

Excerpts: Dragons

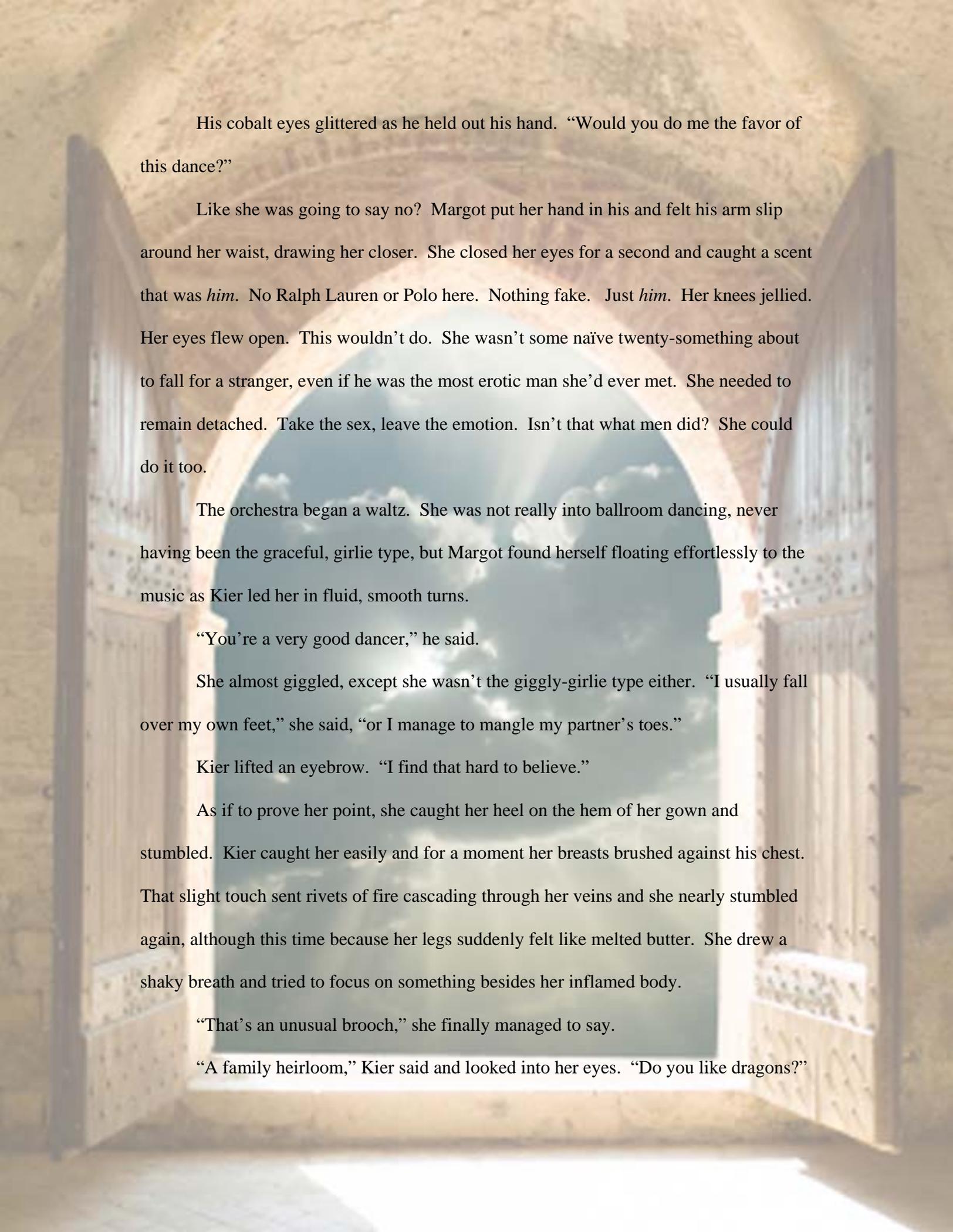
A Dragon's Tale

“Are you enjoying the atmosphere, Miss Guthrie?”

Margot turned at the sound of Kier's voice. She hadn't even heard him approach. For a NYC girl who investigated shady areas, she must be slipping. Then, any thought of self-defense tactics flew right out of her head.

He looked like he stepped off the cover of a Gothic romance. Dressed again in black, his cutaway coat of superfine fit perfectly over his broad shoulders. The black satin waistcoat squared off at the top of tight trousers, defining his flat belly. Tonight he wore his raven hair tied back, revealing finely chiseled cheekbones and just the slightest bit of stubble shadowed his jaw. And...he wore a cape. An honest-to-God black cape that hung over one shoulder and was secured by a gold dragon brooch with a shimmering sapphire eye.

“Nice costume,” Margot said and then felt her skin begin to heat as she realized where *his* eyes lingered. It wasn't like she was shy or anything, but the dress did nearly expose her nipples. They began to bud at the thought and she hoped *that* wouldn't show beneath the thin material. She glanced down. No such luck. So she was turned on by Kier—who wouldn't be?—and maybe she hadn't had sex in more than a year, thanks to the last jerk who'd used her body, thinking she was stupid enough to spill the beans on the big crime case she was covering—but Mr. Gorgeous Goth didn't need to know that. Yet, her breasts—okay, her whole body...*other* parts were beginning to throb, too—were practically advertising her willingness to hop into the nearest bed with him. Or closet. Or behind an urn...



His cobalt eyes glittered as he held out his hand. “Would you do me the favor of this dance?”

Like she was going to say no? Margot put her hand in his and felt his arm slip around her waist, drawing her closer. She closed her eyes for a second and caught a scent that was *him*. No Ralph Lauren or Polo here. Nothing fake. Just *him*. Her knees jellied. Her eyes flew open. This wouldn’t do. She wasn’t some naïve twenty-something about to fall for a stranger, even if he was the most erotic man she’d ever met. She needed to remain detached. Take the sex, leave the emotion. Isn’t that what men did? She could do it too.

The orchestra began a waltz. She was not really into ballroom dancing, never having been the graceful, girly type, but Margot found herself floating effortlessly to the music as Kier led her in fluid, smooth turns.

“You’re a very good dancer,” he said.

She almost giggled, except she wasn’t the giggly-girly type either. “I usually fall over my own feet,” she said, “or I manage to mangle my partner’s toes.”

Kier lifted an eyebrow. “I find that hard to believe.”

As if to prove her point, she caught her heel on the hem of her gown and stumbled. Kier caught her easily and for a moment her breasts brushed against his chest. That slight touch sent rivets of fire cascading through her veins and she nearly stumbled again, although this time because her legs suddenly felt like melted butter. She drew a shaky breath and tried to focus on something besides her inflamed body.

“That’s an unusual brooch,” she finally managed to say.

“A family heirloom,” Kier said and looked into her eyes. “Do you like dragons?”

The Dragon's Lair

Half an hour later, Tania gathered her purse and jacket to head back to the B&B. The session with Holly had gone well, in spite of a slightly rocky start. Thanks to “the cute teacher syndrome” Holly had gone to her room, a dreamy expression on her face.

She nearly collided with Calum as his muscular bulk filled the doorway suddenly. He smelled of fresh air and outdoors. His dark hair was damp, although not wet, and she wondered if he'd been hiking on the mountain with its perpetual fog at the summit.

“What was that artist doing up here?” he asked, still blocking the door.

“Mr. Brice invited him,” Tania replied. “He's going to give Holly art lessons.”

A thundercloud swept Calum's face. “By whose order? I've nae given permission for any such thing. Was it your idea?”

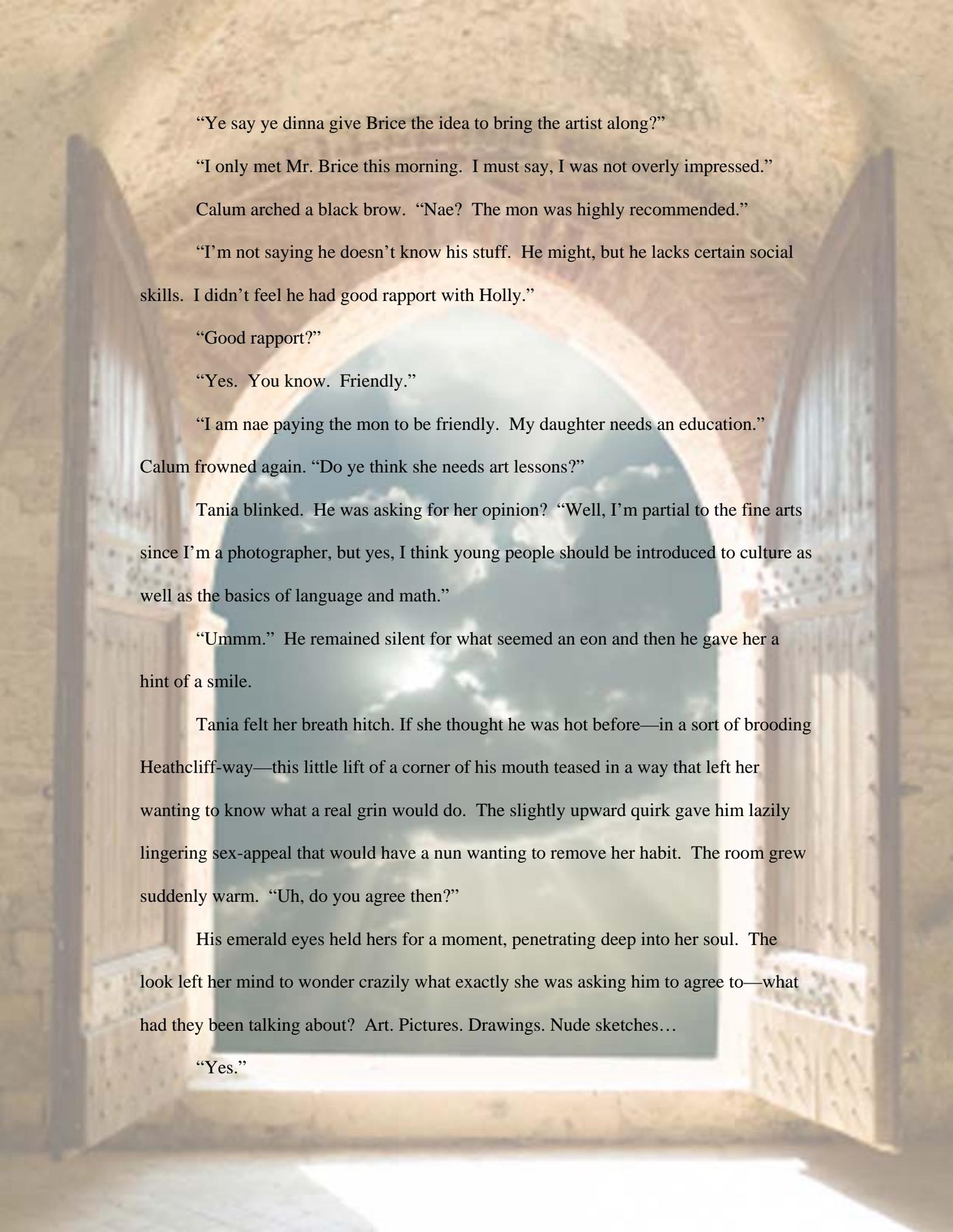
“Of course not. I assumed Mr. Brice had cleared it through you.”

“He dinna.” Calum moved inside and motioned for Tania to sit. “We need to do a wee bit of talking.”

For a defiant moment, she considered standing. The “laird” might be attractive—heck, he was *hot*, if she wanted to be truthful...all that brawn and those mesmerizing green eyes could lead a female to indulge in fantasies—but he was short on charm, even for a New York girl, used to men who were direct and to-the-point. And why was he standing there glowering at her in the first place?

He gestured impatiently. “Will ye have a seat?”

Well, at least he *asked*, even if there was no “please” attached to it. Tania laid her purse and jacket down and sat. Calum took a seat across from her. She had the silliest notion that perhaps he had been *waiting* for her to sit first. How quaint would that be?



“Ye say ye dinna give Brice the idea to bring the artist along?”

“I only met Mr. Brice this morning. I must say, I was not overly impressed.”

Calum arched a black brow. “Nae? The mon was highly recommended.”

“I’m not saying he doesn’t know his stuff. He might, but he lacks certain social skills. I didn’t feel he had good rapport with Holly.”

“Good rapport?”

“Yes. You know. Friendly.”

“I am nae paying the mon to be friendly. My daughter needs an education.”

Calum frowned again. “Do ye think she needs art lessons?”

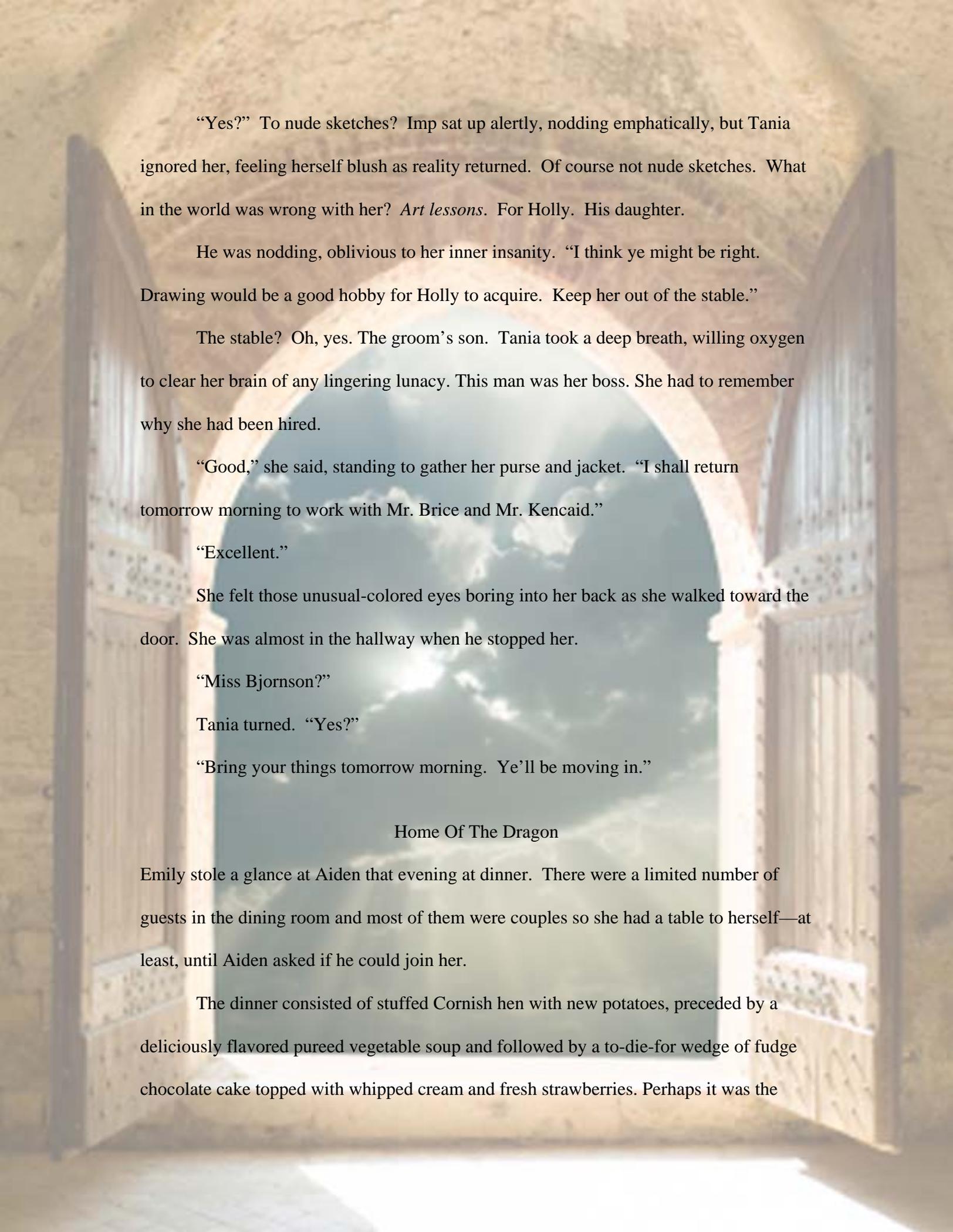
Tania blinked. He was asking for her opinion? “Well, I’m partial to the fine arts since I’m a photographer, but yes, I think young people should be introduced to culture as well as the basics of language and math.”

“Ummm.” He remained silent for what seemed an eon and then he gave her a hint of a smile.

Tania felt her breath hitch. If she thought he was hot before—in a sort of brooding Heathcliff-way—this little lift of a corner of his mouth teased in a way that left her wanting to know what a real grin would do. The slightly upward quirk gave him lazily lingering sex-appeal that would have a nun wanting to remove her habit. The room grew suddenly warm. “Uh, do you agree then?”

His emerald eyes held hers for a moment, penetrating deep into her soul. The look left her mind to wonder crazily what exactly she was asking him to agree to—what had they been talking about? Art. Pictures. Drawings. Nude sketches...

“Yes.”



“Yes?” To nude sketches? Imp sat up alertly, nodding emphatically, but Tania ignored her, feeling herself blush as reality returned. Of course not nude sketches. What in the world was wrong with her? *Art lessons*. For Holly. His daughter.

He was nodding, oblivious to her inner insanity. “I think ye might be right. Drawing would be a good hobby for Holly to acquire. Keep her out of the stable.”

The stable? Oh, yes. The groom’s son. Tania took a deep breath, willing oxygen to clear her brain of any lingering lunacy. This man was her boss. She had to remember why she had been hired.

“Good,” she said, standing to gather her purse and jacket. “I shall return tomorrow morning to work with Mr. Brice and Mr. Kencaid.”

“Excellent.”

She felt those unusual-colored eyes boring into her back as she walked toward the door. She was almost in the hallway when he stopped her.

“Miss Bjornson?”

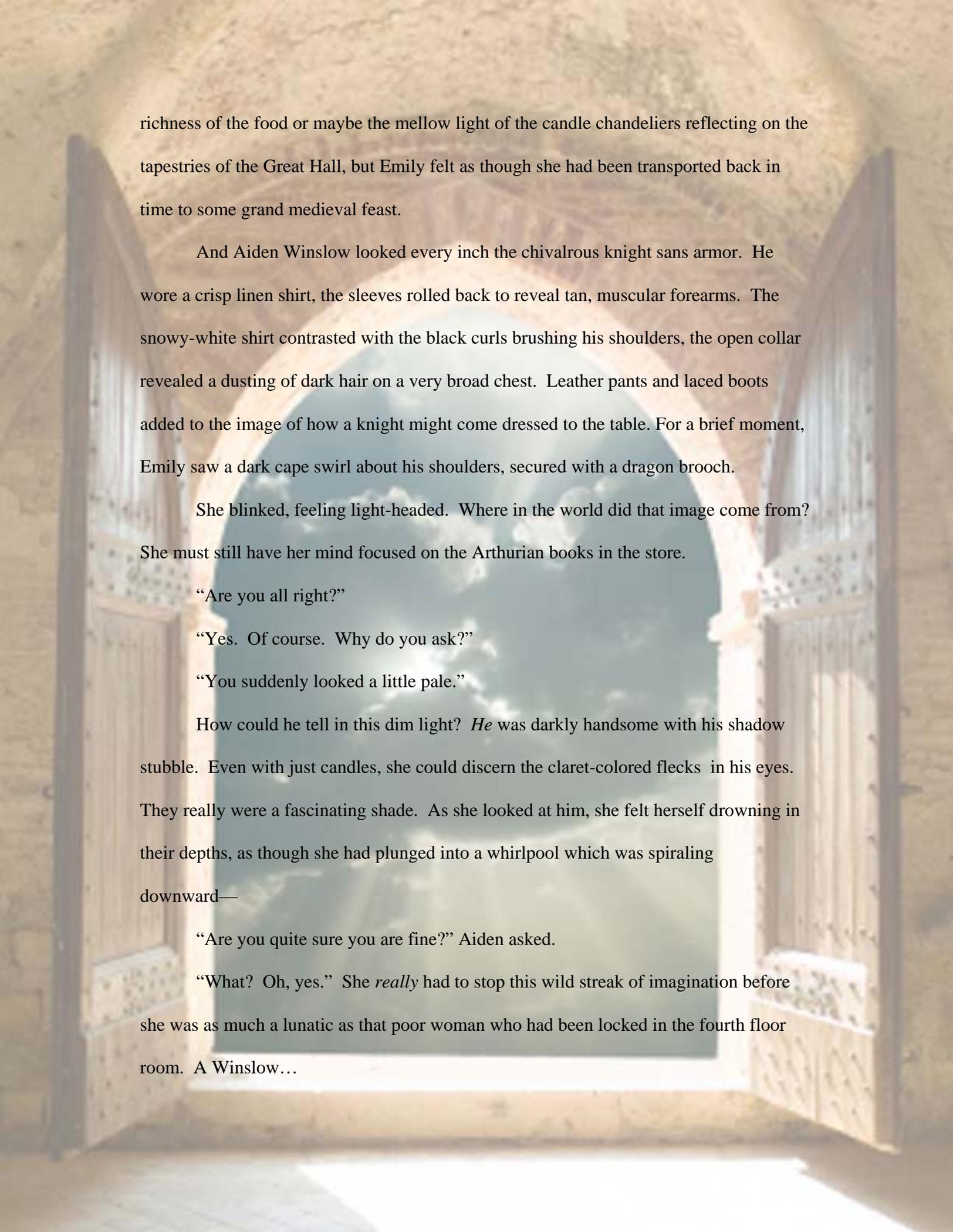
Tania turned. “Yes?”

“Bring your things tomorrow morning. Ye’ll be moving in.”

Home Of The Dragon

Emily stole a glance at Aiden that evening at dinner. There were a limited number of guests in the dining room and most of them were couples so she had a table to herself—at least, until Aiden asked if he could join her.

The dinner consisted of stuffed Cornish hen with new potatoes, preceded by a deliciously flavored pureed vegetable soup and followed by a to-die-for wedge of fudge chocolate cake topped with whipped cream and fresh strawberries. Perhaps it was the



richness of the food or maybe the mellow light of the candle chandeliers reflecting on the tapestries of the Great Hall, but Emily felt as though she had been transported back in time to some grand medieval feast.

And Aiden Winslow looked every inch the chivalrous knight sans armor. He wore a crisp linen shirt, the sleeves rolled back to reveal tan, muscular forearms. The snowy-white shirt contrasted with the black curls brushing his shoulders, the open collar revealed a dusting of dark hair on a very broad chest. Leather pants and laced boots added to the image of how a knight might come dressed to the table. For a brief moment, Emily saw a dark cape swirl about his shoulders, secured with a dragon brooch.

She blinked, feeling light-headed. Where in the world did that image come from? She must still have her mind focused on the Arthurian books in the store.

“Are you all right?”

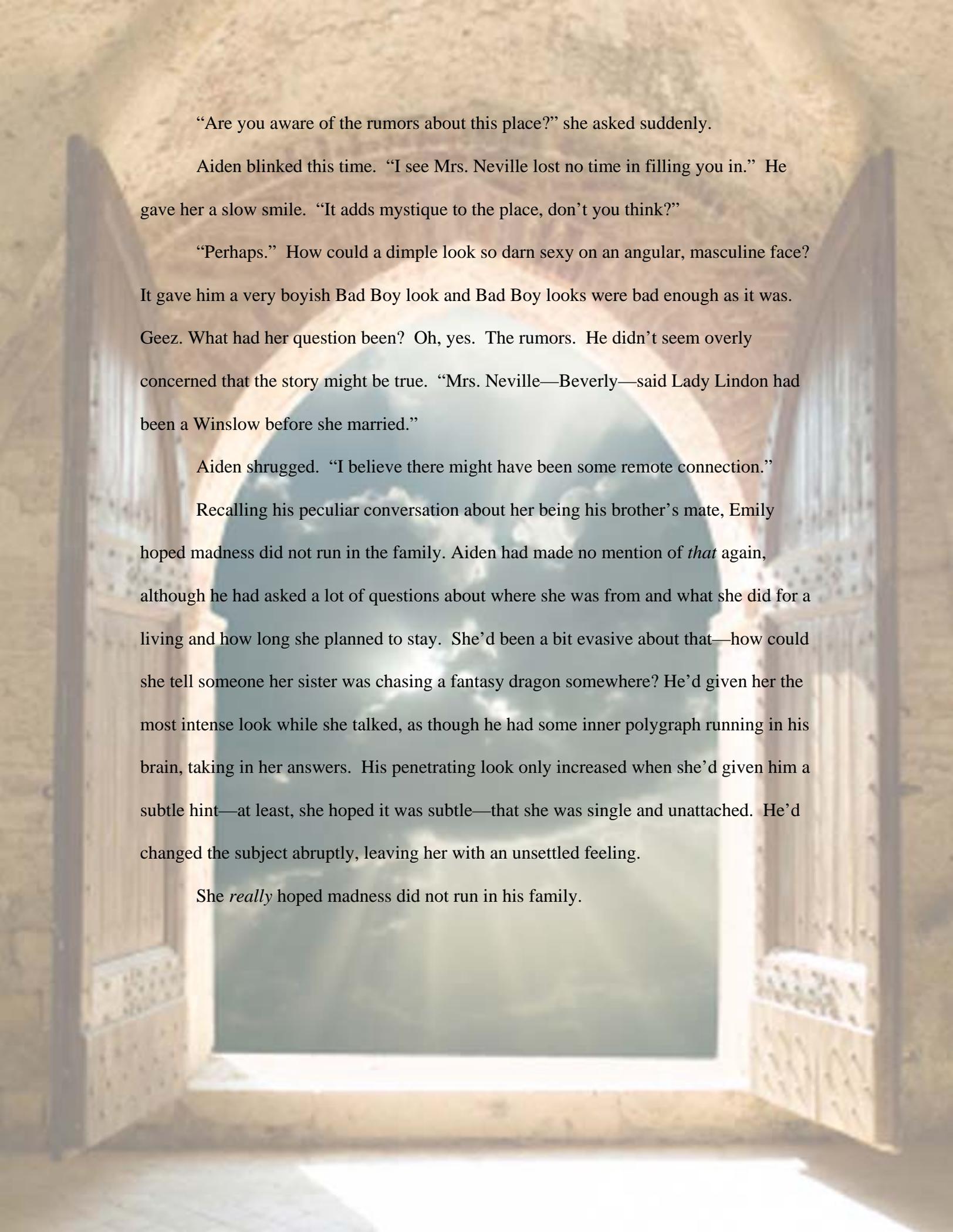
“Yes. Of course. Why do you ask?”

“You suddenly looked a little pale.”

How could he tell in this dim light? *He* was darkly handsome with his shadow stubble. Even with just candles, she could discern the claret-colored flecks in his eyes. They really were a fascinating shade. As she looked at him, she felt herself drowning in their depths, as though she had plunged into a whirlpool which was spiraling downward—

“Are you quite sure you are fine?” Aiden asked.

“What? Oh, yes.” She *really* had to stop this wild streak of imagination before she was as much a lunatic as that poor woman who had been locked in the fourth floor room. A Winslow...



“Are you aware of the rumors about this place?” she asked suddenly.

Aiden blinked this time. “I see Mrs. Neville lost no time in filling you in.” He gave her a slow smile. “It adds mystique to the place, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps.” How could a dimple look so darn sexy on an angular, masculine face? It gave him a very boyish Bad Boy look and Bad Boy looks were bad enough as it was. Geez. What had her question been? Oh, yes. The rumors. He didn’t seem overly concerned that the story might be true. “Mrs. Neville—Beverly—said Lady Lindon had been a Winslow before she married.”

Aiden shrugged. “I believe there might have been some remote connection.”

Recalling his peculiar conversation about her being his brother’s mate, Emily hoped madness did not run in the family. Aiden had made no mention of *that* again, although he had asked a lot of questions about where she was from and what she did for a living and how long she planned to stay. She’d been a bit evasive about that—how could she tell someone her sister was chasing a fantasy dragon somewhere? He’d given her the most intense look while she talked, as though he had some inner polygraph running in his brain, taking in her answers. His penetrating look only increased when she’d given him a subtle hint—at least, she hoped it was subtle—that she was single and unattached. He’d changed the subject abruptly, leaving her with an unsettled feeling.

She *really* hoped madness did not run in his family.