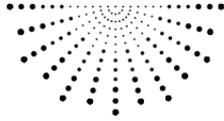
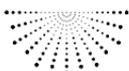


BANK NOTES



COURTNEY MILAN

BANK NOTES



July, 1867
There were some many benefits, Lady Theresa Worth told herself, to her sister's marriage almost a year ago. Theresa could have made a lengthy list. She could have counted her blessings like bank notes and found herself wealthy.

At the moment, she was trying to avoid thinking about the matter. The sun was high overhead, the smells of grass and algae and tar from the boat dock at the duck pond almost overwhelming. From here, with the weeds grown so high, she would be invisible to the house.

She wished she could be invisible all the time. She could sneak about the house, wearing whatever she liked, without worrying about what she might inadvertently do...

But no, that would never work. The instant a vase toppled over, Judith would blame her. Even if she wasn't at fault. *Theresa*, she imagined her sister saying, *out of sight is not out of mind. Just because I can't see you, doesn't mean I can't blame you.* And if her sister would be bad, the dowager marchioness would be worse. Not because she'd scold, either.

No. The dowager never scolded. She would simply look at the shattered vase and stare blankly at the empty spot where Theresa huddled invisibly against the wall.

“Don’t you worry, dear,” the dowager would say. “Vases are replaceable; young girls are not. Although this vase... But never mind. Don’t worry about it.”

If there was anything worse than scolding, it was being made to feel that one was a disappointment.

Visible or no, Theresa was bound to disappoint. Which was why, instead of making a list of advantages, Theresa was making inroads. Inroads, that was, on a cat on Christian’s estate.

It was a ginger cat: a lovely, skittish animal with long, fluffy fur. It sat on a large rock, sunning itself, licking its paws and pretending that it wasn’t watching Theresa. She pretended that she wasn’t watching it back.

Theresa liked cats. Cats didn’t give a damn what she was wearing. Ankles were not shocking to cats; they were delightful accoutrements that a cat could weave in and out of, hiding in her skirts where it was safe.

Cats didn’t say things like, “I have always wanted a daughter.” Cats didn’t look at Theresa with tremulous hope in their eyes. Cats only ever made her feel guilty when she didn’t share her chicken, and that was a problem with an easy solution.

Most of all, cats didn’t bother with the stupid dance of etiquette designed to transform the simplest requests into an hour-long ordeal. If a cat wanted milk, by damn, it demanded milk. If it wanted to be snuggled, it crawled into your lap. If you didn’t pay attention as the cat so obviously deserved, you got a claw to your face.

Nobody ever said to a cat, “For heaven’s sake, you licked that fur three minutes ago. Why ever did you tromp out to the muddy duck pond?” Nobody ever asked a cat, “Why do

you keep ham in your handkerchief?" Nobody ever questioned a cat about anything—not with any degree of success.

Nobody ever gave a cat contradictory, impossible-to-meet standards.

Practice your needlework, they told her.

And Theresa *had*. She was *trying*. She was doing her best to sit still and comply and sew dewdads and whatnots and wear corsets, because she didn't like disappointing people. Yet somehow, she always failed.

"Oh, my dear Theresa," the dowager had said that morning. "Whatever have you done with that beautiful gown?"

"I was practicing my needlework!" she had explained.

Apparently, ladies did not add pockets to gowns—a fact that nobody had seen fit to communicate to Theresa before today. Apparently, ladies weren't allowed pockets at all—something about the line of a gown and her figure and blah blah blah, Theresa had stopped paying attention at that point. How ladies were to keep useful items on their person, nobody had explained.

Do needlework, but not *that* needlework. Sit still, but merciful heavens, not *that* freakishly still. Be yourself, the dowager duchess had advised Theresa smiling at her. She hadn't needed to say the other half of the sentence. Just not *that* self.

If Theresa were her actual self, everyone would look at her with that reproachful look, and she'd feel as if she stood about three inches tall.

Theresa was tired of feeling small.

Lady Theresa Worth removed her illicit ham-filled handkerchief from the unauthorized pocket in her gown and tossed a small square of meat across the ten feet between her and the ginger cat.

"There, kitty, kitty," she said softly. "Nothing to worry about. I'm not looking at you."

Through her lashes, she watched the cat's nose flare. It sniffed the air then carefully, oh so carefully, crept forward a few inches.

It had taken Theresa two weeks to get to the point where the cat wouldn't run away as soon as it sighted her. It had taken her another three days to be able to move—just a little—in the cat's presence. She stood now, very slowly, stretching and looking anywhere but at the other creature.

"Ginger," she said experimentally.

The cat warily sniffed the treat.

"Orange."

The cat bolted the meat and retreated a foot. Theresa idly reached into her handkerchief and tossed another small square of ham. The retreat halted; the cat's gaze fixed on the meat.

Theresa had been reading a book from her brother-in-law's vast library earlier that day. One of the characters had been named...

"Wickham," Theresa said, and at that word, the cat cocked its head and looked at her. "Wickham it is. Although this may end up rather awkward if it turns out you're female."

The cat scarfed up this piece as well.

She tossed another piece of ham, this one just a little closer, and the cat crept forward another foot. Five feet away; Theresa wasn't sure how close she could coax it this time.

"Except," Theresa mused aloud, "Wickham is a last name. There's no reason Wickham can't be a female. It isn't fair. Why can't the villain who besmirches reputations, spreads rumors, and deflowers virgins be a woman?"

The cat skittered back at the sound of her voice. Enough for the day, really. Theresa turned away from the cat and walked out onto the dock. Her shoes—uncomfortable, pinching things—made a hollow wooden sound against the

planks. The heat was stultifying; she could feel her gown sticking to the back of her neck. She walked to the edge and looked at the water. She wished that she could pretend the water was inviting. It looked cool, but that was the best she could say for those murky depths. The pond was a dull, muddy gray. Here at the edge of the dock, near the shore, grasses obscured the bottom. She was fairly certain she'd sink a foot in silt if she were foolish enough to get in the pond. She had no desire to test this theory.

Almost no desire. Sort of no desire. Very well; maybe a little desire.

If she leaned over the edge of the dock, she could trail her hands in it. It wouldn't be that bad, would it?

She'd already caused trouble with the ham at lunch today. Judith had asked her to *please* try to not upset the dowager again.

"She's doing her best," she'd told Theresa. "This has been her home, and she has had sole charge of it, for decades. She wants to like you so much. Can you please keep the dust-ups to once a day?"

Theresa tried. Honestly, she did.

And she *liked* the dowager. The woman wasn't cruel or malicious or stupid. She'd cried when she was first introduced to Theresa. She'd fed her tea and sandwiches, and told her that she had always wanted a daughter.

More than that. The dowager had *had* a daughter for two days, one who would have been only a few years older than Theresa.

"I promise," the woman had said, "I will treat you no differently."

Theresa had walked with the woman out to the grave and held her hand. She had no memory of a mother; she hadn't minded the idea in principle. And she'd felt...loved. Accepted. Wanted, in a way she hadn't felt since her eldest

brother had gone away. Everyone always loved Benedict; nobody but her saw through his sweet, earnest routine.

Now Theresa had someone who wanted to love *her*. *Theresa*. Her alone. Awkward, peculiar, ungainly, clumsy, always does the wrong thing Theresa.

She'd been told all these things a thousand times. It had meant so much to have someone *want* to love her.

Theresa hadn't wanted to ruin it, but ruin it she had, much as she had ruined everything else.

The dowager was failing at the task she had set for herself. Theresa knew it with a quiet desperation that she could do nothing about.

It had been easy to promise Judith that there would be no more dust-ups. Theresa *wanted* to make the dowager happy. She'd chosen this lace-white confection of a gown because it had put a tremulous smile on the older woman's face, even though lace scratched.

No more than one dust-up a day.

It had seemed a reasonable request at the time. But every day had so many hours, and the estate had so many animals. No. Theresa knew better than to go into the water. She probably shouldn't even take off her shoes and dangle her feet.

But the heat was sweltering, and her horrible pinching boots and stockings were both so constricting...

She was just going to unlace her boots, just a little. Just enough to get a little air flowing through. She squatted awkwardly—it turned out, lace gowns weren't made for disrobing on the dock, and who would have known it?—and started in on the laces of her left foot.

"Ahoy, Theresa!" The shout came from the trees.

Wickham's tail puffed up like a bristled brush and the cat darted away. Theresa tried to stand. But she was stepping on the undone lace of her shoe, and the next thing she knew, her

balance was off. She toppled over, windmilling her arms. Air rushed past her for what felt like long seconds. Her leg smacked the wood of the dock with a glancing, smarting blow.

Then water met her. The water was cool—cold, in fact—and she got a disgusting mouthful. It tasted of mud and algae. She flailed—her feet kicked the bottom—and sank promptly in inches of mud. Theresa pushed herself to a stand, set her hands on her hips, and found her younger brother watching her in horror from the edge of the pond.

“Private Benedict!” she bellowed. “What in blazes did you *mean* by addressing me in such familiar terms!”

From the high weeds at the shore, she saw her brother’s nose wrinkle. His hands went to his hips.

“*Private* Benedict? Why am I now *Private* Benedict? I was a corporal just this morning!”

It wasn’t easy to project an aura of command knee-deep in mud, but Theresa folded her arms in front of her and glared at him.

“That is not one of the proper forms of address,” Theresa informed him. “You may call me General Worth, or your excellency, or simply sir.”

“But Tee—”

“That is also not an acceptable form of address,” Theresa said. “Would you like to do two laps around the duck pond as punishment?”

Benedict met her eyes for a very long moment, then shook his head. “No. *Sir.*”

This little imaginative excursion, Theresa suspected, was probably against the rules as well. She could almost see the dowager’s pained smile, could almost hear her gentle rebuke. *Ladies don’t start a private army. They certainly don’t impress their younger brothers into service.*

Rules, rules, *rules.*

“Private Benedict,” Theresa said. “Report on the ongoing situation.”

“Ah.” He frowned. “The general appears to be...embedded in the duck pond, sir.”

“Very astute.”

“The general’s lace gown is likely unrecoverable.”

Theresa looked down. Oh, damn. She hadn’t thought of her gown. Her feet were finally cool, but only because they were squelching in mud. Her gown was liberally spattered with brown, and the parts that weren’t muddy had acquired algae.

What sort of nincompoop bought a clumsy girl who liked running around outdoors a white dress made of a painfully expensive material?

Ah, right. The dowager marchioness. Who wanted a sweet, well-behaved simulacrum of a daughter. Theresa winced.

“Our allies will not approve,” Benedict said. “I still want to know why I was demoted to private. Sir.”

“Because you scared the cat.” Theresa glowered at him. “We’ll talk about your demotion at a later time.”

“But I worked *hard* to become a corporal,” Benedict said. “It’s not *fair*.”

“Most promotions come in wartime.” Theresa realized that the toes of her right foot were sinking directly in the mud. She’d lost a boot.

Good. She hated them.

“But—”

“Private,” Theresa said, “we have before us a clandestine operation of the most delicate nature. We must get me back to my room without being seen. This is not a time for whining. It’s an opportunity.”

Benedict stopped protesting and looked thoughtful.

Technically, it wasn’t *possible* to impress one’s younger

brother into a private army. All he had to do was say, *no, go away, you can't make me*, and that was the end of the matter. Theresa had only managed to do it by offering him more amusement than the alternative. It was more fun for Benedict to be a private in her army than a boy anywhere else.

As for Theresa? She'd been crammed into corsets and white gowns befitting her virginal status. She wanted to besmirch reputations, spread gossip, and... Well, she wasn't sure yet about deflowering men; it seemed a rather complicated process. But Theresa was only fourteen, and she was already faintly interested. She was fairly certain she could grow into it.

"The servants will see me coming through any entrance," Theresa said.

"Yes, and they'll report to the dowager." Benedict's nose wrinkled. "She'll weep—not really, but you know that one single tear thing?"

Theresa did know all about the dowager's one single tear. She deployed it with maddening effectiveness. She shuddered.

"You'll feel badly, I'll stomp off in disgust, and dinner will be ruined before it's even started."

"There is a way to avert the crises," Theresa said. "A solution. I wonder... Do you see it?" She gave her brother a sage look of wisdom. She hoped it was a sage look of wisdom, at any rate.

In truth, she had no idea.

He frowned. "Sir, why are you still standing in the duck pond? Do you need help out?"

"I wanted to go in." She shrugged. "I wasn't going to, but fate had other ideas. If I'm going to get in trouble, I might as well maximize the benefit, don't you think? But you're stalling. What's your plan, Private Benedict?"

"General, sir." He looked back in the direction of the

house. “That’s easy. We’ll need to launch our assault on the back trellis.”

She gave him another sage nod, and suppressed her grin of relief. “Indeed we will.”



There was absolutely no reason that the trellis should have been collapsing under Theresa’s weight. She was a brilliant climber. She’d distributed her weight as evenly as she could. And, for God’s sake, she couldn’t have been *that* much heavier than the ivy that trained up it.

Alas. Here she was, fifteen feet in the air, a nice summery breeze blowing about her, while the wooden boards beneath her feet made objectionable little creaking sounds.

She looked up at the windowsill three feet above her head. “Hurry up, Benedict,” she muttered. “Open the window.”

Eeeeeek. The board she was standing on shifted—just a tiny amount, as if the nails were coming loose.

Odd. The ground didn’t look this far away from the window above her head. Why did it look so high up *now*? Perhaps being on the verge of plummeting to her death magnified the heights. *Eeeeeek.* A third protest. Theresa rearranged herself and felt the trellis shudder under her weight.

Then came another sound—the welcome sound of a window latch being undone. Oh, thank God. She wasn’t going to die. She...

Wait. Why was the window *ten feet to her right* opening?

Benedict stuck his head out and frowned at her. “We appear to have made a small miscalculation.”

“A miscalculation.” Theresa felt the trellis shift again.

“Benedict, I don’t wish to hear about miscalculations. Go to the right window, and—”

“General, sir. I am unable to comply. The sitting room is not empty. Judith and the Dowager are having tea and going over some estate business together.”

This time, the wood that squeaked was one of Theresa’s handholds. She shivered and tried not to think of the hard ground or the thorny roses that waited below.

“Benedict,” Theresa said, “the damned trellis is falling apart.”

“You know you’re not supposed to say—”

“I’m also not supposed to *perish*,” she whisper-shouted, “and yet this appears to be a real possibility in my future. I don’t think I can climb down. I don’t think I can hang on for another ten minutes, not without this whole thing falling to pieces. And there’s nothing but brick between here and there.”

Benedict bit his lip and considered her. “Um. That doesn’t leave many options.”

“It leaves exactly one option: I’m going to have to climb into the sitting room.”

“You can’t.”

Theresa knew exactly how the scenario would play out. She’d crawl through the window, looking like a monster from the back beyond, covered in mud and sticks, with a solitary boot on one foot. There would be shrieking. There would be one, single tear. The dowager would ask Theresa what she had done wrong, how her instruction could have been so inadequate, and Judith would give Theresa that tired shake of her head, the one that signified that she was on the verge of giving up on her sister.

She would disappoint them yet again. Theresa didn’t *like* disappointing them, but the truth was, it was not her behavior they found disappointing. It was Theresa herself.

“Benedict,” she said calmly. “Get Judith and the dowager out of the sitting room *now*.”

“But—”

“Use the emergency mouse, if you must. You know where it is. But that is an order.”

“But—”

“You want a promotion? Use your initiative.”

“But—”

“God rot your cheese-riddled soul. If I die, there will be nobody to promote you.”

“But—”

“There is only one answer to a direct order, Private Benedict. *Yes, sir. Immediately, sir.*”

He stared at her for a long second.

“Yes, sir,” he finally said. “Immediately, sir.” Then he disappeared.

A minute. A minute should not last so long.

Taking command of a nonexistent army was something like...coinage.

Hypothetically, anybody could exchange a British bank note for an equivalent amount of gold. Nobody did. What was the point? Bank notes were more useful than gold. Someone had once invented the lie that paper could substitute for gold; now everyone believed that lie. Everyone but a few ragtag men who shouted at Speaker’s Corner about the Bank Charter Act on Saturday, that was.

It was all a massive lie, but everyone believed it, and it worked.

Much like the rules of etiquette.

Eeeeeek. This time, the board beneath her left foot did not just shift. It gave way completely. Theresa felt her weight drop, scarcely had time to grab hold of the trellis with all her might, to reposition her foot on the nearby board—

Eeeeeek. The shifting of her weight was too much for the

wooden structure. It creaked again, the piece under her right hand giving way. She moved again, and this time, felt a rumble. A tilt, as of the entire structure loosening from its moorings on the wall.

There was nothing to do but climb, and climb fast. She darted up to the windowsill, unable to care who saw her or what they thought. She grabbed hold of the stone lip, her fingers grappling for purchase, her feet swinging wildly. Her arms burned with the effort of lifting herself up onto the narrow ledge. But there was no other choice.

She had just pulled herself up when the trellis careened away from the wall altogether, first tilting, then gathering momentum.

It hit the ground with a resounding crash.

“Oh, hell.” Theresa looked at the wreckage. “They’ll hear that.”

Theresa tugged at the window, but it was latched firmly shut. She peered inside, saw a shadowy figure inside...

Benedict opened the window. “Hurry,” he said. “The mouse can only distract them for so long.”

“What did you do?”

“Don’t ask. Better you don’t know, because you’re a terrible liar and they’ll ask you. Besides, there’s no time.”

True. They’d come out to investigate the crash, and if she were caught on the windowsill in her gown of lace, mud, and algae, the truth would all come out.

Theresa jumped through the window onto the carpet in the room beyond.

Benedict peered out behind her at the wreckage of white wood and ivy. “What are we going to say about the trellis?”

“Flimsy work,” Theresa said. “It must be rebuilt, and rebuilt stronger. How am I to entertain clandestine lovers when the back trellises can’t even support my own weight?”

Benedict narrowed his eyes at her. “I don’t believe you’re supposed to entertain clandestine lovers.”

She waved an airy hand in the air. “Never mind that for now. Let’s concentrate on the important things.”

“You mean, what are you going to do with that gown?”

“No,” Theresa said. “I mean my congratulations on your excellent work, Sergeant Benedict.” She held out a hand.

“Sergeant?” His eyes lit.

“You’ve been promoted,” she said gravely. “We’ll have the ceremony soon.”

He shook her offered hand. Then she darted across the hall before she could be discovered.



Theresa had honestly thought she was safe. She’d kept to herself the rest of the afternoon. Once she was in the room, she had shimmied out of her gown. She’d scrubbed herself as best as she could from the basin in her room, and combed her hair into the semblance of tidiness. She’d dressed herself for dinner—thank God for the fussy practice of changing multiple times per day. And she’d shoved her muddy gown all the way under her bed.

Her misdeeds had gone unnoticed. Nobody had even asked her about the trellis.

She was just about to go down—early, even—when a knock sounded at her door.

She looked around, making sure she’d hidden all signs of her earlier adventure. No sticks on the ground. No mud on the carpet. No errant, filthy shoes on the floor of the wardrobe. She was safe.

She glided to the door and opened it with a smooth, graceful movement. She was bad at lying, but it turned out

she was good at producing bank notes. *Remember, it's not a lie if everyone believes it.*

The dowager marchioness stood on the other side. "Theresa, dear."

Theresa delivered her most gracious smile. It was the fake smile that the dowager made her practice, all lips and bowed head and fluttering lashes. The smile was like handing a shopkeeper a banknote.

"My lady."

The dowager tilted her head and gave Theresa a reciprocal smile. "Might I come in?"

"But of course." Theresa gestured. "My room is...your room."

This earned her a long, searching look.

"Come," Theresa said. "Sit." She herself perched on the edge of the bed, her feet swinging, hopefully obscuring any hint of the muddy gown beneath. Too late, she wondered if it was improper to sit on a bed. Should one only use chairs? Was a bed suggestive? If they'd talked about it before, she couldn't recall.

The marchioness did not critique Theresa's choice. Neither did she sit, not in a chair, nor on the bed. Instead, she came to stand by Theresa, forcing Theresa to tilt her head upward. "My dear, you're much improved. Your manners are excellent, when you wish to use them."

"Thank you," Theresa said.

It wasn't so simple as wishing. Sitting still was like holding one's breath; one could only manage it for so long. The best Theresa could do was pretend. Pretend and hide. She could learn to hold her breath longer and better. She'd never be able to do without air entirely.

"I think," the marchioness said, "that I have been very unfair to you."

This was entirely unexpected. Theresa tilted her head. “How so?”

The marchioness sighed. “I wanted a daughter so much. I always imagined what it would be like—buying gowns, sitting at tea, introducing her in society. I never imagined what I would do if my daughter didn’t want any of those things.”

Theresa’s face froze. “I...*want* to want those things.”

“It’s not fair,” the dowager said. “It’s not fair to you. I need to love the woman I have, not the one I imagined.”

She knew. She knew about the pond. The mud. The trellis. Somehow, she knew. Theresa kept her smile stiffly in place. “Well. How...interesting. That is certainly interesting, my lady. I’m not sure what you mean.” That was what a lady would say. Sweet, kind, and totally devoid of information.

The older woman looked Theresa in the eyes for a very long time before coming to sit next to her on the bed. “Dear.” She reached out and took Theresa’s hand. Theresa let her do it. “My dear. There was the trellis.”

“The trellis...?”

“Completely destroyed. And the bits of mud on the sill, as well as the carpet, and little sticks in the hallway. I assume the gown is under your bed?”

No point lying; Theresa wasn’t any good at it. “Shoved as far under as it will go,” she admitted. “I’m sorry.”

She steeled herself for the inevitable dose of guilt. She imagined her heart freezing so she would withstand the onslaught.

But Theresa, dearest, don’t you want pretty things? Theresa, you’ll be representing not only the Worth family, but my son. Will you not think of our reputation?

Or maybe she would get only a speaking look and a sigh. That single tear would well up in the woman’s eye, and...

The marchioness gave a firm nod. "That's that, then. We need to stop buying you white gowns."

"It's a good idea."

"I think I've gone about this the wrong way," the marchioness said. "I keep expecting you to be..."

"A normal girl?" Theresa said.

She tried. Really, she did. But one could only expend so much effort trying. The weight of propriety, of sitting still and smiling faintly, could only be born so long.

"No," the dowager said. "I made a mistake with Christian when he was a child. I thought I knew best for him, and he disagreed, and..." She looked away. "I made a bad choice. A terrible choice, actually. Judith and I talked, and... I don't want to make a bad choice with you."

Theresa wasn't sure what to say. She looked over at the woman next to her. "My lady." That seemed safe enough.

"Edith," the woman said. "You should call me Edith. It's been so long since I had a child that I forgot. You know, Christian was worse—in his way—than you are."

Theresa's heart stilled. "Was he?"

"I forgot the most important lesson," the dowager said. "You need to love the child you have, not the abstraction who isn't present."

Theresa was not often capable of sitting still. Now, she could scarcely move. She felt her heart thawing, bit by perilous bit.

"Is that so?" she heard herself say. She thought of all the times the dowager had looked at her. All the regret Theresa had felt. The shame. The feeling that she was tiny, a mere speck on the horizon in comparison.

She had felt unlovable, and it had made her feel all the more wild.

"You've not been incorrect," she continued slowly. "There is something wrong with me."

The dowager took her hand and squeezed it. “*Wrong* is what you do with what you have. Wrong is hurting other people. Wrong is not who you are.”

Theresa swallowed. She didn’t want to hope if the dowager didn’t understand.

“*You* are who you are. And if we are to work together, you can’t feel afraid to tell me who you are. Ruined gowns and all.”

The dowager couldn’t mean it. Nobody ever really meant it.

Theresa fixed the dowager with a calm stare. “No. Something is really wrong with me. I am the general of the Worth Army,” she said, “and my brother is a sergeant. It’s a small force.”

The dowager absorbed this with a mere widening of her eyes. “I see.”

“I said earlier today that I wanted to besmirch reputations and ruin men. I was lying; I don’t really care about anyone’s reputation but mine.” She didn’t say anything about the men.

The dowager only winced a little. “I...see.”

“When I was three, I invented an extra sister. Her name was Pri. I think. I still know precisely what she looked like. She was two years older than I was, and she had dark hair and lovely eyes and brown skin.”

“Didn’t you travel to China with your father when you were three?” The dowager squeezed Theresa’s hand. “Likely you missed your own sisters, and invented a friend based on the people around you. You’ve just forgotten the details.”

“I make things up,” Theresa said. “Not little lies; I don’t see the point. I make up bank notes—big lies, and I want everyone to believe them.”

“I think,” the dowager said, “that you’ll not be easily satisfied with what you have. But... I don’t think you mean ill.

Tell me, Theresa. This last year...have any of my methods worked at all?"

Theresa looked at the woman. She wanted to say yes. She *wanted* to give the dowager some satisfaction.

Instead, she shook her head. "No." Her voice came out high and tinny. "They just make me feel...small. Small and wrong."

The dowager gave a nod. "Well, then. I'm doing it wrong. It's time to start making you feel larger and right."

Theresa felt a wave of emotion, impossible to dissect, come over her. Shame, and love, and... And so many things, all mixed up in one. She sniffed, doing her best to stuff those complicated feelings back down to the abyss where they belonged. Her eyes stung.

"There, there," the dowager said. "That was good. One single tear—just like that. I think we'll be able to make this work, after all."

