Haughton peered out the window of his coach. They had already made the turn through the gates, the wide, even lane that led up to the main house curving smoothly into the trees and out of sight. The first leg of his journey from London to Derbyshire had been a trial, the rain becoming a ceaseless impediment, rendering the roads - if such a word could be used for paths so rutted and pockmarked that local wheelwrights would be le with enough business to carry them through to the end of the month - nearly impassable until the worst of the deluge had passed. At one point, several miles outside of Luton, Haughton had considered ordering the driver to turn them around and begin the journey back towards London, but he demolished that thought before he could give it a voice. a He'd already written to Bess and informed her of his impending arrival. Should he fail to show himself at the end of the designated frame of time allotted for his journey, no doubt his sister would send out a search party in order to ensure he hadn't tumbled headlong into ditch somewhere along the way. Bess had written to him to inform him of Sophia and George's arrival at Denton Castle, and then proceeded to write every other day for the following three weeks. From Sophia herself, he'd received not a word. In fact, the last he'd seen her had been when he'd helped her into a carriage in front of his townhouse in St. James's street. A word to the footman, and the step was put up, the door closed, and she began her journey back to Stantreath. The farewell had been remarkably short, a perfunctory demonstration of all things they'd both been trained to say in such a situation. A wish for a safe and pleasant journey. A few words of gratitude from her for all of his help. A slight squeeze of her gloved hand and a brief tousle of George's hair, and nothing more. He'd done nothing to delay her. Her intentions to leave London as soon as possible could not have been clearer. That she'd hoped to receive some word from her sister, he did not doubt. But though several notes were sent out, all of them penned in Sophia's own hand, to Lucy's place of lodging, no reply had been forthcoming. Her sister, it seemed, having achieved her promise of five thousand pounds, seemed to no longer crave further communication with the rest of her family. đ Haughton glanced out the window again, the brilliance of the a ernoon sun dappling the graveled lane with rays of light that shone down through the branches of the trees. At the edge of his view, a large stream wound its way through the woods, its swollen surface catching the light as it snaked towards a stone arch bridge over which the carriage rumbled only a few moments later. The house would be the next thing to come into view. Rolling lawns and stately elms forming a frame to his childhood home. But Haughton allowed the shade to fall back into place. He leaned back in his seat, his eyes closed as he pressed his head against the quilted upholstery behind him. He would arrive at the door, and a flutter of activity would commence. And there would be Bess in the midst of it all, ready to greet him, to chastise him for not arriving sooner. As if he had not had more than enough business with which to occupy his time before he could deem it prudent to depart from London. The carriage rolled to a halt. The usual shouts commenced, along with a tilting of the vehicle as driver and footmen climbed down and changed positions and immediately began to remove his luggage. The door opened, the steps were lowered, and Haughton stepped out into near blinding sunlight. He raised his hand to the brim of his hat as he squinted against the glow, made even brighter by the jewels of moisture that still stubbornly clung to every stone and blade of grass. \neq He glanced towards the front doors of the house, fully expecting his sister to rush out to meet him. But there was no sign that Bess had even been alerted of his arrival. And so he went indoors, passing his hat and coat to the butler while he inwardly bristled at such a silent welcome. Without realizing it, he'd become accustomed to the flurry of conversation and tea things being foisted on him within minutes of his arrival in Derbyshire. "Is my sister at home?" Haughton asked as his gloves were also taken from him. "Yes, my lord." The butler handed o the various accoutrements of Haughton's outerwear to a nearby footman. "She is..." The elderly retainers brow furrowed slightly. "Outside, I believe. With Mrs. Brixton. They are taking the air before dinner." "And do you happen to know where their search for air has taken them?" a "They began in the rose garden, my lord. But where they may have gone from there, I could not say." Haughton nodded and instead of heading towards his study or upstairs to his suite of rooms as the butler seemed to assume, he passed through the main part of the house and let himself out onto the terrace that provided a fine view of several of the gardens and a portion of the lawn that led down towards the lake. The grass was still wet from the rain, though a breeze had picked up that would no doubt dry everything before night fell and a damp chill could set in. He strode in the direction of the rose garden, but changed his mind at the last minute, instead veering towards the edge of the lake, not far from where they'd had their picnic some weeks before. He found no sign of them there, and neither could he discern them on the path that led down through the trees and towards what had been one of his father's favorite fishing spots. Looping around, he worked his way up the low hill that backed the house, his destination a folly commissioned by his mother, a structure that would a ord him a view of half the park. His boots were soaked when he arrived at the top of the hill, and coated with bits of leaves and grass he'd accumulated during the walk. His valet would not be pleased with the state of his dress when he returned to the house to prepare for dinner, but any consideration for his servant's sensibilities were banished from his thoughts as the folly came into view, inside of which were seated his sister and Sophia. The edifice was a crumbling thing, though its age could be traced back to within his own lifetime. The ruin of the piece was all a pretense, an act of architectural artifice, and Haughton would have had the small building, with its cracked columns and tumbledown roof, demolished and taken away once his father had passed away, but for the fact that Bess had taken a liking to the folly and visited it regularly during her daily walks out of doors. Bess, he saw, immediately spied his approach. A broad smile stretched across her face, and she waved him over with her hand. Sophia, who was turned partially away from him and so had not detected his climb up the side of the hill, looked back over her shoulder and saw him. Her lips parted a little. He noticed that first. But she closed her mouth again quickly enough, her back straightening and her chin li ing as she shi ed slightly in her seat. She did not smile as his sister had, but neither did his arrival appear to cause her any sort of consternation. For that, at least, he told himself to be grateful. He stepped up to the edge of the folly, the sun at his back as he bowed to both ladies. Bess nearly leaped up from her seat in her eagerness to embrace him, while Sophia nodded politely in return, her gaze never leaving his face. "How intolerable of you to make us wait for such a time!" Bess stepped back from him enough to give his arm a pinch, before she rose onto the balls of her feet and kissed his cheek. "Of course, I'm sure you'll regale us with all of your tales of bad roads and worse inns and bridges torn from their foundations by floods of most biblical proportions, but you're here now, and I refuse to allow you to leave again until you've spent enough time away from London to erase those dark smudges from beneath your eyes. Sophia!" She turned towards her companion while keeping one arm tucked against her brother's side. "Doesn't he look in need of a rest, Soph? All the time he spends in town has aged him beyond his years, and I think we should do everything within our power to keep him here until he's regained a bit of health and color in his cheeks." a Sophia wasn't given a chance to reply, Bess having commandeered both the conversation and where she believed Haughton should sit, which just happened to be in the place his sister had abandoned only a moment ago, directly beside Sophia. Haughton looked up at Bess, though he could detect nothing in her expression that gave away her intentions to make a match of the two of them. But he knew his sister, and despite every e ort she'd made in her numerous letters to avoid the subject, he'd caught the subtle hints scattered across her lines referring to her desire for him to settle down and find himself a wife, a wish that was always closely followed by a long list of Sophia's beauty and wit and grace. ď But he didn't need his sister to tell him of what he was already well aware, though he wasn't sure Bess knew how o en Sophia had invaded his thoughts over the last several weeks. Bess, he assumed, had taken it upon herself to try and ignite a spark, but he doubted his sister perceived that a fire had already been kindled long before. a "And where is George at the moment?" Haughton managed to slip the question into a brief lull in Bess's commentary. He looked towards Sophia, who lowered her eyes and clasped her hands in her lap before she began to speak. "Sleeping, perhaps. Though he might be awake by now. I had just put him down for his a ernoon nap when your sister suggested a walk, since the rain kept us confined to the house for the last several days." He watched her as she spoke. She looked better than when he had last seen her, a er all of the stress of finding George and dealing with David and her sister. Now, she looked rested, vibrant, and lovely enough to make him wish his sister someplace far away, rather than seated only a few inches to his le, her proximity allowing her to observe every moment of the exchange between Sophia and himself. 3 She looked at him again, her eyes catching the light of the a ernoon sun as it dipped low enough to shine beneath the roof of the folly. Her chest rose and she opened her mouth as if to speak again, but a glance at Bess made her hesitate, but only for a moment. "I received a letter," she began, and paused long enough to unclasp and clasp her hands again. "I received a letter from my sister earlier this week. It was the first she had written to me since—" She cleared her throat and pressed on, though Haughton wondered just how much of the situation Bess knew aside from what he'd told her himself. "Well, she's returned to Bath, and set herself up very well. She has undertaken the role of a companion to an elderly spinster, the sister of a marquess, if I am not mistaken. From what I gather, the role a ords her access to all of the fine parties and entertainments Bath has to o er." a A line appeared between her eyes, the only sign that her sister's current life caused her some distress. "And she is happy there, you believe?" he asked, the question making another line appear across Sophia's brow. "I do," she said, and met his gaze, her face again clear of the shadow that had passed over it only a moment ago. "And I find that I want nothing more for her, but to find some happiness. I would not have wished her to remain in Stantreath, to force herself into a role for which she was not suited if it would only bring her misery. In turn, all of us would have been made miserable, and there could have been no good in that." Whether she believed in the truth of her words or only spoke them out loud in order to make herself believe them, Haughton could not be sure. But a small smile teased the corners of her mouth, and in reply he sent up a silent request towards Heaven that Miss Lucy Penrose would indeed find some happiness, if only for her sister's sake. "Oh, goodness!" Bess chimed in, and clapped her hands together beneath her chin. "I nearly forgot! I was to meet with Mrs. Housekeeper this a ernoon and go over the menus for next week, now that Finn will be with us." She stood, muslin and lace and embroidered rosettes twirling as she gathered her shawl about her shoulders and gestured for Haughton to remain seated. "No, no. You stay here and give Sophia some company. I would not wish to cut her walk short simply because I lost track of the time." Bess was gone before either of them could protest, though Haughton knew that any sort of argument against his sister's behavior would be as e ective as shouting at a mountain in the hopes that it would li its roots from the ground and step aside. He would not be in the least surprised to discover that Bess had no planned meeting with the housekeeper at all, and was simply contriving to toss the two of them together. a He watched Bess walk down the hill, back towards the house. Once he was certain she was far enough away to not overhear them, he returned his attention to Sophia. Her gaze had found someplace beyond the artfully deteriorating walls of the folly to fix upon, the breeze stirring the fiery curls of her hair that touched her neck and the high, ru led collar of her gown. "Are you well?" he asked, and waited for her reply. He watched as her chest rose, her nostrils flaring slightly as she drew in a deep breath. "I am, yes," she said, without turning to look at him. "Your sister has been most kind, doing everything in her power to make George and I feel at home here." "And does it feel like home to you?" đ She turned the full force of her gaze on him then. "Not yet. George, of course, behaves as if he has never been anywhere else. But he is so young, so young that he won't remember any of what happened before we arrived here." Her brow furrowed. "And I think I envy him that." There was more, he thought. He could see the troubles etched in every line of her face. He had a sudden wish to wipe those cares away, or more specifically, to possess the power to achieve such an end. "I've heard from David, or I should say that Winston has apprised me of my brother's arrival in Toulouse, though where he'll wander from there, I cannot say." "Do you expect him to stay on the Continent for any considerable length of time?" Haughton shrugged. "Things have settled there over the last year, and as long as he continues to receive his allowance in a timely manner, I cannot see any reason why he would wish to return to England and what he perceives as my tyrannical rule." a Her mouth moved as if she would speak, before it transformed into a grimace. "I've no doubt Lucy viewed my behavior in a similar light. I think she resented my taking charge of everything a er our parents died, but I had little choice." "But were there no relatives, no aunts or cousins to step in and fill the breach le by your parents' demise? I cannot imagine two young ladies, le without someone to protect them." Sophia pulled in another breath and let it dri away from her on a sigh. "The few relatives of which we knew could not a ord to take us in. I considered seeking employment, as a governess or nurse, but I could not leave Lucy. And then when she discovered she was with child... Well, what penniless cousin would have anything to do with us then?" a I'm sorry He nearly said the words out loud, but he had no wish for her to think he was uttering nothing more than the perfunctory niceties that were expected of him. Instead, he reached out and took her hand. She wore no gloves, and her fingers were cool even though she'd had them tucked in her lap for the last few minutes. When she did not immediately pull her hand away, he brushed his fingers across her knuckles and turned her hand upwards in order to trace one of the lines in her palm with his thumb. đ He dared not raise his eyes to look at her face. As bold as he had been when he'd first met her, barging into her home like a bull, and now the slightest change in her expression held the potential to destroy

Chapter Twenty-Four

He gave no thought to his actions, but only continued to sit there, her hand in his, his fingers gliding over the rough patches on her skin that gave away the di iculties of the life she'd led before arriving in Derbyshire a few weeks before. Eventually, he thought, those callouses on the pads of her fingers, on her palms, would fade. Her knuckles would be smooth again, her brittle nails no longer bearing the evidence of having done her own washing for the last several years. His thumb slid over the heel of her hand and up to her wrist, where the freckled skin of her forearm disappeared beneath the printed cotton of her sleeve. "I should walk you back to the house." Still, he did not glance up at her face. Her skin mesmerized him, and he feared that should he release her hand, he would lose something that might never be returned to him. "My lord," she began, but he shook his head. "Please don't call me that." He li ed his gaze to meet hers, the a ernoon light glinting o the red and gold in her eyelashes. He wondered if she knew how beautiful she was, or at least how beautiful she was to him. He had been given the impression that Sophia thought her sister to be the great beauty in their family. But Lucy, he found, with her so curves and pouting lips that were so in fashion at the moment, stirred nothing inside of him. It was Sophia he could not banish from his thoughts. Sophia, with the fire in her hair and the liberal sprinkling of freckles across her cheeks. "Your sister has been very kind to me," she said, and withdrew her hand from his grasp. The abrupt change in subject was as unexpected as a glass of water splashed into his face. "I could not have imagined feeling more welcome, more... a part of a place, of another person's life. Outside the realm of my own family, that is." "As opposed to myself, do you mean?" The words slipped out, a reaction to her movement away from him, he assumed. And though he had attempted to add a touch of lightness, of teasing to his tone of voice, there was a seriousness to his question that drained some of the illumination from Sophia's face. "No, no. Do not attempt to deny it," he went on before she could interrupt. "I am well aware of the sort of behavior I subjected you to earlier in our acquaintance." "Well." She cleared her throat. "I wouldn't say—" "I was a boor. And I gave not a thought to the ideas or wants of anyone but myself." a "Yes." She said finally, and again folded her hands in her lap. "You were, and you did not." Her gaze li ed from her lap and met his. "But despite the way you went about it, your motives, I believe, were in defense of your family. And since then, you have done so much to prove that you are not the villain I at first perceived you to be. If not "If not for me," he interrupted again, feeling wholly disgruntled with the direction the conversation had taken. "You would still be in Stantreath with George. I would never have caused even the slightest ripple to disturb the life you'd made for yourself there. Your sister—" "My sister acted of her own free will. It had nothing to do with you." But Haughton shook his head as she spoke. "I spoke with my brother. This entire... scheme they concocted came about because of David finding out about his son, finding out about you. Which would not have happened if you had not been in Derbyshire when you were, a journey that ultimately came about because I blundered into your life several months ago, in order to throw a bit of money at you so that I might never have to deal with you again." At that last comment, he lly recoiled. What if she had met her in Northumberland? What if that had been the beginning and end of their acquaintance, aside from the most emotionless of notes and instructions passed from solicitor to solicitor? a But she hadn't accepted his o er. If she had, she would have proven herself to be a dierent person than the one sitting across from him now, a person with whom he would never have fallen in love. a "I am thoroughly ashamed of the behavior I exhibited to you earlier this year," he said, still holding out his hand, as if her own still resided within in. "And I find I must ask for your forgiveness, even if you have no inclination to provide it." She sighed, and when she looked at him again, he noticed the flecks of green and gold twining together in her eyes. He wanted to tell her that she was beautiful, that at some point during their unusual, tumultuous acquaintance, he had fallen in love with her. But the words necessary to make such a proclamation would not rise to his lips. Was it her rejection he feared? Or that any advances on his part would frighten her o her plan of remaining at Denton Castle? đ "It was not your sudden appearance on my doorstep that threw our existence into chaos." She tapped her thumbs against each other, and when he glanced down, he noticed the toe of her right foot bouncing out a similar rhythm. "You forget that Stantreath is not even our original home, but a place we retreated to in order to escape the scandal George's birth brought down on our heads. You forget that I lied, putting myself forward as a widow and claiming George as my own son so as to free my sister from the stigma of bearing a child outside of marriage." A so sound escaped from her throat. Haughton almost took it for a chuckle. "We both of us did all we could to sweep our siblings' transgressions beneath the rug instead of tackling them directly, no matter what our neighbors might have whispered about us behind their hands. And look at where it's brought us! My sister and your brother, driven to stealing their own child in order to ransom him for a small fortune." Haughton raised one eyebrow. "Do you mean to say you blame yourself for your sister's behavior?" "No," she confessed a er a moment of consideration. "At least, not entirely. But can you tell me with all honesty that you have never once gone back over the course of your brother's life and thought about what you or your family might have done di erently in order to bring everyone to a di erent outcome?" a He leaned back in his seat, as far as the sti, unyielding stone of the seat would allow. "I cannot." She swallowed, then cleared her throat before speaking. "It may surprise you to hear me say it, but I've begun to entertain the notion that you and I... Well, that we share some common traits, at least as far as our characters are concerned." Was she mocking him in some way? He watched her, but there was no sign in her manner or expression that she was about to lash out at him with her tongue. "We are both the firstborn children in our families," she explained, apparently impervious to the look of incredulity creasing his brow. "And the both of us bearing the brunt of responsibility to come with such a position." ď When he said nothing in response, if indeed she expected him to provide one, she took up her shawl and her bonnet from the seat beside her and stood up. "It is getting late, and I'm sure that George has already been awake for some time." As she wrapped the shawl around her shoulders and pulled the bonnet down onto her head, Haughton rose and tugged at his coat, only realizing then that he still wore the same clothes he'd arrived in. Once they both had set themselves to rights, he stepped forward and held out his arm to her, but she made no move towards him. "A little while ago, you asked for my forgiveness." She held her arms crossed over her chest, the ends of her shawl held tight in her hands. "I believe I'd already pardoned you, for my own benefit, some time ago. But if it is the words themselves you need to hear, then..." She held out her right hand to him, as if she were o ering it for nothing more than a simple handshake. "I forgive you," she said. "A er all you've done for us, for me and George, while we were in London, and He grasped her hand fiercely, drawing it upwards before he kissed the tops of her fingers. Another kiss was pressed to the sensitive skin of her palm, before a third one found its way to the inside of her wrist. It was the same path he'd traced earlier with his thumb, and he brought himself to a halt when his cheek brushed against the edge of her sleeve. "Sophia," he said, his breath reflecting o her skin and sweeping across his jaw. ₫³ It was the first he'd spoken her name out loud in weeks. Propriety, he knew, would dictate that he refer to her as Mrs. Brixton or Miss Penrose or whichever name she chose to take on for herself. But propriety and its strictures had ruled too much of his life for far too long. "Sophia," he said again, his gaze never leaving her face. She watched him, her eyes wide, her lips slightly parted as her breathing quickened. a "My lord," she began, but he held up a hand to interrupt her. "Finn," he corrected her. "If you will." đ She licked her lips. How such a small movement possessed the

power to a ect him so strongly, he could not tell. "Finn," she whispered. "Before you speak... Please..." She shook her head slightly, and placed her free hand flat against the center of his chest. "I do not know enough of your life before I entered into it, but allow me to assure you now that things will not be easy from here forwards. There will always be George, and you and I both would be setting ourselves up as fools if we thought that our dealings with my sister and your brother were over and done with. And there are so many other things," she pressed on. "George's illegitimacy, and my lack of

"No," he repeated. "Think of what you know of me, and ask yourself if any of those things will make me reconsider what I am about to say

Her mouth closed into a firm line. For a moment, her gaze dropped to the vicinity of his chin, but when she looked up at him again, he

thought he saw something like amusement brightening her features. a

"I love you." He put the words out there, tasting them for the first time. "I wish to marry you, though I've no doubt you'll continue to voice every reason why we should not. And yet I cannot comprehend

Her hand, he realized, still rested against his chest. Slowly, her fingers pulled inward, until she'd formed a loose fist that tapped out a restless rhythm on the front of his waistcoat. "And to think I wanted nothing more than to toss you into a mud puddle the first time you

Haughton allowed himself to sigh. That she had not grabbed him by

Her mouth quirked, and her gaze again dropped to the level of his neckcloth, battered and flattened by the day's journey as it was. "You're waiting for an answer from me, I know. And it is poor behavior on my part to have given myself so much time to think it over, and yet still not have a ready reply when the topic if finally

"What do you mean...?" he began to say, but she waved his words

"You may flatter yourself with the knowledge that I have already allowed my mind to wonder what it would be like to have you as a husband." She laughed, a so sound that escaped her throat and made him want to kiss her. "But I must admit it is still quite jarring to

He ducked his chin until he could see her eyes and the brilliant light that glowed from within them. "And to what conclusion have all your

"That your sister would no doubt be the happiest woman in all of Christendom to discover you'd decided to settle down once and for

He tossed back his head and laughed at that. When his mirth subsided, he looked down to find Sophia watching him, her

lip until she tilted her head up to better meet his.

sliding over his collar to brush the edges of his hair.

along with the loss of daylight.

brush of his lips on her brow.

of him?"

promise."

evening."

put them there.

as it is.

Again, thank you.

Quenby Olson

stars lit up in the eastern half of the sky.

This woman, he realized at that moment, and no other.

below the horizon. The glow of an early summer twilight still

"Your sister will send out a search party for us if we tarry much longer," Sophia said, her voice strangely quiet against the cacophony of crickets and other insects that had sprung to life once the first few

expression more serious than it had been only a moment before. He noticed it, too, that subtle alteration in the feeling between them. Behind her, the sun dipped lower, the edge of it disappearing beneath the hills that formed a backdrop for the house. Haughton leaned forward, though he did not have far to go. Sophia's hand was trapped between them, her fingers sliding up and plucking idly at the already rumpled folds of his neckcloth before he pressed his lips to her cheek. Her breath warmed his chin as he shi ed his mouth to pay equal attention to her other cheek, and then he kissed her lips, parted as they were, her teeth still tugging at the inside of her bottom

She was not a slight thing, certainly not a wisp of a female to wilt in his arms the moment his hand found its way to her waist, and yet his first inclination was to hold her as if she were the most ethereal of creatures, ready to dissipate the moment his fingers sought out greater purchase. But instead of fading away, Sophia stepped into him, the hand that had been making a further mess of his neckcloth

By the time he pulled away from her, the sun had nearly disappeared

illuminated the sky above, but a definite chill had seeped into the air

"Then you don't know Bess," he mused, and tucked an errant curl of hair behind her ear. "No doubt she's already tucked herself before the fire, and is dandling George on her knee while she crows to herself about her abilities at making a match between the two of us." Haughton lowered his head and kissed her again, this time a light

"I still haven't given you an answer," she reminded him as he slipped

He said nothing as he o ered his arm to her. She took it without hesitation, her fingers warm on his sleeve. Leave it to her to draw out his su ering for as long as possible. If she did agree to be his wife, she would always keep him from becoming too complacent. Which was

undoubtedly one of the reasons he found her so attractive.

"George will most likely be in my car until he is grown." She turned to face him, her shoulders rising and falling inside the folds of his coat. "I have always looked upon him as I assume I would my own children. But he is your brother's son. Will you be able to raise him as a father, and without any of your... di iculties with David marring your opinion

He sought out her hands, raising both of them to his lips in order to

"And that is all I will ever ask of you." She shi ed forward onto the balls of her feet and kissed him, her hands slipping out of his grasp in order to frame his face with them. "It is all either of us can promise to each other," she whispered against his lips, and kissed him again.

She took his arm when he o ered it, and they began the walk back down the hill and across the lawn towards the house. The windows were already lit with the glow from the candles and fires in the various rooms, the preparations for dinner well underway. They halted on the terrace, the doors only a few paces ahead of them.

He kissed her once more, away from the light that spilled out through the windows. When he looked down at her, he saw the remnants of the lines of strain around her eyes and at the corners of her mouth. He would do everything he could, over the coming years, to banish

such marks of worry from her face.

smile. "I'll meet you in the drawing room?"

And thank you to all you wonderful readers!

really helped to motivate me to keep posting.

"So, shall you be the one to tell my sister, or should I?"

"Together," Sophia said, and shrugged out of his coat in order to return it to him before they went inside. "And not until a er at the least the first course. Should she discover it before then, I doubt we'll be permitted to sit down to a proper meal for the remainder of the

"Very good," he remarked, while attempting to bite down on his

"Agreed." A dip of her head, a smile of her own, and she slipped inside, pausing only long enough to glance at him over her shoulder, the previous lines of stress replaced by a slight crinkling at the corners of her eyes. Lines of happiness, he realized. And he—cold, boorish fellow she'd once accused him of being—had been the one to

brain wants to give Sophia an epilogue, but I think I may need to step back from the story for a little bit and see if that's simply my own brain being finicky about things, or if it's a nice and complete ending

Like I mentioned so many times throughout this story, thank you to all of the readers who read, commented, voted, added and so on. It

And coming up, I'll begin posting a new story, The Bride Price, which I cannot wait to share with you. My posting on that one should be a bit slower (probably twice a week as opposed to every weekday) as I'm heading into the last couple months of my pregnancy and have a lot

of things to take care of before my next little one arrives.

kiss the tips of her fingers. "I will do my best. That is all I can

out of his coat and draped it over her shoulders.

his collar and threatened to pitch him into the lake a er his declaration had to be taken as a sign in his favor. "Sophia?"

there existing a single one that would matter to me."

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status and fortune, and then there is—"

"No."

She blinked.

to you."

set foot in my home."

broached."

all."

away with a flick of her fingers.

hear the words spoken out loud."

silent ponderings brought you?"