

The Scarred Duke's Bride



Cobalt Fairy
PUBLISHING

HARRIET CAVES

THE SCARRED DUKE'S BRIDE
A Steamy Historical Regency Romance Novel



HARRIET CAVES



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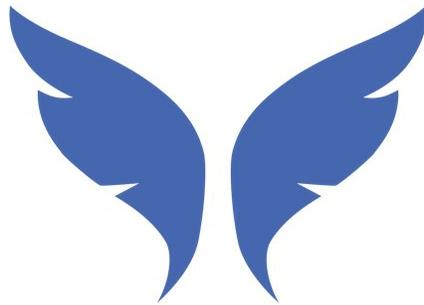
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About the Book

“Marry me. Only then will you get your estates back.”

After his brother’s sudden death, Eric must leave his life as an Admiral, and do what he has been avoiding: become the new Duke of Riverhead and take a bride.

When Freya loses the only place where she feels close to her late mother, she vows to do anything to get it back. Even challenge her father's beastly heir.

Only the Duke makes her an offer that she cannot resist. And marrying the man whose touch has awakened an uncontrollable desire within her is a trap she must never get into...

Chapter One



“Oh, but this one is even more delicious. Listen, Freya,” Isabella said as she read the latest gossip sheet from London, “A prominent *married* lord has been caught *in flagrante* at a molly house.”

She looked up at Freya, her brow furrowed with confusion, “What’s a molly house, Freya?”

Freya cleared her throat, giving her sister a sidelong glance as she continued to remove the weeds sprouting between her roses. “Nothing you need to know about. I don’t know why you insist on reading that drivel when there are perfectly good books in the library. Your governess will have my head.”

Isabella laughed, “And who do you think I steal them from?”

Freya sighed in mock resignation, shaking her head. “Stealing now? What *would* Father say?”

Isabella’s mouth turned down, derisively, “Father would say nothing. No, no, he’d probably say, ‘Eh wot? Who’s that you mean? Isabella? Never heard of her’.”

Freya snorted, almost cutting off a rose’s head in her amusement. “You mustn’t say things like that. Someone might hear you.” She looked around

the garden for good measure, ascertaining that there was nobody within earshot. A few of the gardeners were hard at work, keeping the grass at the right length, trimming the hedges, and watering the plants, but none were close by.

The rose garden belonged to Freya, and she loved to tend to her plants herself. It gave her peace to nurture them and watch as they bloomed every year.

“Oh!” Isabella cried out loud, her head buried in the newsprint, and Freya straightened up.

“What now?”

“Papa is mentioned.”

Freya’s eyebrow rose. “And what has the Duke been up to? One might have thought he’d be too sick to be mentioned in the on dits.”

“He *is* sick. It says he’s taken a turn for the worse.”

Freya frowned. “Read it to me.”

“On a sadder note, we have news that Victor Stark, Duke of Riverhead has taken a turn for the worse. His physicians seem to be preparing for the end and it has been rumored that his heir, Alexander Campbell, is making his way to the city as we speak in order to be on hand should the inevitable happen. The Duke is survived by two daughters and no sons, and so the title will pass to the son of a distant cousin.”

Freya sat back with a sigh, her shoulders hunched. Isabella looked at her. “Will you have to marry him now?”

Freya looked up and pinned a smile on her face, covering her trepidation. “Well, he cannot possibly be worse than Papa, now, can he?”

Isabella snorted, “Not unless he likes to bellow like a bull and swing his whip about in a temper. Not to mention ignoring us as if we hardly existed and making us live in the attic in the dead of winter even though there’s no fireplace up there.”

Freya shuffled over to put her hand around her sister’s shoulders. “Well, we did survive it, did we not? Huddling together for warmth...” She pulled Isabella closer, tickling her as they both giggled.

“Yes, and Mrs. Beecham bringing us hot water bottles and hot stones for our feet.”

“Yes, those were very helpful.”

“And all the blankets she could find.”

Freya chuckled as she nodded. “That too.”

“You think that was bad? Ha! Before I came to you, I used to work for the Viscount Haversham.” They both turned to see Mrs. Beecham approaching, holding a tray. “That man was the very definition of cruel. Why there were some days his family did not eat because he would not allow it.”

Freya stood up and took the tray from the old lady. “Thank you. What is this?”

“Well, there’s a chill in the air and a bit of a drizzle, so I thought I would bring you some hot chocolate.”

“That’s so kind of you, Mrs. Beecham. And unnecessary. We are well covered. After all, since Father left, we haven’t been terrorized by the shouting that made us dare not defy him or dress only the way he deemed appropriate,” Isabella said. “We have the woolen shawls that Aunt Helen brought us from Scotland. They don’t let the rain in.” She illustrated that by tucking the tartan stole more firmly around her, the newspaper she’d been

reading placed on the stone she was sitting on.

“Indeed, and lovely warm things they are, much as your father would disapprove, but the chocolate will warm you from the inside.”

Freya took a sip of her chocolate, relishing the relative peace of late morning at Stark Manor. Ever since their father had decamped to the city where he had access to the best physicians for his tuberculosis, the manor had taken on a tranquil air never before seen within its halls. Life had taken on a simplicity not disturbed by rigid imperatives such as dressing for dinner or eating in the dining room.

Freya and Isabelle were just as likely to take their dinner in the kitchens as to curl in front of the fire in the parlor with a tray of soup and bread instead of dining on lavish five-course dinners eaten amid stilted conversation and wearing too-tight stays.

Freya did not miss it at all. She felt a tad guilty seeing as it was illness that took their father away and thus changed their lives but not enough to wish him back. The Duke of Riverhead had never liked his children. He treated both daughters like nuisance appendages he’d been saddled with that he now had no clue what to do with.

“What is the use of a woman if she is not producing heirs?” he’d been heard to wonder out loud. “Simply pests, eating one out of house and home.”

Freya tried not to take it to heart and did her best to shield Isabella from it all, but she had to admit that was much easier to do now that her father was not in residence.

“You know, I knew of this family as I was growing up in Somerton. The father was a Marquis — a short bad-tempered fellow. He was known to whip people with his horsewhip should they displease him. He had no care whether it was in public or not or whether she was a wife or a daughter or a servant. His whip was indiscriminate,” Mrs. Beecham was saying as she sipped her own cup of chocolate, sitting companionably on the stone next to Isabella. “I

always made sure to be out of range when he was about. One never knew what would set him off.”

Mrs. Beecham had so many stories of the same ilk though she always declined to name names.

“You both have got it quite good. You should be grateful,” she concluded, taking another sip of tea.

Isabella snorted. “Yes, we’re grateful we only got oodles of tongue lashings. Those were much better.” She rolled her eyes.

Freya gave her a sidelong glance. “The problem is men. They are all animals. I do not know why anyone would want to be married to one.”

“Well, you’ll find out soon enough, won’t you?” Mrs. Beecham said.

Freya glared at her. “We shall see. Perhaps this Campbell fellow will take one look at me and run screaming in the other direction. I am not exactly a model of decorum nor a prime article. I am just a simple country bumpkin with mud under her fingernails.”

Mrs. Beecham rolled her eyes. “And I keep telling you to wear gloves.”

Isabella giggled.

Freya glared at them both before getting to her feet, ready to stomp off. Suddenly a footman came running towards them. He was waving a piece of paper in his hand. “Lady Freya, I have just been given this note to give you. They say it’s urgent that you read it.”

Freya frowned, thrusting out her hand. “Give it to me,” she demanded imperiously.

The footman put the note in her hand and backed away. Breaking the seal,

she began to read it out loud.

Dear Lady Freya,

Your father has taken a turn for the worse. It would behoove you and your sister to make haste to London if you want to see him again. I have sent a carriage with this missive that you can use to make your way to the city.

Yours sincerely,

Herbert Mansfield

She raised her eyes, looking from her sister to the governess, seeing the same type of surprise on their faces as was on her own. She could not imagine why her father would want to see them now. He had never shown any interest in them before. But Herbert Mansfield was their father's right hand, his long-time steward. He would not have written the letter or sent a carriage if their father hadn't asked him to.

"What should we do?" she asked Isabella.

Her sister quirked an eyebrow. "We go, of course. What else is there to do?"

Freya shook her head slowly. She could not imagine doing anything other than obey either, but she had a bad feeling about it all.

She looked up at the footman. "Very well, tell the coachman we shall be ready to go soon."

The footman nodded and turned away. Freya turned to Isabella and Mrs. Beecham. "We will need gowns; much of what we have is threadbare. Can we do anything about that?"

Mrs. Beecham nodded. "The seamstress will be able to put together two gowns each I'm sure by day's end tomorrow. We can be on the road by

Friday.”

Freya nodded. “I hope that’s soon enough.”

“It will have to be,” Isabella said.

Chapter Two



Eric's feet wobbled as he stepped off the ship as he had not yet gotten his land legs. He stood for a moment, trying to reorient himself. After so many months at sea, it was jarring to be once again on land. London smelled just about the same as he remembered, and there were far too many urchins darting about the place for his liking. Further down the dock, he could hear a woman hawking her wares. "Pigeon pies! Pigeon Pies! Come get them while they're hot."

His mouth watered.

He had not managed to eat a single thing since land had been spotted last night. He was in London to bury his elder brother, a man he had looked up to his whole life. He lifted his hand, slowly calling to the woman, and she hurried over, already holding out a pigeon pie. "Just tuppence sir, and I'll throw in a second one for 'e."

"Thank you," Eric said, accepting the pies gratefully. He dug in his pocket for coin before demolishing the first pie in two bites. He ate the second one more slowly as he walked along the street in search of a hansom cab. It had been six months since he'd been on dry land, and that was in Marseille where they'd gone to pick up some cargo that was certainly not sanctioned by Napoleon and his war machine.

He looked around, trying to see how London had changed and how much it was the same. Aside from the smell, and the delicious street food, he was glad to note that he could still negotiate the streets quite effortlessly.

Arriving at St. Peter's church in his family's neighborhood of St. John's Wood, he found that it was already quite occupied with mourners. His brother's coffin had not yet arrived, but William, his younger brother, and his mother were both standing in front of the church, waiting.

As soon as William caught sight of him, he broke free of his mother's hold and came running to Eric. He had no qualms about embracing his brother whether or not it would be seen as mawkish by onlookers. Thankfully, nobody paid them any mind.

"You're here," William said, and a single tear escaped his eye. "I cannot believe Alex is dead."

"Neither can I, dear brother. Neither can I." He took William's hand and led him back to their mother, who was clad all in black bombazine with a black veil. She let out a wail as soon as Eric touched her hand before collapsing into his arms.

"'Twas the typhoid that took him. So fast — one day he was well; the next, he was dead."

All Eric could do was pat her back in attempted consolation. "There, there," he murmured helplessly, not knowing what to do. He was saved from having to do anything by the arrival of the hearse.

They all filed into the chapel behind the coffin as they prepared to say goodbye to Alexander.



“You are aware that you are the new heir now of the Duchy of Riverhead?”

Eric looked up as the lawyer dropped this bombshell in his lap. He had been aware in a vague sort of way that Alexander stood to inherit the ducal title from a distant cousin should he not produce a male heir.

“Is that so?” he asked noncommittally.

“Indeed, sir. However, you should know that the current Duke has imposed certain conditions on the succession. For one thing, he is adamant that the heir marries his daughter.”

Eric’s breath hitched. “I beg your pardon?”

The lawyer drew in a deep breath. “The current Duke —”

Eric put up a hand to stop him from talking. “Surely such a proviso cannot have any *locus standi*.”

Mr. Freeman, the lawyer, smiled. “I see you know a bit of the law lingo.”

“Just a few words. But tell me, is it —”

“I am afraid it’s perfectly legal, yes. Furthermore, the current Dukes ailing, and so you should expect to wed soon. In fact, I would recommend you call upon him soon and notify him of your brother’s death. I believe he was expecting a marriage to take place between Alexander and his daughter very soon.”

Eric took a deep and steadying breath. “I see.”

Mr. Freeman smiled sympathetically. “Do not fret too much about it, Mr. Campbell. The rewards outweigh the sacrifice. And you will need someone who knows the lay of the land to assist you. Who better than a wife who grew up on the land?”

“I suppose you are right, Mr. Freeman.”

“Mmm,” he agreed but simply waited for Eric to make a decision. Eric did not see any other recourse than to follow in his brother’s footsteps.

He looked up at the lawyer. “I shall do it.”

Mr. Freeman smiled. “Very good. I shall set up an appointment with the man’s steward for tomorrow together with furnishing you with the appropriate documentation to show Alexander’s death and your replacement of him as heir.”

Eric sighed. “Thank you, Mr. Freeman.”

“You’re very welcome, Mr. Campbell. And congratulations on your upcoming nuptials.”



Eric straightened his cravat as he stepped into his carriage that would transport him to Mayfair where he hoped to meet with the Duke of Riverhead. Victor Stark was a very distant cousin, and he knew little about the man. What he did know for sure was that this was a tremendous opportunity for his branch of the family to elevate their legacy to new heights.

He looked out of the window, watching the streets roll past, remembering his father, Richard Campbell. As a member of the gentry, but untitled, he had forged respect for the family by building a fortune worthy of the name. As the first-born son, Alexander was his heir, his right hand. As the second son, Eric had decided to buy his commission and join the navy.

Sitting back in the seat, he endured the endless bumps and sways brought about by driving on the potholed road. It was difficult to believe that he was

here although that had always been a possibility. Certainly, when his father had taken them around to learn what businesses they owned, he took both sons and made sure they both had the knowledge and skill to continue his legacy.

Eric knew he would have done the same for William had he not been ailing by the time his third son was born. By then, Alexander had pretty much been running the day-to-day operations and doing a marvelous job of it.

Eric felt a pang of loss at the thought of his brother. He would miss him always. Alexander had been a good brother and a great friend.

I will do you proud, my brother. I promise you.

The hansom came to an abrupt halt, and he peered out in surprise, wondering what might have caused this unscheduled stop. He saw that there was a line of carriages in front of him that also seemed to have stalled.

How strange...

Climbing carefully down, he decided to go and see what might be causing this hold-up. "Wait here for me; I shall be back," he told his coachman before walking determinedly down between the carriages.

Chapter Three



They had left Stark Manor before sunrise, barely managing to gulp down some tea before they were on the road. Mrs. Beecham wanted to arrive in the city while it was still daylight.

“We don’t want to be set upon by brigands, now do we?” she asked.

Freya rolled her eyes. She found Mrs. Beecham to be a tad dramatic which was fine ordinarily, but Freya was nervous about this meeting with her father. What would he say to them? How were they to act? It had been a while since they’d been in his presence, and she was afraid she’d forgotten how to be so as not to set him off.

Isabella was singing softly by her side, swaying gently from side to side with the movement of the carriage as she read her book. It was some French tale of love and longing — Isabella had offered to read it aloud, but Freya’s French wasn’t as good as Isabella’s, so she had declined.

In any case, she was too nervous to pay attention to trivial things. She envied Isabella’s ability to just disappear into her book as if there was nothing to fear. Freya hoped one day to be like her.

Much to Mrs. Beecham’s relief, they did arrive in London by late afternoon. There were an awful lot of carriages on the road, and Freya stuck her head

out of the window, overwhelmed by the smells and noise.

Suddenly, she spotted a small rabbit on the side of the road, hunched in on itself, clearly terrified. “Stop!” she shouted, startling Mrs. Beecham and causing Isabella to actually jump in her seat. Picking up the umbrella, she banged on the roof a few times until the coachman came to a halt. She opened the door and stepped out.

“What’s the matter, ma’am?” he called but she ignored him, walking back to where she saw the rabbit. “We’re blocking the road, ma’am!” the coachman continued, but she waved a dismissive hand. No doubt, he could sort it out without her input.

She bent down, far enough away from the rabbit not to seem like a threat. “Hail little fellow.” She looked around for some plants she could feed it, wondering if grass might do. She reached out to pluck a piece of grass and froze.

Hidden beneath the foliage by the roadside was a ghost orchid. Freya had only ever seen pictures of the plant. While she was distracted staring at the plant, the rabbit hopped away, disappearing in the blink of an eye. She looked around, biting her lip but couldn’t help but be drawn back to the plant.

She stared at it, wondering how it had managed to thrive by a busy thoroughfare. She looked up, noting the small wood bordering the road, probably a part of Hyde Park. She leaned closer, examining it.

She had read that the plant did not rely on sunlight to produce food for itself. Instead, it relied on a kind of sponge to feed itself and only ventured out of the soil to produce seeds and flowers sometimes after thirty years.

That’s why it was so rare to see one, and Freya could not believe there was one just growing on the roadside.

She was strongly tempted to uproot it and take it home with her, but she

wasn't sure it would survive.

Someone cleared their throat loudly behind her, but she paid them no mind, assuming it was the coachman again.

“Excuse me madam; would you care to explain what you think you are doing?”

The voice was most definitely not that of the coachman. It was much deeper, and the coachman's voice didn't make her want to shiver. She stood up and turned around and jerked, letting out a startled yell as her eyes fell on the tall man's face. He was dressed in a black suit, a hat pulled low over his head, long black hair blowing gently in the breeze beneath it. Her eyes had fallen immediately on the menacing scar on his face, his intense blue eyes gleaming with annoyance at her.

Pirate!

The word jumped to the forefront of her mind, and she jumped back, almost falling on the precious orchid. She stumbled, twisting her body away from it and falling into an undignified lump beside it. Aside from the incredible sting on her bottom, she was quite all right if extremely mortified.

She looked up at the man who had scared her and saw that he looked amused. That was the last straw for her, and she screamed. “What the *devil* is the matter with you?”

He looked nonplussed. “I beg your pardon?”

“What business could you possibly have accosting people and scaring them half to death? Are you some sort of degenerate? You enjoy terrifying people?”

To her further annoyance, the man laughed some more — though he sounded bitter. He turned away so that his scar was no longer visible. “I did nothing

but ask you a question.”

Freya’s bosom was heaving, her breath coming fast as she tried to think of something to say. It’s possible she was hasty in her assessment of the situation.

“It’s entirely *your* fault that you ended up on your arse.” He continued smirking, and that was *it*.

She scrambled to her feet while he watched her, *still* smirking and fueling her rage. As soon as she was back on her feet, she stepped towards him and lifted her hand to slap his face. She was startled by how fast he caught her hand, his eyes narrowing, making him look even more intimidating. She gasped, trying to jerk her hand away, but he tightened his grip.

“Listen, brat. I have no time for your spoiled tantrums. If your mother did not teach you how to behave, I’d be glad to have you over my lap and spank the rudeness out of you.”

She gasped and kicked his shin without even thinking about it. That made him let go of her wrist, and she stepped back out of his reach as he winced, reaching down to rub his ankle.

“Are all the ladies in London as savage as you? Someone should notify the red coats so they can recruit from the gentry.”

“You...you...” Freya growled, fisting her hands, too angry to come up with anything that could articulate her feelings.

“What? Cat got your tongue?” He quirked an eyebrow impishly.

“Oooh! Devil take you, you ugly...pirate!” she yelled.

People began to pop their heads out of their carriages, pedestrians stopping to stare. This should have bothered Freya, but she was still too angry to care. If

she thought she could get away with it, she would have hit him in the chest repeatedly with her fists.

He flinched at her words, and she was viciously gratified to know she'd made a hit. "Well, well, well...that's it, go for the most obvious dig. That's the spirit. Well done Miss. I'm sure your husband would be very impressed if he saw you."

The man began to clap sarcastically. Freya did not understand why she was letting this stranger rile her up so much, but she could not seem to help herself.

"Much better than some...pirate troubling a lady who has *done nothing* to him! You are nothing but a rakehell with no manners and no regard for nature. You should go and crawl back into the hole from which you came."

"Freya!"

She turned to see that Mrs. Beecham had come to find out what the commotion was about.

Freya blushed as the governess glared at her. Then Mrs. Beecham was turning to the man and apologizing profusely for *her* behavior.

"Excuse me!" Freya protested, "He's the one-!"

Mrs. Beecham rounded on her, "Freya hush!"

The man touched Mrs. Beecham's arm. "Never mind, ma'am. It's quite all right. I do understand that your charge has a few more lessons to learn when it comes to manners. I'm sure you do your best to teach her."

Freya growled at him. He gave her a crooked smile, tipped his hat, and walked away. Freya took a step to follow him, ready to give him a piece of her mind, but Mrs. Beecham grabbed her hand and pulled. "Oh no you do

not, young lady. You might have left the school room, but at the moment, you are behaving very childishly. Come with me right now.” She pulled Freya towards their carriage.

Freya dragged her feet, too busy glaring after the man, but then she noticed all the other carriages, all the people watching her with amusement or disgust, and she straightened up, hastening her footsteps to reach the carriage.

Her face heated with mortification. She had no idea why she behaved in such a way — in public to boot. If her father ever heard of this, she dreaded what he might do.

She let Mrs. Beecham pull her up into the carriage and harangue her the rest of the way until they arrived at the Stark townhouse.

Nobody was at the door to greet them, and the governess had to ring the bell several times before the butler answered.

“Apologies,” he said sounding harried. “We’ve had a bit of an upheaval today what with the Duke...” he trailed off, spotting Freya and Isabella, before stepping back. “Do come in. A footman will fetch your luggage in just a moment. You must be tired. Why don’t you wait in the parlor while I have some refreshments brought?”

Mrs. Beecham nodded, “That will be satisfactory although we should like to freshen up first.”

“Oh! Of course. Well...wait here while I find a maid to direct you to your chambers.” He bowed and hurried off, leaving them milling about in the corridor. Freya avoided everyone’s eyes, still feeling out of sorts by her uncharacteristic outburst.

God, what was I thinking?

She rubbed her hands anxiously together, trying to decide whether she should

tell her father about what happened or wait until he heard about it through the grapevine. She was rather inclined towards the latter because she could not *begin* to imagine how the words would come out of her mouth.

Making a scene in public was certainly *not* on the approved list of lady-like activities. Finally, a maid came hurrying down the hall dressed in black with a white apron and cap. She curtsied carelessly before asking them to follow her.

She led them up a flight of stairs before showing them to their assigned chambers, which were side by side much to Freya's relief. "There's hot water and soap in the basin as well as your luggage should you wish to change. Ring the bell if you require further help," the maid said as she came to a stop in the corridor after pointing out their rooms.

"Yes, thank you...er?" Mrs. Beecham said.

"Sarah. My name is Sarah."

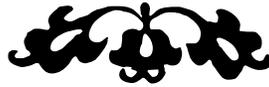
"Thank you, Sarah," Mrs. Beecham said. "That will be all."

Sarah trotted away, and Freya retreated to her chambers and shut the door. She was glad of the few moments' reprieve before she had to face anyone, especially her father. She was happy to also be able to change out of her mud-streaked gown, wash her face, hands, and feet, and take advantage of the chamber pot before changing into a simple muslin gown that required no help to put on.

She liked how light it was and the way it brought out the green of her eyes. She brushed her thick mane of chestnut hair until it shone and let it fall in curling cascades down her back.

Then with a deep breath, she marched to the door, ready to contend with her fate.

Chapter Four



Thanks to the obnoxious girl with the impossible green eyes, Eric was running late for his meeting. He was also still quite heated from the exchange as much as he tried to calm himself down.

It had been years since he'd interacted with ladies of the *ton*, having joined the navy as soon as he attained his majority. He had been in the service for nine years, and much of that time had been spent at sea.

Three years ago, when an encounter with the French Navy had resulted in a major injury, was the first time he'd spent any significant time ashore. However, most of that time was spent recuperating. The ship's physician had done a crude job of sewing him back together in an attempt to save his life. The result was six weeks of fever and a jagged scar that ran from his left cheek down his shoulder to his left elbow.

All in all, it meant he'd not spent much time in company with *ton* ladies, but he was quite sure they were not meant to be so crude and vulgar.

What happened to studied politeness and ennui?

If all ladies of the town behaved like this, he did not know how he and his future bride were to get along. It was a worrying state of affairs. Eric hoped that the Duke would forgive him for his tardiness without forcing him to

explain why. He did not think it would make a good impression if the Duke thought he would get in fights with ladies, no matter the provocation.

The carriage drew up outside a townhouse that was less impressive than Eric had been expecting. He knew that the Duke favored their side of the family because of the massive wealth they had managed to amass, but the man was supposed to have plenty of assets to his name, so it was surprising to see how modest his residence was.

Why it was hardly any bigger than the semi-detached cottage at St. John's Wood where his mother and brother lived. He rang the bell standing to attention as he waited.

The butler opened the door and did a double take at the sight of his scar as many people did. Unlike the young lady he had met, he did not run away screaming. Instead, he studiously did not look at it as he took Eric's card.

Eric was used to that sort of studied disregard. He preferred it in fact to open staring. Still, it stuck in his craw that a mere butler saw fit to extend him this kindness.

He did not wait long before the butler came back indicating that the master of the house would see him now. Eric handed over his hat and his cane, even though being bareheaded made him feel even more exposed. He followed the butler down a long, darkened corridor to a wooden door at the end.

The butler knocked once before opening the door and stepping aside to allow Eric to enter. The Duke was sitting behind a large mahogany desk in a throne-like chair, his hunched form looking small and frail as if he were a child sitting in his parent's chair.

Eric was inwardly taken aback by his appearance, but he kept his face smooth and blank as he bowed to the Duke. "Your Grace, forgive my tardiness. I did not reckon on London's traffic."

The Duke stared blatantly at his scar. "I do not remember *that* from the last time I saw you."

Eric blinked once and then again in bewilderment. As far as he could remember, he had never met the Duke. Then he realized that the man must be talking about his brother. They *were* similarly built with the same dark hair and blue eyes. Perhaps the man was just confused even though Eric had given him his card. "I suppose you have not heard, Your Grace, but my brother, Alexander, tragically passed away three days ago of typhoid fever. It was very sudden, they told me. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Lieutenant Commander Eric Campbell, second son of Richard Campbell and your new heir."

The Duke considered him for a long time without saying a word. Eric resisted the urge to shift from foot to foot as he waited for the verdict. Finally, the Duke made a rumbling noise as if he were both clearing his throat and snorting. "I suppose one brother will do as well as another. Have you been apprised of my conditions?"

Eric nodded. "I have, Your Grace."

"And you are agreeable?"

"I have no reason not to be. They tell me a good wife is a blessing. I look forward to finding out if it's true."

The Duke laughed. "We shall see." He reached out for the bell and rang it. The butler was quick to respond.

"Send my first-born daughter to me at once," the Duke said.

The butler bowed low. "Right away, Your Grace," he replied.



Freya bumped into the butler at the bottom of the stairs. He seemed nonplussed at the unexpected contact and hastily moved away from her, murmuring apologies. “My lady, your father wishes to see you at once in his office.”

Freya nodded, “I suppose he does. Would you guide me there? It has been a while since I was in this house. I do not know it as well as I should.”

The butler bowed, “Of course, my lady, right this way.”

Freya followed him timidly, her heart hammering in her chest, wondering what awaited her. She knew it had something to do with her marriage to the mysterious Alexander Campbell. She just hoped that she would not be expected to carry it out right away, even knowing that it would be better to secure both her future and Isabella’s before her father’s death.

The butler announced her, and she walked into the office and stopped short, staring at the man sitting across from her father, looking a little bit too smug. Had he come to tell on her?

“Pray tell me what are you doing here?” she demanded.

He lifted an eyebrow arrogantly, the scar on his cheeks standing out even more now that he was bare headed. “Just my luck.” Both he and her father got to their feet. “You must be my future wife. Pardon me, but you did not introduce yourself.”

“Have you met?” The Duke looked unsteady on his feet, and Freya hastened to take a seat so that he could do the same. She was surprised at his words. If the man had not come to complain about her, then what was he doing here?

“Yes,” he said, “your daughter and I met just this afternoon as she was picking flowers by the roadside and causing quite the traffic jam. It is ironic that she is the reason that I was late to meet with you.”

Her father looked from her to the man. “Well, then shall we call it serendipity?” He pushed a piece of paper towards the man. “If you will sign this and undertake to give me an heir, then the Dukedom is yours.”

The man took the paper and signed it as Freya looked, and her brow furrowed. “What is happening?”

The man turned to her, “I suppose I should introduce myself. I am Lieutenant Commander Eric Campbell, your husband-to-be.”

Freya’s eyes widened. “No,” she whispered aghast.

“I’m afraid it’s true,” her father chimed in, “and if you know what is good for you, you will produce an heir as fast as possible.”

“No,” she said again louder, shaking her head as she stood up and began backing towards the door, “you cannot make me marry this... this... this *barbarian!*”

The Duke frowned. “What kind of language is that, and who taught you to speak that way? I am your father, and I have decided this. There is no more to be said.”

Freya looked from Eric to her father, wondering what kind of cruel trap this was. “Fa-father please do-don’t make me marry him. I don’t want to!”

“You have known about this marriage for quite some time now. I do not see why you’re having kittens about it all of a sudden,” her father snapped. “Cease these hysterics forthwith. There is no one here who is interested in your games.”

He held up a document. “In any case, your future husband has already signed the marriage license, and so have I. The wedding will take place this weekend. I do not wish to hear any more about this.”

With a sob, Freya whirled around and ran out of the room. She stumbled down the corridor weeping until she came to the other end where the French doors led out into a small garden. With a sigh of relief, she pushed them open, running into the garden, and falling on the grass as she wept with despair.

How can he do this to me?

She wailed, hitting the ground with her fists and bouncing a little with anger. She grasped at her dress, wanting to rent it in two, so angry was she. Nobody came after her, and that made her feel both relieved and extremely alone.

She cried herself into silence and then curled up in a ball, hands holding onto the grass for dear life as she hiccupped, staring in despair at nothing. She heard footsteps approaching but didn't bother to raise her head or turn around to see who it might be. Very likely it was the butler, who came to tell her that her father wished for her to pull herself together and stop making a spectacle of herself.

She was far beyond caring about any of it.

How could anyone expect her to agree to marry the man who had humiliated her so thoroughly not once but twice? How were they to relate to each other with such a disastrous beginning? She did not understand why he was even willing to try until she remembered that he was set to inherit an entire ducal empire. She knew nothing of the Campbells, only that they were distant relatives. She assumed that this must feel to them like the chance to make something of themselves and their lineage.

But why must I be the sacrificial lamb? It is not my fault that my father was unable to bear sons, she thought viciously.

The footsteps came to a stop. "You really are a very dramatic person. Is all this truly necessary?"

Freya did not deign to answer.

He sighed, “Is this how the entirety of our marriage is going to be?”

Provoked, she sat up at once and turned to glare at him. “There will be no marriage between us.”

He pursed his lips, shaking his head. “You know I have spoken to your governess —”

“She’s not my governess; she’s Isabella’s.”

“I have spoken to your governess,” Eric continued, ignoring her interruption, “and she told me of your love of the gardens at Stark Manor. Are you aware that your father intends to sell it?”

Freya gasped, looking up at him with wide eyes, wondering if he was lying to her.

He nodded as if in confirmation, “He told me of his plans just now. He has heard of an experimental treatment in the Orient and means to sell the Manor so that he might travel there in hopes of a cure.”

“No, he can’t! Where would we live?”

He lifted his eyebrows, “Why with me, of course. I suppose this townhouse would be left empty. It might be a good place to conduct my business.”

“And what of Isabella and all the staff at Stark Manor? What will happen to them?”

He shrugged. “That is hardly any of my concern.”

She stared at him in disbelief, “So you just came here to add to my misery?”

Please leave me alone.”

He took a step closer. “Of course not. I came here to make you a proposal.”

Her brow furrowed, “And what makes you think I would be interested in —”

“Do you want to save your gardens, your sister, and the staff or not?”

Freya was rendered mute for a moment. “What is your proposal?”

“Stop this childish refusal to marry me, and I will give your father the funds that he needs to seek this treatment. That way he will have no reason to sell Stark Manor.”

Freya frowned. “And do you have the funds to just give to him?”

“Of course. My family is very well off.”

Freya hid her surprise at this piece of news. “Oh.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “So? Do we have an agreement?”

Slowly she nodded, “Yes, I will marry you.”

He took a step closer, “That is good. As for your father wanting an heir, I am well aware of the repulsive nature of my scars. I will not force you to come near me. That I promise you.”

Freya’s lip trembled with the need to refute his words. He was not repulsive—he might look like a rakehell, a pirate and a ne’er do well but he wasn’t repulsive. But on the other hand, she was not willing to give anyone any heirs. Not under these conditions. So, it was better for him to think that she could not bear to be near him rather than to try to come up with another reason why she was not ready for the intimacies of marriage.

Mrs. Beecham had been very thorough in her education as soon as her father had announced that she was to wed Alexander, so she was cognizant of what might be expected of her in the marriage bed. Mrs. Beecham had even taken her to the stables to watch as poor Miss Potty was bred to a stallion. Freya had never felt so sorry for another living being.

“It’s all quite natural.” Mrs. Beecham had said. “You’ll see.”

Freya was willing to wait quite a good long while before she had to see for herself what that felt like.

Chapter Five



Sitting down with the Duke and his family for dinner felt a little strange after all the hysterics in the afternoon. But His Grace had insisted, and Eric was not inclined to refuse. He was feeling quite pleased with himself for having negotiated a marriage agreement with Freya—one they could both live with. He could always satisfy his bodily needs with mistresses after all. He was quite sure that at least half the town had the same arrangement, and it worked out well for both parties.

“I am pleased that you have come to your senses, Freya. I do not understand what the hysterics you were having this afternoon were about,” the Duke said.

Eric looked to Freya whose head was bowed, her eyes focused on her plate, so he had noticed that she was merely pushing food around and barely eating. He also noticed the slight flinch when the Duke said her name and frowned. It seemed to him that Freya and her father had a very fraught relationship.

He took a moment to spare a thought for his own father, who had been as loving a man as any son could wish for.

“I think I merely may have scared her with my...” He indicated his scar with his hand.

The Duke snorted derisively, “That is hardly something to give anyone the vapors. You must excuse my daughter; she has always been weak and a bit silly. She cares for nothing but her plants. It is quite tiresome though I trust it will not stop you from producing a grandson for me.”

Eric blanched. He had not been expecting such blunt language in mixed company. He cleared his throat. “We shall do our best,” he murmured.

“No, no,” the Duke said, “you will do better than that. I have commissioned for you a townhouse quite close to London so that I may keep tabs on your progress. I expect that by the end of the season, you will be with child.” He glared at his daughter.

Her face paled. “I cannot guarantee that, Father. It is in God’s hands whether I have a child or not.”

“Oh no, it is absolutely in your hands, and I shall deploy Silver to make sure that it is so. He will make sure that you are fulfilling the terms of this agreement.”

Freya dropped her fork, staring at her father in disbelief. “What do you mean by that, Father? Is your butler to make sure that we are copulating, or what do you mean exactly?”

The Duke grinned quite evilly, “Or if he has to, Silver will stand right over you and make sure that you are doing what needs to be done to produce my grandchild. The townhouse shall be ready for occupation at the end of the week. You and Mr. Campbell shall be married the day after tomorrow.”

Slowly Eric cleared his throat, “You will have to forgive me, Your Grace, but Freya and I have agreed to live at Stark Manor, and we will not be permitting anyone into our chambers to view our private business.”

“As you wish, Mr. Campbell, but note that Silver will be reporting to me on your activities, and remember that it is part of your agreement to produce an

heir for me.”

“It is noted.” Eric was beginning to understand why Freya was so tense in the presence of her father. He really was quite an unreasonable gentleman.

As soon as dinner was over, Eric got to his feet. “I would like to stay longer, but clearly, I have some arrangements to make, and I need to inform my family of my upcoming wedding. And so, you will forgive me, but I will bid you both goodnight.”

The Duke nodded dismissively, and Freya gave him a wan smile. He nodded to them both and left as quickly as he could, appreciating his own family a whole lot more.



Freya slowly climbed the stairs to her chambers feeling as if she was a hundred-year-old woman. The day had certainly been longer than she anticipated, and she had anticipated a long day. She wasn't surprised to find Isabella waiting for her. Her younger sister had had dinner in her chambers in company with her governess. Freya wished that she had been able to join them rather than being forced to eat with her father and her future husband.

Much as she appreciated Eric's consideration, there was still a lingering sting from their earlier encounter and the fact that she was being forced to wed him for no other reason than to satisfy her father's ego and his obsession with legacy. A legacy that clearly did not include herself or her sister—merely whatever male offspring she could produce.

Isabella stared at her with sympathy in her eyes. “How was it? Was it very bad?”

Slowly Freya shook her head. “Not very. The man who humiliated me earlier today is to be my husband. How bad could it have been?”

“Oh, Freya.” Isabella rushed off the bed, ran to her, and put her arms around Freya. “It’ll be all right, you’ll see.”

Slowly Freya put her arms around Isabella, grateful for the comfort and warmth she provided, “I know darling girl. I am just very tired.”

Isabella pulled back. “Would you like to have a hot bath? I can call for the servants to bring you hot water.”

Freya opened her mouth to refuse but on second thought realized that she could quite do with a warm soak if only to loosen the stiffness of her muscles and give her somewhere to drown her tears. “Yes, I think I would quite like that.”



Eric let himself into the house and then paused for a moment, just staring at the portrait of his brother that hung in the foyer. He sighed deeply, shaking his head, “What have I gotten us into, brother? Did I do the right thing?”

Alexander's portrait had no answer for him and simply watched him with sympathetic familiar blue eyes. Eric straightened up, blew out his breath, and headed for the stairs. It was late, and he knew that his mother and his brother were fast asleep. He was glad of it—he did not think that he had the words to explain to them what happened that day.

Tomorrow at breakfast should be soon enough to share it all.

As he put his foot on the first step, he heard a shuffling sound coming from down the hall. He froze listening, and the shuffling turned into footsteps. Putting his foot back down, he peered into the dark. “Who is there?”

“Oh, Master Campbell, I did not hear you there.” Candlelight brightened the hallway to reveal his steward, Mr. Green.

Eric's shoulders relaxed, and he heaved a sigh of relief. “What are you doing skulking around in the dark?”

“I was just leaving, sir. Headed to my bed. There were just a couple of urgent invoices that needed to be seen to. I have left them on your desk for your signature.”

Eric nodded. “How urgent? Should I sign them now, or will morning suffice?”

“If you could sign them now, I could post them early in the morning.”

“Mm,” Eric said tiredly, “then I shall get to it at once.” In the few days he had been home, he had come to realize just how much work it took to run their business enterprises. The work never ended. “On second thought, I shall simply wake up early so as to get it done then.”

“Of course, Master Campbell. Whatever you feel is best.”

Eric nodded to him. “Goodnight, Mr. Green.”

“Goodnight, sir.” The steward walked towards the doorway. He and several other servants—including the cook, the head gardener, and the housekeeper — lived in the servants’ quarters at the back of the cottage. The other servants came in from Cheapside every day.

Eric climbed the stairs, feeling the effort that it took on every step. He was so glad to lie down on his bed at last, staring up listlessly at the ceiling, and just breathe. He felt as if he had not even been given the time to mourn his brother; every single thing that he had to do was too urgent.

He longed for just a moment’s peace to gather himself and just remember his brother fondly. Instead, tomorrow he would have to prepare for a wedding. He had told Freya that he would not rush her, but the truth was that he was in no hurry himself. He did not feel ready to be a husband.

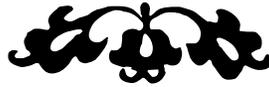
He hardly felt ready to socialize with anyone aside from his brother and mother.

After his injury, he had immediately been redeployed, and having been occupied with the business of war, he had not really had time to come to terms with his injury. And now again, his life had changed drastically.

He just needed some time to breathe. Sitting up, he spotted the bottle of brandy that he had brought to his room last night. Pouring himself a generous portion, he swallowed it down before stripping naked and burrowing into his blankets.

A good night's sleep, that's all I need. It will all be better tomorrow.

Chapter Six



In spite of the very short notice, Eric's mother insisted on having an engagement dinner for the couple, or so Eric said when he called on Freya early the next morning. "I don't know if my father will be able to attend in his fragile state," she said in a low worried tone.

"We will be happy to host you, your sister, and your chaperone. My mother will also be present to act as another chaperone. That is, if your father is in agreement."

"Yes, yes, take them with you; I should like to have my house to myself for one day," the Duke said, walking into the parlor with his cane, startling Freya quite badly. "Mrs. Beecham shall bring them."

Eric got to his feet, making a leg, "As you say, Your Grace."

The Duke grunted in acknowledgment before shuffling slowly around with his cane and walking out of the parlor. Freya watched him go, feeling quite annoyed with him for his continued rudeness to her in front of strangers.

She got up unthinkingly and marched out of the room as well, making her way to the garden. She dropped down on the grass with a sigh, uncaring that it was drizzling, and began to pull little tufts of grass in her annoyance.

“You mustn’t let him get to you so easily.”

She jumped, not having been aware that Eric had followed her.

“That is quite easy for you to say since you do not have to live with him.”

“That is true.” To her surprise, he dropped down by her side, folding his legs beneath himself and swaying back and forth. “I do not have to live with a father who has impossible expectations, but I have been in the Navy for nine years, and I understand what it means to be constantly barked at by superiors who are never satisfied with your performance.”

Freya considered him thoughtfully, trying to reconcile this understanding gentleman with the insufferable scapegrace she had encountered yesterday.

Which one is the real you?

“I suppose there would be some similarities,” she conceded.

He slid her a sidelong glance “In any case, I think you and my mother will get along quite well. And my brother is quite delightful.”

“Your brother? I thought he was dead.”

Eric flinched slightly, and Freya felt a moment’s regret for reminding him. “I have another. He is naught but three and ten years old, but he has an old soul.”

“I look forward to meeting him,” Freya said, just to be placating and to make up for her faux pas.

Eric smiled. “I think you would like him. He’s a lot more like Alexander than I am.”

“I never met Alexander, you know. He was merely a sword placed over my head by my father. I was offered no choice in this marriage whether it was to you or to him.”

Eric nodded. “I suppose that is why you are so hostile. But many a marriage has been born of arrangement, and the two people do quite well together. Did you think of that?”

“No. My father has been a menace to me my entire life. I do not imagine that anything he wants from me would contribute to my happiness.”

“Well, I am no stooge for him, and so you can rest peacefully knowing that I am not here to do his bidding. If he seeks to make you miserable, then know that I do not.”

“What *do* you seek?” She turned to look him in the eye.

He cleared his throat, his gaze slipping away. “I cannot say. I have not had time to consider it. I do as my duty dictates.”

“Duty. That’s what guides you?”

“Do not say it as if it were some dishonorable thing.”

“No, it is not, but it is dull and banal. Are you not passionate about anything?”

He seemed to really ponder the question before shaking his head. “Not that I’m aware of.”

“That is truly sad, Mr. Campbell.”

He huffed in amusement, turning back to look at her, “And what of you, Lady Freya? What is your passion?”

Freya looked down, caressing the grass. “Nature is my passion. I adore my garden. I have nurtured it for years. My flowers have been celebrated and admired and spoken of in my village since I was as young as your brother is now. It is important to me.”

Eric nodded, “I see that. So that is why you want to hold on so tightly to Stark Manor.”

“Well, it is also my home and my sister’s home.”

“Indeed.”

They sat in silence for a while, Freya enjoying the peace that was to be found in the slight drizzle. It was as if they were alone in the world, surrounded by tiny droplets of water. She knew that if her governess saw her, she would receive the scolding of her life for wanting to ‘catch her death’ of cold in spite of the fact that the temperatures were not that low, and it was just a light summer shower that would dissipate in moments, allowing the sun to come out again.

“My mother used to love gardening,” she said surprising herself. “She died a few years after Isabella was born—she never seemed to quite recover from that childbirth and declined slowly until the end. However, even on her worst days, the garden could give her joy. We would sit with her, playing in the soil as she weeded her flowers. It was the most peaceful and happy that we ever were.”

She looked at Eric and saw the sympathy in his eyes. He, too, knew the impact of loss; she could see that he understood what she was saying. The feeling of being alone together in the world intensified. One minute, he was looking at her, his eyes liquid with understanding; the next, his lips were pressing against hers in a soft delicate kiss.

She tensed in surprise, not having expected that, but his lips simply gently brushed against hers as if asking permission, and she relaxed again. Their lips moved together in tandem, and then he brushed his tongue softly against her

mouth, and she parted her lips to let him in.

The feeling of his tongue on the inside of her mouth was a sensation unlike any she'd ever had before. The intimacy of it was boggling, and yet, she felt that there was more she could experience from this. She opened her lips wider, allowing him in, and he gasped, moaning into her mouth as his hands snaked around her waist, holding her tight.

He nipped at her lower lip and then drew it into his mouth, sucking away the pain. Their mouths danced, teeth clashing before they found accommodation, tongues tangling together. She had seen the boot boy kissing the milkmaid in the stables one time, but she did not think that what they did was anything close to the way that Eric kissed her.

She fell into it like it was a well, and she had no control over how fast she was descending. The kiss just kept getting hungrier and more passionate, and she was helpless to stop it.

Not that she wanted to.

There was nothing that she had ever done that felt as satisfying as kissing. As she sucked Eric's tongue back into her mouth, she was quite sure she'd be happy to do this forever. She put her hands on his face, cupping his cheeks, and she let his tongue do what it would inside her mouth, mapping her insides with dedication, leaving no corner unexplored.

Suddenly he gasped and pulled back, her lips chasing his in protest.

"We have to stop," he said, his voice rough as if he had been shouting.

She stared at him, uncomprehending. "Stop why?"

"You don't really want this." He got to his feet quickly, and she had a fleeting impression of a tent in his breeches before he turned away. "Forgive me," he said softly before hurrying off.

Freya stared after him in stupefaction. Then she came back to herself and realized that she had practically been throwing herself at the Lieutenant Commander. Her cheeks heated, and she wondered not for the first time why Eric had her behaving uncharacteristically all the time.

“He’s the one who kissed me,” she told herself. But she could not escape from the fact that she hadn’t stopped him. In fact, she had been a very active participant in the kissing. She looked towards the house, searching the upper windows, wondering if anyone had seen them. Luckily, it was her chambers that faced the garden while Isabella’s and Mrs. Beecham’s rooms faced the road.

She had no idea where her father was but strongly suspected that he would not care about them kissing. After all, they were to be married on the morrow. With a sigh, she got up and walked into the house. Her dress was quite wet, and she needed to notify Isabella and Mrs. Beecham that they were invited to dinner at the house of her husband-to-be.

No doubt, Mrs. Beecham would insist that they do whatever they could to beautify themselves including curling their hair and soaking in lavender-scented water before applying oils and perfumes.

Freya was already tired just thinking about it, but it would keep her busy for the rest of the day and enable her not to think about what had just happened, and for that, she was grateful.

Chapter Seven



Eric received a detailed document in the afternoon outlining his agreement with the Duke. He read through it, quite taken aback at the level of specificity of the language. He and Freya would be required not only to sleep in the same residence but also in the same chambers until such a time as they had produced an heir.

Aside from the duchy itself, Eric and his family would not be eligible to purchase or sell any property tied to the Stark name until the above condition had been fulfilled. Eric was also prohibited from taking another woman to his bed before these conditions were fulfilled.

Eric's mind boggled at the audacity of the Duke. Summoning his solicitor, he went through the document with him. "This cannot possibly be legal, is it?" he asked.

The solicitor blew out a breath, "This is merely an agreement between two people, and so it can hold as many quid pro quos as any of the parties' desires. None of this stops you from inheriting the title, or the duchy that goes with it. It merely stipulates how the rest of the Duke's inheritance can be used. He has not stipulated what will happen should you fail to meet these conditions. It is important that you know that before you sign anything."

Eric slowly nodded, "You're right. I shall return this with a note stating that

the agreement is incomplete.”

“I would suggest calling upon him in person in case of any further questions.”

“His daughters will be arriving for dinner this evening. Perhaps I shall return with them and meet with him after.”

The solicitor nodded, “Yes, if the wedding is to be tomorrow, you need to work this out by the end of the day.”



Freya had thought that she would just be in for a day of primping and preparing for dinner, so it was a surprise when Mr. Silver ushered in a modiste, trailed by several footmen carrying bolts of cloth. “For your trousseau, my lady,” he said with his nose in the air. “Madame Cousteau is one of the best modistes in the city. She will have you set up in no time. You may have to delay your honeymoon for a day or so but certainly not more than that.”

Freya gawked at him. “Honeymoon?”

“Indeed, my lady. Your father has already made arrangements.”

Her eyes bugged out of her face. “Arrangements? To go where?”

“Don’t worry your mind about it, my lady. I shall take care of all the details.”

Freya realized just how closely her father intended to watch over her marriage at that moment. Her heart sank as she wondered if Eric had already known this when he offered her his assurances that he would not rush her. She felt that she would be a fool to trust his word. After all, had he not said her father intended to sell Stark Manor to go on a medical trip? But the Duke

had not so much as mentioned leaving town since then.

What if it was all an elaborate ruse to get me to agree to this marriage without making a fuss?

“Please lift your hands, ma’am,” the modiste said, measuring string in hand, and Freya did so absently, still caught up in her musings.

In any case, there’s nothing I can do about it now.

She huffed in defeat, standing still on the box she’d been given, so the modiste could measure the length of her leg.

While she was still swirling in dark thoughts, the door opened, ushering in Mrs. Beecham and a strange girl. Mrs. Beecham closed the door, gently leading the girl along until they were both standing in front of Freya.

“Lady Freya, allow me to introduce your new lady’s maid, Diana Ferguson.”

Freya looked to the girl, who curtsied very correctly, her eyes kept modestly downward. She was aware that lady’s maids were *de rigueur* for *ton* ladies, but she’d never had one before.

“Why now?” she asked softly.

“Your father says you need one. A proper lady cannot go about without one.”

Freya sighed, looking away from both of them. “Very well,” she agreed tiredly. “I hope you know what to do because I cannot teach you.”

The girl, Diana, curtsied even lower. “I came up in the Winchester household and was trained as a lady’s maid by Her Grace's lady's maid herself.”

Freya flicked a glance her way. “I am sure you have excellent references. My

father would not have retained you if it were not the case. Forgive me if I seemed to cast doubt on your capabilities.”

Diana bowed her head. “It is not my place to forgive you, my lady, but it is quite all right.”

Freya nodded. “Good. Now the farce may begin.”

Diana gave her an uncertain look before Mrs. Beecham ushered her towards the wardrobe, explaining where Freya kept all her gowns and other fripperies. Freya returned to her troubled thoughts and left them to it. What was clear to her was that her life was not only changing at a rapid pace, but that slowly but surely it was no longer her own.

Why am I even surprised? I should have known that Father would not leave us alone forever. He always has a plan for everything, including his daughters.

She thought with a pang of Isabella and what nefarious fate might be awaiting her sister in a few years. She was very afraid that just as her own life had been snatched out of her hands unceremoniously, the same would happen to Isabella.

What can I do? I cannot even help myself. How will I help her?

Mrs. Beecham came back, inspecting the gown that the modiste was currently fitting on Freya’s body. The satin gown was the deep red of port wine with belled sleeves made of thin muslin and an off-the-shoulder neckline. The gown's neckline and sleeves were joined together just above her armpit, with a black embroidered elaborate star design. The dress tapered to her waist before flaring out in an extravagant satin skirt, with a thin, black muslin petticoat peeking from underneath.

“Mm, you look very well in that.” Mrs. Beecham nodded her approval.

Freya might have agreed, might have even enjoyed wearing such a lovely gown were it not for the circumstances she found herself in. She just looked miserably at her governess and shook her head. “I suppose Mr. Campbell will be pleased.”

“Indeed, he should be. And credit to the modiste because that shade of red might easily have clashed with your hair. Instead, you look like a woodland nymph come to frolic amongst humankind for the night.”

Freya could not help snorting in amusement. “You are so ridiculous Mrs. Beecham.”

“Ach!” She waved her hand dismissively. “I only say what I see.” She turned to the modiste. “Will you be finished soon? We have much to do before we leave for dinner with her ladyship's betrothed.”

The modiste nodded. “I just need to put in one more pin, and then you are free to go, my lady.”

She matched action to word before carefully removing the gown from Freya's body. Freya stepped off the box, wearing just her shift, with a sigh of relief. She looked at the governess. “Now what?”

Diana stepped forward. “Now I brush your hair in preparation for your bath. I have sent for hot water and lavender petals and some oils as well since you do not seem to have any.”

Freya was rendered speechless for a moment. “Oh...well...I shall leave that in your capable hands.”

Diana bowed her head and moved away, busying herself with getting the tub ready and putting an intimidating array of bottles, tubes, and brushes on the dressing table.

Freya gawked while Mrs. Beecham looked on proudly. “Oh, I think she'll

do,” she murmured, nodding to herself.

Freya turned to stare incredulously at Mrs. Beecham. “Are you serious?” she hissed. “I have never used so many products on my person in my life.”

Mrs. Beecham nodded. “And it is high time you began. A lady’s skin should always resemble that of an English rose, and you spend too much time in the sun without a hat. I have warned you many times that your skin will pay for it.”

Freya rolled her eyes, quite used to the other woman’s rants by now. She realized she was not going to find an ally in Mrs. Beecham. She was probably quite pleased that Freya was finally forced to conform to lady-like expectations.

Mrs. Beecham turned to the door. “I must go and tend to Isabella. I leave you in good hands.” She gave Freya a pleased smile before closing the door behind herself.

Chapter Eight



“Are you quite sure that you want me at the dinner table?” William wrinkled his brow uncertainly as he looked up at Eric. He had been uncharacteristically subdued since the funeral. It absolutely broke Eric's heart.

“I am sure. Lady Freya has a sister who is just two years older than you. I am sure you will get along famously.”

William wrinkled his nose. “I am not sure. Girls can be quite tiresome.”

Eric laughed. “That is very true. But let us at least give her a chance. She is to be your sister-in-law after all.”

“And will they live here with us?”

“No, I told you that their father, the Duke, has a seat where Freya and her sister have been living. I shall go and stay with him. If you and Mother wish, you can join us there.”

“Will it be big enough for all of us?”

“Of course. Stark Manor once belonged to a knight long ago. He fought for

England and used the manor grounds to house his troops, so it has many rooms. It is big enough that you can choose to live there and not talk to any of the other residents for days.”

William’s eyes widened with interest. “Then I suppose one can play a lot of games in all of that space.”

“Indeed so. I’m sure you can find a hundred ways to make mischief.” Eric grinned at his brother, who smiled slowly back. It wasn’t his usual happy expression, but Eric would take anything that he could get.

He looked up as he saw his mother approaching. She wore a green gown decorated with flowers which fell from her shoulders to her feet in one swirling straight line. “Mother, you look ethereal.” He took her hands and kissed them both.

She smiled sadly. “You are too kind.”

“Merely honest.”

He let go of his mother’s hands, and she hooked her arm through his. “So, what time are we to expect your guests? Everything has been arranged, and we are ready.”

“Any moment now, Mother. Patience.”

To his relief, his words were rewarded by the sound of wheels on the cobblestones outside. He peered out of the window and confirmed that it was indeed the Stark carriage. He smiled. “There they are, right on time.”

He hastened to the door and opened it, stepping out to greet them as the coachman helped first Freya and then her sister followed by the governess out of the carriage. Eric murmured the words of greeting and welcome, noting with concern that Freya looked both pale and upset.

What could have happened between this morning and now? Perhaps she is still upset about the kiss.

He would not blame her if she was. It was tremendously dishonorable of him to steal such a kiss from her—in public to boot! Anyone might have come upon them. Still, he could not help but note how lovely she looked in her blood-red gown, her lush hair piled atop her head and fastened with an emerald brooch.

It could not be denied that she was a prime article, and Eric could not help how his eyes lingered on her. He turned away with a smile to greet her sister. “Lady Isabella, it is a pleasure to meet you.” He bowed over her fingers, kissing the air above them.

She blushed prettily looking pleased. “Pleasure to meet you, too, sir.”

He gestured towards the door. “Welcome to my humble home.”

The governess eagerly led the way towards his mother, who was waiting to greet them on the other side of the door. “Welcome. Welcome.” She spread her hands expansively, “My new in-laws. I am so happy to meet you. Finally, I shall not be the only woman in this family.”

Isabella giggled at that while Freya just widened her eyes in surprise. The governess hung back, watching her charges proudly. It was clear that she was more to them than just a servant. That made sense to Eric, considering that their mother had died quite young. Isabella especially seemed to look to her for direction.

His mother swept them up, cajoling them towards the parlor. “Dinner is just about served, but let us begin with an aperitif and toast to the future of this family.”

Eric could not help noting how quiet Freya was. Her sister was happy to participate in the celebrations, but Freya barely drank from her glass of port

before putting it down. She did not do anything untoward, but she kept aloof as if she would rather be anywhere else but there.

William came forward and was introduced. He grinned wide at Isabella, true to his promise to give her a chance, and sat next to her as the drinks were served.

His mother turned to Freya with a smile. “What a beautiful gown you have. It suits you immensely.”

Eric was inclined to agree.

“Thank you...ma’am,” Freya said softly.

“Oh, please call me Mama Campbell. All of my family does anyway.”

Freya colored up. “A-all right, M-mama Campbell.”

She patted Freya’s arm comfortingly, “You’ll get used to it, never fear.”

The housekeeper came to announce that dinner was served, saving them all from more awkward exchanges. Isabella looked around and then whispered loudly to William, “Do you not have a butler?”

He grinned. “No, we only have a housekeeper and a cook.”

“Oh.” She seemed to think about this deeply. “But my sister said you were rich.”

William laughed. “You’re funny.”

Isabella smiled uncertainly as if she wasn’t sure if that was a joke or not. Thankfully they arrived at the dining room, and Eric directed everyone where to sit, putting Isabella and William next to each other, the governess next to

Freya, and himself at the opposite end from his mother, who sat at the head of the table.

He worried that the dinner might be filled with awkward silences, but his mother and Isabella ensured that did not happen. Mama Campbell asked a lot of questions, and Isabella was all too happy to answer them.

The silence of her sister was quite noticeable in contrast. Eric decided that he needed to get Freya alone and find out what the matter was. It was surprisingly easy as they shifted to the parlor for dessert. As if she had read Eric's mind, his mother chivvied everyone else ahead of them, leaving Freya and Eric in the rear of the group.

Eric grabbed Freya's elbow to stop her from walking. She looked startled, turning to face him with wide eyes.

"Is something the matter?" he asked as politely as he could.

She blinked at him a few times. "What makes you think that?"

"You've hardly said a word the entire night."

"Well, your mother and Isabella talk a lot."

He ground his teeth, gripping both of her shoulders. "Indeed, they do. Especially when they have to carry the conversation."

She frowned as if she had no clue what he meant.

"You've been very quiet all night," he elaborated irritably.

Her eyes widened further, and she swallowed audibly. "I did not intend to be."

“Oh? And what has you so absent-minded then?”

“Why did you lie to me about Stark Manor?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“My father has shown no sign of wanting to sell it.”

“Indeed, he would rather hold it over your head now that he has realized what a hold it has on you. When I offered him the money to go for his trip, he laughed at me and told me that he does not take charity.”

She was staring intently into his eyes as if she might snatch the truth from them. It was disconcerting.

“He does not want to get well?”

“No, I believe he is working with his physicians and corresponding with experts from the Orient about his treatment. I suppose making the journey all that way would be too taxing for him.” He frowned. “You really thought I lied to you?”

She just looked at him and pursed her lips. “I didn’t know what to think.”

“Well, you can be certain that whatever happens now or in the future, I will never bother to lie to you. I see no benefit in that.”

She nodded jerkily, “All right then.”

He let go of her arms. “Very well. I am glad we settled that. Now, would you indulge my mother by attempting to be sociable for the rest of the evening?”

She had the decency to blush. “Of course. I did not mean to be rude.”

“I know you didn’t, but you could try to think of someone other than yourself once in a while.”

Her eyes became pinpoints of anger, but he did not pause to hear what she had to say. He turned and walked over to the parlor, trusting that she would follow. He knew it might not have been the best decision to make that dig, but he was extremely irritated by her behavior. If he was honest, it stung that she thought he was a liar, even though he could see how she came to that conclusion.

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly enough. Freya engaged in conversation with everyone else in the room aside from Eric. He didn’t blame her after his last comment. He was just glad that it did not get awkward.

He took the time to talk with Isabella and get further acquainted with her. She had a lot of questions about the *ton*’s gossip which he unfortunately could not confirm or deny. “I am a relative stranger to town. Ask me about the high seas, and I can tell you some stories. But not so much about what happens with the beau monde.”

She did not seem too disappointed with his answer, which was a relief, but proceeded to ask him about pirates. “I remember that my sister called you a pirate. Were you one?”

Eric laughed. “No, no. I was a Lieutenant Commander in His Majesty’s Navy. We did in our time on the seas encounter some pirates, and in some cases, we had to engage with them as warriors because the enemy used them to transport contraband across our waters.”

“So why did Freya call you a pirate?”

“Probably because of the scar on my face.” He grinned at her to show that he did not mind.

Isabella stared at it thoughtfully. “Did it hurt?”

Eric pondered whether he should tell her the truth. She was a young lady but not that young. “Yes, it hurt me a lot. Sometimes it still does.”

Her mouth turned down. “I’m sorry. Does it hurt now?”

He smiled, touched by her compassion. “No. It’s quite all right now.”

Her face brightened. “Oh good.”



Freya was rather surprised at the attention that Eric gave to Isabella. He answered her many questions patiently and honestly. It was difficult to reconcile this kind, warm gentleman with the cutting brute that she had encountered in the corridor. She was still very angry at his words.

*All of my life, I have never thought of myself or put myself before others!
How dare you say such a thing to me?*

Even as she spoke politely to his mother, she was still fuming. If she had not found herself liking Mama Campbell, in spite of her best efforts to remain aloof, she would have cut the evening short.

But finally, the digestifs were drunk, and everyone got to their feet.

“I shall ride back with you as I have some business to conclude with your father,” Eric said, much to Freya’s annoyance. She had been hoping to be rid of him for the evening at least. They all filed out of the room, Mama Campbell talking animatedly with Mrs. Beecham about the challenges of raising children as they walked ahead while Isabella and William chatted to each other, trailing behind everyone else. Freya had no choice but to engage with Eric.

She gave him a wintry smile. “I hope I was vivacious enough to meet your

standards.”

He smiled back, just as coldly. “I am touched that you would want to meet *any* of my standards. However, I have resigned myself to the impossibility of that happening when you are so hell-bent on seeing the world from your perspective alone.”

“That is not true!” she hissed, her palm itching to slap him.

He shrugged with studied nonchalance. “I can only speak of my own experience.”

“Well, your experience is flawed. Perhaps you are not used to interacting with people of a certain class. We do not all behave like pirates.” She hoped to cut him with her remarks.

He smirked. “Very clever. Were you eavesdropping on my conversation with your sister?”

Irritation rose in her throat like bile. “We were all in the same room; was I supposed to close my ears?”

“As I said before, you are free to do as you please.”

They reached the carriage, and he stepped forward to open the door for them. Extending a hand, he helped Mrs. Beecham climb up the stairs, followed by Isabella. Freya ignored his hand, climbing into the carriage all on her own, bristling all the while. He shut the door behind them. With a frown on her brow, Mrs. Beecham leaned forward to speak out the window. “Are you not coming with us, Mr. Campbell?”

He gave her a smile, “Indeed, I am. I shall follow behind you with my horse; after all, I will need a means to get home once my business is concluded.”

Mrs. Beecham nodded. “Oh. All right then.” She sat back in her seat, and the

coachman took off. Freya stared out of the window grinding her teeth and fuming. *Why did Mr. Campbell have to be so infuriating?*

Chapter Nine



“I don’t sleep much. Even though the tuberculosis makes me extremely tired, it does not make for a restful sleep. I much prefer to sit in my library with a hot toddy and a good book,” the Duke explained to Eric as soon as the butler ushered him into the room.

The Duke had been awake when they all arrived back from the Campbell residence and comfortably ensconced in his favorite armchair.

“I have read through the agreement you sent,” Eric began without preamble as he sat down on the leather Chesterfield opposite the Duke.

“And of course, you have questions.” The Duke put his book down with a smile.

“Just one,” Eric said.

The Duke gestured towards him. “Ask it.”

“You have given me a bevy of conditions for this marriage with your daughter, but you failed to mention what would happen should I fail to meet all these conditions.”

“Ah!” His Grace said with relish. “I am glad you have asked that question. Should my conditions not be met, I have made arrangements for my personal fortune and unentailed property to be remitted to the exchequer and donated to the crown. My daughters will get nothing, and neither will you.”

Eric blanched. “That is rather cruel to them, do you not think? I have my family’s fortune, but they will be left destitute.”

“Indeed.” The Duke nodded. “Do you not think that I don’t know who is resistant to this marriage? ’Tis my daughter as she continues to be a disappointment to me. So, if she does not meet my conditions, she will get *nothing* from me.”

Eric began to realize what a cruel man he was dealing with. He felt quite sorry for both Freya and Isabella. Getting to his feet he glared at the Duke. “You need not worry Your Grace. All your conditions will be fulfilled.”

The Duke nodded with satisfaction. “Good. We shall see you at the wedding tomorrow.”

Eric walked slowly out of the library, his thoughts in turmoil. He began to wonder what exactly he had got himself into and whether it was worth it for his family.

Father would have wanted this. Alexander would have wanted this. I have to do it for them.

Still, there was a niggling doubt at the back of his mind.

At what cost, Eric? At what cost?

That voice in his mind was reminiscent of his father, and he wondered if he was letting them both down.



Freya hardly got any sleep that night. How her mind was churning with so many emotions from anger to fear for her future and Isabella's to the stress of imagining how radically her life would change in the morning. Even if she was supportive of the wedding, the fact was that she had never lived in proximity to any man aside from her father. She had no idea what to expect, and it scared her.

Freya liked to know what to expect.

The only consolation she had was that once they were done with all the formalities, she could go back to Stark Manor and her garden. She missed it terribly.

Light had barely begun to seep in through the cracks in the curtain before her lady's maid appeared, drawing back the drapes before disappearing behind the screen to prepare her bath.

Despite her sleepless nights, Freya felt lethargic and reluctant to leave the bed. Once she did that, the day would have begun, and she would have to face our future.

And who wants to do that? Not me.

Isabella came bursting into her room and jumped on the bed, making her moan with mock annoyance. "Stop it, girl? Why do you have so much energy so early in the morning?"

Isabella continued to bounce up and down on the bed. "Are you not excited? Is it not an exciting day?"

No, it is not.

With a sigh of defeat, Freya sat up and regarded her sister bleary-eyed. “One would be forgiven for thinking it was you who was getting married today.”

Isabella grinned. “I like your betrothed. He is kind. And his brother is amusing. I think they will make good relatives.”

“You are just excited for more people to live at Stark Manor,” Freya rasped.

“Well...yes. I won’t deny it. It will be nice to have a house full of people. And Mama Campbell is lovely.”

“Well, they did not say that they will come to live with us.”

“Yes, they did! I asked William, and he said so.”

Freya was slightly taken aback by this news since Eric had not mentioned anything of the sort to her. But going over their own time together last night, she had to acknowledge that they had spent most of their time sniping at each other. There really hadn’t been an opportunity for their living arrangements to come up.

She pushed her blankets aside and shuffled out of bed, pushing her feet into her slippers and shuffling across the room to peer behind the screen and see what Diana was up to. Her lady's maid had the bath full of steaming water, and she was in the process of pouring in oils and petals. Freya wondered if she should expect this every day now.

She was not complaining, but it seemed like an awful lot of work.

Diana got to her feet and smiled. “Good morning my lady. Your bath is ready.”

Resigning herself to her fate, Freya stepped behind the screen and took off her nightgown. She sank into the water, sighing with pleasure as the hot water enveloped her.

I could get used to this.

Her shoulders relaxed, and she could feel herself becoming less tense as she lay in the water. Diana hummed a soothing tune as she picked up Freya's foot and began to massage it.

Mmm, I could really get used to this.

Chapter Ten



Eric waited impatiently at the doors of the chapel for his bride's carriage to appear. They were to be married at Saint Peters where his brother's funeral had taken place. Eric didn't mind, but he was surprised that the Duke had not chosen a more prominent venue if only for his own sense of importance.

But then when he thought about how the Duke treated his children, it made sense that he would make the minimal amount of effort for them. Eric had been feeling particularly sympathetic to the Stark girls ever since his last conversation with the Duke.

The man was truly insufferable.

The sound of wheels on cobblestones had him straightening to attention. Hands behind his back, he stood straight and waited for the carriage to come to a stop. The Duke was first to alight, leaning heavily on his cane. He was followed shortly by the governess and then Isabella. Finally, Freya appeared.

He could not suppress a gasp as he saw her. She had truly outdone herself, and he was sure that if she had bothered to participate in the season, she would have been a diamond of the first water, top of the trees, surpassing all other ladies there.

He could not help feeling a little smug, that he was to be her husband.

Her luminescent green eyes looked fearful, and he could not blame her at all. She must feel beset from all sides. He made a quiet vow to himself to do better by her. She took a step forward, her sky-blue satin gown trailing on the cobblestones. She looked like a dream of a princess with diamonds shining in her ears and her hair. Her neckline, exposed in the deep V of her dress, showed clearly the rapidly beating pulse at her throat. He wanted to reach out and embrace her, soothe her like a skittish horse; instead, he simply smiled encouragingly, offering her his arm. “You are lovely,” he murmured, so only she could hear.

Her lip twitched like she wanted to smile, but all she did was nod jerkily at him, avoiding his gaze.

One step at a time Eric.

That voice from last night encouraged him. He covered Freya’s hand with his own and led her slowly down the aisle.



Freya did not miss Eric's warm glances nor his admiring gaze. But she had no idea what to do with it all— it just made her feel hot and uncomfortable as if she no longer fit within her skin. It was all she could do to stop her hands from trembling as they paraded down the aisle.

The church was filled with family only, which meant it was quite empty, and yet Freya still felt intimidated. Mama Campbell smiled kindly as she passed, and Freya nodded to her. Soon they were in front of the priest, and it was time to say their vows.

Freya’s voice shook as she tried to say the words, “I take thee to be my lawfully wedded husband.” It all felt very surreal.

It was as if she blinked, and the service was over. She now belonged to Eric

Campbell.

“You may kiss the bride,” the priest intoned, and she blushed bright red.

Eric leaned in slowly as she watched him with wide eyes, his own eyes flicking from her eyes to her lips. Unconsciously, she found herself pursing her lips in preparation. Everything seemed to stop as he got closer and closer, and finally, his lips touched hers ever so fleetingly.

She surged upward to complete the contact, really shocking herself as she grasped his arms, afraid that he would move away. That small action seemed all the encouragement that he needed to pull her close and turn his gesture into a real kiss.

She parted her lips slightly, letting his tongue slip into her mouth briefly. Her heart jumped her fingers tightened briefly on his arm before she let him go. She had not meant to do that and hardly knew where to look. There was applause coming from their audience, but she didn't want to see it. She was reluctant to face the priest after having given him such a display in his church. And she most definitely did not want to look at Eric; oh, she was sure he was smirking in triumph.

So, she looked down at her feet and tried to slow down her breathing. She felt Eric's warm hand on her elbow, and he turned her around so that they could walk back up the aisle. She kept her eyes cast down so as not to meet anyone else's. The whole experience was just harrowing to her. All she wanted was to get out of there and go home.

Instead, she had to contend with her wedding reception, held in their dining room and attended by various close acquaintances of both her father and the Campbells. Freya realized with melancholy that she had no friends to invite. Having grown up isolated in the countryside, with only her sister and governess for company, she had not had much opportunity to interact with other Gentry.

I might find all this easier if I had a particular friend to confide in. One who

had hopefully undergone a similar experience.

Freya could never wish her life on anyone else, but she would have given anything to have a married woman to explain to her just what to expect—without using any horses as illustration.

Freya barely ate though the kitchen had outdone themselves with a feast worthy of a king. She played with her fork, watching as Isabella spoke animatedly with Eric's brother. The intensity of their conversation piqued her curiosity.

What could they possibly have to speak so deeply about?

Her father sat at the head of the table, his eyes glittering with illness, a smug smile on his face. Freya supposed he had gotten everything that he wanted, and so why would he not smile?

Her new husband sat across from her, conversing with his Navy friends, who happened to be in town and had heard of his nuptials. It seemed they were catching him up on everything that had happened since he left, judging from the intense attention he was giving them.

She shifted her eyes to his right hand and found Mama Campbell staring back at her with a sympathetic look in her eyes. She gave Freya a small smile as their gazes met, and Freya blushed, feeling caught out.

She quickly dropped her eyes, lashes coming down to hide her expression. As much as she liked Mama Campbell, she could not forget that the other woman was her husband's mother. Clearly, her loyalties would be with him.

The Duke tapped on his glass to get everybody's attention. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is time to toast the bride and groom so that they may feel free to leave us and embark on the consummation of their marriage and honeymoon. This wedding has taken place with considerable speed, and I want you to know that it is for no reason other than my ill health."

The crowd laughed, and Freya frowned, wondering what was funny.

“While such arrangements are made to finalize their honeymoon, my new son-in-law and heir, Eric Campbell, will stay with us here. I urge you to extend your congratulations and good wishes to the bride and groom as they begin this new phase of their lives.”

He began to clap, and the entire table joined him. Freya tried her best to smile. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Eric bowing to the company as he got to his feet. She watched in horror as he picked up a glass. “I, too, would like to make a toast.”

Freya tensed, watching him with wide eyes.

“Ladies and gentlemen, most of you know me as a humble Lieutenant Commander in His Majesty’s Navy. As of three days ago, I took my brother’s place as the first son of the family after his unfortunate demise.” He paused, mouth turning down. “Of all the obligations that he left, aside from taking care of my mother and brother, this is the most important. I hope to do him proud.”

He lifted up his glass. “To Alexander Campbell.”

“Alexander Campbell,” everyone murmured in a chorus before sipping from their glasses. Freya did the same though it felt strange to be toasting a man she would have married were he still alive instead of the actual one that she had married.

She heard Isabella ask William what his brother died of and ruefully shook her head. Sometimes her sister forgot all couth. What a question to ask a near stranger.

She noticed that Eric was still standing.

“I have one more toast to make,” he said, turning towards her. “To my new

wife, Lady Freya Campbell: as we embark on this journey together, may we always be in step so that as we build the next generation of this family, we do so in harmony, joy, and affection. To Lady Freya!” He lifted his glass in her direction as did everyone else in the room.

Freya blushed deeply, feeling quite mortified with all eyes on her. She wanted to narrow her eyes at her husband, just to let him know she was thinking murderous thoughts. Instead, she had to raise her glass and smile and try to look pleased at the toast. Isabella was clapping with enthusiasm while everyone else gave her polite applause.

She was not one to crave to be the center of attention. She was very tempted to sink into her seat and try to disappear. She was extremely pleased when Eric sat down, and attention moved elsewhere. She waited with bated breath to see if anyone else would make a toast, but luckily, most people were more interested in the food on their plates and the wine in their glasses.

An interminable time later, Mrs. Beecham came to crouch by her chair. “Good news, my lady. Your trousseau is ready. Madame Cousteau has outdone herself to have it ready in time. Mr. Silver tells me that you will be leaving today after all for your honeymoon.”

Freya frowned. “Leaving for where?”

Mrs. Beecham shrugged. “He did not inform me. I am tasked to summon you upstairs so that Diana can help you change into your traveling clothes. A coach awaits you.”

Freya’s heartbeat accelerated with anxiety. She didn’t want to go but knew that making a scene would not help.

Slowly, she got to her feet and followed Mrs. Beecham.



Eric was enjoying the wine and the food and the fact that his wedding was a success. True, the bride's father had arranged most of it, but that was as it should be. He saw the governess come to whisper in Freya's ear and knew immediately that something was afoot, especially since she left the table shortly after.

He did not have long to wait before the Duke's butler tapped him on the shoulder and asked for a word.

"The carriage is ready, sir, to transport you to your honeymoon. I trust your bags are packed?"

Eric huffed with irritation. "As a matter of fact, they are not. I was under the impression that we would have to wait a few days before leaving."

"Indeed, it was a matter of the bride's trousseau which has now been resolved. Therefore, there is no need to wait."

He narrowed his eyes at the butler. "And what of *my* attire?"

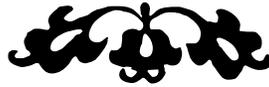
"Of course, we shall be happy to pass by your home and collect it. I trust you had packed your bags to get ready for your move to Stark Manor?"

As a matter of fact, Eric had never quite unpacked the bag that he'd come ashore with, and it contained most of his clothes. He didn't really want to admit that to the butler, however, so he said nothing.

Mr. Silver nodded as if he had read Eric's mind. "We shall be ready to go presently."

With a sigh of irritation, Eric turned back to the dining room, leaving the butler to stand by himself in the hall.

Chapter Eleven



“Bath? Why Bath?” Eric asked as he peered out of the window.

Freya also leaned forward to look outside. She had never been to Bath before. To her mortification, she was quite excited to be in a new place. She wasn’t about to tell anyone that though.

Opposite her, Mr. Silver sat sphinxlike, not bothering to take in the scenery. “His Grace thought that you might benefit from taking the waters,” he said to Eric, “but aside from that, there is little else to do here but, er, socialize with each other at this time of year.”

Freya blushed taking his meaning. She glanced at Eric, wondering whether he was complicit in her father’s plans for them. She was glad to see he looked just as displeased as she was. He had said he would give her time, and she meant to hold him to that.

“Silver, do you not think that it is none of your business what a man and his wife do?” Eric asked.

“His Grace has set me a task, and I mean to complete it. If you have any objections, you can take them up with him,” Silver replied haughtily.

Freya snorted derisively. “Do not even act like you’re not enjoying yourself,”

she murmured half under her breath.

“I am merely assisting the Duke in his endeavors and nothing more, I do assure you, Mrs. Campbell.”

Freya turned up her nose at him before turning away to stare at the passing scenery. She had not been aware that there were so many hills in Bath. Night was falling, and the streets were fairly empty. She looked forward to seeing them in the daytime and to learning exactly what these waters were and why people loved to take to them.

The carriage arrived at a massive pair of gates and stopped. Without any preamble, the gates were opened, and they rode into the compound.

“Whose residence is this?” Freya asked.

“This is one of your father’s properties, Mrs. Campbell,” Silver said. “We shall be staying here for the duration.”

The carriage stopped, and Eric alighted before holding out his hand to help Freya alight in turn. She murmured a word of thanks, looking up at the veritable mansion in surprise. She knew vaguely that her father owned various properties across the country, but he had never given them more details than that. That this magnificent mansion belonged to him was certainly unexpected.

Silver began to walk towards the massive front doors. “Follow me,” he said.

Freya and Eric exchanged glances before shrugging and following the butler. Unless he intended to stand over them while they consummated, Freya did not see what Silver could possibly do to ‘fulfill his master’s wishes’. She waited with trepidation to find out.

The house was populated with servants, who assured Silver that the bridal suite was ready.

He turned to Freya and Eric. “This way please,” he said.

They followed him, having no choice in the matter, and he led them up the stairs before turning to the right, down a brightly lit corridor, lined with a thick red woolly carpet and gold light sconces. At the end of the corridor was a massive double door that Silver opened before stepping back.

Freya stepped into the room, looking around warily and in wonder. The room was lavishly appointed with a huge four-poster bed dominating the center of it draped in red velvet and covered with a gold satin bedspread.

The floor was made of wood and covered with several fur rugs. A three-seat Chesterfield sat just next to the door against the wall. Near the windows was a second door that led to what was clearly a dressing room. Two wardrobes stood side by side next to his and hers vanity tables. A large bath dominated the room just in front of a huge fireplace. Against the outer wall of the room was a hole in the wall, and jutting from it was a pump. Below the pump was a bucket.

Freya curiously went and pulled the lever and then jumped back in surprise as water poured into the bucket.

Eric’s jaw dropped as he came nearer. “I have seen such a contraption in my travels. How clever to have converted it to work for bringing water to the second floor rather than up a well.”

Freya shook her head, just staggered by the revelation that all this belonged to her father. It was luxury worthy of a prince, and certainly, they had nowhere near these amenities available in his ancestral seat at Stark Manor.

It was boggling that her father invested in all this luxury at a home he never used while willfully neglecting the one where his daughters lived.

Eric was looking around, his eyes bright with interest. “I suppose the water is brought up and then boiled over the fire. How decadent.”

“You will also note that the tub is wide enough to fit two,” Silver pointed out in his haughty voice.

Freya stared at him in disbelief. Surely, he did not mean that they should *bathe* together. That was simply going too far.

“Thank you, Silver. I believe we can manage on our own now,” she said curtly.

He bowed low. “Then I shall wish you a goodnight. Your lady’s maid and valet will be by shortly to attend you.” He backed out of the room, his face studiously blank, and closed the doors behind him.

Freya turned to meet Eric’s gaze, and they stared at each other for a long moment. She took a deep shaky breath, trying to steady herself. “What now?”

Eric blew out a breath. “Well, I suppose I should give you some time to... prepare for bed. I shall go and explore the rest of the mansion.” He nodded once then turned smartly on his heel and headed for the door. He’d barely closed it behind him when there was a knock, and Diana entered.

She curtsied before heading straight to the wardrobe, which contained Freya’s bags, and she began to unpack. She laid out a lacy white gown on the bed before inviting Freya to sit on the stool in front of the vanity. As Diana brushed her hair, two servants pumped water and put it to boil in a cauldron over the fireplace. The room soon filled with gentle steam, warming it up and making Freya feel somnolent and relaxed.

Once her hair was brushed to Diana’s satisfaction, and it shone in the candlelight, Diana tied it in a bun atop her head. Freya was then invited to get to her feet and moved to the tub which was filled to almost overflowing with steaming water. She let her lady’s maid’s hand relax her even further as Diana ran them along her body, gently rubbing away the road dust from Freya’s skin.

She felt so calm yet gently aroused from all the stimulation. Once her bath was over, and she had dried, Diana let Freya's hair cascade down her back and dressed her in the lacy gown. It left little to the imagination, and the silky material brushed sensuously against her skin, making her nipples peak and her heart rate speed up.

She knew that all of these things were designed to facilitate their consummation, and she was beginning to wonder what objections she actually had to it. Diana pushed back the bedspread, so Freya could lie down before her lady's maid bid her goodnight.

She lay on the soft goose-down pillow, staring at the myriad of candles that were lit around the bed, bathing the room in a soft rose light. She had to credit Silver's efforts in ensuring that the atmosphere was conducive to what they wanted Freya and Eric to do. It was not long after she'd lain down that Eric came barging in, stumbling a little, almost as if he'd been pushed.

She sat up in bed, startled. "Wha...?"

He gave her a sheepish smile. "Apologies, apparently I was taking too long to return."

She quirked an eyebrow, "Did they make you come back like an errant puppy?" She giggled at the thought.

"You could say that." He reached for the buttons on his coat. "Now excuse me while *I* prepare for bed."

"O-of course." Freya lay back down and shut her eyes tight, trying not to even *listen* to the shuffling noises he made as he carried out his ablutions.

"No valet for you?" she asked.

"No, I sent him to bed. He can attend to what little stubble I have in the morning. And I am perfectly capable of drawing my own water to have a

bath. I did it all the time in the Navy.”

“Mm.” Freya tried not to think of him naked in the bath, but it was difficult. She pictured his broad shoulders, his narrow waist, and then her mind hit a blank wall. She turned around, plumping the pillow and scrunching her eyes shut as she tried to think of something else.

I wonder how Isabella is doing? I hope she's not too scared without me.

Thoughts of her sister only distracted her for a few minutes. Then Eric splashed some water, and she was back to wondering what he looked like at the moment with nothing but water glistening on his skin, his long legs flexing with strength as he bent them to try and fit his length in the tub. Silver was wrong. There was no way the two of them could fit in there. Not with Eric's height.

Not unless she sat between his legs.

And that would be ridiculous. How would we bathe?

She squirmed a bit at the thought of leaning against his lean hard chest, his musk enveloping her, his strong arms bracketing her body.

She gasped, sitting up and throwing her pillow across the room.

Why am I thinking these things?

She quickly got out of bed and ran to pick up the pillow. That's when she noticed the bottle of port from the table as well as two glasses and the plate of grapes, slices of cheese, and biscuits sitting beside it on the bedside table.

She rushed forward, pouring herself a full glass of port and then gulping it down before picking up a bunch of grapes, lifting it over her mouth, and biting off individual grapes one by one.

She closed her eyes enjoying the flavor. “Mm,” she murmured softly.

There was a groan from across the room, and she opened her mouth to see Eric leaning against the door, feet crossed at the ankles, and arms crossed, dressed in nothing but a banyan and staring at her with hungry eyes. “You have a talented tongue,” he rasped.

Freya did not know what he meant by that, but she blushed anyway, sensing the sensuous theme underlined by his tone. She put down the grapes, drained her glass of wine, and slipped back into bed. She pointed to the Chesterfield. “Perhaps you can sleep there tonight.”

He looked at the three-seat couch disbelievingly. “I doubt that even my legs alone could fit on that piece of furniture. You will just have to resign yourself to sharing with me until your father is satisfied.”

“Did you forget your promise to me?” Freya narrowed her eyes at him.

He came forward, picking up the glass of port and filling both their glasses. “No, I did not. And I am an adult who is perfectly capable of controlling myself, so you need not worry. I shall not touch you.”

Freya did not know whether to be glad or disappointed.

He handed her a glass and held up his own. “A toast, to enjoying ourselves on this enforced holiday.”

She almost giggled in surprise but managed to swallow it down by taking a sip of her drink. “Cheers,” she said belatedly.

He sat down on the side of the bed, picked up a biscuit, and took a delicate bite. He sat, chewing as he considered her thoughtfully. “I am getting the impression that you still do not trust me at all. Why is that?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know you.”

“Hmm, well I suppose this honeymoon is a chance to correct that.”

She ran her eyes down his naked chest. “You could begin by covering yourself up.”

He smirked, looking away as he took another bite of his biscuit. “Why is that, Lady Freya? Am I bothering you with my nudity?”

Freya blushed, sliding her eyes away from his body. “I didn’t say that. I merely meant that it would be the polite thing to do.”

He laughed ruefully. “And that is what we are, I suppose. Two strangers with nothing but politeness between us.”

She blinked at him, brow furrowed, trying to discern the emotion beneath his words. He almost sounded...displeased. “What would you rather we have?” she asked curiously.

“Well, how about some candidness for once? If you will admit to me that my nakedness bothers you, I will put on a sleep shirt.”

Her eyes widened, and her breath stopped as she stared at him in surprise. She had not been expecting anything like that. “An-and if I don’t?”

He shrugged with studied nonchalance. “Well then, there will be no need for me to wear a shirt, will there?”

Freya struggled for a bit, wondering if she should say the words as he sipped his port and ate his biscuit. She watched from beneath her lashes as he finished and then walked to the other side of the bed before climbing in. She tensed, waiting for his touch, but it never came.

Slowly but surely, she relaxed, even risking a glance over her shoulder to look at him. He seemed to be asleep. For some reason, that filled her with annoyance.

She turned away from him, flouncing a little, and closed her eyes determinedly.

“Good night, my lady.”

She jumped a bit, her eyes flying open, and she rose on one elbow, turning to stare at him. He still lay prone, facing away from her, his broad back all she could see, his dark hair gently brushing against his shoulders. She stared for a while, but he didn't move. Lying back down on her pillows, she sighed, “Good night, Eric.”

She didn't think she would be able to sleep for a long time, and so she was surprised when sleep pulled her under, and she settled into the secure arms of Morpheus.



Eric got up on one elbow, staring down at his wife. She was sleeping soundly, chest gently rising and falling, the twin peaks of her creamy breasts visible from the low cleavage of her negligee.

It had taken every ounce of his self-control last night not to touch her, pull her to him, and cup her breasts beneath the silky satin. He had wanted to run his hands all over her body, just to feel the contrast between the silkiness and pillowy soft goodness of her flesh.

Her negligee didn't leave much to the imagination, and he was surprised at the womanliness of her body, having thought of her as a green girl, barely grown. Her body told a different story with her lush breasts, perky and alert, begging for touch. Her small waist that he felt he could encircle with a single hand. Her hips, jutting out in soft, curvy contours. It was more than any red-blooded man should be asked to do — to keep his hands to himself.

But he had managed.

Now, here he lay, next to her sleeping form, her impossibly shiny auburn hair spread on the pillow like autumn leaves, her long neck and blue vein exposed just begging for him to lean down and suckle, maybe bite down and feel her pulse ratcheting upwards.

What he would not actually do it.

He scrambled out of bed before she woke up and caught sight of his tumescence. He had no illusions. He was well aware that she was disgusted by him, his ugly scar curving a path from chin to left arm in a jagged, mottled line. She had told him as much last night when she asked him to cover his chest and save her from having to see it.

But Eric wanted no illusions between them. He did not want to trick himself into thinking that they might have something between them. It was better to always have that reminder than to allow himself to fall for somebody who could only find him abhorrent.

Walking to the dressing room, he shut the door behind himself and leaned against it with a sigh. He closed his eyes, his hand moving downward and circling his hardness, squeezing and massaging as he groaned, his mind in the next room on the bed. His free hand cupped itself, palm itching, wanting to touch the actual bosom in his imagination.

How tight would she be if I tried to penetrate her?

In his hand, his erection jumped, getting harder at the thought. He moaned, undulating against the door as he pictured her in his arms, begging for him, lifting her own silky negligee, and urging him to possess her fully.

He cried out and then stuck his fist in his mouth as jets of spend splattered on the floor.

Silver will not be happy about this.

The thought made him laugh in bitterness and despair. He and Freya had gotten themselves into an impossible situation.

Truly caught between a rock and a hard place. How might we negotiate this landscape and come out intact?

Eric didn't know.

Crossing over to the pump, he filled the bucket with water, and then stepping into the tub, he poured it over himself. He really needed the cold water to help cool himself down. He realized as he stood in the tub, banyan wet and clinging to him, that he needed to come up with a plan.

Otherwise, we are all going to end up getting hurt.

Chapter Twelve



F reya was surprised when Eric asked for some brandy to go in his tea at the breakfast table. She quirked an eyebrow at him, and he smiled wryly. “The sun’s over the yard arm somewhere in the world.”

She didn’t deign to answer but simply went back to her scrambled eggs, forking them delicately into her mouth. While she could not deny that sleeping next to him had added a new layer of intimacy to their relationship, it also made her feel increasingly awkward around him.

“What? Nothing to say aside from silent contemptuous judgment?” he asked.

She looked up sharply, glaring at him. “Are you trying to provoke me?”

“And why would I do that, pray tell?”

She ground her teeth. “Perhaps you enjoy it. Who knows what...perversions you enjoy?”

He grinned widely, taking a sip of his tea. “Are you asking? I’ll tell you if you are.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She sprang to her feet, face burning, “Excuse me. I

don't think I'm hungry anymore." She hurried away, feeling a little regretful because she would have liked to finish her eggs. They were delicious.

But she could not sit at that table with Eric for one more minute with him provoking her like this. With a growl of frustration, she decided to take a walk in the garden.

Perhaps when he is done with his breakfast, I can go back and finish mine.

She stepped out of the French doors that led to the back garden and looked around in awe. Someone obviously expended a lot of time and energy looking after the garden, judging by how well-tended it was.

She hurried down the steps, her hand trailing along the vines that bordered them. She bent down and smelt the flowers planted in a row along the wall of the mansion, reveling in their vibrant colors before she skipped further down the garden that was planted with fruit trees and flowering shrubs, bushes shaped like topiaries, and to cap it all, a small pond in the middle of the garden, surrounded by stone benches, lily pads, irises and reeds.

She felt as if she might have died and gone to heaven.

Sitting down on the stone bench beside the pond, she just took it all in. Pushing away thoughts of how her father made fun of her gardening efforts, she resolved to enjoy the peace and tranquility evoked by *this* garden and its carefully tended plants.

She heard footsteps and looked up to see Silver approaching, his hands clasped behind his back, his face solemn, dressed in an impeccable black suit with a white shirt and white stockings. He came to a stop by her bench.

"Mr. Campbell requests the pleasure of your company, my lady."

Freya gave him a skeptical glance. "Did he now?"

Silver nodded.

Freya rolled her eyes. “And what, pray tell, does he wish to do with my company?”

“I believe he means to take you to a picnic in the Vauxhall gardens.”

Freya perked up. “Oh really? And who’s idea was that? Yours?”

Silver said nothing, merely waited.

Freya huffed. “Very well, I shall need to go and change. Have Diana bring the rest of my breakfast to my chambers. Then I’ll be ready to go.”

Silver bowed. “As you wish, my lady.”

He turned and walked away, and Freya sighed. She was happy to exchange one garden for another, but she really wasn’t looking forward to spending more time with Eric. She was quite put out with Silver for carrying out her father’s instructions with such diligence and determination. Whatever happened to not being able to find good help these days?

Oh well, if wishes were horses...

With a sigh, she got to her feet and went back inside.

Focus on the gardens and not the company, she told herself firmly. That’s the only way you will get through this— by finding the nuggets of joy where you can.



The butler did not even let Eric finish his breakfast before he pulled up a

stool and deposited a basket on it, filled with — as far as Eric could see — various types of food and drink. He spotted a bottle of wine, glasses, and a few wrapped packages.

“What’s going on?” he asked with resignation, knowing full well he would not like the answer.

“You and Lady Freya are going on a walkabout at Vauxhall gardens, followed by a picnic.”

Eric frowned. “Is that so? I was not aware.”

“Well then, now you are.”

Eric just glared at him as the butler walked off, his back straight. He would have been tempted to stick his tongue out at the man were it not such a juvenile thing to do. With a resigned sigh, he put his fork and knife aside and got to his feet. “I suppose I shall go and change into something more suitable for walking,” he said to no one.



The pleasure gardens at Bath had beautiful landscapes and romantic arrangements of features and pathways that provided many a route for Freya and Eric to wander along, enjoying nature as well as the music that was played by a resident orchestra.

It turned out that carrying food for the picnic was unnecessary seeing as there were various hotels ready to serve them breakfast.

“We should take to cure,” Freya suggested, “It might help with your-” she shut up as she realized what she was about to say, biting her lip nervously. “I — I mean...”

Eric smirked cruelly, “Do not fear pointing it out. I know very well that my scar is hideous. Unfortunately, no amount of taking to the waters would make it cease to exist I’m afraid. You shall just have to get used to it.”

“I did not mean —” Freya tried to say, distressed that he would think that of her, but he stopped her words by raising his hand.

“It is fine. Let us walk and enjoy the garden and not speak of that again.”

Freya blew out a breath but said nothing more. Just twirled her umbrella as they walked in tense silence. She kept flicking glances at Eric, who was walking stiffly at her side, trying to think of something she could say to apologize or mitigate her faux pas.

She truly had not meant anything about his face. It was just that...the scar was slightly raised and looked painful. She’d seen him flinch, or grimace, once or twice and had just assumed that the scar pained him. She’d heard that the waters might help with painful wounds. That was her only intention.

But she could see that Eric was taking it as some sort of slight to his appearance – which was not the case at all. She did not want to apologize because that would confirm to him that she’d meant his face was hideous, but she did not want him to continue to think badly of her.

She looked behind her where Diana was walking, accompanied by a footman carrying the picnic basket. They were present courtesy of Silver who had miraculously stayed behind.

Freya pointed to a slight clearing, surrounded by all sorts of multicolored flowers. “That seems like a lovely place to settle down and eat.” She declared though they’d hardly been walking for a long time.

Diana curtsied, “Yes, my Lady. We shall set up the picnic while you continue to enjoy the gardens.”

Eric huffed, flicking her an amused glance as Freya deflated. “Er yes, of course. You do that.”

The footman and Diana detoured towards the garden as Freya and Eric kept walking forward. She looked around, determined to immerse herself in the beauty around her and enjoy herself if nothing else. She moved her head from side to side, humming a little to the music as they turned right onto yet another path. Once she stopped pouting, she realized that it truly was quite beautiful around her. Whoever had set these gardens up really knew what they were about.

“What is it with you and gardens? Why do you love them so much?”

Eric’s question took her by surprise.

“Oh, well...it’s something my mother and I used to share. When she died, I felt obligated to continue with it. I also find that it gives me tremendous peace to be among the flowers.”

He grinned, “Is it because they don’t talk back when you speak to them?”

“Ha ha.” Freya sent him a glare, “No, as a matter of fact, that’s not it. And you are wrong to think that plants do not communicate with us – even if they don’t use words.”

He quirked his brow, looking surprised and curious. “Is that so? Do tell me what they tell you.”

“Well, for one thing, certain flowers emit fragrance in order to attract bees and other insects so they can move their pollen to other flowers for fertilization.”

Eric stopped walking to stare at her in shock, “How do you know this?”

“Well, I read books on botany.”

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“Quite the bluestocking, aren’t you?”

Freya tossed him a defiant look, “As a matter of fact, I am.”

He smiled. “Good. There is nothing worse than a vacuous wife.”

She turned, narrowing her eyes at him, “I do not read in order to provide you with entertainment.”

He put a hand to his chest, “Oh God forbid!” he said mockingly.

Her eyes narrowed further, “Are you making a game of me?”

“Not at all. My sentiments were sincere. *You’re* the one who chose to snap at me because of them.”

“Humph...” Freya shot him suspicious glances now and then, but his face remained impassive.

“When did your mother shuffle off the mortal coil?”

She looked sharply at him to see if he was smiling. Her face only softened when she saw how serious he was. She cleared her throat. “I was but a decade old, my sister half that. She died in childbirth. My little brother followed a week later.”

His lips turned down. “That is tragic. And your father never remarried?”

She shrugged. “I think he did try. But his ornery nature is widely known, and he would not take just anyone.”

Eric slowly smiled, "That is...paradoxical."

Freya laughed. "You may go ahead and let your amusement out. I do recognize the irony of wanting very specific things when all you have to offer is a mean tongue and a stingy hand, not to mention two young half-wild children to take care of."

He grimaced. "When you put it like that it sounds..."

"Unpleasant?"

He inclined his head in silent acknowledgment.

"Well, you can imagine having to live that life."

He sighed. "For what it may be worth to you, I am sorry that your life has come to this."

"But not sorry enough to do anything about it."

He gave her a startled look, "Do something? Like what?"

"You could have refused my father's offer when he first made it."

Eric threw back his head and laughed. "You overestimate my power in this situation. If I had refused him, your father would simply have sold all his unentailed property and left you and your sister destitute. Would you have preferred that?"

Freya blinked in confusion, surprised to find that she was shocked that her father could have done such a thing to her and Isabella. She knew he'd long lamented that they were not the boys he wanted, but somehow she'd still assumed that beneath the bluster, he truly cared for them.

"So, you see, little miss Freya, you and I are in the same boat. We both need this marriage."

She looked up at him, brow furrowing in suspicion. "You are telling me this so that I can be on your side. It is not the truth."

He shrugged. "If you don't believe me, ask your father."

Chapter Thirteen



Eric sat opposite Freya on the grass as they listened to the orchestra play. The lady's maid and the footman had arranged their picnic and then withdrawn to a discreet distance out of direct sight. Freya ate her food with fierce focus, ignoring all of Eric's attempts to make conversation.

He was a little put out that she would think he was lying about her father's words. Aside from the fact that he would never do such a thing, it was clear just from Freya's conversation what a cold calculating man the Duke of Riverhead was. He could not understand how she could know that and still believe that he would see to their needs unconditionally.

He shook his head inwardly. What a hold parents have on their offspring however horribly they're treated.

He thought of his own father and the standards he imposed upon his family.

He is the reason I am here, enduring this arranged marriage in the hopes of winning my family a title. It was his dream.

He realized he was just as subject to his father's wishes as Freya was to hers. He decided to treat her a little more patiently as a result. No one liked to discover that their parent had feet of clay.

He blew out a tired breath. "Can we at least try to get along? I feel as if the time will go by easier if we are not constantly at each other's throats."

She turned to him, frowning, still chewing upon her sandwich of bread and cheese. "I have not been at your throat. I think I have been endlessly polite, so I don't know what you're on about."

He rolled his eyes. "I am talking about this gamesmanship you have going on with me. Anything I say, you try to top it with something better."

"That is completely ridiculous!" she exclaimed. "You are the one always trying to make me look silly."

"I swear to you, I am not."

"Humph." She folded her arms, glaring at him. "And now you seek to deny it because you know how childish it makes you look!"

"This is ridiculous. You are imagining things."

She got to her feet and began to stomp away, pulse throbbing angrily in her neck. Eric watched her go, shaking his head as he tried to understand what had just happened. It had been his intention to quell the fighting, not stoke it.

With a sigh, he got to his feet and followed her. "Freya...Freya!"

She ignored him, walking faster along the maze of paths in the garden. Eric hastened his footsteps to catch up. He reached out and grabbed her elbow, he pulled her around to face him. "Stop, please. Let us talk."

Her face was quite red, and he was surprised to see that her eyes were shiny with unshed tears. He frowned. "I'm sorry. I did not mean to anger you." He closed his eyes, pursing his lips. "We must stop assuming the worst of each other. Can we possibly just eat our food amicably and then enjoy the gardens?"

“I can enjoy —” she began to say, but he put a finger over her mouth, effectively hushing her up.

“I said.... amicably.”

She huffed and then nodded reluctantly, flexing her shoulders. He took his finger from her mouth. “Good. Now, take my arm,” he held it out to her, “and allow me to escort you back to the picnic.”

She slid her hand through his arm, resting her palm in the crook of his elbow, and let him lead them both back to the picnic. Folding her feet under her, she sat down before accepting the glass of port he passed to her. “Alcohol should assist us to relax,” he suggested with a smile.

She nodded in agreement and drank before skewering a piece of roast meat and putting it in her mouth. Eric smiled as he took a bite of cheese. “You see, we can get along.”

Freya smiled back. “As long as we do not speak.”

He shrugged. “If that is the price, we have to pay...”

She shook her head in bemusement but continued to enjoy the meat and bread and cheese. The music was certainly helpful in calming her mood as well.

Once they were done with the food, they focused on emptying the bottle of wine, drinking companionably as they listened to the orchestra.

“Do you play the piano?” Eric asked.

Freya nodded. “Is it not mandatory for every lady?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Eric said.

“Oh, yes, of course. You have no sisters.”

“And we did not grow up expecting to join the *ton* and its many events.”

Freya laughed. “And how do you feel about that?”

“I am relatively resigned. It is part and parcel of the occupation.”

She made a face. “I suppose it is. Being part of Society is certainly seen as important, but I think that one can live peacefully in the country without engaging with all of that.”

He inclined his head to the side and made a dissenting sound. “Not if one wishes to continue to be successful in their enterprises. My father wanted my brother to inherit the title mainly because it comes with connections one would not otherwise have.”

“Oh, so it’s all about vulgar commerce.”

He gave her a look. “Money is what enables you to live. Whatever you call the process of getting it, the truth is you rely on commerce just as much as the rest of us. The only difference is that the nobility hires others to deal with the day-to-day aspects of a business.”

She looked away, blushing slightly. “Forgive me, I did not mean to put you down or —”

“Whether you mean to or not, you seem to do it quite regularly.”

She turned back to stare at him with wide eyes. “I...do not,” she said uncertainly.

“Perhaps you do not notice, but you do say some things that make me wonder if you think me beneath you.”

Freya blanched. “No. I am not so high in the instep. Perhaps I am unthinking, but I do not mean to be.”

Eric nodded. “I understand. A lifetime of instruction cannot be dispelled so easily even when one is forced to adjust one’s expectations.”

Freya huffed, shaking her head. “There were no expectations to be adjusted!”

Eric just gave her a skeptical look and went back to his wine. She gave him a sidelong glance, wondering if he would say more, but he just drank in silence. He left her feeling unsettled and discontented. For some reason, she did not want him to think of her as a brat.

Though I don’t know why I should care for his good opinion.

She took a large sip of her port and then put the glass unsteadily down. She turned to him with a resigned sigh. “See here, sir. I am sorry for offending you although it was not my intention. You are far too sensitive, especially about that scar on your face, and I think you would be much happier if learned to be less tense about it.” She was quite pleased with her apology and took another sip of her drink.

Eric stood up abruptly. “I think we should leave now.” He began to gather together their picnic items as Freya watched him, nonplussed. The footman appeared, taking over the task from Eric. He got to his feet and walked a few feet away, facing away from her.

“Is something the matter?” she asked, still sitting and sipping her port.

He shook his head. “No, everything is fine. We should go. It looks like rain.”

Freya sighed as she struggled to her feet, swaying a little on account of the amount of port she’d drunk.

Perhaps I had a tad too much.

She giggled, feeling like a naughty child. Eric turned to look at her, eyebrows raised. “What’s funny?”

She waved a hand blearily. “Nothing. What did I just say about you being overly sensitive?”

He grunted, shaking his head and looking annoyed. She huffed, tottering past him and turning into one of the walkways in the hope that it would take her eventually back to the carriage. She felt something warm close around her arm and looked down to see Eric’s rather large, strong-looking hand, holding onto her.

“You’re going the wrong way,” he snapped and pulled her towards him.

“Oh.” She stumbled, falling into him, her hand coming up to rest on his hard chest in a bid to steady herself. “Oh,” she said again quietly as she stared at the rapid rise and fall of his chest, her own heaving in sync. “How hard you are here.”

She ran her palm along his chest, pressing down and enjoying how there was barely any yield no matter how hard she pushed at him.

“What are you doing?” He seemed torn between amusement and annoyance.

She looked up at him, a frown furrowing her brow. “I am just trying to see how hard your chest is. How do you get it like this?” She moved her hand from his chest to hers. “Mine is so soft and spongy.”

He let out a bark of laughter before smothering it. “You’re ridiculous,” he murmured before taking firm hold of her arm. “And drunk I believe. Come now.” He tried to lead her down the right path, but she resisted, so to her horror, he picked her up and slung her over his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” She began to bang her fists on his back, “Put me down this instant!”

“In a minute. Calm down.” He slapped her bottom lightly.

She growled, increasing the tempo of her hits. “Do. Not. Tell. Me. To. Calm. Down!”

He just laughed, increasing her rage. There was not much she could do about it at the moment except swallow the feeling of nausea and try to endure this humiliation with as much dignity as she could.

Finally, they reached the carriage, and he put her down carefully. Smacking him on the shoulder, she turned around with a huff and entered the carriage, slamming the door behind her.

“You may not sit with me!” she called. “Find your own way back.”

He laughed, shaking his head, and opened the door. He leaped up into the carriage and sat opposite her. “I will forgive your unreasonableness because you’re clearly jug bitten, but behave yourself, or else, I shall have to put you over my knee.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You like to spank me too much.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “I beg your pardon?”

“Yes! You do it a lot. You are always threatening me with a beating...”

“Always threatening?” he asked in disbelief. “I have never threatened you before in my life.”

“Humph.” She crossed her arms and stared out of the window, determined not to look at him again for the entire length of the journey. She heard him chuckle but did not deign to look at him. Even as she sulked in her corner, she could not help but be impressed by how strong he was and how effortlessly he had carried her.

Chapter Fourteen



Freya slept like the dead after all the wine she'd imbibed, but Eric found it a lot harder to get to sleep. For one thing, her lady's maid had dressed her in a lacy bit of lingerie, clearly intended to tempt her husband into bed, and then combed her long auburn mane, so it lay around her like a sparkling halo.

The chambers were warm enough that she'd kicked off her covers in her sleep, her bottom sticking out as she slept on her stomach. He lay next to her, his body aroused, his hand itching to curl along the soft curves of her buttocks. At last, it got too much to resist, and he grabbed his own erection, his eyes on her figure, and began to pump it desperately, needing to obtain some relief.

He put his fist in his mouth so as not to make a noise as he pumped up and down, groaning deep in his throat. It didn't take long to achieve completion, and once he was done, he slid out of bed to get the washcloth from the table and clean himself up, staring at Freya the entire time.

He threw the washcloth on a pile of his dirty clothes with a sigh and got back into bed.

What am I doing? he asked himself plaintively. Unfortunately, he had no answers to give.



Freya woke up with a pounding skull and a cottony feel in her mouth. She groaned, sitting up and clutching her head. She looked around and then down at her body, wondering what happened. Her eyes widened in horror.

“What am I wearing?” she whispered.

A low laugh had her turning to the side, to see Eric settled back on the pillow beside her, watching her. She frowned at him. “What did you do to me?” she accused loudly.

Eric sat up and rolled out of bed and walked over to the table where the sink stood. “Oh no, no, you cannot blame this on me. I did not tell you to drink all that wine.” He poured water on his face.

Freya blinked and then squinted, glaring at the open curtains that let the sun in to burn her eyes. “Would you kindly close the curtains please?”

Eric laughed softly, but he did as she asked. She began to shuffle out of bed but then realized that her night gown was rather revealing. Instead, she grabbed the sheet and pulled it up to her chest glancing suspiciously at Eric.

“Too late,” he said, wiping his hands on a towel. “I’ve already seen all of you.”

She huffed quietly, hesitating before she pulled off her sheet, got out of bed, and dived for her dressing gown. Tying it as tight as possible, she retreated behind the screen to perform her ablutions.

There was a knock on the door, and she tensed, listening as Eric went to answer it.

“I have brought your breakfast, my lord...my lady.” Silver’s voice sounded

low yet authoritative. “And a tisane of willow bark tea for Lady Freya.”

“Mmm, that will come in handy judging by how desperately she was clutching her head this morning,” Eric said, making Freya frown.

“Very good my lord. Will you be requiring anything else this morning?”

“No, I think we shall just rest, so kindly don’t plan anything for us.”

“It is noted, my lord.”

The door shut, and Freya had to assume that Silver was gone. She washed up and then emerged from behind the screen to find Eric arranging their breakfast on the table by the bed.

She took a deep breath. “I heard that there’s some tea for me?”

He picked up a cup and handed it to her without a word. She took a sip and made a face. This wasn’t her first taste of willow bark tea, but she still did not like it.

“Come and sit down,” Eric said, pointing at the bed.

Without thinking too much about it, Freya walked forward and flopped down on the bed. She gave Eric a wary glance over her cup. “What is it?”

“I just thought you’d be more comfortable and therefore less ornery if you sat down.”

“Humph!” Freya took a sip of her drink while also trying to pout. Eric smiled his secret smile and continued to butter the toast.

“You know, there are other ways to get happy which do not involve hangovers.”

“I was not trying to get drunk! And what are you talking about anyway? I don’t need to get happy. I am happy enough.”

“Then why were you imbibing like that?”

“I was thirsty, and I had nothing better to do. There. Are you satisfied?”

He shot her an amused glance, putting two slices of toast on a plate and bringing them to her. “As a matter of fact, no, I am not satisfied, but there’s little I can do about it now. Your father has forbidden me to take a mistress, and you are uninterested.”

Freya frowned, trying to understand what he was saying. “Uninterested? In what?”

He smirked. “Nothing. I am speaking nonsense. Would you like some real tea with your toast?”

Freya thought about it, her hand on her belly. It had stopped roiling about, and she did not feel as if she might cast up her accounts. “I’ll try some,” she said.

Eric poured her a cup before coming to sit by her side with his own cup. “Good morning to you,” he said holding up his cup.

She raised her own cup before taking a cautious sip. The tea was hot and fragrant. It warmed her up nicely from the inside and did not upset her stomach. She sighed with relief and took a bite of her toast. She chewed thoughtfully, looking down at the cream silk negligee that was under her dressing gown. “Not satisfied...” she murmured. “Mistress...” she gasped, dropping her toast as she turned to Eric. “Are you talking about having relations?”

He sighed, “Your father wants an heir. How else are we to give him one?”

“But...I thought we would just wait until he died and then go our separate ways since neither of us wants to be here.”

“Do you think he will allow himself to die before either seeing an heir or changing his will? Do you not understand who he is yet? He will leave you destitute.”

Freya certainly did not like his words, but she had to admit they had merit. Her father was very serious about continuing his male line.

“I am not ready for that,” she said quietly.

“Are you even *getting* ready?” he asked with frustration. “What are we doing here?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Perhaps we ought to return home.”

“I agree. Perhaps there you will understand what you’re giving up.”

“I am not stupid, sir. I know bloody well what’s at stake here. I just need some time to be ready.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “Have it your way. We shall leave here in the morning, tomorrow.”

“Agreed.”

They both sat silently, sipping their tea and fuming.



Eric had never seen Stark Manor before. He was quite impressed with the size of it and how well-maintained it was. He’d been expecting a run-down

property just judging from how impressed Freya had been with the Bath manor.

“You must show me your gardens sometime,” he said in an attempt to be friendly, once they came to a stop. He could see how much lighter she was now that they were on ‘her’ territory.

She even smiled at him. “Of course, if you wish to see them. I expect you’ll have a lot of work, looking over the books and such.”

“I suppose I shall. But even I can make some time for leisure. We might not have had much of it in the Navy, but it was always important to have some rest between all the work.”

She made a non-committal sound as the door opened, and her sister came running out. “Freya! You’re back.” She threw her arms around Freya, hugging her tight.

Eric could not help but smile even as he thought wistfully of his brother and how much he missed Alexander. His eyes widened in surprise as William appeared at the front door, also smiling.

What on earth is he doing here?

He alighted from the vehicle and made his way to his brother. As soon as William saw him, he trotted down the stairs to greet him, his smile widening into a grin. “Eric. You’re back early. Mama said you’d be gone for at least a week.”

“I did not know you’d be here when I arrived,” Eric noted, ignoring his brother’s curiosity.

“Yes, His Grace asked us to escort Isabella home and remain here with her until you arrived.”

“Oh, he did? How kind of him,” Eric said sardonically.

“Isabella was glad of the company although she insisted that she isn’t a baby and could manage quite well on her own,” he confided. He leaned in, lowering his voice. “I think she might have been scared to travel with just her governess though.”

Eric suspected that the Duke had his own sinister reasons for sending his family along with Isabella. Perhaps he meant to remind Eric what was at stake.

It’s not as if I can forget, he thought resentfully with an acidic glance at Freya. He was trying his best, but the arm wringing had him a little impatient. He knew full well what Freya was bracing herself for. He had to look at his own face in the looking glass every day. He knew his scar must fill her with horror.

I wonder if I should offer to wear a bag over my head?

His bitter amusement did nothing to assuage the bile that rose in his throat. Many men had been injured in the war, some, far worse than he. But ego or not, he knew he’d been a handsome man before his injury, one who was well sought after and never short of prospects.

Now people found it hard to look him in the face.

One thing he could say for Freya, she did not flinch when she had to gaze upon his visage. If he did not know better, he would assume she barely noticed the jagged ugly line zig-zagging across his face and down his neck.

She and her sister finished twittering to each other, and Isabella turned to greet him. Unlike her sister, she could not hide her reaction to his scar. She made a face and flicked her eyes away before curtsying properly and greeting him formally. “Mr. Campbell, welcome,” she murmured.

“Thank you, Lady Isabella. I am sure your sister and I will be very happy here.”

She murmured something unintelligible and then ran off back into the house, all without looking directly at him again. His brother followed her, a huge grin on his face. His mother appeared, descending the steps to embrace him. “I know you are surprised to find us here, but His Grace insisted.”

He hugged her back. “I am glad of it, Mama. I haven’t seen the two of you in too long.”

She smiled in relief. “That is good. I did not want to get in the way of your marriage.”

Eric gave her a sardonic smile. “You won’t.”

She turned to Freya, embracing her as well. “I’ve always wanted a daughter,” she said quietly. “Now, I have two.”

To Eric’s surprise, Freya’s bottom lip trembled, and she looked ready to burst into tears. Instead, she grabbed onto his mother and clung on as if she might never let go. Eric turned away, following their bags into the manor house. He stood in the curved foyer, looking around curiously. The corridor was well-lit, thanks to high windows flanking the door. The walls were also gaily colored in a summery yellow, adding to the brightness. After the foyer was a flight of stairs that curved upward, and several doors lined the corridor culminating in a large wooden door at the other end.

Eric was eager to explore it all but first, he needed to freshen up. He turned towards the door as Freya and his mother came in. “Might we be shown to our quarters?” he asked.

His mother jerked in startlement. “Of course, silly me. They have prepared the married quarters for you in the south wing, away from the rest of us busybodies.” She smiled fondly. “Come with me, I shall show you.”

Then she stopped as if realizing something. “Unless...you want to show your husband on your own, Lady Freya?”

Freya’s eyes widened as she looked from Eric to his mother. “N-no. Please do lead the way,” she said.

Eric refrained from rolling his eyes. *What does the girl think is going to happen if we are left alone?*

Whatever she thought, she was very much mistaken.

“All right. Follow me.” His mother began to climb the staircase, and he stepped aside, gesturing for Freya to precede him. She nodded to him as she walked past, and they both began to climb. On the second floor, his mother turned right onto a slightly darkened corridor, lined with a red carpet and several unlit light sconces. “Your housekeeper tells me that no one has used this wing since your mother died.” She turned a bit to smile at Freya, “Don’t fret, we did not put you in the same chambers.”

Freya nodded once, but her expression remained grim. She stumbled a bit as they passed a certain door, and Eric’s hand shot out to close around her elbow and steady her. To his surprise, she rudely jerked her arm out of his hand and quickened her pace.

He frowned, wondering what was causing her bizarre behavior. His mother was assuring them both that the room had been thoroughly cleaned and aired, and they need not worry, so he put it aside for the moment.

Finally, they reached the end of the corridor, and his mother opened a pair of double doors that led to a large chamber that spanned the entire width of the manor. It was located in a corner where the walls were curved, so the chamber looked circular. It was lined by wall-to-wall windows and was brightly lit. A huge four-poster bed sat in the middle of the room, draped with a gold and green embroidered duvet and a mountain of pillows. On one side of the room was a sitting room area decorated with baroque wooden furniture. The sofa had a wooden back and legs while the bench was covered

with gold and red satin pillows flanked by two armchairs. There was a low table with carved legs in front of the sofa and a red turkey carpet on the floor. The entire arrangement faced a huge fireplace, that was currently not burning. On the other side of the bed was a screen, behind which Eric saw a bathtub and a chamber pot. Wooden wardrobes lined one wall, and there was a chest of drawers close to the windows.

As comfort went, the room did not stint.

There was a knock on the door, and several maids walked in, supervised by a rotund apple-cheeked woman. “We’ve brought you some hot water in case you would like to bathe, and a few refreshments should you wish to rest before venturing downstairs.”

Eric forced a smile. He knew full well why they were being supplied with provisions in their chambers rather than downstairs in the drawing room. No doubt, Silver had instructed this household to give them as much opportunity to be alone as possible.

“Well, we shall leave you to it. Ring the bell should you need anything,” his mother said, shooing the maids and the housekeeper out of the door before her.

Eric blew out a breath. “Well, I do not know about you, but I could use a bath.” He immediately began to unbutton his coat while Freya stood around staring in horror. He had decided that if he were to prepare her at all for his touch, he needed to get her used to the scar.

His shirt followed the coat. He threw it to the ground and stood there, letting her look her fill. “Would you like to bathe as well?” he prompted.

She shook her head jerkily. “N-no. I think I shall go and find my sister.”

Without another word, she hurried out of the room. Shaking his head, Eric detoured to the tray that contained an entire bottle of whisky, scooped it up,

and marched to the bath with it. Divesting himself from the rest of his clothing, he lowered himself into the water and took a large gulp from the bottle. With a sigh, he lay back and closed his eyes, long legs hanging over the bottom of the bath and his hand slung out of the side, the bottle still in his hand.

He breathed in and out, trying to empty his mind of everything. He thought about Alexander, of the long late-night talks they'd had after staggering home from a tavern or taking in a play on Drury Lane or Convent Gardens. Sometimes, they picked up more than a play at Convent Gardens.

He smiled in remembrance, taking another sip. Alexander always had big dreams for the duchy. He spoke of establishing their family as one of the most prosperous members of the nobility for generations. He had no fear of being seen to work as long as his family benefited.

Eric had no intention of letting Alexander's dreams die with him. He would do whatever he had to to ensure that what was meant for their family came to them.

I have to bide my time though. I have to go slow. So slow that she does not notice. She will get used to me, and she will give me the heir I need to secure this inheritance. After that, she will be free to do as she pleases.

He took another large sip of whisky, the water splashing he moved. He put the bottle down on the stone floor before submerging his head completely in the water. He stayed submerged, holding his breath until he began to see spots in front of his eyes. Then he surged upwards, panting hard, his skin flushed.

The bedroom door slammed, and he heard running footsteps. "Eric...?"

Freya peered around the screen, her eyes wide and afraid. He quirked an eyebrow. "What do you need?"

“I-I-I heard you panting. I thought something was wrong.”

“I thought you left.”

“I-I did. I came back for a shawl.” Her eyes wandered down his chest, and she blushed scarlet.

Eric could feel his body reacting to her reaction. They stared at each other, each frozen, waiting to see what the other would do.

Just as suddenly as she appeared, Freya’s head disappeared, and he heard her hurrying footsteps receding. The door opened and closed, and he was alone again.



Freya felt hot all over, and itchy as if she had ants *beneath* her skin. She tried very hard not to think about what she’d just seen, but the more she tried to push the thoughts of Eric’s naked body away, the more they persisted. She realized that she’d never seen him fully unclothed before.

It had not been what she was expecting, even having slept by his side for a few days.

For one thing, everything seemed a lot...thicker, harder, and more unyielding than she’d imagined.

His chest was like granite! And...and...

She stopped, scrunching her eyes tight, but that only served to bring the image into greater focus rather than banishing it from existence.

Oh, Lord! Surely, they’re not all like that?

She shivered, blaming it on the draught passing through the corridor on account of the open windows in the chambers to her left and right. Never mind that the doors were closed. There was no other possible reason why she should feel cold then hot then cold again. She leaned against the wall, her knees a little weak.

Her mind went to *his* knees, so muscular and strong, so different from her own. She could admit to herself that she was fascinated.

She shook her head, straightening up and staggering away from her own chambers. Deciding not to look for Isabella until she felt somewhat more composed, she made her way to the rose garden, hoping that no one else would be there. She'd missed her flowers and just wanted to spend a peaceful time with them.

She didn't want to think about Eric or his body or anything really. Life was just too confusing at the moment.

Chapter Fifteen



Eric managed not to see Freya for the rest of the day. It was not of his own choosing. It seemed that wherever he went, she was somewhere else. In any case, now that the honeymoon was over, he had a lot to catch up on.

While his steward, Mr. Green, was an exemplary man, there were some decisions only Eric could make. After his bath, he dedicated some time to reading over new contracts and checking invoices. In addition, he had to begin to craft a way to merge the Stark business empire with the Campbell one.

There were some personal properties that he currently had no right to, but there were various properties that belonged to the duchy that would come to him regardless of the outcome of this marriage. He wanted to look over those records and perhaps find time to pay a visit to the actual properties.

He was of a mind to show the Duke what a conscientious steward he would be to his legacy, and perhaps, in that way, the Duke might be convinced to let up on his insistence on an heir. Eric truly had no wish to force himself upon a woman who did not want him. The very thought was repugnant to him. While at war, he had seen many men take advantage of their position to ‘partake in the spoils of war’ as they called it.

It had always left him feeling sick to his stomach.

All he wanted was the chance to live in peace and prosperity with people who loved him. At the moment, that consisted of his brother and mother.

The bell to dinner rang, and he walked slowly out of the study, his eyes stinging from the strain of reading. He wondered if he ought to change for dinner, not really knowing how formal it might be.

He decided to make haste to the drawing room and consult his mother on the same. If it was the same for everyone else, he would rather not go through the tedium of changing clothes just to eat.

He stepped into the drawing room to find his mother in close conversation with Freya while Isabelle and William whispered together on the other side of the room. He skirted his mother and Freya and headed for his brother.

Sitting beside him on the sofa, he smiled. “What are you two munchkins up to?” he asked.

William frowned. “I am no munchkin, and Isabella will come out in two years.”

Eric raised his hands in surrender. “My mistake. But what are you whispering about so intently?”

To his surprise, it was Isabella who answered. “We are wondering how to ask Mrs. Campbell if we might have some chocolate before dinner. We’re hungry.”

Eric smiled in surprise. “Oh? Then by all means, why don’t you have some?”

Isabella huffed. “Mrs. Beecham will not let me.”

“Ah, so it is a battle of the guardians, is it?” he said gravely.

William narrowed his eyes at Eric. “Are you making a game of us?” he

asked, suspicious.

“I would never!” Eric protested vigorously. “In fact, I am of the studied opinion that you ought to get as much chocolate as you want. After all, what harm would it do?”

Isabella slowly smiled at him. “I think I like you, sir. Will you ring the bell and tell the butler so?”

Eric could recognize when he’d been manipulated. He obligingly rang the bell and asked for chocolate for his cohorts from the butler. The butler bowed and left though there was a pinched expression around his mouth.

“Mrs. Beecham will give him hell,” Isabella confided *sotto voce*.

“Should you be using such language, young lady?” Eric asked, smiling at her.

She shrugged. “You are a sailor are you not? They say nobody curses as much as sailors.”

Eric laughed. “That is true, but then, *I* am no lady, unlike yourself.”

“Well, I am not a lady, yet so no one cares what I do or say.”

Eric frowned, seeing the sadness in that statement. “Well, if it means anything to you, I care.”

She beamed at him. “Oh, I think that we are going to be friends. Which is a relief because I did not want to lose my sister once she married. We were so afraid that you would be just awful.”

Eric cocked his head in surprise and smiled. “Are you saying that I am not, in fact, awful?”

“You are most definitely not awful, thankfully. I’m glad you and your family came to stay here. It’s so much better now than it was with just the two of us and Mrs. Beecham.”

Eric pursed his lips, trying to hide how moved he was by her sincerity. “We shall try to keep it so, my dear,” he said softly.



Freya was trying her best to listen to Mrs. Campbell while keeping one eye on Eric and Isabella. Heaven knew what they might be discussing. She had spent the afternoon hiding in her garden, but still, the image of him sitting in the tub, his very long legs hanging off the edge with his surprisingly shapely feet facing her, would not leave her mind. She could hardly bear to look at him lest her face combust.

The butler came in to announce that supper was served, and she stood up with relief. As the current matriarch in the room, it stood to reason that Eric would escort his mother to the dining room while William offered his arm to both Freya and Isabella.

He seemed just as happy as she was with the arrangement, which conversely made her feel annoyed. He seemed altogether too calm and unmoved to her jaundiced eye. She wanted him to be just as unsettled by their afternoon encounter as she was. Tonight, they would be expected to share a bed again, and she did not know how she was going to do that.

She contemplated moving into one of the other rooms on the floor, but in truth, she had always hated the South wing—avoided it if she could. It held too many bad memories. She did not think she could pass the night alone in that wing. Sleeping with Eric seemed to be the only viable option much as she hated it.

“Pass the salt please,” Isabella said from the other side of the table, and Freya

smiled as she picked up the shaker. A frisson of guilt went through her as she realized that she had spent little to no time with Isabella since she had been back. Her sister gave her back a smile, but Freya did not miss the sadness in it.

She resolved to spend some time with Isabella before going to bed.

Her sister was still the most precious thing she had in the world. The only family who still loved her.

“The flowers are lovely,” Mrs. Campbell said, pointing to the vase in the middle of the table. “Did you pick them, Freya?”

Freya looked to the middle of the table, the first time she noticed the flowers. She recognized them from her garden and frowned. “No, I did not pick them...I don’t know who did.”

She had not seen anyone come or go as she’d lay on the grass, hiding between rose bushes. It disturbed her a bit that someone was picking her roses behind her back.

“It was me,” Isabella piped up. “I wanted you to have something nice for your first supper back.”

Freya felt a lump in her throat as she smiled at her sister. “That was tremendously thoughtful of you. Thank you.”

Isabella smiled tentatively. “So, you’re not angry with me?”

“Of course, not.” She stood up and walked around the table to embrace her sister. “Why would I be angry with you?”

“Well...” Isabella looked around the table and blushed. “You’ve been ignoring me since you came.”

“Oh Izzy, I am so sorry. I have a lot on my mind.”

Isabella nodded. “It’s all right. I understand. You’re a married woman now. You have no time for-” “No! No, no, that is not it at all, Izzy. I was simply distracted today.”

Her sister nodded, a frown marring her brow, still looking doubtful. “All right,” she said quietly.

“After dinner, will you play the harpsichord? I shall play the piano. We’ll have a grand old time.”

Isabella’s face lit up. “Oh yes, I should love that.”

“Then that’s what we shall do.” She went back to her seat, noting the beaming smile on Mrs. Campbell’s face while Eric focused on his food, not looking at anyone. William was already asking Isabella why she hadn’t told him that she played the harpsichord.

Freya took a deep breath. *Whatever happens, I must not get so lost in myself that I neglect my family.*



Eric entered the study and closed the door softly behind him. He’d just bid goodnight to his mother after talking for a long time. Following dinner, they’d all retired to the music room where Freya and Isabella had entertained them with many a song while they digested their dinner amid brandy, port, and desserts.

Eric could feel his heart breaking for the two of them; they seemed nothing less than two orphans left adrift on the ocean of life with nobody to cling to but each other. His instincts to protect rose up in him unbidden, and he found that as much as he wanted his family to get everything they deserved, he also

wanted these two women to be safe and happy.

I can give them what they need.

He resolved to make sure that their inheritance was not threatened but strengthened.

I will do what I have to.

He knew that he couldn't do it alone. He needed help. Once the girls had stopped playing, Isabella and Freya excused themselves. William was falling asleep where he sat. Eric sent him to bed before turning to his mother with a sigh. He held out his hand, and she put her own in it at once.

"What troubles you, my boy?" she asked tenderly.

He laughed wryly. "Hardly a boy, am I?"

"To me, you always will be."

He pushed his lips acknowledging the truth of the statement.

"What's wrong Eric?"

He looked up at her frowning. "I feel as if I am failing this marriage. I'm at a loss as to what to do."

His mother held up her hand in a quelling gesture. "Do not tell me the intimate details, I don't want to know. Every marriage is different. What I do know is that the expectations that you start out with rarely match the reality of your situation. So what you feel is the failure of the marriage is probably the failure of your expectations. Be patient. Learn about your partner. You will find that in the end, something better might come of it than you were imagining."

Eric felt that his mother could not be more wrong. He had walked into this marriage with no expectations — just the hope that they could carry on together peacefully. He knew now that that was not meant to be.

“We cannot be in the same room without fighting,” he confessed with shame.

His mother just smiled, “That means that there’s a tremendous amount of passion between you. That is a good thing.”

Eric huffed, giving his mother a skeptical glance. He felt quite sure she was just trying to console him. “How is it a good thing to fight all the time? We can barely agree on anything.”

“It takes two to fight. If you do not wish to fight with her, then don’t. If she says something to provoke you, refuse to be provoked. Do not say things that you know will anger her.”

“I don’t Mama!” he cried in frustration, “She just takes *everything* I say askance.”

Mrs. Campbell reached out to wrap a hand around his and squeeze. “I know it feels hopeless at the moment, but when next you speak to her, just pause and think before you say anything or respond to anything. If you think that she is provoking you, clarify what she is saying first. Make sure that it is not just your mind twisting things to suit what you expect.”

“I am not doing that; I promise you, Mother.”

She nodded. “If you are doing the best you can, then you have the right to ask her to do the same. In marriage, the most important thing is to ask for what you need, and never expect the other person to just know. Remember that both of you have never been married before. You are both in new territory.”

Eric felt his mother’s words very profoundly.

“You have given me much to think about, mother. Thank you.”

Her smile widened, “I am happy that you are finally home for good my son. This marriage will be good for you, you’ll see. I see how you look at each other. There is great potential for love.”

Eric refrained from snorting derisively. He decided to change the subject. “Enough about me, mother. Tell me how you have been, you and William. I have missed you both terribly.”

They spent the rest of the evening gossiping quietly together. It was a balm to Eric’s soul. When his mother yawned one too many times, he’d urged her to go to bed.

“You should go too,” she told him. “Don’t leave your bride alone for too long.”

He had nodded his acquiescence, escorting her to the stairs before making his way to the study. He still had a lot of work to do, and he wasn’t ready to face Freya yet. He’d rather go to bed when he was sure she was fast asleep.



Freya lay awake tense and worried. She didn’t think she could sleep until she knew what Eric intended to do.

Will he stay away all night, or is he coming?

Freya did not think she would be able to sleep if he didn’t come. Not in this wing. She had gone up with Isabella to her chambers in the east wing, and they sat on her bed together as Freya told her sister about the house in Bath and gave her a heavily censored version of her married life so far.

“He seems to be a lovely man,” Isabella said tentatively. “Do you not like

him because father chose him?”

Freya blew out of breath, once again blown away by Isabella’s perceptive nature. “Who said I don’t like him?”

Isabella just gave her a look.

“All right fine. I did not like how we met, and he has not gone out of his way to impress me ever since with any sparkling personality. He’s rude and callous, and he just makes me very angry.”

Isabella looked troubled. “Is he horrible to you then?”

Freya hesitated. She did not want her sister to worry about her, nor did she want to mislead her. “I suppose he isn’t horrible. He and I are just oil and water— we do not mix. But you are free to like him if you want to.”

Isabella sighed, “He was kind to me, and William sings his praises. He says he was a hero in the war, and the scar on his face is due to some horrific battle that he won in the high seas against pirates.” Her eyes shone with admiration.

Freya refrained from rolling her own eyes. “I suppose that to his brother, he is a hero,” she murmured.

Isabella once again looked worried. Freya rubbed her back. “Do not worry your pretty little head about it. We shall sort it out between us, never fear. Now, tell me what you’ve been up to since I’ve been away. I have missed you so.”

Isabella lit up. “I missed you too, but William has been good company.” She launched into a long soliloquy about everything that they had been doing. Freya barely listened; she was too busy watching Isabella’s face and relishing the excitement and happiness she could see there. Clearly having a mother figure and a companion close to her age was good for her.

Perhaps I can try my best to get along with Eric — if only for her sake.

As she lay on her back staring at the ceiling wondering if Eric would come back, she thought about her conversation with both Isabella and Mrs. Campbell. Both seem to have a very optimistic view of the future regarding their marriage. She could not imagine why.

The candle burned down to its wick, and still, Eric had not returned. She was tempted to get out of bed and go and look for him, but then what would she say when she found him?

She sat up, hesitating with indecision as to what to do next. Suddenly, she heard footsteps in the hallway and dived back down onto her pillow, scrunching her eyes shut in an effort to look like she was sleeping peacefully.

The door opened and the scent of sandalwood tobacco and whiskey let her know that Eric was back. She relaxed her shoulders feigning sleep as she listened to the rustle of his clothing as he took it off, the splash of water in the basin, and the sound of him washing up after himself. She wondered if she opened her eyes, would she see his naked chest?

It was too much temptation; she had to do it. She peered beneath her lashes at him, realizing that he was standing naked by the table, washing his face and armpits. Her eyes fell on the rounded cheeks of his bottom, and her heart stuttered to a stop before speeding up until it was racing.

Under her breath, she whimpered.

What is this man trying to do to me? Why can he not have some propriety?

She lay there in her shift, shutting her eyes tight and trying to still the trembling in her hands. The bed dipped, and she felt his warmth next to her.

Is he still unclothed? she wondered with trepidation. She did not know what she would do if he touched her. He gave a loud sigh and seemed to relax into

the bedding and into sleep.

She did not know if she was glad or disappointed. She closed her eyes as well, doing her best to fall into unconsciousness.

Chapter Sixteen



Eric woke up early as the sun was just lighting the sky. He glanced over at Freya, still buried deep in her blankets, and sighed, remembering his mother's words. Slowly, he shuffled out of bed, reaching for his robe to keep away the early morning cold.

Deciding that a ride would be the best way to begin his day, he changed into his riding clothes and stepped out of the room. The house was barely stirring, and he padded down the quiet hallway before turning down the stairs without meeting a soul.

He slipped out the back door, making his way to the stables he had glimpsed the day before. He found the grooms busy rubbing down the horses, having already taken them for a run.

One of the grooms caught sight of him, put down his brush, and came towards Eric. He bowed low. "What can I do for you, my lord?" he asked.

Eric was tempted to correct the title but then shrugged inwardly.

This boy likely does not care one way or the other if I am a Duke or a Marquis or merely a soldier. All he sees is a master whom he must serve.

"I would like a horse if it is not too much trouble."

The groom bowed again, “Of course, my lord. What kind of horse would you like? Something mild-mannered or feisty?”

Eric’s gestured towards the stables. “May I?”

The groom nodded eagerly, stepping aside. Eric considered him briefly. “What is your name?”

“Hendricks, my lord.”

“Well Hendricks, I am more a man of the sea than the land, but I did grow up riding horses. Which one would you recommend that would assist me to tour the property and also give me a good run without bucking me off?”

Hendricks grinned. “It’s Black Lightning you be wanting. She’s strong and has a good pair of lungs on her, but she’s patient and obedient.” He pointed to a pitch-black horse at the end of the stables.

“Thank you, Hendricks.” He nodded to the groom and smiled before heading to the stall to retrieve the horse.

Black Lightning lived up to her billing, reacting to Eric’s commands with swiftness while keeping a steady pace so that Eric’s seat on his back remained unthreatened. Eric rode along the road, nodding amiably at pedestrians as he passed, noting any croft cottages that he came across. The tenants seemed to be friendly, healthy-looking, and clean. They doffed their hats at him, smiling and nodding, before moving on with their days.

From their clothes to their equipment, it was clear that they were headed to their small holdings, eager to get to work even at this early hour. Some of the women emerged from their cottages, inviting him to break his fast with them. They obviously knew who he was— their future landlord— and they were curious about him.

He resolved that he would return with Freya and in company with his steward so that she might make a proper introduction. He made a note to send for the manas soon as he returned to the Manor. As far as he knew, Mr. Green was still in London, overseeing their businesses there. Perhaps he was jumping the gun by inviting him to Stark Manor, but every day brought home to him the depth and breadth of his new responsibilities, and he wanted to get a proper hold on them while the Duke was still around to question and clarify what he did not understand.

He rode for two hours before heading back to the Manor, eager to have breakfast with William and his mother, and if he was honest, he was looking forward to seeing Freya as well.

He returned Black Lightning to Hendricks before enjoying the scenic walk back to the manor house. As he went to step through the door, he was accosted by Silver, looking somber.

“What’s going on?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“The lady’s maid has reported that your dear wife has begun her courses,” he said *sotto voce*.

Eric was taken aback, first of all, that this was something the lady’s maid felt compelled to report to Silver and also that the butler had the temerity to discuss it with Eric.

“How is that any of your business? You have taken this a step too far!” He snapped.

Silver lowered his eyes. “Forgive me, I should have mentioned that the Duke specifically asked me to monitor your wife’s cycle so that he would know when she got with child.”

Eric sighed with irritation. The Duke was certainly overstepping boundaries of propriety, but they did have an agreement, and the Duke *had* warned them

that he would do everything in his power to see that it came to fruition.

There was no use shouting at Silver for carrying out his duties with dedication. “Where is she?”

“In her old chambers, sir, where she will be lying in for the next few days as she is not feeling well.”

Eric nodded. He knew what that meant. He would not see Freya until her courses were done. He was surprised to feel a pang, thinking that despite himself, he would miss her. “Very well, then. Excuse me as I proceed to breakfast.”

Silver nodded and moved aside for him to pass. Eric paused and turned to him. “Have my valet attend to me, would you? I am in need of a bath.” Eric was indeed very sweaty from his ride, but he also wanted to remind Silver of his place.

“Yes sir.” Silver walked off in the other direction, his back stiff. Eric tried to feel satisfied about that, but he did not. With a growl, he went up to his chambers. There was evidence of Freya’s hasty exit. The bed was made up of fresh linen, and the wardrobes were wide open as if someone had changed in a hurry.

There was a knock on the door, and his valet walked in followed by several footmen carrying pails of hot water. Eric surrendered himself to his valet’s attention while his mind whirled, coming up and discarding ideas as he became more and more frustrated.

This impasse could not be allowed to continue.



Freya wiggled about uncomfortably, trying to ease the cramped feeling in her

belly. Mrs. Beecham had brought her a hot stone which was only helping a little. She had tried to drink the willow bark tea that had come with it, but it made her even more nauseous. So instead, she sat by the window, taking deep breaths and trying to distract herself with a book.

Unfortunately, the story was not riveting enough to distract from her discomfort. The fact that she might have four or five more days of this only served to make her feel more miserable. She hated how miserable her courses made her and had no wish to see anyone, least of all Eric, while she was struggling under the weight of it all.

If I had known, I might have made an effort to speak with Eric last night.

She did not know why she regretted not speaking to him so much. It was not as if they were friends. But now she found that she missed his face, wanted to see it again, wanted to know what he thought about her seeing him unclothed. Did he mind? Was their relationship changed forever? Did he even care? These were pertinent questions, and she really felt as if she might need the answers right away.

She gasped as an idea struck her. “I shall write him a letter!”

The distraction of her thoughts was working much better than trying to read had. She turned to the table and snatched a foolscap. Taking a quill from her drawer, she pulled her ink bottle closer and dipped the quill in it.

Now that she was ready to write, she had to pause, trying to think what to say, knowing that someone else might read their correspondence.

Dear Eric,

As you may know, I am indisposed at the moment as I tend to get at this time of the month. I suppose that the entire household now knows I'm not pregnant. Father definitely knows— I feel sure of it. I don't know if this puts our marriage in jeopardy. I suppose that would not be good if what you told

me was true.

I don't know what to do about it. Have you any ideas?

Freya paused, biting the tip of the quill thoughtfully as she tried to find a way to frame the next part.

I wanted to touch on the other night when I ACCIDENTALLY walked in on you while you were bathing. I want to assure you that I saw nothing that I should not have seen — aside from your bare shoulders and chest. Also, your hips, thighs, and feet.

But that is all.

I hope that it does not make you feel uncomfortable to think about it as it was an accident and not something that I wanted to do. Perhaps you could apprise me of your feelings regarding the above? It would really set my mind at ease.

Yours

Freya.

She read through the letter again and again before nodding, sure that it conveyed what she wanted. The feelings bubbling in her chest made it urgent that she send it and receive an answer.

She pulled the bed, summoning a maid, and after sealing it with wax, handed the letter over. “Take it to Mr. Campbell please.”

The maid curtsyed. “Yes, m'lady.”



Eric expected to receive some letters that day; he was in correspondence with various business associates as well as particular friends from the Navy. What he had not expected was that one of the letters would be from his wife.

“Wha...?” He frowned, breaking the seal, his heart speeding up with anxiety as he unfolded the letter.

His eyes flew over the page as he read through it, and slowly, he began to smile.

“Who has written to you to make your face light up like that?”

His mother’s words had him looking up in startlement. “I beg your pardon. Uh, no one...uh, I mean it’s from Lady Freya. She was just apprising me of her situation.”

Mrs. Campbell’s eyebrow went up. “Does she think you do not know?”

Eric cleared his throat and coughed. “N-no, I suppose she wanted to speak with me.”

His mother’s face inexplicably lit up, and she smiled before letting out a laugh. Eric gave her a quizzical look. “What is it, Mother?”

“Nothing. It is just that our emotions can get jumbled up when we are in our menses. Heightened or just unpredictable. That must be why she’s writing to you even though you just saw each other this morning.”

Eric wanted to correct his mother and tell her that they had not in fact seen each other, but he took her point. He should not read too much into this letter.

“Should I write her back?” he asked.

“Most definitely! She might get very upset if you do not. Maudlin even.”

Eric shook his head in bemusement. “What a strange life.”

Mrs. Campbell laughed. “You do not know the half of it, my boy.”

He stood up, clicking his fingers at the footman. “Bring my tea to the study, please. I have letters to write.”

He nodded to his mother and walked off. She just smiled, indulgently.

Chapter Seventeen



Freya startled awake, surprised that she had even been asleep. She did not remember succumbing. She looked around in confusion, wondering what had woken her up. Someone knocked on the door again, and she realized that that was it. “Yes? Come in.”

The door opened, and her lady’s maid came in clutching a tray. “I have brought some more Willow bark tea, hot chocolate, and biscuits. You have also received a letter,” she said breezily, placing the tray on the table beside the bed.

Freya’s stomach roiled at the thought of drinking more Willow bark tea. She would rather endure the cramping pain. The hot chocolate was welcome though, and she perked up at the thought of a letter.

That was until she remembered what she had written to her husband and cringed. She still had no idea what had come over her.

Why did I bring it up? I should just have kept quiet and had a nap. It is clear that I was not thinking straight.

She snatched the letter off the tray, looking over the handwriting and praying that it was anyone else but Eric’s. To her chagrin, she recognized the writing from the contract they’d signed. With trepidation making her insides quake,

she undid the seal and opened the paper, her eyes flying over the page.

Dear Freya,

I thank you for your letter alerting me to your condition and concerns. I am sorry that I was not present at the time before you fell ill, so we could discuss this in person. I understand I am not going to see you for some time although I would be happy to visit if you would allow me to. I find, to my surprise, that I shall miss you.

Freya stopped reading with a gasp. She did not understand why he would say that.

This must come as a surprise to you as well. I am filled with amused chagrin even as I write. My mother told me that it is important that we have effective communication for a successful marriage, and so I am trying it out.

As to what it means for our union going forward, many ladies do not conceive immediately after marriage. Some take months, others, years. It would be unreasonable for your father to expect an heir to be conceived after only a few weeks.

“You act as if you have not met him. He will most definitely expect an heir after two weeks,” she murmured to herself.

“I beg your pardon my lady?” her lady’s maid asked from where she was cleaning out the fireplace.

Freya blushed scarlet, having forgotten she was not alone. “No, nothing. I am not saying anything.”

She went back to the letter.

I feel sure we have at least a month before His Grace begins clamoring for results. You are right about him knowing. The butler informed me that he

apprised His Grace of the situation right away.

“God damnit!” Freya hissed and then looked up and waved a dismissive hand in the face of her lady’s maid’s inquiring look.

While I was rather taken aback by Silver’s intrusive methods and that your lady’s maid is also his informant, I am glad that we now have this information as we move ahead with OUR lives. It will be useful for future planning.

For now, I wish you well, and should you need anything from me please feel free to ask.

Freya squirmed uncomfortably, her stomach flipping in response to that offer.

What if...? She closed the thought before it could bloom to fruition. Just because her body seemed *particularly* interested in his touch at the moment did not mean that she was ready for it. It was simply her courses making her feel like throwing caution to the winds.

In any case, even if I offered, I doubt he would be interested. Not with me bleeding and casting up my accounts all over the place. He would be disgusted.

She put the letter aside and stood up, beginning to pace from one end of the room to the other.

“Can I fetch you something else?” her lady's maid asked.

“Thank you, no. In fact, you may leave me now.”

The lady’s maid got to her feet, staring skeptically at Freya. “I am just in the middle of building up a fire.”

Freya shook her head. “No need for it at the moment. Please leave.”

Her maid continued to look stupefied for a moment before she made for the door.

“Whatever you say, m’lady,” she said before shutting the door behind her. Freya blinked at the door for a moment, drew in a deep breath, and then blew it out. She felt confined and itched to open the door and run out.

But why shouldn’t I? I am no prisoner.

After making sure the cotton cloth holding her was secure, she put on her silk-lined slippers, marched to the door, and opened it. Peering down the corridor, she looked right and left before creeping towards the back door. There was not usually much activity on it at this time of day. She slipped down the stairs on tiptoe and then out of the side door, happy not to have met anyone.

She crept around the corner before running as fast as she could to her rose garden. Squeezing between two bushes, so she could not be seen from the house, she lay back on the grass with a sigh of contentment.

“That’s better,” she murmured with a smile.

Slowly, her eyes slipped closed, and she lay there, half asleep, just breathing in and out.

“Freya?”

Her eyelids slowly fluttered open when she heard her name whispered, and she turned her head to see Isabella peering at her cautiously.

“What are you doing?” her sister asked.

Freya smiled. “Hiding.”

Isabella looked around, “Is someone chasing you? Are you playing a game?”

“No. I was just tired of being in my chambers unable to go anywhere because of these damned courses.”

“Oh,” Isabella said looking nonplussed, and then she giggled. “William saw you running and came to tell me. He thought something might be wrong. I think he might have gone in search of Eric.”

Freya sat up. “Oh no! I don’t want to see him. I’m not supposed to.”

“Why? Is it because of the...” she lowered her voice, so it was almost inaudible, “blood?”

Freya shrugged. “Who knows? There are just so many rules, it gets exhausting. Do not get married if you can possibly help it, Isabella.”

Her sister giggled. “All right.” She sat down, crossing her legs, “I much prefer to live here with you and Eric, William and Mrs. Campbell.”

Freya made a non-committal sound, suddenly remembering what her father had threatened to do. If she did not get with child, Isabella might not have *any* home. Her stomach dropped, and she suddenly felt very maudlin. Reaching for her sister, she pulled her close, embracing her and breathing her in. She took comfort from Isabella’s presence while pretending to comfort *her* by rubbing her back soothingly.

Approaching footsteps made her look up to see both William and Eric, peering into the garden. “Is everything all right?” Eric called.

Isabella pulled away to turn towards them. “Yes, it’s fine. She just wanted to get out of the house.”

Eric nodded. “Well, we shall leave you to it then.” His eyes shifted to Freya’s, caught, and held. Despite herself, Freya was glad to set eyes upon him. For some reason, he looked taller than she remembered and also more handsome. The scar on his face gave him a dangerous air, and she just

wanted him to reach for her, pull her to her feet, and devour her.

She shivered, sliding her eyes away and hoping he had not divined her thoughts. She heard footsteps receding and didn't know if she was glad or sorry that he'd gone. She looked up towards the opening of the garden and swallowed her disappointment that it was empty.



There was something about Freya — she seemed to glow with some inner light that called to him in a very visceral way. Eric could feel his body stirring as he looked upon her in the garden. That was until he saw her look at his scar and then turn away.

Like a shock of cold water, he remembered that he was not palatable to women, not anymore. Quickly, before she could look back and see the hurt in his face, he walked away, William trailing after him like a lost puppy.

He made for the stables, just wanting to get as far away from her as possible. “Do you fancy a ride to the village, William?”

His brother skipped in excitement. “Yes!” then he frowned, “Do you think Isabella wants to come?”

“Not just at the moment. I’m sure she means to look after her sister. Would you leave me alone if I were feeling under the weather?”

“Er, no. I suppose not.”

Eric smiled. “Oh, you *would*, wouldn't you?”

“Nooo!” William denied it and then ran off, laughing loudly and joyfully.

Eric shook his head as he watched his brother run. He reached the stable and

skipped inside. Eric frowned, remembering that William was not that proficient on horseback.

Well, no better time to teach him than now.



Freya got back to her room in time to take another bath and change her clothes. There was a knock on the door as she settled back on her bed.

“Come in.”

Mrs. Campbell poked her head into the room and smiled. “Your sister told me that you’re already getting restless with confinement,” she said as she came in and closed the door. “I thought I’d come and keep you company as we sup.”

“That’s kind of you.”

The other woman gave her an enigmatic look. “I know how it can chafe to feel like a prisoner in your own home.”

Freya let out a loud sigh. “It is just that I am not usually confined to my chambers. I simply avoid the male servants — or maybe they avoid me. Now, I have to stay in here for four days.”

Mrs. Campbell came to sit on the bed and laughed. “If you think this is bad, wait until you are confined in the latter months when you are with child. It feels endless.”

Freya blushed, looking away. Clearly, Mrs. Campbell did not know their situation. “Yes, I suppose so,” she murmured unintelligibly.

Eric’s mother reached out and rubbed her arm. “Cheer up. Tomorrow, your

husband has arranged for a picnic in the gardens. He plans to take William riding in the hills, and so we shall have the place to ourselves all afternoon.”

Freya felt tears prick her eyes. “Did he? Th-that’s kind.” For some reason, she burst into tears.

Mrs. Campbell gave her an understanding look, reaching for her and hugging her tight. That just made Freya cry even harder. She relaxed against Mrs. Campbell’s chest, glad to take comfort from someone else. “I’m sorry,” she murmured into her mother-in-law’s shoulder.

“Never apologize for expressing emotion, my girl. And it is quite all right.”



In the end, the four days of Freya’s confinement passed faster than he’d feared. He supposed that the daily exchange of letters had also helped. He had not been expecting a reply to his first letter, but Freya sent him one on the morning of the second day, thanking him for arranging a picnic for her. From there, it just seemed like the thing to do to send a reply and receive one in return.

He did not let himself think about what they were doing. He told himself that there wasn’t much to do in her chambers all day. If she chose letter writing to pass the time, who was he to stop or discourage her?

Still, he could not help feeling closer to her after being privy to her thoughts and feelings for the past four days.

Silver came up to him at breakfast as he was waiting for the rest of their respective families to join him. He bowed. “Sir, I have arranged for your breakfast to be served in your chambers.”

Eric frowned, leaning back in his chair to regard Silver with a jaundiced eye.

“Why?”

The butler cleared his throat, “There is a letter from His Grace that he requires you and Lady Freya to read together. I have already delivered this message to Lady Freya.”

“Why must we be in our chambers to read this letter?”

“Privacy, sir. The Duke would have me emphasize that this is important.”

Eric huffed. “Very well then.” He got to his feet, “But there is only so much of this nonsense I will take. You can tell him that.”

“Yes, sir.” The butler bowed as Eric passed him. Straightening his coat, his heart beginning to race at the thought of seeing Freya again, he climbed the stairs.

Freya was standing by the table where trays of food had been laid out. She had a folded paper in hand. He cocked his brow. “Is that the letter?”

Freya nodded.

“Have you read it?” Eric stepped into the room, closing the door behind him.

“I thought I would wait for you.” Her eyes were looking particularly large and verdant. Eric wondered whether it was because he hadn’t seen her for a while or maybe his memory imagined them smaller than they were.

He came to a stop beside her and looked down at the letter. “What do you suppose the old man wants now?”

She snorted with derision. “Can’t you guess?”

He huffed, plucking the letter from her hands and breaking the seal. He

unfolded it and began to read it aloud.

Freya and Mr. Campbell,

My trusty valet tells me that you have experienced your first courses as a married couple. I do believe that as a result, the next two weeks are a particularly fine time for you to exercise your marriage relations.

To that end, I have instructed Silver to confine you to quarters until such a time as he is certain that marital relations have taken place.

Eric stopped reading, looking up at Freya with wide shocked eyes. “Your father is mad.”

Freya swallowed, nodding slowly. She gestured for him to keep reading.

You might be tempted to disobey my instructions, but I remind you of our agreement, and if you do not do this, then the terms will be instituted immediately.

Freya gasped, and Eric looked up and, noting her pale face, raised an eyebrow. “Are you all right?”

She nodded jerkily. “C-continue.”

Eric looked back down at the letter and shook his head. “There’s nothing else, only salutations.”

Freya drew a shaky breath and flopped down on the bed. “What are we to do?”

Eric looked towards the food table, grateful to see a bottle of port *and* a brandy. He put down the letter and walked to the table, picking up a glass. “We drink.” He poured her a full glass and got one for himself. They sat side by side on the bed.

The silence grew between them until it felt like a separate presence, consuming all the air in the room. Eric took a deep breath and turned to Freya with a smile. “So, I do hope you’re feeling better now.”

She cleared her throat and nodded. “I am fine. I’m sorry for my ramblings. I think that my courses did something for me. My emotions were simply ungovernable.”

“Do not apologize. I rather enjoyed your letters. Very telling. For example, I had no idea my nakedness affected you so.”

Freya snorted, looking away. “Do not flatter yourself. I have never seen *any* male naked.”

“Is that so? What a treat for you then.” He sipped his brandy, smiling for no reason. He found that he was rather enjoying sparring with Freya.

“I would not go so far as to call it a treat. A shock, yes.”

Eric threw back his head and laughed.

Chapter Eighteen



Freya was feeling rather bleary-eyed. Between them, she and Eric had finished the brandy *and* the port. Eric had proposed a game of cards to pass the time, but they could find none in their chambers.

“All right, then how about this game? I ask you a question or dare you to do a deed; you get to choose which.” Eric said.

“Oh, is that so? Do I also get to ask questions?” Freya retorted.

“Of course, you do.”

“Fine. Go ahead.”

“All right, so which will it be? Question or dare?”

“I take...question.”

“All right, so what exactly were you thinking when you saw me naked?”

Freya’s face heated, and she looked to the ground. “I don’t want to answer that.”

“You have to. That’s the premise of the game.”

“Fine.” She ran her eyes down from his shoulders to his feet. “I thought that your body is very different from mine...bigger...harder...” She swallowed, hiding her mortified face.

“Is that so?” He sounded quite smug. “That’s interesting.”

She turned to him quickly. "My turn."

He inclined his head in agreement.

“Question or dare.”

He smirked, taking a sip of his brandy. “Dare.”

Freya’s heart sank. She had been looking forward to turning his question on him. With a huff, she tried to think of something to ask. Then her eyes fell on the table. “I dare you to pour an entire glass of port and drink it in one gulp!” she said triumphantly.

He quirked an eyebrow but immediately got up and went to do as she asked. She watched his throat work as he drank and drank. He slammed the empty glass down and turned to smirk at her. “You forgot that I am a sailor.”

Freya had indeed forgotten. She gestured to him. “Your turn.”

“Question or dare?”

“Qu-.er, dare.”

“Fine. I dare you to kiss me on the lips.”

She almost dropped her glass. “Wha...?”

“You heard me.”

“Hell bells,” she whispered before slowly getting to her feet. He stood perfectly still as she slowly approached, not doing a thing to encourage or discourage her. Finally, she stood in front of him, looking him in the eye. He looked back, his face impassive.

“Are you sure you want me to do this?”

“I asked, didn’t I?”

“You did indeed ask.” She swallowed in trepidation before reaching up on tip-toe to plant her lips softly against his. He made no move to take over the kiss or deepen it. She stood there with her mouth motionless on his and waited before pulling back. She stared up at him, awaiting his reaction.

“Is that it?” he asked.

“What else did you want?”

He just blinked, looking away briefly and then back at her. “Nothing. If that is your idea of a kiss, then that is all.”

Freya frowned with annoyance. “My turn to ask,” she bit out.

He nodded for her to go ahead.

“Question or dare?”

He looked at her pursed lips and flashing eyes and smiled. “Question.”

She huffed, “Fine. How would you have liked to be kissed?”

“Well, since you ask, I would have wanted to feel your emotion, passion,

eagerness, need, hunger. I wanted your tongue in my mouth. I wanted you to cup my face with your hands and hold it tight while you plundered my mouth.”

Freya shivered from head to toe. “Show me,” she rasped.

He held up a forbidding finger. “Uh-uh, only one turn at a time.”

She growled in frustration. “Fine, your turn.”

“Question or dare?”

“Question.”

“Fine. Why did you want me to show you how I want to be kissed?”

Freya frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly that? Why do you want to know what I like in a kiss?”

Freya was stymied. She had no idea why she wanted to know...she just did. She shrugged. “You poo-pooed my efforts. I wanted to know what you expected.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know! Because,” she said irritably.

He smiled and nodded. “Very well, your turn. But first, let me pour us more drinks.”

They moved on to other subjects from favorite childhood foods to the worst ball they’d ever attended. Freya found that she was rather enjoying herself. She had to admit that Eric was an interesting man to be around — intriguing

as well as insightful. He kept her on her toes right up until she was too drunk to care.

They moved to the sofa where they sat looking into the fire that Eric lit. “What shall we do about Papa?” Freya asked after a few minutes of maudlin reflection.

“Nothing. I will not force you to do anything with me. Don’t worry,” Eric said passionately.

Freya bit her lip. She was not sure it would be a hardship to lie to Eric, but he seemed so sure, she did not want to correct him. In any case, he was likely to take it as pity. She turned, looking directly at his scar. She reached up and ran a hand along it. “Tell me what happened,” she whispered.

He sighed long and hard before looking her in the eye. “Why?”

“Because it affects you so. I want to know what happened. Is it true you were fighting pirates?”

He huffed in amusement. “Sadly, no. It was just the French. We disembarked at Marseille to take on water and food. It was pitch black in the middle of the night. Our man had brought barrels for us to pick up and disappear before anyone noticed. Unfortunately, the French knew of our rendezvous. They were waiting for us. There was a fight. A bayonet got me.”

She gasped. “A bayonet? That must have been dangerous.” She put a hand on his arm where the scar ended. “You could have bled to death.”

“Yes, I might have. What saved me was an old lady who cauterized my wound closed.”

Freya winced. “That must have hurt.”

He laughed. “The pain was unimaginable.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No need. I am healed now.”

She sat up and looked at him. “Are you really? You still seem quite unhappy about them.”

His lips twisted. “Most of the time, I forget they are there until I see someone look at me with disgust.” He turned his head to look into her eyes.

She moved closer, staring intently at the scars, unblinking. “I am not staring with disgust, am I?”

He chuckled in quiet amusement. “Not at the moment, no.”

She turned to look him in the eyes. They were so close she could feel his breath on her face. “Just the moment?” Her eyes dropped to his lips.

He closed the distance between them, capturing her lips with his own, and inhaling deeply as he kissed her, sucking her bottom lip, pulling it into his mouth before questing with his tongue, asking for entry.

She readily let him in, clinging to him as he kissed her. His hand roamed along her back and then wandered over to the soft swell of her breasts, squeezing gently before returning to her back.

He pulled her close, tongues tangling as his hands fumbled with her buttons, taking them off one by one as he licked along her jaw and suckled a bite into her neck. She moaned, throwing her head back to give him more room. He pulled her dress off her shoulders and let it hang around her waist. She wiggled, pushing it down until it pooled on the ground at her feet. His hands dug beneath her buttocks, squeezing them before he lifted her from the sofa and into his lap.

She could feel his hardness against her thighs as he returned to kissing her

face, her nose, her cheeks, and then back to her mouth. His fingers pulled at her shift, so that it was askew, exposing the creamy swell of her left breast.

He reached into her neckline and scooped out her breast, immediately latching onto it with his mouth and suckling. She squirmed in his lap, moaning and groaning as she reached for his shirt, unbuttoning it slowly. She ran her hands along the hardness of his chest, gratified to finally be able to touch.

It was just as hard as she had imagined. Immovable like stone. She groaned, flicking at his nipples, and he jerked in reaction.

“Oh, did I hurt you?” Her brow furrowed in concern.

“Not at all. Please, continue,” he said courteously before returning to laving her breast until it was wet with his saliva. He pushed her shift off her shoulder on one side and then the other. Turning his attention to her other breast, he began suckling it as well.

She tucked her hands around his neck, pulling him close, hungry for more. She loved how it felt to be touched in this way, and it satisfied a little bit of the hollowness she’d been feeling in the preceding days.

But still, she wanted more.

His hands circled her naked waist, pulling her flush against him, his hips moving beneath her in rhythmic cadence. He pushed her back and took one of her legs, maneuvering it over his waist so that she could straddle him. He pulled her close again, kissing her hard as his hips resumed their rhythmic movement, pushing up against her exposed center.

“Want you,” he murmured into her skin, and she wasn’t sure what he meant, but she had a feeling she wanted it too.

Suddenly, he moved back, pushing her off his lap and doubling over. She

stared at him, stupefied.

“Eric? What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry.”

“What?”

“I shouldn’t have touched you against your will. I’m sorry.”

Freya stared at him, nonplussed. “Don’t be silly. You didn’t touch me against my will.”

“*You are drunk,*” he cried into his own lap. “You cannot consent.”

Freya’s lips worked, but there was nothing she could say. She was indeed very drunk, and maybe she would not have had the courage to offer herself were she sober, but...she did want this.

“I do consen —”

“Shut your mouth!” he held up a trembling hand. “*Do not speak.*”

She obeyed without thinking, staring at him, wondering why he was bent over like that and looking as if he was in pain.

“Go to bed,” he whispered.

She wanted to protest, to refuse, but she also could not throw herself on him. Not when he’d rejected her so thoroughly. Dragging her feet, she let her shift fall to the ground and crawled stark naked into bed. She lay there for a long time, listening to his deep painful sounding breaths and wondering if his scar hurt.

Finally, she heard footsteps, and he walked over to the bed which dipped as he entered on the other side. She waited, tense, wondering if he would touch her now. But he just turned away from her and began to breathe evenly.

She closed her eyes, a single tear falling as she felt something like her heart break.

He doesn't want me.

Somehow, she'd never thought about how he felt for her, but this physical evidence of his rejection was almost too much to take. Folding in on herself, she closed her eyes tightly and attempted to fall asleep.



Eric was a sailor, and so he was used to imbibing large quantities of alcohol. As a result, he was not at all surprised to wake up with a headache but also a clear and complete remembrance of everything that happened the night before. Kissing Freya, touching her, and almost making love to her.

I almost forced myself upon her, he thought with horror.

He resolved then and there not to get drunk again in her presence.

He turned and found her sprawled in the middle of the bed, snoring slightly, and looking debauched. He stared at her mouth, swollen still from their kissing, one breast peeking out from the blankets.

Temptation personified.

How am I supposed to resist?

He pushed himself out of bed in the other direction and disappeared behind the screen to use the chamber pot. He came back out to find Freya sitting up

in bed. She turned to look at him and then screamed. He jumped, looking around for the threat, and then realized she was screaming at his body.

“Oh, hush. You have seen me unclothed before.”

“Not...not...not...” She waved vaguely in the direction of his groin.

He snorted with derision and then plucked his night robe from the hook and put it on. “There, are you satisfied?”

She just blinked at him, looking positively discombobulated. Eric almost laughed but then clutched at his head as it throbbed. Walking around the bed, he picked up the decanter of water and poured himself a glass. He held up the decanter to Freya, eyebrow raised in inquiry. She shook her head, licking her bottom lip and looking disgusted. She got out of bed and then realized she was naked too.

She screeched again before running for her robe and hastily putting it on. Eric watched with bemusement. “I take it you don’t remember what happened last night.”

“What happened?” She stared at him in horror. “What do you mean by that?”

He shook his head, feeling savagely vindicated for his instincts. “Nothing happened. Don’t worry your little head about it.”

“Then why were we both naked?”

He shrugged. “I suppose it was a hot night.”

She glared at him. “You’re lying.”

“And your eyes are red. We all have our challenges.”

She put a hand to her head with a tiny gasp and then went to the basin. Pouring water into it, she began to wash her face. Eric finished his water just as there was a knock on the door.

“Yes?” he called.

Silver came in, accompanied by several maids carrying hot water. They placed them in the bathroom and left. “Your family is down at breakfast. They are expecting you,” Silver said.

“Yes, thank you,” Eric said coolly, dismissing the man.

Freya gave him a look. “What are we to do about *him*?”

Eric sighed. “We must pretend to be the most loving couple in Christendom while he is around. We must act as if we are doing what he wishes, otherwise, he and your father will not stop coming up with schemes such as last night.

Freya nodded slowly. “You’re right.”

“So, for example, he has told us that our families are waiting while bringing hot water for us to bathe. Obviously, he expects us to bathe together. I suggest we each clean ourselves as fast as possible and go down to breakfast together.”

Freya hesitated, looking skeptical. “I-I suppose we could do that.”

“Good, now hurry up and go and bathe while I shave my stubble.”

To her credit, Freya hurried to obey. With a nod of his own, Eric went to get his shaving kit.

Chapter Nineteen



Both William and Isabella were annoyed at them for missing dinner. “We never see you anymore,” Isabella complained.

“I’m sorry darling. I shall try to do better. Last night was a bit of a surprise to us as well. I had every intention of coming down to eat with you all,” Freya tried to soothe her.

“A-are you feeling better now?” William asked tentatively.

Freya smiled at his gentle concern. “Yes, thank you. It’s very kind of you to care.”

“Isabella was very worried for you,” William said.

“Good morning! Lovely to see you all here.” Mrs. Campbell breezed into the room, smiling at everyone. Both William and Eric got to their feet to greet her.

She sat down, and they followed suit. She smiled at Eric and Freya who were sitting side by side. “And how was your reunion? You both look a little worse for wear.”

“Why thank you, Mother,” Eric said wryly.

She waved a dismissive hand, “You know what I mean.”

“Yes. We did have rather a lot to drink last night.” He smiled Freya’s way, and she did her best to answer it. She could see Silver from the corner of her eye, watching them.

“Oh, well, you should have some coffee this morning. I remember Alexander —” She stopped smiling, abruptly cutting herself off.

Eric reached out and squeezed her hand. “I remember. He used to swear by it.” He smiled affectionately, his eyes soft, and then cleared his throat and turned to Freya. “Shall I pour you a cup?”

“Y-yes thank you.” She’d been so busy observing him that she was startled when he spoke to her. He reached for the kettle, but Silver was there first.

“Allow me, sir,” he murmured before pouring them both a cup.

Freya took a sip but did not immediately feel better. She did feel parched and so continued to drink the coffee. Just as she was beginning to appreciate the warmth spreading in her belly and the slightly improved clarity of mind she was feeling, Mr. Green, Eric’s steward, came hurrying into the room.

He bent over Eric’s chair and whispered frantically in his ear. Eric got to his feet, his face blank. “Forgive me everyone, but I beg to be excused. An urgent matter needs to be dealt with right away.”

Freya got half out of her chair. “Can I help?”

“No!” His voice was sharp, and he startled her into falling back into her chair. “It’s fine. I can handle it.” He strode away, his steward following close behind.

Freya watched them both, a frown marring her brow. Whatever had happened seemed to be of a rather urgent nature. She wanted to know what it was and whether it involved their arrangement.

Finishing her coffee as fast as possible, she got to her feet and walked out, determined to find Eric and demand he tell her what was going on.

Silver intercepted her. “Lady Freya, Mrs. Beecham asked for an audience with you to regarding the repairs that Mr. Campbell ordered. She is waiting for you in the music room.”

Freya huffed with annoyance but changed direction anyway to go and talk with her governess. She found both the governess and housekeeper waiting for her. “There you are, my lady,” Mrs. Beecham said. “Now, when you were in confinement, Mr. Campbell ordered that some repairs and modifications be done. Something about a piping system. I did not understand it.”

Freya smiled. She knew exactly what Eric had been alluding to. “I’m afraid that for that one, we may have to get an outside builder. It isn’t something we can do ourselves.”

“Oh...” Mrs. Beecham seemed perturbed. “And who would pay for it?” she whispered.

“I think if Mr. Campbell ordered it, he knows the answer to that. Is there anything else? I would like to —” She pointed out the door just before Mrs. Beecham interrupted her.

“Oh no, no. There’s plenty more we need to discuss. Mr. Campbell had spoken of the drawing room. Some of the furniture in there is threadbare as you know, and he wanted everything revamped according to your specifications.”

“He did?”

“Yes ma’am,” Mrs. Beecham nodded.

“Oh...well then let us go and see.”

Mrs. Leigh, the housekeeper, hastened to open the door and lead the way to the drawing room. Freya looked around, trying to envision the place as she might want it. The sofas had been there even before her mother came to live at Stark Manor and had never been refurbished. She had always hated their dull grey color and if it were up to her, she would have chosen cheerful sky blues and white for the room so that it lit up. She hated the red silk Chinese wallpaper as it darkened the room somewhat, and it had faded to a color indistinguishable from the grey of the chairs.

“We shall start with the walls. Tear down the wallpaper and paint the walls white. Then we shall have the furniture replaced with something more cheerful.”

“Yes, m’lady,” Mrs. Leigh said. “Shall I have the footmen begin right away?”

“Yes. Now, if you will excuse me...” She walked out determinedly and went in search of Eric. She could hear his raised voice from the study and headed that way.

What is happening?

She paused at the door, noting that it was slightly ajar, and put her ear to the gap, trying to hear more clearly.

“Are you sure about this, Mr. Green? We have to be absolutely certain before we proceed.”

“Yes sir. I triple-checked it before I brought it to you. It is definitely true.”

“Then we must set up a rendezvous and talk with them before they move.”

“Yes. But sir —”

Eric held up his finger, looking towards the door. Freya tried to move away quickly, but she tripped on the hem of her skirt and almost fell. The door fell open, and Eric stared at her accusingly.

“What are you doing here?”

“I am your wife. I have every right to be here.”

He sneered. “Oh, you have remembered that little bit of information now? This has nothing to do with you. Kindly go about your business.” He closed the door and locked it.

She stared in disbelief. How could he be so cutting with her? Especially since they’d agreed to play up their relationship for Silver. He’d definitely hear of this. Which meant whatever he did not want her to see was of great importance to him if he wanted to keep it so much of a secret from her.

She resolved there and then to find out what it might be.



“The Dowager Marchioness of Digby has kindly sent us an invitation to her ball that is to take place during the weekend. We are invited to stay over as it is out of town. Isn’t that kind?” Eric said as he read the invitation during breakfast.

Ever since he’d told Freya to mind her own business two days ago, their relationship had been frosty. He felt sorry for it — he had not meant to be so abrupt, but she ignored all his overtures. So, he was glad that they were going to be forced to act as a loving couple for a few days. Perhaps he could talk her around.

Silver seemed pleased by the invitation.

“The Dowager does not invite just anybody to her soirees. You are very fortunate,” he said proudly.

Eric cocked an eyebrow at him, surprised to see the usually solemn butler beaming.

“Indeed,” he said quietly, putting the invitation down. Freya had yet to say a word. To his surprise, it was his mother who asked the obvious question.

“Freya, are you not pleased?”

“Hmm?” she looked up from her plate. “Oh, of course, I am. I was just... preoccupied.”

“William and I will come too, is that not so?” Isabella asked with excitement.

“Of course. We would not leave you here on your own. Heaven knows if there would be a house to come back to if we did,” Eric teased. Freya was still blank-faced.

William gave a derisive snort. “We are not children. We know how to behave.”

“Of course, you do.” Eric teased, “But you just don’t.”

William opened his mouth to protest this characterization but closed it again. He and Isabella had certainly found creative ways to pass the time, including hiding all the chamber pots one day just to watch the servants frantically searching for them. Eric had confined them to the schoolroom for two days.

“If you want to behave like children, then we will treat you like children,” he’d admonished.

Even then, they'd decorated the schoolroom walls with chalk drawings and put grease on the chair so that when Mrs. Beecham tried to sit, she fell to the floor. They were nothing less than holy terrors who would only *sometimes* listen to Mrs. Campbell. Eric was tempted to put them over his knee, but he could well remember that age, and he enjoyed seeing the younger pair carefree and uninhibited by the weight of societal or familial expectations.

"Let them be. They'll grow tired of it soon enough," he told his mother when she came to him in worry. "The novelty of having a companion is probably what is egging them on."

Mrs. Campbell made a skeptical sound, but she agreed to give them their space.

"However, if you want to go for this ball, you will have to behave a lot better than you have been."

They exchanged glances. "Fine. We shall be the very soul of propriety."

"Good. That's the spirit."



There were gowns to be made for herself, Mrs. Campbell and Isabella. Freya was quite preoccupied with preparations for the next few days in addition to supervising the removal of wallpaper from the drawing room. She could almost pretend that Eric did not exist. He spent most of his time locked in the study with his steward or riding off with him to heaven knew where.

At night he came to bed when she was already pretending to be asleep.

It was not ideal. Especially since Silver was still watching them closely. But he could see how busy they were, and that was a perfect excuse for the distance between them. Eric did insist that they sleep cuddled up together so

that nobody would suspect that nothing else was happening in their marriage bed.

Sometimes, he would take his shirt off, and the feel of him, tight and hard, strong arms around her, would keep her awake long into the night. As a result, she was tired during the day and disposed to be crabby. Thankfully, her mother-in-law and sister attributed it to the many fittings they had to do as well as shopping for hats, gloves, and just the right shoes.

Freya was almost surprised on the morning of the ball since she had not been paying much attention to the dates. Two carriages awaited them outside, and she naturally headed for the one bearing her sister.

Silver intercepted her, pointing to the other, smaller carriage. "You and Mr. Campbell will travel in that one," he said firmly.

Freya opened her mouth to protest but then remembered in time that she and Eric were supposed to be a loving couple. She marched to the smaller carriage and settled herself in the corner, pouting slightly. Eric soon joined her, and they took off, rocking gently from side to side on the bumpy road.

Eric sighed, turning to her. "What will it take for you to stop sulking at me?" he asked wearily.

She crossed her arms, pouting even more. "I am *not* sulking."

He just stared at her in disbelief. "You have been sulking for days. Is it because I told you to mind your own business? I am sorry for being abrupt."

"Abrupt?" she screeched quietly. "You embarrassed me in front of the entire household, closed the door in my face, and treated me like a nuisance. You were not just *abrupt!*"

Eric had the temerity to smile. "You've been waiting a long time to say that to me, have you not?"

She simply narrowed her eyes at him.

“All right, I am sorry. I was rude and unthinking. I had more important things on my mind.”

“What things?”

He glanced at her cautiously. “Will you shout at me again if I say it’s none of your business?”

“I am your wife.”

“When it’s convenient for you, yes.”

“What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“Only that you only call yourself that when you think it will get you what you want from me.”

She gawped at him. “That... that’s *ridiculous!*”

“Is it?” he raised an eyebrow.

“Yes. For one thing, I do not want *anything* from you.”

“You want information.”

“Only because you left the table very abruptly, and it seemed like bad news. If it involves us, I would like to be apprised of what it is.”

“Oh, then you can relax. It has nothing to do with you and everything to do with my family’s holdings.”

She stared at him, “Your family *is* my family.”

“Since when?”

“Since we married! Or do you not know how that works?”

Eric laughed bitterly, “Are we pretending that we have a normal marriage now? You have hardly wanted to look at me these past few days, let alone touch me.”

“That is because you disgusted me. Your behavior was atrocious.”

Freya saw him flinch but was too busy ranting to really take it in. “You cannot blow hot and cold like that and expect me to just be fine with it. I am not a puppet to be jerked around on strings. You must treat me with respect.”

“Respect? As if you have shown me any?”

“I have shown you the respect you deserve,” she scoffed dismissively.

He turned from her to look out of the window. “I think it would be best if we ceased speaking to each other.”

She stared, surprised. “But why? We have not finished our discussion.”

He turned on her. “I think you’ve made it clear how you feel. Your *disgust* for me.”

Her eyes widened as she realized what he meant. “No no, I did not mean your face. I meant your *behavior*.”

He snorted derisively, shaking his head and looking away. “Please, you do not need to make up things now. I know full well how the rich and mighty see me. I am nothing but damaged goods, a stain on society. They cringe at the thought of having to make civil whiskers with me. Do not think I do not know I —”

Freya could think of nothing else to do to show him she wasn't disgusted but to kiss him. She pressed her lips tightly to his, trying to remember how he'd done it. Tongue darting out, she licked at his lips, hoping he would do the rest.

He made a surprised sound and parted his lips, and the next thing she knew, her tongue was in his mouth. She moved it around tentatively, pressing their lips together, keeping her eyes wide open.

He sucked her tongue for a moment before pushing away from her and turning away with a pained sound. She stared at him, bosom heaving, having no clue what to do next.

Chapter Twenty



“L et us go. They are expecting us.”

Those were the last words that Freya was expecting to hear from Eric’s mouth. The carriage had come to a stop at least five minutes ago, and they had been sitting in silence since. There was no sign of the other carriage bearing his mother and brother as well as her sister. She stared at him, seeing that his face had gone blank and emotionless. The paleness of his skin made his scars stand out even more. He was clearly very upset.

“I-I’m sorry,” she whispered not knowing what else to say.

“No need for apologies. We all knew what we were getting into.” He opened the door and alighted from the vehicle without sparing her another glance. She hurried to follow him, mindful of the appearance they had to keep up.

He offered her his arm still without looking at her, and she took it. They walked slowly towards the large stone castle. The Dowager Marchioness lived at Stockton-on-Tees, and her castle bordered the river Tees. They had in fact ridden over a moat to get into the compound. If Freya was being honest, she was quite impressed at the largesse. She was not used to such blatant displays of wealth.

They stepped onto the red carpet in the foyer where a straight-backed butler

took their coats and directed them onward towards the drawing room. “Where early guests are gathered for tea,” he explained. “Once you have greeted the Dowager Marchioness, you will be shown to your room to change for the ball.”

Eric nodded his thanks, and Freya smiled at the butler before following an assigned footman down a long corridor with a few twists and turns before they arrived at a large drawing room. Several groups of people stood around laughing and talking in the brightly lit room. Three of the walls consisted of French windows, so there was plenty of light streaming in addition to a breathtaking view of the river and the rolling hills surrounding them.

Freya tugged Eric’s arm, directing him towards the Dowager Marchioness who was holding court in the middle of the room. She stopped speaking as she saw them approach her eyes on Eric’s face. Freya’s heart sped up in anxiety when she noticed where the Dowager Marchioness was looking.

She and Eric came to a stop in front of the group, and Eric made an elegant leg. “A pleasure to meet you, my lady. We were honored by your invitation.”

The Dowager said nothing and simply stared at him— rather rudely in Freya’s opinion. She could see his face going red. Quickly, she looked around, recognizing Lord Hilton, who was a friend of her father's. She smiled at him and nodded, “Lord Hilton what a pleasure.”

He jerked, as if seeing her for the first time, and then smiled, blushing slightly with embarrassment. “Lady Freya, I did not see you there.”

That’s because you are too busy staring at my husband’s scars, she thought resentfully.

That greeting seemed to galvanize the group, and they quickly extended their greetings as well, gazes still lingering on Eric’s face, clearly curious about what happened to him. Freya clung tighter to Eric, knowing that he was extremely uncomfortable with this scrutiny. She did her best to direct the conversation in other directions, wanting to give him time to recover.

She felt embarrassed but not for Eric, rather for the other members of the party who had behaved in such an uncouth manner. She was more than embarrassed; inside, she was seething with rage even as she pasted a smile on her face and made civil whiskers with them.

Just then, the orchestra began to play from somewhere down the hall, and the Dowager Marchioness clapped her hands together. "Ladies and gentlemen, the ball is about to begin. Those who wish may feel free to adjourn to the ballroom and enjoy the music."

There was a cheer around the room and the general exodus.

Lord Hilton turned to her. "Would you care to dance, Lady Freya?"

Freya hesitated for a moment. She flicked a glance at Eric, who was still stone-faced and silent. They had not even changed into their ball gowns yet. But Lord Hilton was her father's friend, and she did not want to snub him in public. Eric turned to her his eyes blank. "Go ahead," he said in a low gravelly voice.

With his endorsement, she found it even more difficult to protest, and so she smiled at Lord Hilton and offered him her hand. He led her out of the room and down the hall to the ballroom. The orchestra was playing a gay ditty to start the night off, and Lord Hilton turned out to be a proficient dancer. To Freya's surprise, she found that she was enjoying herself.

Once the dance was done, she looked around for Eric, wanting to go up to their room so that she could change her clothes. She could see him nowhere around and wondered if he was still in the drawing room.

"Excuse me," she murmured absently to the group that she had somehow become part of before walking out of the ballroom and back to the drawing room. Two men sat on armchairs smoking cheroots and chatting, but neither of them was Eric.

She frowned wondering if he might have gone upstairs without her. Stopping a footman, she asked if she had seen a tall man with a muscular physique, dark tousled hair, and piercing blue eyes. “He also has a scar running down his face.”

The footman frowned before shaking his head. “I’m sorry, my lady, I have not.”

With a sigh, she decided to make her way upstairs to their designated room. She walked back to the door where the butler was welcoming guests. “Excuse me, but which chamber is ours, and have you seen my husband?”

The butler frowned. “I have not. However,” he snapped his fingers and a footman appeared, “Henry will take you to your chambers.”

Freya followed the footman, all the while hoping that she would find Eric in their rooms. She was worried about him and what he might do. His words from the carriage kept playing over and over in her head.

I knew he felt slighted by everyone’s manner. I should have asked him if he wanted to leave right then.

But she knew that asking such a question would have embarrassed him even more. Whatever she did it seemed to have been the wrong thing. Henry opened the door of her chambers and then stood back with a bow. “Your rooms, my lady.”

She nodded to him in thanks and stepped in, looking around and not seeing Eric anywhere or any sign of him. Their bags were placed neatly beside the bed, and they seemed to have been untouched.

Freya blew out a deep breath, her hands on her hips as she wondered what to do now. “Where are you, Eric?”



Eric wandered outside, the music from the orchestra drifting towards him through the open windows as well as the laughter and conversation. Never before had he felt so out of place. His upbringing had been fairly insular — he had his family around him, and he needed little else. Then he had gone off to the Navy, and that was a new kind of family but just as strong and self-contained.

If he was honest, he had been feeling adrift for quite a while. Trying to navigate the Duke's rules while maintaining his honor had proved to be quite the challenge. It felt like the last straw to be stared at like an animal at a zoo by people who were meant to be his colleagues or his peers, now that he was to join the ranks of the nobility.

It did not bode well for his future, and all he wanted to do at the moment was run away.

Coward. Alexander would have straightened his spine and faced them head held high.

“Yes well, I am not Alexander,” he murmured to himself.

He felt a sense of tiredness and defeat. Everything he tried to do seemed to go wrong. Spotting the stables up ahead, he veered in that direction. Horses had always struck him as the most placid of creatures unless disturbed. They accepted you as you were without questions or bias. As long as you meant no harm, they were happy to have you around.

“Vastly different from people.”

He peered into the stables, finding it empty of human occupation, and stepped in. There were several horses in the stall, including, he recognized, the Stark horses— two sleek black steeds enjoying their rest and oats. He

regretted not having an apple to offer or a sugar cube.

Approaching one of them slowly, he put his hand on its flank, smoothing the sleek black fur over and over again. It was very soothing. He spotted a brush hanging on the wall and went to retrieve it. He ran the brush repeatedly from the horse's withers to its dock, down its flank, and over its shoulder. Getting lost in the mindless activity, he put the party out of his mind as his spirit calmed down.



Freya was getting a little bit frantic with worry. She had changed her clothes into a sunny yellow ball gown and piled her chestnut hair atop her head. She'd gone as slow as possible, but still, Eric had not appeared. The castle was large, and she wondered if she was to wander around until she got lost trying to find him. She began to feel angry at him for just disappearing without a word. The more she worried about him, the angrier she became.

She went back into the ballroom, walking around everywhere trying to find him. She spotted William and Isabella on the dance floor, but no Eric. She did not want to worry them by asking if they had seen him, so she slipped out and began wandering the corridors in search of a footman who might help direct her.

She ran into one at the bottom of the corridor, standing as still as a statue in front of a door. "Excuse me?" she began. "I'm sorry to bother you but have you seen a tall muscular man with a scar on his face anywhere around here?"

The footman turned to her. "Such a man as you describe went out this door about an hour ago."

She gasped with relief. "Do you know where he went?"

The footman hesitated.

“Please. I need to know if he is all right.”

The footman sighed, “Well, my lady, I saw him walking down the gardens towards the stables.”

She clutched his arms, squeezing gratefully. “Thank you.”

He nodded uncomfortably and opened the door for her. She dashed out, looking left and right, trying to see in every direction at the same time. She began to walk towards the stables, keeping an eye out for the burgundy coat he’d been wearing. She walked all the way up to the stables without seeing it.

“Eric?” she called tentatively into the relative dark that was the stables. “Eric, are you in there?”

A figure emerged from the blackness, scaring her quite a bit, and she shrieked.

“Hush woman. What is this noise about?”

“Y-you startled me.” She put her hand to her heaving bosom.

“How now? Were you not calling me?”

“I was,” she snapped, “because I did not know where you were. Thank you, by the way, for leaving me all alone without a word.”

His lip turned down derisively. “You seemed to be enjoying yourself.”

“Well, I wasn’t. I was worrying about *you*.”

“No need. I am fine as you can see.”

“What are you doing here?”

He grinned spreading out his arms, “Why nothing, my dear. I am simply... tending to the horses.”

She frowned. “That is what grooms are for. Let us go back to the party.”

“No.”

She jerked in startlement at his abrupt tone. “Whyever not?”

“I do not want to talk to those people anymore. I am fine where I am. *You* may go back to the party if you wish.”

Freya just stared at him nonplussed. “I think I would rather stay here with you.”

“Why? Do you pity me?” he mocked.

“I was worried about you! Why do you not understand that?”

“Well, I have told you there’s nothing to worry about.”

She snorted. “And I’m just supposed to believe that? While you are here grooming horses instead of socializing?”

“I want to socialize with those people just about as much as they want to socialize with me. I think we are both much happier where we are.”

“Then I will stay with you.”

“I think you’d be much happier where they are too.”

“What makes you think that?”

He sneered, looking away, “You are going to make me repeat it, are you?”

“I have told you, I feel no disgust at your face or your scars. To me, they are just symbols of everything that you have been through and survived. They are symbols of your strength.”

“You do not need to placate me, Lady Freya. No go off and play with your friends.”

“I am not placating you. I do not know what it is you want me to say so that you will *believe* me.”

Eric just looked at her, his eyes full of skepticism.

“Do you know what you remind me of?” Freya asked.

He cocked an eyebrow in inquiry.

“You remind me of milk thistle. A prickly plant, not very pretty to look at but terribly useful.”

He barked with surprised laughter. “I have never had myself described so.”

She shrugged. “Well, it is true.”

One of the horses made a sound, and he turned away from her to look at it. Then he disappeared back into the dark, and she could hear him talking soothingly to the horse.

“What if we just rode away? Take the horses for a canter around the countryside?” she asked.

“Can we really do that?”

“Why not? It is not as if anyone will notice. There are too many people coming and going.”

“Hmm...” There was a small silence, and then he appeared at the doorway again, leading a horse. “Your ride, my lady,” he said with a bow.

Freya laughed. “Let us go then,” she said as she let Eric boost her up on to the horse. Arranging her skirts, she took hold of the bridle, holding the horse steady as Eric climbed on behind her. His arms went around her waist, and he took the bridle from her hands.

“Are you ready?” he asked, his breath ghosting against her neck.

She nodded shakily. “Let’s go.”

Chapter Twenty-One



The storm came upon them rather suddenly as they were enjoying the horse ride. All Eric knew was that they were about two hills away from the castle. There was no way they could ride back there in the midst of a deluge, especially on hilly ground. That was asking for a nasty accident to happen. He looked around from the horse's back, trying to find somewhere they might shelter.

Freya leaned in to speak to him. "You remember we passed a crofter's cottage about fifteen minutes ago?"

Eric did indeed remember the cottage. It had seemed to be abandoned with half the roof falling in. He looked around one last time in desperation, trying to see if there was a better shelter insight. All he could see were verdant rolling hills.

With a sigh, he turned the horse around, slipping and sliding as they trotted back down the path. It was an interminable time later that he saw the shadow of a mound. Lightning lit up the sky, showing the crofter's cottage in all its decaying glory.

He turned the horse towards it, calling out in case it was occupied, but with the thundering rain, it was doubtful that anyone would have heard him anyway. Coming to a stop at the door, he reached up for Freya, helping her

off the horse. She stood there shivering, staring at him, and he took off his coat and handed it to her.

He pulled her close, gesturing for her to take shelter inside the cottage before taking the horse's bridle and pulling it inside the cottage as well. He looked around, noting that the area that had fallen in was not as large as he had feared. It was just a round hole the size of a trough.

He spotted the fireplace on the opposite wall from the one that was damaged and heaved a sigh of relief. If he could get some wood burning, they could get warm and perhaps escape the dangers of fever.

Letting the bridle trail to the floor, he went back outside in search of wood. Walking around the cottage, he exclaimed in joy as he found a stack of cut wood neatly stacked against the north corner of the house and protected from most of the rain by an overhang.

Rolling up the sleeves of his shirt, he bent down and got to work transferring the wood indoors.



Freya huddled miserably in Eric's coat, her teeth chattering. She listened for his footsteps fearfully, wondering just where he'd gone when he appeared in the doorway, clutching a bundle of firewood. Bosom heaving, she stared as he marched into the cottage and dropped his load next to the fireplace.

His wet shirt clung to his back, outlining his form in clear loving detail. His muscles rippled as he moved the logs, throwing two of them into the fire before heading to the door again.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To find kindling," he replied without turning back.

She frowned. “How will you find any kindling out there in the wet?”

“I’m sure I don’t know, but I cannot tell you until I’ve tried,” he said without turning around.

Freya looked around the room. “Can we not use some of the fallen thatch? It’s a deluge outside, and every time you go out you just get wetter.”

He turned around, white teeth gleaming as he grinned. “I think at this point I’ve gotten as wet as I possibly can. What’s a little more water?”

She marched towards him and grabbed his arm. “If you go out there again, I shall follow you.” She clenched her jaw with determination.

He blinked at her, seeming nonplussed. “Well...we cannot have that, can we?”

Letting go of him, she reached down and pulled up the skirt of her gown. “My inner petticoats are still fairly dry. You can use that.” She immediately began to try and tear the sturdy cotton material.

With a sigh, Eric bent down and took hold of the petticoat, tearing it along the seam before reaching into his boot and emerging with a small knife. “I never leave home without it,” he murmured. “One never knows when one might need one.”

He cut off a rectangular piece of her petticoat before getting to his feet. Freya found that she was quite breathless and not from the cold. He got to his feet and walked over to the fireplace.

He exclaimed in excitement, making her jump before rushing over to see what the fuss was about.

“Someone left us a flint and steel,” he said with glee and immediately began to try and light it. Soon, he had a flame, and he lit the piece of cotton on fire

before throwing it gently over the few pieces of kindling he'd fashioned from the wood bark. He fanned the flames frantically as Freya prayed.

To her relief, the wood caught and began to burn, first slowly, but soon, there was a roaring fire in the grate. Eric grinned at her as she stood, warming herself. "Better?" he asked softly.

She nodded, looking back at him.

Their gazes held for an interminable moment before he jerked and turned towards the door, "I should get some more wood."

"Don't get too wet," she called.

"If I do, at least there's a fire to dry off in front of."

Freya smiled, rolling one of the logs towards her, so she could sit on it. She looked around the cottage. There wasn't much left in it — a table missing half its legs and a jar of something over on one of the shelves. Whatever it was, Freya doubted it was edible. She had a moment's regret that she'd not had some tea before they left the castle or thought to carry any food with her. The rain showed no signs of slowing down or stopping. They were in a strange place, and it was getting dark.

Dare we even try to get back to Digby Castle tonight?

She did not think that would be a good idea. She tried humming to keep her mind away from how empty her stomach felt, but she could not help thinking about what a miserable night they were about to have.

Suddenly, Eric appeared in the doorway, a second bundle of wood under his arm, and in his hand, he held...a pail. "Found a well," he said. "I think the water's good. At least we'll have something to drink tonight."

She smiled, grateful that they'd been thinking along the same lines. "Better

than nothing,” she murmured.

He came towards her and put the full pail down near the fireplace. He reached for her, and she tensed, wondering what he was thinking. But all he did was reach into the pocket of his coat and extract a hip flask which he shook.

“The finest brandy I could find in your manor,” he explained.

“Oh...well, that’s something.”

“And the flask is full.” He grinned.

“In that case, we can get pleasantly sozzled and forget that we’re hungry and possibly lost.”

“Not lost. I’m sure the horse can lead us home...once it’s safe.”

“Let us hope you’re right.”

He uncorked the flask and offered it to her. She took it, downing a large sip and feeling instantly gratified as it warmed her from the inside. He smiled, reaching into the pocket of his waistcoat, extracting a small pouch. “I also have some tobacco here if you’d care for a smoke.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And just how would we smoke that without a pipe?”

“Ah, well, while we were down in Jamaica with His Majesty’s Navy, I came across a very interesting practice where they roll the tobacco into a paper.”

“Oh? Well, we do not have that either.”

He reached into his other waistcoat pocket triumphantly. “Except I do.” He held it up for her to see.

Her jaw dropped. “You let me cut up my petticoat when you had *paper*?”

He shrugged. “You had already begun to tear it before I could say a word. Besides, you were right to offer. We needed a substantial bit of kindling to get the fire going as well as it was. This paper might have burned too fast.”

“Humph!” Freya said, folding her arms and staring into the fire, sulkily.

“If it is any consolation, I did immensely enjoy seeing your ankles.”

She reached out and punched him in the arm.

“Ouch.” He bent forward, while laughing. “That hurt.”

“Ha! I wish.”

“You don’t know your own strength.”

Freya pouted. “Are you saying that I am mannish?”

“Heaven forbid. Absolutely not, my dear. Merely that a slight thing such as yourself packs more of a punch than expected.”

Freya snorted. “Hardly slight. I know I’m quite sturdy.”

“I would venture to say willowy.”

Freya smiled, her eyes narrowed playfully. “Is that a compliment? Are you paying me compliments?”

“If you want to see them that way. I would call them accurate descriptions.”

Freya laughed. “Oh, of course. Never have it said that Eric Campbell paid his wife a compliment.”

“Oh no, that would be against the tenets of our relationship. We absolutely *insist* on being at odds,” he said with faux solemnity.

“Indeed,” she replied breezily. “Mortal enemies forever.”

Even as she said it, she realized it had not been true in a while. Not only did she quite like Eric now, but she was also halfway to falling in love with him. The thought perturbed her so much that she had to stand up and walk around the cottage.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

She flicked a glance his way where he still stood by the fire. “May I have some more of your brandy?”

Silently, he handed her the bottle, his eyes dark with concern. Thankfully, he did not keep staring but occupied himself with rolling the tobacco. He bent down, lighting it up with the fire before throwing it on another log.

He took a long drag, the muscles of his neck working, the firelight throwing them into sharp relief. She could not stop looking. His wet shirt still clung to him as did his breeches.

“You know, *you* should try to dry your clothes or else you might catch your death.”

He smirked at her, blowing smoke into the air. “Are you trying to get me naked?”

Her face heated, and she turned away. “Of course not. I am trying —”

“Hush, no need to explain. You are right. I should dry my clothes. Perhaps we can both sit facing the fire, so we get as much heat as we can. I will do it if you do.”

She paused in her pacing to give him a look. His face held nothing but sincerity. With a sigh, she walked up to him, and they arranged two logs together before sitting down. For a time, there was silence in the room aside from the sound of logs crackling, the horse nickering and snorting, and of course, the rain falling. It was peaceful, and Freya almost fell asleep sitting up. She swayed a bit in Eric's direction, and he put his hands out to steady her. "You may rest on my shoulder if you wish," he suggested.

Freya wanted to refuse, but she was so very tired. Slipping his coat off her shoulders, she laid it down on the floor. "Or we can both lay down and rest," she countered.

He gave her a long look before stubbing out his cheroot. "Very well."

He got up, added some more logs to the fire, and then lay down on his side, his back to the logs they'd been sitting on, and his head cradled in his hand. He patted the space he'd left between himself and the fire. With a sigh, she lay down, cradling her own head with her hands. There was hardly any space between them; she could feel his warmth all the way down her back. "Are you warm enough?" she asked, worried that she was preventing him from feeling the full warmth of the flames.

"I'm fine," he said quietly.

She lay still, staring into the fire, trying not to think too hard about what she'd realized since it did nothing but plunge her into a sea of confusion.

What does it mean? What am I to do about it? Does this mean my father wins? Does he get his heir? How does Eric feel about me?

She only had a pile of questions and no way to find answers.

"Are you all right?"

The sound of his voice startled her, and she jerked. "Uh, y-yes."

“I can hear you thinking.”

She turned slowly to stare at him, bug-eyed with fear that somehow he could read her mind. “What do you mean by that?”

“Only that there is something clearly bothering you.”

She sighed with relief. “Oh...well, yes. I was just thinking about...our future.”

“You mean how to prevent your father from leaving you homeless and penniless should he die before you are with child?”

“Y-yes, of course.”

He sighed. “Well, there *is* the obvious solution.”

“Which is not guaranteed to work.” Freya did not even know why she was protesting. She quite agreed with him.

“Yes, that’s true.”

She turned around so that they were facing each other and took the chance to really look at him. “But we can’t dismiss it without trying, I suppose.”

“Would you even want to?”

“Of course.”

He sneered, turning his head, so he was not looking her in the eye. “You do not have to lie to me.”

“I am not.” She raised her head, propping her elbow on the coat, so she could lean on it. “I am *not*, Eric,” she said louder and more insistently.

He lifted his hand and ran it down his scar. "I know what a beast I look like."

"You do not look like a beast, and I will thank you to stop saying that about yourself. It is rude and uncalled for."

He gave her a bemused look and then shook his head. "You are kind, beneath all the sharp-tongued scorn, but I am in no need of your gentleness. I am quite cognizant of how people see me. Look at all the people at that ball, staring at me as if I were a worm that crawled into their midst by mistake."

Freya gritted her teeth angrily. "Those people are the ones who should look into their humanity, not you. Never you, Eric. Please do not take what they did to heart!"

Suddenly, there was a loud clap of thunder followed moments later by lightning. Freya froze, looking up through the hole in the roof, and so she did not notice how Eric had curled himself into a ball, whimpering like a child, until she looked back down. He'd somehow managed to wedge himself in the space between the fireplace and the wall, and his shirt was in danger of catching on fire.

"Eric!" She rushed to him, reaching out to touch him, but he flinched, curling in even more on himself and whimpering.

His breath started coming fast and loud.

"I-I c-can't br-breathe," he wheezed, his face going first very pale and then flushing with color as he choked on nothing.

"Eric!" Freya shook him, not knowing what to do. She shook him again, "Please...you cannot die on me."

Not knowing what else to do, she forced him up into a sitting position and put her arms around his chest. "Breathe with me, please come on, breathe in with me...now breathe out. Please, Eric, breathe..."

Her heart was hammering with fear, and she didn't know what she would do if he were to expire.

Don't leave me, Eric. Please don't leave me.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Eric slowly came out of the fugue that had surrounded him, taking him back to the battlefield and the sound of canon and musket fire as he fought desperately for his life. It was as if he was right back there on the battlefield as the soft earth floor of the cottage disappeared, and Freya became nothing but a daydream.

It was the clap of thunder that did it. This was not the first time such a thing had happened to him. He was usually able to pull himself out of it, but he had never experienced one so severe and all-encompassing.

It was Freya's voice that brought him back, urging him to breathe with her when he felt as if he was drowning.

"Breathe with me, in...and out...please Eric, breathe."

And because she asked, he strove to do it though it felt like an awful lot of effort for very little reward.

"Breathe..."

He followed her voice back to her and realized she had him lying in her arms, as she supported him from behind. Mortification filled him at the thought that she'd seen him fall apart like the weakest of men.

He tried to move away from her, but she would not let him.

“Forgive me,” he tried to say with some dignity, “I did not mean —”

“Do not apologize. I understand you. One of my father’s tenants had a son who went off to war. When he came back, he could not stand loud noises either.”

He tried to move away from her, but she held tight onto him.

“Please, stay.”

Her words were so soft and gentle that he felt compelled to obey them. With a sigh, he surrendered, leaning back into her and copying her breathing, in and out...in...and out. Gradually, the calm returned to him, and his hands stopped shaking.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“I said that you should not apologize, and I meant it.” She leaned to the side, trying to peer at his face, her lips just brushing his temple. “Are you feeling better?”

He could smell her perfume and the pleasant grassy smell of her. He nodded, a bit dazedly, unable to find words yet.

“Good.”

Her hands ran along his arm, soothing him as if he were a skittish horse. He relaxed, letting her do as she pleased. He could not lie. It felt wonderful. Sitting on a dirt floor, a fire dying before them and Freya at his back, rocking him slightly as she caressed his arm, was the most wonderful he’d felt in a while.

He huffed in amusement. “If my brother could see me now...”

“What would he say?”

He shook his head. “He would probably tease me about nestling in your bosom like a baby.”

Freya stiffened, her hands halting their rhythmic hypnotic movement. Eric regretted saying a word. He tried again to sit up, but she tightened her hold on him, resuming her touches. She expelled a breath against his skin, and his neck broke out in goosebumps. “I don’t mind if you don’t.”

He tensed, wondering if he’d heard correctly. “What...don’t you mind?”

“You. Leaning against me.”

“Oh...” He moved his head slightly and then froze again as the back of his head brushed against the swell of her breast. “I’m sorry.”

“When will you stop apologizing?” she asked with a tired huff.

“I just...I do not know...”

“If I am uncomfortable with something, I will tell you.”

“All right then.”

They sat in silence for a while, just watching the flames. Finally, Eric stirred, “I should stoke the fire, or else, it will go out.”

“Oh, of course.” Freya finally let go of him, and he stood up regretfully to add more logs to the fire and check on the horse. They had nothing to feed him, but he did not seem hungry. In fact, he seemed to have fallen asleep.

Eric ran a hand down his coat, smoothing it down. “Goodnight, fair beast,” he murmured before returning to Freya. She had not lain down again but seemed to be waiting for him. As soon as he came to a stop by their makeshift bed, she held her hands out to him.

With a smile he could not have held back if he tried, he folded himself back into her arms. She wrapped them around his chest, and they sat like that, staring into the fire.

“Do...” She shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

“No, please, go ahead.”

“All right...do you often encounter such a reaction to your...scar? Is that why you are so sensitive about it?”

“I am not *sensitive!*” he protested.

“All right, let me rephrase. Are people often overly conscious of your scar?”

He sighed. “I don’t know if they are *overly* conscious, but they do stare at it. Especially among the *ton*. Perhaps it’s because there are not many in society who look as fearsome as I do.”

“I do not find you fearsome.”

“Oh? All right, perhaps fearsome might be the wrong phrasing. How about ugly?”

“No! You’re not ugly either.”

“I do not know what you hope to gain by denying reality...” He turned his head to grin at her so that she would know he was joking. “I have a looking glass.”

“I have eyes. And not to say that it is not startling or disconcerting. It is.”

“Thank you for acknowledging that.”

“*But* once a person begins to know you, it fades into insignificance.”

“You’re saying that you forget that it’s there.”

“Yes.”

“Until you look at my face.”

She huffed, shaking her head. “I see that you won’t believe me whatever I say.”

“I do not mean to call you a liar...”

“But you are.”

He sat up and turned around to face her, sitting cross-legged in front of her. “Well, you will have to be patient with me because my experience differs from yours,” he said gently, taking hold of her hands as he looked into her eyes.

She stared intently back. “If you promise to try and believe me.”

He smiled tiredly. “I shall do my best.”

They fell silent, still staring at each other. The fire crackled loudly, and the rain fell, seeming to have calmed down to a steady patter rather than a storm. The horse snorted, and nickered, its tail swishing. The wind had died down, and it wasn’t as cold as it had been. Their clothes had dried off.

Eric’s gaze dropped from the brilliant green of Freya’s eyes to her lush red

mouth, swollen from her biting her lips. They seemed to call to him, and he leaned forward, slowly, fascinated, unable to help himself.

He pressed his lips to hers, relishing how they yielded to him, how they parted to let him in without prompting, how soft they were when he licked against them. Her hands crept tentatively up his arms and then latched onto his shoulders, fisting his shirt and holding on tight. He snaked his arms around her waist and pulled her into his lap.

They kissed, enjoying the dance of tangling tongues and pressed together lips, the intimacy of her allowing her mouth to be plundered, her body relaxed against his. Her breasts pressed against his chest, flattening against him as they breathed in sync.

His hands roamed her back, his body undulating as he sought some friction for his arousal. She shivered, moaning into his mouth and whimpering slightly in either fear or arousal.

He pulled back to look at her, seeing how large her pupils were, and how flushed her skin was. “Do you want me to stop?” he forced himself to ask.

She shook her head wordlessly and then leaned in, hesitantly, eyes flicking between his eyes and his mouth. He leaned in and kissed her hard, his fingers raking through her hair.

He wanted more. He wanted to tear her clothes off and lay her down on the dirt floor — show her exactly what passion could do. The instinct was almost too overwhelming. He took hold of her arms, trying to push her off him, so he could get away from his desire, but she would not let him.

“No, please. Don’t stop.”

He shuddered, closing his eyes and praying for strength. “I won’t be able to stop if I don’t stop now.”

“Please,” she whispered.

He sent up a prayer for forgiveness as he grabbed her and began to kiss her frantically. She clung to him desperately as if she was afraid he would disappear. Lifting with his hips, he turned them carefully around so that she was beneath him. He began to kiss down her neck and along her cleavage, cupping her breasts beneath the ruined satin of her dress.

He pushed down her neckline, scooping out her breast and swooping down to suckle upon it. She threw her head back and cried out, bosom heaving. He suckled frantically while squeezing her breast and grinding his hips onto hers.

His hand trailed down and began pushing her skirt up, slowly, giving her plenty of time to protest. She bent her leg, so her heel was on the floor and her skirt fell from her knees to her groin. He groaned, pushing her dress out of the way with his hips, his hardness poking into her thigh.

He ran a hand down the back of her thigh before lifting it and hooking her leg around his waist. He began to undulate, groaning and moaning as he ground against her. He reached down and nipped at her neck then licked it.

She jerked and made a surprised sound before snaking her hands around his neck and holding on. She laid kitten licks against his jaw and cheek before pressing her lips to his, imploring him for more kisses.

He gave them gladly, plundering her mouth without hesitation. His hands moved between her legs, caressing along her inner thighs before poking at the wetness of her swollen throbbing nub. She gasped in surprise, eyes wide as he rubbed frantically, his own movements becoming more erratic. He moved down, burying his head in her skirt, and licked then sucked.

She screamed, squirming in embarrassed surprise.

“Hush,” he said. “Let me.”

She moved her hands away from his head and lay back, letting him flick at her nub, sucking the juices into his mouth. He licked and used his thumb to press down on the sensitive nub. Her hips jerked up, and she moaned long and loud. Her hips went up and down, grinding into his mouth with desperate need. He pushed into her with his fingers, imitating exactly what he'd like to do with another part of his body.

He snaked his hands between his legs and began to rub at himself frantically even as he pushed in and out of Freya with his finger. She murmured pleading words as her back arched, and she pushed her groin more insistently at him. His breathing grew faster and faster in rhythm with both his hands — one on her, one on himself.

“Freya!” he groaned as his body shuddered, leg shaking, the veins in his neck standing out. Her legs scissored around his waist, her hips jumping and jerking as she cried and groaned, shouted, and screamed. Then she collapsed on the floor, panting loudly, her hair in disarray. He lay beside her, watching her bosom heave, waiting for the disgust to show up on her face.

It didn't come.

He looked away, closing his eyes. “We should sleep,” he murmured even as the blackness of unconsciousness took him.

Chapter Twenty-Three



F reya couldn't sleep. She was so alert and awake, her body thrumming in the aftermath of their encounter. She had taken her gown off, feeling quite warm in the aftermath of their... activities. She knew she wanted to do it again. Her hand crept towards her throbbing center and just covered herself with her hand. She closed her eyes, just feeling herself breathe. She pressed down and made a whimpering sound at the sensation.

She turned onto her side, staring at a sleeping Eric and wondering what she was to do now. She didn't know how they were to proceed. Eric clearly thought that his scar was an insurmountable barrier, and she did not have the words to convince him otherwise.

Am I sure that I even want to?

She sat up with a sigh, shaking her head. She had not expected that this would be as complicated as it was turning out to be. She had not expected to *want* Eric.

“What am I going to do?”

She had absolutely no idea.

She got to her feet with a sigh, reaching for her dress that she'd hung on a

hook on the wall, and she shook it out. It was quite a mess, the satin absolutely ruined, mud-splattered and wrinkled. She didn't think she would ever be able to wear it again.

She shrugged. "Oh well. It was for a good cause." She smirked a bit, giggling under her breath. Smoothing it out with her hand, she put it on. With one last look at Eric's still sleeping form, she ventured out of the door. The rain had stopped, and to her surprise, she saw the sky was lightening. Dawn was approaching, and she found that she could see quite well. One thing that she could see very well was the extremely well-lit castle of Digby. They would have no trouble getting back.

She ran back inside, calling to Eric. He startled awake, blinking up at her with incomprehension. "Where's the fire?" he asked.

"It's almost daylight," she observed. "We should go. My sister will be worried."

Slowly he got up and straightened his breeches while her eyes slid away and her cheeks heated, and then he cleared his throat. "You're right. We should get back."

She took that as a sign that it was safe to look back at him. Her eyebrows quirked when she found that he was grinning. "Good thing we're married, eh? This kind of thing can cause quite a scandal."

She rolled her eyes. "Pick up your coat, and let's go."

Eric did as she asked, but he was still grinning maniacally much to her displeasure. She was surprised, however, to find that she took a secret joy in his childish delight. He went over to the mare, speaking lovingly to her as he smoothed the fur on her flank. He took her bridle and led her outside, the horse following placidly.

Eric had unsaddled her when they arrived, so he went back in to collect the

saddle and reattach it. He held out his hand to Freya, helping her onto the horse before climbing on behind her.

Spurring the horse on, they set off at a sedate pace. The ground was still muddy, but the horse stepped carefully. Freya closed her eyes, leaning back against Eric's chest, trusting that he would lead them home safely.



Eric rode slowly through the gates of Digby castle, a little surprised at the furor that their return caused. It wasn't long before Isabella came running out of the house and straight towards them, looking frantic and afraid. "Freya!" she shouted and then looked at Eric. "Is she all right?"

Eric frowned wondering why she should ask that. He peered down at Freya just as she opened her eyes.

"Freya!" Isabella screamed again, running forward to clutch at her sister's ruined gown. Eric supposed he could see why she would be worried. Without shifting away from Eric, Freya held her hand up to her sister who took it at once.

"I am fine," she rasped hoarsely. "Just tired and wet." She smiled reassuringly at her sister.

Isabella blew out of breath of relief and then began to try and help Freya off the horse. Eric hurried to help lest Freya find herself face down in the mud from Isabella's frantic efforts. Eventually, they all got down from the horse and were surrounded by various guests, all talking at once, wondering what had happened to them.

His mother pushed her way towards the front, urging the other guests to stand back and give them some room. Then she turned to face them. "Eric, Freya, what happened to you? We've been so worried."

“I’m sorry,” Eric said. “We got caught up in the storm. We had to take shelter, until it stopped.” He took hold of Freya’s arm. “Now, if you will excuse me, my wife and I would like to change out of these wet clothes before we catch our death.”

Guests made way for them, still murmuring with concern and understanding. Eric led Freya through the crowds and up the door to the castle where they found Silver waiting just behind the door. He bowed. “If you will follow me...” he said before beginning to walk towards the stairs.

Without a word, Eric followed in his wake, supporting Freya by her arm; she staggered along, unsteady on her feet. He looked at her with some concern. “How are you feeling?”

She turned and smiled at him. “I’m tired and sleepy.”

He nodded. “That makes sense. Never fear, we're almost there.”

Silver opened the door to their chambers, and they stepped in and then stopped abruptly, looking around. It was early morning, and they had barely taken ten minutes to reach their chambers, yet it had been prepared already. Two giant tubs of steaming water stood side by side, the screen that usually separated the tub from the bed chamber pushed aside. The tubs had also been moved closer to the fireplace which was roaring. The room smelled of oils and scents—lavender, peppermint, lemon, and rose filled the air. The giant four poster was scattered with petals as was the surface of the tubs. A gentle scented steam rose all around them, gently urging them towards the tubs.

Both the lady’s maid and valet were present, ready to help them with their clothes. Eric and Freya exchanged glances of perfect understanding. They turned to Silver as one. “We would prefer to be alone, please,” Eric said, nodding to the servants.

The lady’s maid and valet immediately instituted a curtsy and a bow respectively and left the room. Silver hesitated. “I understand that you are tired, but you have a schedule to keep, and this is still your most fertile

period.”

Eric’s grip tightened on Freya even as he saw her blush crimson. “Thank you, Silver. We are aware. Now, unless you intend to watch, we shall have to ask you to leave.”

Silver gave a dignified bow and left the room.



Freya and Eric looked at each other for a long moment.

“Would you like me to help you with your stays?” he asked.

She turned, giving him her back. “Yes please.”

His fingers brushed against her skin as he unlaced her corset. Once it was off, much to her relief, he began to massage her back slowly. “Better?” he asked.

“Much.”

She smiled, turning around to face him. “Is there anything I can help you with?” she whispered, feeling a bit breathless.

He reached for the buttons of his shirt, never taking his eyes away from hers. “Not just at the moment.”

She watched him unbutton his shirt, her eyes following the movement of his fingers. Her breath came shorter and shorter the more of his chest was revealed as though she had never seen it before. She did not understand why.

Finally, his shirt was completely open, and he threw it on the floor. He reached for the ties of his breeches, and she tried to look away, but her eyes

would not let her. Standing there in her petticoat, she could feel the wetness growing between her legs, her knees going so weak that she was surprised they could hold her up.

First with one leg and then the other, he tugged his breeches off, throwing them atop his shirt, leaving him in just his pantaloons. She did not even pretend not to be staring at how his innerwear tented at the front.

When he reached for the waist of his pantaloons and began to pull, she turned towards her tub.

“Are you not taking off your petticoat?” he asked.

With a long inhalation of breath, she reached down and pulled her petticoat off, walking to the tub stark naked while he watched. It was the single bravest thing she had ever done. First one foot and then the other, she lowered herself into the steaming water with a contented sigh.

She heard footsteps padding towards her and swept her lashes down to cover her eyes, seeing his feet, naked and hairy, in front of her before they lifted, and she heard a small splash as he stepped in his tub. He gave a contented smile as well, and she turned to smile at him in understanding.

He returned her smile before his gaze traveled lower, passing over what he could see of her form before returning to her face. “You seem more awake now,” he murmured.

“That’s because I am.” She grinned at him.

“Good.” He reached over with his hand, holding it open, and she put her hand in it.

“Would you like me to scrub your back for you?”

She hesitated, wondering if he meant what she thought he meant.

“Only if you want. I won’t do more than that, I promise.”

“I didn’t *ask* for your promise.”

He blinked at her in incomprehension before his eyes widened in disbelief. “You mean that?”

“Of course. Why would I not mean it?”

He didn’t say anything, just got to his feet, water splashing out of his tub, and stepped out. He shivered a bit, probably due to coming out of the hot water into the cold of early morning even if it was mitigated by the roaring fire.

He picked up the washcloth, lathered it up, and knelt by her tub. She leaned forward, giving him room to reach her back, her knees drawn up almost to her shoulders. She put her head down over her hands which lay atop her knees.

Slowly, carefully, he began to rub circles into her back with the cloth, his other hand on her shoulder, just holding on. She could feel every individual finger and did her best not to shiver and moan.

His hand slipped lower, rubbing against the lowest knob of her spine, round and round, before he rubbed straight across and then down to the curve of her bottom. She made sure to stay very still and not give him any excuse to stop. He squeezed her bottom with the cloth, questing inward along her crack.

She whimpered, squirming a bit in reaction, and he paused, leaning forward and trying to see her face. “Freya?”

She shook her head without lifting it. “I’m fine. Please continue.”

He took that as the permission she had given him and clutched her shoulders, gently urging her backward. She unfolded from her curled-up position, laying back on the back of the tub and straightening her legs, giving him permission

to run the cloth along the neck and down her chest. He circled her breasts slowly, slowly, slowly, until he reached the tip, rubbing it hard until it peaked.

She couldn't have stopped the sounds escaping her mouth if she tried.

She could see that he was smiling and felt gratified to have made him happy. The washcloth moved downward, digging into her belly button in a way that was very ticklish. She squirmed, giggling, and he grinned at her, finally removing his finger from her hole and rubbing at the rest of her belly. She held her breath, waiting for him to go lower, but he didn't. Instead, he stood up and went to the foot of the tub. He picked up her leg and began to massage her foot, taking care to pay attention to the spaces between her toes before running his hand down her leg to her knee and back down to her ankle, kneading and squeezing.

Her hips jerked, and she stared at him with wide-eyed surprise, not having ever realized how sensitive her feet were. He continued to fondle her foot before putting it down and picking up the other. He gave it the exact same treatment as if he was afraid that it might be jealous if he didn't.

Freya was panting, dying for him to finally reach her throbbing wetness. He took his time about it, and her body grew more and more frantic with need the more he played with her. She reached out and squeezed her own breast, just to look for some relief, but it didn't do much good.

"Please," she begged, and he looked up at her with eyes dark with desire.

"Please what?" he rasped.

"Make me..." She did not know how to explain the thing that he had done to her that made her insides explode into a dozen fireworks, her vision go white with pleasure, and her body shake with it. "Touch me," she moaned.

Instead, he took his hands away. "It's your turn to wash my back," he said

inexplicably, and then stood up— his arousal on full display—and turned to his tub. He stepped into it and sat down before turning to look expectantly at her. Her body was on fire, and she hardly knew whether she was coming or going. But she knew that Eric was in his tub, and if she wanted to touch him again, she would have to go there.

She stood up, letting the water slew away from her skin, and stepped out of the tub. She was still fairly soapy, but she paid that no mind. She walked towards him and picked up his washcloth, all the while watching him steadily. She lathered it with care before reaching out to run it along his shoulders.

He let out a long-drawn-out groan, and she grinned. “I haven’t done a thing yet.”

He smiled without opening his eyes as he lay back against the tub. “Just your hands on me is enough.”

She giggled, running the cloth in circles against his shoulder and chest. “Well then, this must feel wonderful to you.”

“Indeed, it does.” She could see his hand creeping forward to touch his hardness, and she blushed.

Drawing in a deep, shaky breath, she began rubbing his nipples with the cloth before pinching them with her fingers. He made noises of appreciation, his body jerking once in a while in response to any pressure she might put on it. He was very responsive to her touch, and she could imagine that he was feeling just as desperate as she was.

“What can I do to...” she began, determined to bring about completion for them both.

“Come in here,” he moaned.

She stood up and hesitated for just a moment before stepping into the tub with him. He opened his eyes which were so wide blown that his pupils had disappeared.

“Straddle me,” he said hoarsely, and she lowered herself slowly, uncertainly, down onto him. His hardness was just beneath her thigh, and she worried what would happen if she squeezed it too hard.

He caught onto her hips, moving her just where he wanted her.

“Wou-would you mind kissing me?” he asked.

Immediately, she swooped in and captured his lips with her own. Having been paying attention, she applied her acquired knowledge by swiping her tongue into his mouth and sucking hard at his. His hands on her back were tight, holding her fast against him as he groaned into her mouth. He began to undulate slowly, and she instinctively rubbed herself against him.

“Yes.” She closed her eyes panting, “Yes, please!”

He grabbed onto her hips, holding on tight. “Wait.”

She opened her eyes and stared at him in disbelief. “I beg your pardon?”

“I will not have your first time be a hurried thing in a bathtub.”

Freya opened her mouth to say she didn’t mind at all, but he was already lifting her off him and getting to his feet. He held out a hand to her. “Come with me.”

She put her hand in his and let him pull her up and lead her to the bed. He grabbed one of the towels on the bed and began to dry her off, slowly.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and reveled in his touch.

He paid attention to every part of her, rubbing slowly, making sure she was dry, igniting her senses and making her body flush as he touched her intimately yet impersonally. Grabbing her breasts, he squeezed and then rubbed before pinching her nipples until they peaked. Lastly, he rubbed her hair dry before throwing the towel on the bed.

He took the other towel and wiped himself down before sitting on the bed beside her. She looked at his scar, deliberately, and reached out to run her finger along it from its inception on his upper cheek, right down his face and neck, following the way it curved around his arm to the elbow. She covered his elbow with her hand, squeezing.

“It really does not repel you?” he asked softly.

In answer, she reached forward and began to kiss him, starting from his upper cheek where the scar began and all the way down to his elbow. He sat still and let her, his eyes on her the entire time.

She straightened up and looked in his eye. “It does not repel me.”

Chapter Twenty-Four



Eric could admit to himself that he was terrified. At this point, however, it seemed silly to continue to disbelieve Freya— perhaps also stubborn and stupid. He reached for her, and she fell into his arms without hesitation. He caressed her hair, smoothing it down her back before tingling his fingers into it. He cradled her head, looking into her eyes intently. “I want to make love to you. May I?”

Slowly, she nodded without looking away from him, and he smiled before swooping in to capture her lips with his. He kissed her thoroughly, deeply, letting his need pour into her, unreservedly.

She moaned into his mouth, clutching at his shoulders, her nails digging into his flesh. He pushed her backward slowly until she was lying on the pillows, a gift, a feast, ready for him to consume.

He sat back, just drinking her in, relishing her creamy soft skin, flushed with arousal and quivering in anticipation. She had a tiny scar just beneath her left breast, and he traced it with his finger. “What happened here?” he asked softly.

She peered downward, lifting her breast to take a look, and then grimaced. “It was a stays accident. The whalebone shot out of it and scratched me.”

He rubbed at it as he smiled at her. “God help you when the clothes attack.”

She huffed in amusement, rolling her eyes. “Indeed.”

He reached down and kissed the scar as softly and gently as she had kissed his.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He got to his feet, so as to be able to straddle her, and then leaned down to kiss her sweetly, slowly, just relishing the taste of her.

His hands traced the curves of her body, and she widened her legs to receive him. He snuggled his hips between her legs, murmuring words of praise all the while as he nuzzled her neck, breathed into her ear, and nipped at its tip.

“Oh...” she whispered hoarsely, her throat working as she threw her head back, giving him room to continue his explorations.

He positioned his hips, allowing his hardness to trail along her groin in benevolent warning of his intent. She widened her legs further, giving her permission. “Freya,” he breathed before gently touching her warm wetness with his fingers in search of that nub that would set her afire.

It did not take long to find it, and he got to work immediately, rubbing and squeezing and providing all the necessary friction she needed to grind against him. She moaned, louder and louder, her hands scrambling for purchase as if she wasn't quite sure how to use them anymore.

He took hold of himself and started pushing into her slowly and gently as he watched her eyes for any sign of pain. They were wide with arousal and hunger but no pain that he could see.

“You... can tell me to stop... at any time.”

She shook her head frantically while panting hard, her fingers finding their way into his hair, and pulling him down towards her. Their mouths met, smashing together like two pillows stuffed into a too-small space. He froze his hips, not moving further into her as they devoured each other's mouths. Then she made a sound, needy yet demanding.

He began to push into her again, holding his breath, his eyes closed, and along-drawn-out groan escaped him. She squeaked, jerking a bit and grimacing as he came upon some resistance. He paused, looking into her eyes, and he snaked a hand between them and rubbed at her nub with his thumb. She squealed loudly and arched up, inadvertently pushing him past the barrier and all the way into her so that his balls were nestled against her entrance.

He blew out his breath, panting hard as he tried to keep still and let her get used to him. She was panting as well, eyes closed, and clutching tight to him.

“Freya?”

“I’m fine. You can...continue.”

Slowly, he pulled out of her and then drove back in. She cried out but also widened her legs to give him more room. Hastening his pace, he pulled out and thrust into her again. Faster and faster, losing himself in the warm, wet, tightness of her most secret place.

She whimpered and cried out, her body undulating in encouragement. His movements became more frantic and erratic as he lost his rhythm to passion.

“Freya,” he cried out, throwing his head back, his back arching, legs shaking as he emptied himself inside of her. With a long-drawn-out groan, he slowly pulled himself out and then shuffled backward, taking Freya’s legs and lifting them high over his shoulders.

She squealed in shock and then screamed as he put his tongue to work,

licking at her wetness and suckling her nub. He used his fingers to rub at her flesh as well. Pretty soon she was wailing and moaning as her hips jumped about in his arms, and with a prolonged scream, she collapsed on the bed in an untidy, boneless heap.

He sat up, grinning down at her as she panted, her entire body flushed, her eyes glazed. “Are you satisfied?” he asked. “Or do you need more?”

She lifted her head, staring at him in disbelief. “More?”

“If your body is still hungry.”

Her eyes grew thoughtful and considering. “How would I know if I was still hungry?”

“You would be filled with need and want rather than satisfaction.”

“Hmm...but what if...I feel replete but also...”

“Eager for more?” he finished for her.

She nodded, blushing. “Yes?”

He grinned. “Then I have done my job. Never fear, we shall do this again, and soon. But for now, we have the chance to sleep in a warm, comfortable bed. Do you not want to take it?”

She sighed. “I suppose I *am* a bit tired.”

He flopped down on the bed beside her and pulled her close. “Sleep then. I shall watch over you.”

Her eyes slowly slipped closed. “Don’t want you to watch...sleep...too...” she murmured.

He smoothed down her hair. “Don’t you worry, my little dove.” He kissed her on the cheek. “I shall have my rest as well.”

He laid his head next to hers, a smile on his face as he too surrendered to the arms of Morpheus.



Waking up later that afternoon, Freya was suddenly mortified to realize that she would have to face the other guests and perhaps try to come up with a story as to why they went running off into the storm in the middle of a ball. She was sure they must seem quite mad to almost everyone.

She looked at Eric wondering if she should wake him, so they could talk and come up with a suitable story to tell. Even without the other guests, surely Silver would want to know every detail of their disappearance in order to report it to her father. She had no intention of telling him the truth. It was none of his business.

But Eric looked so peaceful, she couldn’t quite bring herself to wake him. Getting out of bed, she performed her ablutions before choosing a gown to wear. She had no idea what activities the Dowager Marchioness had planned for the day, if any. She couldn’t worry about it at the moment as she was too busy fretting about what she would tell all of them.

She crept down the stairs and ran into a crowd of people at the bottom, all of whom were apparently waiting for their carriages. It was time to leave.

That was a relief for Freya because it meant that they would escape without having to explain themselves or even interact with the same people who had upset Eric the day before. She went in search of the Dowager Marchioness, wanting to thank her for her hospitality before finding the rest of her family.

The Marchioness was in the drawing room, speaking to none other than

Eric's mother. The latter lit up when she saw Freya. "There you are! Did you get enough rest?"

Freya smiled. "I did. Thank you. I gather we are leaving soon?"

"Yes, I was just thanking the Marchioness, Lady Digby, on behalf of the family."

"Oh. I had the same thought."

The Dowager sighed. "I was hoping to speak with your husband before you left. I'm sure we left quite a bad impression on him yesterday, but please do assure him that we meant nothing untoward. It was simply an unfortunate lapse of good manners."

Freya smiled, "I appreciate you saying so, my lady. I shall make sure to tell him."

"Where is your husband?" Eric's mother asked.

"Still asleep. I shall just go and wake him."

Mrs. Campbell nodded. "That is a good idea. We shall meet you in the courtyard."

"Yes, Mother Campbell." Freya smiled at her before turning and hurrying away. She was filled with a sense of relief about how that had gone. Her mind was actually boggled that the Dowager Marchioness was willing to apologize. She suspected that Mrs. Campbell must have said something to precipitate it. A woman of Lady Digby's caliber was not likely to have spared much thought for her own actions or how they affected anyone else.

Freya climbed the stairs slowly and thoughtfully, thinking about everything that had happened, especially Eric's promise that this morning had not been the end of their explorations. She felt her stomach swoop with excitement at

the thought and realized she could not wait to see what else Eric might show her.

Last night, she had almost been frozen in shock when after emptying himself inside of her, he had proceeded to shuffle down the bed and lick her with his *mouth*.

She still could not believe he had done that. The sensations he had evoked had exceeded everything she had been expecting. She had just wanted to recreate the feelings that had encompassed her when he first touched her intimately, but last night had been beyond anything she could have imagined. And it made her wonder if there was more to be discovered. If he could put his mouth on her most intimate parts, could she do the same for him?

She opened the door to her chambers and found him buttoning his shirt. He turned to look at her with a smile, “Oh there you are. Where did you go? And why didn’t you wake me?”

“You looked so peaceful; I didn’t want to disturb you.”

He grinned, doing up the last button before crossing to the chair to pick up his coat. “How kind of you.”

“Not at all,” she murmured, distracted by the rippling muscles of his arms as he donned his coat, “You should know that we are leaving.”

Right on cue, there was a knock on the door.

“Yes? Come in.” Eric called.

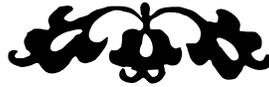
The door opened, and Silver, followed by Diana, stepped into the room. “I have come to pack up your bags,” he explained, “as we are leaving this place.”

Eric seemed quite relieved. Freya bit her lip to stop herself from smiling.

He walked up to her, offering her his arm. "Shall we, my dear?" Eric asked with a small bow.

"We shall," she replied looping her arm through his and allowing him to lead her out of the room, down the corridor, and down the stairs where they joined his brother and mother and her sister.

Chapter Twenty-Five



In spite of the debacle that happened at Lady Digby's, Silver did not let them rest on their laurels. Fortunately for both them and him, he did not have to create occasions for them to spend time alone. They were quite happy to run off in the afternoon for a 'nap' while William and Isabella entertained themselves, and Mrs. Campbell went visiting.

The Campbells were settling seamlessly into the day-to-day life at Stark Manor. Mrs. Campbell had even managed to make friends among the local gentry. Isabella and William never seemed to tire of each other. It all felt like a dream to Freya, and she spent a lot of time waiting to wake up.

Mrs. Campbell inadvertently helped Silver with his agenda by obtaining invitations to a local Venetian breakfast.

"But I hardly speak to those people; why should I go?" Freya protested when Silver strongly suggested that they accompany Mrs. Campbell.

"His Grace wishes you to be influential in the area since your offspring will take over everything; he wants you to begin forging ties."

"Why does he not do that himself then?" she asked with annoyance.

"Because the baby will not be his child, and he is not long for this world,"

Silver said starkly.

“Humph” was Freya’s articulate reply, and she folded her arms and pouted.

Eric just smiled. “Very well, Silver, we will go, and we will socialize.”

Freya turned to him in protest. The only reason she was being stubborn about the breakfast was that she did not want Eric to suffer any more humiliation. He reached for her hand, squeezing reassuringly. “It’ll be all right,” he said. “Let them stay if they wish to, I do not care.”

He met her gaze with his own, trying to reassure her that he meant it. She frowned, still worried, still very reluctant to expose himself to any hurt. “If you are uncomfortable, just say the word, and we will leave. Promise me.”

“I promise you that we shall leave if I’m uncomfortable,” he said.

Mrs. Campbell clapped her hands together, clutching them to her breast. “Bless,” she said, her eyes wide and soft, “you two are just *adorable*.”

Eric looked away blushing hard, but Freya just smiled at her. “Thank you. We aim to please.” She shot a glare at Silver.

“And what are we to do while you are away on your Venetian breakfast?” Isabella asked.

“Perhaps you could try applying yourself to your schoolwork. Mrs. Beecham tells me that you have been slacking off quite terribly.” She narrowed her eyes at her sister.

Isabella looked away, focusing with fierce concentration on her breakfast plate. William snickered, drawing Eric’s attention to him. “What are you laughing at, young sir? You too have not been attending to your lessons. You will join Isabella every morning from ten until noon in the schoolhouse, and should Mrs. Beecham give you any extra work to do, you will do it as if she

were your tutor. Do you hear me?”

He nodded meekly without saying a word. Mrs. Campbell smiled. “I cannot wait until the two of you have some of your own. I can see you shall not be distant parents like most gentry.”

Freya frowned, reminded that her future and that of her sister depended on her getting with child. She and Eric exchanged loaded glances.

“You’re right, Mama,” Eric agreed without looking away from Freya. “We shall be as present as our children need us to be.”

Freya felt a lump in her throat. Suddenly she realized that she would like nothing better than to have a baby with Eric Campbell.



The Venetian Breakfast bored him to tears. Were it not for the presence of Freya and his mother, he would have bowed out within minutes. The lives of the *ton* seemed particularly empty to him with very little substance and a lot of cattiness born of boredom. More than one person made an oblique reference to his scar, but he found that as long as *Freya* was not repelled by it, he did not care much what other people thought.

He was a lieutenant commander in His Majesty’s Navy, a title he had *earned*. He had fought for his country unlike anyone else in the room, and so it was laughable that they thought to look down on *him*.

Freya stayed close anyway, even though it wasn’t really done. Husbands and wives, it seemed, were expected to stay as far away from each other as possible.

“Well good afternoon to you.” He turned around to find a tall, curvy woman holding a glass of brandy in her hand and surveying him with interest. Her

gaze instantly fell on his scar, and she lifted an eyebrow. “Oh...you are an interesting one. Where did you get *that*?”

He inclined his head with a smile. “Should we not be introduced first before you speak to me?”

“Oh pshh.” She waved a dismissive hand. “Such rules are for debutantes, eager to find husbands. I am merely eager...to know you.”

Eric’s eyes flashed across the room, searching for Freya. He did not want her to see this and make the wrong assumption. “How very forward of you,” he observed as his eyes scanned the room.

She took a step closer. “Why, is there any other way to be? Do you not approve?”

He took a step back. “Actually, I don’t. Perhaps you can go and seduce someone else.”

The woman threw back her head and laughed. “Only if you tell me where you got that wicked scar.”

“I got it in His Majesty’s Navy, fighting for my country.”

“Ooh, intriguing. I was inclined to think you a pirate myself. You have that air of mysterious mischief about you.”

Eric could not help smiling in amusement. The woman certainly was persistent. “Well, I am sorry to disappoint.”

“Oh no, no, you haven’t disappointed me! Far from it. Tell me, sailor, how did you come to be here, among this boring bunch, when you could be sailing the high seas? Were you discharged and now hope to find an heiress or a rich widow to wed? Because if so, I must congratulate you — you have found one.”

Eric threw back his head and laughed. “I apologize for laughing madam, but I am already married, and happily. So, I am neither looking for heiress nor widow.”

“Perhaps a little dalliance on the side then...” She took yet another step closer.

Suddenly, Freya was at his side, and she did not look happy. Eric tensed, not knowing what was going to happen.

“Lady Trowbridge, how lovely to see you. I had heard you moved to Bath for your health,” Freya said pleasantly enough.

Lady Trowbridge— as Eric gathered the other lady was called — smiled acidly. “Nothing but Banbury tales. I am still residing here at Trowbridge manor.”

“Oh, well then may I extend my condolences on the death of your latest husband? They say he died quite suddenly, did he not?”

Lady Trowbridge sipped her drink, looking miffed. “It was unexpected, yes,” she replied lazily.

Freya looked at Eric, her eyes bright with malice. “Oh, have you been introduced already?” she asked him.

Mutely, he shook his head, fascinated at this more...catty version of his wife.

“Well then allow me. Lady Trowbridge, this is my *husband*, Lieutenant Commander Eric Campbell, lately of Stark Manor.”

Eric just continued to stare at her, noting how she clung possessively to his arm while shooting daggers at the other woman. He found himself quite aroused by her aggressiveness. He pulled her closer even as he turned to give the woman a perfunctory smile. “A pleasure to meet you, Madam. And my

condolences for your loss.”

Lady Trowbridge looked quite miffed, and after nodding stiffly to Eric, she flounced off. Freya immediately turned to face him. Before she could open her mouth, he swooped down and kissed her. She stiffened, and when he pulled away, her eyes were wide and shocked. “You...I...we are in public.”

“We are married,” he countered.

She just blinked at him, nonplussed.

“Now, you did say you’d leave if I felt uncomfortable.” He leaned in to whisper in her ear. “I’ll have you know, my breeches are very uncomfortable at the moment. I require relief.”

Her eyes widened even further, and she blushed, crimson. “Oh...” she whispered.

“So? Shall we go?”

“Y-yes. Let me just tell your mother that we shall send the carriage back for her.”

“Indeed, no need to spoil her enjoyment. I shall go and get the carriage.”



Freya was in a whirl of confusion, emotions coming and going too fast to be properly examined. She had spotted Lady Trowbridge speaking with Eric, and knowing her reputation, she had hurried over before Lady Trowbridge said something unspeakable to Eric. She had been rather shocked when she came closer to hear her propositioning him!

How dare she? she thought bitterly even as she pushed through the crowds in

search of her mother-in-law.

She did not know what floored her more: Flora trying it on with her husband or said husband kissing her in public. Married or not, it just wasn't done. At least, not that she knew of.

She finally spotted Mrs. Campbell in a corner, chatting animatedly with Old Lady Spencer, paragon of virtue and eternal spinster. She lived on the hill, alone, in a three-room stone cottage with her dogs and cats. It was said that she was the last living member of her family.

Freya tapped Mrs. Campbell's shoulder. "Mother Campbell, we're leaving as I'm feeling rather tired. We'll send the carriage back for you if that's all right."

She smiled, clasping Freya's hand and squeezing. "Of course, dear. I am in no hurry. Take your time."

Freya nodded though she was slightly puzzled by her mother-in-law's words. Putting it to the back of her mind, she turned and began to make her way to the door, eagerness quickening her footsteps even though her knees felt weak in anticipation.

What will he do to me?

She shivered, her mind already jumping forward to them together and alone. Ever since the Digby debacle, Eric had shown her many new things, some she liked, others she didn't. She *did* enjoy the process of learning, however.

He was standing by the door of the carriage, and he smiled when he caught sight of her. She stopped, just staring at him, realizing how much he meant to her.

She walked towards him, and he took her hand, helping her into the carriage. "Your mother said we should take our time though I'm not sure what she

meant by that.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Neither do I.” He shrugged. “Perhaps she just meant that she means to stay for the rest of the soiree. How she managed to make friends among these people, I don’t know, but she has.”

“Well, she was sitting with Old Lady Spencer, who has been dubbed our wise old lady of the district. I think she’ll be fine.”

“Mm.” His hand stayed on hers, fingers caressing her knuckles gently. “Hopefully she does not get my mother burned at the stake.”

Freya gave him a quizzical look. “What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “The wise old lady might one day be accused of witchcraft. Isn’t that how it goes?”

Freya burst into surprised laughter. “I beg your pardon?”

“Oh yes. Who is the local clergy? Does he hate women? That’s how it begins.”

Freya laughed some more, shaking her head in bemusement. “The local priest is a very mild-mannered man. He never even raises his voice, nor does he condemn us for our iniquities. Only urges us to love one another.”

“Well...” He leaned close to her, whispering in her ear. “I suppose I can do that.”

She froze, wondering if he realized what he had just said. His face remained good-humored and mild, and she decided that he had meant it generally and not to her specifically.

She sat back, leaning slightly into him when he put his arm over her shoulders. He sighed. “Isabella and William will be at the door to meet us

when we arrive at Stark Manor. I wish there was somewhere we could be alone.”

“Well...” Freya started, avoiding Eric’s eye, “there *is* the Dowager Cottage. It has its own gate and a little lane that you turn off just before you arrive at the gates of Stark Manor. We could go there.”

“Excellent idea.” He took his cane and banged three times on top of the carriage. It came to a stop, and he leaned out to talk to the coachman, telling him to drop them off just before Stark Manor and then return to the party for his mother.

“Yes sir.” The coachman tipped his hat at Eric before resuming the journey. Freya just watched him, marveling at how easily he had agreed to her suggestion. She was used to everything being a fight with the Duke and having her views valued and heard was something new.

She reached out and took his hand, squeezing it. He turned to face her, giving her a smile and squeezing back. She sighed with contentment, knowing that she truly did want to be here with this man who was her husband.

The coachman came to a stop just before the small tree-lined lane that led to the Dowager Cottage. Eric and Freya alighted, waving him away before making their way on foot. “I don’t know the last time anyone was there. It might be quite dusty,” she said uncertainly.

“Then we shall air it out,” he suggested gently.

He sighed with pleasure, looking around. “These trees remind me of our home in London. I loved how they hung over the path, as if they were curious about the passing people, while providing shade on the hottest days. Can we come here again?”

“Of course. If you wish.”

“I do wish. I already sense that this place will be special to us.”

They came upon the black-painted iron gate that led to the cottage, and Freya was relieved to find that it opened easily on well-oiled hinges. She led the way to the cottage door and tried it, holding her breath.

The door was closed but not locked, and they stepped in to find a lovely sitting room, free of dust or dirt and arranged with old but clean furniture. “It seems someone makes it their business to clean this place,” she observed.

“Mmm,” Eric said, still holding her hand as he moved towards the short corridor. There was a kitchen to his right, the carved wooden counter clean and empty of dishes. They walked past it and found an empty room next with old peeling wallpaper on the walls and nothing but a rocking chair in the corner. They continued walking, and the next room was where they found what they were looking for.

A large sturdy bed sat in the middle of the room, fitted with a white sheet and two goose-down pillows. There was a large chest of drawers just below the windows, and that was it. Freya and Eric exchanged glances before hurrying over to the bed.

Eric grabbed Freya by the waist, holding her to him. He turned his head to whisper in her ear, “Do you remember when you asked me if you could do the same thing to me as I did to you, the first time we made love?”

Slowly, she nodded.

“Well, you can. Would you like to try?”

She turned around in his arms and put her own around his neck. “I would, yes.”

He smiled. “All right, then the first thing to do is of course...”

“Take off our clothes?” she finished for him.

He grinned. “Yes.”

Letting go of him, she turned around. “In that case, would you kindly unlace me?”



Eric lay on the bed, listening to Freya breathe in and out, her body sprawled with careless abandon over the white sheet. He had no idea what time it was, only that it had gotten dark some time ago. He debated with himself whether they should stay here or make their way to the manor. But then he remembered that nobody knew where they were.

With a sigh, he woke Freya up.

“Wha...?” She blinked a few times, rubbing her eyes and looking confused.

“It’s getting late. We should head back to the main house.”

“Oh...” she sighed, sitting up, yawning, and rubbing her eyes.

He smiled fondly at her. “Are you very tired?”

“No, but I was having the most restful sleep.”

“I’m sorry for waking you.”

“It’s no problem.” She looked around. “I think it’s because it’s so quiet here. Nobody walking down corridors or shouting. It’s just...you and me.”

“Indeed.”

“We should come back another time.”

“I concur,” he agreed as he got to his feet and grabbed his breeches. Once he’d donned them, he picked up Freya’s gown from the floor. “Allow me to help you.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Once they were fully dressed, they walked out of the house, hand in hand, and made their way slowly up the darkened garden towards the house. They walked along the paths as Freya enjoyed the night air and regaled Eric with stories of which plants bloomed or were most fragrant at night.

“Your mother taught you all that?” he asked with wonder.

“Yes, she did.” She smiled. “She loved to teach me, I think. Were she not a lady, she would have made an excellent governess.”

He squeezed her hand. “I’m sure she’s very proud of you.”

Chapter Twenty-Six



To their utter surprise, they arrived at the house to find the Duke waiting.

“And where have you been? I have been waiting since this afternoon!” he growled.

“We did not know you were coming father,” Freya ventured to say.

“That’s no excuse!” he shouted.

“Do not speak to her that way, sir!” Eric said, much to Freya’s surprise. No one had ever come to her defense before. She turned to see that her father was also gawping in surprise at Eric.

She smiled. “You should have had your butler inform us that you were coming and that you would need to be attended to immediately. Since you didn’t, you cannot blame us for not knowing. In any case, did Silver not provide you with everything you needed? I thought that was his purpose.”

The Duke glared at her. “Do not think you can speak to me that way just because you have a husband, girl.”

“Speak what way, Father? Honestly?”

The Duke made a grumbling noise under his breath. “I am tired since you have kept me waiting. I shall retire for the evening. I expect you to attend me first thing in the morning.”

“Yes Father,” she said automatically and was surprised that Eric simply kept quiet and did not comply as well. She stared at him wide-eyed.

“We cannot afford to make him angry,” she whispered.

He snorted derisively, still watching her father climb the stairs. “Is he ever *not* angry?”

Freya inclined her head, acknowledging the truth of that observation. “Well...I suppose I am very used to placating him; I do not even notice it anymore.”

He turned to her with a frown. “I did not like the way he spoke to you. Nor the way you cowered. Do you not know that I would protect you with my life? You need not be afraid of him or anyone.”

Freya’s heart skipped a beat. “Uh...oh, well...” she stammered breathlessly. “That is nice to know.”

“Come, let us go to bed. We shall deal with your father in the morning.”



After a rather restless night filled with strange dreams, Freya woke up very early and decided to go and watch the sunrise from her rose garden. Putting on a simple muslin morning gown in gossamer blue and slinging a shawl over it, she crept down the stairs and out the back door in a pair of sturdy black walking shoes.

The house was just awakening with servants carrying firewood over to the

kitchen to light the fires, the milk maids making their way to the kitchens as well with buckets full of milk, and the gardeners wheeling out their garden tools, ready to start the day. There was a quiet morning bustle that Freya enjoyed. Cauldrons of water were put on the boil for everyone's morning baths, the chef supervised two kitchen maids in the kneading and shaping of bread before it was put in the oven, someone collected eggs from the chicken coop next to the stables, and the grooms led the horses out for their morning rides.

It was all so comfortingly familiar.

It's not that she had forgotten that her father was present—it was that she could put him to the back of her mind and just enjoy the morning. She had a feeling he would have a lot to say to her when he had the chance. She sat down between rose bushes, leaning in to take in the heady scent of her roses.

I've missed you. She smiled, her eyes closed.

The sound of approaching footsteps had her whirling around, eyes opening wide. She relaxed when she saw that it was just Isabella. With a smile, she patted the grass next to her, and her sister sat down with a long sigh.

“When do you think Father will be gone?” she asked.

“Well, good morning to you too. I slept well, thank you for asking.”

Isabella slanted her a sidelong glance. “Good morning, Freya,” she said sarcastically. “And how did you sleep?”

Freya smiled cheekily. “I slept well as I said; did you not hear me?”

Isabella punched her lightly on the arm, pouting playfully.

Freya clutched her arm in exaggerated pain. “Oh, such unladylike behavior. What would Father say?”

Immediately, Isabella stopped smiling and frowned. “The house is somehow darker with him in it,” she said ominously.

Freya did not want to encourage her sister’s sentiments by agreeing with her out loud, so she merely rubbed Isabella’s shoulder consolingly.

“Yesterday, he was quite rude to William,” Isabella continued. “I wanted to shout at him, but I was scared.” She ducked her head, looking ashamed.

Freya felt a pang of regret for all the times she’d let their father just say whatever he wanted to her. She had thought that if she made no trouble, then no one else would need to feel the brunt of his anger.

I should have fought back. I should have shown Isabella how to. Now, look at us.

She swallowed back her anger and guilt, getting to her feet. “Come on; let’s go to the dining room. I’m sure breakfast is served since father usually gets up so early. We can find out when he’s leaving.”

Isabella gave her a wide-eyed glance. “Are you sure?”

“Of course, I am. Why would I not be?”

She led the way, head held high, while Isabella followed in her wake.



Eric woke up to find that he was alone in bed. That was a disappointment because he had some very vivid dreams that he wanted to make reality. His body was already aroused; it was anticlimactic to find that Freya was not around.

He peered grumpily out of the window. “How early did she awaken?” The

sky was gray, the early morning sun hidden behind angry clouds. It looked like it just might rain. He could see people milling about below in the gardens. Suddenly, from the direction of the rose garden, Freya emerged, followed by Isabella. They seemed to be walking very determinedly towards the house. Grabbing his banyan, he slipped it on before donning his slippers. He hurried out of his room, wanting to find out what do she was up to.

He caught up with them at the bottom of the stairs leading to the dining room and knew that they were going to confront their father. He slowed down, leaning against the wall next to the dining room, and he listened.

“Good morning, Father,” Freya said.

The Duke simply grunted in response. Eric frowned in annoyance.

There was the sound of chairs being pushed and cutlery clacking against each other.

Otherwise, everything was dead silent. He was tempted to lean forward and peer into the room, but he did not want to inadvertently be seen.

“How long are you staying?”

Eric smiled at Freya’s boldness, having come to understand that when it came to her father, it certainly was not the norm.

“Are you with child? If you are, I shall leave right away.”

Eric straightened up with a frown, ready to walk into the room and confront the Duke.

“I just got married father. These things take time as you know. Didn’t you and mother wait six years before I was born?”

“Humph!” The Duke did not sound amused. Eric leaned back against the

wall, smiling, now confident that Freya had it under control.

“And then between me and Isabella, you waited what? Another six years?”

Eric covered his mouth to stifle the laughter that wanted to bust out.

“Yes, well, your mother and I didn’t go about embarrassing our sires by completely disappearing during the party of the season and coming back wet and bedraggled with no explanation like a couple of ill-bred orphans.”

Eric took a step forward, feeling it was his duty to explain what happened, seeing as it was his fault that they had disappeared. “If there was anybody who behaved ill-bred, it was not us,” Freya snapped.

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“It means, Father, that you should learn to hear all the facts before you judge the case. I can see why the district went with Somerton as a magistrate since you make up your mind even before asking a single question.”

The sound of cutlery clattering onto a dish as if thrown was preceded by a growl. “How *dare* you speak to me in such a way!”

Eric felt that it was really time for him to intervene. He strode into the dining room. “She *dares* because she has probably heard you speak to her in such a way for years.” Pulling back his banyan, he pulled out a chair and sat down next to Freya. “Good morning.” He smiled at both Freya and Isabella.

Freya was staring at him wide-eyed, a blush staining her cheeks. “Good morning,” she said softly.

The Duke sneered at them both. “I see she has you wrapped around her little finger. Well, congratulations. Are you to enjoy each other’s company even more so that I may get my heir before I die?”

Eric leaned forward so that he was looking the Duke in the eye. “You may say whatever you like to me, but if you speak to my wife like that again, I will be forced to call you out.”

The Duke threw back his head and laughed. “You? A soldier? Calling out a sick man on his last legs who happens to also be the man from whom you will inherit your title? How would that look?”

“I want you to believe me when I tell you that I would not give a tinker’s damn how it *looks*.”

“Oh, of course. You have no thought for others’ opinions, am I right?” The Duke sneered, “Well let me educate you, *Lieutenant Commander*. You are in a different world now where reputation is everything. What people think of you is the *only* currency.”

“In that case, I don’t suppose you would like for yours to be ruined, would you?” Eric challenged.

The Duke shrugged, “As I said, I am on my deathbed. Whatever smears you put on my name, I will not have to bear them long.”

“Then we are at a stalemate, sir, because I will not allow you to abuse any member of my family including Lady Freya and Lady Isabella. I will also not allow you to hold an inheritance over me. The title is mine along with the lands that go with it. I am perfectly capable of looking after my family with what I already have. So, you and your butler can go to hell.”

The Duke’s face paled, and he reeled back in shock. “You mean to go back on your pledge? Are you that dishonorable a man?”

“I have made myself perfectly clear. You will keep a civil tongue in your head, or you can find someone else to give you an heir.”

The Duke stared at him, chest heaving with anger. “Fine. We shall be as

polite as you wish,” he gritted out.

Eric smiled and decided in for a penny, in for a pound. “I would also like you to apologize to your daughters for your cruel treatment of them.”

Isabella squeaked, Freya gasped, and the Duke blanched. “I beg your pardon?”

“I believe you heard me quite clearly.”

He stared at the Duke, and the Duke stared back, neither willing to give an inch to the other. Freya looked from one to the other, her face anxious, while Isabella had her fork frozen halfway to her open mouth, also staring at them as if fascinated.

“Eric, it is fine; we don’t need an apology,” Freya tried to whisper, putting a hand on his arm.

He turned to look her in the eye. “You might not need one, but you certainly deserve one.”

Freya blushed bright pink and looked rather pleased. She squeezed his wrist hard before letting his hand go. Eric turned to look back at the Duke. “You have terrorized these girls for too long. You are about to die. Do you not think it’s time for some remorse?”

The Duke cackled, “Remorse? And what good would that do to me?”

“You would die with a clear conscience.”

“You assume my conscience is not clear. I stand by everything I have ever done.”

“Very well. If you are happy with how your daughters would speak of you to their children, then there’s nothing more I can do. An empty apology would

mean nothing after all.”

The Duke furrowed his brow, narrowing his eyes at Eric. He got to his feet abruptly and turned to the butler. “Ready my carriage. I am setting off to London at once.”

Silver bowed. “Yes, Your Grace,” he said before marching out quite smartly.

Eric reached for the tea and poured himself a cup. “Have a safe journey, Your Grace.”

Freya cleared her throat, “Y-yes, safe journey, Father.” Her voice was hoarse as if she hadn’t spoken in years.

He ignored them both, merely stepping out of his seat and walking out of the room. There was a huge sigh from both Freya and Isabella as soon as he was gone. Freya turned to Eric, her eyes shining. “That is the single most terrifying thing I have ever seen.”

“Yes,” Isabella chimed in breathlessly. “I thought I might expire from how rapidly my heart was beating.” She clutched her heaving bosom in an illustration.

“I was only following your example,” Eric said, looking at Freya.

Freya’s jaw dropped. “My example? I...”

“You stood up to him, and I figured that it was about time I stood up to him, too. I have let him manipulate me for too long, and you as well. I want to apologize, Freya, even if your father wouldn’t. I should not have gone along with his scheme to force you to marry me. I thought you were just being a stubborn little chit that I was helping put in her place.”

Freya smiled wryly. “Well after our unfortunate introduction, I can hardly blame you for thinking that.”

Eric smiled back. “It was rather... memorable.”

Freya cocked her head to the side, looking him up and down. “It seems you exited our chambers quite hastily. Would you like to... go and finish your breakfast upstairs?”

Eric’s eyes widened in surprise. “I think I would. Perhaps you could join me?”

“Thank you. I think I will.”

Eric got to his feet and held out his hand for Freya to take, so he could pull her to her feet. He offered her his arm as they walked out of the room, and Isabella rolled her eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



As Eric's large warm hand encompassed hers, Freya felt lit up from within — not only from the desire that had her weak-kneed at Eric's defense of her and Isabella but also from sheer unadulterated awe. She had *never* seen anyone stand up to her father in all the years she'd been living.

They either gave in to him or sought to placate him. His combination of power, money, and audacity had everyone fearing him.

And Eric had chased him off!

They arrived at their bedroom, Freya's breathing already coming fast. They stepped in, and Eric closed the door and locked it. He turned to her, looking bemused. "I cannot believe that you propositioned me. It was all I could do not to pick you up and have my way with you right there on the dining room table in front of God, Isabella, and everyone."

Freya giggled nervously. "Forgive me, I didn't mean to be too forward."

"Oh no, please," he hastened to say. "There's nothing to be sorry for. It made me extremely glad when you did that. It showed me that you truly do want me."

"Of course, I do. Surely you have no doubt of that by now. After I did that

thing you asked me to do the other day?” She blushed as he gave her a wicked grin.

“Ah,” he smiled as if reminiscing, “that was beautiful.”

“That was mortifying. I still cannot believe I did it.”

He pulled her so that she was flush against him. “All right, my darling. If you don’t want to do it again, we never shall.”

“Well...” she said quietly, walking her fingers along his shoulders, “I didn’t say *that*.”

He laughed, low and deep. “Mm, I love how confident you are becoming.”

Freya looked sharply up at him trying to gauge if he meant it. He was smiling lustily, his eyes on her bosom, dark and pinpointed with desire. Inwardly she shrugged. It was always going to be difficult to tell what a declaration meant, especially when said in the heat of passion.

I shall just have to wait until we are both sober.

He leaned down and bit at the junction between her neck and shoulder. She shivered, looping her hands around his neck and throwing her head back to encourage him to do more. He suckled a bruise into her neck, pulling at her vein as if he were a vampire.

He let her go, stepping back to whip off his banyan and fling his slippers into the corner. In solidarity, she pulled off her morning gown and the two petticoats beneath before letting her hair free from its cap. His breeches were off, and he stood before her in all his naked glory. She froze in the midst of taking off her second petticoat and just stared at him, marveling at the work of art that was his body.

He smiled. “Like what you see?”

She nodded mutely.

He reached up, unconsciously covering his scar with his hands, and she frowned, stepping forward to push his hands away. She looked him in the eye. “All of you is beautiful. *All of you.*”

He smiled uncomfortably. “I’m not sure I’m the one who should be called beautiful. Not when you’re standing in front of me with your marvelous cascade of chestnut hair, bouncing and alive, eyes like sparkling emeralds so bright and aware. You’re so willowy and yet full of soft curves. A fairy of the wood that likes to flit amongst her rose flowers and spy on the bumbling loud humans passing by.”

Freya’s eyebrows went up even as she giggled. “I had no idea you had poetry in you.”

“You bring it out of me.”

“If that’s so, then tell me more,” she said coyly.

“As we stand here naked?” he asked.

“Would you prefer to sit?”

“Let us lay down on the bed, and I shall tell you more.”

She finished pulling off her petticoat and climbed on the bed. He went around to the other side and climbed on as well. They lay side by side, holding hands and staring at each other.

He traced the curve of flesh beneath her left eye. “I could drown in your eyes, you know? They’re so alive, open yet mysterious as if one might dive in and then be surprised by how deep it is in there. An enigma you are, truly.”

She smiled, reaching up to wind her fingers around his wrist and keep his

hand on her face. “I am just a simple girl from the country. Everything you see is what you get,” she whispered.

He moved downward, tracing the curve of her cheekbone. “So soft, smooth, silky...not a flaw to be seen anywhere. Not a freckle or a spot, nor a pustule or a blemish, just bone-white perfection. How does she do it?”

She smirked. “Hats. Lots of hats.”

He grinned, twisting his wrist out of her hand, so he could lace their fingers together. He leaned down and licked her nipple. “Your breasts, so supple, so soft, like pillows. I want to lie between them and never leave.” He matched actions to words. “Mm, and you smell so sweet, like honeysuckle and rose,” he murmured into her skin before breathing in deeply. He licked the side of her breast. “You taste good as well.”

She had been giggling all the while, her face heated from all the compliments. “What else?” she asked.

Still burying his nose in her skin, he moved downward from her breasts to her belly. “The gentle curve of your belly is an invitation to touch. To kiss...” He deposited butterfly kisses all over her belly. “Soft, so soft everywhere. I want to drown myself in you. Or eat you up.” He bit down gently against her stomach.

She squeaked, jerking in surprise. The growing anticipation was almost too much. She spread her legs slightly and waited. “Go on.” she urged.

He ran a hand down her arm. “Your downy hair feels like a cushion on your arms.” He squeezed her arm before lifting it to sniff her armpit, making her jerk away and giggle. “Mm, ambrosia,” he said.

“Stop it,” she whispered, laughing.

“Stop what?” he asked, his hand on her hip.

“You are stalling.”

“I am enjoying every inch of you, and I shall continue to do so.”

“This will not put a baby in me.”

“Humph. Serve your father right if we don’t manage to impregnate you while he still breathes.”

“I know you would take care of us, Eric, but I don’t want to lose this place.”

“It is the Stark seat. It is the only place you’re not guaranteed to lose.”

“No. Father purchased this property when my mother became pregnant for a third time as the physicians said that the climate here suited her more than Wessex. That’s where the duchy is, and from what I hear, it is much neglected.”

Eric frowned. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. So, we would lose this place.”

“It means that much to you?”

She lowered her lashes. “It does.”

“Enough to give your father a baby? To lay with *me*?”

“No! If that was so, I would have told you about this as soon as you told me about my father’s conditions. But at the time, I did not care what you got or did not get. If you don’t meet my father’s conditions, you will likely inherit a neglected property that will put you in debt. And you will lose access to the means to make it a viable proposition. I am only telling you this now because I realize that I trust you, and we must truly be in this together, or we will not

make it. I saw it today. My father is an evil, malicious man.” She turned to look him earnestly in the eye. “I thought you were like him or just another man out for what he could get, but you are not. I cannot imagine another man apologizing to me. I think all my doubts were cleared away at that breakfast table.”

He stared intently at her as if trying to gauge her level of seriousness. Then his eyes dropped to her mouth, and he was swooping down to kiss her hard and passionately.

She held on tight, giving as well as she got, her tongue tangling with his as their lips mashed together. Her breasts flattened against his chest, and she slung a leg over his hip. She could feel his erection against her inner thigh, and her breath quickened in anticipation of what was to come.

His hands trailed all over her back before he caressed her thigh, pulling her leg further up so it was almost at his waist. He wiggled his lower body into the space provided, grinding into her as he moaned.

“Can we...like this?” she asked against his mouth.

“We shall see.”

He cupped her breasts, squeezing gently before removing his lips from hers, so he could suckle. She groaned, throwing her head back and arching her back to give him more room. Suddenly, he stopped kissing her and moved away. “Turn around,” he said.

“Wha...?”

Without waiting for her compliance, he reached for her shoulders and turned her, so she was facing away from him. He pushed up against her from behind, lifting her leg out of the way before his erection was questing, seeking entry into her most secret place.

“Ohh...” She let out a long sigh as he slid into her wet tightness, keeping still and letting him lead.

Keeping her leg out of the way with his own leg, he pushed into and out of her from behind. “Watch me,” he whispered in her ear. “Watch as I possess you.”

She made a surprised sound, unsure about what he meant.

“Look down,” he said.

She did as he asked, and she realized that she could see the place where they were joined, his manhood slipping into her, her own body widening each time to accommodate him. Her jaw dropped with wonder as she watched, his rhythm changing from slow to fast as he panted in her ear. She almost did not know how to feel. It was all just very immediate and intimate. Her hips undulated of their own volition, following his rhythm and facilitating him.

She marveled at the ability of their bodies to act so in sync; so taken with watching, she was surprised by the pleasure that suffused her every time he drove into her. His hand reached over her, and he began to rub the glossy pink nub just above where their flesh was joined.

She threw her head back and cried out, unable to focus anymore, caught up in the many sources of pleasure she could feel. Her legs were going numb, and she didn't know if it was from holding the position for so long or because of the repeated hits of pleasure.

Suddenly, he turned with her so that she was on all fours, and he was behind her but still inside of her. He held onto her hips and pistoned himself into her, going so deep she was afraid she might feel his wide, long manhood in her throat.

She could not keep her cries in and did not try. This felt different from before, the same pleasure but more intense in a way that was almost painful.

She could hear him moan with every thrust, and it just fueled her pleasure even more.

Everything seemed heightened as he reached around and began to rub her as he thrust. She spread her legs wider and arched her back, trying to give him room to go deeper, so he could get to her needy center that was crying out for him — crying out to be filled.

“Please! Please! Please!” she cried, pushing back against him as he pistoned into her again and again. “Yes! Just like that. Just there. Oh God, yes, deeper please, yes! Faster. Oh God, I love you so much, harder!”

His thrusts stuttered before getting more frenzied and frantic. Her words became incoherent and thick with need. “Oh yes, just there. Oh! Oh! *Oh!*” She hunched into herself, back arching and hands shaking as she convulsed. She blinked a few times, trying to clear the whiteness from her eyes even as her mind went blank with pleasure, and she was floating off into ecstasy without much further ado.

He kept driving into her unrelenting until she collapsed on the bed, panting hard. Even then, he did not stop, blanketing her with his body and breathing into her ear, making her shiver.

“Come on, I think there’s a little more where that came from.”

He was still inside of her, gently pistoning his hips, reigniting her nerves so that they tried to fire up with each thrust, giving aftershocks of pleasure and coating her thighs with wet juices.

His panting got loud and painful sounding as he increased the tempo of his thrusts, pushing her legs wider and slipping in and out of her with ease, his passage smoothed by her slickness.

“Oh my, oh God, oh yes!” he spasmed and thrust hard into her. She could feel his release, wetting and filling her insides, and her body jerked, waking

up to tighten and loosen around him rhythmically.

She sighed and whimpered, hips jumping as waves of pleasure swept through her again. She truly felt as if she had just lost her innocence.

He collapsed beside her, panting hard before gathering her into his arms. They lay replete, bodies gleaming as the sun slowly chased the clouds away.

“Did you like it?” he asked.

“I...” She shook her head. She really had no words.

He lifted his head, resting it on his elbow, and studied her with a grin. “Cat got your tongue?”

She snorted but still did not speak.

His eyes traveled over her body, softly gleaming with sweat and sticky with fluids. “I had not finished describing you poetically,” he pointed out.

“Mmm” was her only reply.

He smiled. “Your lips, fat and swollen from kisses and redder than any rouge could get them. Plush looking, a temptation no man can resist.” He leaned down and kissed her hard.

She let him do as he pleased, too boneless to do more than part her lips and let him in.

He pulled back to stare over her body again, his hand reaching out to cover her womanhood as he looked into her eyes. “Your quim, so tight, so warm, so welcoming. Once you’re in, you never want to leave. Truly a lifelong addiction.”

That woke her up enough to blush hotly and cover her face. “Don’t say that.”

“Why? It’s true.”

She peered out at him from beneath her fingers. “Nobody is described like that except for women of easy virtue.”

Eric laughed. “I do assure you, Freya, it is the best compliment your husband could pay you.”

She grinned shyly. “All right.”

He removed his hand and moved it to her inner thigh. “What secrets do these hold? No man shall ever know. Dark, secretive, hot...they hold you firm as you plant your oats or keep you out should you get out of favor. Truly formidable to be feared by all.”

Freya burst out laughing.

“Ah you laugh now, but wait until you are annoyed with me over something, and then you will understand the power of the inner thighs.”

“Do go on before you mortify me to dust.”

He pulled at her thigh so that her knee was bent and then ran his palm over it. “What a beautiful knee, especially when it goes weak.”

Freya burst out laughing. “I do declare, you are ridiculous.”

“I am honest and observant.”

“Well, that means you have spent a lot of time observing *me*.”

He executed an elegant bow while naked and sprawled on the bed. “Of

course. I am always at your service, my lady.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight



It was easy for Freya to put the sword of Damocles hanging over her and Isabella to the side, confident that no matter what, at least she had Eric, and he would look after them. In any case, she was too occupied with immersing herself in everything that Eric was.

She found him endlessly fascinating.

He was so different from her father — the only man she'd ever known intimately — that it was as if he was an entirely new species. Every morning, after a night of intense lovemaking, he insisted that they take a walk to the village to give the tenants a chance to approach them if they wished and speak on any issues they had.

“I am not sure papa would approve,” Freya said tentatively when he brought it up.

He smirked. “Well, I am not him, am I?”

Freya smiled, shaking her head. “No. You're not.”

She put on her sturdiest walking shoes, looped her arm through his, and walked proudly by his side as they went down the lane. He had an umbrella in his hand since rain was threatening, but for the moment, it made an

effective walking stick.

He drew in a deep breath. “I love London, I do. But there’s nothing like this fresh country air to invigorate one’s spirit, don’t you think?”

She gazed up at him, a slight smile on her face. “Indeed. It is...quite nice.”

He beamed at her, and they walked in silence, arm in arm, shoulders brushing now and then. It was not until they were in the village proper that someone dared approach, and it was a small girl who broke away from her mother and came to stare with fascination at Eric.

“Wha' 'appened to yer face?” she asked.

“Heather!” Her mother seemed mortified and came running, trying to lead her away.

Eric smiled. “It’s quite all right. Heather is just curious. Aren’t you?”

The little girl nodded, solemnly.

Eric squatted down to her height. “Well Heather, I was sailing the sea when a great big sea monster rose up from the water.”

Heather gasped.

“He tried to overturn our ship, but I would not let him.”

Eyes wide and fascinated, Heather asked, “What did you do?”

“I took out my sword and brandished it at the monster shouting, ‘you will never win!’.”

Freya covered her mouth, trying to suppress a giggle. Heather’s mother was

smiling fondly. Heather was hanging on every word.

“I dashed forward, leaped up the ship’s stern, and flew at the monster, stabbing him in the heart. Unfortunately, one of its great claws scratched me, and that’s how I got the scar on my face.”

“Whoa!” Heather said, gawping at him in wonder.

Eric got back on his feet, gently patting Heather on the head. “So, there you go. That’s what happened. Now, go on with your mother.”

The girl’s mother held out her hand for the girl to take and then walked off, Heather skipping along by her side. It didn’t take long before more people came up to them, some just to greet them, others to make an inquiry or a request.

Freya’s heart felt full.

I have the best husband.

Eric lifted his gaze to meet hers and smiled as they finally made their way back to the Manor at around midday. The tavern keeper had invited them to break their fast with him at his inn. Several villagers had joined them, some pointing out that it was the first opportunity they’d had to wish Freya and Eric well, following their marriage.

Freya had to admit that even though it was a far cry from how her father said they should relate to their tenants, it certainly seemed to be better and certainly more enjoyable.

“Thank you for suggesting that walk. My father always said that tenants didn’t know what they wanted, and so it was best not to ask — so as not to confuse them. Obviously, he was wrong.”

Eric shrugged. “I cannot speak for him, but as a person new to this life, I

always find it beneficial to ask what people might require of me instead of just guessing.”

“Hmm, seems reasonable,” Freya said coyly as she laid her head briefly against his shoulder. “Who knew you were so wise?”

He cackled. “Well, I, for one, did.”

“What?” she replied in faux shock. “Are you sure?”

He snorted, giving her a sidelong glance. “Yes, I’m sure.”

As soon as they stepped into the compound, Isabella and William came running towards them. “Where did you go off to?” William asked.

“Silver was looking everywhere for you,” Isabella said.

William grinned, “He seemed worried that you might have run away.”

Freya snorted. “I wasn’t aware we were prisoners,” she said drily.

Isabella hooked her hand through Freya’s. “I think he just doesn’t like not knowing where you are.”

“Well, he is going to have to find a way around that because I am not spending the rest of my life apprising him of my whereabouts every minute of every day,” Eric declared, making both William and Isabella laugh. Freya smiled, shaking her head.

Eric winked at her, his eyes twinkling, and she laughed out loud.

They spent the rest of the day frolicking with William and Isabella. Freya realized that it had been a long while since she and Isabella had spent time together. She enjoyed the carefree time they were able to spend, much like

they used to do before their father's illness got worse.

She decided not to worry about the future for now. There was little she could do about it that she wasn't already doing in any case. The rest of the week continued in that same vein, and Freya was happy. Whenever a niggling thought threatened to spoil her happy mood, she would either seek out her gardener or look for Eric to distract her in more physical ways.

She knocked on his office door and stuck her head in. "Are you busy?"

He looked up and smiled. "Never too busy for you."

"Flatterer," she countered as she came in and closed the door behind her. She leaned against it, bending her knee slightly. "I haven't seen you all day. Is there some issue that you are contending with?"

"Not particularly. I was just going through the farm records. Growing up, I was exposed to many types of businesses except farming. It is certainly extremely fascinating. I am intrigued."

He looked so bright-eyed and enthusiastic that Freya could not help smiling fondly. "I am happy that you find it invigorating." She stepped away from the door and towards him. "But I was wondering if you might be interested in getting invigorated in other ways."

His eyebrows shot up into the air. "What do you mean by that?"

She grinned. "You know what I mean."

He took a deep breath, getting to his feet. "Come here."

With a giggle, she sauntered over to him, putting her arms around his shoulders. She lifted her mouth to his, letting him explore it with his own to his heart's content. She had not anticipated just how enjoyable kissing was as an activity in and of itself.

I could do this for hours.

His hands roamed all over her back before reaching down to cup her buttocks. She moaned into his mouth, and he reached down and lifted her into his arms without ceasing to kiss her. He placed her on the table, hands immediately going to her breasts to squeeze and knead. She squirmed in his arms, hoping he would get the message. He did, immediately beginning to undo her stays.

He took off her bodice and loosened her skirts, leaving her in just a petticoat. With a growl, he kneeled down, pushing her petticoat upwards to free her legs which he placed on his shoulders. Standing back up, his hands on his flies, he loosened them enough for his engorged manhood to break through.

“Freya,” he groaned as he pushed into her as she braced herself on the desk, feet in the air.

She threw back her head, her mouth open in a soundless cry as he drove into her relentlessly, panting like a steam engine as he kept a tight hold of her hips. The endless pounding continued, and she could not keep her cries in as her entire body shook.

Suddenly he pulled out of her and then pulled her off the table, whipping her around, so he could bend her over the desk. He slipped into her again, smooth and fast, pumping steadily as he held her hips firmly in his large hands.

“Oh!” she breathed, surprised by how deep he could go from this position. She widened her legs slightly, letting him piston into her, grunting with effort, sweat pooling on his temples and falling like little touches on her bare back.

She braced herself against the table as his movements escalated in passion and intensity. She could not keep the answering grunts and moans inside, losing herself to the sensation of total possession and utter wildness.

She arched her back, moaning loudly as he pushed deeper into her, his hands like vices on her flesh. He trailed his fingers along her sides until he could cup her breasts and then use them to lift her to a vertical position. Twisting his head around hers, he kissed the corner of her mouth even as his hips continued to thrust into her. With the change of position came new sensations as he touched her sensitive flesh in new places, awakening new nerves and causing them to fire up into burning bright flames that reverberated throughout her system, causing irreversible change wherever they touched down. Even her fingers tingled with the utter ecstasy of his touch.

I could get used to this.

If there was one thing she was beginning to understand fully, it was that she did not want this union to end. Whether or not they were playing into her father's hands, she wanted Eric. She wanted him forever.

Now how to tell him that?

She knew he would think that she was saying it out of fear for her future or else, pity for his scars. She didn't know the words to convey her feelings, so she simply thrust back at him, encouraging him to do his worst — to possess her totally so that his body at least would know that she belonged to him.

From his reaction, she could tell that his body heard her, and he groaned long and hard before emptying himself into her as her body clenched around him, milking him for every drop.

Rapture.

That's all she felt as her spirit floated away, carried on a wave of pleasure so deep she could register nothing else but that for a few minutes. It felt so big and so overwhelming that she could not contain it in her body; she had to open her mouth wide in a primal cry so as to let it out.

Then she collapsed on the table, leaving it to Eric to pick her up and lay her

gently on the chaise lounge. She closed her eyes, and soon, she was fast asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Eric watched Freya sleep, her face exhausted but at peace from all their lovemaking.

Lovemaking? You rutted on her like a beast, a sneering voice in his mind spoke up.

He turned away, feeling ashamed. The way he'd treated her, no gentleman would ever treat a lady like that. He did not know *what* had come over him. His hand went up unconsciously to touch his scar.

Perhaps looking like a beast has made me a beast.

He crossed to the room and retrieved a shawl from the divan which he used to cover Freya before fleeing the room. He dashed out of the house, chose a horse from the stables, and took off down the road. He let the wind blow through his hair and tried to forget what had happened.

He went down to the village and decided to call in on the tavern. The innkeeper was happy to see him, especially when he declared that he'd pay for everyone's drinks. All he wanted to do was forget what had happened for a while, to not have to face himself.

Sooner or later, he would have to, but in his humble opinion, the later the

better. He settled in to drink everyone under the table in the quest to achieve oblivion. In a few hours, he'd lost track of time; all he knew was that it was dark outside, and he was too drunk to make his way back home.

Settling his coat around him, he huddled in a corner, determined to make the best of it and sleep it off there.

He was deeply asleep when a shake of his shoulder had him waking irritably. "What?"

"I brought the carriage, sir, to take you home."

He squinted up into the dimness and saw a figure looming over him. Blinking a few times in confusion, he realized that he recognized the man. It was the coachman.

"You didn't have to do that," he protested weakly.

"Yes, I did, my lord. The family is worried about you."

Eric took leave to doubt that but staggered to his feet anyway and made his way outside. "Don' f'get th' 'orse," he mumbled.

"No, sir," the coachman said.

Eric saw a young groom leading the animal towards them. He realized that the coachman had not come alone but was accompanied by one of the grooms. The groom took the horse's reins and climbed on, ready to make his way home. Vaguely, beneath his drunkenness, Eric felt a little embarrassed to have caused all this fuss. He had not meant to worry anyone.

He got in the carriage and sat down, lulled back to sleep by the gentle rolling gait of the horses as they made their way back. He woke up again when the door was opened by none other than Silver.

Eric could see the judgment in his eyes.

“What?” he asked belligerently.

“We’ve had a letter. His Grace has taken ill. He is now bedridden. He will not be able to come and check on you, so he has left that up to me. I would urge you to take your duties seriously.”

Eric’s mouth twisted. “What makes you think I’m not?”

Silver just gave him a sidelong glance. “There is hot water awaiting you in your chambers as well as some hot soup and bread. If you need anything further, I am at your service.”

“Oh, don’t I know it. Where’s Lady Freya?”

“She’s waiting for you as well,” Silver said pointedly.

Eric rolled his eyes and with a sigh, he began to climb the stairs.



Freya did not understand why Eric had seen the need to disappear from her after their intense encounter. She feared that he might regret it, but if that was so, she did not want to know. It was one of the best experiences of her life, and she did not want the memory of it sullied by Eric’s rejection.

So, she pretended to be asleep when he came into their chambers, smelling of drink and tavern smoke. The next day, she got out of bed and left him snoring, going out to her garden to spend a little time before she had to face Eric at breakfast.

“Oh, Mama, what are we doing?” she murmured to the roses in despair.

There was no answer.

Isabella came skipping up to her. “Freya, now that father is bedridden, do we have to go to London and look after him?”

Freya paused, pursing her lips as she thought about it. *It would be the right thing to do.*

Freya knew this, but she was reluctant to subject herself to her father’s haranguing, especially if he was now on his deathbed with nothing to lose. Still, she did not want to deprive her sister of what might be the last days with her father.

She took a deep breath. “I don’t know, Bella. I’ll have to ask my husband.”

Isabella nodded in acceptance, twisting her hands. “I hope he agrees. I know Papa isn’t the kindest man, but he’s all I have left.”

Freya frowned. “What do you mean? You have me too.”

“Yes, but you’re married now. You’re starting your own family.”

Freya got to her feet, her brow furrowed in concern, and went to clasp Isabella by her arms. “You are always going to be my family, regardless of anything else. Do you hear me?” She glared sternly at her sister.

Isabella swallowed and nodded. She seemed close to tears.

“Oh Isabella,” Freya said with a sigh before hugging her sister tight. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Isabella tearfully replied into her shoulder.

Freya pulled away to look into her eyes. “Now, banish these bacon-brained

notions about Papa being the only one you have left. We *will* go and see him; I shall persuade Eric if I have to, but it's not because he's all we have. It's because he's our father, and it's our duty to honor him."

Isabella nodded. "All right."

Freya patted her on the head and then put her arm around her sister, "Come. Let's go and get some breakfast. There has been altogether too much mawkishness for this early in the morning."

Isabella laughed. "I suppose," she said as she put her arm around Freya's waist, smiling as they walked back into the house.



London seemed strangely loud and full of smells to Eric as they rode into the city three days later. Everything was suffocatingly close, and one needed to be constantly on the alert. He had lived in Town for the entirety of his life except for when he'd been in the navy, but now, he could barely stand it.

He scoffed at himself. *Two months in the country, and you have become the epitome of landed gentry.*

"Is something the matter?" a soft voice asked.

He looked up into Freya's concerned eyes and twisted his lips wryly. "Nothing. I am just...bemused."

Freya's eyebrow quirked. "Do share."

He shook his head. "It is silly." He looked out of the window, "We're almost there. Are you ready?"

Freya shrugged. "I am trying not to think about it too much. I expect he will

take this as some kind of triumph over us, but Isabella really wanted to come.”

Isabella and the Campbells were riding in the second, bigger, slower carriage. Freya had wanted to arrive first so that they could take the brunt of whatever the Duke had prepared for them. Freya was sure that after their last meeting, the Duke would not hesitate to enact some sort of revenge.

Eric shrugged one-shouldered. “I don’t care *what* he thinks. It is the honorable thing to do, and I applaud you and Lady Isabella for it.”

“What if he wants us to stay with him?”

“Then we will.”

“Even William and your mother?”

He shook his head slowly. “No need to subject them to his...whims. I’m sure mother has a lot of matters to attend to in London. She will be more comfortable doing that from her own home.”

Freya huffed. “I wouldn’t blame you if you joined them.”

He reached out and gently took her hand even though he wondered if she was hoping he *would* join his family in St. John’s Wood rather than staying at her father’s Mayfair town house. “We’re married, and it is for better or worse. So, if you are forced to suffer him, then so will I.”

Freya beamed with relief and...fondness. “Well, thank you. Your sacrifice is noted.”

He barked with surprised amusement and nodded. “You’re welcome.”

Chapter Thirty



Freya woke up feeling like casting up her accounts. She had never felt nausea like this before and wondered if she had contracted her father's illness. She had seen him cast up his accounts on occasion and noted how weak and disoriented it made him.

She quickly got out of bed and ran for the chamber pot just in time to regurgitate everything she'd had for dinner. Wiping her mouth with water, she shook her head with trepidation. She didn't know who she could speak to about it.

She looked at Eric, who was still peacefully asleep, and shook her head. She did not think he could help even if she told him what she'd experienced.

Ach! It's only once, and I do feel better. Perhaps I just ate something bad.

She decided to put it out of her mind and continue with her day. The Evans family had invited them for supper as they were hosting a well-known Austrian writer and were eager to introduce him to English society.

Freya was looking forward to hearing what he had to say. Perhaps she could practice her German on him. Eric had been inexplicably distant since their encounter in his study. She couldn't quite put her finger on what was wrong, but there was something. His touch was also overly careful as if he did not

want to lose control, and it was frustrating.

No matter what she tried, he kept her at arm's length.

Perhaps he realized that my feelings have changed, and he doesn't want that.

She pushed the thought away, but for the life of her, she could not think of another reason why he was so cold to her.

She went downstairs, stopping first at her father's chambers, and found Isabella sitting by his bed, reading aloud to him while he snored gently. She walked quietly up to her sister and rubbed her shoulder.

Isabella looked up and smiled. "He likes it when I read to him. It helps him to sleep," she whispered, pointing at their father.

Freya gave her a strained smile. Between the two of them, the Duke was always softer with Isabella. Freya was glad of it, but it also hurt. "How long have you been here?" she asked just as quietly.

Isabella shrugged. "I think since dawn. I woke up to use the chamber pot, and so I came to check on him. He was tossing and turning, unable to settle. I asked if he wanted me to read to him, and he said yes."

Freya nodded in understanding. "I see. Well, come; let's go have breakfast. Your throat must be parched."

Isabella looked at the Duke, a frown on her forehead. "Will he be all right? He seems to sleep better when I'm talking."

Freya squeezed her hand. "He'll be fine. You'll come back and resume reading after breakfast."

Isabella got to her feet. "Fine. Let's go, but we'll have to hurry," she whispered.

Freya nodded in agreement. Isabella put her book down, and they left, walking hand in hand, side by side.

At the door, Freya looked back and was startled to see gleaming eyes in the dark, staring at her. She gasped inaudibly but then quickly turned away, her heart thundering in her breast.



Eric could really have done without the socializing bit of being in London. There seemed to be an endless supply of invitations from members of the *ton* for this supper party or that masquerade ball...it was tiresome for him. He had gotten used to the stares and the comments about his scar, but he was never comfortable. He tried not to show it and smiled gamely through the evenings, trying to make sure that he was not a wet blanket for Freya or her sister.

Freya had spoken to him about letting Isabella attend as many functions with them as possible so that she too could know the security of marriage.

“You need not worry. I shall not abandon either of you,” he assured.

She rubbed her hands worriedly. “For all he is nearly bedridden, Father might linger for years. I do not want her to be caught up being his caretaker if that should happen. She is such a good-hearted girl; she would want to.”

Eric considered her keenly, feeling sure that there was more to this than met the eye. Perhaps she was planning on leaving him and wanted her sister securely wed before that happened. It was clear to him that the Duke was on his deathbed. Surely, she could see it too.

Tonight, they were headed for the opera— an Italian troupe was visiting London, and they would be performing a rendition of *Othello*. He was looking forward to it. At the opera, there was no staring or need for small

talk. He could simply be, enjoy the evening with his wife, and then come back home and make love to her as gently as possible.

She would never have to see the beast inside him again.

They arrived early and thus were thrust into the crowds of waiting patrons. Eric fetched them some drinks at the bar, handing Freya her glass with a small smile. She took a deep breath, the low décolletage of her gown drawing his eye to the twin creamy mounds just visible.

“You look lovely tonight,” he said softly.

Her face lit up, and he was glad he’d said something to please her. “Thank you,” she replied, her face stained with color. He looked his fill, enjoying her pleased embarrassment.

They walked into the theatre and prepared to sit down and enjoy the show. Eric reached out for Freya’s hand and was gratified when she let him hold it. They settled in and prepared to enjoy themselves.



Freya was quite sleepy when they got home and yawned as she stepped through the door, ready to go to bed. Suddenly, Isabella ran out of the duke’s chambers at the end of the corridor, looking distressed.

She came straight at Freya at full tilt. “He won’t wake up!” she yelled, slamming into Freya and putting her arms around Freya’s waist. “I’ve tried everything. I’ve shaken him; I’ve shouted his name...he won’t wake!”

Eric walked around them and calmly down the hall. Freya felt as if her legs could not support her. She wanted to follow him, but her knees were weak, and Isabella was sobbing into her bosom. He walked into the duke’s chambers and closed the door behind him. Minutes later, he emerged, his face

pale but composed. Catching her eye, he shook his head slowly.

He walked up to them and took her hands. “My sincerest condolences for your loss,” he said quietly.

Freya blinked at him, unable for a moment to make sense of his words.

What does he mean? Is Father dead?

She was suffused with an odd sense of disbelief. How could this be? She realized that she’d always viewed her father as sort of an invincible being, and maybe she’d never believed he would actually die.

She felt very lost and alone.

Eric squeezed her hand. “Would you like to see him before I call the undertakers?”

She swallowed hard, pondering the question.

Do I want to see him? Or do I prefer to remember him as he was?

She took a breath, realizing that if she did not see him now, she would never believe he was dead. Jerkily, she nodded. Looking down into Isabella’s eyes, she pushed her sister away gently. “Wait here. I’ll be back in a moment.”

“Don’t leave me,” Isabella begged.

“I won’t. I promise. One moment, and I’ll be back.” She rubbed Isabella’s arms, realizing that her sister was shaking. She looked to Eric, “Would you stay with her?”

He nodded quietly. “Of course,” he replied, and came to stand by Isabella’s side.

Slowly, Freya made her way down the hall; every step seemed heavier and filled with dread. She was afraid of what she would do when she saw her father.

Will I run mad from the sight? Will I be able to stand it?

Her heart thundered in her chest as she reached for the door handle. As she twisted it, opened the door, and stepped into the room, she felt the last of her childhood slough off at the threshold to be left forever on the other side of these chambers.

Her father lay still on the bed, his head turned to one side, lips turning blue. She gasped, doubling over and clutching her stomach as if the pain might be contained there. A wave of nausea rolled through her, and she had to take a few deep breaths to calm herself down.

Finally, she walked slowly over to the bed and looked down at her father. His thinning hair fell in wisps across his face, and his arms, so frail, the veins prominent, lay prone against his chest. "Oh Papa," she said with despair and was surprised to find that she did not feel like crying. Everything was numb, distant — she watched herself reach out to take his cooling hand, squeeze it, and put it back gently on his chest. Next thing she knew, she was walking out of the room.

She went straight to Isabella and hugged her.

"I shall go and make some arrangements. Excuse me," Eric said with a bow and a small rub to her back. Freya made no reply, her head buried in Isabella's neck.



As he watched the hearse pass by bearing his late father-in-law, Eric realized that it was the end. There was no longer anyone to force them to be together.

No grandchild to be had out of obligation. He could choose to continue to detain Freya in the marriage, or he could let her go.

He knew which he wanted to do, and which one was the right thing.

Not now. We still have to get through the funeral and the reading of the will.

Chapter Thirty-One



Freya wondered when this feeling of numbness would leave her. While her sister had cried buckets of tears at the funeral, the best she could do was to bow her head, one hand holding on to Isabella's. William had looked more distressed than she felt — though she suspected that Eric's sweet brother was concerned for them rather than particularly affected by the duke's death.

Still, she felt exhausted and wrung out as she lay on the chaise in their chambers, waiting for Eric to come to bed. She felt a strong need for his presence, his arms around her. She was surprised when she had to wait until almost midnight for him to come to bed. When he opened the door, he staggered slightly, and she could smell the whisky he'd consumed from across the room.

She sat up, staring at him. "Are you all right?" she asked.

He stared blearily at her, blinking a few times. "Are you not asleep?"

She laughed nervously. "No. were you hoping I would be?"

He said nothing, just swayed on the spot. She got to her feet, clad in her nightgown, and walked to him. She could see his eyes, raking over her in the light from the fire. She remembered that the material of the gown was so thin it would be rendered transparent by the light.

She came up to him, reaching for his necktie. "Let me help you." She began to loosen it. Eric merely swayed on the spot, seemingly unsure of what to do next. Freya divested him of his tie and shirt and then put her hands on his flies, ignoring the tent in his breeches.

He put a hand out to stop her, his head bent, eyes on their joined hands. "Don't," he whispered.

"Why not?"

"Because you don't want this."

She scoffed, wiggling her hand out of his grip, and continued to undo his flies. He bit back a moan, and she smiled, glad to have evoked a reaction from him. When he was swaying gently, naked before her, she stepped back and pulled off her night gown.

"Oh God," she heard him whisper, and then he grabbed her by the waist and pulled her towards him, kissing her like it was the last time before he picked her up and walked effortlessly towards the bed. She clung to him, kissing him as frantically as he was devouring her.

She pulled him down to her, wrapping her legs around his waist and making him let out a deep, heartfelt groan before he wrapped his arms around her thighs, pulling them further apart and surging into her.

She cried out in relief and satisfaction as he filled her, feeling whole again after days of emptiness. She cried out, right next to his ear, and felt him shiver, the rhythm of his thrusts increasing in tempo, strength, and passion. He turned his head, so he could slide his mouth onto hers, kissing her deep and steadily as he pounded her into the downy mattress.

She arched into him luxuriantly.

At last, she thought and didn't know why. He pounded into her as she

encouraged him in every way she could, mewling and moaning as the pleasure hit every inch of her body, bringing her back to life and dispelling the numbness. She opened herself up to him completely, welcoming him utterly, urging him to make himself at home in her body.

They undulated together, their shadows growing large and monstrous on the wall in the firelight.

The beast with two backs. She thought with bemusement as she watched their shadows shimmer and move together.

“Yes,” she whispered, “Yes, please. Like that. More.” She almost cried from the pleasure she was feeling, praying she would never stop feeling like this.

“Freya,” he groaned into her neck and then bit down. She squealed, startled a bit by the sudden pain, but then she moved her head to the side to give him room to lick and nip, suckle, and soothe her flesh as he pleased.

Her back arched off the bed, bringing him deeper into her as she moaned aloud, and he grunted with the effort of pistoning into her, as deep as he could go. He gathered her legs together, pinning them at the ankle and pulling them up and forward, to give himself more room. His body undulated fast and hard as he pumped in and out of her, panting heatedly, sweat dripping from his brow as his veins bulged outwards, and his face flushed.

She cupped his cheek lovingly, loving the evidence of the passion she could see there. She was so focused on him that her orgasm took her by surprise, tearing through her like a hurricane and leaving her wet, wrung out, and limp in its wake. She felt it as Eric began to pour himself into her, and her body jerked and sputtered, wanting to join him in ecstasy once again, despite her own recent repletion.

She clutched at him weakly, mouthing his name and pulling at his shoulders, so he would swoop down and kiss her again. He let go of her legs, surging into her as deep as he could go with a long, drawn-out groan before swooping down and kissing her so gently she almost cried. Cupping his cheeks, she

kissed him back with everything she had, telling him with her body what she could not yet quite say with her mouth.

He collapsed to the side, drawing her into the cavity of his chest and holding her tight as he panted. She held tightly onto his arms, reveling in the feeling of being surrounded and protected. He kissed her forehead gently, and she smiled.

“Go to sleep,” he said.

Tucking herself into his body, she did as he asked.



Eric was dreading the reading of the will. Much as he knew what was probably entailed therein, he had no idea what it would mean for his future with Freya. He wanted it to be all right, but he knew there was no way to guarantee that.

He got dressed alone, Freya having gone to check on Isabella. He had asked his mother and brother to be present with him because they too would need to know how things would go.

He poured himself a glass of brandy, even though the sun had yet to pass the yard arm, and he downed it in one fell swoop before walking out of his study. They were all supposed to drive together to the solicitor’s office, and he was gratified to see that his mother and brother had arrived on time.

He greeted his mother with muted cheer and patted William on the back with a smile.

“Where’s Isabella?” William enquired.

“I’m here!” Isabella called, breaking into a run when she saw William. He

opened his arms to her, and she ran into them, sobbing. Eric looked away, not wanting to see her pain. Isabella was taking the death of her father very hard. Freya, on the other hand, was all too silent.

Eric was worried about both of them. They seemed incredibly fragile to him. He did not like how helpless he felt to soothe their hearts in any way. William was very good with Isabella, talking to her, comforting her, and listening to her talk about her father. Eric was so glad of his presence.

“Shall we go?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” Freya replied equally quietly. She looked subdued and demure in her black bombazine gown and lacy veil, nothing like the wild cat she had been in bed last night. If he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes, he wouldn’t have believed it.

He conjectured that she had decided to bury her grief in passion.

They all trooped down towards the carriage, Silver opening the door for them. The old butler looked just about as shattered as Isabella. Eric found that he felt rather sorry for him.

Once they were all seated, the carriage took off. Nobody tried to speak, the only sound being Isabella’s occasional sniffs, her head on William’s shoulder. Freya sat by his side, and he reached out to cover her gloved hands with his own. To his surprise, she turned her hand around so that she could hold his.

Eric said nothing, just stared out the window and dreaded what was to come.



“I bequeath Stark Manor to my grandson whenever he might be born. In the meantime, the property will be run from a trust, overseen by my faithful

servant, Silver, and my solicitor, JB Abrams.”

Freya gasped, mostly in relief. She had been expecting her father to give the Manor away, now that he did not get his way. She held her belly, quite sure that she was carrying the grandson her father had been talking about.

“At such a time as my daughter is with child, the trust will be transferred into her care.”

Freya beamed, but then a thought occurred to her, “But what if it’s a girl?” she asked.

The solicitor seemed nonplussed. “There was no provision made for such an occurrence,” he replied.

“Typical,” Freya murmured under her breath, crossing her arms in annoyance. Eric patted her hand.

“Let him finish,” he whispered.

Easy for you to say; you’ve already received the Duchy and all the lands entailed to it.

She gave him a dark look and settled back to listen to the solicitor. He droned on about several small endowments before announcing that Isabella was to be given the house in Bath as her dowry in addition to ten thousand pounds a year.

Her younger sister just sniffed, seeming unimpressed by her inheritance. William squeezed her shoulder and smiled at her encouragingly.

The solicitor looked up at them all. “And that is all. That is the end of Victor Stark, the Duke of Riverhead’s last will and testament.”

Eric got to his feet and held his hand out to Freya. She took it, allowing him

to help her up. She smiled at him, wondering if she should tell him the news right now. She had been trying to tell him, but what with his distance, and her father dying, it had just never seemed to be the right time.

The solicitor came and took him away wanting him to sign some papers, and Freya let out a disappointed breath.

Not yet, I suppose.

Mrs. Campbell came up to her looking concerned. “Are you well? You look a little peaked.”

Freya gave her a wry look. “And how else should one look during the reading of one’s father’s will?”

Eric’s mother inclined her head to the side, conceding the point. She offered Freya her arm. “Would you like some help back to the carriage?”

Freya obligingly slipped her hand through Mama Campbell’s, and they left the office together. “Would you like to come over and stay at St. John’s Wood tonight?” Mama Campbell asked. “Your townhouse must seem overly large and quiet at the moment.”

Freya took a deep fortifying breath. “It does. Thank you, I would be grateful to get away from there for a while. It seems as if somebody always wants something of me in that house. I need a little peace and quiet.”

Mama Campbell squeezed her hand. “Then I shall make sure you have it.”

They got in the carriage, William and Isabella following behind. They waited for Eric, but his discussions with the solicitor seemed to be going on for some time.

“Shall I go and tell him that we’ve left, and we’ll send the carriage for him later?”

“Yes, do that William,” Mama Campbell said, and the boy immediately took off. She turned to Freya with a smile. “We will go to your house, so you can pack and then send the carriage back for your husband. Afterward, we can all go to Saint John’s Wood together.”

Freya nodded, quite happy with that plan. Then William came running back and reported that Eric had said that they should go ahead, he would find his own way home.

“Oh, well, then tell him to come to St. John’s Wood; that’s where we’ll all be,” Mama Campbell instructed William, whose face lit up at the news. He skipped back into the solicitor’s office, and he was back within minutes.

“I couldn’t go back into the solicitor’s office, but I left a message with his secretary,” he said.

“Good enough. We’ll leave another message at the house in case he doesn’t get that one,” Mama Campbell decided.

Freya was quite content to let Mama Campbell do all the planning. She was wrung out, tired, and happy to relinquish control to someone else. They drove in silence to the house, and then Freya and Isabella went to pack a few clothes. She was curious to visit Eric’s childhood home. Although they had gone for dinner for the wedding, she had been way too angry to notice anything about the place. She put her hand on her belly. “We are off to visit your grandmother’s house,” she said with a soft smile. “I’m glad you have a grandmother —one who is kind and will love you unconditionally.”

A wave of wistfulness overtook her as she wondered how her own mother might have been as a grandmother. *Well...it’s not as if I’ll ever know now.*

Picking up her bag, she left the room, determined to use her time at St. John’s Wood to really rest and recover from everything. There would be time to think about what’s next later.

I do hope that Eric still wants to continue living at Stark Manor. She thought wistfully of her rose garden, the only legacy remaining from her mother. She would do anything to preserve it and leave it to her own children.

William, Mama Campbell, and Isabella were waiting downstairs. She joined them with a smile, and they all took off for the Campbell house. William was chattering excitedly to Isabella about all the things that they could do once they were there.

“I know you’re feeling sad right now, but there are apple trees in bloom, and if we pick some, then Mrs. Burberry will make us apple pies. You like apple pies, don’t you?” he asked earnestly.

She sniffed and nodded. “Mrs. Beecham used to make us those.”

“Well, I can promise you that nobody makes better apple pies than Mrs. Burberry. You’ll enjoy them; you’ll see.”

Isabella sniffed again, seeming to accept William’s word on the matter. She put her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. Freya swallowed the lump in her throat, heartbroken at Isabella’s misery, and knowing there was not much she could do about it. She was so grateful for William. If anyone could cheer Isabella up, it was him. She gave him a grateful look as he continued to point out interesting things along the streets they passed with no expectation that Isabella would respond. Freya closed her own eyes, lulled into peaceful slumber by his steady soothing voice.

Chapter Thirty-Two



Eric came out of the meeting with the solicitor, his head spinning with facts and figures. He had signed so many documents, he felt a cramp in his hand. But now, everything was squared away. He was the new Duke of Riverhead with everything that entailed. It felt strange—he had thought he would be happy, but all he could feel was that distant sort of quiet terror at the amount of responsibility he would take on.

Nevertheless, it was better than the confusion that he felt in regard to Freya. He was out of excuses, but it broke his heart that he could not give her the one thing she had wanted—Stark Manor. The only thing that consoled him was that the language of the will did not specify that he had to be the father of the baby who inherited the mansion. He felt that was an important distinction. Freya still had the opportunity to gain ownership of the property.

But that meant he would have to let her go.

He flagged down a hansom cab. “St. John’s Wood please.”

If he was going to do this thing, it was best to do it quickly. He could already feel his heart breaking, but he was determined to do the honorable thing.

They arrived at the Campbell house, and after he had paid his coachman, he walked slowly inside. He could hear the loud conversation happening in the

direction of the kitchen. If he was not mistaken, his brother was in the process of trying to persuade the cook that apple pie would do quite well for dinner.

Eric smiled shaking his head. He was quite sure Mrs. Burberry could handle William quite well on her own, so he claimed the stairs to his room, wondering if Freya was there or if she chose another chamber.

He found her sleeping in her petticoat, her black bombazine gown discarded on the chair, her veil hanging precariously from the arm. He leaned against the wall, smiling as he looked at her. Even in her exhaustion, she still seemed to be glowing. He crossed over to his drawer, looking for the silver flask of whiskey that he had left there from his last time ashore.

He gave a quiet yell of triumph when he found it, opening it and downing a huge gulp of the liquid. He closed the cap and put it down on the table before turning to look at Freya. Somehow, he was not surprised to see that she was awake and looking at him. He smiled tentatively. "Good afternoon. I see you have made yourself at home."

She sat up; her chestnut hair brushed against her arm. "Why wouldn't I?" Her voice was raspy with sleep.

He shrugged. "I would not have thought you would want to make yourself at home in this place. After all, it is not *your* home."

She frowned. "You are my husband. Your home is mine."

He walked slowly and sat on the bed, looking down at his hands to avoid seeing her eyes. "You do not need to say that," he said quietly. "We once agreed that we would separate once your father died. I have not forgotten."

Her frown deepened. "But... things have changed since then. We have changed."

He snorted derisively. “Have we? Are you saying you want to be married to me now?”

“Yes.”

Eric got to his feet, turning away. “You don’t have to say that. Stark Manor will be yours one day. The will did not specify that you had to have your child with me. You could have a child with just about anybody, and they will be eligible to inherit the home. Of course, I will look after you until you are settled; you need not worry about a thing. I don’t think Silver will stop you from living at Stark Manor.”

There was a loud silence in the room as Eric waited for Freya to say something.

“You...really want me to go?” She sounded broken and disbelieving.

“I think it would be for the best. I spoke with the lawyer, and he can have the separation papers drawn up by tomorrow. By the time your mourning period is over, you will be free.” He moved to the window to look outside because he could not bear to look into her face.

“W-what if I don’t w-want to be free?”

He shook his head. “You are kind Freya. And thoughtful. You deserve everything the world can possibly offer you. I am setting you free so that you can be happy. Please don’t insult my gift with pity.”

He folded his arms, back hunched, as if that might contain the pain he was feeling. He whirled around with resolve. “I shall spend the night in the library. Goodbye, Freya.” He walked out quickly, relieved that she did not say a word.



Freya was glad she had not unpacked her bag. She simply redressed in her mourning gown, fixed her veil on her head, picked up her bag, and left. The sun had long set, and maybe it was a bad idea to travel alone in an unfamiliar part of town by herself, but she needed to get as far away as she could from Eric.

How dare he? After promising never to abandon me, he does it at the drop of a hat when I'm at my most vulnerable?

She did not know if she was heartbroken or enraged. She walked out of the front door without anyone seeing her, going around to the stables and choosing a horse. She was quite sure she could find her way to her father's townhouse from where she was. If not, she could always ask for directions.

She picked a chestnut mare who seemed fairly docile and climbed on her back, tying her bag to the saddle behind her. Spurring on the horse, she took off at a gallop down the tree-lined lane that led to the main road. The streetlamps were spotty at best, and she had to ride for long periods of time in the dark.

If she had not felt so emotionally volatile, she might have turned back. Instead, she spurred her horse on, urging it to go faster, so she could reach somewhere lighted a lot quicker. Her horse was ready to comply and went from a canter to full gallop.

She did not see the puddle of water that someone had flung out of their house and into the street. Her horse lost her footing, slipping in the mud, and the next thing she knew, Freya was flying in the air, and she slammed into the sidewalk. She had no time to feel pain before she blacked out.



Eric woke up to somebody shaking him. He opened his blurry eyes, looking around in confusion. He vaguely remembered drowning in a bottle of

whiskey before blacking out in his study chair. “What’s the matter?” he asked irritably.

“You have to wake up, Eric!” William sounded urgent.

Eric tried his best to open his eyes and straighten up in the chair. “Where’s the fire?”

“You need to come at once. It’s Freya.”

Eric frowned. What could William possibly mean? If Freya was leaving, she had every right to. He had told her to...

“Please you must come. Freya is hurt.”

Suddenly the drunkenness was gone from Eric. “What do you mean? What happened?”

William shrugged. “They brought her in on a stretcher. Lucky they recognized the horse was ours.”

Eric shot to his feet. “What do you mean *brought her in*?”

William shifted impatiently from foot to foot. “Please won’t you come? She needs you.”

Eric realized that he was standing around asking inane questions when Freya was *hurt*. He stumbled around the desk and began to make for the door. “Where is she?”

“They put her in the guest chamber on the ground floor,” William said, hurrying after him. “Mama has called the sawbones. Mrs. Burberry is seeing to her now.”

Eric walked faster. “Do you know what happened to her?”

“It was an accident, they said. She fell off the horse.”

In addition to fear and concern, Eric began to feel guilty. If Freya was out riding a horse, it was probably because he had told her to leave.

Why did I not make sure to take her home myself? What was I thinking?

But he knew what he had been thinking. He had been more concerned with not seeing her leave him forever than making sure she got home safely.

What a useless husband I am. She will be better off when she is rid of me.

He arrived at the door of the guest room to find his mother and the local physician consulting. “What is happening?” he asked.

His mother looked him up and down, seemingly unimpressed with his disheveled appearance. “Mr. Stein has examined your wife. He says she took a bad knock to the head.”

“But never fear,” Mr. Stein broke in, “the baby is quite all right.”

Eric felt the ground shift beneath his feet and had to look down to check that the floor was not moving. “I beg your pardon?” he whispered breathlessly.

“The baby is fine, Your Grace,” Mr. Stein repeated.

There were spots in front of his eyes, and Eric feared that he might just faint. “H-how is she?” he whispered faintly.

“The Duchess?” Mr. Stein asked. Eric found that he really did not like the man.

“Yes, the Duchess. My wife.”

“She is still knocked out. Of course, we have to watch her closely, but for now, we have done what we can for her. We just have to wait for her to wake up— if she does.”

“What do you mean *if*?”

The physician shrugged. “Head wounds are unpredictable. We just cannot be sure of anything. But as far as I can see, she’s doing well. Her color is healthy, and she’s breathing well. She has had no paroxysms. So, I am cautiously optimistic.”

Eric made a frustrated sound and pushed past the physician. He opened the door to the bedroom and rushed inside, coming to an abrupt stop as he caught sight of Freya. He took a deep shuddering breath, noting that Freya was just as pale as the white pillow she lay on. There was a darkening bruise on the side of her head, and one eye was swollen shut. She looked as if she had been beaten up.

Eric made a sound of distress as he went down on his knees by the bed and took hold of her hand. He pressed his face into her hand, trying his best not to burst into tears. He wanted to apologize profusely for how he acted and beg her to be all right, but he was aware of his audience by the door.

He heard the door close and looked around to see that he was alone with Freya.

“Oh my God, why did this happen to you?”

She lay so still that Eric was honestly afraid. He did not want to think that she could die, that she would leave him alone. He put his hands on her belly, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the baby?”

He recalled the last conversation in painful detail, gleaning the answer for himself.

“I understand. If it were I, and you were saying such things while I knew I carried your child, I would have left too. Without a word. How can you ever forgive me? I hope you don’t. I don’t deserve forgiveness.”

He put his head in his hands and let the tears fall. He couldn’t recall any other time in his life when he had felt this miserable. Not even after he woke up and realized that he would live his life in pain and that he looked like a monster.

“Please God, please let her wake up. I will do anything. Just don’t let her die.”

Suddenly the door burst open, and Isabella was there, her face looking stricken and tear-streaked. “Freya!” she cried with despair and fell to her knees.

Eric wanted to tell her to stop being so melodramatic but only because her distress was feeding his. He wanted to roll around on the floor too and scream and cry. But he was a man, so he had to always maintain his composure.

“Isabella,” he said tiredly, “you can stop now. It will do her no good for you to be wailing and gnashing your teeth. We must be strong for her. She needs us now more than ever.”

Isabella instantly fell silent, sniffing loudly as she walked slowly towards the bed, her eyes on her sister. “Where did she go? Why didn’t she tell me she was leaving? What’s going on?”

Eric shook his head. “It’s my fault. I told her we could separate. I assumed that she would stay here until morning and then you would go back to your home. I didn’t expect her to just leave in the middle of the night.”

Isabella was looking at him with horror. “You told her you would separate? But why?”

Eric shook his head slowly. “I thought that was what she wanted,” he whispered in despair.

“Is that what she said? Did you ask her?”

A sob escaped from Eric before he could stop it. He shook his head. “No, I didn’t ask her. I just assumed.” He covered his face with his hand. “She *has* to be all right. I cannot live if she is not all right.”

Isabella went to him and put her hand around his shoulders, squeezing gently. “Hush. It’ll be all right. Freya is a stubborn one. She doesn’t give up easily.”

Eric straightened up. “Well then, neither will I.”

Chapter Thirty-Three



Eric and Isabella took turns sitting with Freya. The physician was not at all surprised when she came down with a fever.

“It is to be expected. She was out in the cold after all. It will be difficult to treat her if she’s out of it, but you must try your best to make her swallow the willow bark tea. Mop her brow with a cloth dipped in lukewarm water and make sure she isn’t either too hot or too cold. Once she is awake, I shall let some blood, but for now, I have done what I can.”

Eric did not like the physician’s words at all. “Is there no way for you to wake her up?”

The physician shook his head. “We have tried smelling salts to no avail. There’s nothing to do but wait. Despite the fever, she’s still doing well. Just do as I have instructed, and everything will be all right.”

The physician walked out, leaving Freya in their care. Eric had made sure to write down everything the physician said so that he wouldn’t forget.



The first thing she heard was soft voices. The cadence of the voices was soothing, and she felt safe, so she allowed herself to sink back into slumber, escaping from the throbbing of her head. The next time she woke up it was quiet aside from a single bird she could hear singing somewhere close by.

Am I outside? she wondered, but before she could get her bearings, she was drifting off to sleep again.

The third time she woke up, she was completely alert and remembered everything that had happened to her. She knew she was lying on a soft surface, comfortable and a little too warm. She opened her eyes slowly wondering where she was. She looked around at the unfamiliar room trying to orient herself, but she was quite sure she had never been here before.

The door opened, and Isabella came in clutching a tray. Her eyes fell on Freya and widened. She screamed and dropped to the tray, clutching her own face in stupefaction. “You’re awake!” she cried. “She’s awake. She’s awake. She’s awake,” she screamed out of the corridor.

Freya frowned in protest at the noise. It made her head pound, and she did not like it. “Hush! Quiet,” she tried to say.

“Oh! Sorry!” Isabella stumbled forward clumsily, tripping over the tray she had dropped, almost landing on Freya. “Sorry. Sorry,” she mumbled, her cheeks red. She didn’t have time to be more embarrassed because the room was suddenly full of people.

First Mama Campbell rushed in, wiping her hands on her apron, then William, who seemed confused as to what to do. Finally, Eric walked in, looking disheveled and disoriented as if he’d just woken from a nap. He smiled tentatively at her.

“Well, look at you,” he said quietly. “How are you feeling?”

Freya blinked a few times, trying to orient herself. Finally, she shook her

head, looking around. “Where am I?”

There was a general burst of laughter in the room — it may have sounded a little manic and relieved, but it was real. Mama Campbell stepped forward, smiling. “You’re at St. John’s Wood. In the guest chambers — only because they’re the only ones on the ground floor. The physician recommended you not be moved.”

“Oh,” Freya said quietly, concluding that that was why they had not just taken her back to the Stark townhouse and left her there. “Well, I’m sorry for the inconvenience,” she mumbled.

Mrs. Campbell hastened forward, clutching her arm. “Don’t be silly. Of course, there was no inconvenience. We are all just so relieved to see you awake.”

Her eyes drifted to Eric. The details about what happened to her after she left the house might be hazy, but she did remember all of his words. He stepped forward, their gazes locked.

“If you will excuse us for just a moment,” he said to the rest of the room, “I would like some time with my wife.”

Freya’s heartbeat sped up. She wanted to protest. She wasn’t ready to hear whatever it was he had to say. His last speech had been bad enough. Everyone else filed out of the room, and she was left alone with him.

He came up to the bed, his eyes liquid with emotion. “Freya...” he began and then swallowed hard.

Freya stared up at him, braced for more bad news.

“I am sorry.”

She froze in surprise. “Sorry?”

“Yes. I should not have said those things to you. I was a fool. A fool who made assumptions and acted on them.”

She frowned in puzzlement. “What assumptions?”

His head dipped; cheeks stained red with what looked like embarrassment. “I assumed that you did not want me. That you would stay married to me from pity — and I couldn’t stand that. I was resolved to let you go, regardless of how I felt about it. But I realize now that deciding for you what you felt was wrong. So, I am sorry.”

Freya blinked at him, nonplussed. “Is that so? So, when you said that I should go and have a child with someone else, you did not mean it?”

“God, no! The thought of you with another man makes me want to tear this world apart — to tear that hypothetical man apart.”

Freya sighed softly. “So then why did you tell me to do it?”

“I know how much you wanted to keep the house. I thought it might be a solution.”

“So why not offer to give me a child yourself?”

Eric just lowered his head further.

“Oh Eric,” Freya said in realization before she reached up and cupped his scarred cheek. “Even now?”

He gave a shuddering breath. “I suppose I didn’t understand how much I let my scar take over my identity. It’s all I saw. All I thought I was. And this scar certainly was unworthy of you.”

“You’re so silly,” she said fondly.

He smiled tentatively. "I concede that point."

She let her hand trail down his shoulder and down his arm until she was palm-to-palm with him. He closed his finger around her hand and squeezed tight.

"Thank you," he said.

"For what?"

"Forgiving my silliness."

She gave him a mock frown. "Who said I forgave you?"



After a thorough examination, the physician declared that Freya was through the worst of her ordeal but was in no way better. "She will require plenty of bed rest and healing tisanes. I have already given your housekeeper a few recipes to try."

Eric folded his arms and planted his legs as they stood just outside the guest chambers where Freya was currently sleeping.

"Can she be moved to her bedchambers?"

"Of course. Once she has rested, you will even be able to travel if you so wish. I'm sure the country air will do her nothing but good, Your Grace."

Eric nodded. "That is a relief. Are you saying you won't have to oversee her care for the next nine months?"

The physician hesitated as if thinking about it. Eric gave him a cynical glance

and waited to hear what he would say.

“I would certainly recommend that she be under a physician’s care for the remainder of her pregnancy whether you choose to stay here or go to the country.”

“And you’re sure the journey will not be too arduous?”

“I assume that your carriage will be luxuriant, and I recommend frequent stops for rest. Should those conditions be met, I see no reason why she cannot travel in a day or two.”

Eric smiled and nodded, appreciating the man’s honesty. “Very well. I shall consult with the Duchess, and we will decide how to proceed. Your care of her is much appreciated,” Eric said as he handed the physician a pouch of money.

Mr. Stein sketched a quick bow and turned to leave just as Mrs. Burberry approached with a tray. “I have some soup for Her Grace,” she announced.

Eric stood aside and opened the door for her, inviting her in. “I shall leave you to it then.”

Mrs. Burberry was a very no-nonsense woman, and she would not tolerate anything less than Freya finishing every bit of soup, regardless of her appetite. This contrasted sharply with when either Eric or Isabella tried to feed her. Freya would frown and push away the bowl and refuse to eat. Mrs. Burberry did not tolerate that.

He felt a frisson of guilt as he crept away from the door but told himself that it was for her own good. Now that the doctor had given them carte blanche, he decided to go and talk to Silver, to see whether they would be allowed to stay at Stark Manor until the birth.

He wanted Freya to be somewhere where she felt at peace so that her

pregnancy could be as problem-free as possible. He ran into his mother in the corridor as he was getting his coat. “Mama, just the person I need to see. I am thinking of moving us all to the country just as soon as Freya can travel. I do hope you can come with us.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Campbell frowned, “but is it wise to move her in her condition?”

“The physician says it’s all right as long as she rests for a day or two. I am off to consult with Silver, and if he agrees, I thought we could leave by the end of the week. That will give us both enough time to tie up matters that need to be taken care of immediately before we move. Of course, you are free to come and go as you please, but I would like us to be together as a family, at least until things settle down completely.”

His mother gave him a wry smile. “Things rarely settle down completely. But never fear, I take your meaning. And I do understand why you prefer the peace of the country, rather than staying in town, despite the presence of more advanced medical care.”

“Mrs. Beecham is just as capable as Mrs. Burberry. I feel certain she will be able to keep Freya supplied with all the tisanes that Mrs. Burberry has been giving her.”

“I agree. I found her to be very knowledgeable when I was there.” She patted Eric on the shoulder. “Go about your business. I shall prepare the house for departure.”

Eric nodded, kissed her on the cheek, and left.



The nausea was a constant companion, almost debilitating in its ubiquity. Freya knew that Eric thought she was refusing to eat out of some childish

whim, but the truth was that the smell of most foods had her gagging. She did not want to cast up her accounts in front of him, so she simply refused to eat and turned away. It was the same with Isabella, only that she did not want to scare her younger sister, who seemed to always be at a low level of terror at the thought of losing anyone else. With Mrs. Burberry, she did not have to pretend, and the housekeeper had no qualms about her halting the meal in the middle to vomit into the chamber pot before finishing the rest of the soup with gusto.

She still experienced headaches as she could not keep the willow bark tea down, so she appreciated the cooling cloths Mrs. Burberry brought her and put over her eyes.

She found that she was sleeping a lot, which provided relief from the nausea, so she was grateful for it. She was also grateful that nobody bothered her about how much she slept though William or Isabella would sometimes just come and sit with her as she slumbered to keep her company.

But even though she slept, her mind was churning. She felt the need for her and Eric to really talk to each other. Just because he had admitted to making hasty decisions before did not mean that all their problems were solved. She felt sure that if they did not resolve their issues, they would keep coming up over and over again.

These thoughts kept her from really resting.

She decided that as soon as Eric came back, she would insist on having a conversation— a real one. She leaned to the side, picking up the book that was laid upside down on the bedside table. The story of Count Dracula— she hoped it would lull her to sleep if she read a few pages.

A few minutes later, she was completely absorbed in the story, and all thoughts of sleep had left her. She did not mind, after all, as long as she was lying down, she was resting, presumably.



Eric rang the bell at the Stark townhouse and waited. He was surprised when Silver was the one who opened the door. He stared with puzzlement at the butler as he stepped into the foyer. “I would have thought you would resign from your butler duties now that you have been promoted.”

He smiled slightly. “This *is* my duty — to look after the master’s legacy.”

Eric nodded in understanding. “I see. Well, is there somewhere where we can talk? We have some affairs to discuss.”

“Do we, Your Grace?”

“Indeed, we do. Shall we go to the study?”

He hesitated a moment before nodding. “Of course, Your Grace.”

Eric was wary of the formality with which Silver insisted on addressing him, but he had no choice but to go along with it. They went to the study, and then Eric turned to face Silver. “I do not know if you’ve heard, but Freya is with child.”

Silver’s face brightened from its previously wary mien. “Is that so? What happy news.”

“Indeed. So, we were thinking of going to live at Stark Manor for the rest of the pregnancy if you, as the trustee, have no objection.”

“Of course, I do not. The conditions were I would remain trustee until Lady Freya was with child. If she is with child, then it passes to her.”

“You have no idea if she carries a male child or not?”

“That is true. Nevertheless, you are free to use the property pending the birth of the child,” Silver said.

“And you do not have to consult your other trustee?”

“Mr. Freeman trusts my judgment as the late Duke did.”

“Very well then. I thank you for the indulgence.”

“It is my pleasure, believe me.”

If Silver were the kind of person to be overly demonstrative in his emotions, Eric would have said he was beaming. He nodded to the butler and stood up to leave.

“Give my best regards to the family,” he called, and Eric nodded to show he had heard. He was a bit nonplussed at Silver’s change of attitude but decided to chalk it up to finally having gotten his and the Duke’s way.

After all, an heir was all they had wanted.

He decided not to press his luck but left right away. At least he had some good news to share with Freya. He’d been avoiding being alone with her, afraid that he might have to disappoint her again. But now that Silver was on board with their plan, he felt lighter than he had in days.

He could not wait to see Freya’s face when he told her they were free to go and live at Stark Manor.



Freya frowned at him, unsure as to why he seemed so excited about plans they’d made days ago. “Yes, that is indeed wonderful that we will be able to go to Stark Manor. Were you afraid that I wouldn’t be able to travel?”

He sighed and then smiled wryly, "I suppose it did not occur to you that the trustees might bar us from living there per your father's will."

Dawning realization had her feeling faint. "Could they have done that?" Freya could not believe it had not occurred to her before. After all, the proviso was that she bore a male child. "Oh dear, what if the babe is a girl?"

Eric looked as if he'd already thought of all these eventualities and was just waiting for her to catch up. "Should we wait and see?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Why should we? If the trustees have agreed, the onus is not on us to refuse."

She bit her lip thoughtfully as she mulled over his words. "But what if they evict us should we have a girl? What shall we do then?"

"We shall move to one of the other properties at our disposal." He gave her a sympathetic look. "And there is no restriction that says you cannot visit your garden at any time," he added softly.

Her heart melted as she gazed at him. "You are kind to think of me like this, but never fear, I shall be all right either way. My mother lives on in me. I understand that now. The garden is a pleasant reminder of our bond, but the bond exists regardless."

"Indeed." He nodded. "You are wise, my dear."

"And you are earnest." She reached for him. "Come sit with me and let us just be quiet together for a while. I feel as if I have not seen you for so long."

He went to her, sitting on the side of her bed, a guilty look on his face. "Perhaps I have been preoccupied as well. It's been a busy time, resolving all the affairs I now oversee."

He turned to her with a smile. "Being a Duke isn't all just allowing others to

bow and scrape for your favor.”

Freya laughed, quirking an eyebrow archly. “Is it not? I have been sadly mistaken all these years.”

“Yes indeed. There are a vast number of properties to familiarize myself with. I doubt even you know about all of them.”

She considered him seriously. “It must be intimidating.”

“It is certainly more responsibility than I’ve ever had.” He returned her look. “But I think I am up to it...with your help.”

Her heart leaped with gladness at his words. “Of course, I am at your service.”

He reached out and rubbed her belly. “Once you feel better, of course. Your health is the foremost concern in my mind at the moment.”

“Why is that?” she asked coquettishly.

“Because...in case you had not realized, I love you.”

She gasped as everything went a little hazy at his words. “You mean it?” she whispered breathlessly.

He nodded. “I do. You do not have to say it back or even feel it, I just —” She put her finger over his lips to shut him up.

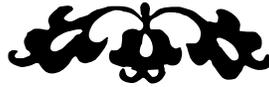
“I love you too. I think I even said so once in the throes of passion.”

“Ah, when I am making you feel good is not the best time to tell me such a thing. I will assume it is gratitude for my actions.”

“Very well then, Eric Campbell, I love thee; does thy heart hear my words now?”

Eric beamed. “Loud and clear.”

Chapter Thirty-Four



Freya sat on one of the trunks as they waited for the carriages to arrive. William and Isabella chased each other in the yard. Eric regretted that soon, Isabella would be forced to behave with more decorum and would be constrained from running around carefree and joyous.

She does not have to come out until she's twenty-one.

He shook his head at the thought. Isabella also deserved the right to find a husband, despite how much of a child she still seemed to Eric. He glanced at Freya, who sat hunched over, huddled in her shawl. It had started to drizzle lightly, and there was a cold wind blowing.

He made his way over to her, his brow furrowed with concern. "Are you cold? Do you need a blanket?"

She smiled wanly. "I'm fine. Just a little headache."

He bent down in concern. "Do you want to go and lie down? We can wait to set off if you do."

She reached out to him, her hand pale and thin-looking. She tried to squeeze his hand, but her strength was minimal. It worried Eric even more. "I'm fine," she said.

He watched her, shaking his head. “Freya, darling, I know you are trying to reassure me, but please, don’t lie. It makes me even more afraid for you.”

She met his eyes, trying to perk up. “All right then, my head is pounding, and I feel dizzy. I’m hungry, but I don’t want to eat lest I feel like casting up my accounts especially since we are traveling. So instead, I contend with lightheadedness. Are you happy now?”

Eric sighed. “Why would any of that make me happy? Tell me, what can I do to make it better?”

She ran a soft hand down his face. “Just seeing your concern is a balm to my spirit. I shall be all right.”

“Fine, but I’m off to consult with Mrs. Burberry. Perhaps she has a solution.”

She nodded weakly, and Eric walked off quickly. Everyone in the kitchen stopped what they were doing as soon as he walked in, and he realized he hadn’t been there since he used to steal hot cross buns. He cleared his throat in some embarrassment before catching Mrs. Burberry’s eye. She put down the bread she was kneading and came up to him. “Your Grace, may I help you with something?”

“Yes. My wife needs something to calm her belly. We will be starting out soon, and she hasn’t eaten because of nausea.”

Mrs. Burberry’s brow furrowed. “Let me think.”

Eric waited patiently as she muttered to herself.

“Well, I think some dry toast would do wonders to settle her stomach, followed by some ginger tea. Excuse me while I prepare some for her.”

Eric nodded. “Thank you.”

“Yes, I shall also pack some buttered bread for later should she begin to feel hungry, and I think some sliced cucumber should be all right. She must eat just a little at a time. And if she should feel sick, you must stop and let her rest by the side of the road for a few minutes.”

Eric nodded along, having already heard most of this from the physician. He had designated five days for a journey that might be completed in one on a fast horse. He was in no hurry and intended to treat Freya with kid gloves.

He went back to Freya, who was still huddled in her shawl but was now on her feet as several footmen loaded the carriages with luggage. He cupped her elbow gently and bent to whisper in her ear. “Come into the dining room a moment. Mrs. Burberry has something for you.”

“But...we’ll be late starting out.”

Eric looked eloquently at William and Isabella, still chasing each other about, and his mother was nowhere to be seen. “Nobody else seems anxious to leave right this minute. Come, it takes two hours to get to our first stop for the night, and it's barely noon now. We have time.”

“Are you sure?” she asked with a frown.

“Yes, please come with me.”

He led her firmly but gently toward the dining room and presented her with a plate of dried toast and a cup of ginger tea. Beside her food was a large bowl. Freya pointed at it. “What’s this for?”

“Oh, that is in case you feel nauseous.” Mrs. Burberry stepped forward, and that was when Eric noticed she was there.

Freya blushed with embarrassment, giving Eric a sidelong glance. “Would you like me to leave?” he asked immediately though it pained him.

Slowly, reluctantly, she shook her head and then laughed softly. “I’m being silly. I suppose I did not want you to see me like that.”

“Like what? Sharing your body with my child? I cannot imagine anything more beautiful.”

She snorted derisively. “It can get quite messy, I do assure you.”

“I am no stranger to messy things.” He touched the scar on his face. “I do assure you.”

The smile fell off her face, and she put her hand on top of his. “I apologize. I must seem so shallow to you.”

“Nonsense. We are both novices at this. We are feeling our way along in the dark. We must give ourselves and each other enough grace to make mistakes.”

She beamed at him. “You’re right. Please sit with me. Eat with me. Tell me something about you. Tell me of your time in the navy.”

Eric sat down with a sigh, casting about in his mind for any story that might not end gruesomely. He hoped to find something entertaining so that she could forget her discomfort.

“Oh! I have just the story. When I was just a new recruit...”



Freya fidgeted in her seat, feeling a sharp pain in the small of her back. It had been growing steadily for what felt like the last hour, but she hadn’t wanted to say anything. Eric had said that the stop was two hours away; surely, it could not be that far. She tried to focus on her book, but Dracula still was not commanding her attention.

Opposite her, Mama Campbell was knitting something. She seemed very focused on her task, and Freya did not want to disturb her. Eric had opted to ride a horse to give her more room should she need it, but she did not think that lying down would help.

“Is anything the matter?” Mrs. Campbell asked without looking up from her knitting.

Freya jumped. “I...well, I suppose I’m a little stiff and sore.”

Mrs. Campbell grabbed her stick and hit the roof of the carriage.

“Yes ma’am?” the coachman called.

“We need to stop!” she said.

“Oh no, no, no, Mama. I’m fine —”

“Well, *I* am not. I need to stretch out. I trust you’ll join me?”

Freya found that she was close to tears. Everyone was just so considerate it was making her emotional. The carriage stopped, and she and her mother-in-law stepped out. Mama Campbell took her hand, and they strolled in the tall grass for some way before stopping to relieve themselves.

“Better?” Mama Campbell asked.

Freya nodded. “Yes. Thank you.”

They strolled back to find Eric waiting anxiously. “Everything all right?”

“Yes, just stretching our legs. We’re fine.”

Eric reached out a hand to help them up the embankment and escorted them

back to the carriage. The smaller carriage containing William, Isabella, and the lady's maids had also come to a stop. Isabella came up to them. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes. Yes." Freya reached out and squeezed her hand. "Let us get back on the road. I cannot wait to reach the inn and lie down."

"Are you tired?" Eric asked, looking around anxiously. "Perhaps we can find somewhere closer to stop."

"No, it's fine. Let us keep to our itinerary."

She climbed into the carriage and collapsed onto the seat, eyes closed. Isabella climbed in, and Mama Campbell went to sit with William in the other carriage. To Freya's surprise, Eric also climbed into the carriage and sat opposite Freya. He held out his hands. "Give me your feet."

Freya's eyes widened. "I beg your pardon?"

"Give me your feet."

Slowly, uncertainly, she raised one foot and handed it to him. He grabbed her boot and began to undo the laces as she watched, nonplussed. He put her stockinged foot on his thigh and then gestured for the other. She lifted her other foot, and he gave it the same treatment. Then he took hold of her first foot and began to massage it. With a sigh, she leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes.

She was surprised at how pleasurable it felt as he dug into her flesh, squeezing and kneading. She was enjoying herself so much that she almost moaned out loud. He seemed to pay minute attention to every inch of her foot and each touch sent tendrils of feeling up her legs before fanning out to every nerve in her body.

She arched her back, pursing her lips so as not to let out a sound.

“It feels good, does it not?” he asked softly.

“Ooh,” she groaned in reply. Her back pain was slowly dissipating.

He dropped his hand up her leg under her skirt and then back down to circle her ankle, squeezing it gently. She hummed in contentment, her head thrown back, eyes closed, she smiled.

“You look as placid as the Madonna, my darling mother-to-be,” he murmured softly.

Freya’s smile widened, but she didn’t say a word. She was too busy enjoying the massage. The carriage jerked as the wheels went over a pothole, and she was flung to the side. Her eyes flew open, and she threw her hands out to break her fall, but Eric was already there to catch her. His arms were tight around her waist, and he pulled her towards himself, depositing her in his lap.

“I think this is the safest place for you,” he whispered in her ear.

She giggled. “Yes, it seems roads have no love for me these days. I cannot travel on one without getting hurt.”

“I’m sorry, but I feel it’s too soon to be joking about that. At least, let your head injury heal completely.”

She laid her cheek against his. “Poor dear. Are you very worried about me?”

“How could I not be? Look how accident-prone you are.”

She put her hands around his neck. “Perish the thought. Just because I fell off a horse one time does not mean that I am accident-prone.”

“And what of just now? When you almost fell out of the door?”

“I did not!” she protested.

“Oh? And what would you call it? Because I saw you almost flying. Had I not been fast enough to catch you, you would have landed in the middle of the field.”

She threw her head back and shouted with laughter. “You are so dramatic. You have missed your calling Sir. You should have tried out for Drury Lane instead of the Navy.”

Eric was grinning from ear to ear. “Tuh. And who says I can’t do both?”

Freya smiled into his eyes. “Well, if you’re intending to start a new career, you are headed in the wrong direction. We are leaving London behind us.”

“Yes well...” he rubbed her belly, “there are things more important than my career afoot. I do not want to miss a second of them.”

Freya’s cheeks hurt from how hard she was smiling. She leaned in and put her forehead against Eric’s, her gaze meeting his from beneath her lashes. She pushed in slowly until their lips were touching. He slanted his mouth over hers, his tongue sliding across her lips, seeking entrance into her mouth. She patted her lips and let him in, and they kissed softly yet intently for an interminable time.

Freya enjoyed the taste of him, the cinnamon from his morning bun mingling with the taste of ginger on her tongue. She expected to feel some nausea, but all she felt was a deep need for him. He had not touched her in a romantic way since his confession, and she was eager to consummate their union, *knowing* that it was one of love.

She pulled back to look into his eyes. “I’ve missed you,” she whispered softly.

He nodded. “I’ve missed you too. I cannot wait to get you alone behind a

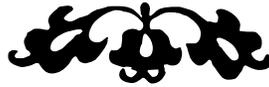
closed door.”

Her arms tightened around his neck, and she whispered his name softly. He wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her close and tight against him.

“Surely you lied Eric. If this inn was two hours away, shouldn’t we have been there by now?”

He laughed. “Patience my love. I promise I will give you everything you need.”

Chapter Thirty-Five



Eric was hard-pressed to hide his arousal when they arrived at the inn. He was grateful for his large coat which hid the evidence from curious eyes. He helped Freya from the carriage and walked her into the inn where the innkeeper himself was waiting to greet them. He had sent word ahead they would be arriving and would require a room immediately for his delicate wife.

The innkeeper led them at once up the stairs and down a long corridor to the room at the end. “I made sure to lay down a feather mattress,” he said earnestly. “You should sleep comfortably tonight.”

Eric reached into his pocket and removed the pouch, handing it to the innkeeper. “Thank you. We shall require hot water and some tea to be brought up. Please see to my mother, my brother, and my sister-in-law. I expect their accommodations will be just as comfortable.”

“Indeed, Sir. I have put your mother and your sister-in-law in one room and your brother in the adjoining room.”

“Very good man. The maids may have a room to themselves as well.”

“Yes, we have accommodations for them in the attic.”

Eric nodded in dismissal. “Well, thank you for your service.”

The innkeeper bowed. “Your Graces,” he murmured before leaving.

Eric turned to Freya with a sigh of relief. “I thought he would never leave.”

Freya giggled. “How could he when you kept talking to him?”

“I did not! He simply insisted on telling me every little detail. In any case,” he took a step towards her, wrapping his arms around her waist and squeezing her rear, “where were we?”

She sighed, putting her arms around his neck, she grinned coquettishly. “Well, you did say something about giving me a massage once we were here.”

He hummed, giving her a mock frown. “Did I?” he asked, rubbing her hand up and down her back as he pretended to think about it. “I don’t recall.”

She pulled away from him and went to lie down on the bed, supporting her head on her palm. “I do assure you, you did.”

He gave a sigh. “Very well then. Allow me to divest you of your gown so that I may better knead your muscles.”

She grinned. “I am at your disposal. Do with me what you will.”

Eric rolled her over and began to unbutton her gown. He pulled it off her shoulders before pushing it down to her legs and off her body, leaving her with just a petticoat.

He discarded the clothes and then climbed onto the bed like a tiger stalking its prey. He straddled her thighs, looking down at her as if she were a buffet, and he was starving but didn’t know where to start.

He put his hands around her neck, slowly kneading the stiffness from her muscles. She closed her eyes, moaning in pleasure. “That feels wonderful.”

“I’m glad.” He rubbed her neck vigorously. “Your muscles are very stiff around here.”

“Yes,” she said with a sigh. “I do not enjoy sitting in a carriage for hours.”

He ran his hand down her thigh to her ankle and picked it up. “Yes, I see how swollen your feet are. Never fear, by the time I am done, you will feel much more relaxed.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

He focused on her neck, looking for all the knots and doing his best to loosen them. He reveled in touching her skin, so smooth and goose-down soft beneath his fingers. He loved how she yielded to him, letting him mold her body to his heart’s delight, and encouraging him with moans of pleasure.

“I have a question,” she said.

“Please,” he breathed, “go ahead and ask.”

She took a deep breath. “I hope you don’t take this askance, but I feel that we should discuss it.”

“I am at your service, Your Grace.”

“You said to me that you were ready to separate from me because you did not feel worthy to be with me because of your scar. I know we spoke of it, but I have to admit to having a fear in my heart that something else might happen, and you will decide that because of your scar, you need to leave me again. And now, we have a child, or we will, God willing, and I need some peace of mind. I know it’s not fair to ask for a guarantee, but I suppose I need to know your thoughts on this matter.”

Eric stopped kneading her back and sat back on his haunches. “Well, well, well, when you decide to ask a question, you do not hold back.”

She laughed nervously. “Do you mind? Is it too much?”

He resumed massaging her back. “Of course not. And that is a fair question. I am the cause of your insecurity, so I’m glad you asked me.”

“Well then, would you please answer?”

He laughed, softly shaking his head. “So impatient. In any case, I want you to realize something. Even as I walked out of the room after I had told you that we would separate, I regretted it right away. But I was too much of a coward to turn around and tell you that I had changed my mind. Instead, I went and buried myself in a bottle. I didn’t even realize that you had left until my brother came to tell me that you had been hurt.” He stopped massaging with a sigh, putting his hands on his knees. “I had ample time sitting by your bed waiting for you to wake up to replay my actions over and over again with deep and unending regret. I realized that my own insecurities had almost caused me to lose you. And at that point, it was touch and go — I truly did not know if you would live or die.”

Freya reached back searching for his hand, so she could squeeze it. He got hold of her fingers and laced his own with them, holding on tight.

“It made me see the error of my ways. What is this thing on my face? Just the spoil of war. People look at it because it’s unusual; they don’t know what to make of it or me. But that has nothing to do with *me*. I realize that now. I realized that there are more important things than a beautiful body.”

“You *have* a beautiful body and a lovely spirit,” Freya insisted.

Eric smiled. “As long as *you* think so, that is all that matters to me.” He inclined his head to the side. “Do you have any further questions for me?”

Freya turned her head to smile sheepishly at him. “Actually, I do. I hope you don’t mind.”

Eric stopped straddling her so as to be able to turn her over. He pushed her up on the bed a little so that her head was at a steeper incline than before, before picking up her foot and beginning to massage it. “Ask your questions, my dear.”

She spent some time expressing her pleasure at his technique before getting down to business. “I know you’re worried that I shall have a girl child and thus lose Stark Manor. I feel strongly that you are ready to take that as a personal failure.”

Eric quirked an eyebrow. “Is there a question somewhere in there?”

She huffed. “I know that I have expressed my attachment to the rose garden, and that it would be a personal loss for me should we be forced to live elsewhere. No one blamed me for being worried, but I just wanted to bring up the fact that we are having a family of our own. My attachment to the rose garden stemmed from a deep loneliness and the feeling that it was an embodiment of my mother’s love. But having gone through the prospect of being without you and then discovering that what I felt for you, and you felt for me too, cemented in this child that we are having together, I realized that love is more than some roses. Whether we lived at Stark Manor or not, my mother loved me. Besides, we can always uproot the roses and take them with us.”

Eric put down one foot and picked up the other. “That’s a relief to hear, to be honest. You’re right, it *has* been weighing on my mind, and I just so want this for you. I hate that your father imposed these conditions. I cannot imagine doing such a thing to my own children. But you’re right— the garden can be uprooted, and your mother’s love is in your heart. I will still continue to try and do everything possible to make sure you can keep Stark Manor, but I promise you that it won’t be at the expense of this new family that we are building.”

He ran his hands up and down her legs, pressing down hard to get the muscles to smoothen it out before cupping her thighs in his hands, rubbing gentle circles up and down as she widened her legs for him, breathing hard, her eyes going dark with desire.

“Are you just going to rub my flesh, or do you plan to do more?” she asked breathlessly.

He smirked. “Is this your next question, or have you been sidetracked?”

She inclined her head thoughtfully to the side. “Hmm, I’m not sure. Perhaps you should answer it while I think about it.”

“I told you...” he lifted her foot and nipped her toe, “at the beginning of this session,” he kissed her heel, “that I would leave you completely relaxed and satisfied.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Oh... so many promises.”

“Have I failed you yet?”

She pursed her lips, mock thinking about it. “No, not yet. Continue.”

He licked her heel and then licked a stripe up her inner leg to her knee. He whirled his tongue in circles against that sensitive flesh, making her cry out and moan.

“Any more questions?” he murmured against her skin.

“Er...” Freya’s mouth stayed open as she panted, his tongue working hard to rouse nerves she didn’t even know she had.

“Eric,” she moaned his name like a prayer.

He kissed the back of her knee, running his fingers along her thighs to tickle her. She squirmed but didn't try too hard to get away from him. "Stop," she giggled.

He kissed down along her thighs until he came to her groin. Lifting his eyes, he met hers, he flicked out his tongue to taste her juices. She gasped, her hips jerking. "Ohh." She breathed as he used his tongue to set her alight.

"You like that?" he whispered as he pursed his lips and suckled at her sensitive nub, pulling more wetness from her.

She arched her back. "Oh God, yes."

His finger joined his tongue, stimulating her almost beyond her ability to withstand it. "Actually, I...have...one...more question."

"Ask...me." He slurped loudly, licking and kissing her most sensitive parts.

"You...made love to me...passionately...once in your...ah!" Her back surged off the bed as his tongue hit a particularly sensitive spot. She shook and shuddered, panting hard.

"In my?" he prompted.

"Your...your...office. But after...." Her brow furrowed in remembrance.

Eric sat up with a sigh. "Yes, I...well, I completely surrendered to passion that day, and I did not treat you like the lady you are. I've been meaning to apologize."

"Apologize? Why? That was...that was..."

"Terrible, I am aware."

“No! It was absolutely mind-blowing. I was flabbergasted in the best way possible.”

Eric blinked at her in what seemed like extreme shock. “What? You liked it?”

“That is an understatement if I have ever heard one.”

He froze just gaping at her as if completely gobsmacked. “But....?”

She gave him a disappointed sigh, “Now Eric, what did we say just a few minutes ago about *assuming*?”

He swallowed hard, his eyes thoughtful. “Are you sure?”

She laughed. “I have never been so sure of anything in my entire life.”

Suddenly, something in his eyes changed, and he dived for her. She squealed as he began to kiss her randomly all over her belly and chest, his hands roaming her body as if mapping her. She squirmed beneath him but made no effort to get away as his teeth closed together on the skin of her neck, and he bit down then blew on her skin to soothe it. His lips smashed down on hers, and they kissed frantically as his body wiggled between her legs, widening them to accommodate him.

She wrapped her legs around his waist as he surged into her urgently, his arms reaching back to grasp her legs and lift them high over his shoulders.

He held nothing back.

Her cries of ecstasy were loud, and she had just enough presence of mind to hope that no one could hear them outside their room. His hips stuttered and jerked as he worked on her, his face straining and flushed with effort.

“Oh, God, Freya.” His pants of effort and groans of pleasure got louder and louder, almost drowning her out.

All the pain and discomfort she'd been feeling for days just disappeared as her body became a heated, sweating receptacle for bliss. She did not want it to end, but already, she could feel her orgasm bearing down on her like a predator looking to take down its prey.

"Eric," she cried, grabbing his neck as she arched her own, breathing loud and groaning as her body was overrun, a wave of sensual satisfaction so deep and intense that she was almost drowning in it. His back arched in a rictus of effort, and then he was emptying himself into her with a long loud groan.

They collapsed onto the bed in throbbing, panting satisfaction, both breathing hard and glistening with sweat. Freya turned onto her side, so she was facing Eric. "I do hope you aren't too mortified by our passion," she said, running her finger along his scar.

He laughed, shaking his head. "You are incorrigible, my dear."

She leaned in to kiss his cheek. "But you love me anyway."

He stopped laughing, and his panting finally slowed down. "Yes," he said quietly, "I do."

Epilogue

Much as she tried not to complain, it was obvious that having to stay put was taking its toll on Freya. There were only so many books she could read, especially since her focus was shot. Her rose garden certainly gave her some peace and quiet, but without free movement, it became just another prison.

Eric walked into the drawing room where Freya was lounging on the chaise and sighing with boredom. “Quarter Day is coming up, and I was thinking that as a celebration we might hold a gathering. Isabella and William have been undertaking some theatre studies, and I thought perhaps they could put up a production of Dracula,” he suggested, “so that you might finally find out the end to that story.”

Freya snorted, “And they have agreed to this foolery?”

“They are very enthusiastic. They are talking about involving the entire village. I thought you might invite a noble or two from neighboring counties as well as any friends that you might want to come. From London perhaps?”

Freya’s brow furrowed as she thought about it. She shook her head, sliding him aside long glance. “I do not want to cause you any discomfort.”

He frowned in puzzlement. “What do you mean by that?”

She looked away staring outside the window. “Last time that we were in

company, we did not fare very well. There is no guarantee that people will behave better this time around.”

The frown slowly cleared from his brow as he realized what she was asking, and he walked slowly to sit by her side and took her hand in his, playing with her fingers as he examined her hand closely, avoiding her eye. “I almost lost you because of my self-absorption. I told you before, I'm not making that mistake again. They can mock me as much as they like; I am a happy man whose only goal is to make his wife happy.”

She considered him closely for several minutes before the smile bloomed on her face. “In that case, I would love it if we were to host a theater night. Please invite your friends from the Navy, and I shall write to my mother’s cousins. They live in Mayberry, and my father cut off all contact with them after she died. I miss them and would like to see them.”

He spread his hands out. “By all means, write to all your mother’s relatives. Let them all converge here. I am sure it will do your heart good. The only thing I ask is that you allow for any festivities to take place around you without you moving too much.”

She leaned in and planted a kiss on his lips, a wide smile on her face. “I promise.”

Eric’s heart was glad to see the excitement back in her eyes, and he hastened to begin making arrangements. He called Isabella and William to his study. They came in looking confused, never having been summoned before.

He gestured to the chairs on the other side of his desk. “Take a seat please.”

They both sat, their faces somber and filled with trepidation.

“What’s wrong?” Isabella asked straight away. “Is it Freya?”

Eric shook his head. “Nothing is wrong. Well... nothing else. I’m sure you

both noticed how listless Freya has been lately. I have had an idea to brighten her mood, and she is very enthusiastic about it. I proposed that we put on a play— Dracula, in fact.”

Isabella giggled, and Eric nodded to her in acknowledgment. “Yes, I thought it was amusing as well. Now, I know you have been studying theatre with Mrs. Beecham, going so far as to attend the Chapel plays, so I feel confident in asking you both to take charge of producing this play.”

There was an immediate eruption of excited noise, both Isabella and William talking over each other as they discussed the details of how they could bring this about. Eric held up his hand in an effort to forestall their enthusiastic suggestions. “I shall leave the details up to you. All I ask is that you make it as entertaining as you possibly can. Make Freya happy.”

William shot to his feet and made a salute. “Aye, sir. We shall not let you down,” he said in all seriousness before grabbing Isabella’s hand and dragging her out of the room, pontificating loudly about all the things that they had to do.

Eric blew out a breath. “You didn't even wait for me to tell you the date of the performance,” he said to the empty room and then shrugged. There would be plenty of opportunity to inform them of the date. At the moment, he had a lot of letters to write.



Freya could not help but be infected by the excitement of preparing for the performance. Isabella and William would not tell her much about what they were up to, but Mrs. Beecham was happy to sit with her as they planned menus, sleeping arrangements, transportation, decoration, and the many other things that went into planning such a party.

She did not have any time to get bored. Her opinions were constantly being

sought on every aspect of the preparations aside from the performance. Eric was building a dais in the garden in conjunction with the village carpenter and various volunteers. Freya could see them hard at work from her vantage point in the drawing room which had vast French windows that opened into the rear garden. She had taken to napping by the window, the soothing voices of shouting men lulling her into somnolence.

She had a soft warm feeling of happiness at the thought of how much effort the entire household was going to simply for her entertainment. Her body had felt increasingly weak and listless, and the coming party was exactly the shot in the arm she needed to rally. She marveled at how Eric could possibly have known the panacea for her struggles.

“You are smiling in your sleep.”

She opened her eyes to see Isabella grinning down at her. “Am I?”

“Yes, you’re smiling like the cat that had caught the canary,”

“Well, maybe I am.”

Isabella took a seat at the end of the chaise lounge. “William and I are going to the village for our last practice. We might be slightly late for supper.”

Freya hummed. “You’re not going alone, are you?”

“No.” Isabella pouted, “Eric insisted that we take a footman.”

“Good, I should hate to think of you walking in the dark by yourself.”

“I won't be by myself; I will be with William.”

Freya hummed again. “Well, an extra footman cannot hurt.”

Isabella got to her feet and kissed Freya on the cheek. “In any case, I just wanted to tell you so that you wouldn’t worry.”

“That’s very considerate of you, Isabella; thank you.”



The day of the party dawned bright and sunny. Freya heaved a sigh of relief as she let Eric lift her from the bed and onto the carrier. He had recently prohibited her from walking long distances and apparently, that included from their chambers to the drawing room.

“The heavens have blessed us with good weather.”

“Hush,” Eric said, “or you will spoil it.”

Freya laughed. “I didn’t know you were superstitious.”

“I am not, but there’s no need to tempt fate.”

She made a skeptical sound, still smiling indulgently. “All right, if you say so.”

She was dressed in a grey silk gown, having just completed her official period of mourning. It was crouched with layers that managed to hide her belly.

She had a white fichu across her shoulders to keep her warm, and her hair was swept up into a beehive. She wore simple diamond stars in her ear and a diamond ring in her hand. She was excited to greet the visitors and to see faces that she had not seen for too many years.

She was also really looking forward to the play. Judging from how excited Isabella and William were, they were really proud of it, and she couldn’t wait

to see what they had cooked up.

The footman deposited her on the veranda on a day bed where she would hold court. There were seats scattered all around her for the other guests as well as out in the garden. Smoke from the kitchens carried the smell of roasting meat in the air towards them.

Freya was glad that her nausea had become more manageable. She had waited until she had cast up her accounts before coming downstairs in an effort to regulate it. Someone brought her a cup of tea and some honey cakes as Mama Campbell came to sit beside her.

“Are you excited for today?” she asked.

“I am looking forward to it,” Freya replied.

“I am so looking forward to meeting your mother’s people. It is the closest I will come to ever meeting her, and I know she must have been a remarkable woman to have raised both you and Isabella.”

Freya beamed. “Why thank you, Madam. That’s very kind of you to say.”

“Not kind. Merely honest.”

Eric came out through the French doors and smiled at them. “The first guests are here. Are you ready?”

Freya nodded. “Bring them in.”



It was a night worth remembering for Eric if only for one thing— this was their first party hosted as a married couple. Of course, the low-level niggling worry for Freya never really went away, but her color was high, and her eyes

were bright as she spoke to her mother's relatives, and that was all he could ask for.

He did his best to entertain the other guests, gratified that two members of his platoon who were home from leave had made the journey all the way from London to attend. They regaled him with stories— only the happy ones— of their last mission, and he in turn told them of all his failings as a new duke.

“It is not all sitting around smoking cheroots and drinking brandy you know,” he pointed out.

Then the bell rang, and it was time to take their seats. Eric sought Freya out. She was still sitting obediently on her day bed, surrounded by her mother's cousins as well as his mother. He took a seat with his friends and waited for the show to begin.

Isabella and William had turned *Dracula* from a drama into a comedy with outlandish movement and over-the-top dialogue. Eric could see Freya from his seat, and she was laughing so hard that tears were rolling down her face. All he could do was smile as he watched her more than he watched the play.

He realized that not once during the evening had he given one thought to his scar.

Once the play was done, Eric put his foot down and carried Freya up to bed in his arms as the rest of the guests broke up into small groups talking and laughing. She put her head contentedly on his shoulder.

“I quite enjoyed that. Thank you so much for arranging it.”

He tightened his hold on her. “Anything for you my dear.”

The End?

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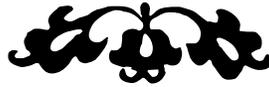
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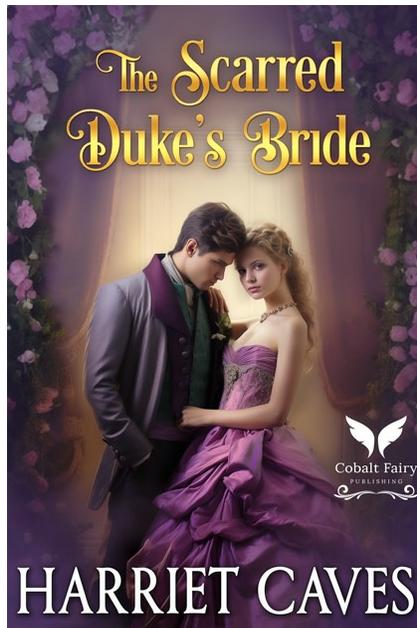
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Extended Epilogue



Would you like to know how **Freya and Eric's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this free complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple!

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Preview: A Virgin for a Heartless Duke



Prologue



“I do not like this.”

Agnes sighed, closing her eyes for a bit, as Prudence’s constant walking to and fro was rendering her slightly dizzy. She understood the unease and apprehension that kept her from staying still for more than a few moments, but she still wished the girl would concede that prancing about was not the answer.

“Prudence, I’m sure everything will be fine,” Agnes spoke calmly, hoping her sister would listen and calm herself.

When she opened her eyes, she saw that Prudence was not only still marching about, but her thumb was pressed against her bottom lip – an anxious habit Agnes had tried and failed to get her to let go of.

“Prudence –”

“I should be in there. I should be by his side, caring for him – just as I have been for months now. He should not be by himself right now,” Prudence said, stopping long enough for Agnes to read the clear expression of worry on her face.

“He is not alone. He has his physicians with him, and they are trying to help. That is why we are out here – you know that,” Agnes softly stated.

Prudence whirled around to face her elder sister, unable to keep the fear in her eyes hidden as she pointed at the door to their father’s chambers.

“We’re his family. Where were they when he first fell ill? They all wanted nothing to do with him when his illness began to manifest outwardly, and now they show up under the guise of being ‘helpful,’ and he is with them, by himself. As far as I am concerned, he is alone.”

It... it was a reasonable thing to say. After all, Prudence had been the one taking care of him for the months he had been ill – just as she had said.

It had been a mutual decision taken by the sisters when their father’s health had begun to decline. As the eldest, Agnes took over his business and managed his affairs in his stead while caring for her younger sisters as she always had. Prudence, the second born, handled matters concerned with their father’s well-being, as no one else was willing to come in contact with the Earl due to his hideous skin infections that had manifested soon after he became sick.

Everything they had done was to shield Imogen, the youngest of the sisters, from having her life interrupted in any way. She was young, soon to make her debut into society in two years, and they did not want anything to taint that.

Agnes looked to her side, where Imogen stood, her perfect face bearing the weight of concern that contrasted greatly with her usual bright demeanor and felt her heart ache.

Please, God... I hope nothing bad happens.

“Imogen,” Agnes smiled a little when her youngest sister looked up at her, “If you wish to return to your music lessons, you can. You will not be faulted for not wanting to witness Father in this state.”

Imogen shook her head, causing her pretty black curls to bounce and spill over her shoulders.

“He is just as dear to me as he is to both of you. And I have a right to be present for him in his times of need.”

It was a brave thing to say, and Agnes wanted to praise her but was stopped by Prudence, who finally ceased her trotting to comment,

“The physicians have never stayed in there this long without consulting us

after a few minutes.”

“Now, Prudence, be patient. I have said many times that patience is a virtue every lady must possess.”

The words sounded easy as they fell from her lips, but Agnes’ heart felt heavy with worry. Something was amiss; she could feel it, but she did not wish to let her sisters sense her thoughts. It had always been her duty to shield them from every bit of sadness and suffering, and she would continue to do so.

The door opened, and the physicians walked in with blank expressions. Agnes’ lips parted to ask about their father’s condition, but before she could, she heard her name.

“Agnes... come to me, my daughter.”

Agnes glanced at her sisters and smiled reassuringly before stepping into her father’s room.

“Close the door and come sit by my side,” he hoarsely instructed.

She did as he asked without hesitation, settling into the chair by his bedside. Looking at him was a difficult task because he looked so sullen and small, as though he had shrunk into himself, but still, she kept her gaze fixed on his, her mind alert and focused on his every word.

“Agnes... I do not have... much time left. Your sisters... you must protect them, and to do that, you need to... sacrifice yourself and marry... A match has been made between... you and the wealthy Duke of Forestwood.”

Agnes’ heart dropped at the thought of marriage, but she accepted it as her duty, not allowing her attention to falter in the slightest.

“I wish... I could have protected you all... till the end. But I am happy to find my love... your mother, once more. I have made arrangements. Prudence will go to our countryside house... to care for your grandmother – you know Prudence is her favorite. Imogen will remain... here, in London, to prepare for her first season at the new townhouse.”

Scarcely had Agnes properly grasped the implications of his words did her

sisters burst in with refusal heavy on their tongues.

“Father, no! You cannot do this!” Imogen cried.

“We will never be apart. You cannot –”

“Be quiet,” their father ordered, and they fell silent immediately. He sighed deeply and went on, “Staying together will not protect you... it will not ensure that you survive without me. Agnes... Only by her marriage to the Duke would you stand a chance to be reunited.”

Agnes leaned forward in an attempt to appeal to him to change his mind,

“But, Father –”

“Roger,” he called out to his butler, and the man stepped through the doorway. “Bring in the footmen and maids.”

Roger nodded and came into the room fully, followed by three footmen and three maids. The Earl of Lockheart gave his daughters one last look of fondness and shifted his gaze back to the servants.

“Take good care of my dear girls.”

“Father –” Agnes tried to plead but was stopped as a hand wrapped around her wrist and tugged her away from his side. “Wait – no –”

She tried to struggle but was distracted by the panicked screams of her sisters as they were pulled out of the room and in different directions. Agnes fought at the hands on her and managed to escape the room but stopped in the corridor, torn on who to go to as Imogen was being dragged to the left and Prudence to the right.

Someone gripped her arm and tried to drag her forward, and she screamed, promising from the very core of her soul.

“Imogen! Prudence! I-I’ll do it! I’ll get married, and I will come and find you both. I promise!”

She didn’t get to hear them and did not know if they believed her or responded to her decree. But she never forgot it.

Chapter One



“**A**nd remember, Agnes, the young woman’s guide in the magazine instructs that in order to make a man fall in love with you, you must win him with a smile.”

Agnes hummed at Lady Anna’s words, her mind certainly not thinking about how to charm a man she was about to meet for the first time with a meager smile.

It had been two years since the passing of her father. Two years since she had seen her sisters. On some days, she wondered how she had survived without Prudence’s calming warmth and Imogen’s bright energy, and on other days, she strived to keep going because she was all too aware that this was the only way to reunite with them.

She cared for not much else besides her sisters, as they had been her responsibility since they were but little children, and that was never going to change. She did not care what it took; she would get them back.

“Do not fret, Godmother. I plan to ensure that this madness will be a success because it is only by becoming a duchess that I will have the power to reunite with my sisters.”

Lady Anna sighed, momentarily taking her eyes off her pamphlet to regard Agnes with a weary expression.

“Darling, I really wish you would focus more on yourself. Your sisters have

been taken care of and are doing well in their respective places. Your primary focus should be targeted towards getting the Duke to fall in love with you.”

Agnes shifted uncomfortably, feeling relieved when her godmother dropped her eyes back down to the paper in her hands.

She did not know what to think or feel when it came to such grand emotions as love. It was not as though she did not believe in it. On the contrary, there was a time she wanted nothing more than the love shared between her parents. Her father loved her mother with everything he had, and when she passed, he loved his daughters until he met his end. There was not a day that went by that he did not think about her or miss her.

And she had wanted that, a love so deeply fulfilling as it was consuming, to be loved and adored with every breath.

But things were different now. She was only doing this because it was necessary, and she had not been left with any other choices. That being said... if she needed to charm the Duke to get his help in reconnecting with her sisters, then so be it.

“Oh! There’s a passage about your future husband in here!” her godmother said suddenly, her eyes alight with excitement as she read, “The Duke of Forestwood, one of the *ton*’s most elusive characters, has been shrouded in mystery. Although, most think it is merely a ruse to keep people from seeing the truth, that he is merely a cruel and lonely soul – what absolute nonsense. These are all lies and slander.”

Lady Anna flung the pamphlet aside and stared straight at Agnes.

“My dearest friend – the Dowager Duchess of Forestwood has told me countless times of occasions where His Grace aimed to help the less fortunate. In fact, he once saved a young orphan from starvation, and the boy now lives with him in his home. These people do not know who he is but still go out of their way to pretend as though they do. It is so unbecoming.”

Agnes sighed and rolled her eyes at the theatrics. Lady Anna had been at this for a while now; as the time to meet her betrothed approached, she went out of her way to entice Agnes with all his seemingly remarkable qualities. It was almost as though she expected Agnes to change her mind at the last minute

and run away – which was a strange notion to harbor, given how desperate Agnes was to reunite her sisters.

In a way, she also understood that maybe her godmother was merely trying to ease her nerves about the matter. Arranged marriages were almost never easy, and the circumstances around this were unorthodox. Perhaps Lady Anna was trying to ease away some silently lingering fears or doubts – which actually did not exist. The only thing that made Agnes slightly curious about their arrangement was the Duke’s motives.

Other than that, she was not particularly bothered about anything else. She had a duty to fulfill, and she was intent on doing just that. The how and why did not matter when she was so close to achieving the goal she had harbored in her heart for two years now.

She would find her sisters if it were the last thing she did.

“Do not worry, dear. He is a very good man,” Lady Anna assured, unaware of how utterly undisturbed Agnes was.

Agnes shifted her gaze to the window of the carriage and hoped that they would arrive at the Forestwood mansion soon so she would be free of this conversation. Scarcely had the thought left her mind when the carriage rolled to a sudden stop. She and her godmother exchanged confused glances and peered out of the carriage through the window, listening as the horses huffed about.

The door to the carriage suddenly opened, and the driver stood, a little wet from the rain that had started a few minutes earlier, his eyes wide with panic.

“My lady – the wheel – one of them is stuck in the mud! What do we do –”

“Charles, breathe,” Lady Anna ordered, and the man straightened, inhaling and exhaling deeply. “There. Better. It is quite all right; we’re not too far from the Forestwood mansion. We would just need to take a secret path to get there.”

She pulled the hood of her cloak over her head and turned to Agnes.

“Dearest, we will head over to the mansion to get some assistance. We won’t be gone for longer than five minutes. Will you be fine by yourself?”

Agnes looked outside, studying the darkening sky and the sound of rain pelting against the roof of the carriage and nodded.

“Yes, I will. Do not worry about me; I will be right here.”

Lady Anna grinned at her. “Excellent. We will be back shortly. Remain in the carriage – lest you come down with the flu.” She turned to the door of the carriage, accepted the hand offered by the driver, and stepped out, closing the door behind her. “It should be around here – ah! This way...”

Her voice faded, and Agnes breathed a sigh of relief, thankful for the break from her godmother’s rambling. Ever since they had gotten into the carriage and began their journey to the Forestwood mansion, her godmother had chattered on and on, dancing between random beads of wisdom on how to attract a man and charm her way into his heart and odd forms of consolation and assurance that everything will go perfectly.

Honestly, she loved the woman to death and was beyond grateful for all that she had done to care for and cater to Agnes’ needs in the two years she had stayed with the lady. She was always thoughtful and kind, ever concerned over Agnes’ well-being – a sentiment Agnes prayed every day that her sisters were also experiencing.

But there were moments when her personality was rather... overwhelming to Agnes. Lady Anna had been born into nobility and raised as the perfect lady. The *ton* was practically her playground with how she frolicked about, ever interested in the latest gossip and trends. It was the life she had chosen. For Agnes, she had also been raised to be the very picture of an acceptable young lady, but her priorities differed from that of other young women her age.

While they spoke about balls and soirees, she was more interested in the responsibilities she was required to uphold in a bid to care for her sisters. They were her whole world, and to an extent... they seemed to be the very reason she existed, not that she minded. For as long as she could remember, she had always been either behind them, watching over them and protecting them or before them, guiding them properly.

When they were separated, she did not know what to do without them, had lost sight of who she really was, without sisters to care for or provide for.

While Agnes appreciated the thought, the only other thing she cared for besides her sisters were horses. She loved horses dearly, and when she was younger, her father had taught her to ride and care for horses. They had been offered as mandatory lessons for her and her sisters, but Prudence and Imogen only saw them as that – extra lessons – while she was inducted into a whole new world.

She loved every moment she spent with horses, ever eager to feed them, care for them, and ride them. There had been a vast field of flowers behind their home, and she used to go riding there as early as sunrise. And sometimes, her father joined her, the two of them conversing comfortably. Some nights, she would dream of those moments, of a time when things were perfect, and her life felt whole, and when she woke up, she could still feel the cool breeze against her skin and smell the flowers in the air.

Now, she was donning a whole new role, being required to step even further from her true self. And this – being stuck in the rain, left alone in a place she was unfamiliar with did not seem like the best foot to kick things off for her.

She had been raised to see the value in sincere efforts and hard work and had experienced for herself that success could be yielded if one did one's best and strived for excellence. So, the situation currently did not seem ideal or encouraging, but hopefully, things were only bound to get better. Agnes was sure that all the pieces would fall into their right places if she behaved amicably and performed her duties, and it would only be a matter of time before she achieved her dream.

As she watched the rain pelt the muddy road through the window, she could not help but wonder what the Duke was really like. This would be their first meeting, and all she knew about him were the awestruck remarks her godmother had told her, which had been fed to her by her dear friend, the Dowager Duchess of Forestwood – and the Duke's grandmother.

For that reason, Agnes harbored some thoughts that their notions of the Duke might not be as straightforward as they had relayed, but she supposed that did not matter as long as he was of good character.

Agnes had shared a conversation with her godmother on a rainy afternoon sometime the year before that had left a rather odd, lasting impression on her.

Lady Anna had taken a long look at her and gently placed her hand over the page of a book Agnes had been reading and asked,

“Pet, what kind of man do you like?”

The question had flustered her so greatly that she had been unable to answer right away. But her godmother had been patient, blinking at her slowly until she answered.

“I... I do not know. An honest man, I suppose. One that is kind and understanding. Loyal and loving – like father was.”

Lady Anna’s gaze had softened, and she smiled. “That’s all very nice, dear, but I was asking more in terms of physical traits. What sort of man do you think you would be attracted to? Physically?”

“Godmother,” Agnes had gasped, aghast. “That’s – I do not – please –”

Her flustered wheezing had not appealed to her godmother in the slightest, and the woman rolled her eyes and simply told her.

“I can assure you, the Duke is very likely to suit whatever tastes you might have – or lack.”

It was strange that she thought about that moment right now, and she still couldn’t help but wonder what he was really like. Oh well, she would be finding out very soon. Sitting back, she lifted her eyes to the ceiling and exhaled deeply, muttering to herself.

“Only time will tell.”

Chapter Two



Just as the words before his eyes began to blur together, a knock pulled Silas out of his mind, shattering his tired focus in a mere moment. He raised his head with a grunt, and his butler, Lukas, stepped into his study with a bow.

“Your bride-to-be is on her way to the mansion, Your Grace. We expect that she will arrive in time for dinner.”

Silas released his pen with a curt nod.

“Good. The sooner our wedding takes place, the sooner I will be granted access to the remaining bulk of the fortune my grandfather left for me. Although I wish I did not have to get another person involved in order to receive what he had intended to leave to me anyway, there is no way around that clause, and therefore, it needs to be fulfilled.”

It had been an irritating discovery for Silas to be told during the reading of his grandfather’s will that a large quantity of his inheritance would be withheld and only released if and only if Silas were to get married, a condition that ensured that his dukedom would be secured. At first glance, it seemed reasonable, but Silas had no need for anyone and greatly disliked the idea of needing to charm some star-eyed damsel into a marriage that would be one-sided for wealth that rightfully belonged to him.

And so, he had been thankful that his grandmother had made arrangements on his behalf and his future bride had agreed to wed without much of a fuss.

The finer details had not been sorted out yet, left to be resolved upon their initial meeting, but Silas knew that regardless, he would be getting what he wanted.

“If that is all, you may go,” Silas ordered, dropping his gaze back down to the documents on his desk, faltering as he reached for his pen. “On second thoughts – tell Simon to prepare my horse. I wish to ride a bit before she arrives.”

“Your Grace?” Lukas frowned reluctantly. “I-I do not think that is wise, Your Grace. There is a storm coming, and it is not safe to ride when –”

“Will you be the one mounting my horse?”

Lukas shook his head slowly. “No, Your Grace.”

“Will I be mounting you?”

The butler flinched. “No, Your Grace.”

“Then I fail to see why my decision should bother you so. Go and do as you were told.”

Lukas’ shoulders slumped in defeat, and he bowed, then turned to leave the study.

“Yes, Your Grace. I will inform the stable boy right away.”

Silas shifted his attention back to the papers he had been going through, already refocused on the details pertaining to the shipment of fabrics he had been expecting.

He had worked really hard to ensure that his businesses ran smoothly, consistently vigilant and thoughtful over every aspect. And he hoped he would be able to handle his marriage just as effectively and efficiently. This woman... whoever she was, would only serve as a gateway to him and his goals and nothing more. The best thing for him to do would be to clear up whatever misconceived notions she might have sustained about their marriage as soon as she arrived.

He just hoped she would not make a fuss about it. For the last few years, he’d had no use for emotional connections or relationships of any kind. He lived a

simple life that revolved around his work, his horse, and his household, and he needed nothing else – other than the rest of his inheritance. Whatever objections the woman might have about his choices, she would have to stifle him because he was perfectly content with the way things were.

He needed no one, and that would not soon change.

After going through a few more papers, he had deemed the work done to be sufficient, and organized the rest neatly into a pile on his left while the signed and reviewed document sat in a pile on his right. Satisfied, he headed towards his dressing room. As he turned down a corner, he spotted a group of maids ahead, chattering away like overly excited insects as they dusted the pieces of art lining the corridor.

“I heard she is from a noble family that is going bankrupt.”

“Oh? I heard that this was just an attempt to keep her from marrying an old baron who could easily pass as her grandfather.”

“Goodness! Between you and me, I did not expect His Grace to get married. He doesn’t have any friends – how will he manage a wife?”

“The same way I manage my staff – intolerant of misbehavior,” he replied coolly.

The girls screamed, huddling together and messily curtsying, struggling to gain their footing and stumbling over their words as well.

“Your Grace, we –”

“I do not pay you to stand around and gossip. If you wish to spend your time pointlessly chattering, feel free to do it on the street and not on my dime.”

They all hung their heads apologetically, and one of them glanced at Silas for a moment and instantly dropped her gaze, stammering quickly.

“W-We’re sorry, Your Grace. It won’t happen a-again.”

Silas snorted, slightly startled when a voice spoke up from behind him.

“That’s fine, girls. Get back to work.”

The girls nodded and shifted their attention back to the painting frames and

vases they'd been dusting, working dutifully as though to atone for their sins. Simon continued his walk to his dressing room, aware that he was being followed, but stayed silent in order to allow the other person to speak first.

“Your Grace, that was not very nice,” she sighed as he reached the door to his dressing room. “They are young girls – it is their nature to gossip and speak mindlessly, but they do not mean any harm. You did not need to threaten them like that. Your grandfather would be disappointed if he saw how rudely you behaved to the members of your staff. It would dishearten him greatly because he always believed that the household was meant to serve as an extension of family –”

“You forget yourself, Mrs. Safield,” he cut her off. “Your role here is to serve as the housekeeper, not to question or make judgments about how I oversee my dukedom.”

She smiled up at him sadly and said, “Your Grace, I do not intend to speak out of turn. I simply wish to keep you from making mistakes you might later regret. Everyone – the members of staff are afraid of you. You turn into a corridor, and they all scramble to hide. At this rate, it would be difficult for you to have any loyal personnel – not if you continue to let your bad temper rule over you.”

Silas opened the door to his dressing room and stepped inside, turning to address Marion with an air of finality.

“That is not your concern. Leave my role to me and do your own job properly.”

Her lips parted to respond, but she did not get a chance to do so as he shut the door in her face. He did not care for whatever beads of wisdom the old crone wished to sow because it was up to him how he wished to rule over his home.

He made quick work of his clothes, easily changing into his riding attire, and then headed out to the stable. The stable boy greeted him eagerly at the doors, announcing with enthusiasm he did not expect,

“Your Grace, Scar has been prepared for your riding session.”

Over his shoulder, Silas could see his horse already saddled and lightly stepping about, clearly eager to stretch his legs, his tail whipping about as he

moved. Silas had not expected the young boy to do that, usually preferring to handle the task of saddling his horse himself, but he appreciated the boy's efforts.

"You can retire for the day, Simon. Go and have some food, and I will handle Scar for the rest of the evening," Silas instructed as he walked towards Scar.

The horse huffed as he stroked his nose, receiving the pats and shuffling closer as Silas took the reins and led him to the entrance of the stable. Simon still stood where Silas had left him, his eyes alight with uncertainty.

"I do not mind waiting for you to return, Your Grace. It is –"

"Do as I say, Simon," Silas ordered sternly as he mounted his horse, his grip on the reins tightened to keep Scar from running off before he had settled on the creature's back properly. "Go and eat, and I will handle my horse for the rest of the evening."

Simon relented, bowing and leaving his side quickly. Silas watched him leave with an exhale and squeezed his legs against Scar's sides, urging him forward, out of and away from the stable, leading him away from the mansion and towards the vast fields that surrounded it.

His mind wandered back to Simon as he rode farther away from his mansion. He recalled that it had been a day just like this one when he had met the poor child while he was out riding. The boy had lost his parents months earlier and had been roaming around, and Silas had felt an urge to adopt him that he could not ignore. So he returned home with the boy and asked his butler to care for him as best as he could.

Simon had not wanted to dwell in Silas' home without giving back as much as he had received and volunteered to work as a stable boy. He had quickly proven himself to be reliable and hard-working, unlike the previous holder of his position, and it reassured Silas to no end, knowing that his precious horse was in good hands.

Silas eventually wished to increase his speed and urged Scar to move from trotting to cantering by leaning forward and applying more pressure to the horse's sides with his legs. Years of riding Scar meant that they understood each other clearly – to the point that most times, Silas preferred the company

of his horse to the people in his household – and the horse immediately picked up the pace.

The Duke relished the feeling of the wind against his face, already feeling his lingering concerns and stress melt away, leaving just him, his horse, and the vast greenery before his eyes. Riding was his favorite pastime, a skill he had cultivated carefully from when he was a boy and an activity he shared with his grandfather, whom he had treasured more than anyone or anything else.

But his grandfather had passed on, and Silas had been left behind with nothing but memories that stung his heart every time he recalled them, urging him even further to keep himself closed off at the possibility of forming any other personal relationship.

It had been a devastating thing to watch his grandfather die, to lose the very person who had raised him into the man he was, unable to do anything as he took his last breath. Sometimes, he still had nightmares about that night, his dream vividly recalling how badly he was shaking, how raw his throat had become from crying out for help, and the sticky feeling of blood all over his hands – both that of his own and his grandfather's.

The loss had served as a lesson to Silas – people were inevitably going to leave him, one way or another. Much like his parents when he was all but ten years old, the ones he cared for would later vanish from his life, leaving him all by himself, hurt and alone. And so, he resolved to refrain from forming any emotional attachments to others. He had the option to avoid potential hurt and pain of that caliber, to shield himself from further devastation and chose to take it.

A lot of people had not liked that, calling him cold and soulless, but he had not cared because, at the end of the day, all he had left was himself, and he was going to do what was needed to ensure his well-being. He wanted for nothing with his successful job and properties. And once he got married, he would receive the rest of his inheritance, and everything would be as it should.

As he often did, Silas lost a little track of time while riding, but it could not have been more than twenty-five minutes since he had left the mansion when he felt a drop of water fall on his cheek. At first, he assumed it would be a

mere drizzle, but then the heaviness of the rain quickly increased into a steady light shower, and he immediately slowed Scar down, cursing beneath his breath.

When Scar stopped, he quickly dismounted, thankful they had arrived at the forests at the edge of his property and could seek shelter beneath one of the thick trees, leading Scar by the reins to the closest one he could find. A large one stood a few feet ahead, and he sighed in relief, swiftly leading them to rest beneath it, patting the horse's nose and muttering.

"It's all right... we will be returning home very soon. You have done well, as always."

Scar sighed, and Silas smiled at him a little, stroking his mane gently, thankful that he was able to get the horse out from under the rain, as he did not want him to get hurt.

While Silas had several other horses, Scar remained his favorite and most prized horse because he was the first one he had gotten. Scar had been a birthday gift from Silas' grandfather when he was thirteen years old, and he was the first horse Silas ever trained with. They had practically grown up together to an extent, both of them learning much from the other, forming a close bond that the Duke would not trade for anything.

Scar served as the last connection to Silas' grandfather, one he intended to keep for as long as he possibly could and, to that effect, would protect with everything he had.

The rain had increased at some point and was starting to slow down, but Silas was prepared to wait it out completely, knowing he had to be careful riding Scar back to keep him from getting hurt. He was thankful that the horse had at least been able to rest and hoped the weather would clear up quickly and allow him to return home.

He saw it before he heard it, the streak of lightning that flashed through the sky, lighting up the earth below. Before he could pray against what he felt was coming next, a clap of thunder resounded in his ears, making him wince. He reached out to steady Scar, but it was too late.

The horse fled, slipping away from him in a panicked daze and running

towards the main road, leaving Silas no other choice than to follow.

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About the Author

Born in sunny California, all Harriet Caves ever wanted was to become a doctor and save lives. During her sleepless nights working at the hospital, the Regency classics were her only solace. To no one's surprise, her British descent led her back to England to discover her roots and where her hidden passion lay: the Regency streets of London.

After obtaining a degree in Creative Writing there, Harriet decided to never leave this magnificent place. A daydreamer and an avid reader herself, she loves spending her days exploring the British countryside or seeking stories under the pebbles of the historical London alleys.

Though she abandoned the hospital wards, Harriet now mends hearts by transporting people back to an era of passionate love. Allow her skilled pen to take you to a special place where souls sing of love and dreams come to life!

