



The Viscount, the Blacksmith, and the Lady (Their Wicked Ways #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: Simon Cooke, Viscount Kinnerton, has been friends since childhood with Xenia Arbuckle and Owen Bishop. The two men have loved Xenia since they were teenagers, but they made a pact that neither of them could have her, for fear their friendship wouldn't withstand the heartbreak of being the one left out.

Xenia has turned away any suitors she's had, and at twenty-two, her parents are hinting she needs to marry. She secretly loves Simon and Owen and was certain one would eventually propose to her. Deciding it's time for her to take control, she steps up her flirting and challenges the men to prove which man is the better lover. What starts as a kissing contest becomes oh, so much more.

Owen and Simon have shared women in the past, but never one they loved. Jealousy arises quickly, and neither man is willing to walk away from a lifetime with Xenia. Can they find a solution they can live with for the rest of their lives?

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Xenia Arbuckles's heart was full as she walked along the riverbank on that sunny day.

Her best friends, Owen Bishop and Simon, Viscount Kinnerton, strolled beside her, their presence as familiar as the cobblestone streets of Kinnerton they had roamed since childhood.

She'd loved Simon since she first saw him at age nine.

Owen's practical joker personality had repelled her affection some, as she was the victim of many of his pranks back then, so she hadn't fallen for him until six months later.

Now she was twenty-two and her work in her parents' bakery occupied much of her time, but she stole away as often as she could for strolls by the river with her friends.

She noticed Simon's well-tailored coat hugging his tall frame with meticulous care, the cravat tied just so, and his boots somehow appearing pristine despite the dirt road beneath them. "Simon, must you always appear as if attending a ball at Almack's?" she teased.

She'd never been to Almack's Assembly Rooms, but her cousin Sarah had, and had written paragraph after paragraph about it.

Xenia hadn't had a Season—bakers' daughters couldn't afford the expense of months in London, and for what purpose?

No one would wish to marry her. After Sarah found a husband, she'd sent some of her gowns to Xenia, who wore them to the local assemblies, but that was as close as she would ever come to a Season.

Simon looked down his nose at her, feigning haughtiness, his hazel eyes holding a glint of amusement as he regarded her playful challenge. "One must maintain a certain decorum, Xenia. Even when in the company of old friends."

"But look at Owen here." She gestured toward their friend as he walked on her other side.

Owen's appearance starkly contrasted Simon's.

He'd taken off his coat and held it by one finger over his shoulder.

His rolled-up shirtsleeves revealed forearms sculpted by the blacksmith's forge he worked over, as his father and grandfather had before him.

Owen laughed heartily, the sound resonating in the open air, and he shrugged. "I've no one to impress other than Zee here, and she has a fondness for my arms." He flexed one arm, his white linen sleeve tightening over the bulge of his biceps.

"See, Simon? There's much to be said for the appeal of a man whose sole focus isn't his appearance," she teased.

When they reached their usual spot, she settled beside Simon on the grassy bank, taking in the gentle ripple of the river.

Owen sat close by. She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear, the warmth of nostalgia flooding through her as her thoughts drifted to memories of summers past. The laughter and splashes, Simon's scholarly advice, mixed with Owen's boisterous

tales, all made up their friendship over the years.

She remembered the day Simon had defended her honor against a group of unruly village boys, his stance noble even at the young age of twelve. Owen had always packed an apple for her when she joined them fishing at this very spot.

With a soft sigh, she glanced at Simon, noting how the afternoon light played upon his features, casting shadows across his defined jawline. He sat with an effortless grace, his black hair catching hints of sunlight, his eyes deep and thoughtful.

Where Simon was the embodiment of refined elegance, Owen was the epitome of rugged vitality.

His broad shoulders and muscular arms, forged by countless hours at the anvil, spoke of his labor.

With his brown hair tousled from the breeze, he exuded a raw strength that made Xenia's heart quicken.

Yet, beneath that brawny exterior lay a gentleness that had always drawn her to him.

There was something in his brown eyes she couldn't resist.

The juxtaposition of the two men beside her—the viscount and the village blacksmith—was as compelling as it was curious. Each held a piece of her affection, a portion of her heart, for reasons as unique as their appearances.

Lately, she wondered why neither of them had courted her.

They had flirtations with the local girls, she knew from hearing her friends talk—well, gossip.

They'd kissed a few, and more. Simon would probably marry an heiress or a member of the nobility, but Owen was free to choose anyone.

Yet they'd never even tried to kiss her.

It hurt to be singled out as undesirable, for that was the only reason she could think for them to avoid her.

She watched Owen as he plucked a smooth stone from the riverbank and tossed it across the water. "Owen, I can't believe you still practice throwing stones."

"I'm not practicing, Zee. I have perfected the skill. It's all in the wrist, and I've got the strongest wrists in Kinnerton." His eyes twinkled with laughter.

"Strong wrists indeed." Simon rose and brushed off the seat of his breeches, as if to accept an unspoken challenge.

Simon tossed his stone with a deft flick of his wrist. It danced across the water's surface, skipping thrice before sinking into the murky depths. He turned triumphantly toward Owen. "Your turn. Care to wager on your throw?"

Owen's eyes narrowed playfully as he selected another stone. His arm swung in an arc, graceful and precise, sending the stone skimming fluidly over the river, beating Simon's count by one.

As the two men bantered and laughed, Xenia's gaze shifted between them.

The ease of their friendship was so enjoyable to watch, yet she couldn't put aside how they treated her.

She'd been kissed and caressed by several young men in the village, but none whose

companionship she enjoyed like these two. Didn't they desire her?

"Zee?" Owen's voice pulled her from her reverie, his brow furrowed in gentle concern. "You've gone quiet on us."

Shaking away her smoldering thoughts, she smiled brightly, masking the struggle within. "Just admiring the competition. It's not every day one gets to witness such... expertise."

Their laughter mingled once more with the sounds of the flowing water, but beneath Xenia's cheery exterior, a seed of determination had taken root. The time for waiting on these two had come to an end. One of them was going to kiss her before they left the river's edge.

Yesterday was her twenty-second birthday, and she wasn't going to wait any longer for one of these two to declare his love for her. No more would she remain a passive observer in her own romantic destiny. It was time to take control, to grip the reins of fate firmly in her hands.

Their competitive jests gave way to hearty laughter over something one of them said, but her attention was on the rush of her decision coursing through her veins.

She stood and took a deep breath, feeling the fabric of her chemise brush against her breasts as she moved.

It was like the sensation of a hand gliding down her side, teasing the edge of possibility.

Her pulse quickened, and she balled her fists at her sides, gathering the strength to act.

“Gentlemen, I have been giving some thought to the village gossip, and I’ve decided it’s high time we put an end to their idle chatter.”

“Oh? And which tidbit are we putting to rest?” Simon’s eyebrows arched with curiosity.

“The talk among the young ladies is always about which of you two would make the better husband, the better... lover.” She let the word hang between them, sweet and tantalizing, like ripe fruit on the vine. “But I find myself more intrigued by something simpler. Which of you is the better kisser?”

The words floated out, light as air, yet they landed with a weight that altered the mood.

Simon’s face was a study in contrasts. A wave of astonishment quickly doused the initial flicker of humor in his eyes.

His jaw tightened, his usual composed manner wavering as if she had asked him to dance naked in the town square.

“Xenia...” The hand that had been resting casually by Simon’s side now clenched and unclenched. He drew back slightly, not unlike a gentleman stepping away from a challenge he hadn’t anticipated, watching her with an intensity that seemed to glide down the length of her being.

She could see Simon wrestling with the notion.

There was vulnerability there, a crack in the armor she had never seen before.

And in that moment, she realized how much this game meant—not just to her, but perhaps to him as well.

He watched her as if waiting for her to retract her boldness and restore the innocent friendship they had always known.

Owen's laughter broke the silence, a rich and hearty sound. He met Xenia's challenge with a roguish grin, his eyes alight with mischief as he stood with easy confidence. "Well now, I've never been one to shy away from a bit of friendly competition."

His stance was relaxed as he stood, yet there was a new, palpable energy about him. "Let's see then, shall we?" He winked at her with an audacious charm.

* * *

Simon watched Xenia as she stood there expectantly, and the desire to close the distance between them, to savor the sweetness he'd tasted on her lips, swelled within him.

He shifted uncomfortably, his thoughts betraying him, wandering down a path that led to forbidden pleasures.

The pact he had made with Owen loomed over him like a chaperone at a ball.

They had sworn an oath, boys masquerading as men, that neither would court Xenia, fearing the chase would fray the seams of their friendship.

Yet here he sat, yearning stirring in his chest. Simon's gaze lingered on Xenia, her blue eyes reflecting the vast sky above, unruly black hair escaping her bun to dance in the wind.

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He considered the ramifications of accepting her challenge, simple as it was.

He could kiss her, potentially causing the fracture of a lifelong bond with Owen.

There was also the risk of exposing his heart only to have it spurned—she likely only toyed with them out of boredom.

Then, as Xenia turned toward him, a playful smile gracing her lips, the decision seemed to make itself.

Simon took a step closer, the scent of her lavender perfume ensnaring him further. His heart thundered in his chest. The pact, once a stalwart guardian of his actions, now felt like chains to be broken.

He hesitated, his gaze meeting Owen's, an entire conversation communicated in a single glance. He saw something in his friend's gaze, a challenge perhaps, or maybe just the reflection of his own turmoil.

The air was charged with unspoken tension, and Simon knew he could not—would not—stand idly by while uncertainty remained about who would step forward first. Owen would gloat over being first, and Simon loathed to hear it.

With a quiet resolve, Simon closed the distance between himself and Xenia, every step measured and resolute.

“Xenia, come closer.” His hand extended toward her, fingers brushing against hers.

Her skin was warm, soft, and he couldn't help but imagine touching her more sensitive places.

His fingertips traced her palm before entwining with her fingers, holding onto this connection as if it were a lifeline amidst the storm of his emotions.

He was being ridiculous. This was a mere kiss.

His resolve solidified as he stood before her.

He lifted a hand to tuck an errant curl behind her ear.

His thumb lingered for a moment too long, drifting across the softness of her cheek, down to trace the full curve of her lips.

She was a vision of loveliness, with eyes that shimmered like the deepest pools of the river beside them.

“Your eyes are the stars of the night sky—limitless and bright.” Simon realized the words sounded like something a schoolboy might say, but he couldn't take it back now.

With a tenderness that belied the fervent beating of his heart, he pressed his lips to hers in a kiss that was both an exploration and a promise. His other hand found its way to her waist, pulling her gently closer, unwilling to let even the whisper of a breeze pass between them.

As their lips parted, Simon couldn't help but bask in the aftermath of that singular touch. Xenia's chest rose and fell as she breathed hard, the luscious swell of her breasts visible above the neckline of her gown, betraying the effect his kiss had wrought upon her.

A surge of pride swelled within Simon, as cocksure as any rake.

Not only had he kissed Xenia Arbuckle, the woman who haunted his most private thoughts, but it had been a kiss that left her wanting more.

He allowed himself a small, victorious smile, one that only deepened as he noted the flush of her cheeks—a bloom more telling than any words could ever be.

Just as he considered kissing her again, Owen took a step forward. “My turn.”

* * *

Without awaiting a response, Owen gently but firmly pushed Simon aside. There was no malice in the gesture, just a bold assertion of presence. His grin was wide and unabashedly confident, as if he had already been assured victory in whatever competition they had unwittingly entered.

He always won when he and Simon competed, whether in women or sport.

He leaned in close, inhaling the scent of Zee’s soap or powder that surrounded her. “Simon may have been the first, but I can assure you, love, what I’m about to do to you will make his kiss seem a mere whisper against your lips.”

Owen reached for her face. “You’re the prettiest girl in the village, Zee. But you know that.” He traced the line of her jaw with his rough thumb.

“Your beauty outshines the stars themselves.” His methodical kisses began, a soft press to her forehead that spoke of reverence. Slowly, deliberately, his lips moved across her temple, dusting her cheekbones with affectionate pecks that stirred the air between them.

Her eyes fluttered closed under the tender assault. Owen reveled in the anticipation he was building, his heart thrumming. When at last his mouth found hers, it wasn't just a claiming—it was a celebration, a feast after famine.

The world seemed to tilt on its axis as he kissed her, his lips coaxing, demanding, giving all in one breath-stealing communion.

How long he kissed her he couldn't say, but it was a potent force that left her panting and flushed with warmth.

As he drew back, his eyes searched hers for a reaction.

A moment of silence hung between them before Xenia's laughter broke through.

“Good heavens. You two are going to be the ruin of me.” Her hand fluttered to her chest, where her heart beat a frantic pace.

She playfully swatted at Owen's arm, her touch light but pointed. “Such boldness, Mr. Bishop. I do believe you've spent too much time at the forge, thinking you can bend people to your will as easily as iron.”

Turning to Simon, who stood watching with an intensity that could melt that iron Zee mentioned, she wagged a finger. “And you, Viscount Kinnerton, don't think I didn't notice the way you took charge of the situation. How very like you.”

Her hand rose, a delicate fan in motion, stirring the air around her flushed cheeks. She glanced from one man to the other, her lips curving into a playful smile. “As for which kiss was superior... well, I must say, you've given me quite the dilemma. Both were so... persuasive in your own right.”

Owen watched her, silently urging her to declare a victor. He saw Simon giving her

the same pointed glare.

“Excellent kisses, indeed,” she continued, coyly avoiding a direct answer. “But to choose a winner? It’s too close to decide. It seems we’ve reached an impasse, gentlemen.” Her eyes danced with challenge and invitation, suggesting this game was far from over.

* * *

Simon’s jaw clenched, a storm of emotions churning within him as he observed the playful twinkle in Xenia’s eyes.

Though bemusement touched the corners of his mouth, the tightness in his chest betrayed his true feelings.

He admired her spirit, the ease with which she turned their fierce rivalry into a jest, but it gnawed at him—the need to surpass Owen, to be the one who ignited the fire in her eyes.

“Miss Arbuckle,” he began, mocking her formal tone, “your levity in such a moment is endearing.” His words were deliberate, chosen to convey both his vexation and his fondness for her impish charm.

Yet, there was something more—a deep-seated drive that propelled him.

Simon Cooke, Fifth Viscount Kinnerton, was not accustomed to sharing victory.

In matters of sport, wit, or matters of the heart, he always strived to best Owen, to stand unrivaled.

And now, with stakes higher than ever, that need burned brighter, fueled by the

alluring glint in Xenia's gaze.

As if sensing the silent battle raging within him, her lips curved into a mischievous smile. She stepped closer, her proximity reigniting the desire that he fought to keep at bay. "Perhaps then, gentlemen, we shall have to try again."

Her suggestion hung in the air, a siren's call that beckoned with the promise of sweet victory and perilous defeat. Simon's heart pounded with the thrill of the challenge. He could see the same eagerness reflected in Owen's stance, the anticipation of another chance to claim her favor.

This game could prove very enjoyable.

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As Xenia's words floated through the space between them, Simon said nothing.

He stood silently, but his gaze told her volumes.

He offered no grandiose declaration or boastful retort.

Instead, there was an unspoken promise shimmering within his steady look, one of passion held in careful reserve.

She shivered, hungry for what he seemed to offer.

He stepped closer with deliberate poise, the distance between them shrinking in an instant. He moved with precision. The air seemed to thicken, charged with anticipation and something more—something raw and unnamed that pulsed just beneath their practiced facade of playful banter.

As Simon leaned in, his approach was neither hesitant nor brash, but assuredly gentle, a firmness underlying his tenderness.

His hand pressed against the small of her back, drawing her imperceptibly nearer.

His lips brushed against hers, a contact so soft it may have been mistaken for a whisper had it not been for the warmth that radiated from the touch.

Xenia felt a surge of heat uncoil within her, spreading outwards to every extremity.

Her pulse quickened, her heart beating a fevered rhythm against her ribs.

The sensation of his lips, firm yet pliant against her own, sent a cascade of shivers down her spine, awakening every nerve ending with a keen sense of awareness.

Lost in the moment, she experienced the subtle dance of pressure and retreat, the ebb and flow of a kiss promising far more than mere skill.

The world seemed to hush around her, every sense attuned to the man before her.

Simon's kiss was a revelation, an unfurling of desire that she hadn't known she'd been holding back.

Within her mind, a chorus of surprise and delight sang praises to the depth of his passion as if he poured every unspoken word, every concealed emotion, into their ardent embrace.

Tingling spread like wildfire from her fingertips to the very tips of her toes, igniting a flurry beneath her skin that left her breathless and wanting.

Her stomach fluttered with a battalion of butterflies, tumultuous and wild in their flight, as though his lips had whispered secrets they dared not reveal.

She melted into him, her body succumbing to his assault as effortlessly as wax to flame, each caress stoking the fire within her.

He drew back, watching her with intense eyes that seemed to see straight through to her soul. He slid his hand down her side, over the curve of her hip, trailing down to the softness of her thigh.

Wondering how far he meant to go with his touches, Xenia met his gaze, her chest rising and falling with uneven breaths that betrayed her reactions.

Her eyes held Simon's steady gaze, silently challenging him to further prove the depth of his ardor.

The air between them crackled with the promise of more.

Her gaze shifted from Simon to where Owen stood a few paces away.

Owen came closer. His eyes glinted with a playful spark that acknowledged their silent game.

"It appears to be my turn again." He stopped beside Xenia, towering over her shorter frame, a knowing smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Without hesitation, he reached out, his large, calloused hands enveloping Xenia's.

One arm snaked around her waist, pulling her flush against him, while the other cradled the back of her head, his fingers threading through the dark tresses that had yet to escape her bun.

His grip was firm yet mindful, as if he held something precious.

His lips descended upon hers with bold intent, starkly contrasting with Simon's earlier tenderness.

Owen's kiss showed his confidence, fierce and unapologetic in its claim.

Yet there was a gentleness in his fervor, a careful balance between passion and respect that sent a thrill coursing through Xenia's veins.

She felt every fiber of her being respond, her body moving against his with an instinctual rhythm. The sensation of his powerful arms holding her so tightly made it

clear he wanted her as badly as she wanted him. She moaned, pressing herself against him.

The world around them seemed to fall away, leaving only the rising heat between their bodies. Her heart hammered against her ribs. His tongue thrust into her mouth, imitating the act she wished they were doing.

When they parted, she saw the question in Owen's eyes, which matched the look on Simon's face.

If they didn't want her in bed, they were excellent actors.

She didn't want their game to end. "Goodness. If this is the best Kinnerton's most eligible bachelors can do, I fear for our village's prospects. "

The two men stood there, momentarily taken aback by her jest. Had no woman ever questioned their virility before? Judging by their kisses, the answer was no, as there was nothing lacking in either man's seduction. Then they laughed, Owen running a hand through his hair.

"Perhaps we are merely out of practice," Simon retorted smoothly, his voice carrying an edge of warmth.

Owen grinned widely. "Or maybe we're just saving our true talents for someone who can fully appreciate them."

Simon still chuckled when he turned, his posture relaxed, a silent signal that their playful challenge had reached its end. Owen, too, nodded with an air of finality, the corners of his eyes crinkling with mirth. They began to retreat, to go back to their stone skipping.

“Wait,” Xenia called.

With a swift motion, she reached for Owen, her fingers curling around the coarse fabric of his shirt sleeve.

She pulled him back toward her with surprising strength, fueled by an impulsive desire.

Owen stumbled slightly, his shock clear as his eyes widened, meeting hers with a look that mingled surprise with a spark of intrigue.

“Do you think you can leave with just that?” She wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing him closer. “Now, seduce me properly.”

His breath hitched ever so slightly, but she could feel the thrum of anticipation between them. The game had changed, and she knew it as well as he did.

“Is that what you want, Zee? A proper seduction?” His question was a whisper against her lips, an invitation hanging in the charged space of their proximity.

A mischievous grin touched her lips, and her heart pounded in her chest. “I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t,” she retorted, eyes locking onto his with an unyielding intensity.

* * *

Before he kissed her again, Owen’s gaze met Simon’s. Being seduced by Zee wasn’t something he’d ever expected to happen. It wasn’t something they could have planned on when they agreed to never kiss her, or anything else.

He could see it in Simon’s eyes, a mental wrestling with the same turmoil that clawed

at Owen's resolve.

They had sworn that neither would seek Zee's affections, to preserve the sanctity of their friendship.

Yet here she was, her eyes alight with mischief and desire, unknowingly beckoning one of them to forsake honor for passion.

The silence coiled around them tightly until Owen could bear it no longer. With a resolve that surprised even himself, he leaned into Zee. "I must ask again. This is what you wish?" He searched her face for any hint of uncertainty, any sign that she might recant and free them from this precipice.

"More than anything," she whispered, her breath hitching with a mix of anticipation and excitement.

Her response made his groin tighten. He'd wanted this for so long, and he could have her now. No recriminations. His touch was gentle as it traced the line of her jaw before gliding down the curves of her body. The fabric of her gown was soft beneath his fingertips, and warm from her body.

His lips found hers with a hunger that startled him, and a quiet gasp escaped her as their mouths met in an urgent, heated exchange.

His hand rose to find the fullness of her breast, fingers splaying to cup and caress through the layers of her gown.

His thumb brushed over her nipple. Her answering whimper drove him on.

He cupped her bottom with his other hand, squeezing the soft flesh and pressing her against his groin. His cock jumped at the increased pressure. The heat of her skin

seared his palms through the thin fabric of her garments, the sensation sending ripples of yearning coursing through his veins.

Zee's body arched into his touch, her hands reaching up to tangle in the locks of his brown hair. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, and her kisses trailed over his face and neck.

Simon loomed closer. With a swift motion, he grasped Zee's arm, pulling her away from Owen's passionate embrace. "Enough."

Zee stumbled slightly against Simon's chest, her eyes wide, her lips full and red from kissing.

Startled, Owen could only watch as Simon cradled her face in his hands.

There was no hesitation in Simon's actions, no uncertainty.

He seemed to pour every ounce of his longing into the kiss he pressed upon her, his lips descending with intensity onto hers.

It was a kiss that sought to claim, to possess, to brand her soul with the depth of his longing.

He kissed her not just with his mouth, but with his entire being, her black hair falling free of its pins around them like a curtain, eyes closed in fierce concentration.

Her soft moan fueled the fire within Owen's gut.

Simon's boldness stirred envy in Owen when his fingers traced the neckline of Zee's gown. With a swift motion, he lowered the delicate fabric just enough to expose the soft curve of her breast to his hungry gaze. He bent his head to take the fullness in his

mouth.

She gasped as Simon's lips worshipped the tender flesh, her back arching slightly into the caress, eyes closed as if to better focus on what she felt. Her breath hitched. "Simon," she whispered with a sigh.

Hearing her lost in pleasure, Owen desperately needed to reclaim a part in this seduction. His lips descended onto the nape of her neck, brushing aside the thick waves of her hair. His kisses were gentle, as if he sought to tame the storm of emotions raging within him.

Her skin was warm under his lips, and he could feel the subtle shivers that ran down her spine. His fingers found the laces of her gown and tugged them, pulling the garment down over her shoulders. She lowered her arms to let it drop.

"Your skin is so soft," Owen said, as he stroked her back above her chemise.

Her response was a breathless sigh. His hands descended further, shaping the curve of her buttocks through the thin fabric.

Simon's moves seemed possessive when he bunched her chemise in his hands and lifted it over her head. He let the fabric fall to the ground as he gazed at her naked form. "You're perfect, Xenia, just as I imagined you'd be." He stroked his fingertips over her hip, over her belly.

Owen's body tensed in reaction to the soft moans that escaped Xenia's lips. Her need for pleasure was a siren's call, and his own desires surged. He drew back just enough to witness Simon worshiping her with his mouth, the sight igniting a primal urge within him.

Simon straightened, glancing at Owen, a wordless conversation passing between

them. They'd shared a woman once, a willing barmaid in a nearby town, but this was incomparable. This was their Zee, their friend. What they were doing changed everything.

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When Xenia felt her chemise being raised, her breath hitched.

She'd never been fully naked with a man, and here she stood with the two men who had frequented her most clandestine dreams. She'd never dreamed of loving both at the same time, however.

The sheer idea was overwhelming, yet she wasn't afraid of disappointing them.

And the only way they could disappoint her would be to stop now.

Simon's face was tense with restrained passion, his eyes alight with an intensity that sent a tremor skittering down Xenia's spine.

The anticipation coiled within her, tight and insistent, as her body responded to the unspoken promise etched into his smoldering look.

She could nearly feel the weight of his desire.

She stole a glance to see his erection pressing against his breeches.

"Is this all right, Xenia?" He watched her with an intensity that caused her knees to weaken.

Without breaking eye contact, he slid his hand down her side in a languid trail that ignited her skin.

His touch was reverent as it traced the curve of her hip, then ventured toward her

center, causing a hushed gasp to part her lips. His fingers whispered over her thigh.

“Oh, yes,” she sighed. A shiver raced over her bare shoulders, not from a chill in the air, but from the exhilarating sense of vulnerability.

Simon’s fingers brushed her dark curls, and her hips rocked toward him.

She felt the heat of Owen standing behind her. Reaching over her shoulders, his fingers smoothed across her collarbone before descending to the swell of her breasts, drawing circles around the sensitive peaks that ached for further attention.

The sensations they stirred were beyond what she could have imagined. Hands on her breasts, someone cupping her bottom, squeezing and spreading her, then someone found her dampness. She gasped at the throb that finger awoke.

Simon caught her gaze, his eyes alight with passion. He licked his lips and smiled.

Owen spread his coat on the grass and Simon followed suit, fashioning a makeshift bed. While they undressed—finally—she lay down, one knee bent in a weak attempt at modesty. Here, in the full light of the sun, they could see everything, the padding on her belly, the lines on her full thighs.

Her stockings and shoes were unnecessary now, making her feel more exposed. She quickly removed them while watching the men undress.

Simon tugged off his waistcoat, unwound his cravat, and fumbled with the buttons of his fall. When he shrugged off his shirt, exposing the broad expanse of his chest, Xenia saw black hair dusting the firm muscles.

Owen had worn no cravat. He pulled his shirt over his head while holding her gaze as if he awaited her reaction.

His smithy work was evident in the powerful build of his shoulders and arms, the sinewy strength that came from years of laboring over an anvil.

He cast his clothes aside with a carelessness born of urgency.

Xenia's breath caught as she took them in—Simon's dark strip of hair trailing down from his muscular chest, and Owen's hairless muscle.

As they stepped out of their breeches, need pooled low in her belly.

Her gaze traced every hard line and contour on display, sparking a flame deep within her, a throbbing need.

They positioned themselves on either side of her, their nakedness enveloping her like a cloak. The heat emanating from their bodies chased away the chill, wrapping her in an embrace of pure warmth. She lay back, lifting a hand to stroke Owen's biceps. He was like rock.

Simon's eyes roved over her and his gentle fingertips followed in a path from her thigh to her breast, stroking but not landing anywhere.

Owen kneeled at her hip, parting her thighs and dipping into the warmth of her wet, hot sex. "God save us, you're drenched. Seems we're doing something right, wouldn't you say?" he teased, his voice thick with desire, yet laced with a playful edge.

"Something—" her breath hitched when he brushed against her nub. Her legs spread a bit more, and she rolled into the touch. "Oh, yes."

Simon lowered his head to capture one pert nipple with his lips. He lavished it with attention, sucking and kneading. His tongue flicked out, toying with the hardened

bud, drawing a gasp from Xenia's lips. His other hand trailed over the curve of her waist and down the length of her thigh.

Owen continued to trace the damp heat between her legs, spreading her moisture.

Just before her eyes fluttered shut, she saw Simon lower his head between her thighs.

His fingers joined Owen's, then his tongue found her nub, flicking and teasing.

She cried out. Someone's finger slipped inside her, and Simon's tongue continued his worship.

"Make her come," Owen said with a growl.

She quivered around the finger at the thought of coming. As much as she wanted it, she didn't want it yet. More tongue, more hands, more eyes watching her—that's what she wanted now.

As Simon sucked her clitoris, she rode the finger inside her, her thighs brushing against the rough bristles of Simon's cheeks.

"That's good, Zee. Let it happen," Owen encouraged, then licked and nipped the skin on her thigh.

She was too weak to make it last. They were too skilled. A few flicks of the tongue on her clitoris shattered her, and she cried out. "Oh, oh, Simon, Owen, don't stop."

They continued their caresses as wave after wave of pleasure engulfed her. The finger withdrew, and Simon lapped up the evidence of her wicked desire. "So sweet."

Simon spread her thighs wide and positioned himself at her entrance, stroking the

length of his cock.

The heat in his eyes burned into her. He lifted her legs, angling for his entry, and guided himself with a steady hand, the tip of his cock nudging gently against her.

With a deliberate thrust, he breached her warmth, inch by inch, until he was fully sheathed within her.

Her breath caught in her throat, a soft moan escaping as she felt the delicious stretch, the sensation of being wholly filled by him.

Her fingers dug into the makeshift bedding of their coats beneath her, eyes fluttering closed as she adjusted to him.

His thrusts were measured, a rhythm set to stoke the fire building inside her, rather than to achieve his orgasm.

Each motion drew a deeper gasp from her lips, her body responding with an eager undulation to meet him stroke for stroke.

“You’re so lovely,” Simon said in a strained voice.

“And wet,” added Owen, who kneeled beside her.

After a succession of purposeful thrusts, Simon pulled out, and Xenia whimpered at the loss of fullness. With a glance at Owen, he moved aside.

Owen crawled into place on his knees. He slid into her with a steady glide that made her shiver with anticipation.

He didn’t plunge fully into her immediately, and she enjoyed the graze of his body

against hers.

Xenia's heart raced, feeling the difference in their lovemaking, both distinct yet equally exhilarating.

Owen's fingers found her clitoris, flicking his nail gently across it.

"Look at you," Owen said as he watched her face.

"So beautiful, so ready for us." His thrusts picked up pace, each one punctuated by the careful ministrations of his fingers, stoking the flame that Simon had kindled.

Xenia's world narrowed to the points where they connected, to the building crescendo of bliss that threatened to wash over her in waves.

He drove into her as Simon watched, uttering brief comments that were as obscene as the touch of Owen's finger on her nub.

Simon angled her leg as if to better see where Owen slid in and out of her.

The naughtiness of him watching, of her being with two men at the same time, made her quiver around Owen's cock.

Then Simon licked her clitoris, and she squeaked at the sensation. Owen began to grunt with each thrust of his cock, and she knew he was getting close. Without warning, she burst into waves of ecstasy, her hips rocking.

He suddenly withdrew, and she met his gaze while his hand moved with purpose along the length of his slick cock, strokes measured and deliberate. As he came, his seed spilled onto Xenia's thighs.

She sought Simon's cock, still swollen and turgid.

Her fingers wrapped around him and she drew her hand up his length.

He exhaled a deep, ragged breath as she stroked.

She observed every subtle change in his expression—the way his eyes darkened, his jaw clenched, and his lips parted with each stroke she administered.

With her thumb, she spread the liquid on his tip.

Using the sounds he uttered as a guide, she quickened the pace of her strokes as he grew closer to release.

His face was etched with fervor as his climax neared.

His stomach tensed, his hips fucking her hand.

And when he finally surrendered to the sensation, his body jerked with a primal force into her hand, his release shooting across her belly.

Xenia watched him rock back on his heels. Then she looked at Owen, who studied her with a smoldering look she'd never seen on any man before. She wished they would lie beside her and cuddle in the contentment of satiation.

Simon took out the handkerchief tucked in the pocket of his discarded coat, unfolding it with careful hands.

Xenia watched as he dabbed at her belly, the touch light and considerate, a stark contrast to the fervor that had preceded it.

His actions were unhurried, the fabric gliding over her skin, mopping up the traces of their shared abandon.

“Here,” Owen said softly, proffering another handkerchief. He took his turn, his fingers brushing against her sensitized skin between her thighs as he tended to the remnants of their passion, a small smile playing on his lips.

The act was practical, yet there was an intimacy in these moments—a silent acknowledgment of the care they held for one another. It was a different closeness than the lustful heat that had just simmered between them.

With the quiet task complete, Simon’s gaze met Xenia’s, a playful spark igniting within the depths of his eyes. “So, lovely Xenia, who was the more adept lover?”

Her elation sank, dampened by this reminder that what they’d shared had simply been a contest. What she perceived as emotion behind their loving acts was merely a competitive need to best the other man.

She quickly swept aside any foolish notions she had that they might enjoy each other another time in the future.

She glanced between Simon’s expectant look and Owen’s curious tilt of the head.

With a coy smile, she replied, “Why, Simon, I believe you wouldn’t wish to hear if the answer didn’t favor you. ”

A chuckle rumbled from Simon’s chest, deep and resonant. “Perhaps,” he conceded.

Owen moved closer, his voice a low whisper that tickled her ear, “Then let us consider it a tie, for now. A rematch might be necessary to make a proper comparison.”

Laughter bubbled from Xenia as relief soothed her tension. There might be another lovemaking session in the future, after all. Or two. She could claim her indecision as long as was necessary if it meant more glorious time naked with her men.

Simon rose and picked up his smallclothes. Xenia sought her own garments as she stood, then pulled on her chemise. When she donned her gown, Owen came up behind her.

“Allow me,” Owen offered, his hands brushing against her back with a familiarity that sent a shiver down her spine. He’d touched far more intimate places just a short time ago, and with such skill. She refused to let her thoughts wander to questions of how many women he’d helped dress.

She only found a few of her hairpins in the grass where they’d fallen, but they were enough to maintain propriety until she returned home, and her mother shouldn’t notice the difference.

“Shall we?” Simon asked when she’d repaired her bun, extending an arm to Xenia.

She took his arm with a smile, her other hand finding Owen’s sturdy forearm. They walked with unhurried steps, and contentment filled Xenia. “Remember, the Harvest Festival is in a few weeks,” she commented.

Owen made a noise close to a growl. “The perfect occasion for round two, wouldn’t you say, Simon?”

Simon laughed. “I might find a moment to escape my duties as magistrate.”

“So, a quick fuck, then. What do you say, sweeting, to a quick fuck at the festival?” Owen nuzzled her neck.

“Hmm.” She pretended to ponder the question. “When it comes to comparison, quickness isn’t necessarily an asset. But it might prove who is better at making me come. Can you satisfy me in a short time?”

“I promise to never leave you unsatisfied,” Simon said.

She offered them a melodramatic sigh. “That might cause some difficulty. I fear I can never have my fill of you two.”

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Their horse's hooves drummed a steady cadence as Simon guided his steed along the well-trodden path that meandered through the outskirts of Kinnerton the day after their romp with Xenia.

He rode in silence beside Owen, whose usually relaxed demeanor was taut with uneasiness.

The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the ground, and a tension hung between them, palpable as the heat of the day.

Owen's horse nickered, breaking the rhythm, and he shifted in the saddle, a clear sign of his internal disquiet. Simon, familiar with his moods, remained silent, waiting for his friend to broach whatever matter weighed upon him.

Owen's voice eventually pierced the comfortable silence that had settled between them, his words deliberate as they trotted side by side. "I must say, I never expected you to lean in, bold as brass, and taste Xenia like she was a ripe peach, while I was fucking her."

Simon felt the blood rush to his cheeks at the recollection, a smirk playing on his lips. He hasn't been thinking clearly at that point of the fucking. Too deep in his desire for her cunny to wait his turn. "Ah, it was an impulse driven by.... Let's call it an adventurous spirit."

"Adventurous?" Owen snorted. "That's one word for it. I'll admit, it shocked me to feel your tongue there."

The air hung heavy with the unspoken, the memory vivid in both their minds. Simon glanced at Owen, noting the unusual flush on his friend's face—a mixture of embarrassment and something else undefined.

“As I was saying,” Owen continued, “it's best we not mix our pleasures in such a manner if we have the joy of sharing our fair Zee again. No harm done, but it's not to my taste.”

Simon nodded. To be honest, he hadn't realized he'd licked Owen's cock, his focus on Xenia was so intent.

The sweet taste of her juices that they had spread by their stroking her made all the skin in that area seem the same.

Hot, wet. He could see in her face how the sensations of Owen's cock were affecting her, and he'd gotten jealous.

He'd wanted those whimpers she uttered to be because of what he was doing to her, not Owen. So he dove headfirst, so to speak, into pleasing her clitoris, the most sensitive spot on her lovely body.

“Understood,” Simon replied. “A moment of passion, nothing more. I'll be more considerate in the future. And I do intend to spend more time pleasing her, whether or not you're there.”

Owen rode in silence for a bit before speaking again. “That pact we made as boys. I never thought it would come into play.”

Simon's hand tightened on the reins. “I am not one to break a promise lightly, especially not to my oldest friend. I don't feel as though we broke the pact since we both fucked her.”

“Would it be wise to fuck her again like that?” Owen asked.

“Her desires created this entire game. She asked us to kiss her, to seduce her. When we were kids, we never imagined she might desire us like that.”

“In my mind, when we pledged to stay away from her, I was thinking of one of us marrying her.”

“As was I,” Simon said. “But I knew which of us it would be. You know as well as I the expectation of my future. My grandfather must approve of my choice of a wife. He would never accept the baker’s daughter as wife to the future Earl of Staplegrove.”

“Your grandfather’s expectations be damned. What of your heart, Simon? What of Zee’s? What if she wanted to marry you?”

“Damn it, do you think I feel nothing for her? She is as much a part of my life as you are. To think that some man will marry her is bad enough, but if that man was you, I don’t know if I could bear the jealousy. I don’t know that I could see the two of you together without it killing me.”

Owen didn’t comment.

“Feelings aren’t always a luxury we can afford.” Simon’s fingers went to the gold signet ring on his finger—a symbol of the lineage he was bound to uphold.

“Nor are they something to be ignored,” Owen countered, leaning forward in his saddle as if he was growing sore. “Will you bury your wants, your affections, your...love, beneath a mound of duty until you no longer recognize yourself?”

Simon swallowed hard, the question one he asked himself occasionally in recent

years. He had yet to find an answer. “Love is not the only thing that binds a man. Duty, honor—they have their own chains.”

“Chains that can strangle the life out of joy if you let them,” Owen retorted.

He grimaced, opened his mouth a few times to speak, but said nothing.

Then he spat out what he thought. “You’re a selfish bastard, Simon.

You think this is all about your discomfort?

What about Zee? What about what she wants?

Should she settle for some other man because she can’t have either of us? ”

Simon stiffened in the saddle, his hand gripping the reins until his knuckles turned white. He struggled to maintain composure under the raw openness of Owen’s accusation.

“Is it so selfish to uphold one’s duty?” Simon challenged. “To wish for order in matters of the heart?”

“Just know that I’m free to marry whomever I wish. I want Zee to be happy, and that matters more to me than a promise made when I was too young to understand what we were doing.” With that, Owen urged his horse into a trot down the lane that led to the village.

Simon rode on to his estate, which wasn’t a long enough distance to dissipate his frustration.

Of course, he wished the best for Xenia’s life, but he wanted to be part of it.

When he reached his home, he dismounted and handed the reins to a waiting stable boy, his mind still churning as he made his way inside.

He lived in a fine house decorated by his mother not too many years ago, the perfect place to bring up a family.

Yet it meant nothing to him when he thought about Xenia.

Seeking refuge, he entered his study, the door shutting with a thud behind him.

The room was dimly lit by the dying light from the hearth, where a servant had set a fire that morning, and a few strategically placed candles.

Shadows played along the walls, giving the space a somber atmosphere that mirrored his mood.

He moved toward the brandy decanter with a sense of purpose, pouring the amber liquid into a crystal glass with a steady hand. The comfort of the ritual offered a fleeting respite, the subtle warmth of the brandy spreading through him like a whispered promise of oblivion.

As Simon settled into a leather chair, his gaze drifted over the volumes of books lining the shelves, the maps of lands both near and far, and the various trinkets of his travels. But they were mere specters of distraction from the true conflict that raged within.

Simon's fingers traced the intricate carvings on the arm of his chair, the flourishes as familiar to him as the lines upon his own hands. The room was silent save for the occasional crackle from the hearth.

In the quiet solitude, Simon's mind wandered, and the walls of his study seemed to

dissolve away, replaced by the verdant fields and golden sunlight of his youth.

He saw himself, a boy with tousled black hair and wide eyes, running through the meadow alongside Owen, laughing and shouting as they played at being knights or crusaders.

Xenia was there too, her eyes alight with mirth, her black hair escaping its ribbons to dance around her shoulders.

His upbringing had been strict, the expectations as an earl's heir being felt even in his youth.

Yet, in those moments with Owen and Xenia, he found freedom.

The village gatherings were their playground, where they competed in races, ate far too many sweets, and played hide-and-seek among the stalls.

It was an innocent joy, unmarred by the duties that would later define their lives.

Simon recalled the day when everything changed—the day when childhood wonder gave way to the depth of adolescent yearning.

It had been during the harvest festival, the air rich with the scent of ripe apples and fresh-baked bread from the Arbuckle bakery.

He was maybe sixteen or seventeen years old.

Xenia was laughing, the sound as clear and melodic as the church bells that rang through the town square.

Her gown, a soft shade of cornflower blue, swirled around her as she turned, offering

glimpses of her stocking-covered ankles that sent a jolt of heat through Simon's body.

He remembered reaching out, his hand brushing against the fabric of her skirt, the delicate material gathering beneath his fingers.

Her head spun toward him, the surprise in her eyes melting into something warmer, softer.

His heart had hammered against his ribs, the moment stretching taut between them.

He wanted to pull her closer, to feel the curve of her waist beneath his hands, but the pact he'd made with Owen held him back.

That was the pivotal moment when Simon realized the nature of his affection for Xenia irrevocably altered, no longer just the fondness of a friend, but the fervent longing of a man for a woman.

The sweetness of it was laced with the bitterness of restraint, and even now, seated in his study, the memory stirred a dull ache within his chest.

Pushing aside the memory, he let out a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding.

The warmth from the brandy slid down his throat, but it did little to quell the turmoil of emotions that churned inside him.

The innocence of those days felt like a distant dream, one that the complexities of desire and duty had overtaken.

He set his glass down sharply, his eyes fixed on the flames that fluttered within the grate. The study, normally a sanctuary of solitude, felt oppressive, its walls closing in around him. He rose and paced before the hearth, the carpet beneath his boots

muffling the sound of his restless steps.

“Damnably folly,” he muttered to himself, a hand coming up to rake through his hair.

As the night deepened, the stillness of the house seemed to mock him, and Simon knew sleep would elude him this evening.

With a last glance at the portrait of his grandfather—his stern glare a reminder of the earldom’s expectations—he acknowledged the truth that clawed at his soul, that there was no easy way forward.

With a heavy heart, Simon turned away from the fireplace and left the study, and headed to his bedchamber.

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One day a month, servants and a few friends of Simon's late mother bustled about the kitchen of Kinnerton Manor, the sweet aroma of baked goods wafting from the kitchen as they put together baskets for the poor.

When he came into the room, he found Xenia amidst a sea of activity.

With a subtle glance to ensure their privacy, he reached for her, his touch discreet beneath the din of preparations. "Xenia," Simon said.

She turned, her eyes meeting his gaze.

Without a word, he led her away from the prying eyes, up the servants' stairs and down the hallway to his study. Once inside, he turned with a fluid motion, his hand leaving hers only to press firmly against the door, sealing it closed.

He took her hand again, lifting it to his lips and placing a kiss there. "I've missed you."

"Only three days have passed since the river." Her smile flirted with him.

"Three days is too long to wait to feed the hunger you woke in me." He pulled her to him, grasping her shoulders and pressing his lips to hers. His mouth moved over hers with a fervor that spoke of nights filled with yearning.

She kissed him back with equal measure, opening to his teasing tongue and sighing. She tasted of mint.

Simon's hands encircled her waist, lifting her with an ease that belied his quiet demeanor. With deliberate care, he placed her upon the polished mahogany desk, and continued to kiss her, trailing little pecks across her cheek to nibble on her earlobe.

"May I please you without having Owen present?" he asked.

She gasped and pulled back slightly.

"That was poorly said. I want you, Xenia. No games."

Her eyelids lowered and her lips parted. "I want you, too, Simon." She clutched his face and kissed him with a heat that took him by surprise. He pressed back, his tongue hard and demanding in her mouth.

Lifting her skirts, he stroked her stockings, enjoying feel of the smooth silk almost as much as her smooth skin. His fingertips traced circles upon her inner knee before moving ever higher. "Your pleasure is my utmost concern. Tell me what your heart desires, and it shall be yours."

A sigh was Xenia's answer as Simon's hand found the wet heat between her thighs, his fingers deft and knowing. Her body arched toward him, seeking more of his touch, her hands clutching at the edge of the desk.

"You're so wet for me already." He chuckled. "Just the snack I wanted."

Sinking to his knees, he pushed her skirts higher, parting her legs, opening her to his gaze.

She leaned back, holding her gown up with one hand, bracing herself with the other.

His hands stroked her thighs above the stockings, his thumbs circling the closer he

got to her curls.

He brushed over her slit, then opened her, inhaling the scent of her arousal.

She shifted as if offering herself to him, and he slid a finger through the moisture, spreading it around her clitoris. He toyed with it, loving the little sounds it brought out of her throat, the gasps and squeaks. He could play with her for hours just to hear her.

His cock jerked. Well, not for hours.

He slipped a finger inside her and stroked, then added a second. She clenched around him. His tongue pressed against the swollen nub, flicking and swirling, before he pulled his fingers out and laved her entire length. He moaned. "That's the sweetest nectar a man could find."

As he continued to lick and stroke, she began to move with him. He thrust his tongue deep inside her, his strokes matching her pace. He wanted desperately to hear her cries of release, to know he was the one who gave it to her.

Her whimpers rose in pitch and he knew she was almost there. Almost in heaven. Just a little more. He pinched her clitoris while his tongue pushed deep in her wetness and it was exactly what she needed.

She bit her lip to swallow the cry as her hips jerked against his face. Her thighs tightened on him, her juices filled his mouth. He licked it all up until she pressed a hand to his cheek. "It's too much. I'm too sensitive."

Pressing a kiss to her thigh, he took one last look at the swollen, wet, red flesh, satisfied he'd pleased her well.

He stood, letting her gown fall back over her legs, and he noticed her nipples were ripe buds.

Next time he'd spend some time on them, but for now, they needed to return to the others before someone noted their absence.

Xenia pulled him into her arms and kissed him like she was starving for him. Her hand slipped down to press against his cock, where it strained against his breeches.

He pushed her hand aside. "Not this time. We must return belowstairs."

"Are you certain?"

He moaned, then grinned. "No, but I will be brave." All he'd sought was her pleasure, and the pleasure he took in giving it to her.

He helped her off the desk, and she wobbled as she stood, her limbs languid and still trembling from the fervor of their union. She looked at his breeches, and he shifted his cock, but there was no comfort to be found until he softened. "We'll descend the steps slowly, I suppose."

He kissed her once more, a soft press of lips that held the echoes of their earlier passion. Even that gentle touch made him stir. He stepped back and cleared his throat. One day soon, he'd have her in his bed.

With brisk movements, Simon smoothed the front of his waistcoat and adjusted his cravat, and helped Xenia straighten her gown. Anyone who looked too closely would know what they'd been up to, but they were out of time.

"Shall we?" he offered. She tucked her hand around his arm and left the room at his side.

* * *

When they reentered the kitchen, the others turned toward them and exchanged smiles and nods as if they hadn't disappeared.

It seemed to Xenia that every word Simon spoke to someone, every courteous nod, was laced with the thrill of their shared secret.

And as they parted ways to attend to different tasks, the air between them was charged like after lightning struck.

She should feel sated after the way he'd pleased her, but she wanted more.

When the last of the baskets was loaded into the wagon that would take them to the church for distribution, Xenia waved goodbye to the others who piled into the wagon or Simon's carriage.

She waved at him where he stood on at the door of his home and wished at the very least, she could blow him a kiss.

Instead, she urged her horse down the winding path that led back to the village,

The memory of Simon's touch still lingered on her body, and she smiled. She should have insisted Simon and Owen make love to her years ago. There was no comparison to the other men she'd been with, who'd seemed more concerned with pleasing themselves.

Xenia knew they needed to be discreet in their liaisons to keep from drawing attention to themselves, but everyone knew they were close friends.

No one gossiped about how often she went to the river with the men when they

fished.

Although, her mother had said it wasn't proper that she should continue to do so.

That was at least two years ago, and Mama hadn't pressed the issue.

Without warning, her horse's hind foot clipped its front hoof, loosening the shoe, and Xenia almost tumbled off.

She grabbed the pommel to keep her seat until the mare caught her footing.

The animal limped for a short distance until Xenia halted her.

Dismounting, she examined the creature's hoof and confirmed the shoe was loose.

"Looks like we'll be making an unscheduled stop, old girl.

" She patted the mare's neck before leading her toward the heart of the village.

The clang of metal striking metal grew louder as Xenia approached the familiar structure of Owen's smithy. The red glow of the furnace cast dancing shadows on the walls, and a wave of heat enveloped her as she stepped into the open doorway.

There stood Owen, hard at work, his shirt discarded to combat the sweltering environment. Every muscle rippled under his sweat-slicked skin as he swung the hammer on the thin metal piece on the anvil. His thin hair clung to his brow.

He drew back from the anvil, his gaze catching hers as he wiped his forearm across his forehead—dark eyes alight with a blend of surprise and something more enigmatic. He set the hammer aside, the sound of metal on metal ceasing abruptly, leaving a palpable silence in its wake.

“Zee,” he greeted with a broad smile. “What brings you around?”

“Trouble of the four-legged variety,” she quipped, gesturing to her horse outside. “She has a loose shoe.”

“Let’s have a look then,” Owen said, stepping closer with a purposeful stride. His hands were sure as they lifted the mare’s hoof, his touch gentle as he worked.

Xenia watched him, her own hands itching to glide over the expanse of his broad shoulders and trace the outlines of muscle etched into his form.

She imagined tugging at the waist of his breeches to fondle that one favorite part of him, waiting for that moment when he might set aside his tools and turn his full attention to her.

But she held herself back, caught between the memory of Simon’s delightful caresses and the raw vitality emanating from Owen. How could she be hungry for Owen so soon after Simon had pleased her?

* * *

Owen straightened from removing the old shoe on Zee’s horse and turned to find the woman watching him from inside the smithy. She licked her lips, and he could swear he felt her tongue on his cock. That was something he hadn’t tried at the river, letting her suck him. He should remedy that. Soon.

He went inside for a new shoe, but Zee hovered close as he worked. He turned to say something, but her fingers brushed a single drop of sweat from the center of his chest above the leather apron he wore.

The simple touch sent a spark through Owen, igniting something deep within him. He

wiped his hands on a rag and stepped closer to her. “There’s something special in your look today. Your cheeks are bright, your eyes sparkling.”

Before she could respond, his lips claimed hers, a kiss that was at once gentle and demanding. She melted into him, her hands boldly exploring his chest and shoulders. He was dirty, sweaty, and probably smelled disgusting, but none of that was reflected in how she reacted to his kiss.

She pressed herself against his length, her hands sliding beneath his leather apron. Her fingertips brushed against the waist of his breeches, teasing the edge, daring to venture further.

Owen groaned into her mouth, and her tongue became more fervent in its exploration of his mouth. His hands roamed with growing boldness, fueled by the urgency of her touch. He cupped her breast before recalling how grimy he was.

Zee didn’t seem to mind the dirt. Her fingertips slipped beneath the placket of his breeches, and his groin tightened. It was late afternoon.... could he close the smithy and take her next door to his house?

Before he could decide, Zee’s horse whickered and a man’s voice spoke to the mare. Footsteps sounded on the cobblestones outside.

“Owen! Are you there?” called the voice, piercing through the haze of their intimacy.

Zee’s breath hitched, her eyes wide with the realization of their compromised seclusion. She pushed against Owen’s chest. Her breathing was heavy, as was his own.

“Quickly,” he whispered, voice gruff with unsated need. He straightened his apron and ran a hand through his tousled, sweat-dampened hair, while Zee scrambled to

straighten her gown.

“Stay here. I’ll get rid of him,” he said as he moved toward the entrance.

He promptly took care of his caller, then returned to Zee.

By now, reason had returned, and he stayed out of reach.

He wasn’t sure which of them was more likely to start something again.

He just knew the time wasn’t now for them to kiss, or anything more pleasurable.

“There’s no need for you to wait. I’ll take your horse to the stable later, after I replace the shoe. ”

“Thank you, Owen.” She leaned toward him as if to kiss him again, perhaps just a brief farewell, but she turned and left.

He watched her walk away, curious about her reaction to him. Did the fact that she was so eager for his touch mean she found him to be the better lover, after all? Or had they simply awakened a hunger in her she’d kept under control until now?

Either way, he planned to keep her happy as often as he could in the future. He didn’t want to wait until the harvest festival to make love to her again. He’d have to find a way to see her alone before then.

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Simon settled into the rigid chair in his grandfather's study, his posture as straight and formal as the severe lines of the desk before him.

The room was a shrine to somber reflection, every inch polished to a meticulous shine.

Portraits of long-dead ancestors glared down at him from their gilded frames, each face etched with disapproval for any deviation from duty.

The weight of expectation hung heavy in the air, thick as the damask drapes that shielded the room from the comforting light of day.

His grandfather's summons had been a succinct, though non-revealing, note. Since Simon hadn't exceeded his income in the past three years, and it was even longer since he'd seen the friends with whom he'd pulled several pranks at school, that left only one topic of discussion.

Marriage.

His grandfather's silhouette loomed large in front of the window, the earl's back turned toward Simon as he detailed the state of his properties, all of which would one day be Simon's.

Then he got to the point, turning to face Simon. "It's time you took a wife."

Simon's jaw clenched, a visceral reaction to the words that seemed to echo through the room. "I am scarcely five-and-twenty. There is time yet before such measures

need to be taken.”

The earl leaned forward, his gaze piercing as if it could carve the very thoughts from Simon’s mind and lay them out upon the desk between them.

“Time, my boy, is a luxury we do not possess. Your father was but thirty-four when consumption took him. Your uncles fared little better, all with poor health and your siblings... well, you know the sorrow that befell our house.”

Simon didn’t need his grandfather to list everyone in their family who had died tragically young.

He’d lost an older brother and younger sister, both before they’d reached their teens.

His mother succumbed to a fever just before his twentieth birthday, leaving him alone, other than his grandfather, who’d never been a nurturing sort.

“Secure the lineage, Simon,” the earl urged, his voice a blend of command and entreaty. “For the sake of our family, for the future of Staplegrove.”

Simon’s hands clenched into fists at his sides, his nails biting into his palms as he prepared for the discussion he knew was coming.

They discussed his future from time to time.

He didn’t want the type of marriage his grandfather had.

To marry without love, to bind himself to a stranger for the sole purpose of producing an heir—it was anathema to all he desired.

Yet as he looked into the eyes of the earl, he saw not only the reflection of his own

apprehension but also the fear of a legacy extinguished.

The echo of his father's laughter, the ghostly memories of his uncles' wisdom, and the fleeting joy of siblings lost too soon swirled around him, a chorus urging his acquiescence.

The earl took a seat behind the desk, resting his elbows on the polished wood, steepling his fingers. "I had initially contemplated a match with Lady Vivian Crestwood?—"

A distant cousin, Simon recalled, whom he had met once at a summer ball, a pretty sort with little conversation to recommend her. His chest tightened at the prospect, the walls of the study seeming to inch closer with each word Grandfather uttered.

"However," the earl continued, oblivious to Simon's growing discomfort, "I have since considered a more advantageous match."

Simon's breath hitched. This was not the life he enjoyed—bartering his happiness for lineage, his future traded like livestock at market. He fought to keep his expression placid, though internally he raged against the notion of such cold pragmatism dictating his heart's fate.

"Sir Edward's daughter, Miss Anne, is to make her debut in the spring. An alliance with their family would be most beneficial. His father lived to be eighty-three."

The words struck Simon like a winter chill cutting through the heavy velvet drapes.

A young woman—a stranger—whose name was now being etched into the ledger of his destiny without so much as a by-your-leave.

His mind rebelled at the image conjured.

He'd end up standing beside a bride whose eyes held no spark for him, whose touch would never stir the deep well of passion he yearned to explore.

"Her dowry is substantial, and her breeding impeccable," Grandfather pressed on, as if listing the qualities of a prized mare rather than a wife.

Simon's hands flexed, the joints hurting from being fisted so tightly.

The very idea of laying claim to a woman he did not know, could not love, felt akin to donning a suit of armor that would suffocate all that lay within.

Yet, he could not let the turmoil show. It would serve no purpose but to deepen the rift between duty and desire.

"Your considerations are most thorough, Grandfather," Simon managed. He'd been to London during the Season and had met some lovely ladies of the sort the earl sought. They were well-mannered, excellent dancers, and would be proper wives.

They wouldn't fit into the life he preferred. He envisioned a woman who shared his love for such pastimes as fishing. A woman whose laughter blended with the bubbling of the river, whose delight in the simplicity of country life matched his own.

Xenia's face came to mind. If this imaginary woman were daring enough to slip from her garments beside the river, her skin kissed by sunlight as he partook of her beauty, all the better.

Her spontaneity would ignite a fire within him, a fire that only grew as she glanced over her shoulder with an impish smile, inviting Owen to join in their secluded revelry.

The thought of Owen being part of that tryst sent a shiver through Simon. The shared

pleasure of pleasing her, watching her surrender to the dual sensations they provided—it was a thought both scandalous and intoxicating.

That type of activity was fine now, he admitted, while he was young, but he needed a woman of his own to bear his children.

Xenia's father being a baker placed her worlds apart from the noble or gentile lineage his grandfather insisted upon.

But her spirit, unconfined by title or wealth, ensnared him far more profoundly than any pedigree could.

How could he tether his life to another when every fiber of his being clamored for Xenia?

Somehow, he needed to find someone he could love as well as Xenia. Although, it wouldn't be fair to his wife if he imagined the dark-haired beauty each time he bedded her.

A better idea would be to convince his grandfather to accept Xenia.

Simon inhaled deeply, schooling his features into a mask of attentiveness.

The resolve within him coalesced into a silent oath.

He wouldn't mention her today. Instead, he would craft an argument so compelling that even this bastion of tradition before him would have to concede.

After all, love was a force that even the most rigorous of pedigrees could not ignore.

He absorbed his grandfather's words, each one a chisel shaping the future he was

expected to carve. "I understand the gravity of the situation, Grandfather," he said.

"Good." The earl leaned back in his chair, satisfied with the apparent submission.

"We must ensure the succession. There is no room for dalliance."

"Of course," Simon replied.

"Very well," the earl concluded, oblivious to the storm he had stirred within his grandson. "I trust you will act accordingly."

"Indeed, I shall." Yet his thoughts already drifting to the moments he would steal with Xenia, with or without Owen.

"I shall write after I've spoken with Sir Edward." The earl's voice cut through Simon's reverie.

Simon rose, his posture impeccably erect, betraying none of the tumultuous desires that raged within him. With a respectful nod, he left.

Outside, the crisp afternoon beckoned, offering a reprieve as Simon mounted his horse.

He welcomed the familiar creak of leather and the soft snort from the horse beneath him.

With a gentle nudge, they set off toward home, the rhythmic cadence of hooves upon the path a soothing balm to his frayed senses.

As the landscape unfolded, villages nestled between grassy fields, Simon's anticipation swelled. His thoughts raced ahead to next Sunday by the river, where he hoped to see Xenia again. In his mind, her laughter mingled with the burble of the

water, her eyes alight with mischief.

He was surprised by how erotic seeing her nude in the sunlight had been. No blind fumbles after the candle was blown out for her. She'd looked and touched as much as he and Owen had, and not once was she shy or missish, even when the two men had spread her legs, fingering, licking, fucking...

The thought of another Sunday, another stolen moment with her, set his blood afire.

Jealousy, that gnarled root within him, lay dormant at the prospect of sharing her again, but he thought the act of another man being with him in those acts had multiplied his enjoyment.

It made little sense, unless his more prurient side was stronger than he thought.

Also, knowing Owen cared equally for her made a difference.

He wouldn't want to deprive Owen of pleasure.

With each mile closer to Kinnerton, Simon's resolve solidified. He'd spend as much time as possible with Xenia, and perhaps she would come to decide she'd rather be with him alone. Owen would still be hurt, but that couldn't be helped. If it was Xenia's choice, they'd have to honor it.

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Xenia's pulse quickened as she approached the riverbank, the soft murmur of the flowing water synchronizing with the thrumming in her veins.

The idyllic scene before her was momentarily undisturbed.

Simon and Owen remained oblivious to her presence, their lines cast into the gentle currents.

Yet, it was not the fish that stirred her today, but the need that burned within her.

"Simon, Owen," she called out, her tone laced with mischief and resolve. As they turned, her hands were already tugging on the ties in the back of her gown. "Let's see which of you can stir my heart and body to greater heights."

The fabric of her gown brushed against her skin as it fell away, pooling around her feet. Her shoes met the grass with a soft thud. Her stockings followed. In no time, Xenia stood there, naked before her two friends.

Simon's eyes widened, the surprise painting his visage as starkly as if he'd been plunged into the cold river beside him. His fishing rod slipped from his fingers, forgotten, as he gazed upon her.

Owen halted mid-cast, his mouth agape, the rugged line of his jaw slack with astonishment.

"Xenia, I didn't expect you to join us today," Simon said.

Xenia's heart fluttered like a trapped bird against her ribs, her bravado flickering in the face of their stunned silence.

She felt exposed, not just in flesh but in spirit, the vulnerability of her request wrapping around her tighter than any corset.

In a defiant act to reclaim her boldness, her fingertips brushed against the peak of her breast, teasing the sensitive bud into a firmer prominence. Her eyes challenged them to respond.

Simon recovered first, his eyes alight with a flame that matched the intensity of his forge.

A grin curled his lips, and he rose to his feet, his movements initially clumsy as he fumbled with the buttons of his waistcoat.

With each piece of clothing he shed, his confidence seemed to grow—his toned chest bared to the sunlight, and the muscles of his thighs flexing with each movement.

“Allow me to show you, Xenia,” Simon said, his voice husky with desire as he closed the distance between them. “I’ll prove my worth in ways that words cannot express.”

He bent before her, his breath warm on her skin as he took her nipple gently between his lips, sucking with a fervor that promised deeper pleasures.

His tongue flicked across the sensitive nub, eliciting a soft gasp from Xenia as she threaded her fingers through his hair, anchoring herself to the moment.

“Trust me to bring you more pleasure than you’ve ever known,” Simon said against her flesh, his voice vibrating through her.

* * *

Owen watched Simon's mouth on Zee's ripe pink nipple, the way she arched into the touch, her eyes fluttering closed in pleasure. The sight sent a surge of jealousy through him, but it was quickly followed by a stronger wave of arousal.

As his shirt joined the pile of garments on the grassy riverbank, he approached the others with measured steps, his gaze never leaving the intimate scene before him.

Her body was exquisite, from the rosy areola on her full breasts, the soft pad of flesh on her belly, and the black curls at the juncture of her hips.

He came to her side, his hand reaching for the ample flesh of her bottom with a sense of ownership that belied his usual casual nature when it came to bedding women. His fingers slid between her thighs, slipping through the damp curls that betrayed her arousal—and his heart pounded.

Somehow, with Simon's head bowed to her breast and his own hand exploring her more intimately, Owen felt the walls he'd built around his desire for her crumbling.

He acknowledged the flare of jealousy, recognizing it not as a force to drive him away, but as fuel that stoked the fires of his want.

"Zee, I've never endured such a test of restraint as I've lived while not touching you."
"

His gaze locked onto hers as he battled the storm of emotions raging within—the conflict, the jealousy, and above all, the burgeoning realization that sharing her with Simon might not divide his affection but amplify it.

It was a revelation that both alarmed and exhilarated him, enticing him further into

the depths of their shared passion.

“Oh, Owen...” Zee cried when he thrust two fingers inside her wet heat.

With his other hand, he turned her head toward him, his fingers threading through her raven locks. His lips claimed hers with all the passion he needed to express, but didn't have the words.

She lifted her hand to his face, cupping his cheek and caressing him as her tongue thrust into his mouth, mating with his.

Simon pulled her away and lowered her onto her discarded gown, its fabric bunching softly beneath her, a makeshift bed. His mouth traced a path of adoration down her neck, teeth grazing lightly, and she shivered with a light laugh.

Owen returned to her cunny with his fingers, toying, stroking, spreading her moisture while listening to her cries to advise him what she wanted. The slick opening called to his cock, but he was afraid he'd come too quickly if he entered her now.

“More, please, both of you,” Zee gasped, her voice a velvet plea as she arched into their touches.

Simon adjusted his position, stretching in the grass to lie beside her. “Damn it, Xenia, your body makes me mad with lust. I cannot have my fill of you.”

She smiled. “All I seem to think about is you two making love to me.” She looked from Simon to Owen, as if to ensure he knew he was included in the sentiment.

“I love to watch your body react,” Owen said, as his fingers curled inside her and found the place he knew would drive her over the edge to madness.

As he hoped, she shuddered and cried out, her back arching as she crested her peak. He watched her face, alight with ecstasy, and felt a surge of pride and tenderness, knowing he was part of this moment, part of her joy.

As Owen shifted between her legs to let his cock take her higher again, she wrapped her fingers around Simon's cock.

She urged him closer so she could suck on his hard length.

Something about the sight of his friend's erection slipping in and out of her lips, while he thrust into her tight, wet cunny, made Owen even harder.

He felt the tension coiling in his body, his excitement heightening with every deliberate push Simon gave. As his friend's pace quickened, the sound of their joint unions—a rhythmic, wet cadence of both cocks—surrounded them.

Then, with a final, reverent drive into her mouth, Simon stilled, his entire form tensing as he pulled out and ejaculated to the side, his release painting the grasses beside their makeshift bower.

Zee's eyes, wide with need, met Owen's. "Please," she pleaded, her voice a siren's call, "make me come again."

With a singular focus, Owen continued to fuck her, his movements deliberate and driven by the urgency of her plea.

Her response was immediate, her body rising to meet each of his deep, determined thrusts.

He released her hip with one hand and wet his finger where her arousal was spread on his cock, then delved below and pressed against her tight back entrance.

She gasped and pushed back against him as he continued to tease her with his finger, and she tightened around his cock, crying out, “Oh, my, Owen—oh!”

He felt her spasms milking his cock as he came inside her. Her cries melded with his guttural groan.

“Fuck,” Simon said softly as he watched.

Owen’s breath came out in a ragged sigh as he watched Zee, her eyes fluttering closed in pure bliss.

He noticed her cheeks, flushed with pleasure, the soft parting of her lips as she said his name again.

He stretched out to lie beside her as Simon sat on her other side, tenderly stroking her hair off her face.

The satisfaction that bloomed within Owen was more than carnal.

It was a profound recognition that it was Xenia they were pleasing, the woman who had been intertwined with their lives since childhood.

Their laughter had filled the air for many years, their secrets whispered in the shade of the old oak just up the riverbank.

And now, their bodies were entwined in an intimate congress that transformed their friendship into something raw and beautiful—a bond forged not of innocence but of passionate abandon.

As the rhythm of their breathing slowed, and the echo of their union faded into the calm of the afternoon, Owen found himself reluctant to disentangle from the moment.

But reality pressed upon him like the cool breeze that whispered through the trees.

They couldn't continue like this. The secrecy, the stolen moments—they were unsustainable. A pang of fear tightened around his heart. What if this was all it could ever be? These few brief encounters stolen from their busy lives?

At some point, Zee needed to marry, especially if they continued to spill their seed inside her. He wasn't bound to consider others' opinions when it came to marrying, not like Simon. Owen's parents were dead, but Zee's family and his were equals, so they would have been thrilled at the union.

Lying beside her, Owen dared to let his thoughts wander to a possible future—one where he didn't have to share or conceal his affection. He imagined waking beside her, not just once, but every dawn that followed. Could she ever consider such a life with him? Would she consent to be his wife?

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Xenia stood before the mirror in her bedchamber, her hands delicately skimming over the fine fabric of her gown—one sent from London by her cousin—ensuring every pleat and lace fell perfectly for the village assembly.

The reflection staring back at her was a woman caught between scandal and splendor, the flush on her cheeks not attributed to the artful application of rouge.

Her fingers toyed with the silk ribbons that adorned her bodice, as her mind tumbled through the memories of Owen's firm touch and Simon's smoldering gaze.

The second intimate encounter with both men lingered in her senses like the sweet, lingering aroma of freshly baked pastries from her parents' bakery.

Xenia felt a whirlwind of embarrassment that such a moment had overtaken her usually composed demeanor, yet she couldn't deny the exhilarating rush that pulsed through her veins at the recollection.

Owen's calloused hands had traced the lines of her form, his eyes alight with a playful fire.

Simon, ever the quiet storm, had regarded her with hazel depths filled with a passionate possessiveness that thrilled her.

Surely something would come from this. Both men clearly found her pleasing to bed, and they already knew they got on well in other important matters. She would make the perfect wife for either man. They must also see that.

She turned away from the mirror, pacing the length of her small chamber, her footsteps muffled by the woven rug beneath her feet.

Which one would she prefer? It was impossible to decide.

How could she choose between the steadfast heat of the blacksmith and the enigmatic allure of the viscount?

Owen, with his robust laughter and muscular arms that promised safety and excitement, contrasted so starkly with Simon's refined gestures and the fine, fancy life he could offer her.

"Please, let one of them decide," she whispered into the stillness of the room, the words a prayer cast into the world. If only it were that simple, if only her heart did not tug her in two opposite directions with such ferocity.

If neither of them acted, the decision would be hers alone, and as she steadied her breath, catching her own determined gaze in the mirror once more, Xenia felt that tonight's assembly would be a turning point.

Surely one of them would reveal an affection for her that everyone in attendance would see.

With one last glance at her reflection, she adjusted the neckline of her gown, the soft material holding the warmth of the skin beneath.

She looked as pretty as she ever had, she decided.

Somehow, being pleased by two men gave her a glow that brought out the best in her features.

A huge grin lit her face as she realized she might enjoy that pleasure again tonight.

“Xenia, it’s time to leave!” shouted her father from belowstairs.

She gathered up her reticule and shawl and hurried out the door.

* * *

Xenia stepped into the village assembly room, her heart drumming a fierce rhythm against her ribs.

The room was awash with laughter and the warm glow of candlelight, the air alive with the strains of a lively melody from the fiddler’s bow.

She paused, surveying the scene as colorful gowns twirled and feet stomped in time to the music.

From across the room, she caught the gaze of both Owen and Simon.

Owen’s eyes sparkled with an impish light, his muscular frame cutting through the crowd with determined strides.

Simon stood a little apart, his tall silhouette framed by the doorway, his eyes fixed on her with an intensity that seemed to reach across the space between them.

“Zee!” Owen called out, his voice rich with warmth. He reached her side first, offering his hand with a flash of his charming grin. “Care for a dance?”

Before she could respond, Simon appeared at her other side, his bearing impeccable as always. “May I have this honor, Miss Arbuckle?” he asked, his words wrapped in the velvet of his smooth tenor.

Caught between them, Xenia felt the weight of their attentions like a heavy cloak. She was acutely aware of how her body responded to each man. Owen's proximity sent a familiar thrill through her veins, while Simon's quiet regard promised depths yet unexplored.

"Owen asked first," she said, feeling the solid strength of his hand envelop hers. "I would love to."

Simon's lips curved into a polite smile, though his eyes betrayed a flicker of disappointment. "Perhaps later, then," he conceded, stepping back with a graceful bow.

"Of course, the next set is yours, my lord," she called as she walked away.

As Owen led her to the area cleared for dancing, his hand found the small of her back, guiding her movements. They found a spot amidst the other dancers and awaited the start, following the oft-practiced steps when it did.

Xenia's laughter mingled with the lively tune of the fiddle as she twirled beneath Owen's arm. The warmth she felt on her cheeks wasn't just from the spirited dance. It was the exhilaration of being the focal point of such delightful rivalry.

When the set of dances ended, she followed the other dancers to the edges of the room.

"Xenia, my dear," came her mother's mirthful voice. "You'll have them dueling at dawn if you're not careful."

She glanced toward her mother, who stood at the edge of the dance floor.

With hands folded neatly in front of her, Mrs. Arbuckle wore an expression that was

equal parts amusement and affection.

Her eyes sparkled with the same blue hue as Xenia's but held decades of wisdom that only a mother's gaze could possess.

"Mama, I wouldn't dare claim such power over men's hearts," she said, slightly breathless still from the dancing.

"Ah, but you do, love. You do." Her mother chuckled, leaning closer to add in a conspiratorial whisper, "Just remember, a wise woman chooses not only with her heart but also with her head."

"Is that your way of saying you have a preference?" Xenia teased, her chest tightening at the hint of expectation woven into the light-hearted banter. Everyone would choose a viscount over a blacksmith, she was certain, but to her, they were simply men who owned her heart.

"Me? Oh, I couldn't possibly say," Mrs. Arbuckle said with feigned innocence, though her knowing smile lingered.

Before Xenia could respond, Owen's hand gently guided her away from the conversation. His touch was subtle as he whispered, "Let's step outside for a moment."

He led her through the crowd, his presence a shield against the bustling assembly. They slipped through the door, and the raucous warmth of the celebration fell away, replaced by the cool embrace of the evening air.

"Much better." Owen drew a deep breath that seemed to ease the tension in his broad shoulders, judging from his stance. He led her to a dark spot in the doorway of an adjacent shop.

“Quite so,” Xenia agreed, wrapping her arms around herself against the chill. She watched him, intrigued by the sudden shift from a playful suitor to a man seemingly weighted with thought.

The stars above glimmered like scattered diamonds on a velvet cloth, their light painting soft shadows across Owen’s face.

He drew back slightly, locking his eyes with hers.

The silence between them was filled with unspoken questions, and for a moment, Xenia’s heart quickened, wondering if he would seek answers that evening.

His hand hovered in the space between them. “Zee, about what happened.... I’m sorry if I...”

“Owen,” Xenia interjected, placing her hand atop his, stilling his words. “There is nothing to regret. That moment... it was unexpected, but not undesired. If you recall, I incited the entire escapade.”

A soft sigh escaped him as he absorbed her words, his shoulders relaxing ever so slightly. His features, previously tense with concern, now held a playful mien that matched her mood.

“Tell me then,” he teased, the corner of his mouth curling into a sly grin. “Who was it that left a deeper impression on your heart?”

Xenia bit her lower lip, feigning contemplation. The warmth that crept into her cheeks belied the calm she tried to project. “Oh, Mr. Bishop, a lady mustn’t reveal all her secrets. Where would be the fun in that?”

“Ah, so you keep us both guessing.” He chuckled, his voice carrying the warmth of

the assembly hall they had left behind. He leaned in closer, his breath tickling the shell of her ear. "Perhaps I should strive harder to tip the scales in my favor."

"Perhaps," Xenia whispered back, the single word laden with provocation. Her heart raced, echoing the rhythm of the distant music that filtered through the walls of the assembly hall. The idea that he could do anything better made her damp in certain places.

She gnawed her lower lip as images came to mind. "Owen..."

"Zee," he responded, his tone rough with need. His lips found hers, capturing her mouth in a kiss that immediately had her remembering their lovemaking. His hands grew bolder as they roamed her body, lifting her gown past her knees, exposing the stockings beneath.

The cool night air brushed against her now-bare thighs, but it did nothing to quell the heat that Owen's touch ignited. As he kneeled before her, their gazes locked. Xenia saw the hunger in his brow, an echo of the fretful emotions that surged within her own breast.

His fingers trailed over the bare skin above her stockings, and she bit her lip to stifle a moan. He cupped her cunny and his thumb began a slow, deliberate dance over the sensitive nub of her pleasure.

"Oh, lord, Owen," she gasped, her hands clutching at his shoulders for support. Her world narrowed to the sensation of his tongue as he parted her folds and circled the bud with the tip, while his fingers pursued a relentless exploration inside her.

She trembled, quickly on the edge of something wondrous, her mind awash with sensations. Xenia fought to remain silent, knowing the thin veil of night was all that shielded them from discovery. Her efforts came in ragged breaths, each a struggle as

his mouth drove her closer to the brink.

And then she was there, quivering around his fingers, her climax washing over her in waves of exquisite relief. She pressed her hand over her mouth to muffle her cries, her eyes squeezing shut as ripples of pleasure coursed through her.

Owen's grunt of satisfaction vibrated against her flesh, a primal sound that spoke of his triumph in bringing her such ecstasy. He looked up at her, smiling as he gently withdrew his fingers, leaving her to catch her breath in the quiet aftermath of their stolen intimacy.

When he stood, she reached for the fall front of his breeches, but he drew back, his gaze holding hers as he caressed her side, over the curve of her hip, and along the softness of her thigh. The unspoken question hung between them like a charged current. She wanted to please him as he'd just done.

Owen whispered, "We'll find time—soon. Just us." His words wrapped around her like a warm blanket, soothing yet igniting a new yearning within her chest.

Her lips parted to speak, yet no words came, only a nod. Her fingers grazed the rough stubble along his jaw in a tender acknowledgment of the deep connection that pulsed between them. "Promise me," she finally managed, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Upon my soul," he vowed, pressing a gentle kiss to the inside of her wrist.

With a shared glance that sealed their secret, they straightened their attire, erasing any evidence of their tryst. As they walked back toward the warmth and revelry of the assembly, Xenia's gait was lighter still, if that could be possible.

As Xenia entered the room beside Owen, she noticed Simon watching from across the crowded space, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. Butterflies stirred at the sight of

him.

He was frowning as he approached them. “Ah, there you are. I feared the fairies had spirited you away. Did you forget our dance?”

“We merely took in a breath of fresh air,” Xenia replied, feeling as flirtatious as ever. Her gaze flitted to Owen, looking for his reaction to his rival, before she turned back to Simon. “And of course I didn’t forget our dance. The next set is yours.”

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The heat of anger or frustration flooded Simon's body when Xenia reentered the assembly room, leaning lightly against Owen.

Her cheeks were rosy, her breath slightly uneven, judging from the rise and fall of those luscious breasts—signs not missed by any man versed in the language of desire.

Simon's jaw clenched, knowing that Owen had seduced her, and worse, knowing he had no right to complain.

He took in every detail. The way her black hair, earlier neatly coiffed atop her head, now had a few rebellious strands framing her face.

How her eyes sparkled with mischief and satisfaction, more than at ordinary times.

The curve of her smile, suggesting secrets only she and Owen shared.

Each observation was a thorn in Simon's side, stoking the embers of jealousy into a blazing inferno.

Yet, beneath the jealousy, a deep longing twisted his heart—a yearning not just for Xenia's body but for her affection, her laughter, her everything. He couldn't sit back and watch her find happiness with another man.

Was that wrong of him? To wish to interfere with her happiness? He didn't want to take away her joy, but merely change its source. He longed to be the one who brought joy into her life.

“Xenia,” he called out. She turned, her gaze finding his, and for a moment, time seemed to pause. When she smiled, his breath caught.

“Simon, you’ve decided to grace us with your presence on the dance floor?” She laughed lightly.

“Only if you’ll do me the honor,” he replied, offering his hand with a bow.

“Of course.” She placed her hand on his. The contact sent a jolt up his arm.

As they took their positions amidst the other dancers, the music began—a waltz that allowed couples to draw nearer than the country dances.

Simon placed one hand on the small of Xenia’s back, feeling the warmth of her skin through the fabric of her gown, while the other held her hand gently aloft.

He drew her closer than was proper, aware of every point where their bodies nearly touched, each breath she took, and the intoxicating scent of her perfume.

They moved together, steps practiced and precise, yet charged with unspoken emotions.

The space between them crackled with tension, words unnecessary when their bodies communicated all too clearly.

Simon searched her face for signs of the thoughts whirling behind those captivating eyes, but she was an enigma.

“Are you enjoying the evening?” he asked.

“Immensely.” Her lips curved into a smile that might have been innocent if not for

the gleam in her eye.

Simon's resolve hardened. He would show her that he, too, could elicit such responses from her—that he could match whatever Owen offered and more. He focused on the dance, knowing how much she enjoyed dancing.

As the final chords of the music played, Simon held her gaze, willing her to see the depth of his feelings. But Xenia, ever inscrutable, merely smiled, leaving him filled with doubt and desire.

Simon extended his arm with a subtle bow. She took it with grace, her hand light upon his sleeve as they moved away from the throng of dancers. Needing to speak to her without an audience, he led her toward the door. "Let's take some fresh air."

Her polite demeanor had him worried that something he'd done had upset her.

Was she distressed about their time at the river?

Admittedly, he and Owen had taken advantage of her.

He couldn't think of anything else he might have done to distress her.

"I must apologize for my demeanor on Sunday. It was not gentlemanly of me."

Her laughing response both soothed and unsettled his warring emotions.

She paused, turning to face him fully in the shadows of the building.

"Oh, Simon, I believe you and Owen have been reading from the same script." Her eyes sparkled with amusement.

“Nothing happened that I didn’t wish for. We are all still friends.”

He studied her, noting the playful tilt of her head and the way her lips quirked up at the corners. She was enjoying this, the game they were all entangled in.

“Perhaps,” he conceded, “but I find myself desiring to be more than friends. You must know that.”

“Must I?” she teased, her gaze bold and unflinching. “Then tell me, what would you think if I said I found great pleasure in both your company and Owen’s... together?”

The words jolted through him like a lightning strike, igniting a fire of jealousy and desire. He was normally quiet, thoughtful, not given to flights of fancy or fits of passion, but Xenia, Xenia could unravel him with a mere look.

“You are a bold woman. I suppose I hadn’t realized just how bold.” That trait was one of his favorites of hers, a list that grew each time he thought about her.

“Life is too short for timidity, don’t you agree?” She stepped closer, her breath a warm whisper against his cheek. The scent of her hair—was it merely lavender?—was intoxicating. “And I must admit, the idea of being courted by two of Kinnerton’s most handsome bachelors is rather exhilarating.”

Simon’s heart hammered in his chest. She spoke of courtship, yet her eyes hinted at secrets and shared rendezvous.

Did she want him at that moment as badly as he desired her?

He clasped her arms, his thumbs brushing over her ripe breasts.

She inhaled a gasp, and her nipples hardened beneath his gaze.

She leaned into him, her smile deepening, her eyes alight with challenge and promise. “Careful, my lord. One might suspect you’re trying to compromise me.”

“Would you stop me if I were?” His voice was a husky growl. He held his breath, awaiting permission to continue, although they needed to go somewhere less open. Anyone could walk outside the assembly and see them where they stood.

“Perhaps,” she whispered back, her breath hitching as his hand stilled. “Or perhaps I would simply enjoy the scandal.”

His cock jumped at her words. He would enjoy seducing her, but without the scandal.

Taking her hand, he led her along the street.

A soft breeze whispered through the leaves of the old elm tree that stood sentinel outside her family’s bakery.

Its branches hung low, providing an adequate screen if they stayed close to the trunk.

When he stopped, she turned to face him, her face shadowed. Her lips curved in a knowing smile, and for a moment, Simon wished he had light to see her eyes.

“Simon?” She tilted her head, a lock of raven hair slipping from her bun to caress her cheek.

He took another step closer, so close now that he could feel the warmth radiating from her skin. He brushed back the stray strand of hair, tucking it behind her ear with a tenderness that belied his racing pulse.

“May I?” he whispered, though what he sought permission for, he couldn’t quite articulate—not with words.

Her nod was slight, but it was all the consent Simon needed. His hands came up to frame her face, fingers trembling slightly as he caressed the softness of her cheeks. He leaned in, his eyes flitting between her lips and her eyes, seeking reassurance, finding it in her steady gaze.

Their lips met, and the world narrowed down to the sweet pressure of her mouth against his.

The kiss was a crashing wave of emotion—passion laced with desperation, as if he could convince her of his worthiness through this single act.

His touch was tender, almost worshipful, yet undeniably possessive, as if by holding her just so he could claim her heart and banish the specter of his rival.

“My Xenia,” he spoke against her lips, the words a prayer, a plea, a proclamation. With each brush of his lips, he willed her to understand the depth of his longing, the silent vow that he would be the one to cherish her above all others.

She moaned when he turned her to face the tree, and she braced her hands against the trunk. His groin tightened at the need in her voice. She wanted him.

His fingers worked with swift efficiency, freeing his cock from the confines of his breeches.

He was aching hard, screaming for release, for the sweet surrender of her warmth.

Lifting her skirts, he bunched the fabric around her waist, revealing the soft curves of her bottom to his hands.

He cupped the warm flesh, squeezing and caressing her soft skin. He truly loved her bottom.

“Forgive me,” he whispered, though he knew not whether he sought forgiveness for what he was about to do or for wanting her so desperately that it bordered on madness.

And then he was inside her, sheathing himself fully with a single, potent thrust that tore a gasp from her lips.

He paused, savoring the exquisite sensation of being enveloped by her, before setting a rhythm that was frenzied and passionate.

Each movement was a claim, a declaration that she belonged to him, that no other man could possibly ignite her senses as he did now.

Simon’s hands roamed over her hips, gripping her firmly as he drove into her, each thrust punctuated by the soft sound of flesh meeting flesh. The intensity of the moment spiraled, wrapping them in a cocoon of pleasure so all-consuming that nothing else mattered.

He could feel the pressure building within him, a tidal wave of desire ready to crash over them both.

His movements became less measured, more primal, as he sought to brand her with his touch, his passion, his very soul.

And through it all, he wished for time to halt, for this stolen moment to last forever.

She breathed hard but didn’t sound like she was close to an orgasm, so he reached around and found her clitoris, which was as hard as his cock. He moaned at the feel beneath his stroking fingers, and she echoed the sound.

“Yes, that’s it, Xenia. You’re so wet. Feel my cock thrusting inside you, feel how

much I desire you. This is all for you.”

Her back arched, and she flexed her hips to take him deeper. “Fuck me, Simon. Make me cry out in ecstasy.”

He growled and rocked harder against her, timing the flicks of his finger on her clitoris to match his thrusts. Her little cries, muffled as he imagined she must be biting her lip, rose in pitch and he felt her tighten around his length inside her.

He bent over her, pressing a kiss on her back. He was so close, about to shatter, but he needed her to finish first. It was all he could give her in the moment, the promise that her happiness was more important than his.

Spreading her wetness from where his erection entered her, he continued fingering her.

Circling that sensitive bud, her answering pulsation around him was going to be his undoing.

He straightened, looking down at the beauty that was his cock and her cunny together as one.

Her tight opening above flexed, and his cock jumped.

How he wanted to take her there, but not tonight. Still, he brushed his thumb across the wrinkled flesh. Xenia cried out, her hips rocking, so he pressed there again. He spit on his fingers and spread the moisture on her skin, mixing with her juices, then pushed just the tip of a finger inside her.

Again she cried out wordlessly, so he kept it there as she pushed back on his cock, body shaking, muffled whimpers matching the thrusts of her hips.

Undone, Simon could only hold her hips in place and watch the erotic dance that milked him as he pumped into her. His release was unlike any he could recall, stealing all thought and leaving his body weak.

Without removing his finger from her bottom, he stroked the skin of her buttocks with his free hand as he grew soft inside her. His mouth was dry, and he needed a drink. He needed to kiss Xenia.

He needed to strip her bare in a well-lit room and make love to every inch of her.

As she sagged, breathing hard, he stepped back and cleaned her with his handkerchief. Unable to stop himself, he bent and kissed the tight opening that was still slightly spread from his entrance. She moaned and tipped herself up to him.

Chuckling, he patted her bottom. “No more tonight.” He lowered her gown.

Xenia straightened and turned to him, reaching her arms around his neck. “Soon, then?”

“Very soon.” He caught her shoulders and pulled her into a kiss that showed her everything else he wanted to do to her. With her. Without Owen, although including him occasionally was something he hoped to continue.

As he fastened his breeches, his eyes searched her face, laden with expectation.

His heart pounded, not solely from the fervor of their tryst, but also hoping she would reveal a preference for him over Owen.

However, she merely brushed a stray curl behind her ear and regarded him with an enigmatic smile that set his pulse racing anew.

“Let me walk you home.” He offered his arm. They walked in silence, and he wondered at her lack of giddy energy that she usually displayed. “What I did... is that acceptable?”

She squeezed his arm to her side. “I can’t imagine you doing anything that isn’t acceptable. Unless you wish to not pleasure me anymore.”

That was unlikely to happen, ever. Even if he couldn’t find a way to marry her, he’d want to make love to her.

“Never fear. I don’t think I can ever have my fill of the sounds you make when I touch you.

Especially there.” He broke his arm free of hers to squeeze her bottom, then continued to smooth his hand across one side, then the other.

He stopped himself before reaching between her legs again.

“I didn’t expect it. Owen touched me there, but not like you did,” she said.

“Would you like me to do so again? I can show you how much pleasure it can bring.”

“Oh, my.” She gnawed on her lower lip. “If I decide I don’t care for it, will you stop?”

The question hurt him. “Of course, I would. Any time you’re uncomfortable with the way I touch you, you must tell me. And if Owen doesn’t stop when you ask him to, you must tell me.”

He felt her relax. “Thank you. Then yes, Simon, I will enjoy learning what you can teach me.”

They arrived at her home, where movement and voices showed her mother had returned from the assembly. Simon wondered how long he'd kept her after they left the others. Her father wasn't scouring the streets in search of him, so it must not have been too long.

"You should go inside. Thank you for dancing with me tonight." He couldn't bring himself to thank her for the rest. He bent and kissed only her forehead, in case anyone inside was watching.

"Goodnight," Xenia whispered. She went up the steps and inside.

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When she closed the door behind her, not wanting conversation, Xenia simply called out, “Goodnight,” and raced upstairs.

Safe in her room, she leaned back against the wall, her breath still unsteady from the intensity of Simon’s attentions under the tree.

Her bodice felt constrictive against her heated skin, and she hastily loosened the laces.

Her hands trembled slightly as she reflected on the way Simon had taken her—fierce, unyielding, yet undeniably intoxicating.

And undeniably satisfying.

Xenia sat on the edge of her bed in her bedchamber, her fingers absently tracing an intricate pattern on her coverlet as her mind tumbled through a whirlwind of memories. Her heartbeat fluttered, recalling how different her two romps had been.

Simon’s touch lingered on her flesh like the ghostly brand—a searing intensity that she couldn’t dislodge from her senses.

As if he was there with her now, she could almost feel the weight of his gaze, heavy and laden with unspoken promise, the way he watched her with those deep hazel eyes, searching for signs of retreat. But oh, how she craved the advance.

Her body remembered with acute clarity the boldness of his passion, the way he took control with an urgency that left no room for hesitation.

It was an act devoid of the usual preliminaries, a stark contrast to the tender explorations of their times by the river.

His hands had glided over her skin with the confidence of ownership, igniting smoldering fires everywhere he touched.

His cock, hard and unyielding, had pressed into her without ceremony.

The quick thrust before he'd even fingered her showed how desperately he wanted her.

And then, that unexpected sensation, when his finger entered that other place, breaching her tightest entrance with a firm but gentle insistence that shattered her last vestige of restraint.

It hurt at first, but the pain left quickly, and the presence of his finger there while his cock thrust in and out had made her clitoris pulse even stronger.

"Am I wicked?" she whispered in the silent room, the words slipping like sin from her lips. A flush crept across her cheeks as she recalled the surge of pleasure that had coursed through her veins, a pleasure so intense and foreign that it bordered on sacrilege.

The memory alone was enough to draw a shiver from deep within, her body betraying her with its yearning to relive those forbidden moments, to succumb once more to the wickedness of Simon's desires.

Caught between remorse and longing, she chastised herself for reveling in such decadence, yet secretly, desperately wanting to experience it all again.

"Simon, you have captivated me," she whispered into the darkness, her confession

lost amidst the shadows that played upon the walls of her room from the glowing embers in the fireplace.

Her thoughts wandered from the passionate lovemaking of Simon to the tender warmth that Owen always seemed to wrap her in.

He might not have been as daring, if lifting her skirts just around the corner from the busy assembly rooms could be anything but daring, but he'd focused purely on her pleasure.

It had been quick, a stolen moment when they escaped the revelry, but oh, how satisfying.

His tongue had danced over her, igniting sparks that flickered and flared into a blaze of pleasure, leaving her breathless and flushed with delight.

The memory of the sensation when he'd continued to lap up her moisture made her throb now. His tongue was such a talented muscle.

Rising from the bed, Xenia began the familiar ritual of undressing for the night. Her hands moved deftly, but her mind was elsewhere, sifting through the myriad sensations both men had given her.

She imagined the solid weight of Owen's muscular frame on her in bed. His body matched the sculptures she's seen at Simon's house, carved by artists who captured every line, every bulge. And then there was Simon, tall and lean. His power came from the way he did things, the surety in his touch.

Her fingertips traced her collarbone, following an invisible line down to the swell of her breasts, remembering the press of their mouths against her skin. Simon's kiss was like a storm, fierce and possessive. Owen's, however, held a playful promise, coaxing

laughter even as it stirred desire.

Her contemplation turned to their more intimate differences, the thought sending a shiver of more wickedness down her spine.

Simon's cock was longer and thinner, and it seemed to react more to what she did, if she judged by the way it jumped under her ministrations.

Owen's, though slightly shorter, was thicker, a solid presence that made her feel filled.

Both men had touched her in places that sparked her arousal to life, their hands knowing just where to wander to draw out her deepest pleasures.

As she absently toyed with a nipple, licking her lips, she couldn't help but wonder which she preferred—the length of Simon or the thickness of Owen?

It seemed an impossible choice when each encounter left her yearning for more, her body singing with the memory of their touch.

The fabric of her bedclothes whispered against her skin as she slipped beneath the coverlet.

Her mind swum after being pleased twice in one evening by the two men.

Simon's words on their walk home echoed in her ears, promising a slower, more deliberate encounter that both thrilled and unnerved her.

He spoke of touches that she shouldn't allow, yet the very thought sent a trail of heat spiraling straight to her clitoris.

He had been so sure in his touch, only asking permission after.

She should be upset about that, but she honestly believed he had her enjoyment in mind, not just his own.

Curiosity mingled with apprehension now, thinking about allowing him to do that again, an internal conflict that had her wringing her hands even now.

Such wickedness he offered, and yet, how could something that promised such intimacy be anything but beautiful?

He was that way, though. At his house, when she was helping with baskets for the poor, she remembered the brazen way he'd claimed her, his finger delving into her with a boldness that would have caused a scandal if someone had discovered them.

And once she'd had her orgasm, he'd insisted they return to the others.

No thought of his own release, just like how Owen acted tonight.

And then there were the times at the river with both Simon and Owen, the contrast between them sharpening the sensations.

Owen's laughter, his gentle teasing, seemed to amplify the fervor in Simon's touch.

Somehow, when both men laid claim to her body, every caress felt magnified, every kiss a promise of endless ecstasy.

Her breath hitched as she recalled the dual sensation of being filled and adored, the memory alone enough to ignite a flame within her core.

She pressed a hand to her stomach to still the butterflies.

How could she yearn for more, for this other avenue of lovemaking that Simon vowed they would explore?

She was sinfully wicked to want more. More places to be satiated, more time spent with two men she wasn't married to. No one could ever know the truth of their relationship.

“Damnation.” They had shown her a world where passion reigned, where the connection of their bodies spoke a language older than time itself.

And she wanted to understand it, to lose herself in the discovery of every sensation, every touch that Simon—and Owen—could offer her.

She wanted to embrace this facet of her desires, to allow herself the freedom that came with their unconventional love.

How could she keep them both? A frisson of excitement darted through her at the thought of sharing her days—and nights—with these two men who stirred such disparate parts of her being.

“Simon... Owen...” she whispered their names into the darkness, a benediction and a plea entwined. Could she dare to hope for a lifetime of such intimacy with not one, but two souls so interwoven with her own?

As sleep blanketed her thoughts, Xenia nestled into the comfort of her bed, a smile curving her lips. The promise of new experiences, of exploring the depths of her passions with Owen and Simon, shone brightly on the horizon.

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The bell above the bakery door chimed a welcoming note as Owen stepped inside, the familiar scent of freshly baked bread and sweet pastries enveloping him. His gaze swept the cozy space, searching for the one person who could set his heart into an erratic gallop.

“Good day, Mrs. Arbuckle,” he greeted with a nod.

“Owen,” replied the matronly figure from behind the counter, her eyes crinkling with mirth. “Xenia’s in the kitchen.” She gestured with a flour-dusted hand toward the back, where trays of pastries awaited their turn in the oven. “Go on back.”

With a grateful smile, Owen made his way past the shelves laden with loaves of bread and sweet buns. As he pushed through the door into the warm kitchen, he called out, “Zee?”

She turned from her task of drying a bowl, a few stray locks of black hair escaping her bun to frame her flushed face. Blue eyes, bright as a summer sky, locked onto his, and she straightened up, wiping her hands on her apron. “Owen! What brings you here?”

“I thought you might fancy a walk,” he said, trying to keep his tone casual so she wouldn’t know it was primal urges that brought him looking for her.

A playful glint sparked in her eyes, and she tossed aside the cloth. “I’m just finishing here. Let me ask Mama.” She left him alone, but returned quickly. “Shall we go?”

As they left the kitchen together, Mrs. Arbuckle looked up from her work, a knowing

grin spreading across her features. Her gaze followed them as they exited the bakery. “Have a lovely walk.”

Owen glanced back, acknowledging her well-wishes with a brief nod before turning his attention to the woman by his side, ready to spend some time with her alone.

He steered Zee down the lane that led away from Kinnerton Manor, improving the chances they could spend the afternoon without the company of Simon.

His gut clenched at the thought of having him join their outing.

While he enjoyed the trysts the three of them shared, Owen needed this time to show Zee who he really was as a man, as a lover. To show her how he felt about her.

“Remember when we used to race up to Old Miller’s bridge?” Zee’s laughter floated on the breeze, pulling Owen back to a simpler time when love was a game children whispered about.

“I could never beat you,” he admitted, a grin spreading across his face. “You always knew the shortcuts.”

“I still do,” she teased, nudging him playfully with her elbow. “Though I imagine you’ve gained other strengths since.”

“Perhaps. But some things haven’t changed. Like how the Harvest Festival is coming up. I hear your parents are planning something special for the baking competition this year.”

“My lips are sealed as to what Mama’s planning. She’s sworn me to secrecy. Though I can say it’ll be a treat for the senses.”

“Everything that comes out of the Arbuckle’s bakery is,” Owen said earnestly, his words laced with an admiration that encompassed more than just the baked goods. “Just like the woman standing before me.”

Zee blushed, the rosy hue matching the vibrancy of the poppies scattered along the roadside. Their conversation meandered as the road did, touching upon memories of shared summers and village lore. As much as he loved talking with her, her nearness was driving his cock mad.

“Would you... would you come to my house? I want—no, I need to be alone with you. Not in the shadows or on the side of the road near the river, but properly, in my bed.” His cheeks blazed with a heat that mirrored the fire of his forge, but his gaze remained locked on hers, unwavering.

A moment passed, thick with tension. Then she stepped closer, her eyes alight with a daring spirit that had always drawn him to her. “I’d enjoy that.”

They turned around, and Owen had difficulty keeping his pace as casual as a few moments before.

As they approached his home, the afternoon sun cast shadows across the walls of the buildings on the lane.

His hand trembled slightly as he led Zee to the entrance.

He glanced over his shoulder up the lane, which was empty.

“I should bring you in the back way, shouldn’t I, to keep the neighbors from seeing you. ”

“Good thought, scandalous talk might ruin me,” Xenia replied with mock severity,

playing along.

“Why, if anyone says anything, I might have to marry you to save face.” He paused at the door and met her gaze. “I’d do so in a minute, even without the gossip.”

He realized how close that sounded to a proposal and wondered what Zee thought.

She said nothing. He ushered her into the dimly lit main room, where the windows offered some sun still, casting a warm glow over the simple furnishings.

He paused for a moment, the air between them charged with anticipation, and asked, “Would you care for a drink? I have lemonade, or I could make tea.”

Her eyes met his, sparkling with either laughter or happiness, he wasn’t sure. “No, thank you.”

Acknowledging her response with a nod, he took her hand, leading her to the narrow staircase at the back of the room.

Reaching the sanctuary of his bedchamber, he closed the door behind them, sealing away the rest of the world even though he lived alone, so no one would interrupt them.

He turned to face Zee, drinking in the sight of her—the woman whose body he planned to worship.

With deliberate care, he brushed a loose strand of black hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. His fingers trailed down, tracing the line of her jaw, before coming to rest at the nape of her neck.

He untied the ribbon that held her bonnet in place and set it aside. Pulling the pins

from her hair, he let the dark tresses cascade around her shoulders in a silky waterfall. He ran his fingers through it, stroking the silky strands. “So soft, just like your skin.”

Loosening her gown, he helped her take it off, followed by her chemise. He ran his fingertips across her bare shoulders, then down her arms, marveling at her beauty. She was exquisite, and she was all his, at least at the moment. “If you were my wife, I’d have you dress like this always.”

She laughed, but she didn’t try to cover her nudity, which pleased him. “And what of the customers who call here when they don’t find you at the forge?”

He raised an eyebrow and grinned wickedly. “Why, I might just let them look their fill. I’d be proud to show everyone how beautiful my wife was.”

There was that word again, wife. And he’d mentioned marrying her when they first arrived there at the house. He should simply propose and end his uncertainty. Then he’d know whether she preferred Simon over him.

He dropped to his knees, bringing him closer to eye level with her thatch of dark curls, but he didn’t touch them yet. Inhaling deeply, he hoped to catch the scent of her arousal, but it was too soon. Grasping her hips, he urged her to sit, then he removed her shoes.

Untying one of her garters, he rolled her stocking down her leg.

As he took it off, he kissed her toes and suckled them, before trailing his tongue up her leg and untying her other garter.

He liked the way her hips rocked when his tongue neared her cunny, but he didn’t go there yet.

He waited until he had the second stocking off, then nudged her shoulders so she'd lie back.

With his hands behind her pale, bare knees, he stood, spreading her to his gaze. For a moment, all he could do was stare. "Zee, you're so incredibly beautiful."

"I want to see you too," she said, her gaze bold and full of longing.

He nodded and began to undress, but kept his eyes on her as if this was the first time he'd seen her. This was a first, though. Their first time alone in a place where they could explore each other's likes and dislikes. He planned to know every inch of her before she left.

When his clothes and boots were in a pile on the floor, he stood before her, his cock rising proud and hard. He fisted himself and watched her reaction.

"Owen," she said softly, raising a hand to him.

"Soon," he said. He lifted her knees again and this time bent to taste her, licking her fully. She was already damp for him, but not wet enough. He let his tongue play, circling, entering, flicking, and he briefly sucked her bud into his mouth, rubbing his lower teeth over it.

She cried out, bucking her hips. He chuckled, and began kissing and licking a trail up her torso, nibbling the padding of flesh around her belly button, and dipping his tongue in the small indentation.

Then he kissed his way to her breasts, and spend a long time with them.

He loved how they filled his hand—and more—and how her rosy nipples tightened just from him looking at them. He couldn't get his fill.

But his cock had waited long enough, not satisfied with the gentle strokes Zee gave it as he enjoyed her breasts. Owen crawled up the bed and lay with his head on his pillow. He curled a finger at her. "Come here."

"If I must." She heaved a dramatic sigh and crawled up beside him. He draped one of her legs across his and helped her position herself on his lap, guiding his hard length into her wet heat. She hissed with pleasure.

He groaned, savoring the feel as she slowly settled onto him. She wriggled a bit, and he grasped the bend of her hips, pressing his thumbs against her clitoris. Her delighted gasp made his cock jump, so he pressed again. "I want to watch you ride me."

Zee began to rock slowly, and he watched her hands lift to cup her breasts. "Yes, that's it," he encouraged. "Don't they feel wonderful? Pinch your nipples."

She did. Her cunny tightened around his cock.

"Do you touch your breasts when you're alone at night?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Show me. I want to watch how you please yourself."

Her hands got busy with those heavy mounds, pinching her nipples, tugging them, then one hand slid between her legs and he held his breath. "You touch yourself there, too?"

"Yes."

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His thumbs spread her lips so he could see her finger her clitoris. Fuck. He hadn't imagined she pleased herself that way. "Do you think of me when you do that?"

"Yes, Owen. I imagine it's your tongue on me."

Fuck. His cock nearly burst at those words. His hips rose to meet her. "I love licking your cunny, tasting your sweetness. I love having my cock in you, watching you ride me while you make yourself come. Do it for me, Zee."

He pumped into her so fast she was bouncing on him, her breasts jiggling, and her fingers continued to work her bud.

She moaned, softly at first, then suddenly cried out, arching back, her body tense.

Her inner muscles milked him into his release, and he groaned, holding her hips to keep her in place.

When he could move again, Owen held Zee close, her heart thundering against his chest. He twitched a few times inside her and rubbed his hand up and down her back. She felt so right in his arms, in his bed. He didn't want to move.

But he needed to. She couldn't stay long without her parents questioning how far they'd walked. Tenderly, he disentangled himself from her embrace and wet a cloth in the basin of water in the corner. With utmost care, he cleaned Zee, his touch as gentle as he could make it.

"Is this all right?" he asked as he blotted the wet fluids between her legs.

“It feels nice,” she answered, her smile soft and filled with a trust that warmed him to his core.

In the afterglow, as he lay beside her, tracing idle patterns across her skin, a sense of rightness settled over him. Here, in the quiet intimacy of his home, with Zee nestled against him, every doubt seemed trivial. Her feelings for him were clear.

Too soon, he had to help her dress, and he escorted her home.

As they approached the Arbuckle bakery, the lightness of their talk gave way to a comfortable silence.

He stopped just outside the door, taking her hand in his.

“Thank you for the company,” he whispered, his thumb caressing the back of her hand.

“Always a pleasure, Owen,” she said.

With a final squeeze of her hand, he released her, watching as she slipped through the door.

Once inside, the warm glow of the bakery ovens enveloped Xenia, but the heat of Owen’s touch lingered on her hand.

“Back so soon, love?” her mother’s voice carried from the back room.

Xenia gave a quick check of her hair, making certain it wasn’t mussed, but wasn’t too neat, which would reveal how she’d just put it up after Owen took it down. “Yes. We

had a pleasant walk.”

“Simon was here earlier, asking after you. I told him you were out walking, but I didn’t say with whom.”

Xenia entered the bakery kitchen before going upstairs to their home. She didn’t feel like talking, but Mama clearly did.

“Those two are certainly paying a lot of attention to you.” Her mother’s words were gentle, but they struck deep, unearthing the conflict that churned within her.

“They’re my friends, Mama.”

“Yes, but this feels more like courting. A mother senses these things. Trust me, there’ll be a proposal soon. Or two. Which will you choose?”

That was the precise question that had Xenia so distressed lately.

Mama continued. “Kinnerton, of course. Owen is a nice young man with a steady income, and he’d treat you well, but a viscount... A woman would be foolish to turn her back on a man with a title. Well, perhaps if he had no money to go with it, but?—”

Xenia couldn’t listen to any more, not with Owen practically calling her wife so recently. “Do you need my help with anything?”

Her mother stopped what she was doing. “No, not here. But perhaps you could start cutting the vegetables for supper.”

“I will.” She hurried upstairs, where she found her father waking from a nap. He normally rose first to heat the ovens in the bakery, so he often napped in the late

afternoon. “Would you like some tea, Papa?”

“No, thank you. Is your mother in the bakery?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He mumbled something and headed to the staircase.

Xenia went into the kitchen and picked up the basket of vegetables her mother had purchased that morning. She gathered the knife and cutting board and set to work, taking her built-up frustration out on the potatoes and carrots.

The weight of her choices pressed against her, a burden of love divided, each man holding a piece of her heart. She knew that no matter her choice, a part of her would forever remain lost to a dream that might have been.

Her loss would be nothing compared to what one man would feel should she marry the other.

And that’s where her guilt lay. She started this whole mess with her foolish challenge.

Never did she imagine it would turn out this way.

She thought it would be a single occasion.

They would enjoy their congress in the sun and would go back to their close friendship minus the fondling and fornication.

She could admit now that was ridiculous, but it worked with the other men she’d made love to. There were no hearts involved there, though, she realized. While she’d known she cared strongly for Owen and Simon, she hadn’t imagined either of them

felt the same for her.

Or perhaps she hoped one of them did. One of them might feel a strong affection for her but still believed she didn't return the sentiment, so they hadn't approached her.

But they both did. They both wanted more of her. Simon and Owen desired her in the same way she desired them. Unbelievable.

In a perfect world, she'd continue to meet with both of them. In this world, however, she must end the farce.

"Damn it all," she whispered into the stillness, her voice catching on a sob.

The duality of her feelings, a blend of sweet yearning and bitter helplessness, swelled within her chest, threatening to engulf her.

She could easily envision herself as Owen's wife, standing by his side as they forged a life rich with shared laughter and many children.

But there was also the allure of a life with Simon, one of grace and duty, where she could help others in the village while raising their family.

Neither situation appealed more than the other. She wasn't used to fine things, and she was perfectly happy with what she had, which was the life that Owen could offer her. It would be enough.

But to never kiss Simon again, never feel the safety of his arms around her, hear him cry out with the pleasure she'd brought his body...

It was too much to think about. Neither man had proposed.

While Owen had hinted at doing so, he hadn't said the words yet.

Logic said she should accept the first man to ask, since she couldn't know for certain the other man planned to propose.

She certainly couldn't ask the first man to wait while she asked the other man his intentions.

So, she had her decision. She'd accept the first offer for her hand.

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Simon had sent a note around inviting Xenia to join him on a picnic and had packed a basket and blanket into his curricule, so there'd be no need for a servant to accompany them.

No need for anyone to be present while they rolled about naked under the sun.

He knew he was taking advantage of the class difference between them—Xenia had no maid to chaperone her.

He wouldn't suggest her parents might be eager for a compromising situation that would call for an engagement, but they'd surely celebrate such a marriage if it happened.

His grandfather, on the other hand, might throw a fit.

Since there were income-bearing properties entailed on the earldom, and Simon was the heir apparent, the earl had nothing to threaten him with.

Simon also had income from his maternal grandfather's will, more than enough to support a family until such time his grandfather died.

And there was no love lost between him and the old man.

Nothing the earl could threaten him with would force him to not marry Xenia.

In truth, there was only one thing keeping him from speaking to Xenia's father now.

His friendship with Owen. While his friend hadn't mentioned his intentions, Simon saw the way he looked at Xenia.

Gone was the childlike innocence in his eye, and the passion that replaced it was unlike the lust visible around other young women.

Owen was in love. And Simon couldn't bring himself to break his friend's heart.

Simon was determined to find a solution that would please the three of them.

"Lord Kinnerton, dear boy!" Mrs. Arbuckle beamed from behind the counter when Simon entered the bakery, dusting flour from her hands onto her apron. Her eyes, so like Xenia's, twinkled with unspoken delight as she caught sight of him. "Here to collect our Xenia, are you? She'll be just a moment."

Her knowing smile hinted at dreams of a union between her daughter and him, a match that would undoubtedly please any mother in England.

Simon, ever the gentleman, offered a polite nod, his lips sealed on matters of the heart.

He was here for a picnic with Xenia—nothing more, nothing less—or so he allowed Mrs. Arbuckle to believe.

"Thank you, Mrs. Arbuckle. I can wait."

When Xenia entered the shop, Simon's heart stuttered.

She'd curled the strands about her face that usually came free of their pins, and it framed her beauty.

Her cheeks were rosier than usual, her eyes brighter, and her lips.

.. well, they were unchanged but called out to him to nibble them.

“You look lovely,” he said when he finally found his voice.

She thanked him and walked out with him to his curricule.

He took her to a secluded meadow outside the town’s gentle bustle.

Pride swelled within him as he unveiled the contents of the picnic basket after spreading the blanket on a patch of grass he trampled down.

His preparation had been meticulous, not to impress her but to please her appetite.

An array of cheeses, meats, and fruits lay nestled among fresh-baked loaves from her parents’ bakery.

He’d chosen each item for its vibrant hue and inviting aroma—the ripe red strawberries, the rich amber honey, and the deep purple of the blackberries.

After they sat, he placed a plump strawberry to her lips, his eyes twinkling with mischief as she took a delicate bite. The juice trickled down her chin, and she laughed—a clear, melodious sound that intertwined with the whispering leaves above them.

He reached out with a white linen napkin, dabbing at the sweet droplet. “Careful now, we can’t have you staining your lovely gown.”

Xenia playfully swatted his hand away, her eyes sparkling with mirth. “Perhaps I should simply remove my gown.”

His cock twitched, and he cleared his throat to allow air into his frozen lungs. “If you do that, we might forget to eat this wonderful meal.”

Her look suggested she wouldn’t mind missing the food, but she picked up a wedge of cheese and took a bite. As if to taunt him, she swiped her tongue across the seam.

Then she took up the jar of blackcurrant jam, spooning a generous dollop to put onto a scone, but the jam dripped, landing on her other hand with a plop. She raised her finger, ready to lick it off, but Simon was quicker.

“Allow me,” he said, taking her hand in his. His mouth closed over her fingertip, swirling his tongue around her finger.

Her breath caught as she watched, her lips parting at the sight of him lavishing attention on her finger. She pushed deeper between his lips and withdrew to the tip, as if she fucked his mouth. His groin tightened as he imagined his cock sliding into her mouth.

He released her finger slowly, and for a moment he couldn’t look away from her.

Then something snapped inside him. With a deliberate slowness, he began pushing aside the remnants of their picnic—a feast forgotten in the wake of a hunger far more pressing.

She joined him and they quickly cleared the blanket.

“Come closer,” Simon whispered when they finished. He traced the soft skin exposed by her neckline, venturing lower over the ripe mounds of flesh with each stroke.

Her breath hitched, and she tilted her head back, offering herself to him. His mouth found the tender hollow at the base of her throat, tasting the salt of her skin, savoring

the pulse that beat there.

“Oh, my,” she breathed out, her hands exploring the breadth of his shoulders, slipping underneath his coat. There was an urgency in her touch that matched his own need.

Simon’s hands roamed over her curves with a reverence and hunger, his fingers tracing every dip and swell. Unable to wait any longer, he tugged to lift her gown, which she helped him take off completely. She shed her shoes and stockings just as quickly, while he tore off his own clothes.

Stretching out beside her, he kissed her with all the built-up passion he felt for her, kneading his lips against her, exploring her mouth with his tongue. He tasted the sweetness of the fruit she’d eaten, which made him hungry for another sweet taste he’d enjoyed before.

When his skilled fingers delved between her thighs, spreading her moisture with a delicate touch, Xenia arched into him, a wordless cry escaping her lips. The sensation was overwhelming, each touch sending shockwaves of pleasure through her body.

He scooted down on the blanket, nestling between her thighs.

He toyed with her bottom while inhaling the scent of her cunny, teasing and touching with a mix of playfulness and fervency that left no doubt of his intentions.

She spread her legs wider, and he groaned.

“We should always make love in the sunlight.”

Simon wanted to tease and tantalize her, but he was too hungry not to just dive in.

He dragged the flat of his tongue over her entire length, savoring her taste.

She was more than ready for him, which pleased him immensely.

He loved how much she enjoyed what he did to her. It made him want to do more.

After a few more minutes of eating her cunny, he remembered something he'd brought in preparation. Rolling to the side, he dug through his coat and removed a small vial from his pocket. When he returned, he lifted Xenia's knees. "Hold your legs like this."

She did, and he saw her cunny open and close at the attention he was giving her. She enjoyed being exposed, it would seem. He would remember that.

He poured a bit of oil on his fingers and rubbed his hands together to warm it, then he wiped a finger between her buttocks. "Remember your promise to stop me if I do anything you don't enjoy."

"I will."

Circling the opening, he pressed lightly at the center and smiled when her breath hitched. "You will enjoy this, I'm certain."

He continued to play there, occasionally moistening his hand in her escaping juices, but not doing more than pressing lightly. He wanted her relaxed for what came next. Pouring a splash more oil on his fingertips, he pushed one inside her, just the tip.

"Oh!"

Waiting, he watched her muscles flex around his finger.

Damn, she was beautiful, even here. He ran his tongue up her cunny, flicking over her hard bud while pushing his finger deeper.

Slowly, with his tongue and fingers, he worked to build her climax.

Her hands clenched in his hair, and when her cries changed pitch, he slipped another finger inside her rear.

She tightened around him, rocking her hips higher.

When he thought she was close, he oiled his cock with one hand, keeping his fingers stroking in her bottom, then he pulled out and pressed his cock to her opening. "This might stretch you even more, but I'll go slow."

"Just fill me. Make me come," she begged.

His hips flexed at the desperation in her voice, pushing a bit deeper than he planned, but she only moaned.

One of her hands toyed with her clitoris, rocking to encourage him to slide in deeper.

When he was fully seated in her bottom, he let her adjust to the fullness for a moment, then thrust two fingers into her cunny.

"Yes!" she cried out, tightening around his fingers and his cock.

It was almost his undoing, but he held on and stroked in and out.

Her fingers continued to flutter on her bud, and her other hand found her breast, squeezing it.

She arched off the blanket as Simon thrust inside of her with his own desperation for release.

Her head rolled from side to side and she moaned loudly. “Oh, Simon—oh!”

She continued to rock with him, fucking his cock with her bottom. She was more vocal than normal, making sounds that made his legs grow weak.

Eyes fluttering open, she froze, her back lifted off the blanket as she pressed hard against his hips.

He pulled back and pushed deep again, growling low in his throat, feeling an overwhelming need to claim this woman completely.

He began thrusting harder, faster, feeling his control slipping away bit by bit.

Xenia met him stroke for stroke, and her fingers again played with her clitoris as if she was nearing another release.

His head wanted to fuck her like that forever, but his body gave in to the orgasm that rocked him like nothing had before. “Xenia! Oh, God, Xenia.”

He continued to shoot inside her, and she tightened around him, milking him. Shaking, he had to withdraw carefully to keep from falling on top of her. As gently as possible, he lowered her hips to the blanket, ran his fingers up her leg and hip, and collapsed next to her beautiful body.

He sighed heavily.

She rolled to face him, her hand stroking through the hair on his chest. “I wasn’t certain I would like it, but I did.” She smiled wickedly.

“Next time, we’ll have Owen’s cock where my fingers were while I’m inside you.”

Her eyes widened. “Is that possible?”

Nodding, Simon planted a kiss on her forehead. “Do you enjoy when we both pleasure you?”

Her lascivious laugh made his groin tighten. He was too sated for another round, though.

“I take that for a yes. In that case, I believe you’ll enjoy two cocks inside you.

If not, we never mention it again.” In saying that, he realized he’d practically scheduled another afternoon of the three of them sharing their passion for each other.

And that was all right. He enjoyed watching another man bringing Xenia to peaks of pleasure.

What Owen did to her body didn’t make him jealous, only the thought of what their friend might be doing to her heart.

He knew it was too late to demand it, but he wanted her heart for himself, alone.

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Xenia lay beside Simon, their naked forms stretched languidly upon the woven blanket, their picnic foods lying unnoticed near the basket to one side. She watched the gentle rise and fall of his chest beneath her hand, the way the sunlight kissed his skin, glowing where sweat still clung.

She stole a glance down his length as he lay there unabashedly nude. He had more body hair than Owen did. Everywhere, it seemed, but she enjoyed the scratchy feel of it on her skin when their bodies slid over each other. The coarseness was so masculine, so different from her own body.

Everything about him was so male, his scent, his muscles, his deep voice. She felt fragile beside him, but safe. He'd protect her from any harm, no matter what may come.

Rolling to her back, she looked up at the bright sky, where a few clouds made a slow crawl. "Remember when we used to lie like this as children?" She laughed suddenly, and added, "Well, we wore more clothes, then. We would make shapes out of the clouds, and you always saw knights and dragons."

Simon chuckled softly, the sound resonating with warmth. "And you would see loaves of bread and pastries, even back then, dreaming of new recipes for your mother's bakery."

She laughed. "I suppose becoming a baker was my destiny." Her gaze shifted from the skies to meet his eyes.

"Perhaps. But you were always meant for more than just kneading dough, Xenia."

His fingertips brushed down her body, a calm worship rather than a seduction.

A comfortable silence fell between them, and she listened to his steady breathing and the occasional bird calling from the trees. Her thoughts continued to wander through the years. “You know, with you and Owen, there’s always been a difference. Your personalities are so unique.”

She felt the muscles of his belly tighten. Was that because of her mentioning Owen’s name? It couldn’t be. Simon had suggested only minutes ago they might have Owen with them soon. No, he hadn’t said perhaps we’ll, he said next time we will ...

Men. She would never understand them. “Should I not talk about Owen when we’re naked?” She kept the sarcasm from her tone, leaving it to him to remember his own words.

“Owen is our friend,” he replied tersely.

“And so much more to both of us, of late. Our friendship is... complicated, isn’t it?”

“Complicated,” Simon echoed. He stared at the clouds, his brow furled and lips thin.

Eventually, he captured her hand in his. “Xenia, know this—regardless of your feelings for Owen, my affection for you is unwavering. You must never doubt that.”

Her heart nearly broke at the emotion in his eyes. She cupped a hand to his cheek and stretched up to kiss him. “I feel the same way, Simon. You will always be in my heart.”

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Sweat traced down Owen's brow, dripping onto his shirt as he hammered Farmer Morgan's plow blade on the anvil, repairing the damage created when the blade struck a large rock submerged in a field.

The heat of the smithy wrapped around him like a second skin, and the muscles in his arms thrummed with a tiring rhythm born of the extra work he'd taken on.

His stomach growled, reminding him he hadn't eaten yet, and it was already midafternoon.

"Owen," Simon called from the doorway. "I must speak with you."

"Can't it wait? I've got to finish this before nightfall," Owen shouted back without looking up, sensing the urgency in his friend's tone, but too ensnared in his task to afford distraction.

"No, this is urgent." Simon came closer while avoiding the flying tool in Owen's hand. He was not one for idle visits, especially not to the sweltering heat of the smithy.

Owen lifted his gaze, about to rebuke him with a reminder that dawn would come soon enough for all matters, when the door creaked open once more, halting the words on his tongue.

Zee walked in carrying a basket likely filled with the fresh bread he'd ordered.

"Good day to you both," she sang out. Her eyes sparkled with mischief as they landed

on Owen's sweat-slicked form and then flicked to Simon's more composed demeanor. "I'm delighted to find you both here, as there's a matter we've yet to settle."

Owen exhaled sharply. "Zee, this really isn't a good time.

.." His voice trailed off, the admonishment losing steam as he watched her approach, shifting her hips as she walked, well aware of the effect she had on him.

The heat of the forge no longer accounted for all the warmth spreading through his veins.

She approached Simon first, offering him a scone with a coy tilt of her head, before turning toward Owen, the basket extended in silent offer.

Desperate to maintain focus, he squeezed the handle of his hammer and swung it gently at his side.

Yet, as she neared, the scent of cinnamon and yeast teased his senses.

"Surely you have time for a quick bite, Owen. Mama threw in some leftover scones."

Despite himself, he fisted the edge of his leather apron, tugging at it as if to physically hold himself back from succumbing to the distraction she presented. "Work," he grunted, the word clumsy and inadequate against the backdrop of her laughter.

"Always work," Zee sighed. "And what about after? Will there be time then or will you be so tired you'll go straight to bed?"

He swallowed, the conflict raging within him.

His arms tensed, the hammer he held momentarily forgotten as Zee's words hung in the sweltering air.

Heat flushed his skin not solely from the furnace's blaze, but from the growing irritation within him.

His patience frayed like the worn leather of his apron.

"Enough!" The word burst from him, loud and sharp, echoing off the stone walls. He slammed the hammer down upon the anvil, sending a shower of sparks flying toward the dirt floor. "You think I'm free to go gallivanting about at your pleasure?"

Simon straightened, his eyes widening slightly at the harsh tone that was so unlike him.

Owen continued, his voice thick with exhaustion, "Both of you—you come here with your... your jests and your sweet confections, and neither of you understand the workload on my shoulders." His chest heaved, the fatigue from repairing Farmer Morgan's plow blade mingling with the hunger gnawing at his belly.

Taken aback by the outburst, Zee froze, her playful facade crumbling, the basket of baked goods hanging from her limp arm. She hesitated, then placed it gently on the worn wooden workbench, the baked treats untouched.

"I'm sorry, Owen," she said with a soft sincerity that stung him more than any rebuke. Her eyes dimmed, clouded by hurt, and the dawning realization that her lighthearted visit had been an unwelcome interruption.

"Truly, I didn't mean to—" Her words trailed away as she turned to leave, her drooping posture conveying a profound disappointment that settled uneasily in the pit of Owen's stomach. Her footsteps were quiet against the stone, yet thunderously loud

in the silence left in the wake of his anger.

He lunged forward, his work forgotten in the sudden chill of realization. He caught her arm just as her hand touched the latch, her pale wrist a stark contrast to his soot-smeared fingers. “Wait, Zee. I was out of line, truly. I’m sorry.”

She turned back slightly, a single tear escaping down her cheek.

His heart constricted at the sight, and he released her arm to cup her face gently, his thumb brushing away the moisture that marred her porcelain skin.

But as he did, the grime from his work smeared across her cheek, a dark smudge against her fairness.

“Look at what I’ve done. I’ve gone and made a mess, here and here,” he said, gesturing first to her cheek and then around the smithy, his own state of disarray mirroring the chaos of his emotions.

“It’s fine. I’m not injured.” The tremble in her voice betrayed her lingering sadness. She tried to turn once more, but this time, it was his unspoken plea for forgiveness written on his face that held her in place.

Simon stepped forward, his gaze locking with Owen’s in a silent exchange that spoke volumes. “Let’s go next door. Owen needs to eat a few of those scones, I believe, and then we can discuss what brings Xenia here.”

Zee hesitated, her gaze flitting between the two men, but Simon’s encouraging smile coaxed a reluctant nod from her.

Without warning, Simon scooped Zee up into his arms. She let out a surprised yelp, her arms instinctively wrapping around Simon’s neck. “Come, we’ll await him next

door.” He headed for the rear door.

“Put me down this instant!” she protested, though her eyes gleamed and the corners of her mouth twitched as if fighting a smile.

“Ah, but I much prefer you aloft, where I can keep a proper eye on you,” Simon said.

Owen watched them, relief blossoming in his chest as Zee’s laughter finally broke free. Simon had managed to turn the tide, and for that, he was immensely grateful.

He strode hastily to the pump behind the forge. He peeled off his shirt, bent down and pumped the handle, and cool water gushed forth, cascading over his head and down his back, washing away soot and sweat that marked the day’s toil.

His hands worked quickly, scrubbing the grime from his arms and chest, droplets catching the fading light as they flew from his vigorous shaking.

The urgency was not solely for cleanliness, it was an ache to rectify the rift he’d caused with Zee.

After dousing himself one last time, he wrung out his hair, beads of water shimmering like diamonds in the waning sunlight.

Turning back to the forge, Owen banked the fire, uncertain how long he’d be with the others. The heat of the furnace paled compared to the warmth that awaited him inside—a warmth kindled not by fire, but by the presence of those he cared for deeply.

Rushing inside his home, he saw the door to his parlor stood ajar, laughter spilling into the hallway like the light from the hearth within. He sighed, relieved Zee had returned to her usual humor, then continued to his bedchamber to change into dry

clothes.

* * *

Simon looked up when Owen entered the room, noting he hadn't bothered putting on a waistcoat or his boots.

Was he planning to allow Xenia to seduce them, as she obviously intended?

He pressed his lips together. As much as he desired what she offered, now wasn't the time to play.

Not after the outburst, not without coming to an agreement about how things lay between them all.

Xenia's heart—and her body—wasn't a plaything they could continue to toy with, no matter that she was the one asking them to do so. She deserved better.

Owen nodded at them as he continued into his small kitchen. "I'll make some tea. Will you have scones and cream?"

"Thank you, no," Simon said from the small chair he sat in near the hearth.

Xenia also turned him down.

"More for me then," Owen quipped gruffly.

The kettle soon sang with steam through the spout, and Owen poured the hot water into the delicately patterned teapot that had once been his mother's.

He carried a tray with the pot and three cups and set it on a low table, then sat in the

chair beside Simon and opposite the sofa where Xenia perched.

Xenia and Simon continued their light conversation while Owen prepared their cups and sat back to eat his scones.

Simon took a slow sip from the cup Owen handed him, watching over the rim as Owen made quick work of the pastries, a faint smile touching his lips. It was a rare scene of domesticity that Simon found surprisingly comforting, a brief respite from the seriousness that awaited their conversation.

Setting down his teacup with a gentle clink against the saucer, his gaze lifted to the faces of his companions. “There’s a matter I came to discuss with Owen, and I suppose it’s right that we include you in the conversation, Xenia, since it concerns you.”

Owen nodded, brushing crumbs from his lips, his brown eyes attentive. Yet it was Xenia who captured Simon’s focus, her eyes bright with a mix of curiosity and something like apprehension.

“Xenia, our current... arrangement, while most enjoyable, is laden with pitfalls that concern me.” He paused, searching for the right words, wanting to convey both the gravity and the care behind his admission.

He caught her expression, and he felt a pang of remorse for any distress his words might cause.

Yet he pressed on, committed to honesty.

“I value our friendship above all else, but we cannot continue as we have. It does neither you nor Owen nor myself any justice to pretend that what transpires between us is of no consequence.”

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Taking a breath, he watched her face, seeking signs of understanding, of acceptance. His heart, quietly fierce in its affection for both of his dear friends, feared the potential loss that such truth-telling might bring. But it was a risk he was willing to take.

“Please understand that my concern stems from a desire to protect what is precious among us. We cannot continue to treat what we’ve recently enjoyed as if it’s a game.

You are not a prize—” He stopped, realizing what he’d said, and chuckled.

“Of course you are a prize. What you are not is a trinket to be passed about.”

Xenia’s brow creased, a shadow of hurt flickering across her delicate features before she caught herself. Her eyes darkened and her lips parted slightly, her breath catching. Then she offered a seductive smile that went straight to his cock. “And what if I enjoy being passed about?”

Another shot to his groin. “Don’t misunderstand me.

I’ve enjoyed every stolen moment, every shared glance, the laughter we’ve found in each other’s company.

But I fear what our being pitted against each other might do to our friendship.

And how those resulting emotions might reflect on how we feel about you. ”

Simon’s heart thrummed in his chest, a steady drumbeat urging him forward. He took

a breath, steadying himself for the proposal he hoped would bind them closer rather than drive a wedge between their hearts.

“Consider this,” he said, his eyes never leaving hers, leaning forward and placing his hand on her knee. “A relationship between the three of us, one where neither you nor Owen nor I must hide the depth of our affections. Where jealousy has no quarter because we share in something far greater.”

Her eyes widened at the boldness of his suggestion, but no fear showed there—only curiosity and perhaps a flicker of hope.

“We’ve grown up together, entwined our lives in such a way that unraveling it now would leave each of us less than whole.

I don’t wish to force your hand, dear Xenia, nor ask you to choose between two halves of your heart.

” Simon’s gaze was unwavering. “Unless, of course, you’ve already formed a preference for one of us. ”

He let that statement hang in the room, noticing how Owen’s brows knitted together. If she preferred one over the other, the damage was unavoidable.

Xenia licked her lips and reached for her teacup as if just now noticing it. She sipped quietly, not meeting their gazes.

Simon took the lack of response with hope, and continued, trying to choose words that focused on what she gained, not the lascivious desires he and Owen shared.

“Let us three create a bond that honors all facets of our connection, that respects the friendship that is the very foundation of our... predilections.”

The silence that followed was thick with contemplation, the air charged with the potential of uncharted territories being mapped out in their midst. Simon could see the gears turning behind Xenia's eyes as she considered what he said.

Owen's brow still showed the lines of concern.

He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees, his hands clasping one another tightly.

"We can't venture into this lightly, Simon.

There's much at stake—our reputations, Xenia's good name.

What of the rules that will govern us? How do we ensure that what we share with her doesn't become a poison in our friendship?

I still see the possibility of jealousy if she spends more time with one of us.

Will she give us a schedule when we may lie with her?

Or will we only be allowed to pleasure her at the same time? What of her wishes?"

Simon drew back and nodded slowly, acknowledging the weight of Owen's words. "I have considered such things. I trust Xenia to guide us in setting boundaries that will safeguard all our hearts. She knows us both—knows our spirits—and will not steer us toward ruin."

"Discretion is paramount," Simon continued. "Our trysts must be cloaked in utmost secrecy, for if word were to spread, it would spell disaster not only for Xenia."

His gaze shifted between Owen and Xenia, seeking affirmation. "It is a delicate

balance we seek, but not an impossible one. We are three people aligned by affection and respect. With care and honesty, we can navigate this path without tarnishing the honor of any party.”

Simon drew a deep breath and waited, but neither of his companions spoke.

Had he gone too far in his desire to regulate their assignments?

He glanced at Xenia, her eyes bright with a curious blend of emotions, and then to Owen, who sat with a thoughtful, guarded expression, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Let us consider a more... private arrangement.” Simon’s belly warmed with the vision of Xenia spread *au naturel* on his blanket.

He would miss seeing her thus. “My residence is discreet enough for our meetings. No one would think anything odd if they saw either of you going there. I suggest we gather there on Sundays when we would normally be fishing.”

He watched Xenia’s expression carefully, noting the faintest flutter of her lashes, before turning his gaze to Owen. His chest was tight, making it hard to draw a breath. What if she turned him down? What if she wanted Owen alone?

“Sunday at your house?” Owen echoed, uncrossing his arms, his posture signaling his contemplation of the prospect. “That would be sensible, as much as I hate to limit our time together to once a week. It will soon be too cold for disrobing by the riverside, anyway.”

The corners of Simon’s mouth lifted slightly in relief. “It will provide us with the discretion we require and the comfort Xenia deserves.”

Xenia leaned back against the sturdy oak chair, her fingers playing with the edge of the ribbon adorning her gown, the black curls that had escaped her bun framing her face in a way that suggested innocence but belied the mischief in her eyes.

“You know, I never imagined our little adventures would lead us here, to this moment of... negotiating affections.”

“Neither did I,” Simon admitted. The surrounding air seemed charged now, not with tension, but with an anticipatory thrill.

“Shall we seal this new arrangement with a kiss, then?” Xenia proposed, her suggestion bold as it was flirtatious. She stood up, the fabric of her gown hugging her curves, the gesture pulling Simon’s gaze from her lips—full and inviting—to her round breasts.

He watched her as she stepped in front of him, her movements deliberate and unapologetically sensual. Her hand reached out, fingertips barely grazing his jaw before she turned her attention to Owen.

“Xenia,” Simon growled, reminding himself now wasn’t the time for lovemaking.

But Xenia’s intentions were clear. The playful glint in her eye transformed into something more fervent, a reflection of her own desires. “Why not express our... mutual fondness properly? It’s only fitting, given our decision.”

Her words, brazen and filled with intent, left no doubt what or whom she wanted in that moment. She was eager to have them both again.

He glanced at Owen, who watched the interaction with intensity, before speaking.

“Xenia, it would be remiss of us to indulge in such... pleasantries without considering

our other obligations. Owen has his forge to attend to, and I,” he paused, fabricating urgency within his own schedule, “have matters of estate to oversee.”

Owen nodded his agreement, though his gaze lingered on Xenia with an unmistakable hint of regret.

Steeling his resolve while trying to mentally damper his cock, Simon continued, gently steering the conversation toward a more stable ground. “Though our hearts are aligned, we must also heed the call of our daily endeavors.”

Xenia’s lips curved into an acquiescing smile. She sighed and stepped back.

“Let’s meet on Sunday,” Owen proposed. “At Simon’s, where we may discuss the matter further... and in as much detail as possible. We might even review your preferences for certain acts.”

Simon nearly groaned as visions of certain acts he still looked forward to flashed vividly in his thoughts. For all his years of learning to control his demeanor, Xenia was a taxing challenge. “Sunday.”

“Sunday,” Xenia echoed, her voice laced with anticipation. “It shall be our day.”

The men stood, and Simon placed Xenia’s hand on his arm. “I’ll escort you home. We’ll leave Owen to his work.”

While his mind sighed with relief that the handling of this matter had ended in satisfaction all around, the rest of his body wished for a deeper satisfaction, the kind he only found buried fully inside Xenia’s warm, wet sheath. Three days. He only need wait three days.

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On Sunday, Simon welcomed Xenia into his home. “We have the place to ourselves. The servants have their leave.”

Something felt different. This wasn’t the casual visit like when she came to help put together the baskets for the poor. She felt like a true guest.

He led her into the drawing room, where the curtains were all pulled back and sunlight poured into the room. Owen watched them enter with a playful glint in his eyes. He leaned against an ornate mahogany bookcase, arms crossed over his broad chest, a knowing smile playing on his lips.

Simon urged her to a sofa sitting opposite two chairs.

She felt him fiddle with the back of her gown before the neckline loosened.

She caught the fabric with a hand to her breasts to keep it from falling.

This was as subtle as her tearing off her clothes at the river, she thought wryly. She glanced from one man to the other.

“Undress for us.” Simon’s words were calm but laced with authority, resonating through the hushed ambiance of the room. He sat in one of the smaller chairs just a few feet from her. Owen came to take the other seat.

The words hung in the air like a spell, and Xenia felt the weight of them settle upon her shoulders.

Her heart pounded fiercely against her ribcage, a staccato rhythm that matched the tremor of her fingers.

With deliberate slowness, she let the gown sag, baring her chemise-covered breasts.

She could feel Simon's gaze upon her, heavy with desire, and Owen's too, his breathing shallow and measured.

She took her arms from the sleeves, held it in place for a second longer as her nipples hardened, then let it go. A nervous giggle threatened to bubble up within her, but she smothered it with a gulp, focusing on the task at hand.

Simon and Owen watched silently, their eyes never straying. Simon's lips were parted ever so slightly, his breaths measured and controlled. Owen shifted the growing hardness in his breeches.

As she lifted her chemise over her head, she felt momentarily vulnerable.

Being told to bare herself to them rather than doing so of her own accord felt different.

This was just as wicked, but not in her control.

She enjoyed feeling in control. The reactions of her men were the same, that she could see, but part of her felt like she was submitting to their urges, not her own.

So ridiculous, when she'd sought them out for a tryst just days before and had left frustrated. Her eyes locked with Simon's, a silent exchange passing between them. There was admiration there, but something deeper too—a reflection of the burning need that equaled her own.

Dropping the garment, she pressed her shoulders back and put a hand on her hip, tilting her pelvis slightly as she posed for them. “Is this what you two want?”

“Sit,” came Simon’s velvet command.

The heat from the fireplace did little to calm the shivers that swept over her limbs. She backed up to the sofa and perched on the edge, the cool fabric of the upholstery on her skin reminding her of her lack of clothing.

Simon licked his lips. “Touch yourself. Show us how you prefer to be aroused by us.”

Xenia hesitated, her eyes flitting between Simon and Owen.

Again, being told to do something was so different from when she sought to tease them.

She lifted her hand to her skin, a petal-soft touch against the column of her neck.

She felt her skin tingle under her fingertips, emboldened by Simon’s approving nod.

Her movements gained confidence, tracing the curve of her collarbone, then lower, to the swell of her breasts.

Simon reclined slightly, his posture relaxed but his attention anything but casual. He watched Xenia through half-lidded eyes, his hand moving subtly over his breeches, betraying the intensity of his arousal.

Owen mirrored Simon’s stance, though his desire was less cloaked in reserve. His fingers pressed firmly into the fabric covering his thighs, outlining the strain against the material, his gaze never wavering from Xenia’s self-discovery.

Her breasts swelled as she kneaded them with both hands. At home, she would close her eyes and imagine those hands belonged to one of them, but she kept her eyes open, enjoying the rapt attention she held.

When her hand slid down to part her slit, she noticed Simon's lips twitched. Was he imagining his tongue in place of her fingers? She spread her thighs wider, wetting two fingers before pressing them inside. Now her eyes closed, but only for a moment. Her breath hitched.

Having them watch was erotic. They didn't need any instruction, she knew from their lovemaking, but her mood was falling into see what I'm touching and you're not ?

Simon broke through the thick tension. "Now, taste your fingers."

Xenia lifted her hand, her fingers slick and shimmering in the filtered sunlight.

With deliberate poise, she brought her fingers to her lips, her tongue darting out to obey.

As she savored herself, she'd swear neither man breathed, her eyes never leaving Simon's.

She was so sinful. She'd be damned to hell for displaying herself like this.

"Beautiful." Simon's eyes softened with something akin to reverence.

Owen simply growled and adjusted himself again, as if instructed not to touch her.

The moment lingered, and she dipped her fingers into her moisture once again and sucked them into her mouth.

Then the mood shifted as Simon turned his attention to Owen with a tilt of his head.
“Attend to him.”

Owen advanced on her, a smoldering intensity in his eyes as he closed the small distance between them. His hands caught hers, guiding her toward the bulge that strained against his breeches, his breath catching as she made contact.

“Like this, Zee,” Owen whispered in a voice roughened by desire.

His hand covered hers as they traced the outline of his arousal through the fabric. Owen’s grip tightened ever so slightly when she rounded the fat tip. She wanted to open his placket and take him into her mouth, but forced herself to follow his direction.

* * *

Simon watched the exchange, a quiet intensity burning in his gut.

He could see Owen losing himself in the moment, his jaw clenching as Xenia’s attentions sent ripples of pleasure through him.

Simon felt a surge of possessiveness, mixed with a deep-seated satisfaction that it was within his power to orchestrate such intimacy.

He enjoyed sharing Xenia with his friend, became aroused watching how much Owen enjoyed her ministrations.

Up to a point. When Owen reached to unbutton his breeches, Simon acted.

“Come here,” Simon beckoned Xenia with a tone that brooked no argument.

Obediently, she rose and approached Simon, her movements a blend of boldness and hesitation.

She paused before him, a question in her gaze, and he answered by scooting forward in his chair and unbuttoning his fall.

He freed his erection from his small clothes, then he guided Xenia onto his lap, straddling him so she faced Owen.

He held his cock as she sat, sliding inside her with no preamble.

She gasped as she sank down, rotating her hips when he was fully inside. “Mmm, Simon, it’s bigger than I remember.”

He watched Owen’s reaction as his hands roamed over her curves, tracing the swell of her breasts, the dip of her waist. And as she leaned into his touch, he became both a participant in their shared pleasure and an observer to the unfolding passion between her and his friend.

Xenia did something then that nearly shattered him. She dipped a hand between her thighs, fluttered her fingers around where his cock slid in and out of her, then raised her hand to Owen. “Would you like a taste?”

“Fuck.” Owen rushed to her and sucked her fingers while unfastening his breeches.

Simon’s hands steadied her with a firm grip on her hips, guiding her up and down. His thumbs slid down to the crease in her bottom, spreading her to his gaze. He caught a glimpse between the globes and realized they needed to go upstairs soon. As soon as she came, they would, he decided.

Owen sucked and kneaded her breasts while fingering her clit, and her little moans

rose in pitch.

“Do you feel us both, Xenia?” he asked.

“Yes.” Something one of them did brought a sharp, soft cry from her. “Oh, it’s so good!”

“Let go, my dear. Surrender to your desires.”

“Come for us, Zee.” Owen kissed her heatedly, thrusting his tongue in her mouth. One of her hands cupped his head and her bottom tightened each time she rocked up to his mouth. Her other hand stroked his cock.

“Owen, Simon...” Her voice broke on his name, a plea for the release that hovered just out of reach.

“Let it come, Xenia. Now,” Simon commanded sharply. He pinched one nipple as he said it.

“Oh my, Simon, Owen, fuck me!” Moving her hands from Owen to Simon’s thighs, she bounced hard on his cock.

Her shift forward gave him the view he loved of where they were joined.

Her actions were frenzied, and he fought against the feeling of her inner muscles flexing on him.

He wouldn’t come until later... unless she kept milking him like she was.

Her thighs tightened around his and she tensed, crying out again one last time. Owen captured her mouth in a kiss, his hands wild in her hair.

Simon just held on to his need to release, biting his lower lip, curling his toes in his boots. When he could breathe again, he lifted Xenia off his cock. Her legs were weak, but Owen held her up.

Simon stood. “We belong in my bed.”

Owen swept Xenia into his arms and strode out of the room toward the staircase. Simon followed, his very unsatisfied cock bouncing in front of him.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:46 am

Owen's arms tightened around Zee's naked form as he carried her into Simon's bedroom, her laughter echoing through the chamber. He playfully tossed her onto the bed, and she landed with a bounce that sent ripples across the soft linens.

"Owen! You brute!" She giggled, her eyes twinkling with excitement as she looked from him to Simon. "I'm eager to see what more you two have planned for me."

As if driven by her words, Owen and Simon exchanged a knowing glance before they tore at their clothing with an urgency that spoke of their desperation to be with her. Piece by piece, the garments fell to the floor, revealing the hard cocks they could no longer ignore.

"Xenia, you have us both wrapped around your finger... and inside other parts," Simon added with a deep chuckle.

Owen couldn't help but laugh, even as he felt the weight of his own desire threatening to overwhelm him. "Yes, Zee, you've got us both right where you want us."

She bit her lip, watching them with a mixture of curiosity and anticipation. Owen wondered what she thought about the way they treated her. Did she like when Simon became bossy? He trusted her outspoken manner to say something if she was unhappy or uncomfortable.

She propped herself on her arms. "Then don't keep me waiting. Show me how badly you want me."

Simon's eyes gleamed as he looked at Owen. "Restrain her wrists above her head."

Owen hesitated only for a moment before complying, his grip firm yet gentle around Zee's delicate wrists. He could feel the heat of her skin against his own and sensed her submission to their desires. As he held her there, he positioned himself so that he could watch Simon's next move.

"Is this to your liking, my lord?" she purred, opening her legs to him.

"Very much so." A slow smile spread across Simon's face.

As Owen watched his friend take control, a flicker of doubt crossed his mind.

Would Simon expect to be in charge every time they gathered at his house now?

The thought made him uneasy. While watching Zee submit to another's command was undeniably arousing, he wasn't eager to follow orders himself.

He considered the possibility of sneaking her away to his own home, where they could make love on their own terms. But first, he knew he needed to discuss the matter with Simon.

He couldn't tear his gaze away from the sensual tableau before him. Simon's powerful hands glided over Zee's exposed, quivering flesh, her eyes half-lidded and lips parted. He alternated deep pressure with featherlight touches, judging from the impressions around his fingers.

"Tell me what you want, Xenia," Simon said, dipping his head to taste her open cunny with a languid lick, eliciting a soft moan from Zee's throat.

He lifted her legs gently, pushing them apart and leaving her vulnerable to his every

whim.

Owen felt a surge of arousal at the sight, his heart pounding in time with the rapid beat of Zee's pulse in her wrists.

"Please, Simon, I want... I need..." she gasped.

"Go on," Simon urged. He traced his fingertips along her inner thighs, spreading her wetness and lightly grazing her clit in a teasing touch that left her writhing beneath his hand. "You have no trouble telling us what to do. What do you want?"

"Touch me... there," she finally managed to whisper, her cheeks flushed at the admission. She looked as though she had bared not only her body but her soul to the two men who held her in their command.

"Such a good girl," Simon praised, rewarding her honesty with a firmer caress of her delicate flesh. His movements were deliberate, designed to stoke the flames of her passion until it consumed her.

Simon's eyes met Owen's as he positioned himself at Zee's entrance. A surge of excitement rippled through him, and Owen couldn't help but hold his breath in anticipation, as if it was his cock going in. With a firm grip on her hips, Simon looked deeply into her eyes.

With a slow, deliberate movement, Simon thrust inside her, filling her completely. The moan that escaped her lips was music to Owen's ears, a symphony of pleasure that stirred him to his core.

"Attend to Owen now, dear girl," Simon instructed.

Owen released her wrists and crawled closer to her head. She stretched out her arm,

her eyes heavy with lust, her fingers wrapping around his length as she guided him toward her mouth. Her lips parted, and Owen felt the warmth of her breath on his skin just before she took him into her mouth.

“God, Zee...” Owen moaned, unable to contain his pleasure. Her mouth was like velvet, soft and welcoming, but it was her wicked tongue that truly drove him mad. It danced along his length, teasing and tantalizing him with every stroke.

“Beautiful,” Simon murmured, his own pleasure evident as he continued to move within her. “You’re both so beautiful together.”

The room seemed to pulse with an electric current, the air thick with desire and anticipation as the two men stroked in and out of Zee. Owen’s heart raced, his breath coming in shallow pants as he watched his cock sliding between her lips.

Suddenly Simon withdrew and crossed the room, rummaging in a drawer beside the bed.

Moaning in satisfaction, he held up a vial.

Owen’s eyes widened as recognition dawned—it was oil, and he knew what they intended to do next.

His cock twitched with renewed vigor at the thought of taking Zee in her bottom.

He’d toyed with her with his fingers, and was eager to feel that tight passage around his cock.

“Are you ready for this?” Simon asked, his eyes burning with intensity.

“More than ready. More importantly, is she?” Owen asked.

Simon nodded, a smirk playing on his lips. "I told her recently that you would soon pleasure her there."

Owen pulled his erection out of her mouth. "Is that so, Zee? Are you eager for more than a finger in that beautiful arse?"

Her eyes widened, and she looked to where Simon had resumed his spot between her legs. She licked her lips, nodding as if she wasn't quite certain.

The wind in a tree outside cast shadows on the walls as Simon climbed onto the bed, his eyes alight with a sensual hunger.

He moved between Zee's spread thighs. Holding the vial of oil in one hand, he poured a bit onto his fingers and rubbed his hands together, warming the slick substance.

"Grab your knees and lift your hips, dear."

She did, and Owen could see her glistening cunny now. He licked his lips and fisted his cock.

"Are you certain this is what you want?" Simon asked softly.

"Yes," she said breathlessly.

Simon's touch was slow and deliberate as he played with her sensitive entrance, preparing her for what was to come. He teased her for a few minutes, touching her everywhere but concentrating on the one spot.

Suddenly Simon crawled up the bed and lay beside Zee, tossing Owen the vial of oil, which he caught with ease. When he was comfortable, he stroked his erection and

said to Zee, “Come here.”

As she straddled him, she lowered herself onto his throbbing cock, her moans mingling with his as they found their rhythm.

Owen moved to stand near Simon’s feet and waited.

“Lean down upon me, love,” Simon said, running his hands up her back as he urged her to relax.

She complied, lying on top of Simon so that their bodies melded together. Simon wrapped his arms around her, spreading her and revealing her tight entrance to Owen. “You know what to do.”

Owen’s heart raced as he crawled between Simon’s thighs, eying the cock so deep in Zee’s sheath.

He brushed his fingertips over her back, savoring the softness of her skin, anticipating what he was about to do.

Not only would he be in her delightful bottom, he and Simon would be inside her at the same time.

He opened the bottle of oil. “I’ll be gentle, Zee. ”

“Hurry,” she urged, a sultry smile gracing her lips as she looked over her shoulder at him.

With a nod, he poured a small amount of oil onto her bottom. His large, rough fingers spread the slick substance, gradually softening her. As he eased his finger inside her, the erotic sound of her gasp filled the room. She clenched around him, her body

reacting instinctively to the intrusion.

“Relax, love,” Simon murmured from beneath her, his reassuring touch caressing her hip.

Her exhale was shaky, her muscles yielding to Owen’s slow and deliberate movements. Encouraged by her response, Owen continued preparing her. The rhythm of her moans matched the tempo of his thrusts, a sensual symphony building between them.

As he continued toying with her, the pitch of her moans rose. “Owen... please.”

“Patience,” he said. “I want to be sure your body is ready for me.”

With a steadying breath, Owen positioned himself at Zee’s entrance, the tension in his body palpable as he prepared for their intimate union. “Relax, Zee. I’ll go slow... and if it hurts too much, tell me, and we’ll stop.”

“Thank you, Owen,” she whispered, peering over her shoulder, trusting and vulnerable. “I need to feel both of you inside me... at once, I want nothing more than to have you both come inside me.”

Her words sent a jolt of lust through Owen, and he clenched his jaw, fighting the urge to thrust hard into her. He knew he needed to be gentle, to give her time to adjust to this unfamiliar sensation. With a small nod, he pushed forward slowly.

“Are you all right, love?” he asked, his gaze searching her face for any sign of discomfort.

“Y-yes,” she stuttered, her fingers digging into Simon’s shoulders.

“All right then. We’ll take it slow, together.”

Owen fought to not move too quickly, and Simon lay still beneath Zee, but she wriggled between them. “Owen... Simon... I love you both. Don’t stop.”

Sweat beaded on his brow, and despite the intense pleasure coursing through him, he focused wholly on going slowly, ensuring her comfort.

“Easy now, love,” he whispered, pushing in just a little more, then withdrawing slightly before sinking back in.

Each time he did this, he went deeper, her body gradually relaxing around him until he was fully sheathed within her.

Zee panted, her eyes glazed over with desire as she adjusted to the sensation of having both men inside her simultaneously. She tilted her head back, baring her throat, as if offering herself up completely to their shared passion.

“Are you ready?” Simon asked, his voice laced with concern as he met Owen’s gaze.

“More than ready,” Owen replied, his chest tightening with anticipation.

He could feel Simon’s cock through the thin barrier separating them, and again, the knowledge that they were both buried inside her sent shivers down his spine.

Sharing Zee this way was everything to him, a perfect solution to both of them loving her.

“Then let us begin,” Simon murmured, his hands gripping Zee’s hips as he began to move within her.

The three friends moved together, their bodies finding a rhythm that seemed almost natural, as if they had been doing this for years rather than minutes. The wet, sloppy sounds of their union filled the room, punctuated by her moans and gasps of delight.

“More... please,” Zee begged. “I need more.”

Owen met Simon’s gaze, and they shared a silent understanding, increasing their pace. One sliding in as the other slid out. Zee threw her head back, her moans growing louder with each thrust from both men.

With a shuddering cry, Zee succumbed to her orgasm, her body quaking with the force of it. Owen and Simon continued their quest for release, and when Zee’s utterings became squeaks, he wondered if she came again.

The idea broke him, wrenched all control from him, and he thought he would black out. His body trembled, and he heard Simon cry out as he came, too. He held himself above Zee to keep from crushing her, then rolled to one side, where he lay until he could draw in a complete breath again.

He went to the basin and dampened a cloth, and wiped himself before cleaning Zee’s glorious body. He could spend hours just looking at her, especially when she was languid and well-loved. “Are you well, Zee?”

“I’m delighted.” She practically purred, her smile drowsy and content as she cuddled against Simon’s chest. “I never imagined it could be like this.”

“Neither did we,” Simon admitted, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on her back.

“Promise me we’ll never lose this,” she begged, looking from one man to the other.

Owen and Simon exchanged a glance before answering in unison, “We promise.”

Setting aside the wet cloth, Owen returned to lie next to the others, content to just savor the moment. He might have drowsed, he wasn't sure, and the others were so quiet he thought they napped, too. At some point Zee had shifted to lie between them, resting her head now on Owen's chest.

He gazed at the flickering shadows cast by the fading sunlight on the bedroom wall, feeling Zee's steady breath against his skin and Simon's arm draped over her waist. The serenity of the moment wrapped around them like a warm embrace, providing a haven from the world outside.

Not checking to see if anyone was awake, he mused aloud. "Have you ever thought about what it will be like in the future? We three, together like this?"

Zee shifted slightly, resting her chin on his chest to meet his eyes. "I think about it all the time. The laughter, the love... the understanding we share."

Simon's hand smoothed over Zee's back as he added, "It's not something I ever would've imagined, but now that we have it, I can't imagine living any other way."

A smile tugged at the corners of Owen's mouth as he looked from Zee to Simon, his heart swelling with affection for them both. "We're lucky, you know? To have found each other like this. To have built this trust, this connection, between us."

"More than lucky," she agreed. "Destined, perhaps."

Ever the voice of logic, Simon said, "We must tread carefully. There's too much at stake if we're discovered. But there's no doubt in my mind that we're worth fighting for."

Owen nodded. "We'll navigate whatever challenges come our way, side by side."

“Or sandwiched between the two of you,” Zee teased lightly, drawing a chuckle from both men.

But at that moment, Owen wasn’t concerned about the unknown ahead of them. He was content to simply enjoy what they shared.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:46 am

Xenia sat opposite her mother in the cozy kitchen of their family bakery, the scent of bread rising nearly overwhelming her. They shared a simple meal amidst the quiet hum of the midday lull.

Her mother's features, usually softened by a maternal smile, today were etched with lines of concern. "I cannot pretend to be oblivious to the chatter that's been stirring through the village," she said eventually.

Xenia's hand paused mid-air, a crisp crust of bread halfway to her lips. She searched her mother's face, frowning as she sensed where the conversation was heading. "You're referring to Simon, aren't you?"

Her mother nodded, reaching across the table to still Xenia's restless fingers. "Lord Kinnerton," she corrected gently, though the underlying message was clear. "You must consider the difference in your stations... It's all anyone can talk about."

Surprise flickered in Xenia's blue eyes, giving way to a spark of frustration.

She withdrew her hand, tucking an errant strand of black hair back into her bun.

"When was Simon reduced to nothing more than his title in this house?" Xenia countered.

He was her Simon, first and foremost, beyond the reach of any societal decree.

Her mother sighed. "You know how fond I am of him. But fondness cannot shield you from what people think. His rank... it casts a long shadow over any possibility of

a...” She trailed off, leaving the unsaid match to hang heavily between.

Her mother’s words struck a chord within her, thrumming with the same rhythm as the dogged pulse of her own desires.

Her hands clenched beneath the table, her nails pressing crescents into her palms. She wished to push away these constraints, to continue with the life she knew, unburdened by the weight of titles and whispers.

She wanted to stand firm, to hold on to the friendship with Simon.

People were talking about her relationship with Simon, and they didn’t know what that relationship truly was. They thought she was hoping for a proposal, an escape from her life in the bakery. If they knew how intimate she and Simon were, they would run her out of town.

Xenia’s gaze shifted, taking in the familiar walls of the kitchen, the sturdy table that had borne witness to countless meals and conversations.

This was her world, and she was bound to it, just as she was bound to the expectations that governed it.

But within her, a fire was kindled, a determination not to let go of the love she harbored, not to succumb to a future written by others’ hands.

She pushed her chair back, the legs scraping against the wooden floor, standing abruptly. “You of all people know Simon and I have been friends since we were very young. Our friendship isn’t some fleeting fancy to be snuffed out by idle chatter. It is longstanding and genuine.”

Her mother sighed, her eyes softening with a maternal blend of worry and

resignation.

“Darling, I know you hold your friendships dear, but we must also think of your future. The viscount must make a match to please his grandfather, and if Owen planned to propose, he would have by now. However, a friend knows a man, Mr. Harwood, the widower who owns the farm just past the mill. He’s a good man, kind, with two small children who need a mother’s care.”

Pausing, her mother studied her reaction. “Marriage to him would offer security, practicality. He could provide for you, protect you from the unpredictability of life.”

Xenia felt the air in the room grow heavy, the suggestion settling around her like a shroud. Her heart rebelled against the thought, yet she knew her mother spoke with love, seeking to shield her from the potential heartache that loomed on the horizon of her uncertain future.

Her mind whirled with images of Owen and Simon. They both expressed a wish for their lives to continue as they were now, sharing their love between the three of them. But she couldn’t tell her mother that. She must continue to voice the same objections she’d used before.

“Mama, I appreciate your concern, but I cannot—I will not—be pushed into a marriage of mere convenience. I’ve seen love, the genuine kind that lights up one’s entire world, like you and Papa. That is what I seek. That is what I shall wait for.”

* * *

After closing the smithy for the day and washing up, Owen decided he needed the company of a certain woman, the one filling his heart. As much as he’d enjoy bedding her again, at the moment, he only wanted her company.

He found Zee in the bakery, kneading dough as if to punish it for some grievous mortal sin. What had distressed her?

“Good evening, Zee. I thought you might fancy a walk. These warm evenings won’t be with us much longer. Best we enjoy the warmth while it lasts.”

She wiped her hands on her apron, leaving white marks on the stained cotton fabric, and smiled, her shoulders dropping slightly. “A walk would be delightful. Let me divide up this dough and we can walk while it rises.”

When they stepped outside, the last rays of sunlight painted the cobblestone street with a golden hue, and Zee took a deep breath, tipping her head back, eyes closed. Beside her, Owen matched her pace.

A comfortable silence enshrouded them, the sort born from years of time spent together. They passed Mrs. Tibbets’ flower shop, its windows aglow with the soft light of candles flickering in the encroaching dusk.

A dog darted out from an alleyway, its barks slicing through the quiet of the evening.

It chased after phantoms down the street, lost in its own world of imagined pursuits.

Owen’s gaze, however, fixed upon Zee, his eyes tracing the tension in her shoulders that belied the calm facade she had so meticulously constructed.

“You’re quieter than the church on Monday morning. What’s weighing on you?”

She looked down at the pavement, lips pursed. “Mama’s pressing me to marry. She’s even found me a match with a widower with the two little ones. She says that’s as good a life as any other I might expect.”

Owen could see the struggle in her eyes, the way they darted away as if to hide the raw desperation clawing at her composure. Her hands fidgeted, fingers gnarled together.

He stilled, his breath hitching as the gravity of her situation sank into his bones.

The thought of Zee marrying anyone other than himself ignited a fire within him he'd long kept at bay.

Picturing her as Simon's wife was difficult enough, but no other man could have her.

"I promise you, this will not be your fate."

"I tell Mama not to listen to what the gossips say. Thankfully, no one has discovered the truth of my relationship with Simon." She met his gaze, her brow wrinkled. "I can't continue to fool myself that we can go on as we are."

"Simon and I will put an end to these idle whispers." He gently cupped her cheek before catching himself, mindful of being observed. "We'll find a way. You deserve happiness, and not the kind that's decided for you by others' wagging tongues."

His assurance seemed to steady her, if only slightly, as the tension in her shoulders eased. Owen knew the risk of his words—promises made in the face of uncertainty—but for Zee, he would move mountains or, at the very least, confront Simon about his insistence they remain as they are.

His heart hammered against his ribcage as he escorted her back to her doorstep.

The warmth of the night air did nothing to ease the icy knot of dread that had formed in his stomach.

He squeezed her hand, holding it a bit longer than necessary, as he was reluctant to let her go.

He longed to hold her in his arms and promise her that nothing would ever hurt her.

“Good night, Owen,” Zee whispered.

“Good night,” he replied. As she turned to enter the safety of her home, his mind raced with a fervor that matched the intensity of their parting glance.

He strode away, fists clenching and unclenching at his sides as the weight of the decision pressed upon him. Marrying Zee himself—it was a solution so simple. He loved her, she loved him.

The only thing holding him back was that stupid pact. As Owen saw it, the pact only benefitted one person—Simon. As matters stood, Simon could continue to dally with Zee while marrying a high-born lady and raising a family with her.

Why hadn’t Owen seen that before now?

“I’ll do this for her,” he murmured to himself. “I’ll ask for her hand.”

He’d already told Simon he wished to marry her, but he’d foolishly agreed not to.

Their resultant relationship, if it could be called that, seemed like the perfect answer.

He’d be lying if he said he didn’t enjoy sharing her in bed.

He could as easily gain a painful erection by watching Zee ride Simon’s cock as he could while feeling her around his own.

And the sensation of Simon's cock sliding against his with just a thin bit of flesh separating them inside her.

.. Fuck. He got hard thinking about it. If he married her, they could continue these trysts, if Zee wished.

But it would be his decision, not Simon's.

He could then tell the viscount when he was permitted to enjoy the salacious pleasures his wife offered.

He gritted his teeth. This would likely lead to the end of his friendship with Simon. He questioned if the viscount was strong enough to put aside the jealousy he claimed he'd feel if Zee married. As much as the knowledge hurt, he had to do what was best for Zee.

Instead of returning home, Owen went to the stables and saddled his horse. If Zee's mother was planning a wedding, there was no time to waste. He must tell Simon what he intended to do.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:46 am

A groom appeared from around the side of Simon's house when Owen rode to a stop, taking the reins while Owen dismounted. "I won't be long," Owen said. He marched to the door and banged on it.

When Simon opened it, Owen barked, "I must speak with you, and it cannot wait."

Stepping aside and pulling the door wide, Simon motioned for Owen to enter.

Somehow, Owen kept his piece until they were in the study, with the door closed to keep the servants from overhearing. "You know as well as I the depth of my affection for Zee. I intend to marry her, Simon. To provide for her, protect her, to be the one she turns to in joy and in sorrow."

Simon's gaze remained steady, yet he cocked an eyebrow. "Shouldn't you be telling her father this?"

Owen clenched his jaw, the muscles in his forearms tensing visibly. "You've been insisting we share her affections. You know that won't last. What if she's with child? She could, even now, be carrying the future Earl of Staplegrove. Only he could never inherit because you aren't married."

"Xenia needs a husband, yes." Simon's eyes betraying a flicker of emotion.

"But she also needs the security and standing that I can offer her. If she becomes my wife, you need not fear exclusion, Owen. You have no wife to honor, no duty that binds you. You can still be a part of our lives, our... arrangement."

“Arrangement?” Owen’s voice rose, roughened by a mix of disbelief and anger. “Is that what she is to you? A mere detail in your grand plan?”

Simon’s expression softened slightly, but his stance remained firm. “You misunderstand me. I care for Xenia deeply, but we must think practically about her future—and ours.”

“Practically?” Owen spat out the word as if it were bitter on his tongue.

He took a step forward, his presence commanding despite his lack of title.

“I’ve no mind for practicality with matters of the heart, Simon.

I refuse to stand aside and watch the woman I love marry another man, even if that man is you. ”

“Consider it, Owen. My proposition allows for all of us to remain close. Should you wed Xenia, I would have to seek a bride to bear my heirs, and our bond—as we now enjoy it—would sever.”

“Sever? What do I care? What of my wants? My needs? I’ve spent years putting others before myself, and for once, I want to choose what brings me joy, what fuels my soul.

I want Zee, a life with her, not just a fleeting closeness that could be snatched away at the whim of a man who believes he’s my better. ”

“Your happiness is important to me, truly.” Simon clasped Owen’s shoulder. “But we must think of what is best for Xenia as well.”

“Best for Zee?” Owen shook off Simon’s touch, his heart pounding against his chest

like the hammer upon the anvil. He kept his fisted hands at his side as a precaution, not trusting his temper. “Or best for Viscount Kinnerton?”

Simon must have seen a telltale sign of Owen’s anger, as he paced a short distance away, as if in thought, then turned back.

“You misunderstand my intent. I would not ask you to relinquish your place at Xenia’s side.

I find a particular... gratification in watching you with her.

It stokes a fire within me as fierce as when I am the one joined with her.

What kind of husband would I be to deny my wife something she enjoys so fervently? ”

Owen’s brow furrowed, the muscle in his jaw ticking with tension. He’d thought almost the same thing about Zee’s pleasure with Simon. At least on that, they agreed. Zee deserved to have both of them, if she wished.

Simon continued, taking a deliberate step closer. “We wouldn’t merely tolerate your presence, but desire it. If you wished, you could share our home. There would be space for all of us.” His eyes glinted with sincerity.

Snorting, Owen said, “Live with you? Do you not consider the whispers that would ensue? Zee’s reputation would be sullied by such an arrangement as badly as if she remained unmarried.”

“Kinnerton is a quaint village, and yet we are not without our secrets. Gossip is as easily managed as it is spread. We could be discreet. Our shared suppers need not raise eyebrows, nor our long evenings spent in each other’s company.”

“Discreet?” Owen scoffed, unable to mask the bitterness that laced his tone.

“And what of the mornings, Simon? When the sun rises and finds me still within the walls of your home? What then of the tongues that wag seeing me ride to the smithy in the morning?” He paced before the fireplace, the heat of the flames a pale comparison to the fire of his indignation.

“Xenia is strong,” Simon said quietly, yet with conviction. “She would endure the idle talk for the chance to have us both.”

Shaking his head, Owen regained some of his composure. “Zee is already feeling the gossip. Her own mama is suggesting she marry a widower with children. Do you understand how desperate the family feels, to be considering widowers as the only possible match?”

“Think how delighted they’ll be when she marries a viscount.”

Owen’s heart cried out at the idea. He searched for reasons it couldn’t happen. “What of your grandfather?”

“I’ll take Xenia to Gretna Green and there will be nothing my grandfather can say.” Simon grinned wryly. “Or, rather, there’ll be plenty he will say, but nothing he can do.”

Raking a hand through his hair, Owen swallowed a bitter taste. “Are we at an impasse, then? Neither of us willing to step aside? Do we force Zee to choose?”

“That would destroy her.”

Acid burned in Owen’s gut. If Simon truly meant to marry her, Zee would have a much more comfortable life than she would at the smithy. She’d have servants to

clean and cook, and she'd never have to knead another loaf of bread.

"Consider it," Simon pressed softly. "For Xenia, for us. This is a way forward where no one is forsaken."

Owen met Simon's gaze once more, the tempest within him not quite quelled, but the edges of his resolve softening as he grappled with the viscount's proposal.

"You could ride back to the smith under cover of twilight, and take up your hammer at the forge as the village stirs awake, none the wiser."

"Damn it, Simon. I want her. More than I've ever wanted anything. Sharing my bed, sharing my life. Bearing my children."

"Love is sacrifice. I know that's easy for me to say when I'm in the position to offer her the more advantageous life, but I hope I have it in me to step aside if there's something better for her.

I'm earnest when I say I want you in her life—our life.

And if some of my children have fair hair and blue eyes, I'll still consider them mine.
"

"And if your son shows a fondness for iron?"

Simon shrugged. "As long as he's not the firstborn..."

Bloody hell. Accepting what's best for the person you love most should make you feel happy, shouldn't it? Then why did he feel so miserable? This was best for Zee.

"Very well," he conceded, the reluctant agreement laced with an undercurrent of

excitement. “We’ll try it your way—for her.”

Simon’s lips curled into a smile, and the stiffness in his posture relaxed. “She’ll be glad to hear it.”

Owen turned to leave, now that they’d settled the matter.

“Say nothing to her, please.” The words were a request, not a command, which surprised Owen. “We’ll propose on Sunday, when we’re all here.”

Nodding, Owen left.

* * *

As Xenia prepared to depart for her Sunday visit with Simon and Owen, she was surprised when Owen came to her home.

“Good day. I was just leaving. Will you walk with me to the river?” Her parents, who were just inside, might overhear and she’d told them she was meeting the men at the river where they were fishing.

Owen’s attire caught her off guard. Normally when he fished, he wore slightly worn breeches, his jacket might be off, and the top button of his waistcoat undone.

Today he had on something suitable for an assembly, or church.

She hoped her parents didn’t look out the window as she and Owen left.

Her mother would have questions when she returned.

“That was my exact desire,” Owen said. He brought his arm around from behind his

back, revealing a rose cradled in his calloused hand.

“Is that for me?” A smile curved her lips as she accepted the delicate gift. She raised it to her nose, inhaling the subtle fragrance, a balm to the bustling morning she had endured.

“Indeed, it is,” Owen confirmed. His gaze lingered on her face, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a smile that reached his brown eyes. “A bit of color to match the glow of your cheeks. I saw it in a hedgerow along the road and knew I must give it to you.”

The gesture warmed her, and she tucked the flower into the ribbon of her bun with care. “Thank you, Owen. It’s lovely.”

Owen extended his arm, and Xenia looped hers through it, the unexpected formality of his gesture prompting a flutter in her stomach. They began their walk to Simon’s house, a journey that was becoming quite familiar to her lately.

“You’ve certainly outdone yourself today,” she teased, glancing up at Owen, noting how the afternoon sun caught the copper highlights in his brown hair. “One might think you were off to court a queen rather than sit by the river and stare at your fishing line.”

Owen’s laugh rumbled deep within his chest, a sound that always seemed to resonate within her own. “For you, Xenia, I would outshine the sun if such a thing were possible. Besides, it’s not every day that I get to escort the loveliest baker in all of England.”

Xenia felt her cheeks warm at the compliment. She let the moment linger rather than brush it aside with another jest. They walked on, their silence comfortable, neither needing to fill it with idle talk.

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As they approached the manor house, Simon emerged from the front door, his attire also capturing Xenia's attention.

He wore a finely cut waistcoat under a coat that hugged his broad shoulders and tailored breeches that accentuated his long legs—again, not fishing attire.

But he had no one to fool about his plans, so she let it pass.

“Good day, Xenia, Owen,” Simon greeted. He led them into the drawing room. Xenia took her usual seat on a small chair opposite the sofa. The moment she settled in, a memory unfurled in her mind of when she sat on that sofa with the two men opposite her.

Her arousal flared at the recollection of being told to undress before them, a blush warming her cheeks as if the ghost of their touch lingered still.

She'd touched herself most intimately while Simon and Owen had watched, fully clothed.

She grew damp as she thought about it. Would they have her do that again?

Owen seemed fidgety, approaching her, then turning away, standing behind her, then coming back to stand near Simon.

Simon stepped forward, and in one fluid motion, dropped to one knee before Xenia. Her heart stuttered, eyes wide as saucers, breath hitching in her throat. She glanced toward Owen. Should Simon be doing this in front of their friend?

Taking her hand, Simon said, “Beautiful Xenia, I can’t think of a time when you weren’t in my life. All the happy memories of my childhood include you. And lately...” His pupils flared, and she wondered which particular memory struck him that way.

“Lately I find it hard to concentrate on anything. I want to know how your day is going, what you’re thinking.

In truth, I find myself unable to envisage a future without you by my side.

” The words spilled from him with a vulnerability she had never witnessed in Simon.

His hand trembled ever so slightly as he held hers.

In the silence of Simon’s pause, Owen stepped forward. His declaration came as a surge, impassioned and raw. “Zee, there’s no life for me where you aren’t present. I love you, with all I am, and all I’ll ever be.”

Her pulse raced, and confusion wrinkled her brow. What were they doing, both proposing at once? Was she expected to choose one now and send the other on his way with his heart trampled? How could they do this to her?

As Simon’s formal proposal echoed in her ears, Owen’s fervent confession wrapped around her, tugging at the strings of her heart. Her trembling fingers brushed against Owen’s calloused ones, seeking solace in their familiarity, even as Simon held tight to her other hand.

The pressure bore down on her, a decision between the two men who had been the twin anchors of her very soul. Confusion clouded her mind, her body tense with the weight of their combined pleas. It was a choice she had hoped she wouldn’t have to make.

When she looked back at Simon, he continued. “I have given this much thought, and I ask not only for your hand but for your heart in a union most unique.” He paused, searching her face for any sign of understanding. “I propose you marry us both—me and Owen.”

The silence that followed was thick, almost tangible.

Xenia could not draw in a breath. She felt as if the ground beneath her had shifted, the ground tilting beneath her feet.

Had she heard him right? Marry both men?

Her mind raced through the implications, the scandal it would cause, the sheer impossibility.

Yet, as she watched Simon’s hopeful gaze and then turned to see the vulnerable expectancy etched into Owen’s rugged features, something inside her softened.

“Both of you?” Her voice trembled, mirroring the quake of emotions within her. It wasn’t a question of desire; the very thought sent a thrill through her veins. It was the audacity of it all, the leap into the unknown.

“Both of us, Zee,” Owen affirmed, stepping closer still. His eyes shone with sincerity.

Her heart swelled, filled with an overwhelming sense of completion. The fear ebbed away, replaced by a burgeoning certainty that this—this was the path meant for her. She looked from Owen to Simon, seeing the open vulnerability in their eyes, the silent plea for her to accept what they offered.

“Yes. Yes, I will marry you both.” The words came out in a burst of relieved laughter.

The breath that Simon and Owen had each been holding released in tandem, both men sagging in relief.

They moved closer, encasing her in the warmth of their presence.

Simon's tall frame leaned down as he wrapped his arm around her, while Owen's muscular body pressed against her side, enveloping her in a cocoon of affection.

Simon traced the curve of her waist before slipping behind her, reaching for the hem of her gown. She felt the warmth of his breath against the nape of her neck, igniting a shiver that cascaded down her spine.

Reaching for her sleeves, Owen tugged at them, moving her neckline off her shoulders, baring her breasts. He cupped one, and the other, then pressed both together.

A firm pressure on her back bent her gently over the chair, her skirts being coaxed upwards with a deliberate slowness. Simon pressed against her inner thighs, urging her to spread her legs. As she did, his tongue began doing indescribably delightful things to her cunny. Her wetness increased.

Owen moved around the chair near her head, sliding his fist up and down on his thick erection. She saw a drop on the tip and licked it up, grinning up at him, before drawing him into her mouth.

"Let me show you how much I cherish you," Simon murmured into the skin just above her stocking, placing a kiss there. He was kneeling behind her, nipping her thighs, spreading her open.

His tongue found the sensitive bud and Xenia moaned around Owen's cock, a bolt of pleasure shooting through her core. Simon lavished attention upon her, his tongue

swirling, teasing, urging her toward a precipice she was all too eager to tumble over.

The world narrowed to the feel of Simon's mouth on her, the taste of Owen, the scent of arousal thick in the air.

She moved with them, a symphony of sighs and moans and the slapping of wet skin.

As Simon's tongue circled her clitoris with a fervor that matched the pounding of her heart, she felt the coil within her tighten.

The crescendo built swiftly, and when it broke, she cried out, her body quivering with the intensity of her climax. Simon held her through it, his mouth never ceasing, drawing every last shudder from her until she lay spent and panting.

It was then, in the aftermath of her release, that Owen found his own. His hips jerked once, twice, and with a strangled sound that was half growl, half plea, he spilled himself into her mouth. She savored him, continuing her glide up and down his length until he was done.

As she felt Simon aligned himself with her, Xenia peered back at him beneath lids heavy with lust, her breaths coming in quick gasps, inviting him to fuck her.

He entered her in one smooth, determined thrust. The air left her lungs in a soft, keening sigh as she felt him fill her completely, the sensation of him inside her reigniting the fire that had scarcely dimmed.

Owen watched while running his fingers through her hair. His hand found its way to her breasts that hung and bounced in time to Simon's thrusts, teasing a pert nipple that strained for his touch.

The room reverberated with the sounds of their union, the rhythmic cadence of flesh

meeting flesh, the whispered encouragements from Owen's lips spurring them on. Simon's movements grew more fervent.

And then, with a groan, Simon poured himself into Xenia, gripping her hips and bending over her back.

Carefully, they began the quiet task of redressing, their movements unhurried, Owen handing Simon a handkerchief to clean his seed from Xenia.

Her cheeks were still warm with the flush of arousal as she smoothed down her skirts.

She kept looking from one man to the other, unable to get her fill of the sight of them, clothed, naked, or anywhere in between.

She had questions—oh, so many questions—but there was time enough to learn how they pictured their marriage working.

Simon, having reclaimed his composure along with his attire, turned to them with a smile that was both satisfied and affectionate. "I believe some refreshments are in order."

"Lovely," Xenia said. "A little sustenance sounds delightful after such... vigorous activities."

With a graceful motion, Simon adjusted his cravat, his eyes never leaving Xenia's gaze. "Quite true. The afternoon awaits us, and with it, I dare say we will need our strength."

His words hung in the air, a tantalizing hint at continued desires and the union that had bound them together in passion and affection. Xenia's heart fluttered at the notion, excitement tingling through her veins like the finest champagne.

Simon offered his arm, which she took with grace, and led them toward the dining room where a light repast surely awaited, since the servants were not at home. Owen followed, his presence a comforting constant at her side.

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Before sending his servants away for the day, Simon had his cook prepare some meats, cheese and fruit to offer to his guests. "This looks like a picnic," Xenia said with a smile. She served herself and sat at the dining table with her men.

After he and Owen discussed some matter of politics, during which Xenia idly watched something outside the window, Simon said, "I have given much thought to our situation. The marriage we've proposed.

I wish for you to become Lady Kinnerton, to live here with me, and.

.. to have a life with both Owen and myself. "

Xenia's fork hovered midway to her lips. She set down the utensil, hands trembling slightly. "It is more than I ever hoped for. I hoped to one day marry one of you, but feared losing the closeness with the other if I did."

Having had similar thoughts, Simon understood her fears.

"We must be careful to avoid doing anything that will draw attention to our arrangement. My servants are loyal, I believe, so we don't have to fear what stories they might tell.

Owen will keep his house in the village.

He will continue his work at the smithy, which is essential for maintaining both his livelihood and our ruse. "

Xenia nodded, offering Owen a smile.

“I’m concerned someone will notice how often I return home at the break of dawn. There are others in the village whose work day begins early. Xenia’s parents, for one.”

Simon stroked his chin as he thought about the alternatives.

Part of him wanted to say Owen should simply spend fewer nights with them, but that’s not what he’d promised Xenia.

“There’s an empty house near here. Perhaps we shall purchase it for Owen.

He can give the appearance of leaving from there each day, rather than here.”

Owen tipped his head as he met Simon’s gaze across the table. “Perhaps Zee might stay with me there at times. Just the two of us.” His suggestion hung in the air, bold and unapologetic.

Simon’s jaw tightened. Could he live with that? It’s what he was expecting Owen to accept, spending nights knowing Xenia is enjoying the pleasures of the other man. But Simon would be her true husband, her legal husband. She should stay with him.

He hated to admit how poorly suited he was to this idea—one wife for two husbands.

This would be the hardest thing he’d ever attempted—no, he wasn’t attempting to give her what she wanted.

He would succeed. How, well, he’d find it within himself to do so.

That was how much he loved Xenia. But today, he wasn’t that man.

“We may discuss such arrangements at another time.”

The tension in the room was palpable, like the charged air before a storm. He hated that for her. They were discussing marriage, the happiest time for a young lady. He must do better for her.

Owen’s hand came across the table, fingers brushing against Xenia’s. His gaze met Simon’s. “I appreciate the lengths you’ve gone to, Simon. For Zee—for all of us. I’m for this with every ounce of my being.”

Simon leaned back from the table, the food on his plate holding no interest for him. “Time is of the essence. I propose we leave for Gretna Green without delay. Owen, do you have any pressing commitments at the smithy?”

Owen nodded. “I’ve but one project to finish, and it should be done on Monday. After that, I’m yours and Xenia’s to command.”

“Why must we elope?” Xenia asked. “My mother will be upset about missing the wedding.”

He’d considered getting a special license so they could marry quickly at home, but that required him to travel a few days alone. Owen’s plan to marry her himself was foremost in Simon’s thoughts. If Simon left town, would the other man elope with her?

Common sense said he wouldn’t, but Simon was having little luck convincing himself of that.

The fact Owen had agreed that marrying Simon was the better option, for all the reasons Simon had stressed, showed he was thinking of what’s best for her.

He wasn't scheming to seduce her away from Simon for his own satisfaction.

Which was awfully close to what Simon wanted to do—seduce her into accepting a life with him alone. As much as he trusted Owen, he wouldn't relax until he and Xenia were married.

He realized she waited for his answer. He conjured one to cover his selfishness. "I don't wish to wait. The travel will take the same time either direction, to London or Gretna Green, but this way I have you at my side and we'll be married in half the time."

Her smile said his answer pleased her. Owen's cocked brow said he, too, questioned the need to elope, and the answer hadn't fooled him.

He offered Xenia a loving smile. "Pack only what you must. We depart under the veil of nightfall tomorrow night."

"I shall leave a note for my parents," Xenia said. "That will relieve their worries when I'm missing."

"Excellent," Simon said. "Go to the smithy at midnight. We'll be waiting in my carriage to whisk you away to our future."

Xenia's gaze flitted between the two men. "But Simon, how am I to be wed to both of you?"

Simon found her hand across the table, his touch gentle yet firm.

"You know how it must be. Legally, you will marry me alone, but Owen's attendance at the ceremony—and our wedding night—is imperative to us.

It is his blessing, his vow alongside mine, that will bind us together in all the ways that truly matter. ”

Xenia smiled.

“Perhaps afterward we’ll have a private ceremony where I may bind myself to you,” Owen said, his voice huskier than usual.

“And I to you,” Xenia said. “I’d like that.”

* * *

They were married without pomp in a smithy, which Xenia thought was ironically fitting, seeing how Owen stood at her side opposite Simon.

She wore her best gown, which had formerly seen the insides of prestigious homes or assembly halls in London, thanks to her cousin.

Simon wore navy trousers and matching tail coat, looking more dapper than she recalled seeing him.

Owen’s buckskin breeches fitted his strong thighs, giving her wicked thoughts even while hearing the wedding rite being spoken, and he wore his finest tailcoat.

After they were married, the three returned to the inn where Simon had requested two rooms. They’d only use one, but must adhere to propriety.

Xenia removed her bonnet and pelisse in their room while Simon set his hat and gloves aside.

Owen had gone first to his room, but quickly joined them, minus his hat, coat, and

neckcloth.

“Such a swift ceremony,” Simon mused, breaking the silence as he slipped off his coat and unbuttoned his waistcoat.

Xenia chuckled softly. “I daresay the blacksmith believed Owen was my brother, intent on forcing your hand in marriage.” Her laughter rang clear in the quiet space. She offered her back to Owen. “Will you help me undress?”

He quickly came to her aid. “Simon, I cannot express my gratitude enough. For your trust, for this... inclusion.” His eyes flickered from Simon to Xenia, the unspoken words lingering between them like the delicate touch of fingers on skin.

Simon merely nodded. It was clear in the slight tilt of his head that he valued Owen’s presence as much as Xenia did. This night was a defining moment for them all—a chosen path that went beyond the bindings of tradition.

“Xenia, you’re so beautiful,” Owen murmured, low and intimate. When her gown loosened, he held it as it fell, allowing her to step out of it before hanging it from a hook on the wall.

As Xenia lifted her chemise over her head, Owen quickly undressed.

Standing in just her stockings, she hesitated a moment, unsure if either man wanted the honor of removing them.

Sometimes the three of them tore at each other’s garments in their haste to take to the bed, but other times the men preferred to draw out the unveiling of her skin.

She thought they were silly about it sometimes, but then she’d see Owen’s torso bared inch by inch as he removed his shirt, or watch Simon’s lower torso, cock and

all, revealed like a gift when he unbuttoned his fall.

Simon took the matter into his own hands, gathering her into his arms and kissing her as if she was his everything. And perhaps now she was. She felt Owen's cock brush against her lower back just before his lips warmed her shoulders.

Simon's lips traced a fervent path across her collarbone, his breath hot against her flushed skin.

His kisses ignited a fierce desire that pooled deep within her.

Owen's hands were a comforting counterpoint, sweeping over her back in broad, soothing strokes before moving to encompass the soft curves of her breasts.

As he kneaded the flesh there, Simon sucked on her nipples.

Each nip of Simon's teeth sent a jolt straight to her clitoris, and she whimpered with desire.

As Simon took one nipple between his lips again, Owen's hands slid lower, parting her buttocks gently.

The slickness of the oil he applied there was cool at first but quickly warmed to her body's heat, a single finger circling the sensitive spot before pressing in slowly.

Her legs weakened. She wanted to stretch on the bed so all her attention could go to their explorations. She moaned.

Owen whispered assurances to her, his tone thick with his barely restrained need. "Shhh, love, we'll take care of you," he soothed, even as his finger withdrew, only to be replaced by the firm pressure of his cock nudging insistently at her entrance.

Simon suddenly lifted her legs, wrapping them around his waist, as he aligned himself at her core, his erection a heated promise against her slick folds. The two men entered her in unison—Owen filling her from behind, while Simon claimed her with a gentle but insistent thrust.

Tightening her legs on Simon, Xenia could rock on their cocks.

She laughed at the sensation. As they moved within her, she was sandwiched between the strength of Simon's chest and the solid warmth of Owen's body.

It was as if they were one entity, all hearts beating together, all breaths coming in tandem, all focused on her pleasure.

Her world narrowed to the slide of skin on skin, the building pressure that threatened to consume her. Their coordinated thrusts pushed her higher, taking her to the precipice of ecstasy before holding her there, suspended in a moment of pure, unadulterated bliss.

"Xenia, let go," Owen growled against her ear, his voice tight as if all his effort was required to wait for her release before he could come.

Simon's grip tightened on her hips, his thrusts becoming more urgent as he sought his own climax.

Together, they crested the wave, Simon's seed spilling into her as Owen filled her from behind, their combined heat marking her as theirs in the most primal way.

As the tremors of her orgasm washed over her, Xenia knew without a doubt that she belonged to both men—body, heart, and soul—and they to her.

In this unconventional union, she found an unexpected wholeness, a sense of

completion that defied propriety but fulfilled every hidden desire she had ever harbored.

They remained in a tight embrace for a long minute or two, everyone breathing hard, then Owen pulled out. He lowered the coverlet on the bed to allow Simon to lay her down, then went to the ewer to clean himself. He rinsed the cloth, handing it to Simon before lying on the far side of the bed.

Simon tended to himself and Xenia, kissing her shoulders and torso absently while running the cloth over her tender places. While he finished, she scooted closer to Owen. His smile as she neared him was a gift, revealing exactly what was in his heart. "I love you, Owen," she said, kissing him.

The kiss started out gentle, nearly chaste as her lips met his, but his lips parted to allow her tongue inside.

She rolled onto her back and he hovered over her, his thrusting tongue tangling with hers.

When the mattress shifted under Simon's weight, Xenia broke the kiss, lying back on the pillow.

She pressed her hand on Simon's chest, her other hand stroking the curve of one of Owen's muscles.

She lay nestled between them, a tangle of limbs, while satisfied sighs filled the air. Simon took her hand in his and wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her closer. His breath caressed her neck. She nuzzled her nose in his thick hair. "I love you, Simon. Lord Kinnerton. Husband."

That last brought a smile to his lips.

Owen's hand cupped the fleshy part of her tummy, flexing gently, a comforting touch. She closed her eyes, stifling a yawn, and let herself doze.

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Simon watched the passing landscape as the carriage rolled toward Staplegrove.

Beside him, Xenia's head lolled gently with the rhythmic motion, her breathing even and calm.

He noted the shadows beneath her eyes—evidence of the whirlwind that had swept them to Gretna Green and bound them as husband and wife.

He broke the silence that filled the small space. “We shall stop at Staplegrove. I must apprise my grandfather of our nuptials, and Xenia needs rest.”

She stirred, a delicate frown creasing her brow as she processed his words, then nodded without protest.

Owen, who sat across from them, offered a supportive smile, but said, “Are you certain this is wise? Will he accept Xenia without objection?”

“He won't say anything untoward in front of you two. I believe that upon seeing our lovely bride, he'll agree she'll make a lovely viscountess,” Simon said.

She pressed a hand to her hair, attempting to tame the wild curls that had fallen free on their long journey. “I wish I could make myself presentable before meeting him, but I suppose putting the introduction behind us will relieve some of my worries.”

With a small smile, Simon turned his gaze out of the window again, allowing himself the privacy of his thoughts.

The decision to marry Xenia without announcement, no reading of the banns or purchase of a license, was out of character, he acknowledged.

Yet, he'd done so out of an all-consuming love for the girl who had grown up alongside him, transforming from playmate to confidante, and now, to his beloved wife.

The past few days had been frenzied—the rush to Gretna Green, the exchange of vows, the press of her lips against his outside the smithy in their first kiss as man and wife. He'd put Xenia through so much, but she kept smiling.

His grandfather might understand eventually, he thought. Introducing Xenia to the Earl of Staplegrove was a necessary course of action—it was the next step in legitimizing their marriage in the eyes of society and, more importantly, in the eyes of his grandfather.

As heir to the earldom, Simon knew many would scrutinize and judge his actions.

But his determination to prove their love outweighed any fear of reprimand.

Xenia was worth every consequence, every scandalous whisper that might arise.

And if his quiet, thoughtful nature had been perceived as a weakness before, let them now see the steel resolve that came from loving deeply, fiercely.

A pair of hounds raced alongside the carriage, heralding their approach to Staplegrove, his family's ancestral home that stood as a beacon of wealth and privilege.

Simon felt the familiar swell of pride for his family's legacy, yet alongside it, an acute awareness of the gulf between this grandeur and Xenia's simple beginnings

above her parents' bakery.

"Look," he said to Xenia, leaning back so she might share in the view from the small window. The main house, a behemoth of stone and classical design, pierced the horizon with its towering columns and expansive wings.

"Staplegrove," he announced. "One day this will be our home, Xenia."

Her eyes widened slightly, as she leaned into him and peered out the window, and he wished he could discern her thoughts. Was she intimidated by the opulence, or did she see the beauty he had always seen? He hoped that one day she would come to love this place as he did.

As the carriage came to a halt, Simon alighted first, then turned to assist Xenia. He grasped her hand as she descended the step, a connection that conveyed more than words could at that moment—a silent promise that he was there for her, as her husband, her partner, in all things.

"Welcome to Staplegrove, my lord," said the butler, who appeared by the carriage door.

Simon nodded to the man who had served his family for years, thankful for the formality that helped mask the nervous flutter in his chest. "Thank you, Davies. This is my new wife, Lady Kinnerton."

The butler bowed, masking any expression on his face. "Felicitations, my lady."

The butler led them through the foyer, Simon, Xenia, and Owen trailing behind. They moved past portraits of stern-faced ancestors and landscapes painted in oil. "Lord Staplegrove is in the drawing room."

Simon drew in a breath, feeling Xenia's slight hesitation beside him. This was it—the moment of truth. He placed a hand on her back in reassurance. Whatever lay ahead, they would face it together, as Lord and Lady Kinnerton.

The drawing room doors swung open, revealing the figure of Lord Staplegrove where he stood before the hearth. "Grandfather," Simon greeted with a respectful nod.

"Kinnerton," the earl acknowledged in a voice that seemed to rumble from deep within his chest. His gaze shifted, landing on Xenia with an intensity that belied his outward calm.

"May I introduce Xenia, the new Lady Kinnerton? My wife." Simon wasn't sure what he expected to happen when he said those words, but a bolt of lightning crashing through the roof wouldn't have surprised him.

The earl offered a curt nod toward Xenia, his politeness not quite reaching his eyes. "Welcome to Staplegrove, Lady Kinnerton."

"Thank you, my lord," Xenia replied with a curtsy.

"Owen Bishop, a close friend and ally." Simon continued, turning slightly to present their companion. He left out the details of Owen's occupation, not wanting to push the boundaries of his grandfather's good nature.

"Mr. Bishop," the earl greeted evenly.

"Grandfather, might I request that Xenia be allowed to rest?" Simon interjected smoothly. "Our journey has been taxing, and she deserves some reprieve."

"Of course." The earl called to the butler waiting outside the doorway. "See to it that Lady Kinnerton is made comfortable."

As Xenia left, Simon turned back to his grandfather, his spine stiffening with quiet resolve. “Might we speak privately?”

“Very well.” The earl gestured toward the hallway.

Simon fell into step beside his grandfather, steeling himself for the confrontation. The stakes were higher than ever—his marriage, his love, his future. Nothing his grandfather could do would null the marriage, but he could make their lives quite miserable in the future.

“Grandfather,” Simon began once they sat in the private study, the door closing with a definitive click behind them, “there is much we need to discuss.”

Lord Staplegrove settled behind his imposing mahogany desk, his penetrating gaze fixed on Simon as he took the seat opposite.

“A hasty marriage in Gretna Green, Kinnerton? Is she with child? That’s the only reason I can see that led you to bypass a settlement, which my solicitor should have handled.

And I know there is none, for the man would have informed me immediately if you requested one. ”

Simon met the old man’s eyes, a clear reflection of his own hazel gaze, yet tempered by years of authority. “I felt it was imperative that our union not be impeded by... external influences.”

“External influences?” The earl’s eyebrows arched skeptically.

“I’m fully aware you intended to approve or disprove my choice, whoever she might be. Xenia doesn’t have the pedigree you require. I chose to marry her despite what

you might see as a failing.”

Lord Staplegrove leaned back in his chair, fingers steepled, frowning. Silence stretched between them before he finally spoke again. “And what of her security? Without a dowry, there’s nothing to set aside for her. How do you plan to provide for her?”

“I will arrange for funds to be set aside for her out of my own income. Moreover, I intend to buy a cottage near Kinnerton. It will serve as her dower house.”

When Simon had initially considered the cottage, it was as a home for Owen to allow him to live nearby.

If Simon were to die, Xenia would naturally join Owen there.

Of course, he kept this information away from his grandfather, but the dower house was an excellent diversion if the earl questioned him about it later.

The earl grunted. “You’ve shown more forethought than I anticipated. Still, this is a matter that requires careful consideration.”

“I’ve known Xenia for my entire life, and I know her to be an intelligent, loving woman.

I love her more than I can imagine loving any other woman.

” Simon refrained from adding that he’d agreed to allowing another man to share in their relationship out of love for his wife.

He doubted his grandfather could understand a deep, overpowering love.

Lord Staplegrove's eyebrow arched, skepticism etched into the lines of his aged face. "Love," he pronounced the word as if it were a foreign coin he was unsure of its worth. "It is admirable that you place such stock in this emotion, but love alone does not maintain an estate or secure a lineage."

Simon leaned forward, hands clasped before him, his voice imbued with a fervor that filled the study.

"With all due respect, Grandfather, I must disagree. Love is the very cornerstone upon which we shall build our family. It is the foundation of happiness and stability for any children we are blessed with. Xenia's warmth, her generosity of spirit; these are the attributes that will nurture our heirs and endear them to the people of Kinnerton."

"Children need more than mere affection, they require guidance, discipline, a name..." The earl's retort was pointed, yet there was a softening around his eyes, perhaps recalling his own youthful passions. No, Simon didn't believe the old man had ever felt passion.

"Which they shall have, under the guidance of a mother who loves deeply and a father who will strive to emulate your example of leadership." He paused, the fire within him dimming to embers as he broached the next subject, one heavy with unspoken fears.

"But should my efforts be cut short by an untimely demise?—"

"As we know all too well is possible," the earl interrupted with a brusque wave of his hand, but Simon pressed on.

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“Life is uncertain,” he persisted, “and should fate deal me a cruel hand, I implore you to extend your protection to Xenia. To treat her with the kindness and respect she deserves, especially if she is left a widow with children to care for. Your great-grandchildren.”

“Should such a tragedy befall you, rest assured, I would not abandon your widow or your offspring.” There was a grudging respect in his tone, a tacit acknowledgment of the gravity of Simon’s request.

A profound relief washed over Simon, though it did little to ease the tension that still thrummed in his veins. He nodded respectfully, acknowledging the gravity of the conversation and the concessions made. “Thank you, Grandfather. Your support means more than you might imagine.”

With those final words, he turned and made his way to the door, each step measured and deliberate.

As eager as he was to leave this house, he needed to consider Xenia’s well-being.

He could maintain a pleasant facade for a few hours longer and allow her to rest, but then they must renew their journey.

* * *

The carriage swayed gently and Xenia wondered if they’d ever be home. This was her first journey from the village and, aside from the joy it brought of her now being married to the men she’d loved always, she hoped she’d never have to travel again.

She sat alone, facing her two men, each staring out a window.

Simon exuded an air of quiet intensity. She wondered how his private audience with his grandfather had gone.

The earl had been polite enough in the short time she spent with the three men after her brief nap.

He was a very austere sort, she'd decided, very noble.

What had he been like before assuming the earldom?

Would Simon change much when his time came?

Owen looked restless, shifting his position often.

Likely he didn't spend entire days doing nothing like this.

As she studied him, he turned his head and caught her gaze.

As the carriage took a curve in the road, he rose from his seat and moved to sit beside her, his proximity sending a thrill through her body.

"Husband," she said softly, her insides smiling as much as her lips did.

"My Zee," he whispered back, his tone low and husky. His hand moved to her lap, where he began gathering her gown.

She felt the cool air kiss her legs as they were bared to the hungry gaze of the two men she had loved in silence for so long.

She watched Simon lean forward opposite her, his attention riveted on her most intimate parts, now visible by Owen's boldness.

There was something almost reverential in the way Simon looked at her, as if he were beholding something precious and forbidden.

She spread her legs to be certain he had his fill of the sight.

"Look how eager you are for us," Owen commented, his finger sliding up and down her slick folds, parting her with a gentle but insistent touch. His words were not just an observation—they were an invocation, calling forth the heat that pooled between her thighs.

Xenia could feel a blush rising to her cheeks, the heat of it nearly as intense as the heat building within her. "I can't help it. Not with such handsome men beside me, looking at me."

"She blames us. Typical." Simon's formal tone held a hint of amusement and an undercurrent of arousal that was impossible to miss. It was a sound that stirred something deep within Xenia, emboldening her.

Owen's hand between her thighs continued to toy with her idly. Rather than an insistent stroke aimed at building arousal, his fingers seemed content to simply explore. Yet her arousal grew.

Simon's gaze bore into her, a glint of mischief mingled with desire in his eyes. "Xenia, you are the embodiment of wicked temptation."

The words sent a shiver down her spine, stoking the flame within her.

Her hips flexed, wanting something inside her—a finger, a tongue, a cock.

She didn't care. She felt scandalous under their dual attentions, yet she couldn't deny the thrill that coursed through her veins.

Owen's fingers sought her warmth with a practiced ease, pressing into her as the carriage jostled them gently.

Each bump in the road had her hips unwittingly grinding against his hand, the sound of her arousal embarrassingly audible in the confined space.

"Ah, Owen..." She could barely form words, her mind clouded with a haze of pleasure brought on by his fingers.

The sensation of being displayed, coupled with Simon's intense stare, was overwhelming.

She surrendered to the rhythm set by the movement of the carriage, each roll accentuating the strokes of Owen's fingers inside her.

As he continued his tender assault, her fingers clutched at Owen's wrist, urging him on. Her body craved more.

"Good heavens, Zee," Owen said, his own excitement palpable in the tremble of his voice. "You move with the carriage as if it were your lover."

Simon's voice, low and thick with desire, punctured the haze of Xenia's pleasure. "Imagine, my dear, when we reach our home. Upstairs, in my bedchamber. No need to send away the servants anymore, as we're married now."

Owen's fingers stilled momentarily inside her, and he leaned closer, his breath hot against her ear. "Picture it, Zee. We'll have you naked on that soft bed all night. No need to hurry before someone questions where we are."

Her heart raced at the idea of bedding them every night. Her pulse pounded, throbbing in her clitoris. Eventually she would grow tender, she imagined, and might beg for a night with just cuddling, but even that.... oh, her life was so delicious.

Owen resumed his movements, fingertips drawing circles around her now slick and sensitive flesh, while his other hand filled her. She arched toward him, inviting more of his touch, craving the fulfillment only they could provide.

The carriage hit a bump, and the sudden jolt sent a shockwave of pleasure through her. A gasp escaped her lips, louder than intended, and her cheeks flamed knowing that beyond the thin walls of their private world, the coachmen might hear. But it was too late for modesty.

“Almost there, love,” Owen said, and she knew he wasn’t just referring to their destination.

As if on cue, the carriage wheels slowed, the rhythmic rolling that had been their accomplice in sin now ending.

With one last flick and press of Owen’s fingers, Xenia tumbled over the edge.

Her climax washed over her in an overwhelming wave, just as the carriage came to a complete stop outside the looming silhouette of the manor house.

Unable to contain herself, she cried out in the sudden stillness.

Heat warmed her face, and she ducked her head, pushing Owen’s hands away as she straightened the skirt of her gown.

“Xenia,” Simon said gently as he prepared to exit the carriage. “You’ve nothing to be ashamed of.”

She couldn't reply, her breath coming in short pants, her body still shimmering with the aftershocks of her release. The sound of the manor door opening brought her back to reality, reminding her that the journey—this part of it, at least—had ended. But another was about to begin.

Owen chuckled beside her, deep and unabashed, as if the world outside their intimate cocoon mattered little.

“Imagine the tales our coachman could tell,” Simon teased, eyes twinkling with mirth as he glanced upward toward the driver's seat, invisible beyond the confines of their shelter. “The envy of the town he would be, knowing the treasure we've claimed.”

“True,” Owen agreed, the timbre of his voice laced with satisfaction as if he'd orgasmed alongside her. “But what's ours is ours alone, isn't it, Zee?”

She nodded, caught between embarrassment and pride. The men's words were a balm to the heated flush on her cheeks, turning her mortification into a secret thrill. They did not care for propriety, they reveled in their possession, in their shared love for her.

Simon's hand found the door handle, and he swung it open with a graceful motion, stepping out into the cool night air. He turned back to her, extending an arm like a lifeline. His silhouette framed by the doorway was both a promise and a temptation.

“Come now, my dear,” Simon said. “You wouldn't want to tarry and miss what awaits you inside.”

Her heart raced at the anticipation of what was to come, a playful smirk dancing on her lips despite the lingering tremors of her recent pleasure.

She placed her delicate hand in Simon's, allowing him to assist her from the carriage.

As she stepped down, the brush of her skirts against her sensitized skin was a reminder of the imprudent acts they had indulged in, acts she longed to continue within the privacy of the estate's walls.

“Swiftly, love,” Owen urged from behind her, his hands skimming the small of her back, propelling her gently forward.

And with a last glance at the silent coachmen working to unload their bags, whose ears had borne witness to her ecstasy, Xenia allowed herself to be led away by the two men who had claimed her body and soul.

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Xenia stretched languorously before ascending the staircase, her body aching from the long carriage ride from Staplegrove to Kinnerton.

Somewhere mid-stretch she realized that was likely something she wasn't supposed to do in front of the servants, but at that moment when she was still flushed from the coachmen hearing her orgasm, she thought stretching was a minor sin.

She laughed under her breath as she turned to Simon.

"I find myself in dire need of a bath after our tedious journey. Is it too late to ask the servants to prepare one?"

He turned back to the butler, who was directing the servants where to put Xenia and Owen's belongings. "Andrews, please have a bath prepared for Lady Kinnerton immediately," he instructed.

As an afterthought, he added, "Advise the staff to gather here tomorrow at noon, to meet the new viscountess." Xenia shivered at the announcement. She was a viscountess now.

"Very good sir," Andrews said.

When they reached Simon's bedchamber—now hers, too, she imagined—Owen continued down the hall to the bedroom he would use when he stayed overnight. Or the bedroom where he'd muss the bedclothes, since the whole point of his staying was to be with Xenia.

Once they were alone in the chamber, Simon turned his attentions back to Xenia. He drew close, gliding the flat of his hand down her side in a tender caress that made her want to melt into him.

He suddenly straightened, his arm wrapped about her waist, keeping her tight against his body. "I don't have a lady's maid for you. The woman who assisted my mother left to be closer to her family. I'll have to contact the agency."

His hand slid upward, covering her breast, and he bent to nuzzle her hair. "In the meantime, I shall take on the role myself, with Owen's assistance, of course. We've gotten quite proficient at removing your clothing."

Xenia laughed. "I'm to have two handsome, strong lady's maids. How very fortunate am I."

Owen, who had been lingering in the shadows of the doorway, grinned. "At your service, m'lady," he said with a mock bow, his brown eyes alight with camaraderie.

Simon glanced at the door to the dressing room before saying to Owen, "I don't believe the bath is ready. Come back in half an hour."

With a gesture of compliance, Owen retreated. His footsteps echoed lightly down the corridor.

Xenia watched him leave, and a heaviness hit her heart.

For all their talk about her being married to both men, in truth, Owen would be hidden in corners, darting into cupboards if they were about to be discovered in flagrante delicto.

She must make an effort whenever he was near to show him how important he was to

her.

When Simon opened the door to his dressing room, the warm glow from the newly lit hearth bathed the room in a soft, amber light.

Servants shuffled in and out carrying steaming pails of water which they carefully poured into the large, copper tub that dominated the space.

Seeing the size, Xenia realized two could easily fit in it if it wasn't overfilled.

"Is there anything else you require, Lord Kinnerton?" one footman asked.

With a subtle shake of his head, he dismissed them. "Thank you, that will be all for now."

Once the door closed behind the last servant, leaving only the faint echo of their departure, Simon returned to his bedchamber and rapped on the wall it shared with the one where Owen waited.

Owen strode in with the confidence of a man who knew he was more than just a guest, to Xenia's relief. He appeared to have washed his face, and he'd taken off his coat.

Simon's fingers deftly worked the laces of Xenia's bodice, and it dropped to the floor. Owen, standing beside her, lifted her chemise, his fingertips grazing her skin, igniting a trail of warmth that bloomed across Xenia's flesh.

Her hair came tumbling down as Simon gently removed the pins that held her bun in place. The locks cascaded over her shoulders, framing her face in a dark halo that contrasted starkly with her pale skin.

“Each time I look at you, I’m astonished at your beauty,” Owen murmured. “And that you allow me to love you.”

Xenia sat and removed her shoes and stockings by herself, then took Simon’s hand for balance as she stepped into the tub. The temperature was perfect, hot enough to relax her travel-weary body without being too hot.

Owen picked up a bar of soap and a cloth, lathering them until bubbles formed, white and inviting.

When she settled at one end of the tub, he began to wash her, his motions deliberate and soothing.

The cloth glided over her arms, her chest, dipping lower to worship the curves that made her uniquely feminine—the curves both men adored.

Behind her, Simon dragged a chair closer and sat. His skilled hands spread over her shoulders, kneading and rubbing. Slow, purposeful circles transitioned into gentle strokes that traveled the expanse of her neck and back. His touch was magical.

Xenia lounged amidst the warm embrace of the bathwater, the tender ministrations of Owen and Simon having eased her into a state of languid bliss. Soon enough, she realized they meant the bath to be for her alone.

“Simon, Owen, won’t you join me?”

“You appeared so tired when we arrived. I thought for tonight we’d let you rest,” Simon said.

Owen nodded.

She pressed her lips together, her eyes narrowed as she looked from one hauntingly handsome man to the other.

“Husbands, this is my first night in my new home. I’m a viscountess now, not simply a baker’s daughter.

I intend to celebrate my fortune. Now, undress, both of you, and get in the damned tub! ”

Simon drew back slightly, shock showing in his expression, but then he grinned. He tugged off his waistcoat and pulled his shirt free of his breeches.

Owen’s laughter echoed off the walls, rich and hearty. “How could we ever deny you anything, wife?” He set about undressing.

As Simon stepped into the bath, he said, “We’re entirely at your service, dearest.”

The flickering candlelight cast a golden glow over him, turning the droplets on his flesh into tiny jewels. His gaze fixed upon her, his eyes dark with desire, as he drew closer and extended his hand to trace the line of her collarbone with the tip of his finger.

She breathed his name in a sigh, lifting her hand to meet his, fingers dancing across his chest before venturing lower, seeking, finding. Her touch was bold and unabashed as she found his arousal, his primal grunt sending a surge of heat through her body.

With a gentle tug, he lifted her, turning her and guiding her onto his lap, where their bodies aligned in heated anticipation. A shared sigh escaped them as he entered her, the sensation overwhelming in its intensity. She arched her back against him, cupping her breasts above the water.

When she opened her eyes, she saw Owen watching, his hand around his cock. There wasn't room for him in the tub, but she wanted him taking part. She called to him.

He stepped forward, and as he neared the edge of the tub, Xenia stretched her arm out to him.

Her hand encircled him, her movements sure and eager as she drew him into the intimacy they all shared.

The sound of water splashing gently against the sides of the tub provided a rhythmic backdrop to their synchronized breathing.

Simon's grasp on her hips tightened, and he slowly lifted her up the length of his cock, moaning.

The slow stroke was heavenly, and as he entered her again, his erection rubbed against the place inside her that magnified everything he touched.

Her lips were parted to take Owen into her mouth, and a gasp escaped her.

"That feels so wonderful, Simon," she purred, then licked the liquid on Owen's tip.

Somehow, her men found a rhythm in their awkward positioning, thrusting alternately as she moved between them. Her hands clasped Owen's bottom to keep him close. Her hips flexed against Simon, and she sucked Owen into her throat.

The tension coiled within them, each sensation amplified by the shared connection that tethered their souls.

Xenia exhaled a moan as waves of pleasure radiated from where Simon filled her, the sound harmonizing with the low, throaty grunts that escaped Owen as she drew him

deep into her mouth again.

Simon's fingers dug into her flesh as if to anchor her on him.

Quiet, urgent whispers and stifled cries filled the dressing room.

And then, as if by some unspoken signal, they shattered together.

Simon's body tensed, his grip on Xenia tightening as he spilled himself into her.

Xenia's own climax washed over her in relentless waves, her inner walls fluttering around Simon, milking him.

And beneath her lips, Owen pumped once more before tensing in a guttural cry.

In the aftermath, they clung to one another, the water now cool against her skin flushed from passion. Silence settled, broken only by the ragged cadence of their breathing.

Owen withdrew first, reaching for the cloth he'd used on Xenia and washing away the remnants of his passion.

Simon carefully lifted Xenia from his lap, setting her on the cold floor with a tenderness that belied the fervor of moments ago.

She caught his gaze as he stepped from the bath, water cascading down the planes of his muscular form.

Owen handed him a length of toweling before wrapping Xenia in another.

Together, they attended to Xenia, drying her curvaceous body with the same care

they had shown in undressing her.

Xenia returned their attentions, helping to dry their broad shoulders and sculpted chests, her fingers treasuring the feel of the taut muscles.

Bathing together might not be practical regularly, but she would ensure it happened often enough.

Once dry, they made their way to the bedchamber, the scent of soap surrounding them.

The bed, with its clean linens and soft pillows, beckoned invitingly.

After extinguishing the candles, Simon and Owen took their places on either side of Xenia on the mattress, their bodies aligning naturally as they lay.

Simon drew the covers over their sated bodies, his arm slipping around Xenia's waist, pulling her back against his chest. His skin was cool from the bath, soft and slightly damp on her back. She sighed contentedly, nestling closer into his embrace.

Owen leaned in to press a gentle kiss on Xenia's forehead, his breath caressing her skin.

She looked up, offering him a sleepy smile, and with the moonlight streaming through the window, she saw him return it.

His hand found hers beneath the covers, fingers intertwining.

She mouthed, "I love you," and he kissed the air between them.

As she closed her eyes, she found a name for what she'd felt these past few days,

even while rocking endlessly in the carriage. Contentment. She had everything she needed.

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Xenia awoke to the brightness of morning light against her eyelids, for a moment panicking that she'd overslept and was late for work in the bakery, until the softness of the sheets reminded her of her new circumstances.

She stretched languidly beneath the silken covers, her hand reaching for the solid warmth of Owen and Simon beside her.

But the space on each side was empty. Owen must have left some time ago. But where was Simon?

Rising from the bed, she let her gaze wander over the bedchamber.

She hadn't paid it much attention before, her mind always in the depths of carnal desire when she came into the room.

The walls, dressed in sumptuous wallpaper, enclosed her in a world so different from the cozy confines of her childhood room above the bakery.

She felt as if she had stepped into a dream, or rather, stumbled into a storybook where she was still learning the rules of being a lady of the manor.

Xenia slipped into one of the finely stitched day gowns that Sarah had given her.

She pinned up her hair, giving up the fight against the few tendrils that refused to be tamed.

In the mirror, she could see how those curls softened her face.

Both Simon and Owen had a tendency to brush the hairs back, which was a gentle touch she enjoyed.

Satisfied with her looks, she went in search of Simon.

As she neared the dining room, the aroma of fresh coffee pulled her forward. Simon already sat at the head of the long dining table, his tall frame relaxed in the high-backed chair. He looked up from his newspaper and greeted her with a tender smile that was echoed in his eyes.

“Good morning, my dear.” He set aside the paper and stood to welcome her. “I trust you slept well?”

“Very well, thank you.” She poured herself a cup of tea from the pot on the sideboard, still warm, making her think he might not have been awake long.

Sitting in a chair at his side, she observed him over the rim of her teacup, noting the way his gaze lingered on her.

The way he looked at her made her feel warm, loved. Eternally happy.

Simon took a drink from his coffee and set the cup down again. “I thought we might go into the village this morning.”

“I must face my parents. And pack the rest of my clothes.” She made a mental list of her treasures she would bring with her, including her needlework.

Uncertain what her new duties involved, beyond the pleasurable ones of keeping Simon happy—and Owen—she would be glad to have something to keep her hands busy.

“We shall depart after breakfast. There are other arrangements we must discuss. I’ve written to inquire about a lady’s maid.

” He paused, reaching out to brush her cheek.

“And while I would much prefer to keep you naked in bed round the clock, we shall pay a visit to the modiste in Chester this week. You will need gowns suited to a viscountess.”

“New gowns.” Her smile widened. “How delightful.”

“We shall dress you from the skin out. Perhaps a few nightgowns, too, although I much prefer sleeping beside your naked body.” His gaze dropped to her breasts, which swelled as if he touched them. “But I cannot be selfish.”

She covered his hand with hers, stroking her fingers over one of his as if it were his shaft. “I find that most of your so-called selfish desires please me.”

“Is that so?” His breathing changed, quick breaths much like when they made love. “If it wouldn’t shock the servants, I would indulge in a few right here.”

Heat warmed her in places that were still tender from their lovemaking the night before.

At times she thought she’d never be sated, but having two men pleasuring her also meant twice as much friction on tender skin.

Owen enjoyed taking her with his mouth as much as his erection, for which she was grateful, but her best orgasms came when she was filled front and rear with their cocks.

She was sure they—all three of them, not just her men—would eventually settle into a routine of a few nights a week to enjoy each other.

The pace they kept up now, much of which was begun by her, would wear her out.

She forced herself to focus on their original topic, the items she would need in her new life. “I don’t need many gowns, and as you say, I find myself not needing nightclothes...”

“Xenia,” he interjected gently, “this is your home now, your life. I wish only to see you happy and at ease here. You will make new friends who will expect you to wear the latest fashion. I won’t have you feeling as if they are above you.”

Her heart swelled at the sincerity in his hazel eyes. “I appreciate all you’re doing for me. Truly, Simon, I am grateful.”

“Some of my reasons are selfish, too. I can’t have people thinking I’m a miserly husband. I want all men to look upon you and be envious of my beautiful bride. To see you take your place by my side fills me with no end of joy.”

“A poor wife I would be if I denied my husband his happiness.” She was such a lucky woman, to have a man such as this love her. Owen, too, although his role didn’t seem to include being a material provider. He gave of his heart, same as Simon, and that was more than she deserved.

* * *

After Xenia was introduced to the servants, she and Simon went into the village, as discussed. As they alighted from the carriage in front of the bakery, guilt hit her once again. Having excluded her parents from such an important moment would plague her for the rest of her days, she feared.

The ring of the bell on the door as they entered comforted her with its familiarity. “Papa, Mama,” she called out.

Her parents came out from the bakery’s kitchen, their faces bright with happiness. Mama held her arms out for a hug. “Lord and Lady Kinnerton. I never could have imagined it.”

Xenia accepted the embrace, noting her father’s handshake with Simon.

“You make us very happy parents,” Papa said. “I won’t make the expected speech demanding you take care of our girl, as I know you will.”

“I must say, I thought it would be Owen who won her heart,” Mama said.

Xenia cringed. Her mother said some of the boldest things, sometimes.

Simon chuckled. “As it turns out, the better man won.”

Now Xenia blushed, thinking of the contests she’d forced on the two men. Her parents would never suspect there was anything scandalous about his comment, but she and Simon knew. She quickly changed the subject. “I must apologize for?—”

“My child,” her father interrupted, his eyes twinkling with a knowing warmth that belied any sternness she had braced herself for.

He wrapped an arm casually across her mother’s shoulders.

“There’s no need for explanations. I understand at times the fire of young love burns too fiercely to be delayed by ceremony or announcement.

I’m just happy you finally found that love. ”

Xenia's mouth parted in muted astonishment, her heart swelling with affection for the man who had always encouraged her to chase after her desires.

She had expected disappointment or even anger, but instead found understanding—a reflection of the romance that had once blossomed between her own parents, and continued to flourish today.

“Thank you, Papa.” she whispered, her blue eyes shining with unshed tears.

Her father returned to the bakery kitchen while Mama went upstairs with Xenia and Simon. While Xenia quickly packed her few possessions, Mama went into the small kitchen at the back of their home.

A few minutes later, she entered Xenia's bedchamber.

In her hands, she cradled a serving dish Xenia recognized as the one Mama used on special occasions, its surface marred by hairline fractures in the glaze that spoke of countless meals and washings.

“My lord, Xenia, my parents gave this bowl to Mr. Arbuckle and me when we wed. I wish for you to have it now.” Her fingers caressed the rim as she spoke.

Her mother's gesture made Xenia think of her own family's heritage, humble thought it was. With trembling hands, she took the dish. “Thank you, Mama.”

“I realize it's merely ironware, but it has served us through many joyous occasions,” Mama said, looking at Simon apologetically.

Beside her, Simon took the dish, freeing Xenia's hand for her sorting and packing. “We shall treasure this, and one day pass it to our daughter.”

Xenia glanced at her husband, her heart brimming with a love that grew stronger with each thoughtful word he spoke. She knew he meant the sentiment and that her family history was just as important as his own.

Too soon, she finished packing and gave one last look around the room that had been hers since birth.

This was where she first realized she cared for Simon and Owen, the start of years of fantasies that matured as her understanding of love and carnal relations grew.

Now she was living those dreams. She, Simon, and Mama went downstairs so she could say goodbye to her father.

“Thank you, Mama, Papa, for understanding, for this...” She gestured to the basket that held the bowl, now wrapped carefully in cloth. “And for everything.”

Her father, a man of few words, enveloped her in his strong arms. “We always wished the best for you. I never imagined it would turn out as well as it did.”

Mama hugged her and pressed a kiss on her cheek.

“You must come to supper soon,” Xenia said.

Simon nodded. “Ready, my love?”

She forced herself to leave. As much as she was enjoying being married, a small part of her would always be in the bakery.

* * *

On a lazy afternoon not long after Xenia had moved into the manor house, Simon

rose from his desk, missing her company. He sought her in the morning room and the library, but she was neither place. He went to the bedchamber next, where he found her stretched on the bed with a book in her hand.

She smiled when she looked up to see him enter. “Good afternoon, husband.”

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He loved how that word sounded on her lips. Closing the door, he came around to her side of the bed, bent, and kissed her. “Why look, my lovely wife is alone.” He wished nothing more than to ravish her at that moment, but felt guilty for intruding on her private time.

“Alone no longer, it would seem.” She set aside the book. “Is there something you need?”

Oh, was there. His lips twitched. “Nothing is amiss. I was reviewing accounts when I realized I miss you fiercely.”

She scooted toward the center of the bed, setting aside her book. “Sit with me, then. Or should we take a stroll in the garden? It’s a lovely day.”

He sat on the edge, but didn’t stretch his legs out beside her. “Would you prefer we walk? I’ve seen the garden this week. It holds no fascination for me. Not like you do. But if you’d rather?—”

“I’m happy for your company, no matter where we are, Simon.” She plumped the pillow by his side. “Sit with me. Tell me about your day.”

He took off his boots and leaned against the carved headboard, taking her hand in his.

His day was nothing to make note of, really, but he described the little things he’d done since he’d seen her at breakfast. Somehow, as he spoke, his hand found its way onto her thigh and he absently kneaded the muscle through the layers of her clothing.

He was fond of her legs, her thighs thick and feminine.

She asked questions, which he answered. Their discussion reminded him of afternoons by the river, simply enjoying the passage of time. He was happy to make time in his day for this.

He saw her hand gather the fabric of her gown, inching it up.

His mouth watered. Making even more time for her body wasn't a bad idea, either.

Rather than tucking his hand under the fabric, he decided to see what she would do.

Xenia was so bold in their lovemaking, and he gained much pleasure being her audience as well as her lover.

When her hem reached the tops of her stockings, she lifted her bottom, baring her hips and the glorious delights below. No longer able to simply watch, he swept his hand up her thigh, his little finger flirting with her curls. Choosing to taunt her a little, he asked, "And how has your day been?"

"Quite pleasant." She went into some detail, but he didn't hear. Her legs parted, and he stopped breathing for a few seconds. How did her body still have such a pull on him?

Still reclining against the headboard, he drew his finger up her slit and found dampness forming.

What a fortunate man he was that the woman he loved enjoyed pleasures of the flesh as much as he did.

"Are you finding everything to your liking? You know if there's anything you

require, you must simply ask, and I'll make certain you have it.

” He pressed his finger between her folds and swiped upward.

Her hips flexed, and she hissed, one leg spreading wider. “You are very good at providing what I need, my lord.”

He liked when she called him that almost as much as when she said husband.

She'd never felt the class difference between them, even as children, and her use of the honorific had been her way of flirting when she grew older.

It gave him the same rush of pleasure as when he instructed her to perform some act, and she did so.

As he continued to stroke her damp flesh, her hips tipped slightly. “You receive what I offer so graciously, love.” He had to adjust his cock with his other hand, as it swelled painfully, but he wanted this time to be hers. If he could stand it.

He palmed her cunny and pressed his middle finger inside her.

She rocked into him with a moan, continuing to move in the rhythm he set.

With his thumb, he strummed her nub, then stroked faster to catch up to her.

Legs trembling, her familiar whimpers rose as her head tipped back against the headboard.

When he curled his finger inside her hot sheath, her eyes opened wide. “Oh, yes!”

Smiling, he watched the tension build on her face, her brows drawing together, her

lips forming a pout that begged to be kissed. Her release came, spilling past his fingers, softening her brow. She was stunning in ecstasy.

He continued to touch her as she came down from her orgasm, then he sucked his fingers clean of her juices. While his cock screamed for its own release, he felt strangely satisfied.

* * *

Xenia opened her eyes and smiled when she found his gaze. “I have the most generous husband. But don’t think you are the sole bestower of passion.” She grinned and licked her lips in anticipation.

With a swift movement, she had his cock free and pointing skyward. She leaned forward, her hair cascading down like a curtain. “Now let me show you how quickly the baker’s daughter can stoke a fire within the viscount, and maybe bring a rise.”

Her hands roamed with purpose, shoving his shirt higher, finding all the places where she knew he was sensitive.

Stroking his tight belly, flicking a nail on his nipples, her hands explored.

She moved to sit beside his hips, allowing her mouth and eyes to explore the lean rod she enjoyed so much.

She grasped the base, stroking with enough pressure to please him.

He grew harder as she watched, making her cunny throb despite its recent fulfillment.

As she drew her hand up his shaft, she felt the ridges of his veins.

Her other hand found his sack, testing the weight of his stones.

Bending over him, she lapped at the fat head, where droplets of his seed pooled.

He moaned, smoothing one hand up the back of her thigh, the other one fisted in her hair.

She took him fully in her mouth, tasting the saltiness of his arousal.

As she bobbed up and down on him, she gripped the base with a firm hand, squeezing in time with her moves.

His bottom thrust in rhythm, lifting himself to her mercies, setting a pace that had them both gasping for air, lost in the throes of shared intensity.

“Xenia,” he managed between labored breaths, his voice hoarse. “You unravel me completely.”

He pushed deeper, his cock brushing the back of her throat, and she fought the reflexive spasm of her muscles as her eyes watered. She brought her hand higher on his length to keep him from entering her mouth fully, moving her fist in time with her head.

“God—” he broke off when he climaxed inside her mouth. Hot waves of his seed filled her mouth, and she swallowed, her hand milking the last of it from him.

His arms dropped to the coverlet, and he lay sprawled, completely spent. She smiled as she licked away a bit of his seed remaining on her lips. She had pleased him well. That prostrate form was not the body of a man under his own control.

She let him lie there as his breathing evened, his body so limp she wondered if he

slept. Cuddling beside him would be lovely, but she was hungry. She was loath to leave him when he'd sought her company, however, so she stayed.

She would remember this afternoon, in the future.

Someday, she might wish to sway Simon to her point of view, and sucking him to satiation seemed the perfect remedy.

She might prefer letting him have his way with her in all the ways he'd shown her, but a woman always needed to have a tool of her own handy when the time came.

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Some nights, they didn't fall asleep immediately after satisfying their carnal needs. Simon's cock felt satisfied, and his heart was full, but he was restless.

The flickering candlelight cast a warm glow on Xenia's flushed skin, illuminating the beads of sweat that had formed during their passionate encounter.

He admired her beauty, his eyes drinking in every detail of her body as she lay beneath him.

His gaze shifted to Owen, who lay on her other side, watching them with an intensity that both surprised and excited Simon.

"Isn't my wife beautiful, Owen?" Simon asked, his voice heavy with lust and pride.

"She is," Owen agreed, his eyes never leaving Xenia's face. He remained silent, but the slight curl at the corner of his lips betrayed his shared admiration for the woman they both loved.

Spurred by Owen's acknowledgement, Simon's hand on Xenia became more deliberate. He increased the intensity of his thrusts, and with each motion, he pressed his thumb against her clitoris, ensuring that she felt every inch of his desire for her.

Xenia's moans grew louder, more urgent, as Simon continued to push her closer to the precipice of pleasure.

He became attuned to her vocal cues, searching for any sign that she was nearing her climax.

At this moment, there was nothing more important to him than bringing Xenia to the peak of ecstasy.

“Ah, Simon... please, make me come,” she gasped, her eyes wide and pleading as she clung to him.

He could feel her body trembling, her breath hitching with each movement. Simon knew that she was close, and he wanted nothing more than to coax her over the edge, to see her lose herself completely in the throes of passion.

“Let go, love,” he whispered into her ear, his own arousal growing at the thought of her complete surrender to the pleasure he was providing. “I want to be the one who brings you there.”

Simon’s gaze locked with Owen’s, a fierce determination burning inside him. “She is exquisite, isn’t she?” he said possessively, the words barely audible as he toyed gently between her legs. “My wife.”

“Xenia, you are perfect,” Owen agreed, his voice strained.

Xenia moaned, her body writhing beneath Simon’s hand, her hips meeting his thrusts with growing urgency.

Simon’s heartbeat quickened, every nerve in his body attuned to Xenia’s reactions.

He could feel her quivering around his finger, her breath coming in ragged gasps, and his own desire intensified at the knowledge that he was the one responsible for her pleasure.

His mind raced, determined to bring her to the peak of ecstasy by focusing on every subtle cue from her body.

“Owen, do you see how she responds to me?” Simon asked. “Our beautiful Xenia.”

“Simon,” she moaned, her fingers clutching at his arms, her eyes filled with unbridled passion. “Don’t stop.”

“Come for me, Xenia,” he whispered against her ear, his thumb continuing its tantalizing dance across her clitoris.

“Simon!” she cried out, her voice rising in pitch as the floodgates opened, her climax washing over her like a tidal wave. The intensity of her pleasure seemed to reverberate through the very air, wrapping them both in its electrifying embrace.

His heart swelled with love and contentment as he glanced at Xenia, her chest heaving and her skin glistening with perspiration. The sight of her in such a state filled him with pride, knowing that he had caused her pleasure.

Owen brushed a stray lock of hair from her forehead. “You were absolutely breathtaking.”

A blush crept across her cheeks as she smiled at him, her eyes twinkling. “Thank you.”

Meeting their friend’s gaze across Xenia’s languid body, Simon said, “I must say, I am glad we decided upon this arrangement. It seems to work well for all of us, don’t you agree?”

Owen grinned. “Indeed, Simon. I never thought I’d see the day when we’d share anything so intimate, but... it feels right. As long as Xenia is happy, I’m content.”

“Me too,” Simon echoed, his eyes meeting Xenia’s gaze. “That’s what matters most, after all. Xenia’s happiness.”

They lay in silence for a moment, each lost in their thoughts. Simon mulled over the unique situation they were in. He meant what he said about her happiness, but even now, as he watched Owen playing with her hair, he wanted to brush away the man's hand.

Xenia's soft voice pulled him from his reverie. "Do you think it will always be like this? Can we truly make this work?"

He took her hand, gently intertwining his fingers with hers. "We can, and we will. We've made our choices, and we'll stand by them. Together, we will create a life filled with love and happiness."

"Hear, hear," Owen chimed in, his deep voice laced with sincerity. "I am committed to this as well."

"Thank you, Owen," Xenia whispered, her eyes shining with gratitude.

Rising to extinguish the candles, Simon repeated his vow in his head. We can and we will make this work. He would find a way to deal with his jealousy.

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Days later, Owen was interrupted in the smithy. He set down his tools to talk to his friend.

Simon's voice cut through the din of the smithy with an urgency that set Owen's nerves on edge. "I'm called away on an urgent matter. My grandfather is not well. I must entrust Xenia's care to you while I am absent. I might be gone up to a week."

"Of course," Owen replied, concern creasing his forehead. It wasn't like Simon to leave without notice. "She'll want for nothing."

Simon's lips pressed thin as he studied him, making Owen wonder at the viscount's actions. Would he insist Owen stay out of her bed?

"I trust you, Owen. Ensure her needs are met, in every regard."

"Understood." He had his answer, and it surprised him. More and more, Simon's actions seemed to stress his benevolence in allowing Owen into their bed, so much so that Owen wondered if he'd still be welcome there come summer.

As dusk fell, Owen made his way to the manor, a bag packed with several days' clothes. Business at the smithy was slow, so he could spend extra time with Zee.

She met him in the foyer as if she'd heard his horse arriving, her eyes sparkling with a vivacity that cut straight to his core. "I'm so glad you're home."

He drank in the sight of her, clad in a gown that plunged low, revealing much of her plump breasts.

She must not have worn her chemise, for he could see her nipples and curls through the fabric, distinct against her pale skin.

Her hair cascaded in loose waves, a sharp contrast to the usual prim bun atop her head.

Owen's breath hitched. She was ethereal, a vision of desire and domesticity intertwined.

"Did Simon tell you he's gone away?" she asked, her lips curving into a flirtatious smile that sent Owen's pulse racing.

"He did. He insisted your needs are taken care of, and I am here to oblige."

"Then let us not waste time." Xenia licked her lips, and he felt it on his cock. She turned to the staircase.

"Don't you wish to have supper first?"

Her grin was wicked as she said, "I requested a cold repast that we can eat whenever we wish. I claimed I didn't know what time to expect you, so there was no need for a formal meal."

"You think of everything, my love." Owen's heart thundered, and he said a silent prayer of gratitude to his absent friend for this unimaginable gift—a chance to sate his longing, if only for a brief spell.

Tonight, he vowed, he would worship at the altar of Zee's pleasure, fulfilling not just the duties of a surrogate husband, but the desires of a man enraptured by love.

As they ascended the staircase, he could feel the warmth of Zee's presence just ahead

of him, her every movement fueling the fire that blazed within his chest.

Zee opened the door to her bedchamber and entered. “Simon told the servants you would stay at the house in his absence, and that they’re to answer to you as if you were Simon.”

Owen nodded, closing the door behind them, shutting out the world and its judgments.

“And of course, I intend to see you have everything you need,” she said. She reached for the back of her gown, but he stopped her.

“Don’t take it off yet. It would be a shame to not enjoy what that gown offers.” His hand covered her breast, squeezing gently. “I can see everything through the fabric. You must wear this more often.”

She shivered as he drew the neckline down and revealed her nipple to his gaze. “Simon has only seen me wear it with the chemise. It’s much less scandalous that way.”

“I prefer scandalous.” He sucked her breast into his mouth, his tongue pressing hard before he pulled back and let her pop out again. While he nuzzled that one, he played with the other nipple through the fabric, feeling it harden.

Zee leaned into his touch, her breaths coming faster, her eyes darkening with desire.

He brought her closer to the fire, where the light was better. Circling around her, he let his fingers explore her delightful curves. His hands found the roundness of her bottom, squeezing gently. “I think these might just be my favorite part of you.”

A soft laugh escaped her lips, tinged with the flirty edge that was quintessentially

Zee. "Is that so?" she teased, casting a glance over her shoulder.

"If you could see how you look through this fabric, you'd understand.

" He kneeled behind her. His lips pressed against her buttocks, kissing tenderly at first, then growing bolder with little nips and playful licks that elicited a symphony of breathy sounds from her.

She squirmed delightfully, each little sound stoking the fire within him.

"Owen," she gasped as he spread her open, admiring the hidden beauty there. "You make me feel... beautiful everywhere."

"Because you are," he whispered reverently. Now he lifted the gown, again kissing her flesh, kneading, enjoying the sight of her. "Every inch of you is to be worshipped."

"I didn't think I'd enjoy being touched there," she admitted between ragged breaths. "But with you, Owen, I do. Very much."

Hearing her confession, feeling her body respond to his touch, sent a wave of pride through him. And a deeper desire. He stood and removed the gown, letting it fall to one side. She watched him disrobe, her eyes touching him in all the places he ached.

Zee stepped toward the bed, but he stopped her. "No, here, in front of the fire." He patted the rug as he kneeled again, so she lay down.

"Roll over on your tummy." When she did, Owen kissed the soft skin behind her knee, moving upward along the inside of her thigh.

A shiver rippled through her, and her breath hitched when his tongue found the

delicate folds between her legs.

He savored the taste of her, the sweetness mingling with the musk of her desire, his mouth worshiping her with every flick and lap.

“Your tongue is delightful,” she said with a sighed, her voice threaded with yearning as his tongue traced a path higher, teasing over her wicked opening, eliciting a gasp that reverberated straight to his core. It was in that sharp intake of breath that he felt his control slipping.

He remembered the oil he’d brought and fetched the small vial from his pocket. “Lift your hips for me, love,” he instructed gently, helping her rise to her knees.

Uncapping the bottle, he poured the slick substance onto his fingers, warming it before returning his attention to the place he’d just worshipped with his mouth.

With deliberate care, he massaged the oil into her, while his other hand ventured to where her desire pooled.

His lips met her clitoris, his tongue thrusting in her wet sheath in mimicry of what was to come, building her pleasure even as he prepared her for their union.

He felt her tremble under the dual sensations. “You’re exquisite, my love. Every part of you sings to me.”

She arched her back, pushing against the fingers that explored her most intimate places. A gasp escaped her lips, transforming into a moan of pleasure as Owen’s skilled touch coaxed her body into a state of blissful surrender.

When he couldn’t stand being outside her any longer, he pressed his arousal against her, then eased into her welcoming heat. The passion that had simmered inside him

now ignited, burning fiercely as he moved within her.

Her body responded to him, tightening around his length. Her breath hitched in her throat, her senses consumed by the man who filled her so completely.

“Zee, love, you’re so tight... so perfect.”

The waves of her climax crashed against him, her inner muscles clenching around him in a vice-like grasp that threatened to undo him.

His name fell from her lips like a benediction, urging him on until he too came.

With a final, deep thrust, he spilled himself inside her, their bodies trembling together through the aftershocks of their shared release.

When he could move again, he wrapped an arm around Zee’s waist and helped her lie down, as he cuddled around her, still inside her. He stroked over her stomach slowly, then cupped her breast, enjoying the feel of her against him, in his arms.

He realized this was a moment where Simon would crow about Zee’s beauty, calling her his wife, which she was. Owen wished for a moment he could claim that right, but he must be grateful he was allowed to share in her life.

Eventually, he withdrew from her warm passage and washed them both before offering her his hand. “Do you wish for food or sleep?”

“What if I said neither? I wish to lie with you, listen to you talk about your day. I want to hear your dreams and where I fit into them.” Her smile had a touch of sadness as she stood and wrapped her arms around him. “I want to be as husband and wife.”

His breath hitched. “As do I, Zee. Did I do wrong by not fighting for you?”

She pulled him still closer, pressing her face against his muscular chest. “You thought of me, not yourself, and gave me the gift of both of you. For that, I am forever grateful.”

He smiled. “I’m glad.”

Together, they climbed into bed, their bodies finding the comfort of nearness as they settled close. Owen sighed, resting his hand on her belly once again. Then he told her about his day.

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The next day, Owen stayed at the manor house and pretended to be the man of the house. He leaned over the billiard table, working to improve his shots so he might beat Simon more often. Zee sat perched on the edge of a nearby chair, her eyes twinkling with mirth as she watched him.

“Tongues must be wagging, since I’ve been alone with you all day,” Owen said.

She dismissed his concern with a wave of her hand. “Our discretion has been enough thus far. You spend so many evenings here, and most Sundays, so the servants are used to seeing you. And we’ve been careful not to display any affection where we might be observed.”

He straightened, eyeing her with an affectionate smirk. “Would it be too scandalous if I were to ravish you atop this table?” He didn’t ask if Simon had done so already.

Zee burst into laughter, then looked thoughtful. “I wonder if the door has a lock.”

He straightened from his shot, missing the ball entirely, but not caring in the least as her infectious laughter filled the room. Holding up the cue, he worked it up and down through cupped fingers, leering. “This could stand in for Simon, so you’d be filled to your satisfaction.”

Xenia’s laughter only deepened, a warm flush spreading across her cheeks. She eyed the billiard cue, then met his gaze with a saucy tilt of her head. “I could never tolerate such a cock. Yours is as large as any I’d ever want.”

His cock enjoyed her answer and thickened slightly. He leaned the cue against the

table and approached her. “Is that so?” He reached out to trace the back of his hand along the curve of her jaw. Their eyes locked, the rest of the world fading away as he bent down and kissed her.

He put his heart into the kiss, hoping to express how much he loved her rather than seducing her.

There was always time for seduction. Love was more important and just as hard to show her without being observed.

Just to be sure, he spoke before going back to the table and taking up his cue. “I love you, Zee.”

“I love you too, Owen.”

He made another shot, sending a ball cracking into a corner pocket. “It’s hard, Zee. Being so close to you and having to pretend there’s nothing between us.”

Her features softened with understanding. “I know, my love. But it’s the price we pay for this arrangement.”

He nodded, pushing down the familiar ache of longing. He focused instead on lining up his next shot, the familiar motions grounding him. As he leaned over the table, he couldn’t help but imagine Zee pressed against the green felt, her dark hair spilling loose from its pins...

He shook his head, banishing the thought. “You’re right, of course. And it’s worth the price to be with you like this. Even if only in stolen moments.”

Zee’s nimble fingers worked deftly at her needlework.

She looked every part the viscountess, a lady of leisure.

Having servants and fine possessions were some of the reasons that made it easier for him to agree to Simon being the lucky man to marry her.

He couldn't provide those things for her.

He had a woman who cleaned weekly, but he cooked for himself.

Straightening, Owen cleared his throat. "I was surprised when Simon encouraged me to spend more time here while he's away. He said he didn't want you to be lonely."

Her fingers stilled, her eyes meeting his. "Did he? That's kind of him."

He nodded, leaning against his cue. "Aye, it is. Especially given how possessive he's been of late."

She sighed, setting aside her needlework. "I've noticed that too. It's... concerning. How do you tolerate it, Owen? The other night, after we'd all... well, you know. He kept calling me his wife, over and over." She bit her lip, a habit Owen found endearing.

His jaw clenched, remembering the night in question. He took a deep breath, considering his response. "It's challenging, but I understand Simon's fears. He loves deeply, that one."

"As do you. I just worry. This arrangement of ours, it's delicate. I couldn't bear to lose either of you," she said softly, her eyes filled with warmth.

Owen set down his cue and crossed the space to her again. He kneeled before her, taking her small hands in his. "You won't lose me, Zee. Ever. I may not have

Simon's title or wealth, but what I have—my heart, my love—it's yours. Always."

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. "How do you do it? How do you bear Simon's possessiveness with such grace?"

His thumb traced gentle circles on the back of her hand. "It's not always easy. But I made a choice, Zee. A choice to love you, to be with you, even if it means sharing you with him. And that choice... it's worth every moment of difficulty."

She leaned forward, pressing her forehead against his. "You're a better man than most, Owen Bishop. I don't know what I'd do without you. Your strength, your unwavering support... it means everything to me."

His heart swelled at her words. He cupped her face gently, his rough hands a stark contrast to her soft skin. "And you, my love, are worth every sacrifice. Your happiness matters most to me."

Zee's lips curved into a tender smile. "I am truly blessed to have not just one, but two men who love me so deeply. But Owen, your presence in my life... it brings a joy I never thought possible."

There were some aspects that hadn't been easy to accept, but he had, for her sake. "I've made my peace with our arrangement. Even if it means being 'Uncle Bishop' to our children someday."

Her eyes widened, a mix of surprise and concern flashing across her face. "But Owen, how can you bear the thought of not being recognized as their father? Surely it must pain you."

Owen's lips quirked into a small, thoughtful smile. He lowered his hands to clasp hers, his thumbs brushing over her knuckles. "Of course, there's a part of me that

aches at the idea. But being a father isn't just about blood or titles. It's about love, guidance, and being there."

He paused, his gaze never leaving hers. "I may not be called 'Father,' but I'll be there for every skinned knee, every triumph, every heartache."

"But is that truly enough for you? To be in the shadows, always the uncle, never the father? I would understand if one day you decide to marry another woman."

He shook his head. "Just imagine, Zee. I'll be the one to teach them how to fish at our spot by the river. I can see it now—little ones with your sparkling blue eyes, squealing with delight as they reel in their first catch."

He chuckled softly, his hands gesturing as he painted the scene. "And come Christmastide, I'll be the uncle who showers them with presents. Maybe a wooden rocking horse I've crafted myself, or tiny tools for the curious ones."

She reached out, running her fingers along his muscular forearm. "Oh, Owen. You make it all sound so wonderful. I can scarcely imagine how dull my life would be without you in it."

She paused, her eyes meeting his. "You bring such joy and excitement to each day. Even now, in this quiet moment, just being here with you makes everything brighter."

He grinned, pulling her closer. "Is that so, my dear? And here I thought it was your radiant presence lighting up my dreary existence as a humble blacksmith."

Her light laughter rang out. "Hardly dreary, you great fool. You're the talk of every single woman in Kinnerton with those powerful arms of yours."

"Ah, but there's only one woman whose opinion I care about," Owen murmured, his

voice low and husky as he leaned in closer.

Her breath caught as his hand cupped her cheek. “You’re so much more than just your physical strength. Though I must admit, those muscular arms of yours are quite... distracting. You really should wear a coat more often in consideration of our weak constitutions.”

He chuckled.

She placed her hand over his. “But it’s your emotional strength that truly amazes me. The way you handle this... unconventional arrangement we have, with such grace and understanding. I don’t know how you do it.”

“It’s not always easy,” he admitted, his voice low and earnest. “But you’re worth it, Zee. Every moment with you is precious to me.”

Tears pooled in her eyes, and she blinked hard.

“You’re the cornerstone of this relationship, Owen.

Without your strength—both physical and emotional—I don’t know where Simon and I would be.

You hold us together. I’m so grateful to have you, for everything you are.

You’re not just the man I love, you’re my rock, my anchor in this storm of life. ”

His arms encircled her, pulling her close. “And you, my dear, are the light that guides me home.”

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When Simon stepped out of his carriage into the cool evening air upon his return, there she was—Xenia, his wife, the beacon of warmth in his world. Her eyes sparkled with delight upon seeing him, an emotion he mirrored tenfold.

He wrapped her in a hug he hated to end. “How I’ve longed for this moment.”

She offered him a playful smirk as she tilted her head in feigned innocence. “And what moment is that, my lord?”

“To bed you,” he confessed without hesitation, his voice a deep rumble of contained desire. “But alas, we mustn’t give the staff fodder for their whispers, so I can’t take you here beside the carriage.” His fingers brushed lightly up her spine, making her shiver.

“Then we shall go somewhere more private,” Xenia suggested, her eyes alight with mischief. She took his hand, leading him away from the prying eyes of their household servants.

They slipped into the study, the door clicking shut behind them. In an instant, Simon’s hands were upon her, his lips claiming hers with a fervor borne of longing. He drew back just enough to look at her, his gaze tracing the lines of her face before descending to the décolletage of her gown.

“Forgive me, I can’t go slowly.” Tender yet insistent, his fingers worked at freeing her breasts from the confines of her gown. The cool air of the study mingled with the heat of his mouth as he lavished attention upon her, drawing a gasp from her lips.

In between love bites, he asked, “Did Owen touch you like this while I was gone?”

He regretted the words as he felt her go rigid. Her hands shot out and pressed against Simon’s broad chest. She pushed, and he stumbled back. With trembling fingers, she righted the fabric of her gown, her cheeks flushed not just with desire but with a flare of anger.

“Simon, what happens in my private moments with either you or Owen is exactly that—private.” Her eyes blazed as she held his gaze, daring him to challenge her.

“I do not speak to Owen of your intimacies, nor shall I recount his to you. You’ve welcomed this arrangement into our marriage, so you will respect its sanctity. ”

The air was thick with unspoken words and tension as they made their way to the drawing room. Simon took his usual seat, unfolding the newspaper with a crisp snap, hiding behind the printed words as though they could shield him from the discomfort of the situation.

Xenia picked up her needlework and stitched in silence.

The quiet of the room was broken a bit later when the butler announced, “Mr. Bishop is here to see you, my lord.”

“Send him in, and have another place set at the dining table.” Simon said. His presence couldn’t make the room feel any colder.

“Owen!” Xenia exclaimed, her voice filled with what sounded too much like relief.

“I thought you weren’t due back until tomorrow, Simon,” Owen said with a hint of apology in his tone. “I’ll just head home then.”

“Stay,” Simon said with uncharacteristic haste. “We’d enjoy your company.”

Owen hesitated, glancing between husband and wife, as if sensing the undercurrent of tension. Then, with a nod, he accepted the invitation.

“Good. How about a game of billiards?” Simon rose, folding his newspaper with deliberate care.

In the billiard room, the click of ivory balls filled the air as Simon took his shot, leaning over the table. Owen appeared thoughtful as he observed Simon lining up his next play.

“How was Xenia while I was gone?” Simon asked suddenly, his voice low, almost hesitant. “Did you take her in every room in the house?”

Owen folded his arms across his chest. “You know I can’t answer that, Simon. What happens when I’m alone with her is private.”

Simon released a sigh, the weight of it carrying more than just air. His shoulders slumped ever so slightly as he nodded. “Of course. My apologies, Owen. It’s... been a difficult return.”

“Did your grandfather recover?” Owen asked.

Simon steadied his cue and aimed for the side pocket. The cue ball rolled with a purpose, striking the striped one and sinking it with a satisfying clunk. He straightened, feeling Owen’s eyes on him.

“Yes, he is well. My presence wasn’t required, I discovered, but I’m his only family remaining, so I felt I should stay.”

He took his next shot, but missed. “My troubles are of my own making. I didn’t realize how fierce this... jealousy would grow. The thought of you with her while I was away—it gnawed at me.”

After missing his own shot, Owen leaned against the billiard table, arms crossed over his chest. “Now you see what it’s like for me most days. You’re not alone in that feeling.”

Simon took longer to choose his next move as he processed Owen’s words, his mind grappling with empathy and jealousy intertwined. A silence ensued, filled only by the soft rustle of fabric as he shifted his stance.

“Take your shot,” suggested Owen, breaking the stillness.

As the game went on, the tension slowly dissolved. They moved around the table, each man cloaked in his own reverie. Simon fought to shake off his mood. He was home now, and Xenia was here. That was all that mattered.

* * *

Xenia’s fingers paused mid-stitch as the sound of footsteps approached, heralding the end of the billiards game.

She set her needlework aside on the small, polished table next to her, smoothing the delicate fabric with a tentative smile.

She wasn’t certain what she expected—her men to be jovial once again, or sporting black eyes.

The two entered the drawing room, their expressions betraying no signs of discord. A silent relief washed over her.

She observed them, her eyes flickering between Simon and Owen, searching for any hint of strain, but found none.

“Good evening, Xenia,” Owen said. “I’m not certain I greeted you when I arrived.”

“Did your game go well?” she inquired. She refrained from asking who won, to keep from stirring up more uneasiness.

Simon grunted in affirmation. “I’m satisfied with the result. We’ve reached a gentleman’s understanding.”

Her heart skipped at his words, hopeful yet cautious. What if the very arrangement she cherished was now at risk? The thought that Simon might revoke his consent and send Owen away clawed at her insides with sharp, unwelcome talons.

But she remained silent, her outward composure a carefully constructed facade. If Simon proposed to end their unconventional triangle, she would not allow it to happen without making her own desires known. The love she held for both men was not a fleeting fancy.

For now, she simply watched them, the lines of tension around Simon’s eyes softer as he settled into his chair. Her gaze lingered on him until he caught her staring. A small, enigmatic smile played on his lips as he returned his attention to the newspaper.

Owen, meanwhile, took a seat opposite her, appearing much more relaxed than Simon. He maintained small talk with Xenia, which continued during their meal. Simon kept to himself while sitting with them in the drawing room after they dined.

Unable to stop herself, Xenia yawned.

Owen was quick to respond. “Zee, are you ready to retire?”

Her heart fluttered as she glanced at Simon, searching his face for any sign of what he might be feeling. His features were an unreadable mask, but his eyes held a glimmer that spoke volumes. With the slightest nod, almost imperceptible, he gave his silent agreement. It was all she needed.

Rising from her chair, Xenia folded her needlework and lay it aside. The three of them moved through the familiar space of the drawing room, Simon extinguishing the candles as they went. Without uttering a word, they began their ascent upstairs.

Simon trailed behind Xenia, close enough that she could feel the heat emanating from his body.

Her breath caught as she felt a sudden pinch at her bottom, a playful yet intimate gesture that sent a jolt of surprise through her.

A squeak escaped her lips before she could stifle it. The sound seemed to hang in the air.

She turned her head, peering over her shoulder at Simon. His expression was one of mischief and tenderness intertwined, the corners of his mouth turned up in a smile that reached his eyes. The gesture, though unexpected, was a silent message—a reassurance of his love and desire.

“Careful now. We wouldn’t want to cause a scandal here in our own home,” she said.

She turned forward once more, continuing to climb the stairs with a newfound warmth blossoming in her chest. Simon’s playful touch had ignited something within her, a spark that promised the night would hold more than just sleep.

Her surprise when they reached the bedchamber couldn't have been greater. She turned her back to Owen, who stood nearest, to help her undress, and Simon stayed near the door. Something in his quiet manner made her look his way.

"I'm going to sleep in Owen's chamber tonight," Simon announced.

She frowned and turned to Owen to see if this was by prearrangement. Not seeing her answer on Owen's face, she asked, "Are you feeling unwell? Shall I ring for a posset for you?"

"There's no need." He looked away but didn't move to leave.

She wanted to go to him, to ease whatever burden strained his comfort, for clearly he was uncomfortable again.

Simon put his hands on his hips. "I know my actions aren't always the most gracious. It was my suggestion that we could enjoy a sort of marriage with all three of us taking part."

Her heart stopped. Was he going to put an end to what they shared?

"I thought I was a big enough man to accept that I'm not the only man Xenia holds in her heart.

I've failed horribly. The jealousy that plagues me is unbearable at times.

" He raked a hand through his hair, again breaking eye contact with them.

"I don't understand how I become aroused by watching the two of you in bed, then feel the need to make clear she's legally mine alone. "

“I would have the same problem, Simon,” Owen confessed.

Xenia felt as if her world was collapsing. “Do you wish to make changes?”

“Yes. I’m fighting to be better about this, because I know how important Owen is to you, my love.

I’ve decided to step aside occasionally and let the two of you spend a night together without me.

This feels like an addiction I must conquer, the need to keep you to myself.

The best way to fight an addiction is to turn away from temptation. ”

Panic hit her and she rushed to Simon, wrapping her arms around him, burying her face in his chest. “I cannot bear losing you.”

He patted her hair and planted a kiss on her head. “You’ll never lose me, love. I’m talking about one night here or there where it can be like I was away. You and I have nights alone every week, and are free to enjoy each other’s company throughout the day while Owen works.”

“But you’ve just returned,” she said, searching his eyes for reassurance she didn’t see.

“There’s never a better time to make changes than now.” Simon looked at Owen. “I can’t promise how often I’ll offer you this boon.”

“I understand,” Owen said.

Grasping Xenia’s arms, Simon urged her away from him, and kissed her so thoroughly she was gasping for breath. “I love you, Xenia. I will see you at

breakfast.”

With that, he left her alone with Owen.

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Owen could scarcely believe the sight before him.

Zee stood rooted to the spot, her gaze fixed on the closed bedroom door through which Simon had just vanished.

The confusion etched into the crease of her brow was profound—mirroring the very disbelief that gripped Owen's own heart.

Her delicate hands, usually steady with her confident nature, now trembled like autumn leaves on the cusp of surrendering to the wind.

She drew a sharp breath, and it hitched in her throat, a sign of the emotional storm Simon's abrupt departure had conjured within her. Owen's chest tightened at the sight of her distress, an instinctual urge to protect and comfort her surging forth.

He went to her. Without a word, he enveloped her in a hug, his arms wrapping around her trembling form.

He felt her stiffen for a moment before relaxing against him, her tension ebbing away as she accepted his silent offer of solace.

"Come now, let's get you to bed." His words were gentle, meant to soothe and encourage, but also to remind her they were still together, even without Simon.

She nodded against his chest. He coaxed her away from the door, leading her toward the sanctuary of the bed they often shared—tonight, just the two of them.

When she made no move to undress, he loosened her gown himself. She lifted her arms slightly, letting him take off the gown and chemise.

“Would you like a nightgown?” he asked.

Her lips parted, but no sound emerged. A subtle shake of her head conveyed her answer.

He guided her to the dressing table and helped her sit.

Carefully, he removed the pins from her hair and began to brush it.

Each stroke was measured, more concerned with calming her than removing tangles.

He'd taken up brushing it at night while Simon was away, and he enjoyed the domestic feeling it gave him.

Slowly, her shoulders relaxed, the tremble in her hands ceased, and her eyes fluttered closed under the spell of his ministrations.

As he brushed, Owen's mind waged a silent battle.

Gratitude for the unexpected gift of privacy with Zee warred with frustration toward Simon's abrupt departure.

It was an odd ache in his chest, this duality of emotions.

His heart thrummed with the joy of having her to himself, yet that joy carried the guilt of relishing something born from Simon's pain.

Even now, with the warmth of her body so close, with the intimacy of their actions

painting a tender portrait in the mirror, his thoughts were haunted by Simon's troubled gaze. Could he truly enjoy these stolen moments, knowing they came at someone else's pain?

The love he held for both Zee and Simon was no simple affair.

It was carved from years of shared laughter and whispered dreams, from the pact made in boyhood, and the desires that bloomed in its wake.

And yet, here he was, caught between his longing and his loyalty, cherishing the touch of Zee's bare skin while yearning for Simon to understand that their hearts could be vast enough for all.

With each stroke of the brush, Owen wove his concern into care, his frustration into tenderness, hoping that by morning, the knots in their relationship would be as smooth as the locks now flowing freely through his fingers.

Zee's breath hitched, a fragile sound that tugged at Owen's heart. Her hands twisted together, the knuckles white. "Owen, how can this last? We belong to each other, yes, but Simon... he's not here. And when he is, I expect him to make the moment uncomfortable at any time."

Her eyes, wide and shimmering with unshed tears, darted away from his gaze. The sight of her so fraught with uncertainty sent a pang through him, sharp and urgent.

He pulled her back against him, wrapping an arm around her breastbone. Gently, he captured one of her hands, stopping its nervous dance. He held it firmly. "Look at me, Zee."

When her eyes met his in the mirror, he continued with quiet conviction.

“I’m here because I choose to be, for both of you.

Simon’s heart is vast, even if his fears are sometimes greater.

We must be patient, love.” His thumb caressed the soft skin of her inner wrist. “Our happiness, this bond we share, it’s worth every effort to keep the harmony. ”

Zee’s hand trembled within his, but she nodded, a slight movement that gave him hope.

Her head pressed back into him and she drew in a breath. “I hope you’re right, Owen.”

He led her to the bed, and as she lay down, he undressed and joined her. He wasn’t ready to put out the candles, but he couldn’t say if that was to allow him to see Zee as he loved her, or so she’d know it was him, not Simon, touching her.

In that, he was no better than Simon.

The candlelight danced across her curvaceous form, casting shadows that played hide and seek with her most intimate contours. He leaned forward, pressing his lips against the valley between her breasts, tasting the salt of her skin.

Her fingers wove into his hair, guiding him closer as if she could merge his very essence with her own. She urged him up to kiss her, which he gladly did, the gentle touch quickly turning wild as her tongue pressed into his mouth. He met her thrust for thrust until she broke away, gasping for air.

His mouth trailed lower, finding the softness of her belly, the dip of her navel, the rise of her hips. He sought to comfort her in their caresses, to bring her the pleasure she deserved.

“Owen,” she gasped when he moved to lie between her thighs.

“Shh, love,” he whispered against the tender skin of her inner thigh. “Let me cherish you.”

And he did. With every stroke and touch, he worshipped her with a fervor that spilled forth from his soul. She wasn’t to be denied, however, and pulled him up so his cock nestled against her wet heat.

He moaned as he entered her slowly, feeling the heat and the tightness that welcomed him home.

This was love in its purest form—gentle yet passionate, slow yet inevitable.

They moved together, finding a rhythm that belonged only to them, a rhythm that spoke of yesterday’s vows and tomorrow’s promises.

Owen held onto her, to this moment, to the woman who had captured his soul, knowing that nothing would ever be the same again.

In the aftermath of their passion, they lay entangled, the soft panting of their breaths the only testimony to the tempest that had raged moments before.

He brushed a lock of hair from Zee’s forehead, his gaze lingering on her flushed cheeks, the blue of her eyes darkened by the depths of their intimacy.

She lay against him, the rise and fall of her chest a slow, steady rhythm now. He watched her, his fingers skating over the softness of her skin, the delicate fabric of reality settling around them once more.

“Is it always to be this way?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Always,” Owen said, his heart echoing the certainty of his words.

The contentment that swathed him was as comforting as the coverlet they shared, though a nagging whisper of concern for Simon’s response threaded through his thoughts.

“With me. With Simon. With us. We’ll always make it this way for you. ”

Zee nestled closer, seeking the warmth of his chest. Her breathing slowed, syncing with his own, a gentle rhythm that lulled them toward restful slumber. His arms tightened around her, a shield against the doubts that dared disturb their serenity.

He could feel the steady beat of her heart beneath his palm, a tempo that matched his own. It was a comfort that eased the edges of his worry for Simon’s sensibilities. Surely, their friendship, the love they both held for Zee, would weather this tempest.

As sleep beckoned, Owen allowed himself to surrender to the tranquility of the moment, to the softness of Zee’s breath against his arm. Tomorrow would come with its challenges, but for now, there was only the quiet assurance of their embrace.

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Simon walked into the breakfast room with an ease in his gait that had been absent only a day prior. He felt refreshed, much like when he, Xenia, and Owen first spent a night together. And yet, by his own choice, he'd slept in the next room while they shared his bedchamber.

"Good morning, lovely wife," he greeted with a warm smile when he saw her already at the table.

"Good morning." She rose from her chair and came around the table to kiss him. "You seem in good spirits today."

"Indeed, I am," he admitted. "The day promises to be quite splendid."

As they conversed over breakfast, Simon's laughter mixed with Xenia's more easily than it had in recent memory. He was careful to steer their banter clear of any topic that might lead back to the previous night's events, focusing instead on the simpler pleasures of the day ahead.

After their meal, he suggested they take a ride in his curricule.

Side by side they sat, shoulders occasionally brushing, as Simon held the reins with practiced ease.

As they approached a familiar bend in the river, Simon slowed the horses to a gentle trot.

"It seems a lifetime since we last fished."

Xenia turned toward him, her expression bright. “I miss those times.”

“Those were indeed joyous times.” His gaze lingered on the spot where he’d first kissed Xenia. First kiss, first fuck. He felt a stirring within him, recalling the brazenness with which she’d revealed her charms and encouraged them to satisfy her.

She caught his gaze, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Why not go fishing again sometime soon?”

He licked his lips and adjusted his cock, which thought now was a good time to stop. “As much as the idea enchants me, it would be too tempting to make love to you. Someone might see us.”

She didn’t argue, but her hand rested on his thigh, awfully close to his semi-hard staff.

He missed being naked with her in the sunlight, though. “There must be a secluded spot on our property. A private place where we can be free to spend some time under the rays of the sun, unseen by prying eyes.”

A smile curved Xenia’s lips, and she nodded. “I’d like that.”

* * *

In early spring, Xenia awoke in a room suffused with the soft daylight of early morning, her body entwined with Owen’s.

She lay there for a moment, recalling the passion they’d shared the prior night—one of their private nights, just the two of them—feeling the rise and fall of his chest against her back.

She reflected on the journey of their relationship, how Simon had grown in his understanding and acceptance.

His fits of jealousy that had threatened to fracture the bond between the three of them were replaced with a remarkable restraint.

Indeed, Simon's love had deepened, become something more trusting and secure.

After worrying about their marriage for so long, she was relieved to have put that behind them.

Turning her head, she met Owen's sleepy gaze and smiled. There was contentment here, in the quiet moments before the day began. Simon's growth allowed them this peace, this space to explore the depth of their feelings without fear or doubt.

Their plan for the day was for Simon to show them the dower house he'd purchased.

The building was one of the grandest examples of his love for her, because it meant she'd have a home should Simon die before her.

It wasn't entailed with the title, so if she failed to produce a son, she needn't fear it could be taken away.

When they visited the house, Simon led Xenia inside, his hand resting lightly at the small of her back.

Owen followed. Sunlight filtered through the dusty windows, casting the room in a golden hue that revealed the years of disuse.

Furniture shrouded in white linen stood like silent sentinels, waiting for life to return and animate their stoic forms.

“We’ll hire servants and have it livable in no time.” Simon’s voice echoed softly in the high-ceilinged space.

Xenia wandered through the rooms, her fingertips grazing the dust covers. “It’s quite large. Owen should be very comfortable here.” She offered Owen a teasing grin, knowing he had no intention of sleeping anywhere other than the manor house now, except to give Simon and Xenia some time alone.

Owen nodded thoughtfully, his hair catching the light as he tilted his head. “A sound strategy, Simon, to say I’m living here. With no houses between this and the manor house, there’s no one to see me leave for work in the morning.”

“Exactly,” Simon affirmed. “It’s about being prudent. We must think ahead, plan for every possible outcome.”

As she looked about, Xenia realized that one day she and Owen might share the house. If Owen outlived Simon, he and she could marry. She shook off the thought. She hoped to be old and grey and a great-grandmother before either man died.

Simon had a smile that reached his eyes, a sight more and more common now. He drew Xenia closer, his hand finding hers and squeezing gently. “Do you like your house, Xenia?”

“Immensely. You think of everything. I’m grateful to you, and so happy to have married you.

” She hesitated for a moment before catching Owen’s eye, not wanting to take anything away from Simon’s generosity.

“I’m grateful to you, as well. You’ve given up much to satisfy my selfish needs.

Not materially, but in the enormous concessions you've made. Thank you to you both."

Rather than becoming petty, Simon said, "We're the lucky ones, Xenia. We have your love."

* * *

That night, Xenia watched as the two men, her dearest companions since childhood, stood at opposing ends of the bedchamber while she sat between them on the edge of their bed.

The air was thick with an unspoken tension that she found erotic.

She didn't think they were undressing for her entertainment, but entertained she was.

She hadn't decided if she would remove her own clothing or let them do it for her. The fact that she wasn't tearing at either her clothes or theirs showed tonight wasn't going to be a wild ravishment of each other, but a slow celebration of the joy they could bring to each other through touch.

"Wife, do you not plan to join us in bed?" Simon asked as he hung his coat on a hook.

"Yes, wife," Owen echoed. "Why are you still dressed?"

She sighed, trying to hide her smile and failing miserably. "I fear I might miss the entertainment you two are providing."

"She is entertained," Owen said, meeting Simon's gaze.

“We could entertain her further...”

As if they read each other's minds, the two men rushed to her and took off her garments in a mad dash. She laughed as if she was being tickled, as they tumbled her about in their haste to have her nude.

“What is this? Have we found a naked sylph?” Owen asked, lifting her into his arms and holding her out to Simon like a rag doll.

“Let me see...” Simon suckled her breast while running a hand up her inner thigh, where he discovered how aroused she was. He licked his fingers, smacking his lips. “Yes, she definitely tastes like a sylph. What shall we do with her?”

Owen tossed her onto the mattress. “I'm uncertain taste alone can tell us if she's sylph, rather than fae, or sidhe. We should examine her further.”

They turned to look at her. Abandoning their disrobing, they crawled up the mattress like predatory animals.

She giggled and scooted back. “What do you mean, examine?”

Simon grabbed her foot and studied it closely, then sucked her big toe. “We must scour every inch of you, of course.”

Owen picked up Simon's discarded neckcloth, wrapping it around his hands. “But first we must make certain she cannot escape.” He clasped her other foot in one hand and wrapped the cloth around her ankle, tying the ends to a bedpost.

“Oh, good idea.” Simon's laughter was wicked. He picked up her stockings and tossed one to Owen, using the other to tie her free leg to the bed.

As Owen took care of one arm, he asked, “What else can we use? I don’t wear a neckcloth.”

Meeting Xenia’s gaze, Simon was thoughtful for a moment, then reached for the buttons on his fall. “I believe we can distract her from wanting to escape.” Freeing his cock, he scooted closer to her and placed her hand on his erection.

She didn’t wait for orders. She circled his width and stroked slowly.

“That’s a good little sylph,” Simon said softly.

When he spoke that way, her body always grew warm, and tonight was no exception. Her clitoris wanted attention. She was too curious about their game to ask, though, and was content to see how they planned to “examine” her.

Owen leaned down to kiss her, his lips crashing against hers with an intensity that stole her breath away. The playful banter stopped, replaced by a fervor that spoke volumes of his arousal. His hands cradled her face tenderly as he wove his fingers through the tresses of her hair.

The kiss deepened, and Xenia felt as if she were melting.

The laughter that had just filled her ebbed away, replaced by the burgeoning flame of desire.

Owen’s mouth moved over hers with a passionate urgency that told her he was just as lost in the moment as she was.

It wasn’t just a kiss. It was a silent vow, an unyielding promise to cherish every part of her.

Her hand continued to move on Simon, who watched as he kneeled at her side.

His fingertips grazed the skin of her torso, feather-light touches that trailed along the column of her neck before finding the soft fullness of her breasts.

She shivered under his touch, anticipation building as he cupped her flesh, weighing it in his hands with a reverence that only Simon could convey.

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Then, his lips latched onto her, drawing the peak into the heat of his mouth, and she gasped, arching into him.

The sharp sensation of his teeth grazing her sensitive buds sent jolts of pleasure straight to her core, causing her to rock her hips in search of more contact, more of that exquisite pain mingling with the heady pleasure.

Each nip was a spark igniting deeper fires within her, each suckle a wave washing over her senses, leaving her drowning in the myriad sensations that only these two men could evoke.

Simon's eyes flickered up to meet hers, the quiet intensity within them promising more—more pleasure, more pain, more of everything she craved.

After fetching the oil from the dressing table, Owen crawled between her legs, still tied and spread wide.

His breath was a warm whisper against the tender skin of her inner thigh, an anticipatory shiver cascading down her spine as he traced the softness there with reverence.

His eyes, usually so full of mischief and challenge, now bore into her with a gaze that was hot and intense, his purpose clear.

“Ready for more, love?” His voice was a roughened murmur, vibrations tickling her flesh before his lips pressed closer, finding the sensitive inner folds that yearned for his touch.

With the gentle scrape of teeth against her most intimate place, Xenia couldn't suppress the moan that rose from the depths of her being.

The light graze was both a tease and a promise, and when Owen's tongue delved deep, she felt herself unraveling under the expert caress.

His tongue moved with precision, crafting sensations that heated her blood and bent her will to his skilled manipulation.

Each flick and thrust mirrored the rhythm of her hand on Simon's cock.

She pulled against her bindings, wanting to wrap her legs around him but forced to remain displayed as they wanted her.

Her body tensed as the waves built higher within her, each lap of his tongue stoking the fire until it roared out of control.

"Owen," she gasped, her hips lifting off the bed, seeking even more of his mouth's sweet torture.

She teetered on the edge of pleasure, and with one final, languorous lick, she tumbled over into bliss.

Her climax shattered through her like delicate glass meeting the hard floor of reality, fragments of ecstasy scattering and piercing every nerve ending with light.

As her body quivered in the aftermath, Owen applied the oil to her. The sensation of his finger entering there sent a fresh wave of release through her.

Owen looked at Simon, stroking her with two fingers as he spoke. "You or me?"

Simon had watched her come and his cock was ready. “Me.” Without removing his pants, he slipped beneath Xenia, so she lay on her back on top of him. He aligned his erection, and she felt him slide into her.

She moaned at the feeling of Simon filling her, knowing her limbs were splayed, allowing Owen to see their joining in extreme detail. And Owen looked. He watched as his friend pushed deeper in small stages.

Reaching around from beneath her, Simon caressed her breasts with one hand and dipped two fingers into her moisture with the other. “She’s ready for you, Owen. Look at how wet she is.”

Owen spread her folds, licking his lips as he watched Simon delve into her.

Xenia lifted her head to see what Owen was doing. Would he lick her more? Would he fuck her? “I want you inside me,” she begged.

“We must always give the lady what she wants, mustn’t we?” Owen said.

“We haven’t determined if she is lady or if she’s fae,” Simon retorted.

“I have just the tool needed for that investigation.”

When she looked down, she saw Owen open his breeches, releasing his glorious cock. She sighed, knowing just where he intended to use it. “Yes, put your tool in me. Be very thorough.”

Simon chuckled. His groan matched the feeling of Owen entering her, and she realized he could feel the extra fullness just as she did.

Her men found a rhythm, a very pleasing beat they pounded into her. Simon’s hands

offered her breasts to Owen's mouth, and she grew wetter still, once again climbing that glorious cliff she hoped to fall off soon.

The dual sensations were overwhelming. She felt both of them in her most sensitive places—the push and pull, the give and take—each movement orchestrated to bring her to the brink of rapture.

She couldn't think of anything but the feel of what they were doing to her. Simon's thrusts became more insistent, each one stoking the fire Owen fanned as he stroked deeper, until all thought dissolved into pure sensation, a crescendo of pleasure that threatened to engulf her entirely.

As Simon's touch traced the curve of her waist, a shudder ran through Xenia. She arched into the dual ministrations, her breath coming in ragged gasps. It was Simon's grunts that broke her, signaling his orgasm. Her hips convulsed, rocking between them, wave after delicious wave cresting.

Owen lasted a bit longer before his seed filled her, his face looking pained. He almost growled with satisfaction. Somehow the sound increased the pleasure she felt.

After moments that stretched into eternity, with the trembling aftershocks of their passion still quivering through her, Simon gently withdrew and rose from the bed. He fetched a cloth and dampened it in the ewer. He returned to Xenia's side and began to wash himself with meticulous attention.

Owen moved to stand at the foot of the bed, his gaze rapt on Xenia as he finished undressing

Simon's hands were gentle as he wiped away the evidence of their shared ecstasy from between her legs. The tender strokes of the cloth were soothing, a balm to the fire that had raged so fiercely within her moments ago.

A now naked Owen asked, "Should we untie her?" His lips were twitching as he fought a smile.

Standing and looking down at her submissive display, Simon smacked his lips. "I don't know. I rather like how she looks. Perhaps we'll want to take her again shortly."

They both laughed.

Xenia tugged with both legs and the restrained arm. "I'm cold. Someone free me, please."

"We could free you.... or we could warm you." Owen trailed a hand up her calf.

Xenia bit her lower lip and closed her eyes with a moan. Her body was still overly sensitive.

Giving in to a chuckle, Owen loosened the cravat binding her leg and examined the skin before moving to her arm. Simon freed the other leg. Xenia rubbed her wrist, drawing her knees up as she watched Simon undress.

Owen planted a kiss on her wrist. "If you find you like being bound, we should look for silk next time. Less chance of injuring your delicate skin."

She wasn't certain how she felt about it just yet. Not being able to touch her men while they loved her was frustrating, yet being completely at their mercy gave her an unusual thrill. But now she was tired and sated and ready for sleep.

Xenia melted into a languid peace as she lay enveloped in the warmth of Owen's and Simon's bodies. She turned her head to look at each of them, their features softened by satisfaction and the dim light of the hearth. "There's no question about it. It takes

both of you to satisfy me.”

Simon’s lips quirked into a half-smile, his eyes alight with a joy that made her heart swell. “Then we shall never question it again,” he agreed, his hand finding hers and giving it a gentle squeeze.

Owen chuckled, the rumble vibrating against her side. He leaned over and brushed his lips against hers, a kiss featherlight but brimming with promise. “We are yours, Zee, in every way that counts.”

Simon joined the tender ritual, his kiss a lingering touch on her forehead. “Indeed, in pleasure and in love.”

Their laughter mingled, low and content, filling the room with a harmony that spoke of intimacies far beyond the physical.

As they settled into the bed, the boundaries of their bodies blurred, three becoming one in the afterglow of their union.

Xenia, nestled between them, knew a rapturous serenity that Simon and Owen were hers, husbands and lovers for eternity.

* * *

I hope you enjoyed Xenia, Owen and Simon’s book!

Keep reading for a sample of Defying the Duke, another story where class differences come into play.

After her father’s death, Dinah takes over bookkeeping duties at the scandalous gentleman’s club, Tantalous.

When one of the owners, the Duke of Abingdon, rescues her from potential assault, he insists on becoming her protector when she's at the club.

But can he protect her from his own wicked desires?

Or, read the book now .

London

The numbers didn't add up.

With an unbridled yawn and stretch of her arms, Dinah Westfall turned back to the first page in her father's last ledger and once again began to calculate the figures written in her father's shaky script.

She knew his handwriting well enough to be sure she read the numerals correctly and was confident enough in her mathematics to believe her totals were correct, but the ledger in question belonged to the exclusive club, Sutcliffe's, and the figures had to be accurate.

Not only did her position as bookkeeper depend on accuracy, her father's reputation was all she and her sister had left of him.

In the year before he died, she'd noticed his mental sharpness was slipping, though.

Not enough to make her double-check his work, initially, but a noticeable difference in the nightly takings from the gambling tables, in particular, had her questioning why there was such a decrease since Father's death.

None of the three owners had mentioned changes in the number of guests to the club.

The Duke of Dainsfield and the Duke of Nomansland rarely entered the business office when Dinah was working, so she wouldn't have heard anything from them.

The third owner, the Duke of Abingdon, made a point to check in with her weekly—or was he checking up on her work?

No, she shouldn't think like that. He was a good man, the only one of the three to call upon Dinah's grandmother after the funeral to make sure she was coping as well as could be expected over the loss of her son.

Dinah assumed he was the one who'd paid their accounts at the grocer and coal company, although any of the men might have instructed the bills should be paid.

The payments weren't made from the club's account, so she hadn't seen signatures, and when she mentioned it to Abingdon by way of thanks, he'd been non-committal.

After another hour of tabulations, she still hadn't found the answer to the discrepancies, and the shadows in the room were encroaching on the lamplight.

She didn't like to work into the night, as she tried her best to avoid contact with any guests.

No one but employees should be in the basement where her office was, but the later the hour, the greater the likelihood of a drunken loser wandering the back staircase and getting lost.

As the thought passed her mind, she heard a noise from the hallway, making her move a little more quickly to lock up the books and receipts before taking her bonnet and pelisse from the coat rack by the door. Before she could grasp the door handle, it opened, spilling light from the hallway.

A large, dark-haired man jerked to a halt in the doorway. "Oh, forgive me. I didn't know anyone was still here," he said. His manner of speech was elegant, as were the fit of his clothes, leading Dinah to believe him to be a guest, not an employee.

“No one is allowed down here, sir. Can I direct you to the area you sought?” She didn’t ask him why he was there if he expected everyone to be gone.

The sooner she could get him to return upstairs, the better.

She couldn’t make out his features clearly with the light behind him, but she didn’t feel as if she knew him.

He smiled. “Well, now, why hurry away? I’ve nowhere important to be, and you’re a pretty young thing.” His large frame took up most of the doorway, leaving no room for her to pass.

“You aren’t allowed here,” she reiterated. “If you go up one floor and through the doorway, you’ll find the lobby. Any one of several footmen stationed there will help you find the area you seek.”

“I like what I have here,” he said in a low, seductive voice. He reached up and grasped the lock of hair that had fallen across Dinah’s cheek. “So soft. I always expect red hair to be coarse.”

His gaze dipped to her décolletage, and he drew in a breath. Her gown had a modest neckline, but she felt exposed from how his gaze raked over the rounded skin of her upper breasts.

Dinah took a defensive step back, pulling her pelisse closed and crossing her arms over her breasts before he could grasp anything else.

She had to find a way past him, but she was sure he’d read any forward movement on her part as eagerness.

Also, she needed to lock the door behind her—with him on the outside.

While any cash was securely locked up or in the safe, she couldn't risk allowing anyone a chance to be alone in the room.

Aside from money, there were financial records, including a few IOUs accepted by the Duke of Abingdon.

That man had such a soft heart. He'd never succeed in business if it weren't for his partners' frugal and decisive actions.

Nomansland was brilliant with marketing ideas for any occasion, and Dainsfield had a way with people that kept all their guests returning to happily lose their incomes.

The stranger moved closer still, and when Dinah stepped back, he followed.

"Sir, leave. Now." She'd lost the ability to include polite words such as, please . Not only was she angry, her heart beat faster as she imagined what he might plan to do to her.

"Only if you join me upstairs. I keep a room here."

That narrowed the list of who he might be.

Still, she didn't know the names of which members leased a room monthly for their private activities, versus those who booked one night at a time for more spontaneous assignments, and those who limited their activities to the gambling tables.

Nor did she care, to be honest. Her only concern at Sutcliffe's was the ledgers.

When she backed up again, the edge of her desk pressed against her buttocks.

She was trapped. Reaching up with one hand, she pressed hard against the man's chest. He stood firm.

She might as well beat on a wall. “Move! Leave this office now!” She couldn’t even threaten to scream, since no one was likely to be on this floor at this hour of the evening.

He cupped her shoulder, his thumb brushing over the fabric of her pelisse. “Ask nicely.”

Dinah shoved with both hands, but his body barely moved.

He bent forward, licking his lips.

Suddenly, he jerked away from her.

“Get off her!” growled a man behind him. As her assailant twisted awkwardly, Dinah could see who rescued her. Abingdon.

“Why, do you want her first?” The stranger sounded almost jovial. Drunk, perhaps, but he didn’t smell of alcohol.

“Miss Westfall, are you hurt?” Abingdon ignored the other man, focusing on her. He stood almost as close as the stranger had, but at least she could stand straight now. His black eyebrows were pulled so close as to nearly touch, and his lips were tight in a frown.

“I’m fine, Your Grace. Thank you.”

Abingdon turned to the other man, who, surprisingly, hadn’t left. “What are you doing here, Peter?”

He knew the man?

Peter raked his fingers through his black hair, then straightened his waistcoat. “Has it

been so long since you've had a woman that you have to ask?" He chuckled.

Dinah gasped, but before she could deny the inference, Abingdon had taken two steps to close the distance and grabbed the man's lapel.

"Do not even suggest such a thing regarding this woman." Abingdon's normally deep voice scraped the bottom of the register of her hearing. He sounded more than threatening. He promised severe punishment if Peter didn't listen.

Peter laughed again as though this was a nightly conversation between good friends. "I see. I hadn't realized I was trespassing on your property. She isn't as glamorous as your usual playthings."

Abingdon's hands fisted, and Dinah was afraid he would hit the man. She quickly said, "Nothing happened, Your Grace. He must have been looking for your office and came to mine by mistake."

The duke's hand flexed, but he remained focused on Peter. "My brother knows I'm not in my office at this hour."

For a moment, Dinah could only stare upon hearing this bit of news.

The drunken stranger who'd tried to force himself on her was the duke's brother, Peter Hill.

Then, hoping to cut through some of the palpable tension, Dinah laughed lightly.

"You've commented on how quickly time passes when one is playing at the tables.

He might not have realized it was growing late. "

Looking back over his shoulder, Abingdon met her gaze. His mien was as fierce as

when he'd first arrived. "Were you expecting him?"

"What?" She hoped her expression didn't display her true distaste at the idea before she schooled her features. "I?"

The duke faced her fully, his hands on his hips. "I thought we made it clear when you began working with your father that you weren't to associate with the guests."

"I—"

Abingdon continued. "It's only due to Mr. Westfall's lengthy employment with my uncle that I was able to convince Dainsfield and Nomansland to hire a woman in the office. If they hear?"

"Will you let me speak?" Dinah interrupted.

"I don't know this man. I had no... assignation or any other sort of plans to meet with him.

You do my father's memory no respect by assuming the worst of my character, Your Grace.

I was trying to lock up for the evening, but since you're here now, I shall trust you to lock the door behind you. "

She turned to leave but caught herself. Remembering her manners, she took a deep breath and smiled politely. "That is, if you don't require anything else of me this evening."

The corner of Abingdon's lips twitched. "You're free to go.

You, as well," he added and grabbed Peter's arm.

He led the man to the hallway, then stepped aside in the doorway to allow Dinah to exit.

He locked the door behind them, then turned his harsh demeanor on Peter.

“Your membership to Sutcliffe’s is revoked.

You will not enter the premises for any reason, under any circumstances. Do you understand?”

Peter smirked. “Loud and clear.” He offered a lazy bow to the duke and sauntered off to the far staircase.

Dinah turned toward the servants’ stairs. “Good evening, then, Your Grace.”

Abingdon fell into step beside her. “I’ll see you home.”

“There’s no need,” she said. “It’s not far, and I’m sure your warning was understood.”

“It’s dark. You shouldn’t be walking the streets alone at night.”

Dinah wondered how he thought she shopped and ran errands before she’d come to work there.

She was the daughter of a bookkeeper, not a member of Polite Society, despite her grandfather being a baron.

She didn’t have a lady’s maid to accompany her everywhere, and her sister wasn’t always free to tag along.

“It’s early. I’m hardly the only working girl returning home at this hour.

” She didn’t add that at her age, twenty-six, and dressed in a serviceable day gown, she wasn’t likely to catch any man’s eye on the street.

When they reached the ground floor, Abingdon held open the door to the lobby. Dinah turned toward the other door, which led to the street. The duke quickly switched doors and followed her onto the pavement. “I insist.”

“Very well, it’s your time.”

The street was busy with hackney cabs and pedestrians heading in either direction, like most nights when Dinah walked home.

No one paid them any mind, but she was very aware of who the man walking next to her was.

The Duke of Abingdon was at the top of the prospective husbands list drawn up by marriage-minded mamas, according to her sister, Chrissy.

His name filled the columns of the society gossip sheets, either alongside that of his latest courtesan or in reference to some business venture he and his partners had undertaken.

Her father rarely spoke about the men he worked for, so she knew nothing of the real man.

“I was rude back there,” Abingdon said, breaking their silence. “I apologize.”

“It was an upsetting situation. I’m the one who should apologize. You came to my rescue.”

“Has he—Peter, my brother, has he been in the basement before? Have you seen him, I should say.”

“No. I see very few people other than you and your partners. Mr. Bickley makes his deposits after I leave, most days.”

Abingdon placed his hand on her back to guide her through a crowd. “I’m not certain I like having you alone there the entire day.”

“The servants often use the stairs at my end of the hall, so I’m not completely alone.”

“And yet he found his way into your office.”

“I do have to open the door in order to leave, you know. He happened to be there at that time. It’s not likely it will happen again, with any man.”

He didn’t respond, and Dinah gave thanks that perhaps the discussion was ended.

Father had had a difficult time convincing the dukes to allow her to assist him when his health began failing, and she’d feared they’d fire her when he died.

They hadn’t, although nothing was specifically said about her staying on, either.

Business simply continued as usual, minus her father’s presence.

Every day, she hoped the subject wouldn’t come up.

When the warmth of Abingdon’s hand returned to her back, Dinah glanced at the duke.

How could a man be so handsome even in the shadows cast by lamplight?

He wasn’t scowling now, so the fierceness was gone.

His black hair showed the ruffles where he’d run his fingers through it earlier, but

that made him appear even more rakish than the gossips claimed.

She could imagine her hands had done the damage to his neat coiffure?—

No, she could imagine no such thing!

Dinah wasn't a dreamer, and not romantic, as were most single women her age.

She knew the reality of her life. At some point in the future, she might accept the offer of marriage to a widower, or a returning soldier or merchant marine, someone with few other options.

Sometime after her sister married, perhaps.

Poor Chrissy's dreams had been pinned on the tailor's son, who reportedly married an American after traveling there to investigate opening a store in New York.

All Dinah wanted was for her sister to find love.

In the meantime, she could fantasize all she wanted about handsome dukes and lords, but not her bosses. Never her bosses.

As they neared the corner to her street, Abingdon said, "Tomorrow, I shall escort you home at the end of the day. Sixish?"

"That's not necessary, Your Grace."

"I'm your employer, and I say it is." He smiled, but it quickly turned into a scowl. "I don't trust my brother. He's up to something, and I don't want you hurt."

"Very well. I'll be ready to leave at six."

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