continued on with his experiment, being careful and cautious as he did so. It was not the most important experiment he had ever done but it was of interest to him and thus, he had thrown himself into it, working even through dinner. Instead of going to sit with his mother and cousin, Edmund had taken a tray in the study where had managed to leave most of it to go cold, such had been the depth of his thoughts. It had also distracted him from all thoughts as regarded Lady Vivianne and her brother, Lord Jedburgh. At the time of the ball, when Lord Jedburgh had stated such bold things in front of Lady Lillian, Edmund had been so stunned, he had not quickly thought of a response. However, once Lady Lillian had taken her leave, Edmund had told Lord Jedburgh in no uncertain terms, that such things were not to be discussed in the middle of the ballroom but that there would be a better situation for that particular conversation. As yet, he had not made any further contact with Lord Jedburgh or his sister and though he knew that the gentleman would be waiting for that, had found himself pulling back from it.

They might be at the soiree this evening and then what shall I do?

“Wrexham?”

Edmund stood up straight, a string in his hand as the door opened and his mother stepped in. She had not waited for him to ask her to enter, had simply walked straight into his study without a second of hesitation – and given the way her eyes swept around the room, Edmund presumed that this was why. Evidently, she had surmised his reason for missing dinner and had come either to see what it was he was doing or to berate him.

From the scowl, Edmund presumed it would be the latter.

“Might I ask what it is that you are doing, Edmund?”

Edmund blinked, a little surprised that his mother had used his Christian name for it was spoken so rarely, it could only mean one thing.

She was greatly displeased with him.

“I am working on something,” he said, silently reminding himself that while she was his mother, she did not have any right to tell him what he could or could not do. “Is there something the matter?”

“And what about the soiree this evening?”

Edmund shrugged. “What of it?”

“We are to attend.”

He cast her a quick look and then turned back to his machine. “I am well aware of that.”

“And you are doing this instead?”

Hearing the note of alarm in his mother’s voice, Edmund let out a small sigh and then shook his head. “No, Mother, I am doing an experiment until it comes time for me to prepare to depart. I have every intention of working here until I must change and, thereafter, we will make our way to the soiree.”

His mother frowned all the harder though she did not protest, much to Edmund’s relief. “You missed dinner with Dinah and myself.”

“But that is only one dinner out of many,” Edmund reminded her, threading the string back in the way it had come. “I do not think that is such a terrible thing, do you?”

Again, his mother’s frown grew deeper but Edmund only smiled at her, waiting for her to say something more... though nothing was really said. Instead, she let out a small sigh, then turned on her heel to walk to the door. “Only do not be tardy for the soiree. It is important to Dinah. Lord Weatherly will be there.”

“Lord Weatherly is of importance to Dinah?”

With yet another sigh, his mother turned back to face him, throwing up her hands. “Of course he is! He has been very attentive for some days now and I know that he spoke specifically to her to see if she would be present this evening.”

“I see.” Edmund considered this for a moment and then shrugged. “If he is in earnest and seeks to court her, then I shall look into his background and the like a little more but for the moment, I find him an agreeable sort.” His smile grew. “His sister is also very agreeable, I must say.”

At this, his mother’s eyebrows lifted but Edmund quickly explained. “I only mean in terms of the fact that it is clearly a well-respected, genteel family.”

“Indeed.” His mother’s gaze sharpened. “Might I ask what it is that you are doing at present with all of... that?” She gestured vaguely to the box on Edmund’s table and he turned to look at it before turning his head back to face her.

“Are you interested in my experiments?”

“Interested might not be the right word but I should like to know what it is that takes a hold of your imagination – and your time – with such strength.”

“It is an electrifying machine,” Edmund replied, his voice rising such was the excitement within him. “I have heard of them before, of course, and have seen them work also but I am now attempting to make the effect a little stronger.”

His mother blinked in obvious confusion.

“Have you heard of them before?” Edmund asked, beckoning his mother towards him. “Now, I have only just finished connecting it back together. The first thing I had to do when I purchased it was to take it apart so that I might see how it worked! Now that I have reassembled it, I am trying different things to see what might work... so if you simply hold this string, then I shall show you what will happen.”

The Duchess frowned. “I am not sure if – ”

“It will not hurt, I promise you,” Edmund stated, as his mother picked up the string. “Now, all I need to do is turn this crank here and you will soon feel the reaction.”

“Feel?” his mother repeated, only to let out a yelp as Edmund cranked the machine as hard as he could. The string fell from her hands and she stepped back, shaking them as though she had been burned. “I thought that you said it would not hurt!”

“It does not hurt, it is more of a tingle,” Edmund said, grinning at her as enthusiasm pushed him to explain. “This is a wonderful machine, for it brings this electricity to us and – ”

“I do not want your explanations.” His mother waved her hands vaguely, shaking her head. “You may keep this box to yourself and your experiments with it. Good gracious, have you any thought as to what the ton would say if they saw you with such a contraption?”

Edmund lifted his chin, his smile fading as his enthusiasm dissipated. “I do believe

that they are slowly becoming popular,” he stated, as his mother turned towards the door again. “You might even see one at the soiree this evening!”

“I highly doubt that,” his mother sniffed, opening the door and making to step out. “Please do not be tardy, Wrexham. And do not mention this box to anyone at the soiree, I beg you! The last thing I desire is for my son to be made a mockery!”

Edmund opened his mouth to say that he did not care what the ton thought, only to close it again as he watched the door close behind his mother. With a heavy sigh, he closed his eyes and scowled. She did not understand his enthusiasm, did not really have any words of encouragement to offer him and instead, wished that he would hide such things away from others. Edmund could understand why she might wish for such a thing but all the same, he found himself rebelling against that idea. He did not want to hide the truth from others about who he was and what he enjoyed and yet there was the understanding that he had no other choice but to do so, if he wanted society’s approval. With a start, he recalled how, even as a young man, his father had shown the same unwillingness to even consider what Edmund was involved in, how – with anger – he had directed Edmund to forget such pursuits. There had been anger too from Lord Fullerton himself, his very own cousin, simply because Edmund had been spending time with his father so that they might invent together. Edmund rubbed at the space between his forehead. He had garnered a good deal of anger and upset from a good many people simply because of his love of natural philosophy and now, it seemed, he was going to have to push it away from himself again, even if it was only for a time. If he wanted to find a bride, then he might well have to set that whole notion aside, no matter what it cost him.

With another sigh, Edmund passed one hand over his eyes and then made his way to the door, following after his mother. There was no use in continuing on with his experiment now. The conversation with his mother had pulled the joy from it and now there was nothing else for him to do but prepare for the soiree.

“Your Grace?”

Edmund turned to his left, only for his face to break into a broad smile, his arms thrown wide for a moment as he embraced his friend. “Huxley! I did not think that you would be in London this Season!”

“And yet, here I am.” Nicholas, the Marquess of Huxley, grinned broadly as he stepped back. “I did not expect to be in London either, I confess it, but my plans to sail to my holdings on the continent has been delayed.”

“Oh?”

Lord Huxley grinned. “I have decided that my journey to the continent can be delayed. I might, instead, turn my attention to other responsibilities.”

Edmund’s eyebrows lifted as his friend’s gaze roved around the room. “You think of matrimony?”

“I do,” Lord Huxley replied, with that same refreshing honesty that Edmund had always known from him. “I think it important that a gentleman do as he must and produce the heir. And I have not done that as yet.”

“Nor have I,” Edmund answered, a little ruefully, “though I can see that it is an important responsibility.”

“And have you any candidates in mind?”

Edmund laughed at this, shaking his head at his friend. “My dear Huxley, it is not as though I must find them all qualified in this or in that in order to consider a young

lady suitable. My main concern for this Season is Dinah – my cousin, you recall – and her come out, though she has already secured herself some interest already, so it may not be long that I have that responsibility.”

Lord Huxley’s eyebrows lifted. “That is excellent.”

“Indeed.”

“It does mean that you have now the time, at least, to consider the young ladies of London and whether or not they are suitable for you.” His friend grinned as Edmund rolled his eyes. “That is what I intend to do this Season, at least.”

It was on the tip of Edmund’s tongue to tell his friend about Lady Lillian, only for someone behind him to clear his throat. A little frustrated at being so interrupted, Edmund turned sharply, only for Lord Jedburgh’s eyes to narrow slightly.

“Your Grace. It has been some day since our first conversation and we have not, as yet, had any correspondence from you.”

Edmund frowned, a little perturbed by Lord Jedburgh’s bold and rather rude statement. “Good evening, Lord Jedburgh,” he said, as firmly as he could so as to show the gentleman just how impolite he was being. “I wonder if you are acquainted with my friend, here? If you are not, I should be happy to introduce you.”

Lord Jedburgh sniffed. “I do not think that there is any need. This conversation does not involve anyone except you or I.”

Edmund folded his arms over his chest, all the more irritated. “Might I remind you that I informed you, Lord Jedburgh, that I would speak to you about this matter privately? This is not exactly private, is it?”

“I am afraid that I must insist upon it, given that you have not yet called nor even written to us!”

“Perhaps it is because I have been very busy indeed and have not yet had time to think on all that has been put to me by both yourself and your sister,” Edmund hissed, taking a step closer to Lord Jedburgh but lowering his voice at the same time. “Have you not realised how heavy a burden this could be for me? I had no knowledge that your sister expected engagement from me, Lord Jedburgh and yet, despite that, you decided to throw that at me during our first meeting without so much as asking after my health or any such thing!”

Lord Jedburgh’s chin jutted forward. “Again, those questions bring no bearing to the situation. If they had purpose, then I might be willing to ask them but given that they do not, I see no reason in speaking them. Therefore, I must ask you again, Your Grace, whether or not you intend to engage yourself to my sister.”

“I do not.”

The words ricocheted from his mouth before he could prevent himself and Lord Jedburgh instantly recoiled, his eyes wide with evident shock.

“I do not think that there is a requirement for me to do so,” Edmund said, hoping that Lord Jedburgh was not about to explode with anger in front of the other guests. “I understand that my father hoped for such a match but I do not find myself willing to do so.”

“But... but you must!” Lord Jedburgh exclaimed, his voice a little louder than Edmund had anticipated. “It is your duty!”

“It is not.” Edmund glanced around, a little embarrassed to see that the other guests were now looking towards them and that their conversation was now becoming of

interest to listening ears. “It was suggested and yes, I will admit that my father hoped that – ”

“My sister has been waiting for you to acknowledge this!” Lord Jedburgh cried, interrupting Edmund furiously. “Do you not understand? She has been waiting , refusing all other offers and even the attentions from other gentlemen and now you are standing here, telling me that you will not do as has been demanded of you?”

Growing all the more frustrated, Edmund threw out both hands, slicing through the air with them. “There are no demands, Lord Jedburgh! No demands whatsoever. My father wrote that he hoped it would be so, I can see that your sister and that you also prayed that it might be so but that does not mean that I must agree to it.” He lowered his voice. “I do not think it wise for me to engage myself to a lady that I do not know.”

Lord Jedburgh blinked frantically. “Then – then you must know her better!” he exclaimed, nodding his head as though he were a jack-in-the-box who had only just escaped from the confines of its small wooden box. “That is what must be done. You shall declare that you are courting her, Your Grace, with the expectation that should the courtship go well, engagement will move forward.”

“Who is courting?”

Edmund opened his mouth to state that he was not courting anyone, only to catch a glint flash in Lord Jedburgh’s eyes. His mouth went dry as Lord Jedburgh turned to face the slightly older lady who Edmund recognized to be one of the most prolific gossips in all of London.

“The Duke has just asked my permission to court my sister, Lady Vivianne,” he heard Lord Jedburgh say, his voice very loud indeed as though he wanted everyone in the ton to hear it. “Of course, I was glad to give my permission.”

“Lord Jedburgh, for shame!”

Without warning, Lord Huxley stepped closer, his own voice seeming to echo around the room. “You ought not to be saying such things, given that I have been standing here and have not heard the Duke of Wrexham ask you such a thing!”

The lady – Lady Morpeth – looked from Edmund to Lord Jedburgh and then back again, her eyes rounding in either surprise or delight at being a part of this conversation. Inwardly, Edmund boiled with anger, furious that Lord Jedburgh had thought to do such a thing, had thought to force Edmund’s hand by speaking as he had done. Catching a glance from Lord Huxley – one that told him to be as calm as he could be – Edmund took a step closer and lifted his chin.

“I am afraid that you have misunderstood, Lord Jedburgh.”

“No indeed, I have not,” the gentleman declared, clearly unwilling to back down from what he was attempting to do. “I understand very clearly indeed. I do not know why your friend is insisting that you did not ask me about my sister. Mayhap it is that he is a little jealous and wishes to marry before you?”

“Marry?” Lady Morpeth gasped, though Edmund quickly shook his head, reaching out one hand to her.

“I can assure you, my thoughts are not on such things.”

“Yes, they are, if you are courting my sister,” Lord Jedburgh stated, making Edmund’s hands curl into tight fists such was his anger. “You cannot expect me to grant permission to you if you are not considering things seriously!”

Catching a hold of that, Edmund hid his smile, triumph filling him. “Alas, then, I cannot pursue her. I am afraid that my thoughts are not yet turned to matrimony.”

Lord Jedburgh's jaw jutted forward, his eyes narrowing. "You are something of a rogue, then? That is a great pity, Your Grace. I must say, especially since your reputation is so high amongst society."

Edmund wanted to shout aloud that Lord Jedburgh was doing and saying such things for his own purposes, that none of this was true and yet, he could not. Lady Morpeth was still listening intently, her eyes searching his face as he kept his gaze away from her for fear that she would see his anger.

"I am no rogue," Edmund stated, firmly. "It is only to say that, as yet, my thoughts do not turn to matrimony. It is something that I must consider in great depth for who can say what sort of bride a Duke requires? I do not know if any young lady of my acquaintance will fulfill such a requirement."

A tight smile flashed across Lord Jedburgh's face. "That is why you consider courtship, then? Because that is how you will get to know my sister a good deal better and, as I am sure you will discover, she will be more than satisfactory in every way that you require."

Edmund swallowed hard, his anger so great, he could not bring himself to speak for fear of what would come out of his mouth. He was going from hot to cold and then back again, his fury mounting with every second that passed, with every smirk that flicked across Lord Jedburgh's lips. He had no understanding as to why this gentleman was so determined to have him court his sister, no knowledge as to what it was that drove Lord Jedburgh to such a thing and yet, for whatever reason, this gentleman was being forceful enough as to push it into Edmund's hands without him desiring it.

"I would be very careful indeed about what you say, Lord Jedburgh." Lord Huxley lifted his chin. "You speak to a Duke and to a Marquess, both of whom have very high standing in society. To have your own reputation smeared would be rather

difficult indeed, would it not? You would not want that.”

Lord Jedburgh’s eyes flashed. “I want what is best for my sister,” he stated, unequivocally as Lady Morpeth began to back away, her hand at her mouth as if she wanted to keep back all that she might say until she found someone to listen. “You will court her, Your Grace, at the very least.”

Edmund shook his head. “You have no right to demand such things of me.”

“Yes, I do. My father and yours were great friends. There has always been the expectation, the hope that you will marry Vivianne.”

“But that does not mean that I must agree,” Edmund answered, angrily, catching the way that Lady Morpeth was now standing in a small group of ladies, whispering furiously.

“Though,” his friend murmured, quietly, “it appears now that you may have to court the lady, whether you wish it or not.”

Edmund let his gaze rove around the room and felt his spirits sink. It was not for his sake that he was going to have to do so more than it was for the lady’s sake. Lady Vivianne would have the ton speaking of her, wondering why Edmund had first of all, asked to court her, only to step back and refuse, thanks to the story both Lord Jedburgh and Lady Morpeth had brought together. Passing one hand over his eyes, his shoulders dropped and he groaned aloud, his anger turning to despair.

“I will not engage myself to her,” he breathed, dropping his hand and looking straight ahead into Lord Jedburgh’s face. “Do you understand me? I will court her but only because of what will happen to her reputation if I do not.”

Lord Jedburgh’s smile was an ugly one. “We shall see what happens,” he said,

triumph burning through every word which made Edmund's anger fire back up all over again. "Mayhap you shall find yourself quite drawn to her and all will be well."

In an instant, Lady Lillian came rushing into Edmund's mind and he shook his head furiously, angry now that the lady he had begun to care for would now find herself pushed back from his company, thinking that he was now courting another. "I can promise you, that shall never happen," he grated, as Lord Jedburgh turned on his heel, his head held high. "I shall never marry Lady Vivianne, no matter what happens."

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Lillian smiled at Lady Dinah. "I am glad to see you. It has only been a few days since we were last able to take tea but it does feel like a very long time indeed!"

Lady Dinah laughed and nodded. "I quite understand what you mean."

"And I was not able to talk to you even when we met at Hyde Park!" Lillian exclaimed, rolling her eyes gently though inwardly, her curiosity began to grow. "My brother was most insistent that he should steal you away for his own company."

Dinah's cheeks dimpled, giving Lillian the impression that she was rather taken with Harry and his attentions to her and that made Lillian's smile grow all the more.

"Today at least I shall have you all to myself for a time," she continued, when Dinah said nothing. "Tell me, which gentlemen have you danced with of late? Who have you spent company with? And who has called upon you?"

Dinah's smile faded. "Too many," she sighed, with a shake of her head. "I confess that I do not like to have such attentions thrown at me by so many gentlemen, especially those who come only to see what sort of creature I am." She arched one eyebrow at Lillian and Lillian winced in return, understanding exactly what it was that her friend meant.

"I had Lord Thornlake call upon me yesterday," she told her friend, as Lady Dinah shuddered lightly. "He sat much too close to me and, at one point, put his hand on my knee although it was only for a moment. My mother was rising to ring the bell when he did so, else I am sure that he would never have dared to do such a thing."

“I do believe that he is a dreadful rake and I have been thoroughly warned away from him,” Lady Dinah said, closing her eyes for a moment. “He did much the same to me, sitting so close to me that I felt my skin prickling and believing, I think, that I enjoyed his nearness given how he smiled.”

“I have no intention of giving even the smallest amount of time to any rake,” Lillian declared, firmly, “and there are so many of them within the ton ! I do not want to have any of them come near me, though Mama says that it is something that simply must be borne until they realise that I am not about to give them the attentions that they desire.”

Lady Dinah nodded. “Indeed. Though, might I ask if there are any other gentlemen that have caught your attention, aside from these rakes?”

Lillian blushed immediately, aware that only one gentleman had come to her mind the moment Lady Dinah had asked and she was certainly not going to admit that to her friend! “I do not think that there has been as yet, no,” she lied, her cheeks warm and betraying her as Dinah smiled. “To be truthful, I do not feel as though many of them truly know who I am and in that regard, I find myself pushed away from them.”

Lady Dinah tilted her head. “In what way?”

“In that they do not know how much I love arithmetic and the like,” Lillian answered, though she smiled as she spoke. “Your cousin does, of course, and he has not rejected me for it but there are many gentlemen who would consider me a bluestocking and, thereafter, turn away from me. In that regard, these gentlemen who come to take tea or to make afternoon calls have no real understanding of me and I suppose, in that way, I have no desire to draw closer to any of them.”

“But then you must tell them!” Lady Dinah exclaimed, as Lillian chuckled. “You must reveal just how wonderfully you think and see what they make of it. It might be

that there is more than just my cousin who thinks highly of you.”

“Mayhap,” Lillian answered, reaching to take her tea and doing her best to change the topic of conversation onto something new. “Now, you must tell me what else you have been doing. Have you had an ice at Gunter’s as yet?”

“Yes, I have.” Dinah sighed contentedly and settled back in her chair a little more. “My cousin took me, though I think it was to appease his mother after he did not sit with us for dinner on two occasions!”

“Oh.” The question on Lillian’s lips could not be held back. “What was it that kept him?”

“His workings on whatever invention it is he is working on at present,” Lady Dinah said, with a roll of her eyes. “I know that he has told you about such things so I do not mind speaking of it, though I must say that it is terribly frustrating for the Duchess to see. She does not like it, fearing that society will think him a fool or some such thing, should they discover it.”

“And you?”

Lady Dinah smiled and lifted her shoulders. “I do not know what to make of it all. I do not think that it is a terrible thing that he should miss dinner with us on two occasions for he does very well in everything. Yet, at the same time, I can understand why the Duchess is fearful of society’s considerations of what he does. If they were to discover it, then there might be a great many whispers and rumours flying about London.”

“But he is a Duke,” Lillian answered, with a slight shrug. “The ton can speak ill of him and he will still be welcomed in society.”

Lady Dinah considered this, then shook her head. “Mayhap, though there can still be some damage to his reputation and, mayhap, to whoever young lady he might be considering. I suppose that the Duchess considers that it might also bring her some difficulties also. I – ”

“Dinah, I must say... oh, forgive me.”

Lillian rose quickly, her tea cup placed back on the table before she dropped into a curtsy. “Your Grace.” Her face, which had been a little warm already from her blush, now began to burn with a furious fire as the Duke smiled at her, his expression gentle. “I have just come to take tea with Lady Dinah. However, if you are in need of her company, I am happy to take my leave. I have been here some minutes already and – ”

“No, no, please do not!” The Duke came a little further into the room, his hand out towards her. “No, I insist that you stay. There is no urgency in my request.” He looked to Dinah. “I do hope you have been enjoying your afternoon so far?”

Lady Dinah smiled. “We have been speaking of your studies, Wrexham. I could not describe to Lady Lillian what it was you have been doing at present given that I have no knowledge of it as yet, but I am sure that Lady Lillian would like to hear an explanation of it.”

Lillian’s face burned all the hotter but she kept a smile on her face and nodded when the Duke looked back at her, his eyebrows rising a little higher.

“Is that so?”

“Yes, it is.” Lillian glanced to Lady Dinah, who was sipping her tea again. “Lady Dinah and I mentioned my love of arithmetic and that is why the conversation came up. If there is anything that you would be able to tell me about what it is you are

studying at present, I should certainly be glad to hear it.”

The Duke hesitated for a few moments, his expression uncertain until, after another moment, he smiled and held out one hand to her. “All the better, why do I not show it to you?”

Lillian blinked. “Show it to me?”

“Yes, indeed! It will help with my explanations and Dinah can join us. Might you wish to come?”

Lillian rose to her feet, ignoring the butterflies which had burst into life in her stomach. “Yes, of course.” To be in the Duke’s private study, to be close to him as he explained what it was he was doing was sending frissons of excitement through her, though she did her best to contain it. Taking his proffered arm, she walked with him through the door, Lady Dinah behind her, and listened carefully to the Duke as he explained all that he had been doing.

“My interest in such things came from Lady Dinah’s late father, in fact,” he said, making Lillian look at Lady Dinah in surprise. “He was an excellent man, full of all manner of ideas and interests. He was not afraid to keep searching, to keep trying no matter what it was the ton ... or his family... thought of him – though I do not mean Dinah, of course.” He gave his cousin a smile but Lillian, seeing it, was certain there was some sadness there. “What he did, brought great change to the farming practices of the estates, to the tenants as well, who made a better living. That was his purpose – to be of aid to those around him in this life, whether rich or poor. It is an ambition I should very much like to have.”

“That is an excellent ambition,” Lillian answered, speaking genuinely. “I confess to having an interest in natural philosophy, though I do not understand a great deal of it.”

“Oh, but I am sure that you could!” the Duke answered, looking at her with warmth in his expression as they came to the study. “You have such a quick mind, I am quite certain that you would be able to understand a great deal.”

Lillian smiled and blushed gently at this, relieved that the Duke had to let go of her arm and step away so that he might open the door to the study and direct her inside. She came into the room but caught her breath at the sight of a machine in the center of the room, upon a small table. “I recognise this, though it is not something I have ever seen with my own eyes. There were drawings and descriptions of them within some of the books I have been reading recently. Is it an electrifying machine?”

“It is!” The Duke chuckled as he gestured to it. “I am afraid that it is not the least bit helpful to anyone, despite my words about seeking to be of aid to those around me. It is for entertainment only, I believe. It has begun to be a little more popular in amongst society though I do believe that the ton would not be fully accepting of it as yet, if my mother’s response is anything to go by!” He laughed but Lillian caught the slight hint of sorrow in his eyes, feeling her sympathy rise gently. It must be difficult for him, she considered, to have a mother who was not particularly enamored by his interests.

“What is an electrifying machine?” Lady Dinah wanted to know, coming towards it though she stepped with a little more caution, clearly a little trepidatious. “It sounds a little dangerous.”

“It is not dangerous at all,” Lillian said, smiling. “All you do is hold the string, then the Duke would crank the side of the box here and you will eventually feel a gentle tingling in your fingers.”

“A tingling?”

“Yes, it comes from the electricity which is being generated here.” The Duke moved

into a long and lengthy explanation, pointing out the various parts of the contraption and how they worked in order to push the electricity along the string and though Lady Dinah blinked and frowned and shook her head in confusion, Lillian hung onto every word, storing up as much information as she could. This was all quite marvelous, she considered, thinking to herself that the Duke of Wrexham was indeed a very learned gentleman though, at the same time, quite curious which was a trait she herself appreciated. It was a delight to her to know that the Duke had a questioning mind, eager to learn as much as he could about a subject though she herself could never dream of taking a machine apart and then replacing it all again, as he had done!

“Should you like to take a hold of this string, Lady Lillian?”

Lillian nodded, anticipation fluttering within her like a bird. Coming forward, she took a hold of the string and then watched as the Duke began to crank it round and around. After a few moments, a shock nipped lightly through her fingers and Lillian let out an exclamation, astonished by what had just taken place. “Good gracious!”

The Duke stopped cranking at once. “Are you all right?”

“Of course I am! I am only marveling at what has taken place, that machine is quite extraordinary.” She held the string out to Dinah. “Should you like to have a turn?”

Lady Dinah shook her head. “No, I thank you. It is not something that I would enjoy, I do not think.”

“I think it remarkable,” Lillian said stoutly, looking back to the Duke who was smiling brightly. “And you say you wish to make the effect stronger somehow?”

He nodded. “I would like to know also if the string could be held by many a person and if the effect would be the same. It is not something that will be of aid to anyone, however, it is just something that I find interesting and I do believe that others will

find it to be so also.”

“A little fun while you are here in London, then?” Lillian suggested, as the Duke nodded and smiled. “Thank you for showing me this, Your Grace, I do find it quite extraordinary.”

He smiled again, opening his mouth to say something, only for there to come a rap at the door. A footman came in, looking a little apologetic. “Forgive me for the interruption, Your Grace, but the Duchess requests the presence of Lady Dinah for a short time. She is in the parlour.”

Lady Dinah looked to Lillian. “I should go. There is talk of ribbons and the like and another trip to the modiste!”

Lillian laughed and reached to squeeze her friend’s hand. “But of course. I will see you again this evening, I hope?”

“I will escort Lady Lillian to the door,” the Duke added, as Lady Dinah made to quit the room. “Enjoy your conversation about gowns and lace, cousin!”

This made both Dinah and Lillian laugh though, when Lillian realized that she was not only alone with the Duke but also alone with him in a closed room, her smile faded and her heart began to thud furiously. Whether the Duke realized it or not, Lillian did not know, but his smile disappeared also and he coughed quietly before gesturing to the door.

“I should take you back to the carriage at once,” he said, a strange sense of tension beginning to grow that sent gentle prickling running down Lillian’s spine. “Thank you for indulging me, Lady Lillian.”

“Thank you for sharing such a thing with me,” Lillian answered, casting another

glance to the electrifying machine. "As I have said, I do not know much about natural philosophy but what I have learned, I find very interesting indeed."

The Duke took a few steps closer to her, his hands clasped behind his back. "I would be glad to share with you some of what I have been learning recently, if you would like to discuss such things with me." His eyes twinkled. "I may end up coming to you to ask for your help if you agree, however, for you are blessed with such a quick and clever mind that I am certain you would be able to solve some of the difficulties for me!"

Lillian smiled. "You are very kind, Your Grace," she murmured, something warm curling in her stomach. "I would be very glad indeed to speak with you about any subject relating to natural philosophy, if you would be willing to speak with me." A sudden thought had her dropping her head, her hands twisting as she caught them together in front of her. "I do hope that the awareness that I am something of a bluestocking does not push you from our acquaintance, Your Grace. However, if you would prefer that I – "

"Goodness, no!"

Without warning, the Duke came so close to her, he was only a single step away. His hand caught hers, his eyes searching her face.

"I do hope that I have not given you the impression that I think poorly of bluestockings, Lady Lillian. I understand that the ton does not think that ladies ought to be educated beyond a certain degree but I can assure you that I do not think the same way." He smiled again but it was a little wry. "I confess that I can well understand the disinclination some have towards all manner of learning and experimenting. My late father was often very irritated with my interest in such things and my mother, as I might have already said, has practically insisted that I hide my interest from the ton until after I am wed. It seems that the young ladies of London

might not appreciate a gentleman who likes to experiment with things such as this!” He pointed to the electrifying machine but Lillian, who had not taken her eyes from his ever since he had begun to speak, pressed his hand gently, her breathing quickening all the more.

“You have never given that impression, I assure you,” she promised, though her voice was a little hoarse. “And I should never think less of a gentleman for his interest. I find it quite refreshing, Your Grace.”

He smiled. “As I do you.”

Something happened in that moment. Lillian was looking back up into his eyes, the Duke was gazing back down at her and, within her heart, there came a great and significant change. Her breath hitched, her heart began to pound and she licked her lips, uncertain as to what it was that was growing so strongly within her. Warmth swept up her arm as she realized he was still holding her fingers in his own and, for some inexplicable reason, her gaze went to his lips.

The Duke swallowed, his jaw tightened and then, after a moment, he frowned. His hand pulled from hers and whatever it was she had been feeling, it slowly began to steady itself. “I should inform you, Lady Lillian, that I am now courting Lady Vivianne.”

Lillian blinked furiously, her whole body filling with a cold which made her shiver. “Lady Vivianne?”

“Yes. But it is not as society will say,” he continued, rubbing one hand over his eyes and then walking towards the door. Lillian tried to follow but her legs felt weighted, every step a struggle. “I will not go into detail as to why this has come about but I should like you to know that I have no intention of pursuing Lady Vivianne indefinitely.”

Lillian reached the door which the Duke had held open for her, though, for some reason, he stood framed in the doorway rather than letting her through it. She did not know what to say, her heart beginning to ache, her whole body feeling heavy and tired. She stood perfectly still, no longer eager to converse but instead, simply waiting for him to remove himself from her path.

“I intend to end the courtship just as soon as is appropriate,” the Duke continued, his voice a little quieter now as Lillian reluctantly lifted her gaze to his. “I want you to understand that there is no serious connection between Lady Vivianne and myself.”

“Why do you want me to know such a thing?”

The Duke hesitated, then frowned. “I... ” His frown grew heavier but, much to Lillian’s surprise, rather than ending the conversation and retreating back to the hallway and leading her to the carriage, he stopped, turned to face her and then, after another moment, let the door close behind him.

Lillian’s breath wrapped itself around her chest, her eyes fixing to his.

“Because,” the Duke said, softly, “I find myself greatly intrigued by you, Lady Lillian.” He smiled, then spread out his hands. “I mayhap ought not to speak so clearly and openly but I am afraid that there might be a good deal of confusion otherwise and I do not want that. To be utterly truthful, Lady Lillian, I should very much like to continue our acquaintance and see where it progresses. I find you wonderful, your quick mind and your love of learning are of great interest to me. Besides all of that, I find you remarkably beautiful and, if I were given opportunity, I should like to ask to court you rather than Lady Vivianne.”

“You... you would?”

The Duke nodded and, after a moment, lowered his head only to stop himself when

she snatched in a breath. Disappointment flooded her, wondering what he had thought to do had she not made such an exclamation. Would he have kissed her? A sudden desire roared to life... though it was now a little too late given the way he moved back from her.

“I would respond favourably to such a request,” Lillian breathed, half hoping that he would come closer to her again, that this time, his lips might settle on hers for even a moment. She had not realized just how much passion she held in her heart for him, how much desire was within her but this sudden closeness, this nearness which was both unexpected and welcomed, had seemed to bring everything into sharp relief. She was caught up with him, almost desperate now to draw as close to him as she possibly could so that he would understand how her heart had become affected by him.

“That is a delightful thing for me to hear, Lady Lillian.” After a few moments of smiling down into her eyes, his smile faded. “It is only because of other circumstances that I am required to court Lady Vivianne but, as I have said, it will not be for long.”

“I do not understand,” Lillian whispered, her chest tight with both confusion and happiness, her mind and body caught up with tension. “Why must you do such a thing?”

The Duke sighed and closed his eyes briefly. “My father wrote in his will that he should like it if I would wed Lady Vivianne, as her father was my own father’s very dear friend. There was no demand, however, though I did feel it my responsibility to, at the very least, speak to her about it. However, Lord Jedburgh then made a statement in front of both yourself and, thereafter, another few members of the ton , to the point that I have no other choice but to court the lady simply so as to keep her reputation pristine – and my own with it. Though, I intend to bring the courtship to an end very soon and,” he continued, leaning forward just a little, “thereafter, pursue

another courtship. Should you still be willing to consider me, of course.”

Lillian’s heart leapt and her face broke into a smile – and suddenly, she could not look anywhere but his eyes. “It would not matter to me how long I had to wait, Your Grace, I should certainly be glad to accept. I am only sorry that there is this barrier between us for the present.”

“As am I.” The Duke scowled suddenly, making his handsome expression darken. “More than you can know.”

She smiled quietly. “All the same, I thank you for being so willing to speak to me in such a way. It means a great deal.” And has revealed a great deal more.

He smiled back at her, then caught her hand before bowing over it. “I am thrilled to hear it, Lady Lillian,” he said, making her heart pound with an urgent desire to push herself forward, to beg him to put his arms around her even just for a moment. “I look forward to the day when I can come to speak with you about that particular matter.”

“As do I,” Lillian murmured before, reluctantly, stepping away from the Duke and making her way to the door though, as she made her way back to her waiting carriage, it felt as though she were lighter than air.

“Lady Vivianne.”

Edmund bowed his head and then rose, though Lady Vivianne did not even attempt to bob a curtsy. Instead, she watched him with dull eyes, her lips thin as she folded her arms across her chest.

“Good afternoon,” Edmund tried again, though the lady did not say a single word to him in response. “I hear that your brother has informed you that we are to court?”

“Indeed.” Lady Vivianne sniffed and turned her head away. “Though he has also informed me that I must do everything I can to make certain that our courtship leads to engagement.” She arched an eyebrow and glanced back at him. “You have made it clear that you do not wish to marry.”

I do not wish to marry you , Edmund thought to himself, though he did not say such words to the lady for fear of injuring her. “I do not like being forced into anything,” he said, after a few moments of consideration. “And I am afraid that this courtship is something which has been forced upon my shoulders.”

Lady Vivianne lifted her chin. “My brother says that you are neglecting your duties by refusing to seriously consider matrimony.”

A prickle of irritation crossed Edmund’s shoulders. “I understand that your brother truly desires me to marry you, Lady Vivianne, but my father did not put any demand for such a thing within his will and as such, the decision was left in my hands. Now, while I will entertain this for a time so as to protect both of our reputations, might I suggest that we walk so that the ton take notice?”

He did not wait for Lady Vivianne to agree but instead, began to walk along the path, leaving her to either follow along with him or remain where she was and return to her brother. Inwardly, Edmund found himself deeply angry, frustrated that Lord Jedburgh had done all these things without even once seeming to think of his sister and, in addition, that she was going along with all that her brother had stated though, Edmund considered, he could not blame her for that. No doubt she had been told a great many things by Lord Jedburgh and had come to London with the thought of soon becoming a Duchess. To have those thoughts and hopes dashed, he realised, had to be a little trying.

“Good afternoon, Your Grace.”

Edmund lifted his head, only for his stomach to drop low as he saw Lady Lillian curtsying towards him.

“And to you, Lady Vivianne. I do not know if you recall that we have already been introduced, though it was not – ”

“I do not recall you.” Lady Vivianne lifted her chin, her lip curling, her tone a little less than friendly. “If you would excuse me, I am taking a short walk with the Duke of Wrexham.”

Edmund flushed hot as Lady Lillian dropped her gaze, her cheeks growing red with obvious embarrassment. “Lady Vivianne, there is no need to speak so. I am more than happy for the interruption.”

Lady Lillian glanced at him only for her gaze to tug away again, as though she could not bear to look at him when he was in company with the lady the ton knew he was courting. “I did not mean to interrupt your walk. Excuse me.”

The urge to reach out and grasp her hand, to beg her to stay, to linger, was so strong,

Edmund could barely fight it. He took in a breath and closed his eyes for a moment, struggling with the anger which swirled around him and the frustration which followed it. Lady Vivianne had no right to speak to one of his acquaintances in such a manner and yet, she had done so without hesitation.

“Are you coming to join me or will you stand there and try to block out the sight of me?”

Edmund’s eyes flared wide. “Lady Vivianne, I will not have this! I will not have you push aside those of my acquaintance simply because you do not wish to speak to them! Do you understand me? It is entirely improper, not to mention rather rude!”

Lady Vivianne shrugged. “I care not.”

Edmund curled his hands into tight fists. “You must understand, I have no interest in courting you and I can step away at any time. If you continue to behave in this manner, then the ton will quickly understand why I ended the courtship, for they will all hear of your rude manner and dislike of others.” He waited, feeling a little triumphant and expecting Lady Vivianne to buckle under the threats he had placed there, only for Lady Vivianne to shrug again.

“I care not,” she said, for what was the second time. Her gaze locked with his for just a moment and, in that, Edmund’s anger faded away. There was a sadness in Lady Vivianne’s eyes, he was sure of it. A sadness which, mayhap, she was covering with callousness and disregard.

“What – ” He dropped his head, silencing himself. He did not need to ask her about such a thing, did not have any need to discuss the lady’s situation. After all, he was trying to bring their connection to as swift a close as he could, was he not? There was no reason to ask her why she appeared troubled! With a shake of his head, he began to walk again, though he made sure to stand at least a foot away from the lady and did

not once offer to take her arm.

They walked in silence for some time, with both Lady Vivianne and himself having very little to say to each other. Edmund despised the silence but, at the same time, had very little thought of interrupting it with conversation for what had he to say to the lady?

“Is that not he?”

Edmund frowned, seeing two young ladies whispering behind their hands, their eyes going to his face though, as they passed, one of them giggled loudly. Glancing over his shoulder, he wondered what it was that was being said, quite certain that what he had heard from them was about him though he could not know precisely what it was about. His frown grew deeper as another three ladies came towards them and, again, the very same thing happened. Their eyes went to his face, broad smiles spread across each one and one of them laughed, though the other two hushed her immediately.

“What is happening?” Lady Vivianne glanced at him, then gestured behind her. “I can see that there is something being said about you, though I must hope it is not about our connection for that would be most displeasing.”

“I do not know what is being said.”

She looked at him again, scowling. “Are you certain that you have not started a rumour just so that you can free yourself from me?”

Edmund snorted. “Of course I have not. Why would I do such a thing when all I need to do is to announce that I am no longer courting you?”

Lady Vivianne’s frown lifted just a little. “Then what are these whispers about?”

“I do not know.” Edmund spread out his hands at her disbelieving look. “I can assure you, I have no knowledge as to what is being said. I shall soon find out, however, I am sure.”

“I do not want to have any whispers being spread about you, given that we have only just begun to court,” Lady Vivianne sniffed, lifting her chin and scowling at him. “Are you certain you have not done such a thing on purpose?”

Edmund shook his head. “I do not think that I shall answer that question, Lady Vivianne, given that I have already told you the answer once already.” He did not look at her again but found himself turning, wondering where Lord Jedburgh was. “Ah, there is your brother now. Mayhap you might like to return to him, Lady Vivianne, given that our conversation has ceased and I now have another matter to attend to?”

She glared at him but then turned on her heel and hurried away to her brother without so much as offering him a single word of farewell. Doing his best not to let his irritation come out in either his expression or in any words he might throw at her retreating back, Edmund turned on his heel and stormed away from her, filled with both relief and frustration – relief that he was no longer in company with the lady and with frustration that he did not know what it was that was being whispered about him. He wanted to ignore it, wanted to tell himself that it was not worth pursuing but the niggle within him, the curiosity about what it was that was being said would not leave him. somehow, he would have to find out.

Lady Lillian.

Edmund stopped short, seeing her talking to Lady Dinah, who had come out with Lord Weatherly for a short stroll in the park. His heart clattered in his chest and he paused for a moment, wondering if it would be right for him to interrupt their conversation. It would be entirely selfish of him to do so, of course, for the purpose

of his heart was to find out what was being said though, he also had to admit, he did want to speak to Lady Lillian again, to show her that he was no longer in company with Lady Vivianne.

Edmund closed his eyes and blew out a long breath. The conversation with Lady Vivianne – what there had been of it – had been both difficult and, quite frankly, angering. He did not want to be anywhere near the lady but she appeared to be just as determined as her brother was for them to wed. “No doubt she wants to be a Duchess,” Edmund muttered, pushing one hand through his hair before, after a few more moments, making his way towards Lady Dinah and Lady Lillian. His heart quickened as Lady Lillian looked back at him, before looking away again very quickly indeed. The smile which had been on his lips faded quickly at her reaction, berating himself for hoping that she might respond with warmth and interest. He was courting another lady now, was he not? And even though he had explained the situation, even though he had told her of the hope within his heart, that did not mean that she was without upset in seeing him with Lady Vivianne. With a sigh, Edmund turned away rather than going towards her, suddenly losing his desire to go and speak with them both.

All in all, he considered, as he made his way back to the carriage, this had been nothing short of an utterly dreadful afternoon.

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Lillian's shoulders dropped as she walked into the ballroom, finding her spirits sinking low as she saw the dancing, heard the laughter and took in the extravagant décor around the room. This was something that was meant to bring her joy, something that she should delight in but instead, her heart was doing nothing other than sinking low, almost to the very depths of despair.

Seeing the Duke of Wrexham walking with Lady Vivianne and hearing the whispers of society – and indeed, reading it in society papers – that he was now courting Lady Vivianne had brought her more pain than she had anticipated. It was not as though there was anything between them, not as though they had shared intimacies and the like and were now desperate to find a way restore their connection but yet, all the same, Lillian's heart was deeply pained. There had been a beautiful moment where she had thought that the Duke might take her into his arms, that wondrous excitement which had filled her mind with hopes for the future, only to realize that there was nothing for her now but sadness. Yes, he had promised her that this was not a courtship which would lead to any sort of engagement or the like, but Lillian was not as certain as he. Courtship very often led to engagement and even though he had told her that it was not his desire to marry Lady Vivianne, given what had happened thus far, was it not possible that such a thing could happen? The Duke might well be forced into it, might find himself in a position where he had no other choice but to marry the lady and then what would happen? Her own hopes would be dashed, her heart would be quite broken and her Season would be ruined.

And yet, I cannot help how my heart feels.

Taking in a deep breath, she sighed loudly – garnering a look from her mother.

“You must smile, Lillian! No gentleman will look at you if you stand there with such a sour disposition and, recall, given that the Duke of Wrexham is now courting another, you cannot waste your time considering him !”

Lillian looked back at her mother steadily, wondering if she had somehow known what Lillian was thinking of. “Mama, I am not putting on a sour disposition, as you call it. I am simply standing here, considering.”

“Then consider something a little more cheerful, if you please,” came the sharp reply, “so that you appear to be happy to be at Lord Jenkins ball!”

Seeing that she had no other choice but to do so, Lillian forced a smile she did not feel and took in another breath, relieved when her mother turned away. The smile fell to the floor and Lillian wrapped both arms around her waist, feeling a little vulnerable and upset. Her mother had not asked her why she was in such a sorrow but instead, had only insisted that she alter herself and that made Lillian a little sad. Why could she not ask Lillian what the trouble was instead of simply demanding that she do otherwise?

“Come now.” Lady Galesbury gestured for Lillian to come forward, though she only glanced at her rather than looking back directly. “And do hurry, I can see a gathering of gentlemen and ladies that we could attend.”

With a heavy sigh, Lillian followed after her mother, all too aware that she had no interest whatsoever in being present with these gentlemen and ladies. She did not want to smile, she did not want to converse, she did not even want to dance. Her heart was much too heavy.

Which means, she considered, her eyebrows lifting in surprise, that I must have greater feelings for him than I ever considered.

“Good evening, Lady Lillian.”

Lillian snapped her attention back to the group near her, forcing herself to smile. “Lord Drayton, good evening.” She smiled and greeted everyone in the group, seeing her mother smile in obvious relief that Lillian had chosen to do as she had been directed and had not stood there in silence instead.

“I do hope you will dance this evening?” Lord Drayton asked, holding out his hand for her dance card, clearly expecting her to agree – and from the sharp look that her mother sent her, Lillian knew she had no choice.

“Yes, of course.” She offered Lord Drayton her dance card and, once he signed it, he then passed it to the next gentleman who did not even ask if Lillian wished to dance. Her spirits dropped all the lower. Did any of these gentlemen care about her, truly? Would any of them have any sort of genuine interest in her? Or would it be that, the moment she started speaking about her love of arithmetic and all that she had learned of late, they would run from her?

“I do hope that you have been enjoying the Season thus far, Lady Lillian?” the third gentleman asked, taking her dance card from the second fellow who had signed it.

Lillian looked at him, seeing his easy smile, his dark eyes flicking towards her only to then dart around the group so that his smile went to every young lady. One hand curled into a fist as she battled a wave of frustration, seeing how little these gentlemen truly considered each lady that they seemed so eager to dance with. “I have been enjoying the Season thus far, yes,” she said, lifting her chin just a little.

“And what do you do when you are not dancing or taking tea?” Lord Drayton asked, his smile warm but his gaze on another young lady even though his question was directed towards Lillian. “Is the pianoforte your delight? Or is poetry something that I might entertain you with one evening?”

Lillian's lip curled, seeing just how insincere the gentleman was and despising it. She was not about to be like the other young ladies, delighting in his questions and hoping that they might show even the smallest measure of genuine interest. "I prefer to sit and work through some mathematical difficulties, given opportunity," she said clearly, watching Lord Drayton's face freeze into an expression of astonishment, though her mother let out a small but almost inaudible exclamation. "I am sure that I will soon be given some accounts to go through and I very much enjoy such things as that."

Lord Drayton blinked rapidly, then, much to Lillian's annoyance, let out a bark of laughter. "Accounts? Are you truly trying to say that you are given accounts to work through? Why would someone do such a thing as that?"

"Mayhap because I am trusted and I am skilled enough to do such a thing without difficulty," Lillian answered, bristling a little. "That is why."

A ripple of laughter moved from Lord Drayton to the next gentleman, and then to the next. "I can hardly believe that," the third muttered, as the ladies in the group simply looked at each other, perhaps astonished that Lillian had confessed such a thing willingly.

"I think that you are being a little insulting, Lord Souter."

Much to Lillian's surprise, it was her mother who stepped into the breach, her eyes flashing as Lord Souter's smile quickly cracked and fell away.

"Lady Galesbury, I did not mean any insult, I assure you." He put his hands to his heart, then inclined his head. "It is only an astonishing thing for a young lady to say!"

"And yet, it is quite true and I find myself remarkably proud of my daughter in that regard. To know that her father trusts her above his own paid accountants is quite

remarkable, is it not?" Lady Galesbury put one hand to Lillian's shoulder and, despite her astonishment, Lillian let herself smile, her chin lifting a notch. "I am sure that none of you would be willing to go through your accounts and declare them all correct, no? Instead, you send them to your solicitors or your accountants and have them do such things for you. Why, then, would you mock a young lady for having a skill that you do not?"

"Unless it is that these gentlemen are jealous that Lady Lillian has such a gift?"

A familiar voice had Lillian turning her head, only to smile as Lady Dinah came to stand directly beside her along with a gentleman that Lillian did not recognise though he had a pleasant enough expression.

"Lady Lillian, I presume?" The gentleman besides Lady Dinah smiled and bowed. "Lord Huxley. Lady Dinah has just been telling me about you and about your remarkable gift when it comes to arithmetic and the like. Quite marvellous, I must say."

Lillian smiled at him, liking him immediately. "I thank you, Lord Huxley."

"Though I would agree with Lady Dinah that it does appear the gentlemen present are jealous. How very strange!"

"I do hope that is not true," Lady Galesbury said, her hand dropping from Lillian's shoulder. "Envy is a trait that makes a gentleman ugly. I am sure that the ton would agree."

Lillian heard the warning in her mother's voice and her smile grew as all three gentlemen blanched and then dropped their gazes to the floor. It was clear that none of them wished for her mother to speak to anyone else within society of their reaction and response to what they had learned about Lillian and therefore, they were doing all

they could to take back their laughter.

“Of course, no insult was meant at all, Lady Lillian,” Lord Drayton said, as the third gentleman cleared his throat and then handed her back her dance card. “You can understand my surprise, however, I am sure.”

Lillian’s eyebrows lifted. “Surprise?”

“Well,” Lord Drayton replied, spreading out his hands and shifting from foot to foot. “It is not often that a young lady such as yourself would pursue such a skill. I understand that every young lady of the ton is educated, of course, but to have such an interest in arithmetic and the like is certainly unusual.”

“Though that in itself is not a criticism,” another gentleman added, quickly, as Lillian shared a glance with Lady Dinah, seeing the twinkle in her eye as the gentlemen fought to cover their foolishness with words of appreciation instead. “You understand that, I am sure.”

“Of course.” Lillian offered them all a small smile, though she said nothing else, keeping her expression steady. There came silence to the small group for a short while and Lillian found herself smiling inwardly at it. Lord Huxley, with a nod to her, stepped away and as he did so, Lillian caught the twinkle in his eye. Evidently, he had rather enjoyed seeing these gentlemen mortify themselves and now, it seemed, no-one knew what to say. All of that, she considered, had come about simply because of the gentlemen’s foolish words and in that regard, they had no-one to blame but themselves.

“I suppose you have all heard about the Mad Duke?” Lord Souter puffed out his chest and grinned broadly, though he avoided Lillian’s gaze. “That is quite something, is it not?”

“The Mad Duke?” one of the ladies asked, as Lillian looked to Lady Dinah, seeing a lack of understanding in her expression also. “Who is he?”

“Well,” Lord Souter began, rubbing his hands together as though he were greatly delighted at being able to dispense this information. “This gentleman has been doing nothing but experiments, or so I hear, involving himself in all manner of strange things!”

Lillian’s stomach twisted and she snatched in a breath, a deep and terrible fear taking a hold of her heart.

“I have heard that he was working on some kind of contraption which would burn a person alive!” Lord Souter finished, as some of the ladies gasped in horror. “It seems that he is more inclined towards spending time on his experiments instead of attending balls and the like, though he must do, it seems, because of his responsibility towards his cousin.”

Lillian closed her eyes briefly as Lady Dinah’s gasp of shock rang out beside her. “Lord Souter,” she said, as loudly as she dared, hating the broad smile on the gentleman’s face. “I do hope that you are not speaking of the Duke of Wrexham, given that his cousin, Lady Dinah, is standing beside me?”

All at once, the color ran from Lord Souter’s face and he opened and closed his mouth in an obvious attempt to find the answer to the question though nothing came from his lips. Instead, he closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose and waved one hand, as though to dismiss all that he had previously said.

“I also think it quite dreadful that you should be so willing to share such a thing,” Lillian continued, slipping her arm through Lady Dinah’s in the hope of offering her strength. “I know the Duke of Wrexham and I can assure you, he is not mad in the least!”

“Though does he do experiments, as Lord Souter has said?” asked one of the ladies, her eyes rounding. “Is he attempting to find a way to burn people through with his contraptions?”

“No, he is not,” Lillian answered, firmly. “I have seen what he has been studying of late and it is nothing to be concerned about.”

The ladies exchanged a glance with each other but said nothing.

“You say that you have seen the Duke’s work?” Lord Drayton asked, as Lillian nodded. “In what capacity?”

“I was calling on my dear friend, Lady Dinah,” Lillian answered, narrowing her eyes just a fraction. “Given that I have an interest in arithmetic and the like, I was very glad to see what the Duke is considering at present, though I can assure you it will bring no harm to anyone. What I understand, the Duke of Wrexham is much more interested in being of assistance to those around him. All that he studies, all that he learns is so that the lives of others might be made a little easier. That is all. It is not something to be feared but, mayhap, to be celebrated.”

“All the same, he is involved in natural philosophy, is he not?” one of the young ladies asked, a somewhat bold look on her face as she ignored the stricken expression on Lady Dinah’s face. “I must say, I have heard a little about such things and I find it all rather unsettling. In that regard, mayhap it is fair to name such a thing as madness?”

Lillian did not know what to say. Lady Dinah stiffened in clear upset and though there were a few glances and a few mumbles, no-one else said anything. “How could you say such a thing as that?” Lillian asked, her voice a little hoarse. “That is utterly disrespectful.”

The young lady shrugged, laughed and then turned away, her arm going through that of her friend. Lillian closed her eyes briefly, then turned to take Lady Dinah away from the rest of the group. "I do not think there is any need to stay," she said, knowing that her mother would be staying near. "I am sorry that you had to hear such a thing. I did not know that he was being spoken of in that way."

"Nor did I." Lady Dinah blinked furiously, her eyes a little glassy. "I did not imagine for a moment – "

"Ah, Lady Dinah." A loud, cheerful voice broke through the strain and Lillian recognized, with relief, her brother's arrival. "I have been hoping to see you this evening. Might I ask if you are dancing? And, I hope, that you have saved me the waltz?" His smile faded as he looked from Dinah to Lillian and then back again, though Lady Dinah remained silent, leaving Lillian to explain.

"There were some gentlemen and ladies speaking ill of the Duke," she said, as Harry scowled. "Somehow, they have discovered his love of natural philosophy and his experiments and are now mocking him, calling him 'the Mad Duke'."

"I am sorry to hear that." Harry shook his head and then reached out to press Lady Dinah's hand. "That must have been difficult to hear."

Sensing the desire from both Lady Dinah and her brother to be together without interruption, Lillian released her friend's arm. "Why do you not walk with Harry for a time, Dinah?" she suggested, as her friend looked to her with a grateful smile. "I might go in search of the Duke, so as to make certain that he is already aware of this."

"A wise thought, sister," Harry agreed, as he took Lady Dinah's arm. "Though do be cautious. Mother might not be particularly pleased."

Lillian glanced over her shoulder, only to see her mother distracted in conversation

with another young lady. Though Lady Galesbury had been defensive of Lillian's mathematical mind, she might not be enamored with the idea of Lillian going in search of the Duke of Wrexham so she might converse with him, given all that had been said thus far. With a small sigh, Lillian shrugged her shoulders. "I shall do so regardless of what she thinks," she answered, determinedly. "If she asks where I am gone, do make some excuse for me!" With a quick smile, she hurried away, silently praying that her mother would not spy her and follow after her and, at the same time, that she would quickly find the Duke.

Her heart began to hammer as she made her way through the ballroom, already a little afraid of what she would say when she saw him. That intimate moment that they had shared, followed by darkness and disappointment, lingered heavily in her mind. To know that he would be courting Lady Vivianne was one thing but to see him with her was quite another. Would she be able to speak to him freely, if Lady Vivianne was there? She could not exactly ask him for a few private moments, given that she had already lost her mother as her chaperone!

There he is.

Lillian's eyes fixed upon the Duke, seeing him twirl Lady Vivianne about the floor. Her mouth went dry, her hands clasping tightly together as she watched him, her heart aching suddenly, the pain so intense that she wanted to cry out. They had been so close to something, her heart revealing to her the true depths of interest she had in the gentleman, only for Lady Vivianne and her brother to steal it all away.

I cannot speak to him now.

Lillian closed her eyes, shutting out the sight of the Duke and Lady Vivianne. She wanted to be the one dancing with him, she wanted to be the one with his arms wrapped around her, the only one who would be looking up into his eyes. Over and over, she reminded herself that there was no interest in Lady Vivianne from the Duke,

nothing that would pull him towards her... and yet, that fear lingered. Opening her eyes again, she saw the dance come to an end and, with relief, saw how the Duke immediately dropped his arms from Lady Vivianne. He bowed low and thereafter, offered his arm so he might walk her from the floor but there was no smile on his face, no warmth in his eyes. Steeling herself, Lillian walked towards him, hoping that he might see her, hoping that she would be able to speak with him – and that Lady Vivianne would not think to dismiss her, as she had so callously done before. She caught the moment that he saw her, seeing the flash in his eyes and the way his lips curved. Happiness poured into her heart, chasing away her fears, driving back her worries and instead, replacing it with a sense of relief.

“Lady Lillian.” The Duke inclined his head. “Good evening.”

“Good evening,” she answered, “and to you also, Lady Vivianne.”

Rather than responding, the lady’s lip curled and she looked away from Lillian directly, making it quite clear that she had no interest in speaking with her.

Lillian ignored her.

“I wonder, Your Grace, if...” Trailing off, she sent another glance towards Lady Vivianne though she was still not paying attention to her.

“Oh, how rude of me!” the Duke exclaimed, releasing Lady Vivianne’s arm at once. “Might I ask to see your dance card, Lady Lillian?”

Her heart lifted. “How very kind, Your Grace. Yes, of course.”

“I think I see my brother.” Lady Vivianne sniffed and then walked away without another word. The Duke shook his head but took her dance card and, throwing her a smile, looked down at it.

“I must speak with you, however,” Lillian continued, her voice low. “Mayhap while we are dancing?”

The Duke looked at her, surprised. “If you wish. Or we might take a turn about the room? No-one will think anything of it, I assure you.”

“I should like that very much.”

The Duke held her gaze for a very long time, a small smile touching the corners of his mouth, heat in his gaze as he let their connection linger. It felt as though fireworks were exploding in Lillian’s frame, making her tremble gently as her heart began to pound. This gentleman was, she realized, more dear to her than she had ever realized. Ever since that first meeting out in the wild, furious storm, there had been something about him which had connected to her heart. She simply had not realized the strength of it.

“You cannot know the joy that comes from simply being in your company, Lady Lillian,” he murmured, so quietly that she was sure no-one else could hear. “I wish I could have come in search of you sooner, but there are expectations at present which I must fulfill.” The smile faded to something like a scowl and he took his gaze from hers, looking down at her dance card. With a sigh, he wrote his initials down and then handed it back to her. “I wish that I could have taken the waltz, Lady Lillian, but there is nothing that would make the ton’s eyebrows lift more!”

“I – I am afraid there might be,” Lillian answered, a nervousness twisting around within her as he looked back at her in surprise. “Your Grace, there is something that I must share with you, something that I have heard which is of concern to me.”

He nodded, smiled briefly though his eyes remained grave as he offered her his arm. “Shall we walk, Lady Lillian?”

She accepted it at once. “Yes, thank you, Your Grace.” With another breath, she looked up at him. “And I shall tell you all.”

The Mad Duke

Edmund scowled as he poured some coffee into his cup, irritated beyond measure with all that Lady Lillian had told him. It was not that he was upset with what she had said, of course, finding himself relieved that she had been willing enough to do so, but angered that the ton had somehow found out about it and, thereafter, had decided to whisper about it all. It was most displeasing to be whispered about, though he himself did not care. What society thought of him was of very little consequence, given that he was quite sure that the lady he sought did not think the same way!

“Edmund.”

He glanced behind him. “Mother. It is not often that you refer to me in such a way. Is there something the matter?”

His mother walked directly towards him, then slammed the paper down on the table beside him. “You promised me that you would not speak of your little... hobby to anyone!”

Edmund set down his coffee and picked up the paper instead. “And I have not,” he said, quietly. “Mother, just because there is something written in here about me does not mean that it is true and neither does it mean that I have had anything to do with it!”

“And yet how else would they have discovered such a thing? Society does not start whispering about a ‘Mad Duke’ from nothing!”

Hesitating, Edmund fought to find an answer but nothing came to him. There was, he realized, very little he could offer by way of explanation for where had that come from? He had only spoken to Lady Lillian and to Dinah about his experiments and he could not imagine that either of them would whisper about it to anyone else.

Can I be sure of that?

Letting his gaze travel to the place his mother was pointing at, Edmund quickly read the few lines, his lip curling as he read descriptions of various experiments he was supposedly undertaking, all dreadful and all utterly preposterous. “This has all been made up out of someone’s imaginings,” he said, firmly. “If society chooses to believe it, then I cannot stop that.”

“But this is damaging!” his mother exclaimed, throwing up her hands and then marching around the table to pour some tea, as though that would be the answer to it all. “Your reputation will be besmirched!”

Edmund shrugged. “I do not think that it will be and, even if it is as you say, that does not trouble me. I have very little consideration for what the ton will think and you need not question me about Dinah either. Lord Weatherly is not about to turn his back on her simply because of a rumour from the ton about her chaperone! I do not know him very well as yet, but I do know him well enough to understand his character is one of strength and determination.”

“All the same, you must see what this could do,” his mother protested, clearly still a little concerned. “What of your own situation? What if Lady Vivianne turns from you? What if she decides that – ”

“I have no intention of marrying Lady Vivianne.” Edmund lifted his chin and saw the shock ripple across his mother’s expression. “Yes, I am courting her and mayhap I should have explained this to you beforehand but I do not expect to engage myself to

the lady. In a few days, I shall end the courtship and all will be well.”

The Duchess stared at him with wide eyes for a few long moments, only to throw up her hands, exclaiming furiously. “But that is all the worse! You will then be courting no young lady at all! And who from the ton will look to you when you are known as ‘the Mad Duke’? You may well have the highest title in England aside from the King himself, but that does not mean that there will be gladness in the hearts of those who might then be considered by you. A father or mother might think twice about permitting their daughter to become attached to you! There shall be no heir, the line shall go to Lord Fullerton and – ”

“Enough, mother!” Edmund interrupted, speaking with a good deal more force than he had intended, making his mother recoil. “Please,” he continued, speaking a little more gently now. “I have everything in hand, I assure you. There will be nothing to concern yourself with, for I have the promise of a young lady that, once I am ended with Lady Vivianne, she will be glad to step along with me.”

This made the Duchess deflate a little, her eyes searching his. “Are you quite sure of that?”

“I am.”

She blinked, then frowned. “And is she a lady of quality?”

“Of course. There may come a bit of surprise from the ton as they see me end one courtship and begin another, but I will not be delayed, Mother. I care for Lady Lillian and I care nothing for Lady Vivianne.”

The Duchess nodded slowly, showing no surprise whatsoever at his words. “Lady Lillian would understand you, I suppose.”

“She does.” Edmund smiled gently as he thought of her. “I spoke plainly to her and explained all as regarded Lady Vivianne and her arrogant brother. Indeed, I have also spoken to Lady Vivianne herself, explaining that it is only because of her reputation – and mine also – that we are courting, given that her brother proclaimed such a thing in front of all of the ton ! But I have told her that it will not last and that she must prepare herself for that, though she is not exactly pleased at the notion.”

Taking in a deep breath, the Duchess set her shoulders and looked back at Edmund with a firm expression. “This is all very convoluted and rather concerning, my son.”

“Yes, I am aware of that.”

“I had not.... ” His mother looked away. “I did not expect any of this, Wrexham. It has come as a surprise to me and to be sure, I do not like to hear that you are now known as the ‘Mad Duke’. That brings pain to my heart.”

“I cannot help that, Mother, though I can assure you that I had nothing to do with the ton ’s knowledge of my experiments.” Edmund frowned. “That being said, I still do not know how such a thing has come about. After all, it seems to me that someone must have spoken to the ton about such things and very few people know of it.”

“That is true.” The Duchess frowned along with Edmund, her hands going to her hips. “Though I cannot be held responsible! I certainly have said nothing of the sort to anyone.”

“And nor would Dinah, I am sure.”

His mother’s eyebrow lifted. “Then what of Lady Lillian?”

Edmund quickly shook his head, having already disregarded the idea entirely. “No. Certainly not.”

“Then who else?”

Edmund shrugged. “I do not know. The only other thought I had was that it might be Lord or Lady Galesbury or even Lord Weatherly. Not that they would have done such a thing with any ill intention, of course! They would simply have spoken about it in passing.”

His mother hesitated, then spread out her hands. “Mayhap. What about your friend?”

“Lord Huxley?” Edmund laughed and shook his head. “No, indeed not. I can assure you that he would not have said a word to anyone.” Clearing his throat, he gestured to the paper and shrugged. “This does not matter, Mother, truly. There is nothing that can be done to silence the ton and nothing that I wish to do either. It will have to be whispered about for a time and that is all that can be done about it.” Seeing his mother open her mouth to protest, Edmund made his way towards her and took her hand in his, looking down into her face. “Please do not worry, Mother. You have Dinah to look after and there is nothing that you need to worry about as regards my reputation. I am sure that Lady Lillian will be contented with our connection, when the time comes, and all will be well.”

After a moment, his mother sighed but though she smiled, there was no light in her eyes. Instead, she simply nodded and looking away, pressed his hand before turning her head away, her concerns and fears pushed down... for the moment at least.

“I am sorry to hear that things have gone badly.”

Edmund sighed and rolled his eyes. “It is all because of Lord Jedburgh. If he had not insisted, had not declared aloud that such a thing might be – even though it was not – then I might now be as contented as could be with Lady Lillian.”

Lord Huxley looked at him, his hands clasped loosely behind his back as they walked together in the park. “Do you think that Lord Jedburgh will do something in order to force your connection to Lady Vivienne?”

“I do, though I cannot imagine what it will be.” Edmund scowled. “At least I know for certain that he cannot have begun the rumour about my supposed madness!”

Lord Huxley’s eyebrows lifted. “No?”

Edmund looked back at him. Why would any gentleman start such a rumour about the man his sister is courting? The one that he wishes to see wed?”

Slowly, Lord Huxley nodded. “I suppose that makes sense.” He frowned. “What are you going to do? Are you going to search for the culprit?”

“The person behind the rumour?” Edmund shook his head no. “I can see no reason for that. If Lady Vivianne feels the need to end our courtship because of this then I cannot blame her for it and, indeed, might find myself rather pleased by it!” Chuckling along with his friend, Edmund shrugged his shoulders. “Besides, even if there is to be difficulties from it, I know that Lady Lillian will not step away from me. That is a comfort.”

Lord Huxley smiled. “You have found someone quite wonderful, it seems.”

“Oh, she is indeed – and the truth is, I did not realise the strength of my interest in her until I was forced away from her!” Edmund grimaced. “Lord Jedburgh has made things difficult for me, I must admit, though I have certainly found a greater awareness of my own heart which is not necessarily a bad thing.”

“All the same, that is frustrating. Would that I could be of some assistance to you!”

Edmund grinned at him. "Would you like to court Lady Vivianne in my place?" he asked, as Lord Huxley let out a bark of laughter.

"I hardly think that is a suitable answer" Lord Huxley rolled his eyes, though he laughed aloud. "As the daughter of a Marquess, I am quite certain that she will be able to find herself a suitable match."

Edmund nodded. "I suppose so. If I am to be truthful, it is only because of her reputation that I began this courtship. I did not want society to look down upon her knowing that her brother had insisted we were courting. I have already informed her that the courtship will soon come to an end, but she does not seem to accept this. Instead, she appears to be quite determined, just as her brother is."

"Is there any reason as to why?"

Shaking his head, Edmund looked away. "Not that I could tell you." Letting out a long and heavy breath, he grimaced. "It may very well be that she simply wishes to be a Duchess. Apparently that is the dream of many a young lady."

"I think I should like to meet this Lady Vivianne." Lord Huxley sent Edmund a calculating look. "If she is as dreadful as she sounds then I am sure I will be turned away from her almost immediately. All the same, I should like to become acquainted."

Edmund lifted his eyebrows. "Are you quite sure?"

"Yes, I think I should like it very much. This is certainly an intriguing situation, and I confess, it is nothing other than morbid curiosity that makes me desire to know her, especially if there is a chance that she may become your wife!" Lord Huxley chuckled at Edmund's dark look. "There could be nothing wrong with being introduced, I am sure. Besides, if you are trying to paint a picture for society's benefit,

then it would be better for you to introduce the lady to your friends, would it not?"

"Very well, very well," Edmund huffed, not quite certain whether Lord Huxley's words were irritating or mirthful. "I shall do so at the next opportunity." He turned his head to look about the park, only to come to a sudden stop, one hand going out across Lord Huxley's chest. His friend stopped at once, looking first at Edmund and then across the park.

"Is there something the matter?"

Edmund's whole body turned cold. "It seems as though your wish is to come true this very moment." With one hand, he pointed towards Lady Vivianne. She was walking through the park with her maid beside her, but no other company. For a moment, Edmund thought about turning on his heel and marching in the opposite direction, making certain that she could not either see him or catch up with him, but propriety told him to stay where he was.

"Is the young lady approaching us in particular?"

Edmund nodded, struggling to remove the scowl from his face. "It is."

"Then that is excellent! I can be introduced to her at once." Lord Huxley grinned at him and, with an effort, Edmund tried to put a pleasant expression on his face though, he noted, Lady Vivianne did not even so much as smile as she drew near.

"Good afternoon, Lady Vivianne." He bowed and kept the smile pinned to his face despite the eager desire within his heart to escape from her. "Are you intending to stay for the fashionable hour?"

She looked away. "I might."

Silence grew and Edmund's stomach twisted, finding every moment that he spent with the lady to be more and more discomfiting. It was only when Lord Huxley cleared his throat that Edmund recalled what he was to do and, with a nod, gestured to his friend. "Lady Vivianne, might I introduce you to my very dear friend, Nicholas, the Marquess of Huxley? Lord Huxley, this is Lady Vivianne, of whom I have been speaking."

Lady Vivianne turned her head and her eyes flashed over Lord Huxley, her chin lifting and, much to Edmund's surprise, a small smile touching the corners of her lips. Mayhap she was just as relieved as he was to have someone else within the conversation, he considered, as Lord Huxley bowed towards her.

"Good afternoon, Lady Vivianne. I am very glad to make your acquaintance."

"You say that you are friends with the Duke?" Lady Vivianne glanced at Edmund but her smile quickly faded when he caught her eye. "For how long?"

Lord Huxley grinned. "A very long time indeed, so I am well able to tell you anything you wish to know about him."

Edmund frowned, throwing his friend a dark look which, after a moment, took some of the smile from Lord Huxley's face. He did not want Lord Huxley to be jocular with Lady Vivianne. What he wanted instead was for his friend to make it quite plain that he though this match would not be any good to either Lady Vivianne or to Edmund himself, adding weight to Edmund's determined words that he would not engage himself to the lady.

"Mayhap I shall take you up on that particular offer one day." Lady Vivianne's voice was cool, casting yet another glance towards Edmund as though to remind him that she had every intention of keeping them in close connection regardless of what he himself thought. "It does seem to me that I do not know the Duke very well as yet,

especially given the whispers I have heard of late.”

“The Mad Duke?” Edmund shrugged. “I would advise you not to listen to gossip, Lady Vivianne.”

“Though you do enjoy your experiments and the like,” Lord Huxley put in, sending Edmund a slightly wide-eyed look, making him realise what his friend meant. Perhaps in speaking this way, perhaps in confirming all that Lady Vivianne had heard, he might be able to encourage her to end their connection no matter what her brother desired.

“Yes, yes, I do.” Edmund spread out his hands either side. “Indeed, I am always doing something in that regard. I very much enjoy experimenting and my thoughts are very often caught up in natural philosophy.”

Lady Vivianne blinked, her face paling a little. “Then you accept the title of the Mad Duke?”

“Accept it?” Edmund shook his head. “No. But I will not pretend that I do not try out experiments, that I am eager to attempt different things in the name of advancing natural philosophy. That is something that you must understand about me, Lady Vivianne.”

She blinked again, then looked away. Edmund threw a glance to his friend, a hint of a smile on his lips in the hope that this might make Lady Vivianne think twice about their connection.

“Well.” Lady Vivianne looked back at him, her eyes darting this way and that and barely resting on his for even a moment. “If that is the truth, then I shall have to learn how to respond to such whispers. Though I do not much like it.”

Edmund's gut twisted. "I am afraid that I do not much care as to whether or not you like it, Lady Vivianne, though forgive me for speaking so bluntly. I am not about to change my interests and set all of that to the side. It is a part of my life that must be accepted, even if there are rumours that come with it."

Lady Vivianne's lip curled and Edmund looked away, wanting to make it clear to her by his silence that he was not about to change his mind or alter himself in any way, only for someone else to catch his eye. His heart leapt and a broad smile spread across his face before he could prevent it, his gaze fixing to Lady Lillian as she looked back at him.

Lord Huxley cleared his throat. "Might you walk with me for a time, Lady Vivianne? I should be delighted to better acquaint myself with you, if I may. I can see that your maid is present but –"

"My brother is nearby," she said, taking Lord Huxley's arm without hesitation, though Edmund found himself inwardly rejoicing that she was so willing to depart from his own company, casting his friend a mouthed, 'thank you' before making his way towards Lady Lillian directly, caring very little as to whether or not Lady Vivianne saw where he went.

"Lady Lillian." His hand caught hers and he bowed over it, his heart skipping about with delight at being in her company again, heedless to the fact that there were those within the ton who would be watching him and all of his interactions. "You cannot know how happy it makes me to see you again."

Lady Lillian smiled back at him though, discreetly, pulled her hand from his. "Forgive me, but given that you are still courting Lady Vivianne, I think it wise that we maintain propriety. As much as I might wish to –"

"Forgive me." Stumbling over his words, Edmund took a step back, realising just

how caught up by his emotions he had been. “I – I did not mean to bring you any sort of embarrassment.” A sudden dread wrapped around him. “If you also wish to step back because of the whispers about me at present, I quite understand.”

“Oh, goodness, of course I do not!” Lady Lillian’s eyes flared and Edmund’s whole body softened with relief. “That does not concern me in the least. I am only sorry that the rumours and whispers have continued to spread. I heard the most preposterous one from Lady Anne this afternoon, though I was quick to silence it, I can assure you.”

Edmund tried to let that pass him by, tried to put that out of his mind but it niggled at him, biting down hard. “It is disappointing to hear that the ton are so fixed upon the gossip about me but it cannot be helped, I suppose. Might I ask what it was you heard?”

Lady Lillian searched his eyes and then, with a sigh, shrugged her shoulders. “It was foolishness. They said that you have damaged your estate severely with all of your tests and some rooms are now in severe need of repair. Evidently they do not think very highly of your skills in natural philosophy! I was certain to tell them otherwise.”

Edmund rubbed one hand over his eyes. “I cannot imagine where such rumours have come from. Who would know that I have been doing experiments at the estate? It seems very strange indeed.”

Her smile was a little rueful. “I think that the ton are very capable of making up a good many things, Your Grace, and do not need to know the truth simply to whisper foolishness.” A sudden brightness caught her eyes. “Though why do you not counter these whispers?”

Edmund tilted his head. “In what way?”

“Have a literary event!” she exclaimed, her hand going to his arm for just a moment as enthusiasm and excitement rippled through her voice. “You could host an evening of natural philosophy and other things, where we might come together to read to each other, to discuss and to learn! Though, of course, ladies might not be invited to such an occasion and I quite understand if that is to be the case.”

A thrill ran up Edmund’s spine. “What a marvellous idea!” He saw her smile and felt his heart warm at the light in her eyes. “You are quite remarkable, Lady Lillian and of course, you shall be invited. I will send out invitations to as many of the ton as I think would be interested, which shall include both ladies and gentlemen. And,” he continued, a grin spreading across his face, “I shall bring out my electrifying machine. That will make the ton speak of me all the more, I know, but it may be that some find it exciting and interesting! Then that might diffuse some of the more negative whispers... though such a thing does not truly concern me, I admit. It would bring a sense of ease to my mother, however, and at the same time, would show the ton that I have no interest in hiding away or pretending that I do not care for such a thing.” His chest lifted as he took in a deep breath, his grin sticking to his face. “My dear Lady Lillian, once more your remarkable mind and quick thinking leaves me in awe of you.”

She blushed but smiled, making Edmund grin. The lady was accepting his compliments, though she did not fawn over him nor seek out more, as many other young ladies might do. The way that her mind worked, the delight she had in numbers and the like inspired him all the more to pursue his experiments, to continue on with the things that he had always sought to do.

“You are very kind, Your Grace.”

“I speak the truth,” He touched her hand for only a moment, seeing the way that fire leapt up into her eyes. “I confess that my desire to be courting you rather than to continue on with this fa?ade with Lady Vivianne is growing all the more. My

frustrations increase, my upset continues and yet I must continue to tolerate it, though it can only be for a few days longer now.” His smile faded. “I suppose I shall have to extend an invitation to her as regards this literary event, though I do not know if she will step back from it.”

“Mayhap she will not attend. Though, given that she has not stepped back from you as yet what with these rumours, I do not think that she will.” Her shoulders lifted and fell. “Might you wish for any assistance in planning the literary event, I should be glad to offer it to you.”

A sudden rush of warmth ran over him, reminding him of just how much he desired her. The thought of being in company with her, in closer acquaintance than this, made his heart thud wildly. “I should like that very much. Mayhap you would like to come to take tea with Dinah and myself soon?” His eyebrows lifted gently. “Dinah could take her leave for a short time, I am sure, should I explain the situation to her.”

The heat in Lady Lillian’s cheeks grew all the more though she nodded quickly, thrilling him with her eagerness. “Shall we say tomorrow?”

He reached out and took her hand in his again, bowing low over it. “It cannot come quickly enough,” he murmured, as her eyes flared with the heat of his breath on her skin. “I look forward to being in your company again, Lady Lillian. More than I can express.”

“I think that would work marvellously well.”

Lillian smiled as the Duke ducked his head and wrote some more down upon a piece of paper, taking all of her ideas and thoughts and accepting every single one without hesitation.

“This event will certainly be very different to those that the ton have held in the past,” Dinah murmured, having not yet taken her leave from the study even though both Lillian and the Duke, she presumed, wished that she would so they might have even a few minutes alone. “Do you think that those you invite will attend?”

Lillian watched as the Duke shrugged, clearly not at all concerned. “If they do not, then that does not concern me in the least. However, I think that there will be many who will attend for, given that the rumours calling me the Mad Duke have continued to swirl, there will be both interest and curiosity about what it is that I intend to do at this event! Therefore, some will come because they wish to see what it is that I will do but some will attend simply because they do enjoy literary things.”

“And no doubt the ton will whisper about your event thereafter,” Dinah pointed out but again, the Duke smiled and shrugged.

“The ton whisper about every event,” Lillian put in, gently. “It is not something that I find favourable but it is something which occurs regularly. Whether it be a ball or a soiree or even the fashionable hour, the beau monde will always find something to speak about whether it be good or bad.”

“I suppose that is true.” Dinah sighed and shook her head. “Would that it were not so.

Harry was saying... ” She stopped and then, her gaze darting from Lillian to the Duke, flushed bright red, though Lillian smiled warmly. Clearly Lady Dinah and Lillian’s brother were becoming very closely acquainted!

“You are referring to Lord Weatherly?”

“I am, of course.” Dinah cleared her throat and then rose, making for the door. “I think I shall go and enquire as to whether another tea tray might be sent up to us.”

Lillian gestured to the bell. “You could simply pull the bell.”

“But there are some honey cakes that the cook made recently and I should very much like to have some. Do excuse me. I will not be too long.”

Lillian smiled as her friend quit the room, though the moment that Lady Dinah stepped out, a swell of anticipation and excitement rose within her. She dropped her gaze for a moment and then turned her attention back to the Duke who was now standing very quietly indeed. His eyes were fixed to hers, his hand frozen in place as he held the quill, his other hand planted flat on the desk. Lillian took in a shuddering breath, pressing her lips together as she waited for him to say something, to do something.

“It seems that my cousin has granted us the time I so eagerly desired,” the Duke murmured, setting his quill down and coming around from behind his desk, just as Lillian herself got to her feet, though she did not know why she stood. “The literary event is going to go marvellously well, I am sure, though that is only thanks to you.”

Lillian shook her head. “No, it was not only my thoughts that helped plan this literary event. Both Lady Dinah and yourself –”

“You inspire me, Lillian.” The Duke spoke in a low, steady voice, coming to a stop

only a step away from her and, as Lillian looked up at him, she forgot everything that she had wanted to say. “From our very first moment of meeting, I was astonished by your intellect, by your quick thinking and by your beauty. I confess that my interest in you and my desire to spend more time with you grew all the more. I will also confess that I found myself rather astonished at how fiercely that interest grew, to the point that, in seeing that I had no choice but to spend time with Lady Vivianne, I realised that my heart was filled with an affection for you. An affection which, Lady Lillian, has grown significantly with every word, every look, every moment I spent in your company.” A tenderness came into his eyes and Lillian pressed her lips together lightly, trying to contain the happiness which was flowing all through her, making her want to exclaim aloud and express her own affection. “Lillian, I want you to know that my only desire is for you. You are so different in character and in emotion to any other young lady of my acquaintance, for there is a depth to you that I have found in no other. I want nothing more than to court you, with my intentions going forward straight and determined.” There came a slight huskiness to his voice and Lillian closed her eyes for a moment, a tingling running through her frame. “Be assured that my hope of courting you remains as strong as ever and that I fully intend to end my courtship with Lady Vivianne within a few days.”

“A few days?” Hope surged through her and Lillian took a step closer to the Duke, seeing the gentleness of his smile. “Truly?”

“Truly.” His hand reached out to catch hers, his thumb skimming lightly across the back of her hand. “I have not told her of this as yet, of course.”

“But what shall you say?”

He shrugged. “I might say that the rumour about the Mad Duke was too severe and that I did not think it fair for Lady Vivianne to endure such a thing.” A quirk caught the edge of his lips. “Though that might then not reflect well should I court you very soon thereafter!”

“I care very little for what the ton thinks,” Lillian answered, quickly. “Do not withdraw from me for fear of that.”

The Duke lowered his head just a little and Lillian trembled at the sudden heat in his eyes – and the curl of warmth in her stomach. “I do not want to withdraw from you, not even a little,” he murmured, shifting his feet so that he came even closer to her. “That would bring me nothing but pain and believe me, what I have had to endure thus far in stepping back from you is not something that I wish to prolong.”

Lillian swallowed hard, the Duke’s breath brushing across her cheek as he lowered his head a little more. “I did not know what you would think of me when I stepped out of the carriage in order to assist you,” she said, her voice a little hoarse as emotion swirled through her. “But to know that you not only did not turn from me because of my bluestocking ways but also that you value my skills and interests means more to me than I think I can express. I was afraid that any gentleman I met would reject the desire within me to learn as much as I can. I was sure that they would push aside my love of mathematics... and then, I met you.”

The edge of the Duke’s mouth tipped upwards. “Any gentleman who rejected you because of that would be a fool,” he whispered, his other hand lifting and settling lightly on her shoulder as, emboldened by his nearness, lifted her hand to settle gently against his heart, her fingers reaching up towards his shoulder. “And I, Lady Lillian, am no fool.”

His head lowered a little more but then stopped, his eyes searching hers – and Lillian realised that he was waiting for her to fill the space between them. He was being respectful enough towards her to let her be the one to decide whether or not this was something she desired and would not force his lips upon hers. Her heart swelled with an even greater affection for him, loving that the sweetness of his nature showed her both respect and consideration. Her desire for him grew and she tilted her head back a little more and, after a moment, after a quick breath, lifted herself so she stood on her

tiptoes, and, in doing so, closed the distance between them.

It was like fire and ice at the very same time. She shivered violently, only for heat to sweep through her as his arms wrapped around her, pulling her closer to him. Their kiss was soft and gentle, speaking of his tenderness for her, of his willingness to hold himself back just so she would not be overwhelmed. Her hand pressed against his chest, the other at his shoulder before sweeping both arms up and around his neck, her fingers brushing through his hair – and the Duke groaned lightly.

Jolted in surprise, Lillian broke the kiss, leaning back so that her hands went again to his shoulders. Had she done something wrong? Was he now filled with regret at kissing her and that was why he had made that sound?

The Duke blinked rapidly, then smiled. “If you wish, I can release you,” he murmured, his arms still about her waist, “though I pray that you do not desire it.”

“I... I was afraid that...” Struggling to find the words, Lillian closed her eyes again. “I thought you were upset or that there had been some difficulty in what we shared.” When she dared to peek at him again, the Duke was grinning broadly, his eyes twinkling and, despite her own concerns, Lillian smiled back at him.

“My dear lady, it was only from sheer ecstasy, I assure you.” Taking one hand from her waist, he rested it against her cheek for a moment or two. “To have you in my arms and to have such a tenderness shared between us is the most wonderful thing I have ever experienced. Though I wish very much that I was courting you rather than keeping up this fa?ade with Lady Vivianne!” His smile grew a little sorrowful. “But it will not be long.”

“And I can wait,” Lillian promised, as his hand fell to her side, only to grasp her fingers and thread his own through hers. “Knowing that there is this bond between us means that I am well able to endure another short while until we can finally court.”

“That is good.” The Duke closed his eyes and let out a sigh of frustration, just as Lillian heard the sound of footsteps coming back along the hallway. “Though it seems that we are not to have any further time together, Lady Lillian, not for the moment, at least.”

Lillian smiled, aware of the heat in her cheeks, before she stepped back from him and made her way to the opposite side of the room – and it was just in time, for Lady Dinah appeared just as Lillian sat down, her face wreathed in smiles.

“The cook has not only made honey cakes, but three others of my very favourite cakes,” she said, beaming at Lillian who was struggling to look anywhere but the Duke. “They will send a tea tray in a moment.” With a satisfied sigh, Lady Dinah sat down opposite Lillian and then looked up at her cousin. “Have you made any further plans for the literary event?”

The Duke chuckled and Lillian ducked her head, blushing furiously. “We have made some plans, certainly,” he said, as a tiny smile crept across Lillian’s face, hearing the promise in his words. “And I hope that they will come to fruition very soon indeed.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:07 am

“I do not much care to be in the park during the fashionable hour.”

“And I do not much care about continuing on with this supposed courtship, but I must do so,” Edmund stated, aware that there was anger in his voice but choosing to do nothing to hide it from her. “Your brother is nearby, however, so whenever you wish to return to him, I would be delighted for you to do so.”

Lady Vivianne said nothing though she turned her head away just a little, leaving Edmund with a pang of guilt. He ought not to be so sharp in his words, he supposed, but given that he had just spied Lady Lillian nearby and felt the surge of desire deep within his heart to be in her company and her company alone, Edmund had struggled to keep frustration out of his voice.

“Nor do I want to come to this literary event,” Lady Vivianne whined, making Edmund scowl. “I think it is a foolish idea. I do not think that you ought to celebrate such a thing, for the rumours about the Mad Duke continue to grow and – ”

“I am not mad, certainly, but I do enjoy doing experiments and studying natural philosophy. I am not about to hide that from the ton and, in this way, I can show them precisely what it is that engages me so much.”

Lady Vivianne wrinkled her nose. “I hardly think that is wise.”

“I do not much care whether you think it wise or not. That is what I am going to do. The invitations will be sent out this afternoon and if you do not wish to attend, then do not.”

“But I must.”

Edmund shook his head. “No, there is no expectation.”

“We are courting! I must be seen to be by your side and that means, attending these foolish events,” she complained, making Edmund’s irritation grow with an even greater strength. He cast a glance behind him in search of Lady Vivianne’s brother, wondering when he would be able to remove her from his company and return her to him. “This is deeply unfair and inconsiderate of my requirements and sensibilities.”

Letting out a heavy breath, Edmund paused and looked at her, coming to a stop rather than walking along with her, though he kept her arm through his. “Lady Vivianne, might I remind you that we are courting solely because of my desire to make certain that your reputation was not damaged in all of this. I intend to end our courtship very soon.”

Lady Vivianne’s chin lifted. “No. You know as well as I that this is an expected engagement.” Her voice was thin, her tone as though she were berating him for speaking so. “I am aware that you do not expect us to become engaged but I must hope that our time together will bring about a change of heart.”

Edmund shook his head, thinking of how he had kissed Lady Lillian and how much that had thrilled him. He felt nothing for Lady Vivianne, not even the smallest iota of affection. “I can assure you,” he said, with emphasis, “that will never be.”

“We shall see.”

His anger rose to a crescent and, dropping her arm – and making certain that they were not in close proximity to the others in the park – he turned to face her, his whole body tight with tension. “In case you have forgotten, Lady Vivianne, I never had any intention of courting you. My only intention was to speak to the family about what

had been said and, thereafter, to consider and discuss the matter. Instead, your brother has forced this situation upon me and I find myself rebelling against it entirely, to the point that I quite frankly, would never find myself persuaded towards engagement and matrimony. Please, if you have any sense, put such an idea from your head.” Taking in a deep breath so as to control himself a little more, Edmund continued on, seeing a pinched expression come over Lady Vivianne’s face. “You may be disappointed with such a thing given that you know you may not become a Duchess, but I can assure you that there are many wonderful gentlemen of high title who will be more than delighted to court you. You are the daughter of a marquess and – ”

“I have no interest in becoming a Duchess!”

Edmund glanced around the park where they both stood – with Lord Jedburgh a little way off – for fear that someone would overhear them but, much to his relief, most of the other gentlemen and ladies walking through St James’ Park were in their own conversation and did not throw him even the smallest of glances. “I dd not mean to insult you, Lady Vivianne, but surely you must hope that – ”

“I have no interest in becoming a Duchess, I can assure you.” Lady Vivianne narrowed her eyes, coming a little closer to him, her hands going to her hips as her eyes narrowed. “I am only doing as my brother demands, not because I have any hope or desire for such a thing myself.”

For some moments, Edmund did not know what to say. He looked back at Lady Vivianne for a long moment, then frowned. “I understand.”

“You are not the only one who is uncertain about this courtship,” Lady Vivianne continued, biting her lip before dropping her gaze, her voice gentling a little. “However, my brother insists upon it and I must do as he asks. He holds the greatest title within our family and he has taken his responsibility with my future very seriously. Lord Jedburgh is not someone who can be argued with, Your Grace,

whether you be his sister or a Duke.”

Not certain what to make of this, Edmund rubbed one hand over his chin. He had not expected Lady Vivianne to make any sort of complaint about their courtship, had expected her to be just like her brother but instead, it appeared now that she was just as displeased as he himself felt. “I believe that this is the first time you are being honest with me, Lady Vivianne,” he said, seeing her dart her gaze away from him again. “I thank you for it.” He looked back at her in silence until she turned her gaze back to his. “Tell me, Lady Vivianne. Is there any part of you that wishes to wed? That desires to become a Duchess?”

She closed her eyes and took in a long breath, her shoulders rounding a little. There was a heaviness in her frame now, and in her voice as she spoke, a dullness in her gaze. “The truth is, Your Grace, I should like very much to choose my own husband. I should like to be able to respond to the attentions of those who have shown an interest in me, only to step back when they realise that I am not at all free to offer attentions in return.” Lady Vivianne blinked furiously though she still would not look directly back at him. “I would like to give permission to whoever asked me as regarded courtship, I would like to be able to decide which gentleman I would accept a proposal from. But I have had no opportunity to do such a thing and therefore, I must do as my brother asks, as must you.”

A curl of displeasure made Edmund scowl. “I have no intention of doing as your brother demands.”

“Though you have given in thus far.”

“Because I had no choice!” Edmund exclaimed, throwing up his hands. “I had to make certain that your reputation was not besmirched and that mine remained clean also. But you should know that I have no intention of bringing this any further than courtship.”

Lady Vivianne closed her eyes, a slight tremor in her voice. “We shall see, Your Grace. My brother is a dark minded gentleman and can usually do whatever he wishes and get whatever he wants.” The tremble in her voice became all the more pronounced and this made Edmund frown, wondering why she sounded so. Initially, he had thought that she was pleased that her brother’s schemes had been going so well. Now, it seemed, she was of an entirely different mind.

“I am not about to be forced into this, Lady Vivianne,” he said, making sure to speak with a gentleness in order to encourage her to speak more freely again. “Might I ask if you know why it is that he desires this match so strongly?”

Lady Vivianne’s gaze softened and, for the first time since the start of their conversation, she offered him a small, sad smile. “My father has briefly mentioned it – though he did not ever once suggest that there would be any expectation of engagement – but my brother, from that moment, seemed quite determined. What is worse is that my father is very much involved with his business matters here in London and my mother so eager to be involved with her own friends, she does not even think of me. Thus, my brother has taken on the responsibility for me and has told my parents that he is glad to do so.”

“So your father is not pushing this engagement forward?” Edmund watched as the lady nodded, seeing a slight gleam in her eye – was that from hidden tears? “Has he any knowledge of this?”

Lady Vivianne swallowed, then shook her head. “And I dare not speak to him about it for my brother will insist that he is quite correct in all that he has done thus far and my father will berate me for bringing it to him when there was nothing wrong. I already know that will be the response given to me, so I cannot speak a single word.”

There was something happening between them now, something in this conversation which was making Edmund’s heart lift with a sudden though strange hope. Lady

Vivianne did not appear to be as angry, as cold as she had been at the beginning of this conversation. Instead, she seemed to be a little more open towards him, the tension beginning to fade between them. “Might I ask if you have any thoughts or knowledge as to why your brother is so insistent upon this engagement?”

Lady Vivianne studied him for a few moments as though deciding whether or not to speak honestly, only to sigh and shake her head. “He did not give me his reasons – he never has – but it may very well be that he is eager for the status that the connection will bring. Yes, he will one day be a Marquess but to have a sister married to a Duke might bring him a little more elevation in standing in society.”

“But you do not care about that.”

“No, I do not.”

“Then... then we are both of the same mind,” Edmund answered, slowly, coming a little closer to her, aware that he felt nothing for her whatsoever but being aware that she felt the very same way which was, admittedly, something of a relief. “Might I ask you, Lady Vivianne, if there is another gentleman in whom you have an interest in? I do not ask you to make you blush and indeed, you do not have to give me his name, but it was only with the thought that, should our engagement come to an end, there would be someone else as to whom you could turn.”

Lady Vivianne looked back at him for a long time but did not say a word. It was as though she were attempting to ascertain whether or not he was speaking the truth, whether or not he could be trusted. Edmund said nothing, curling his fingers up tight into his fist so that he would remain outwardly calm.

Eventually, she spoke.

“There may be. I believe that, in knowing that I am no longer bound to this foolish

connection, he may then seek to court me – and would go to my father rather than to my brother.”

“And you would be glad of this connection?”

She nodded. “I would.”

“That does bring me some relief,” Edmund admitted, honestly. “I also seek the company of another, someone who knows of our situation and has been greatly pained by watching it. I should very much like to be free of this so I could turn to her.”

Lady Vivianne’s lips quirked. “Even though you are known as the Mad Duke?”

Edmund laughed for what was the first time during their conversation. “Indeed, Lady Vivianne. In fact, she has always been aware of that aspect of my character and has not turned from it. Instead, she seemed to delight in it, truth be told, and for that, I shall be forever grateful, I think.”

Lady Vivianne smiled, took in a deep breath and then let it out again, her shoulders dropping and her smile fading. “But what shall we do? It is as I have said, my brother demands and I must do as he asks else... ”

Edmund’s eyebrows lifted as Lady Vivianne’s eyes rounded, perhaps realizing that she had said more than she had intended. A sudden anger struck him and he moved closer to her still, lowering his voice so that those around him would not hear. “What will he do if you do not obey?” he asked, his voice barely louder than a whisper. “That is something that I have not thought about until this moment but I can see in your eyes that there is fear there. Why is it that you are in this courtship with me if you do not wish to be so? You have told me that your father will not listen, that your brother will be able to manipulate him to make it appear as though you are

complaining about him with very little reason to do so and that your mother has no real interest either, but what has forced you to do as your brother demands? Why is it then, if you have no wish to be a Duchess and desire to make your own choice as regards the gentleman you might one day wed that you agreed to this?"

Lady Vivianne's eyes were wide with fright and, as Edmund watched, she looked over his shoulder to where her brother stood. Edmund felt as though he had been kicked hard in the stomach, leaning forward a little more as he waited for her to look back at him.

"It is because of fear, is it not? What is it that he has said?"

"He has said that, if I do not, then he will ruin me," she whispered, her eyes closing tightly, only to widen with a sudden flare, her hand reaching out to grasp his. "Pray, do not tell him so! You must not tell a soul, I beg of you!"

Edmund pressed her hand back firmly, then released it. "There is a purpose to all of this," he said grimly, rubbing one hand over his face as a heavy weight sank onto his shoulders. "There must be some purpose in ensuring that you and I are wed, some reason that he is so forceful as to threaten his own sister. I cannot imagine what it will be but I do believe that there is a darker purpose here than simply wishing to have a connection with a Duke."

A single tear fell to Lady Vivianne's cheek. "I should never have said a word. He told me that –"

"I am glad that you did," Edmund interrupted, gently but with great firmness. "You are unhappy, as am I, and there is no reason for you to be so, not if I have anything to do with it. There must be a way to discover what the purpose is behind all of this and, in doing so, free ourselves from our connection. You can go to whichever gentleman you have an interest in and I shall go to Lady Lillian... if she will still have me."

Lady Vivianne did not show any sort of surprise at this remark though she had gone very still indeed. It was as though she was trying to make sense of what had happened, of what had been shared between them and was still thinking through it all.

“You can trust me, Lady Vivianne,” Edmund said gently, seeing her eyes turn to his, tears still lingering there. “There must be a purpose behind all of this, a nefarious purpose, I fear, but in exposing it, we shall both be free. Is that not what you want?”

She closed her eyes and nodded, though a small sob came from her throat.

“Do not be afraid, I will let no harm come to you.” Edmund waited until she had opened her eyes and composed herself, smiling at her with as much reassurance as he could put into his voice and expression. “Do you think that you can trust me, Lady Vivianne?”

It took a few moments but, with a sniff, Lady Vivianne lifted her chin and nodded, tears still sparkling in her eyes but determination burning there also.

“Good.” Still smiling, Edmund offered her his arm and they turned back towards the rest of the crowd. “Come, then. Let us continue on the pretence for a little longer until we can think of how we are to go about finding out the truth.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:07 am

“Lillian? I must speak with you.”

Lillian blinked in surprise but then nodded. “Of course, Your Grace.” She glanced about the room which was filled with a great number of gentlemen and ladies, who had all come for the literary event. “You have still to show the electrifying machine. And is Lady Vivianne present?”

The Duke nodded, though his expression remained grave. “She is, as is her brother.” He looked back at her again, steady now. “I must ask you to stay close to Lady Vivianne, if you can. I shall ask Lord Huxley to do so also. There is much that I must explain to both yourself and to him and Lady Vivianne must be present also. However, her brother cannot be nearby.”

Astonished at the change of heart towards Lady Vivianne, Lillian stared back at him, nonplussed. It was only when the Duke’s gaze returned to her from where it had been darting around the room that he responded, evidently seeing her uncertainty and concern.

“Do not think for a moment that my heart is at all affected,” he said quietly, his voice low, his hand reaching out to take hers surreptitiously for just a moment. “There is more to this situation and to this foolish courtship than there appears.”

“I understand.” Relief washed through her as she pressed his hand, then released it. “I will do as you ask.”

“I thank you.” The Duke smiled briefly but then turned away, leaving Lillian to stand alone for a moment.

A hand touched her arm. "Lillian?"

She turned. "Dinah." Smiling, she took in a deep breath. "I am very glad indeed to see you. The Duke has just asked me to go to speak with Lady Vivianne."

No surprise flickered in Lady Vivianne's eyes. "Yes, he asked me the same thing though he did not say why. Only that it was important."

Lillian nodded slowly, her mind whirling with thoughts. "I see." Taking in a breath, she turned her head to look to where the lady was, her stomach twisting. "I confess that I do not want to do as he has asked of me."

"Then you do not have to," Lady Dinah said, quickly. "I am sure that he will understand."

Considering, Lillian shook her head. "No, it sounded rather serious especially given that the Duke desired for her brother to be far from her. I said I would do as he asked and I shall."

Smiling, Lady Dinah linked her arm through Lillian and together, the two of them walked around the room slowly in search of Lady Vivianne. Lillian saw her first, seeing how she appeared to shrink back from the others, her arms folded over her chest, her expression pinched. Swallowing hard and reminding herself that the Duke had no feelings for the lady, Lillian lifted her chin and made her way to the lady directly.

Lady Vivianne frowned.

"Good afternoon, Lady Vivianne. The Duke has informed me that you might be willing to accept my company for a time?" Putting a smile to her lips, she waited for the lady to respond but Lady Vivianne simply remained silent, a frown still lingering.

“I believe that there is something that the Duke wishes to tell Lady Dinah, Lord Huxley and myself, for he is to come and join us soon. He also wishes for us to make certain that your brother is absent from your company when he speaks?” She ended on a question, watching as Lady Vivianne’s expression changed from a heavy frown to wide, frightened eyes.

“He has told you everything?”

Lillian shook her head, seeing the fear in Lady Vivianne’s expression. “He has told us nothing,” she said gently, as Lady Dinah nodded. “Please, do not be afraid. We want to come alongside you, truly. We have no ulterior motive.”

Lady Vivianne blinked rapidly, a sheen of fear being forced back from her eyes. “Why would you do such a thing?”

Lillian smiled. “Because the Duke has asked me to. He is clearly concerned for you and therefore, I trust his judgement. “

The lady closed her eyes and took in a shaky breath. “The Duke of Wrexham is a good gentleman, despite all that I have demanded,” she said, hoarsely. “Thank you, Lady Lillian, Lady Dinah. I will accept your company.”

With a glance to Lady Dinah, Lillian nodded and came to stand beside her on one side, with Lady Dinah on the other. They stood in silence with Lillian struggling to know what to say, looking again to Lady Dinah who only offered her a smile.

“And here it is!”

The cry of the Duke made Lillian start in surprise, only for murmurs to run quickly around the room. She forgot about the awkwardness between Lady Vivianne and herself and instead, focused entirely on the Duke and the electrifying machine that he

had brought into the room. Rather than look at the machine, however, she took in the expressions of the others in the room, silently praying that they would not reject the Duke over this, that they would not think him entirely mad and, thereafter, run from his company!

To her relief, most of those present appeared to be quite interested, given the murmurings, the way they moved forward and the smiles on some of their faces. Lillian herself was about to make her way to the machine, only to recall that she was to stay by Lady Vivianne's side.

"Come, come all and let us see whether you have the strength to endure a spark from the electrifying machine!" the Duke cried, making a few louder exclamations lift up from the audience. "I have been called mad but I assure you, I am not. What I try to do, I do in the hopes of improving the lives of those around me whether they be gentry or otherwise. This, however, has been something I have done simply because of the joy of it and I am delighted to say that the improvements have gone very well. I shall show you all how it works and, thereafter, the gentlemen of the room might wish to be the ones to step forward and try it for themselves! And the ladies also, if they be brave enough!"

This made the room explode with exclamations, making Lillian smile as she clasped her hands together in front of her and watched the guests making their way a little closer to the contraption. Thus far, they had enjoyed some reading, lively discussion – which she had only been able to listen to given that the subject of natural philosophy was not something she knew much of – and thereafter, some further reading on various new inventions. She had learned a great deal, her interest quickened and ignited for further reading and learning of her own, but this moment, this electrifying machine was the pivotal moment of the afternoon. If the guests rejected it, then the chances of the Duke retaining the title of the Mad Duke would linger but if they accepted it, then all would be well, she was sure.

“All that you must do is hold this piece of wire in your hand,” the Duke finished, having made a prolonged explanation about what was to take place. “I shall rotate this by turning the handle and after a short while, the electricity which will be generated will run down here and into the piece of wire in your hand.” He straightened and then looked around the room. “Who would like to go first?”

Everyone looked at each other and Lillian’s heart began to pound, fearing that no-one would dare, no-one would be bold enough and that it would all fall flat.

“Come now!” the Duke exclaimed, as Lillian saw the smile on his face grow a little fixed. “There must be someone willing to try! Or must I challenge someone to it?”

“Challenge?” One of the gentlemen spoke up, as another frowned and tilted his head. “What do you mean?”

The Duke licked his lips, hesitating. “Well, there are some who are betting gentlemen here, are there not?” His eyes lit up, an idea obviously taking a hold of him and he looked straight at Lillian. A shiver went down her spine as he smiled, his eyes gleaming. “For those who are bold enough but still uncertain about the electrifying machine, I challenge you to answer a mathematical question. If you can give me the answer, then you do not have to hold the wire and the challenge passes to the next person.”

The gentleman whom Lillian recognised to be Lord Williamson, laughed harshly. “A mathematical problem? That is what you wish to challenge me with?”

The Duke shrugged though he looked back at Lillian who, realising what he thought to do, gave him a small nod even though her stomach twisted this way and that in nervousness.

“I do indeed,” the Duke declared. “Though you must answer the question before

another challenger... Lady Lillian.”

At once, a quiet gasp rippled around the room but Lillian, rather than being in any way embarrassed, felt a sense of pride grip her as she lifted her chin and looked about at them all before, with a beckon from the Duke, making her way to the front of the room.

“Lady Lillian are you quite contented to answer some questions?” the Duke asked, sounding a little apologetic. “I am sorry that I did not have time to ask you this in advance but – ”

“I am quite delighted to have the opportunity,” Lillian answered, seeing her brother out of the corner of her eye. He had come with her but given the grin on his face, had no concern whatsoever over her presence at the front of the room. “Who shall challenge me first?”

The gentleman, Lord Williamson, stepped forward. “I believe that I can succeed against a mere woman,” he said, a supercilious smile on his face though Lillian only smiled, her confidence growing steadily given the pride in the Duke’s eyes at her presence and her willingness. “I shall escape the electrifying machine.”

The Duke chuckled quietly. “Do not underestimate the lady,” he said, throwing Lillian a wink. “Now, here is the question. If you answer before Lady Lillian, then you will succeed and can escape the electrifying machine. But if you do not, then you shall be the first to hold the wire! And we shall see just how many gentlemen are willing to come thereafter.” He lifted an eyebrow. “Are you quite ready?”

With a nod, Lillian looked back at Lord Williamson, taking in the dark curl of his lip and realising just how little he thought of her. That, she hoped, would soon change.

“Sixteen multiplied by sixty-three, with five hundred and ninety-six deducted,” the

Duke said, speaking slowly before repeating himself. “The answer, if you please.”

Lillian closed her eyes, shutting out the sight of everyone else in the room. Her mind worked quickly on the problem, her hands squeezing into fists as she fought to get a clear answer.

Her eyes flew open. “Four hundred and twelve.”

A gasp rang around the room for what was the second time in a short duration, though Lillian’s eyes were on Lord Williamson.

He was scowling.

“I believe that the lady is correct,” the Duke said, with a grin. “Lord Williamson, this way, if you please.”

Lillian watched as the gentleman stomped towards the electrifying machine. There was clear tension in the air, with Lord Williamson hesitating and clearly reluctant. The Duke cranked the machine and, after a few moments, Lord Williamson let out a yelp and then, stared down at his hand.

That was the moment that seemed to break the hold which had cast itself across the room. Some laughed, some put hands to their heart in shock and stepped back whilst others moved forward, ready to take on the electrifying machine. Lillian beamed with delight at the Duke who, offering her a smile and an inclination of his head, then turned to the next gentleman and thus, the entertainment began.

“It seems as though the guests are remarkably interested in the electrifying machine,” Lady Vivianne murmured, as Lillian watched the proceedings along with her. “They

are going to be taking turns to crank it, I think.”

“I believe so.” Lillian, who had moved back with the others some time ago, stood side by side with Lady Vivianne with Lady Dinah next to her. “I see that your brother is amongst the throng. Oh, and look, here is Lord Huxley.” Gesturing to the gentleman who had slowly detached himself from the crowd and began to come towards them, Lillian caught the slight catch of breath from Lady Vivianne, though when she looked at her, the lady had schooled her expression into a very calm one indeed.

“Good afternoon to you all.” Lord Huxley smiled and inclined his head. “Lady Lillian, might I say how remarkable you are? Your mind works so very quickly – more quickly than my own, I might add!”

Lillian flushed but smiled. “I thank you. I was glad to help the Duke bring the other guests to the electrifying machine.”

Lord Huxley chuckled. “Indeed, though I am not convinced that he was best pleased about being forced into such a thing – though no doubt it came more from a dislike at being beaten by you, my dear lady!”

“I thought it very impressive also.”

Lillian turned in surprise to Lady Vivianne, seeing surprise flash across Lady Dinah’s face also though she was quickly distracted by the arrival of Harry who came to join them. “Thank you,” she answered slowly, wondering if Lady Vivianne meant such a thing with any genuine spirit whatsoever. The lady only offered her a small smile and then dropped her head so that her gaze went to the floor. Lillian looked to Lord Huxley but he was frowning, his eyes on Lady Vivianne.

“Ah good, you are all here. Come now, we only have a few minutes with which to

speak.”

Lillian looked up, her heart flooding with happiness as the Duke came to join them, his smile broad but his eyes serious. “What is it?”

“Come, come.” Beckoning to Harry and to Lady Dinah, the Duke waited until they had joined the small group before directing his gaze to Lady Vivianne. “Lady Vivianne, I think I must speak of what we discussed most recently. Lord Huxley is my very closest friend and he can be trusted, as can Lady Lillian and her brother. Please, might you permit me?”

With a slight shudder, Lady Vivianne closed her eyes but nodded, her face going rather pale. Lord Huxley took a step closer and murmured something to her before taking her arm, letting her rest and support herself on him. Lillian’s stomach tightened as she looked back to the Duke. Clearly, there was something significant in this.

“Lady Vivianne has informed me that there is a great insistence by her brother that we wed, to the point that he has said he will ruin her if she does not.”

Lillian’s heart slammed hard against her ribs. “What do you mean?”

“Just that,” Lady Vivianne whispered, as Lady Dinah and Harry looked to each other in shock. “I have no interest in this connection. I do not want to marry but my brother insists upon it and, though my father is still the authority in the family, he will listen to my brother over anything that I say. Jedburgh has a hold upon me and I cannot escape from it.”

“I do not understand,” Lillian began, her hands squeezing tight as she fought the rush of shock which threatened to unbalance her. “Why are you being forced to do so? What does your brother want? If it is the connection to a Duke, then I can understand

it but there does not need to be such insistence, surely?"

"That is the worst of it," the Duke said, coming a little closer to them all and keeping his voice low. "Lady Vivianne does not know and I cannot think of any particular reason as to why he would do so. But I fear for Lady Vivianne if I were to end the courtship, concerned as to what her brother would do. Therefore, I must discover the truth."

"And you should like us to aid you." Lord Huxley looked again to Lady Vivianne. "We are all your friends in this, Lady Vivianne. Of course we will be of aid to you."

Lady Vivianne managed a wobbly smile, only to drop her head and close her eyes but not before Lillian had caught the way a tear fell to her cheek. Her own heart squeezed with sympathy, seeing the lady in a whole new light now that she understood the circumstances she found herself in.

"But what can we do?" Lady Dinah asked, her expression troubled. "How can we discover it? Lord Jedburgh is not simply going to tell us, is he?"

Lillian's eyes flared with a sudden thought. "Could it be that Lord Jedburgh is the one who began the rumours about the Mad Duke?"

There came a short pause, only for the Duke to shake his head. "I cannot see why he would do that. I am courting his sister and he wants us to wed. Why then would he begin a rumour that might endanger that?"

Pursing her lips together, Lillian fought for an explanation but none came.

"Unless it is that he wants to shame his sister in some way, though I do not know why." Lady Dinah threw a glance to Lady Vivianne, an apology in her expression. "If there is animosity between you, then might he do such a thing?"

Lady Vivianne shook her head. “I have never done anything to make him spite me.”

Lillian bit her lip as silence ran around the group. Many thoughts came crowding into her mind, pushing her this way and that as she battled to find answers. “Could it be to try and make you feel more inclined towards Lady Vivianne?” she asked, a little embarrassed to be speaking so. “To show you that she will stand by your side despite the rumours?”

Again, this was met with silence though Lady Vivianne closed her eyes briefly and gave a small shake of her head.

“We are going to have to find out,” the Duke said, after a few moments. “I cannot surmise the truth as yet. But I hope that, together, we might be able to come up with a solution that would lead us to the truth.”

“And thereby free both Lady Vivianne and yourself,” Lord Huxley murmured, as Lillian nodded. “Yes, of course. I quite understand. I will do whatever I can to help.”

Looking around the small group, Lillian frowned and then spoke the question which had come into her mind. “This ‘Mad Duke’ story – did it not mention that you had been doing experiments and the like? You yourself questioned how someone would know such a thing. Have you come to any conclusions? Would that not be of aid to us?” She glanced around at the others, wondering if any of them would have an answer only for Lord Huxley to answer.

“That would be easy enough to ascertain, surely for there are only a few people who know of that.” Lord Huxley held up one hand. “The Duchess, Lady Dinah, Lady Lillian, her brother and myself, I presume. And now, Lady Vivianne.”

“But I have said nothing to anyone,” Lillian said, frowning. “I do not mean to suggest that you are accusing me, Lord Huxley, only to say that I have not said a single word

either by accident or otherwise. I did not know the Duke well enough to speak of his passions for such a thing and I know my brother would not have done either.”

Harry quickly shook his head.

“And my mother is mortified enough by my endeavours to never speak of them,” the Duke murmured, gentle lines forming across his forehead. “And I presume your yourself have said nothing, Huxley?”

His friend shook his head. “And I have not been in London,” he reminded them all. “I could not have said a word.”

“I can assure you, I have been so caught up with my own Season that I have not mentioned such a thing to anyone!” Lady Dinah exclaimed, her eyes rounding as though she feared that what had been said now made her the guilty party. “The only thing I have done is to write of it to my brother, though he was already aware of your interest, given that our father was the one who encouraged it in you.”

Lillian set aside that information almost at once, discounting Lady Dinah’s brother – Lord Fullerton, if she remembered correctly – for he was away on business abroad, was he not? So he certainly could not have done anything.

The Duke, however, appeared to disagree.

“Your brother,” the Duke murmured, rubbing one hand over his chin as his gaze sharpened. “He is still on the continent, yes?”

“From what I know.” Lady Dinah sounded confused, frowning as she gazed back at the Duke. “The letters I send are to go to the solicitors and they send them on to whatever address my brother has provided. Given that he has moved about at various holdings, it often changes.”

Lillian saw the Duke's frown deepen and felt her heart quicken. She had never met Lord Fullerton and had never expected to meet him given where he was. Surely the Duke could not be considering that particular gentleman to be responsible? That did not make very much sense at all.

"I do not understand, Wrexham," Lord Huxley said, slowly. "Do you suspect Lord Fullerton even though he is on the continent?"

"It makes sense, does it not?" The Duke asked, as the room filled with exclamations and laughter as the electrifying machine continued to entertain people. "No-one else could be responsible. And I cannot be certain that he is on the continent."

"But what reason could he have to do such a thing?" Lady Dinah asked, as the Duke scowled. "I know that there was not any great affection between you both but surely there would be no reason for him to speak so cruelly!"

"No affection?" Lillian asked, as the Duke nodded. "But you are family! Why would you not care for each other in that way?"

"Because," the Duke said, heavily, "his father was greatly encouraging in my efforts to experiment and improve things and did not spend time with him in return. My own father disliked all such things and instead, I went to my uncle for support and encouragement. My cousin did not take well to this and has often been very cold towards me though I did not think that he would ever do such a thing as this!"

Lillian blinked, surprised to hear pain in the Duke's voice. She could not imagine what it would have been like for him to have no family member supporting him in his endeavours, none delighting in his achievements. Surely that must have brought him a great deal of sorrow!

"What can be done, then?" Lady Vivianne spoke up for the first time in some

minutes, her voice quavering. “Is the rumour of the Mad Duke somehow connected to what I have been expected to do?”

“Mayhap,” the Duke agreed, as Lillian nodded slowly though she could not yet see a connection. “There is a great deal of mystery still, Lady Vivianne but I am determined to find out the truth. For the moment, however, we will still continue our courtship in order to protect you.”

Lady Vivianne closed her eyes and nodded though she did not say a single word.

“I will make certain you come to no harm,” she heard Lord Huxley say, his voice very quiet indeed. “The truth will be revealed and you know that you have safety here with me.”

A thrill of surprise ran up Lillian’s spine but she looked away quickly, not wanting to interrupt what was otherwise an intimate moment. Lord Huxley cared for Lady Vivianne?

“We must be cautious,” the Duke continued, clearly unaware of what Lord Huxley had said to Lady Vivianne. “Dinah, might you make your way to the solicitors and discover precisely where your letters have been sent? I am sure that Lord Weatherly would be able to accompany you. I dare not for fear of my interest being noticed by whoever is behind this.”

Lady Dinah’s eyes had rounded in surprise though she nodded. “Of course. I will go tomorrow.”

“And I will go with you,” Harry added, patting her hand and making Lillian smile at the clear affection between them. “We will come to you immediately thereafter with what we have learned.”

“We must all be careful,” the Duke finished, looking directly at Lillian as he spoke. “Lord Jedburgh cannot know of our concerns so we must hide all that we are doing as best we can. It may be that the rumour of the Mad Duke and his demands are combined in some way, though I do not know in which way as yet.”

“I am sure we all understand,” Lillian whispered, as the Duke held her gaze, a small smile on his lips. “But please, Your Grace, do be careful.”

He nodded, making to reach out only to pull his hand away again. “I shall be,” he promised, as the rest of the group looked on. “The truth will be discovered, I am sure of it, and it shall be discovered very soon.”

“A ball?”

Edmund nodded.

“So soon after your literary event?”

“Indeed, Mother,” Edmund answered, lifting his cup so he might take a sip of his coffee. “The invitations were sent out earlier today and I fully expect to receive some responses very soon.”

His mother paused as she stood there, looking back at him and clearly thinking about what she ought to say next. “I did not expect you to throw a ball.”

“Why ever not? Dinah deserves one and, given that I fully expect Lord Weatherly to come and seek her hand very soon, it could be a celebration of their impending marriage.”

The Duchess frowned. “You are contented with Lord Weatherly?”

“Yes, I am.”

That frown quickly faded. “That is good. I must say, I like him very much and think him more than suitable for Dinah. I presume that her brother would be contented for you to arrange the match, yes?”

At the mention of Lord Fullerton, Edmund’s expression darkened. “I presume so, given that he asked both of us to be her chaperones for the Season. That means that

we are entirely responsible for her, does it not?"

The Duchess nodded and smiled. "Yes, that is quite so. I think it an excellent choice for she is clearly quite besotted with him – and he with her!"

"And that is the best situation, is it not?" Edmund murmured, as his mother sighed contentedly. "You should like that for me also, would you not?"

At this, the Duchess' eyes flared wide. "Do you mean to say that you have an affection for Lady Vivianne?"

Edmund laughed and shook his head. "No, indeed not. I am quite in love with Lady Lillian and fully intend to propose once I have ended the courtship with Lady Vivianne and waited an appropriate length of time, of course." He watched as various emotions flicked across his mother's face though, much to his relief, her smile lingered still. "I do hope that you will be glad for me, Mother. Lady Lillian is a wonderful, inspirational young lady and I have lost my heart to her."

"I did think that you might," came the reply. "Though with Lady Vivianne, there is still a requirement and a consideration there, is there not? What of her?"

"She does not want to be attached to me either," Edmund assured her, quickly. "Mother, Lady Vivianne is caught up with another also, though I am not certain who that is as yet."

"Then why do you still court?"

Edmund hesitated, choosing in the end not to say anything to his mother. "I must speak to her brother," he said, after a few moments. "Lord Jedburgh will not be pleased but it must be done. However, I do wish to be sure that Lady Vivianne can find the same happiness as I, so therefore, the conversation must be done very

carefully.”

His mother nodded. “I quite understand. I will say nothing to anyone, of course, though you will have enough to do with Lady Dinah and Lord Weatherly! I am sure that Lord Fullerton will be delighted with the news whenever it comes about. Will you write to him about it all?”

“I shall,” Edmund smiled, hiding the worry which quickly rushed over him. “Dinah is going to take her letters to the solicitors very soon and I might well be able to add in my own additional note.”

“The solicitors?” His mother frowned. “Why would she go there?”

“Because they seem to know where Lord Fullerton is at present and can send them to the correct address,” Edmund explained, seeing his mother’s frown deepen. “Why? Is there something wrong?”

“But he is not abroad still, my dear!” the Duchess exclaimed, a hint of a smile dancing about her lips. “Did I not tell you that he was in Scotland only last month?”

A cold hand squeezed Edmund’s heart. “Scotland?” he asked, no longer any lightness about his tone. “How do you know that?”

His mother’s smile faded to nothing. “Because Lady Campbell wrote to me. She is my very dear friend, you know, though we do not often see each other given that she is in Scotland and I here in England.”

“But what did she say that told you Fullerton was in Scotland?” Edmund asked, a little more urgently now. “I must know, Mother.”

She looked back at him in surprise, perhaps astonished by his sharp and somewhat

demanding tone, only to lift her shoulders and then let them fall again. “She told me that she had been at a soiree and that Lord Fullerton had been present. I thought he might come back to London once his time in Scotland had come to an end but it could be that his business has kept him there for a little while longer. That is why I asked if Fullerton would be contented with you giving consent to Dinah’s match to Lord Weatherly.”

“Because her brother is back in England.”

“He could be back in England,” his mother corrected. “But that does not matter. If he has not written to you to confirm his presence, then I do not think that you need to concern yourself about Dinah. She will be very happy with Lord Weatherly and so, I think, will Lord Fullerton be.”

Edmund swallowed hard, a chill running through his body. If his cousin was back in the country, why had he not been informed of it? Why had he shown no interest in taking Dinah to her presentation to the King and Queen? Why had he not been there for her very first ball? Edmund had always presumed that Fullerton cared for his sister, just as Edmund cared for his own family but now, he began to grow concerned that there was no true familial affection there.

“You appear troubled.”

Bringing his gaze back to his mother, Edmund forced himself to smile. “It is nothing severe, Mother. I must hope that my letter reaches Lord Fullerton quickly, then, so that if he has any protestation to make about Lord Weatherly before the engagement is made, he will let me know of it! In fact, I think I shall write to him at this very moment!”

“Now?”

“Why ever not? There is no time like the present,” Edmund declared, rising from his chair in the drawing room and making his way towards the door. “Thank you, Mother. I am grateful to you for telling me.” Without another word, he quit the room but, instead of going to his study, made his way directly to the front door. Taking his gloves and hat from the butler, he did not wait for his carriage to be made ready but instead, hurried along the street towards Lord Huxley’s townhouse. A sudden, dreadful fear had grasped a hold of his mind and, try as he might, he could not seem to shake it.

What if this had all been some dreadful ruse and he was caught right in the middle of it?

“My dear Dinah, thank goodness I have found you.” Edmund grasped his cousin’s hand, seeing the way that Lord Weatherly’s eyes flared, then how his gaze darted to Lord Huxley. “Have you been to the solicitors?”

“Yes, we have,” Dinah said, clearly confused as to why Edmund was speaking to her so fervently. “Whatever is the matter?”

Lord Huxley grimaced. “We have come to the conclusion that it might very well be your brother who is involved in all of this, Lady Dinah. I do not mean to speak ill of him for, of course, he is known to me and is someone I would consider to be a good acquaintance but, all the same, I cannot pretend that there is not some merit in all that the Duke has said.”

“My brother?” Lady Dinah’s eyes rounded, her face paling just a little. “Surely you cannot think that – ”

“You should tell the Duke about the address to where your letters have been going,”

Lord Weatherly touched Lady Dinah's arm and Edmund's heart began to pound. He had gone directly to Lord Huxley's townhouse and, having found him at home, had explained his theory directly. He had presumed that, had his theory been foolishness, his friend would have told him so but instead, Lord Huxley had agreed with everything that Edmund had said and had suggested they go in search of Lady Dinah in order to ascertain what the solicitors had told her. Now, Edmund presumed, he was about to discover it.

"I heard something very strange from the solicitors, which has troubled me," Lady Dinah told him, her lips pursing for a moment as she looked to Lord Weatherly who nodded for her to continue. "It seems that my letters were going to Scotland and the last two letters have gone to Bath."

Edmund blinked. "To Bath?"

Lady Dinah nodded, her worries evidenced in the gentle lines of her forehead. "I was just about to make my way back to the house in order to inform you," she said, as Lord Weatherly nodded. "But you appear to have been so eager to discover it, you have come out into town yourself!"

"I could not wait." Edmund closed his eyes for just a moment, attempting to gather himself. "That is very distressing, I am sure."

Lady Dinah nodded. "It is," she answered, her voice quivering and betraying the great swell of emotion. "He is my brother! He gave you responsibility for me given that he was to be away during my come out, but now I find that he was first in Scotland and now in Bath? Why did he not want to be present with me? Why did he have no interest in being there when I was presented?"

"I cannot say," Edmund answered, as Lord Weatherly took Lady Dinah's hand and pressed it, offering his support. "This does concern me a great deal, however, for now

that I know he is present – albeit supposedly in Bath – it does mean that there might be a reason for the Mad Duke rumour.”

There was no surprise in Lady Dinah’s eyes as she looked back at him. “My brother was never truly happy in your company, was he?”

“No, he was not,” Edmund admitted, quietly, aware that there were others present. “I spent a good deal of time with your father, assisting with his inventions and the like. My own father was most displeased with such ideas and therefore, I sought solace in the late Lord Fullerton. Your brother did not appreciate the time I spent with him, I know that.”

“But to spread a rumour like that?” Lord Weatherly asked, confusion lining his forehead. “Why would he do such a thing, knowing that it would affect Dinah?”

Edmund shrugged. “I cannot say. It may be that he hoped Lady Dinah would find a match regardless or mayhap he heard that there was an interest there with you, Lord Weatherly. All the same, I am convinced that he is the one behind the rumour.”

“And I did write to tell him about the experiments and the like,” Lady Dinah added, her face heating. “I did not go into any great detail but I certainly mentioned it.”

Edmund smiled to reassure her. “I do not blame you for that in any way. That is just what would be expected, for a sister to tell her absent brother about all the goings-on during their time apart. Besides, it is not as though Fullerton is unaware of my interest in such things! He knows all too well that I still have a love for natural philosophy, though he has never said a word about it.”

Lady Dinah held his gaze for a long moment before swallowing tightly and then looking away. “I am sorry for it if it is his responsibility. Though unrelated to Lord Jedburgh and Lady Vivianne?”

Edmund spread out his hands. “It appears so.”

“Then what shall you do?” Lord Weatherly asked, moving just a fraction closer to Lady Dinah. “How will you find him?”

“I do not know as yet what I will do or how I shall find him!” Edmund exclaimed, as Lord Huxley let out a small exclamation, perhaps feeling the same frustration as Edmund in that there was no easy path forward. “But we have found the beginnings of the truth and I can assure you, I will not stop until I find it all.”

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“I must speak with you! At once!”

Lillian blinked in surprise as Lady Vivianne grasped her arm, beginning to pull her away. “Lady Vivianne? Is everything all right?”

“Please, walk with me if you would. My brother knows that we are acquainted and he will not think anything of it. Please, Lady Lillian, I beg of you. I know that I have been cold and unfriendly but that is only because I have been so very afraid.”

Lillian did not resist any longer, seeing the lady’s genuine fright. “Of course I shall come. Will we walk around the ballroom?”

The lady nodded but said nothing more, the silence suddenly strained, a tension flooding into Lillian’s frame. She looked to Lady Vivianne, wondering if she ought to ask something more, only for Lady Vivianne to let out a shaky breath, pulling herself a little closer to Lillian.

“I am sorry to have to ask you this but I must have your help, please.” Lady Vivianne looked again to Lillian though, this time, her expression was quite calm. “I am in trouble.”

Confused by the lady’s change in expression, Lillian frowned. “What is the trouble?”

Lady Vivianne took in another breath and then set her shoulders, her chin lifting. “I must appear to be happy and contented, you understand, so that my brother – and whoever it is that he is working with – do not see me troubled and afraid. Then they will know that I have not done as I have been asked.”

“What you have been asked?”

Lady Vivianne nodded. “My brother spoke to me just before I came into the ballroom, taking me from my mother’s side and informing me that I must put a vial of some concoction into the Duke’s glass this evening.”

Lillian almost stopped walking such was her shock but Lady Vivianne continued to move forward, taking Lillian with her. “His drink?” she whispered, as Lady Vivianne nodded. “Do you mean to say that your brother wishes harm to the Duke?”

“I do not know,” Lady Vivianne replied, in a strangled voice. “I do not know what it is in this but he told me that it must be placed in his glass this evening.... and that he would be watching.” Her eyes closed for a moment as she shuddered and Lillian’s eyebrows drew together, concerned for the lady.

“You think it harmful, however.”

“Yes, I do. I do not know why my brother insists on this nor what it is he intends for the Duke but I am afraid. I do not want to be held responsible but if I do not, then... then...” She dropped her head and let out a strangled sob only to pull out her fan and waft it in front of her face, hiding her expression from anyone who looked at her, though Lillian could see the tears shining in her eyes.

“What did he say?” Lillian asked, gently. “Did he threaten to harm you also?”

“He said that he would put the same vial in my own glass when I was unaware of it,” Lady Vivianne whispered, the colour fading from her face, leaving her skin like parchment. “You must tell the Duke, Lady Vivianne, I beg of you.”

“I cannot leave you alone,” Lillian said, firmly, even though her heart began to fill with panic, beating in her chest like a frightened bird. “You are not in the right frame

to be so.” Her eyes alighted on another gentleman and she let out her breath in a rush of relief, gesturing to Lord Huxley who was arm in arm with Lady Dinah. “Here, now, why do you not walk with Lord Huxley and Lady Dinah for a time? That way, you will be protected and your brother will think nothing of it.”

After a moment, Lady Vivianne nodded, putting her fan away as the two approached. Lillian gave a hasty explanation, begged Lord Huxley to keep Lady Vivianne safe and then hurried away, looking all about her for any sign of the Duke.

A vial? she thought to herself, her heart still pounding furiously. Whatever would he do with that? And why should he want to harm the Duke, given that he is supposedly courting Lady Vivianne?

Her heart leapt in her throat as she spied the Duke of Wrexham bowing towards a young lady, having just finished dancing with her. Without caring about propriety nor about who might be watching her, Lillian hurried forward towards him and, without a word, grasped his wrist and tugged him away to the back of the room.

“Lady Lillian!” the Duke exclaimed, as she turned to face him. “We shall have all of the ton thinking that there is some manner of impropriety here, will we not? What could have possessed you – ”

“Lord Jedburgh has told Lady Vivianne that she is to put some concoction into your glass this evening,” Lillian interrupted, her chest heaving as she dragged in air, struggling to speak clearly. “She is distraught but fighting to keep her expression clear and calm so that her brother will not see her and understand what she has done. She begged of me to come and inform you.”

The Duke blinked rapidly, the smile falling away. “I beg your pardon?”

“It is just as I have said,” Lillian answered, a little breathlessly. “She is afraid for her

own life, for I believe that her brother insisted that she would suffer the very same fate should she refuse to do as was asked.”

Running one hand over his face, the Duke blew out a long, slow breath. “I see.”

“What shall you do?” Lillian moved closer to him, caring nothing for the noise around her nor wondering where her parents had gone to. “You cannot permit this to happen!”

With a frown, the Duke pulled his lips to one side. “No, I cannot,” he agreed, quietly. “But nor can I let this pass by.”

“Pass by?” Lillian repeated, not understanding what he meant. “You cannot mean to let her do this!”

“But if I do not, then she will be in fear of her life, will she not?” The Duke offered her his arm and Lillian took it, though she had to fight not to cling to him and, in doing so, make it obvious as to her desire for him. “Besides which, I know that there is something serious going on at present and this may be the only way to discover it. I was going to write to you this afternoon but knowing that I would see you this evening, I thought better of it.”

“What is it that you wish to tell me?” Lillian asked, her heart beginning to quicken all over again, sweat forming on her forehead. “Are you in danger of your life?” When the Duke did not answer her immediately, Lillian’s heart cried out with fright and her hand tightened on his arm.

“I am not in fear of my life, but it has come to my attention that my cousin, the Earl of Fullerton, has been back in this country for some time.”

Lillian stopped walking and the Duke turned to look at her, nodding his head as

though to answer the questions which had built up immediately within her mind.

“I do not know why he has been hiding himself,” he continued, as Lillian closed her eyes tightly, swaying gently such was the shock within her. “Dinah is deeply upset, as you can imagine, but I must wonder if the rumours about the Mad Duke were begun by him.”

“But... but why?”

The Duke smiled sadly. “I was always very close to his father. The late Earl of Fullerton was the man who inspired me to pursue natural philosophy, the one who was always tinkering with this or improving that. I found his experiments delightful, vastly enjoyed his way of thinking and found myself lost in the ideas he presented. My father was greatly displeased but that only made me turn towards my uncle all the more. However, at the same time, my cousin – the new Lord Fullerton as he is at present – began to despise me for he was not given the same attentions from his father since he was not in the least bit like minded.” A broken sigh left his lips as he shook his head. “I did not see the difficulty at the time but now, I do. Ever since then, my cousin has not been warm towards me though he has always been cordial. When I received the request to chaperone Dinah at the Season this year, I felt glad that he was so trusting of me but now, I wonder if it might have been for his own purposes.”

“To disgrace you,” Lillian breathed, as the Duke murmured. “He wants the ton to look down upon you, to think ill of you because of your interests in natural philosophy.”

“I think so,” came the answer, spoken slowly as the Duke’s forehead furrowed. “I told Dinah that I did not think that there was any connection between this and Lady Vivianne’s dilemma with her brother’s insistence but now, on hearing this from you, I do begin to wonder.”

Lillian's eyes widened and she swallowed hard, struggling to find the right words. "I – I cannot let you drink whatever the vial contains."

The Duke smiled. "Of course I shall not. But I shall make Lord Jedburgh think that I have."

Relief built in Lillian's chest. "In what way?"

His shoulders lifted. "I presume that it is meant to make me ill in some way? Perhaps even so unwell that I reach death?" His hand reached out to take hers. "But I will not touch it, I promise you. Instead I will feign illness, make my way to the private parlour – with assistance, of course – and then see what happens thereafter."

Lillian nodded and closed her eyes. "I see."

"Might you wish to join me? I know that your father and mother would not be agreeable but perhaps your brother and Dinah could accompany you? If you would all go to sit in Lord Umbridge's parlour, then that is where I shall request to go."

Swallowing thickly, Lillian opened her eyes again and tried to speak but nothing came out except a rasp. With comfort in his eyes, the Duke took her hand and squeezed it gently, before bowing over it. "All shall be well," he said, lifting his head and then releasing her hand. "Might you return to Lady Vivianne and inform her? She will have to come and stand by me."

"You are very courageous," Lillian whispered, hating the fact that she was going to have to step away from him. "I will do so and then find Harry to take me to the parlour."

The Duke smiled at her, though a shadow came into his expression as he did so. "Thank heavens my mother decided to remain at home this evening, else I do not

know what I should do! Do not worry, my dear Lillian. We shall soon find out the truth and be free of all of this. And then, what a joyous future awaits!”

Lillian tried to smile but tears came into her eyes instead. Aware that she might herself be being watched, she bobbed a quick curtsy and then stepped away, fear and hope twining together in one dreadful sensation which sent ice into her veins and fire to her heart. Would they find out the truth this evening? Or would something go terribly wrong and break them both apart forever?

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Edmund smiled reassuringly at Lady Vivianne as she handed him the glass of whiskey he had suggested he fetch for him. “I thank you.”

Her hand trembled as she gave it to him, her eyes darting away and, for a moment, Edmund feared that she had placed whatever the vial contained within the glass. Had her fear been too much for her? Had she been pretending, right from the very beginning, that she was being coerced? His brow furrowed, only for Lady Vivianne to take his arm and, as she did so, pressed something against his arm, clasped lightly in her fingers. With a small smile of relief, Edmund set his glass of whiskey to his other hand, the arm of which she clung to, and then took the vial from her fingers under the pretence of patting her hand. One glance at it told him that it was still filled. With a nod to her and keeping the smile on his face, Edmund pushed it into his pocket and then, with a deep breath, took a sip of his whiskey.

“I do not know whether it is meant to be quick or slow acting,” he said, beginning to wander across the room with Lady Vivianne beside him – and her brother behind them. “I must imbibe all of this and then the play shall begin.”

Lady Vivianne did not say a word but instead, gave him an almost imperceptible nod. Edmund threw back his whiskey, managing not to cough as he set the glass back on the tray and then let out a long sigh, forcing a smile towards her. Spying Lord Huxley nearby and praying that his friend would forgive him for not having time to explain in advance, Edmund began his pretence.

“Oh.” He leaned forward, putting one hand to his stomach. “Forgive me, Lady Vivianne, I feel...” He let out a long groan as Lady Vivianne stepped back, her eyes wide with uncertainty. “I do not feel – ”

“Wrexham! Are you quite all right?”

Edmund let out another groan and then reached for Lord Huxley. “Might you guide me from the room? To the private parlour, mayhap? I feel suddenly very weak.” He glanced over his shoulder to see Lord Jedburgh coming to stand by his sister, one hand to her shoulder. Exclaiming aloud again, he bent almost double and, with Lord Huxley exclaiming his concern, permitted his friend to lead him from the room. Continuing on with the fa?ade until they had reached the parlour, Edmund waited for his friend to open the door and, making his way inside, straightened up immediately and closed the door tightly behind him.

“Whatever is the meaning of this?” Lord Huxley exclaimed, as Lady Lillian rushed towards them both, reaching for Edmund’s hands. “I thought you were unwell and terribly so!”

“Which is precisely the impression I wanted to give,” Edmund answered, wrapping his arms around Lady Lillian despite the company they were in, relief filling him. “I am sorry I could not tell you now – nor you either, Dinah, but there has come something of great concern which Lady Vivianne informed Lady Lillian about. This pretence has come from that.”

He waited as Lady Lillian explained it all, seeing the shock rifle across his cousin’s face, though Lord Weatherly drew close to her also in order to bring comfort. Lord Huxley blew out a long breath and shook his head, pushing one hand through his hair.

“Goodness,” he murmured, as Edmund threw him a wry smile. “That is dreadful. Why should Lord Jedburgh wish to do such a thing? It makes very little sense. He has wanted his sister engaged to you and now – ”

“And now, I believe, whoever it is that has been forcing his hand has demanded that he do this,” Edmund interrupted. “I do not think that Lord Jedburgh would desire my

death. That would not make sense, as you yourself have said, for he has expected his sister to marry me. Therefore, I expect that someone else has demanded it.”

“And you hope that, in acting as you have done, that this person will make themselves known?”

Edmund nodded. “Indeed. Though if anyone should come to the door, you must insist that I am unwell and cannot have visitors. If it is as I expect, someone will insist and might even push their way into the room. However, if nothing happens within the hour, then I shall make my way to the carriage at some point and be taken home and thereafter, I expect something will occur.” Looking down at Lady Lillian, whom he still had clasped in his arms, Edmund took in a long breath and then let it out slowly. “Then, this entire matter will come to an end and I can think on more important things.”

“As can I,” Lord Weatherly muttered and Edmund quickly looked to the fellow, sharing a look which spoke of full understanding and agreement. Lord Weatherly had Edmund’s full permission to wed Lady Dinah and, truth be told, Edmund would prefer it to happen sooner rather than later. Thinking that, he frowned and then beckoned to Lord Weatherly, murmuring to Lady Lillian to excuse him for a moment.

“Yes, Your Grace?” Lord Weatherly looked at him steadily, his hands spread out. “Anything I can do to be of aid, I would be glad of it.”

Edmund took in a breath before he spoke, aware of just how heavy his words might become. “Listen to me, Lord Weatherly. This may be a great trial for Dinah and though she has both my mother and myself to support her, I am certain that she will look to you, first and foremost.”

Lord Weatherly’s chin lifted just a fraction. “I can be relied upon. I care for her a great deal.”

Glad that there were other, quieter conversations going on so that he might speak freely, Edmund tilted his head towards his cousin. “Do you love her?”

Lord Weatherly nodded, not even a second of hesitation in his voice. “Of course I do. I have not yet sought your permission to marry her as I have been aware that you have a good many trials yourself at present but that is my intention.”

“You have my permission,” Edmund said, quickly, “but I would urge you not to hesitate.”

A frown darted across Lord Weatherly’s expression. “Why?”

“What if Lord Fullerton returns unexpectedly to London and, thereafter, refuses to grant you permission? What if, in his malevolence, he seeks to spite me and, seeing that I care for your sister, decides that you shall have no happiness in being permitted to wed Dinah and, thereafter, separates you? He might speak words of evil to Dinah about you in the hope of convincing her how much he has saved her from and you shall never be together again.” He watched the play of emotions run across Lord Weatherly’s face. “But if you engage yourself to her – and make it known – then there is very little that he will be able to do.”

Lord Weatherly ran one hand over his chin. “It sounds as though you are expecting the gentleman to return at any moment.”

Edmund nodded. “I am.”

Lord Weatherly’s eyes flared, only for him to take in a deep breath, filling his chest with air as he held Edmund’s gaze. “Then,” he said, after a few moments, “might I be permitted to speak to Lady Dinah in private?”

“Of course.”

“I may... I may seek out a Special License.” Lord Weatherly bit his lip, assessing Edmund’s reaction. “Engagements can still be broken. Marriages cannot.”

Edmund grinned, putting one hand on Lord Weatherly’s shoulder. “Indeed they cannot. You will be wise in whatever you decide to do, I am sure. But do it quickly.” His smile softened. “Might it be that your engagement announcement will be made this evening?”

A light shone in Lord Weatherly’s eyes. “Thank you, Your Grace. Thank you for your acceptance of me. I swear to you, I shall do all that I can to make Dinah have nothing but happiness every day of her life.”

“I am certain that you shall,” Edmund answered, only for there to come a knock at the door.

He turned quickly. “Huxley, if you please?” Watching as his friend opened the door a crack and then murmured quietly, Edmund clasped his fingers together, waiting in eager anticipation. Lord Huxley closed the door again and then turned to Edmund, his eyebrows lifted.

“Lady Vivianne and her brother,” he said, as Edmund nodded, having expected as much. “I have told Lord Jedburgh that you are resting and may have to return home. He asked if the doctor had been called.”

“And you said?”

“I said yes,” Lord Huxley answered, as Edmund made his way across the room to the couch. “Was that right?”

“Yes, perfectly so. Now,” Edmund continued, looking around the room. “Dinah, Lord Weatherly will take you back to the ballroom. Might you stay near to Lady Vivianne

so that, when the time comes – if it comes – she is kept safe from her brother? Lord Weatherly, despite what else you may have on your mind, if there is any sort of commotion, I wish you to take Lady Vivianne and Dinah back to my townhouse without hesitation. Do not stay to see what it is happening. Your sole responsibility is to Dinah and also to Lady Vivianne.”

Lord Weatherly inclined his head. “I understand and will do as you ask.”

“I thank you.” Edmund threw a smile to Dinah. “Do not be afraid, dear cousin. All will be well, I assure you.”

“And I?” Lady Lillian asked, coming a little closer to him. “Might I stay with you? If Lord Huxley is to be here, then – ”

“So long as your brother is contented with that.”

Lord Weatherly nodded. “I trust you, just as you trust me,” he told Edmund, making him smile in appreciation.

“I thank you,” Edmund murmured, as Lord Weatherly took Lady Dinah’s arm. “If your mother or father seek out your sister, might you make it clear that I have something I wish to discuss with her and that I will return her presently?” He looked to Lady Lillian as he spoke, loving the warmth which spread red across her cheeks. She knew exactly what it was that he wanted to say and though he was already sure of the answer he would be given, excitement and anticipation ran through him, despite the strangeness of the circumstances.

“I shall make that very clear indeed,” Lord Weatherly declared before turning and, with Lord Huxley opening the door, stepping out into the hallway and leaving Edmund, Lord Huxley and Lady Lillian behind.

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Lillian pressed her lips together, holding back the question for as long as she could. It had been almost half an hour since her brother had quit the room and still, nothing had happened. Lord Huxley had poured himself a brandy, though the Duke had refused one, but as yet, she still did not understand exactly what the Duke expected to take place.

“How long will we wait?”

Lillian turned just as Lord Huxley asked the very question which had been on her lips.

“And who is it that you are expecting to see?” he continued, as Lillian came to sit down quickly rather than walking up and down the room. “This is all rather mysterious.”

The Duke smiled briefly. “I am sorry for that,” he said, looking to Lillian and then back to Lord Huxley. “I do not want to throw blame upon someone before it has been confirmed but –”

Before he could continue, a knock came to the door and Lillian caught her breath, lifting her head to look at it directly.

“Huxley.” The Duke waved one hand towards him. “Now, whoever this is, inform him that the doctor is searching for a cure but you fear that I will succumb to this severe illness. You are sorrowful and distraught.” He looked to Lillian. “Lillian, might you sit in the corner, there? It is dark enough there for you not to be seen and, no matter what happens, do not reveal yourself until all has been revealed.”

“But it could be a footman,” Lillian protested, as Lord Huxley made his way to the door, “or someone who saw you quit the ballroom.”

The Duke nodded before turning and lying down on the couch, one arm falling out from him towards the ground. “It could be, in which case, I shall sit up again and we shall wait a little longer,” he murmured, as Lord Huxley reached the door and looked back at them both, waiting for confirmation that he should open it. “Promise me you will stay quiet, Lillian.”

She nodded, scurrying back to the corner of the room and sitting down in a chair covered in shadows. After a moment – and another knock – Lord Huxley opened the door and the murmurs began. Lillian closed her eyes and took in long, slow breaths, a mixture of fear and anticipation rattling through her – and then there came a loud shout.

“I must see him!”

Lillian jerked in her chair, seeing the door being flung back and Lord Huxley thrown back out of the way. A gentleman she did not recognise stumbled into the room before stopping dead as though in shock. He stared at the Duke, one hand at his heart, his eyes wide... and then he crumpled.

“Oh, my dear cousin!” he exclaimed, falling on his knees beside the Duke, his hand going to the Duke’s flung out arm. “I have only just returned from the continent and now, I hear, you are taken ill! Cousin? Cousin! Can you hear me speaking to you?”

Lillian watched with wide eyes as the Duke did not respond to the fellow, his eyes closed, his head lolling as the man shook him gently. This was the Duke’s cousin, then? Lord Fullerton? Lillian pressed her eyes closed tightly as she fought to make sense of it all. If this was Lord Fullerton, then why was he saying he had only just returned from the continent if the Duke had previously informed her that he had been

back in the country for some time? And was this the very same person that the Duke suspected of attempting to injure him with the vial?

But why?

She knew that Lord Fullerton had held a great dislike for the Duke, given what the Duke himself had expressed to her but did that truly mean that he would be as cruel as to try and take the Duke's life? She did not understand, struggling to make sense in her mind about all that was taking place.

"What is the doctor to do?" The gentleman rose and looked to Lord Huxley, who threw up his hands.

"It is as I have told you! The doctor has gone to consult with others as to what might be happening to the Duke. He did not know what was wrong but it appears as though he is becoming weaker with every minute that passes." A slight catch came into Lord Huxley's voice and Lillian fought not to smile, despite the tension flooding the room. Lord Huxley was putting on an excellent performance indeed!

"Then he will die," the other gentleman breathed, hanging his head. "How sad I am to hear that."

"It may not be so," Lord Huxley answered, quickly. "It may be that the doctor will return. You cannot give up hope, Lord Fullerton."

Then this is Lord Fullerton, Lillian thought to herself, just as Lord Fullerton gestured to the door.

"Might you give me a few moments alone with my cousin?" he asked, his own voice trembling. "If this is to be his last, then I should like to speak with him, even if he cannot hear me. Dinah should be here too. Perhaps you would be good enough to

bring her here? I came to the ball, having been informed that she would be present, only to discover the most disastrous circumstance! I am certain she will be horrified to hear of it also.”

“But of course.” Lord Huxley hesitated for only a moment before quitting the room, leaving only the Duke, Lillian and Lord Fullerton who was, of course, entirely unaware of her presence.

Tension built like a wave, threatening to crash over her, and Lillian dug her fingernails into her palms, trying not to move or make a single sound. The moment the door closed, Lord Fullerton’s demeanour changed and, much to Lillian’s horror, he let out a cold, calculating laugh.

“Well, well, cousin. What a game I have played with you and how much you have lost!” he said, wandering back towards the Duke who was still lying there, as though he truly was close to death. “Taking on Dinah was only the first step but bringing Lord Jedburgh and Lady Vivianne into the situation was truly brilliant on my part. You do not remember, I suppose, telling me about the mention of Lady Vivianne in your father’s will, but you did and I remembered it, desperate to find a way to bring you low. And thus, I have.” He chuckled darkly, still wandering around the room and speaking as though the Duke could hear every word. Lillian shrank back in her chair, afraid that he would come closer, that he would see her, and yet she found herself willing him to continue.

Thankfully, Lord Fullerton did not need much encouragement.

“Lord Jedburgh is a fool. He lost so much at cards that he was going to have to go to his father to request additional funds but, given that he had been doing so for many years and had been told he would receive no more, he was desperate to find a way to bring in some more coin. I told him that I would give him what he required, so long as he did as I asked – and he accepted without hesitation! That gentleman cares

nothing for anyone aside from himself, though I do not find myself ridiculing that for he is precisely like me! He should have known that I would threaten him into doing as I demanded. He should never have trusted me.” He laughed horribly and Lillian shuddered, her whole body tight with tension. This had all been by Lord Fullerton’s hand, then. It had all been his game, his cruelty reaching out to injure the Duke.

Injure him? Or kill him?

She shuddered again, just as Lord Fullerton threw out his hands towards the Duke, as though the man could see him.

“I do not know what he said to the lady to make her place that vial in your glass but she did it very well and now how sad everyone shall be at your sudden demise! Have no fear, however. I shall tell them all that the Mad Duke took his experiments too far and that it was by his own hand that he lost his life. I will declare that I am glad for Lady Vivianne, that she has been spared your madness and will marry her myself instead.” He laughed again, cruelty in every tone. “She may not much like it but there are always ways and means to encourage someone towards obedience. Thus, I shall be the next Duke of Wrexham, I shall have Lady Vivianne as my Duchess and you will be forever known as the Mad Duke, who lost himself in experiments and brought himself to his own demise. Though I must play the part of the broken-hearted cousin for some time yet, which is a little irritating. Nonetheless, I –”

“I think your mourning comes a little early, cousin.”

The Duke swung his legs around, sitting up straight before standing up directly, just as Lord Fullerton staggered back, his face white with shock, his mouth agape, eyes wide. The Duke lifted his chin and advanced towards his cousin, his broad shoulders and height making him an imposing figure. “But I thank you for confessing all. I will admit that I had no knowledge of what was truly taking place, not until Lady Vivianne began to tell me about her brother’s demands upon her. In hearing that the

letters Dinah was sending you were going to Scotland and then to Bath, I quickly realised that there was more to this situation than I first saw. And now you have admitted to everything! How very gracious of you.”

The irony in his tone rattled around the room as Lord Fullerton stopped backing away and instead, stood as tall as he could. “There is nothing that you can do with it, however,” he hissed, his eyes sparking fury. “You have been called the Mad Duke and should you try to say a single thing to anyone, the whispers about your madness will only grow stronger.”

The Duke lifted an eyebrow as Lillian watched, her hands clasped so tightly together, it was painful. “You appear to be very good with threats, Fullerton. Alas for you, there are witnesses.” His gaze went to Lillian and, steeling herself, Lillian rose from her chair and stepped forward into the dimly lit room, catching the way that Lord Fullerton’s face fell. At the very same time, the door opened and Lord Huxley walked inside, his face flushed with anger.

“I pressed my ear to the door and strained to hear but I can assure you, I know everything that you said,” he stated, as Lillian closed her eyes in relief. “It is all done, now. There is no way to escape.”

Lord Fullerton’s mouth opened and then closed again as he fought to find a response – a response that he could not give. Lillian swallowed hard but then took the Duke’s hand, standing alongside him, determined that her courage would not fail her now.

“I heard everything that you said, Lord Fullerton,” she said, as clearly and as firmly as she could. “Every single word.”

Lord Fullerton’s lip curled. “And who are you?”

“My betrothed,” the Duke said, sending a thrill of delight rushing over Lillian. “I am

afraid it is as Lord Huxley says, Fullerton. It is at an end – and I am sure that Lord Jedburgh will be more than happy to tell us all, given that we have discovered a great deal. If you do not wish for there to be any sort of consequence, then might I suggest that you take your leave of London and return to the continent at once?”

A darkness came into Lord Fullerton’s eyes. “Consequence?” He laughed but it sounded dull, no longer filled with the confidence he had once had. “I do not know what you speak of.”

“Bedlam.”

It was as if an icy cold wind had filled the room. Lillian shivered and clung to the Duke a little more tightly just as Lord Fullerton’s eyes widened. Even Lord Huxley went very still as the Duke nodded, his expression grave.

“If I were to tell everyone what had happened, if I had Lord Jedburgh, Lady Vivianne, Lady Lillian and Lord Huxley confirm and expand on it all, then what do you think the ton would think? They would say that you are mad, attempting to kill me out of some misplaced anger over our childhood. They would be concerned for you, thinking you unwell given all that you have done and those that you have manipulated. So might I suggest, Lord Fullerton, that you take yourself away and return to the continent? You shall never be Duke and if you dare linger, then I will make certain you are shut away in Bedlam for a time until you have recovered.”

The threat of such a thing made Lord Fullerton blanch. There was nothing that he could say, no excuse that he could give, no demand that he could make and, much to Lillian’s relief, he turned on his heel and made for the door, almost tripping over his feet as he did so.

“I will make certain he does as is asked, my friend,” Lord Huxley said, before hurrying out of the room after him. The moment the door closed, Lillian found the

Duke's arms around her and, flinging her arms about his neck, she pulled herself as close to him as she could, sensing tears just behind her eyes.

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“My darling,” the Duke murmured, his lips close to her ear. “I am sorry for all that you have had to endure. It has been a great trial, I know, but it is at an end now.” Leaning back gently, he looked into her eyes. “I am sorry, my dear. But it is at an end now and I promise, all will be well.”

Lillian let herself smile, her heart aching with relief, joy and love. “It is finished?”

The Duke nodded, lifting one hand to brush his fingers along her temple then down to cup her cheek, making her shiver. “It is,” he promised. “I still must speak to Lord Jedburgh but he appears to be a gentleman easily swayed. Lady Vivianne will marry Lord Huxley, I am sure of it, and Dinah and your brother will wed also. Though,” he continued, his eyes searching hers, “while that makes me happy, it does not fill me with overwhelming joy. That can only come from you, Lillian.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, though she smiled as she did so. “You did tell my brother that there was something you wanted to discuss with me, Wrexham.” Her eyes fluttered open as his fingers skimmed down the side of her neck. “What was it?”

The Duke smiled at her gently, tenderness blossoming in his eyes. “I am sure you know very well how much I have been longing to say these words to you,” he answered, his other hand at her waist. “Lillian, I have fallen quite in love with you. You are the most extraordinary person I have ever met, right from the very first moment I met you. Your intellect inspires me, it pushes me forward, it amazes me! I delight in your desire to learn all you can, to further your own skills in any way you can. I promise you that you will never find me pushing that away from you, demanding that as a lady, you pursue things such as the pianoforte or the like.”

“Which is just as well, given that I do not play well at all,” Lillian interjected, making him chuckle. “Did you say that you were in love with me?”

A seriousness returned to his gaze as he nodded slowly. “Yes, Lillian, I do love you,” he murmured, beginning to lower his head as her heart quickened. “We have been separated, held back from each other for a long time, but no more. I do not want only to court you, my love, but I wish to marry you. I want to have you as my bride so that we might explore this life together.” His thumb pushed up gently into the curls at the back of her neck and Lillian closed her eyes, overcome by the emotions and the sensations flung up within her.

“I love you too, Wrexham,” she breathed, opening her eyes to see him so close to her, her whole being burning with an affection, a love for him which she knew would never be dampened. “You have never once rejected me for the learning I love so dearly but have only championed it. I trust you completely and in giving you my heart, I know you will keep it safe and secure.”

The Duke leaned closer, his lips brushing against hers and igniting a spark deep within Lillian’s core, her hands going up around his neck. “Then is that a yes from you, my love? You will marry me?”

Lillian pressed her lips against his, his arms wrapping tightly around her as they embraced. Every moment now was nothing but brightness and joy, the shadow of the Mad Duke, the storm of Lady Vivianne and her brother now fading into the background. There was nothing holding them back now, nothing that would keep them apart and Lillian revelled in it, clinging onto the happiness which wrapped around her. “Yes, Wrexham,” she whispered against his lips, feeling his arms tighten all the more about her waist. “Yes, I shall marry you. I shall be yours, this day and for always.”

THE END

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Martha yawned as she came into the dining room, finding herself happily contented as she sat down, ready to break her fast. The door opened before she had even had a chance to pour the tea and, with a warm smile, her mother came into the room to join her.

“It was a wonderful day yesterday, was it not?” she asked, coming to sit down beside Martha, who then poured them both a cup of tea knowing how much her mother appreciated a cup in the mornings. “Though Jane was a little tardy, which was a trifle frustrating.”

Martha laughed and pressed her mother’s hand for a moment. “I do not think that the Earl minded that in the least bit, Mama,” she said, recalling the way that the Earl of Nottingham had turned to look at Jane as she had come into the church, ready to make her way to his side. “Did you not see how warmly he smiled, how much love was there in his eyes?” Letting out a soft sigh, Martha cradled the cup of tea in her hands, her elbows on the table in what, in company, would have been a most improper posture. “I think their marriage was one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen.”

Lady Hampshire smiled gently. “Yes, it was. I have always hoped that my children would marry someone who cared for them in the same way that I have come to care for your father.” Her head tilted. “Your brother is already wed and settled and now your sister! Which means that I can now focus all my attention upon you.”

A gentle flush rose in Martha’s cheeks. “Thank you, Mama.”

“I know it has been a little difficult for you, remaining in your sister’s shadow as we

prepared for the wedding, but that is over now. This time next year, I am very hopeful that I will have the joy of seeing you married – and to a gentleman who cares for you too.”

“I am hopeful of the very same thing,” Martha answered, speaking truthfully. “I have been glad for my brother and my sister, of course, but my heart has always been hopeful that there would be someone for me too. I should very much like to marry a gentleman who has some affection for me and for whom I feel the same way. I have seen how much you and father care for one another and I want that very same thing within my own life.”

“And I am sure you shall have it.” Lady Hampshire took a sip of her tea. “Though it shall have to wait a few months still! The Season does not begin again until a little later this year. Your father, however, has already made plans for our return, with the sole aim of securing your future.” Setting the cup down, she reached for the teapot to pour herself a second cup. “He is just as committed to that as I am.”

“That is good to know,” Martha answered, smiling. “I am glad that – ”

The door flew open, stopping her sentence midway through. Blinking in surprise, Martha gazed at her father as he stood, framed in the doorway.

Something was wrong.

“Hampshire?” Lady Hampshire turned in her chair, looking over at her husband. “Is there something wrong? Why do you not come to take tea with us?”

“Ruined!”

Martha snatched in a breath, her eyes flaring wide.

“I am ruined, my dear!” Lord Hampshire came staggering into the room, looking as though he would collapse at any moment. Somehow, he made his way to the chair beside his wife and half sat, half fell into it. His eyes were wide and staring, his face puce, his hand reaching out to grasp his wife’s hand. “We shall survive, of course, but only barely. However am I to – ”

“I do not know what you mean.” Lady Hampshire’s voice was a little raised, a slight tremble running through it as Martha stared at them both, trying to understand what was going on. All that her mother had spoken about only a few minutes ago began to evaporate before her eyes, rushing away from her like smoke.

“I am ruined,” the Earl whispered, closing his eyes now, seeming to sink back even more into his chair. “Our investments are now at the bottom of the sea.”

Lady Hampshire gasped and Martha’s heart slammed into her chest, making her breath hitch.

“I was foolish,” the Earl admitted, brokenly. “I did not tell you for it is a gentleman’s prerogative to gamble and to enjoy such things without hesitation, but the debts I owe are substantial... and now... ”

“And now you cannot pay them because of the failure of your investments,” Martha whispered, as her father opened his eyes to look at her. “Is that what you mean?”

After a moment, he nodded.

“But what... what about my dowry?” Martha asked, her eyes wide now, panic beginning to take a hold. “What about – ”

“Your dowry will go to pay some of my debts, Martha,” her father interrupted, speaking with a desperation which Martha felt break through to her very soul. “I

cannot help that. I am sorry but it is the only way I can salvage my reputation even a little. I – I am afraid that it will not pay for all my debts, however, and since I put a great deal of money into these investments, investments which have now turned to dust, there will be very little left for us to live on.” He took in a shuddering breath, closing his eyes again. “Over the next few years, we must pray that the crops grow well and that some of my other, smaller investments give us a greater return but we will have to economise.” Opening his eyes again, he looked straight into his wife’s face. “We must economise. There is no other choice, otherwise this estate and everything we own will crumble around us.”

“But... what about my future?” Martha asked, her voice now hoarse and rattling. “Mama and I were just talking and – ”

Her father held up one hand to her, his palm out flat, bringing a sudden end to her questioning. “I am sorry, Martha.”

Martha began to blink back furious, hot tears which sprang to her eyes as she understood exactly what her father was saying, albeit without him saying a single word. There was to be no future for her, no happiness, no joy with a gentleman who came to care for her. All that her mother had spoken of, all the hope she herself had felt was now gone in an instant.

“Oh, Hampshire, how could you have done such a thing?” There was a note of sadness and of rebuke in Lady Hampshire’s voice and though she spoke quietly, the amount of pain which crossed Lord Hampshire’s face was not insignificant. “You did not tell me any of this.”

“I did not,” the Earl admitted, brokenly. “Mayhap I should have done but I was ashamed of my gambling debts. I knew what you would say and I could not bring myself to speak to you of them.”

Martha dropped her head and squeezed her eyes closed as her mother spoke again, telling her husband how much she wished he had been honest with her. Her whole world suddenly grew dark, great shadows passing over it as she fought to find even the smallest chink of light.

But there was none.

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“Another ball, another dance, another lady.” James chuckled and leaned back against the wall of the ballroom, lifting one eyebrow towards his friend.

“Indeed, indeed,” Lord Radford grinned, folding his arms across his chest. “Now, which one are you to dance with next? It is the waltz, is it not?”

James nodded. “I have the very obliging Lady Jemima on my arm.”

“Oh.” Lord Radford dragged the sound out, lightness in his voice as he chuckled. “I presume that you are hopeful that she will be kind to you? That she will be nothing but smiles and laughing eyes? Or do you hope for something even a little more?”

James could not help but laugh, knowing all too well what his friend meant. “Perhaps a little something more at the end of the evening? I have been told that Lady Jemima is well used to being a little.. warmer than other young ladies seeking a husband.”

“Though mayhap she hopes that, in being so, you will find her all the more pleasing,” his friend suggested. “Mayhap she hopes you will offer her your hand in marriage.”

James snorted and rolled his eyes. “Then she will be sorely mistaken,” he said, firmly. “She will realise that soon enough, I am sure.”

Lord Radford lifted one eyebrow. “Though not before you have made certain you can garner as much affection from her as you can, yes?”

James shrugged. “Of course! Why should I not?”

His friend laughed again and James continued to grin, thinking about what it would be like should Lady Jemima permit him to take her into his arms. He was well known to be a rogue but he did not care. He had been building this reputation for the last few years and was more than determined to continue. There was nothing that he would do to satisfy society's considerations of him. Their thoughts and their opinions of his behaviour meant nothing. He was a Marquess and, regardless of how much of a rogue he became, he knew all too well that there would be many a young lady eager to take her place as his wife – and, for that matter, a good many mothers who would be more than thrilled to have their daughter as his wife. Regardless of what he did, society would always see his title rather than his character and thus, James felt himself quite satisfied.

“Ah, now, look at this!”

James turned his head to see a short, broad chested gentleman hovering near the shadows of the room. “Are you speaking of him?” he asked, pointing at the fellow directly, heedless as to whether the man in question would turn to look at him. “That slightly smaller fellow?”

“Hush!” his friend exclaimed, though he was still grinning. “Yes, that is who I am speaking of. Do you not recognise him?”

James tilted his head, scrutinising the man, only to shake his head. “No I do not.”

Lord Radford looked a little surprised. “Indeed? I thought everyone would recognise Lord Hampshire, though I admit that it has been a few years since he last came to society.”

“Lord Hampshire?” Recognising the name, James considered carefully. “Is that not the gentleman who lost a good deal of wealth?”

Lord Radford nodded. "Yes, the very same. He enjoyed gambling a little too much and, for whatever reason, found out that he could not pay all the debts he had accumulated. They were significant, I must say, but something must have happened to make the lack of coin a real problem for him."

"The fool." James snorted at the gentleman before them, though the man himself did not turn around. "What a fool he was to think that he could take on debts and not repay them."

"I do not think that is exactly what happened," Lord Radford suggested, but James did not care. Instead he shrugged, yawned and turned away.

"I do wonder what he is doing back in London," his friend continued, as James let his gaze rove around the room, taking in the many pretty faces of the young ladies he could see. "It is not as though society will have forgiven him as yet."

"Not unless he has repaid his debts."

Lord Radford nodded slowly, a small flicker of light coming into his eyes. "That might very well be the case," he said, making James look at him quickly. "Mayhap he has returned to London because he has been able to make reparation for his debts. Now, he hopes, the ton will be willing to welcome him back into their society."

"But why should he wish for such a thing?" James asked, a little frustrated with himself that he was being drawn into a conversation about this gentleman when he had already attempted to dismiss him. "Why return to society at all? I presume he has stayed away from London these last few years and must surely be contented now with the company near to his estate. Coming to London only draws him back into the tumult which he left behind him some years ago."

"I do not know for certain, I confess, but from what I recall, I think the Earl has

another daughter who is yet unwed,” Lord Radford answered, speaking a good deal more slowly now as he thought aloud. “I cannot quite remember how many children that gentleman has but I believe that there could still be an unwed daughter.” His shoulders lifted and fell. “Though I cannot say such a thing for certain.”

James laughed harshly. “I do hope that such a young lady is not eagerly hoping for a good match,” he said, as his friend smiled ruefully. “No gentleman in good standing and with a good fortune will want anything to do with a gentleman such as that! The Earl might have been able to pay his debts – if that is what he has done – but that does not mean that his fortunes are restored. What if he does not have a good dowry for her? What if she does not take anything with her into the marriage? What good is it, then, for any gentleman to even consider her?”

“Perhaps there will be an arrangement,” Lord Radford suggested, his eyes twinkling. “Mayhap you would like to offer yourself as her husband?”

Before he could stop himself, James roared so loudly with laughter that the gentleman they had been speaking of turned to look at him. This brought James’ loud outburst to a very quick end and he cleared his throat and looked away, though the smile he tried to hide simply would not fade.

“No?” His friend grinned, his eyes twinkling. “Your mother has already removed to the Dower house, so what could be preventing you? You could be just the gentleman she requires.”

“I hardly think so,” James managed to say, still feeling Lord Hampshire’s questioning eyes upon him as well as the slight sting that came with the reminder that his own mother had already vacated his estate, choosing to live alone rather than with him. Thankfully, after a moment, the gentleman looked away and James permitted himself to relax a little more. “What about you, Lord Radford? Should you not like to have a beautiful young lady as your wife?”

“Oh, I do indeed, very much so!” came the reply, making James’ eyebrows shoot towards his hairline. “Though I do not think that such a thing is required from me any time soon! I have a brother with a family who could very easily take my place should the worst happen, which means I have no requirement to marry soon. Though, when the time comes, I will have the most beautiful young lady in all of England as my bride, I am sure.”

“But until then?” James asked.

Lord Radford grinned and spread out both hands. “Until then, I have every intention of doing the same as you and doing all that I can to enjoy every single moment of my bachelorhood.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:07 am

“I do not think this is a good idea, Mama.” Martha looked around the ballroom nervously, relieved that the shadows had kept her back from the prying eyes of the many gentlemen and ladies who were dancing in the ballroom. “I know that you said it would be a crush – and indeed, it is – but that does not mean that someone will not take a notice of my presence here.” Or notice my father. Martha’s stomach twisted as her mother tried to smile, well able to see that there was just as much concern in her mother’s heart as there was in her own. “What will I do then? I am already practically a spinster.”

“You are not a spinster!” her mother exclaimed, though she kept her voice quiet enough to make sure that no undue attention was brought to them both. “This is why you are being brought to London, so that you can find a husband before it is too late.”

Martha winced inwardly but said nothing. The last three years, she had watched the spring, then the summer and finally the autumn go by, her heart broken with the knowledge that she could never again return to the London Season as she had done before. The hopes and dreams she had once had of finding herself a love match, of marrying that gentleman and beginning their life together had faded only to distant memory, leaving nothing but pain and sadness in their place.

But then, much to her astonishment, her father had gathered them all together with the news that his debts had been repaid and, though they were still economising severely, he had decided they would make their way back to London in the hope of finding her a suitable husband before the year came to an end.

That news had not brought much hope with it. Martha had felt nothing but dread, fully aware that, even though her father’s debts were paid, society would not look

upon them with any sort of delight or happiness. The ton would not think well of them, would not be glad of their company and idea of her making a suitable match with any gentleman was entirely without hope. As far as she was concerned, the time would come very soon where she would return to her father's estate, knowing without a doubt that her future was set. She would remain a spinster, would settle in her father's house for as long as he lived and then, thereafter, would only be able to pray that her brother or sister would give her a chance for some sort of home with either of them. And if they did not, then she would have to find employment. It was not a pleasant future prospect but what else was there for her? Her father's name had been ruined, she had no dowry to speak of and there could be no hope, then, that she would be given any sort of happy future.

"We will find you a match, my dear."

Pulled from her thoughts of the past, Martha looked into her mother's face, seeing the hope and the determination in her eyes but finding her own heart sinking from the sorrow of it all. "I know that you want to do such a thing, Mama, but you need not think that I will be given the same opportunities as the other ladies," she said, softly. "I am all too aware of the situation I am standing in."

"There will be someone ," her mother said, with that steady resolve in her voice. "Though I will make quite certain that your father makes the very best possible match."

A knot tied itself into Martha's stomach. "What do you mean, my father will make a match?"

Her mother blinked, clearly a little confused that Martha did not know what she meant. "Why, your father intends to find you a suitable match, though I have told him that I must be satisfied with the gentleman for I will not have you thrown to someone who does not appreciate you! This gentleman, whoever he may be, will have to be

kind and generous and shows no wickedness in him.” Smiling, she reached out and cupped Martha’s cheek for a moment. “My dear girl, you will find yourself wed soon, I promise you. It may not be the love match you hoped for but it will still be a match. You will have your husband and your secure future.”

For some moments, Martha remained silent, not knowing what to say. Her father had never made such a thing clear to her and now that she knew of it, the shock was still spreading right through her, making her shiver. She swallowed hard, her throat tight, her heart beginning to pound as she wondered who exactly her father might find to marry her. It would not be anyone reputable, surely, for what gentleman with sense and good fortune would agree to marry her?

“You did not know this?”

Martha shook her head in answer to her mother’s question, setting one hand to her forehead for a moment. “No, I did not. I thought... ” Seeing her mother’s lifted eyebrow, she tried to explain. “I thought it would be the same as before. I thought that it would be my responsibility to find a suitable gentleman and, thereafter, when I failed, we would have to return to father’s estate and all would be just as it has been these last three years.”

Her mother quickly shook her head. “No, my dear, that is not at all the case. Your father and I are quite determined to find you a husband. It will be a match arranged between the gentleman and your father and there will be no courtship or the like, but it will still be a marriage. That is a good thing, is it not?” Perhaps seeing Martha’s uncertain look, Lady Hampshire smiled big and bright, her eyes searching Martha’s face for any sign of happiness at this notion. “There will be someone for you, I am sure.”

“I am not as certain as you,” Martha answered, her voice rasping a little. “I have nothing to offer this potential husband. I have no dowry, no fortune to speak of. My

father has borne some disgrace and even now, society does not look favourably on him. The gentleman who makes a match with me will have to endure that, will have to understand – and be willing – to be connected with our family. I cannot think that there will be a great number of fellows all eager to do such a thing, can you?”

Lady Hampshire let out a slow breath, her eyes pulling away from Martha for a moment. “I will not pretend that there will be a great deal of choice,” she said, rather quietly. “I am very aware that the gentleman who agrees to such a thing might have his own concerns but that is something that you will simply have to endure.” Reaching out, she caught Martha’s hand in her own, her eyes fixing to hers again. “It is far better to be wed and to have that security rather than remain a spinster,” she finished, gently. “You understand that, I hope?”

Martha swallowed again but nodded. “Yes, I do.”

“Good.” Letting go of her hand, her mother turned to survey the ballroom. “Now, let us simply stand here and take in whoever it is we can see. You will recall some gentlemen, I am sure, though, of course, as desperate as we might be, we cannot even consider some of them.”

A slight shudder passed through Martha’s frame. “Indeed not. I should not like to be wed to a scoundrel.”

“I do not think for a moment that your father would permit such a thing,” came the firm reply. “Let us look and merely see who is present. That is all we need to do for the moment.”

“And if someone should come to speak with us?”

“Then we speak with them, of course,” came the reply. “There is no reason for us to hide away, though I understand your inclination. The debts have been repaid, your

father has regained his standing a little and there is no reason for us to stay in the shadows.” She smiled and glanced at Martha. “Trust me.”

Martha tried to smile but nothing but doubts assailed her. Her stomach was roiling, her hands now icy cold and though she clasped them in front of her, no warmth came. Her mother began to murmur some names but Martha did not pay much attention. Why was she here? Was it simply so that, should her father find a gentleman he thought to be suitable, he could point her out? Then the gentleman could survey her, to see if she pleased him? Heat began to burn through Martha’s core, chasing away the cold but instead filling her with a sense of dismay. Was she merely to be an adornment, then? Did her father hope that her supposed beauty might capture the eye of a gentleman? She closed her eyes briefly, feeling herself grow all the more disillusioned with the idea. With her vivid red curls, green eyes and smattering of freckles which remained on her cheeks and her nose no matter how many times she bathed with milk, not every gentleman would consider her beautiful. In fact, many would lament such features which, again, put her at a disadvantage.

I shall find myself wed to a baronet, or to a gentleman who is almost in his dotage, she despaired, tears beginning to prick in the corners of her eyes. Or my father shall fail entirely and I will be left as a spinster, just as I feared.

“I am certain that we have been introduced but I do not recall where!”

Martha lifted her head sharply, turning to see two gentlemen approaching. Both had slight smiles on their faces though the way they darted a glance to each other told her that there was something more to this greeting that perhaps they were ready to offer her.

“I do not think that we have been introduced, no,” Martha told them, her chin lifting as she made to look away, only for the first gentleman to reach out and touch her arm. Horrified, Martha stepped back, catching the attention of her mother who instantly

turned to stand beside her.

“Might I be able to assist either of you gentlemen?” Lady Hampshire asked, her tone crisp. “Or is there some reason that you have both come to speak to my daughter without first greeting me?”

This made the smiles from the two gentlemen crash to the floor, making Martha’s heart lift just a little, her confidence returning. Her mother was quite determined to speak openly and decisively and that certainly seemed to have taken some of the strength from the gentlemen’s unwelcome presence. They shared yet another glance but this time, it was the second gentleman who spoke.

He bowed and then put one hand to his heart. “My lady,” he said, sounding most apologetic though the first gentleman rolled his eyes at this, making Martha’s eyes flare in surprise. “We thought that we recognised your daughter and came to make her acquaintance again, that is all.”

“Then I think you are mistaken, though I am very well aware of who you are,” Lady Hampshire continued, moving forward just a little and gazing up at both gentlemen. “Lord Radford, is it not? And you are the Marquess of Granton, I believe.”

The two gentlemen blinked in obvious surprise and then both nodded in assent, remaining entirely silent.

“Then I can assure you both that I would never have permitted you to be introduced to my daughter,” Lady Hampshire continued, making Martha’s lips quirk into a smile. Her mother had always had a strong countenance and clearly these two gentlemen had not expected it. It was something of a delight to see how they almost visibly deflated in front of her, their shoulders rounding and their heads lowering just a fraction.

“I do not think that we need to continue this conversation any further, Martha.” With a toss of her head, Lady Hampshire turned and took Martha’s arm, taking her away from both gentlemen without so much as another glance or another word to either of them.

Martha wanted to applaud.

“Goodness, whoever do they think they are to treat you in such a manner?”

Martha looked to her mother, seeing the knotting of her brows, the anger which broke across her expression. Her own smile quickly faded. “I thought they were simply a little brash.”

“Oh, no, they are far more than that,” came the reply. “Those two gentlemen are scoundrels, my dear. Rogues! You must stay well away from them.”

Her skin prickling, Martha darted a look over her shoulder, only to see the two gentlemen laughing aloud together. For some reason, she felt herself quite certain that they were laughing at her and, her face burning hot, she turned away again.

“You must understand, my dear, that now you are a little... well, now that there is a slight disinclination from society towards us, there may very well be some gentlemen from the ton who are eager for your company, though they will not be at all interested in any sort of genuine connection.” Lady Hampshire slowed her steps and let out a heavy breath. “You do understand what I am saying, I hope?”

Martha nodded, a slight embarrassment filling her. “Yes, Mama.”

“And you will not speak to them, do you understand?” Turning, her mother grasped her hands tightly, looking into her eyes. “I must know that you understand. To have anything to do with any of these rogues will only cause you disaster.”

A little surprised at her mother's vehemence, Martha nodded and squeezed her hands. "I understand, Mama. I have always understood that rogues and scoundrels are not gentlemen to be tolerated. That will not change now."

Her mother's lips pressed flat for a moment and then she let out a sigh. "You say that now, my dear, but when things become almost too difficult to bear, when you find yourself feeling almost invisible to every other person present save for these gentlemen, there might be the temptation to draw near them."

Martha nodded slowly, her heart a little painful as she realised just what her mother meant.

"I do hope that it will not be too long until your father finds you a match," Lady Hampshire finished, releasing Martha's hands. "But you must be on your guard, no matter how long it takes."

"I will," Martha promised, feeling the heaviness begin to creep in upon her again. "I will take the greatest care."

"That is good." Lady Hampshire managed a smile though it did not leap into her eyes. "And let us hope that neither Lord Radford nor Lord Granton ever think to come near you again!"

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:07 am

Settling back into a chair, James offered a lazy grin to Lord Radford, before turning his attention to Lord Mayhew. “Now, are you not offering us a drink this evening?”

Lord Mayhew rolled his eyes. “You have only just sat down, Granton. Do be patient and permit my footman time to pour from the decanter! In case you have forgotten, I have four other gentlemen across the room who also require a drink.”

James chuckled and leaned back all the more, finding himself quite contented after what had been an excellent soiree. He had been in London for almost a month now and in that time, had found himself in a different house every evening, enjoying whatever entertainment they put on. This evening was no exception.

“I have sent the ladies to the drawing room and we shall soon have a few other guests coming to join us, so we should have around fourteen or fifteen of us to play,” Lord Mayhew continued, as the footman finally brought over the tray of drinks for them all to take. “I am well aware that some of the ladies would have enjoyed a game of cards or two but it is not quite the same with their company, is it?”

Lord Radford’s lips twitched. “Indeed not,” he agreed, “for I find myself often much too distracted by a pair of pretty eyes and, when that happens, I often lose a little more money than I had anticipated!”

“In which case, mayhap you ought to bring those ladies back into the room!” James quipped, making Lord Mayhew laugh. “After all, we are each eager to gain as much of a fortune as we can, are we not? Even if it is at the expense of others.” He winked at Lord Radford but his friend clearly knew he was jesting, given the broad grin on his face.

“Indeed, indeed, that is quite so. Ah, now, here are a few of the other guests arriving. Do excuse me.” Lord Mayhew quickly rose from his chair and made his way to the door, ready to greet the gentlemen who had arrived. James watched with interest, taking in each and every face and trying to recall whether or not he had played cards with them before. If he had, then he would have a better chance of keeping his money, if not adding to it! But if he had not, then he would have to be very cautious indeed when it came to the game. So many gentlemen had little ways of telling him what they were about to play, though they did so without realising it, and this was always entirely to James’ advantage. Much to his joy, there were four gentlemen that he recognised and had played with before, and only two he had not. The chances of him leaving the house with an increase in his coin was high indeed!

“Not that you need such a thing.”

A little confused, James looked to Lord Radford, who had something of a wry grin tugging at his lips. “I beg your pardon?”

“I know what you are doing,” Lord Radford replied, a slight glint in his eye. “You are looking at each and every gentleman and wondering whether or not you know what it is they do when they play cards. That way, you will be able to tell whether or not you will be able to gain from them. Is that not so?”

James shrugged. “You know me very well, Radford.”

“I do.”

“Though you still manage to best me at cards sometimes,” James reminded him. “And let us make certain that we are both in different games, shall we? That way, we need not compete with each other.”

His friend lifted his glass in a half-toast. “That sounds like a good idea.”

“And it means our friendship shall not be affected,” James added, seeing his friend nod. “Yes, you are quite right that I do not need an increase in coin but there comes such a delight in being the victor, is there not?”

Lord Radford laughed ruefully. “You have struck at the heart of the matter there, my friend. I will confess that I too find it more than delightful whenever I am given the full victory.”

James lifted his own glass in a toast. “Then let us hope that this evening, fortune will favour us both,” he said, as Lord Radford clinked his glass against James’. “Let us pray we will leave this house with more coin than we came in with.” Throwing back his whisky, James set the glass down with a smile, only for his eyes to fix upon the final gentleman who stepped into the room. Lord Mayhew greeted him warmly, shaking the gentleman’s hand which only increased James’ astonishment. Looking to Lord Radford, he nodded in the direction of the fellow, seeing the way Lord Radford’s eyebrows shot towards his hairline.

Clearly, he was just as astonished as James to see none other than the Earl of Hampshire stepping into the room. This was the gentleman that Lord Radford had pointed out only recently, the gentleman who had been close to ruination. Why then had he come to a card game where they were to gamble and take risks in such a way that could ruin him all over again?

“I think this will be a very interesting evening,” Lord Radford murmured. “If Lord Hampshire is to play, then we may very well find ourselves richer without too much difficulty!”

James frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Why, I told you before that Lord Hampshire had a great many debts, did I not?” When James nodded, his friend continued. “Therefore, he cannot be much good at games such as this. It will be easy enough to take from him!”

The frown on James' face remained. "Unless it is that he will leave us only with nothing rather than paying what he owes just as he did before."

Lord Radford shrugged. "I suppose we shall have to wait and see."

Lifting an eyebrow, James looked to his friend. "Let us hope that he is at your table rather than at mine, then!"

This made Lord Radford laugh aloud and James himself chuckled, looking across the room again to where Lord Hampshire now stood, talking with some other gentlemen though none of them looked particularly pleased to be in his company. The gentleman himself appeared ill at ease, shifting from one foot to the other and again, James wondered what it was that had brought the gentleman here. Did he have enough coin to play an entire evening of cards? Or was he hoping that, somehow, his luck would change and he would win a significant amount?

"At least now we can see where Lady Newton's astonishing hair colour comes from," Lord Radford mentioned, a small smile tilting his lips. "Her red curls were certainly striking."

James considered this, then nodded. "Yes, I suppose they were, though I do not find red hair to be in any way attractive. I would prefer to gaze upon young ladies with golden curls or burnished bronze. Red is a little too... well, red!"

"I understand what you mean," came the reply. "I thought her a little ill-mannered also, in the way that she responded to us at the first and then the sharpness of her gaze thereafter."

"I quite agree." James considered the lady for a moment, recalling how she had lifted her chin as they had spoken, how her eyes had filled with shards of glass as she had looked at them. When he had first seen her, he and Lord Radford had thought to go and strike up a conversation with her, simply for their own enjoyment and laughter,

though it had not gone as they had intended. Her mother had spoken with harsh words and made it very clear that they were not welcome to continue their conversation and James had been left feeling a little deflated. Though, he concluded inwardly, there had not been even the smallest flicker of interest in the lady herself and even now, as he considered her, he could only think rather poorly of not only how she had behaved but also of her very red curls. That was not something that he valued in any way.

“Come now, then, gentlemen! Shall we gather to play?”

With a look towards Lord Radford, James rose from his chair and made his way towards one of the tables which Lord Mayhew had pointed out. Seeing Lord Radford sit down at one of the two available tables, James quickly sat down at the opposite one, relieved that he would not be playing alongside his friend.

“Lord Grayson, Lord Templeton, Lord Huxbridge, Lord Carnuthy, Lord Newcastle and Lord Hampshire, if you might join the Marquess of Granton at this table, please? We shall begin with a game of Commerce!”

James forced a smile but groaned inwardly as Lord Hampshire was directed to sit down at the very same table as he. Casting a look towards the other table, he caught the broad grin spreading across Lord Radford’s face and felt his own spirits drop low. Evidently, his friend was relieved that the foolish Lord Hampshire was not present at his own table.

Which means that I must play against him, James thought, his jaw tightening just a little. He would accept no excuses, he considered, wondering if he ought to make that very clear from the beginning of the game. That way, at least, Lord Hampshire would know that there was not to be any sort of debts held, no matter how much he might want it. With a nod to himself, James looked to Lord Mayhew, waiting for the gentleman to declare that the games would begin. Then, he would make his statement and, thereafter, the betting could begin.

“Capital!” Lord Mayhew exclaimed, clapping his hands and catching every gentleman’s attention. “Now, each table will play a game of Commerce. A fine game, yes?”

James nodded, a little surprised to see how quickly Lord Hampshire nodded too, as though he were eager to begin. Did he really have such confidence?

“Might I suggest, Lord Mayhew, that we state there can be no excuses and no debts?” he asked, as his friend turned to look at him. “I do not think that it is fair to have debts left here at the table. If a gentleman is to play, then he pays what he owes before he leaves this house.”

Lord Mayhew clearly caught what James meant, given the glint that came into his eyes. “I quite agree,” he said, firmly. “Yes, I quite agree. Whatever coin you have brought, that is the coin you play with. You cannot place any bets without money upon the table.”

Looking around and seeing the other gentlemen nodding, including Lord Hampshire and with a nod, James let a small, dark smile settle across his face.

I am certain to win, he told himself, his chin lifting a little as confidence filled him as he thought of what it would be like to leave the house knowing that he had won both the game and the coin of the other gentlemen. That thought sent a flood of pride in his heart and, with his smile growing, James picked up his dealt cards and the game immediately began.