

Joun, Mount Lebanon, 1838

The sun swirls the crystalline decanter dreamily on the table by the window. A kaleidoscopic black concoction, so sharply presented and darkly coated. My eyes swim and perouse, fiddling with the handle restlessly.

Ah yes, this will do well with the visitors.

It's always the same, nowadays. Locals and tourists hear of me somewhere and want to meet in person. Hester Stanhope, Queen of the Desert. Renowned adventurer and archaeologist, turned mad woman with a sharp tongue. Of course there is a story to be told.

And so I pour two glasses from the decanter. One for me, of course- I adore the concoction- and one for my visitor.

I understand, however, that some visitors will be from England. I despise England, or at least despise the fact that from my aristocratic connections gossip can be noted and spread like a plague through the stately homes of London and Devonshire alike. I have not spoken to any family since I left for Malta all those decades ago.

It's a tradition of mine to stay wholly mysterious and androgenous with these visits. I am not a woman, nor am I a man. I manage to maintain a neutrality in my day-to-day clothing, wearing a turban or a veil, accompanied by velvet robes that obscure my body shape. I light a pipe, and am fascinated by the excess smoke curling around the room. I feel prepared for a visitor.

One of my servants, Lena, makes sure the room is ready. Something I enjoy about my servants is that they will allow me to do as I please. Lena is used to the strong scent of tobacco, therefore doesn't protest nor let out the slightest cough.

I order to have the lanterns leading up to the mountains lit, and the fireplace in the fortress hall too. The guest will be here soon.

Half an hour later

With a warmed lounge and decanted drink, I welcome my guest. The room, at this point, is covered in cloudy smoke. A tobacco curtain borders my green leather sofa in which I lounge with my bare feet to the fireplace.

Familiar blue eyes welcome me. He coughs violently, presumably from the smoke, and produces a handkerchief from his tweed trousers.

"Hello Lady Hester." A deep, familiar voice too. Although he did call me "Lady", anyone who is a friend will be well aware of how I despise references to my aristocracy.

"Sit, sir. Are we acquainted?"

"I don't believe we are. Or at least not in your memory." He laughs smugly.

"Can I have a name?"

"It's Charles," Rings a bell, "I have travelled far to hear your story. So many villagers below the mountain have recommended meeting you, I am fascinated by bohemians like yourself you see."

Bohemians. I laugh.

"I see." I pass the sharp concoction slowly over the smooth table towards his recliner, "I will begin, and I will tell all you need to hear, so long as you drink this."

Like a child, he gags at the smell. He's taking too long, and I will soon become impatient.

But he drinks it all in one large gulp, surprising me.

I suppose Charles really does want to hear about my life.

"Let's begin."

"My life started when I moved at the age of twenty eight to the home of my Uncle, the former Prime Minister, William Pitt. From 1803 to 1809 I spent my days in Walmer Castle in Kent. We would entertain guests and argue politics and host lavish parties. Our lives had become somewhat the same, and I was never seen anywhere else. I, to this day, still fit in more with men than women.

But then the war struck. England and France. Not only my uncle, but my brother, and my then lover General Sir John Moore, went to fight for their country. None came back alive. All I had left was the glove of Sir John that I have kept for my whole life." My eyes gazed down towards the white leather glove on the low table to my side. My guest looked too.

"Yes. I then would spend a year in my London Townhouse, alone and miserable. I had attempted suicide. I would quite often be sent to a doctor, Dr. Meryon. He understood me and we became quite well acquainted. He was then sent to me at home daily. But slowly, I felt healed. He too hated England, and we agreed to escape the country for a month or so. It was impulsive and improved our moods vastly. We ventured out to Malta, where we met another Englishman, Michael Bruce."

The fire interrupts my soliloquy with an attention-seeking hiss.

"The three of us then travelled to Greece, and were involved in a shipwreck off the coast of Rhodes. I lost all my expensive English dresses, but had never felt so free. I dressed in fluidity, and often smoked pipes. From Rhodes we went to Constantinople, and from Constantinople we rode in Damascus. I, being a defier of stereotypical traditions, became the first 'woman' to ride into Damascus unveiled. For the next half of a decade we stayed in Palestine. After hearing from locals about treasure hidden under a mosque I underwent an archaeology course. I found the treasure." My eyes locked on the decanter. Not the decanter itself, but the rich dark elixir of life that swirled away inside.

"I know it's the drink, Hester. It's me- Doctor Charles Meryon. I have been sent letters from your estate. You can't keep avoiding paying for the castle. You are becoming more forgetful by the day. You drink the 'elixir' because you think it will help. It is poison, Hester. You are slowly poisoning yourself because it promises immortality. You need to come home to England."

"I am not an Englishwoman- I will not knit or sew. I am Hester Stanhope, Queen of the Desert. Now get out of my fortress. Now!"