

Bonus scene, *Like Chaff in the Wind*, where Margaret and Luke have words, following on the events in chapter 45

Margaret didn't say a word to Luke for the first few miles. After ensuring her son was safely astride a horse and her belongings neatly packed away in the saddle bags, she concentrated her efforts on reacquainting herself with her mount, a light bay mare by the name of Desdemona that Luke had bought her some years ago.

Now and then she slid a look in Luke's direction; he could have been dead! Or he could have killed Matthew, skewering his elder brother on his sword while all Matthew had at hand was that pitchfork. Her mind was still reeling with the graphic images of the recent fight between the brothers, and it seemed to her that her ribcage must have shrunk, how else to explain the constricted sensation in her chest? Had she – and Alex – not interceded, the Lord knows how things would have ended.

Her continued silence was making Luke restless. Her husband fidgeted in his saddle and kept on throwing her looks, riding his horse close enough that his leg should brush against her skirts. Margaret studied him from under her lashes. The velvet coat was torn in a couple of places, the cuffs were dirty and he had stuffed the ripped collar into his pocket. His dark red hair lifted in the wind, there was a shallow scrape on his cheek and at some point his lower lip had burst, leaving it rimmed with dried blood.

"How could you?" she finally said.

"How could I what?"

"You provoked him! Why, Luke?"

"Provoke him? I was but stating facts. Am I to blame for his violent attack on my person? Was it me who struck the first blow? No, it was him, God curse him." Luke held in his horse and scowled at Margaret. "It's not my fault he's still alive, is it?"

"Your fault?" Margaret near on spluttered. "It was through your machinations that he almost died and ..."

"He's alive because of your meddling!" Eyes as cold as marbles met hers. Green and bright, they dug into her, making her quail. Would he ever forgive her?

"I couldn't do otherwise," she said. All her jewels she had given Alex, a contribution in kind to Alex' quest to find Matthew and buy him free.

"Why not? I wanted him dead – why did you interfere, woman?"

Because what you did was wrong, because Matthew didn't deserve it, because your immortal soul is grey enough as it is and you can't afford to blacken it any further, because... Margaret chose not to say anything out loud. No matter what she said, this argument would quickly turn into a rampant wildfire, and last time the discussion had gotten so out of hand she had ended up with a black eye and a broken mouth. Luke had been devastated by what he had done, and she wasn't sure what had been worse; the blows as such or his obsequious, apologetic presence the following days.

"Mam?" Ian called from further down the line. He was riding pillion behind one of Luke's grooms, and when she turned she saw him leaning to the side, dark brows pulled together in a concerned frown.

"Aye?" She forced herself to sound calm and unruffled.

"Nothing," Ian said, "I just..."

Margaret sighed. The lad was protective of her, and any sign of discord between her and Luke had him gravitating toward her.

“Your mam and I were but discussing your uncle’s appalling behaviour,” Luke said. “Uncle or father, one wonders,” he added in a vicious undertone.

“Uncle,” Margaret said. “How many times must I tell you? Ian is your son, not his.” She thought she succeeded in sounding quite convincing, and by now she’d repeated this statement so often she mostly believed it was Luke that had fathered Ian, not Matthew.

“I can count, you know,” Luke said.

“He was born early,” Margaret said. “I told you; nigh on three weeks too early.” She dropped her eyes to her gloved hands. Not true, not true at all, but at the time the lie regarding who was Ian’s father had slipped so easily from between her lips, and now there was no taking it back. I did it for my son, she thought, I did it to keep Ian with me. Had she not lied, Ian would have remained with Matthew when he divorced her because of her adultery – a most unbearable outcome.

“Strange that he looks so much like Matthew and so little like me,” Luke muttered, eyeing Ian.

“Strange? Why so? You don’t look much like your father, do you?”

“Thank the Lord for that!” Luke spat to the side.

The only thing Luke had in common with his dead father was his height. And apart from his vivid colouring, Luke bore more than a passing resemblance to Matthew, but to say so was to ignite yet another burst of anger. The Graham brothers were tall, well-built men, with similar facial features – well, not anymore, not since Matthew had sliced off Luke’s nose.

“Old Malcolm wasn’t all bad,” Margaret said, smiling slightly at the memory of Luke’s da. The man had saved her from the poor house and given her a home, raising her as his own.

“No? Have you forgotten, then? He threw me out of my home, and me only fifteen! He...” Luke closed his eyes for an instant, and when he opened them they were greener than usual. “It was always Matthew with Da, never me. His beloved heir could do no wrong, and when Matthew joined the Commonwealth armies Da near on burst with pride. But it was me who stayed at home, it was me that toiled with Da, who worked at his side all those years when Matthew was gone. It was me, not Matthew, and yet the moment Matthew came home I ceased to exist in Da’s eyes, discarded as the spare he no longer needed now that his precious heir was back.”

“It wasn’t quite like that,” Margaret said.

“Yes it was! It was exactly like that!”

“But it wasn’t Matthew’s fault,” Margaret said, “nor was it his fault that your da threw you out.” She just had to touch him upon saying that, reliving the utter desolation that had gripped her when she watched Luke riding away from Hillview. Luke’s fingers closed round hers, his eyes sought hers, and she knew, as she always did, that this was her man, her one and only love. Luke’s eyes heated, his fingers slid up to caress her inner wrist. The caress became a fetter, his fingers tightening to the point that she gasped. But she didn’t protest or try to pull away, because this was the way it was with her and Luke, that he took as he pleased and she gave to please him – and herself. It had been that way since the first time they bedded with each other, it had been that way that afternoon when old Malcolm came upon them in the hayloft. She suppressed a giggle; Malcolm had near on had an apoplectic fit, his lower jaw hanging wide open as he regarded Luke and her, stark naked in the hay.

A pheasant rose from a stand of gorse just yards in front of them. Luke’s stallion shied and their tender moment was interrupted as Luke focused on bringing his mount under control.

“You’re right; none of that was Matthew’s fault,” Luke said once they were back to riding side by side through the moor. The heather gleamed pink in patches, but mostly it was all a dull green and

a faded brown. Despite the brightness of the day there was a tinge of autumn in the air, a promise of frosts to come.

“But what he did to you...” Luke’s jaw clicked shut. Margaret looked away

“He knew you loved me,” Luke continued, “he knew how much I loved you, and yet...” He cleared his throat. “Do you think I can ever forgive him for what he did to you? For forcing you as he did?”

Dearest Lord forgive me, she thought; another lie, a long embroidered story that she could never take back, not now, ten years and more after the fact. Back then she had never stopped to consider the potential consequences of painting Matthew as cruel and abusive, of insinuating she’d had no choice but to wed him, fearful as she was of being with child. Since then she’d had cause to regret her lies, but at the time it had all been about telling Luke whatever he needed to hear, because she couldn’t bear the wild look in his eyes, how he cursed her for being false, how his hands had dug into the tender flesh of her upper arms, punishing her for not staying true. So she had held him and comforted him, she had kissed him and whispered just how much she loved him – only him – swearing over and over again that had been up to her she would have waited for him for ever.

“It’s all in the past,” she said, giving her husband a little smile. “I would have you forget and move on.” She rode close enough to brush at his soiled coat. “You’re the king’s man now. A bright future beckons, does it not? Leave Matthew to lead his life in peace – concentrate on living yours.”

“I can’t” Luke said. “I want him to pay – for you and for this.” He placed a finger on his silver nose.

“He has paid,” Margaret tried. “You’ve made him pay – you’ve even made his wife pay.” It sickened her to think of how her Luke had pummelled poor Alex. And Matthew... accused of treason he had never committed, abducted and sold as a slave. She closed her eyes and prayed, begging the Lord to find it in him to forgive her man, because he couldn’t help it, he had no control over the black ire that at times bubbled through his blood, causing him to lash out and maim.

Luke flushed. “She brought it on herself. She hit me, and I...” He looked away and gnawed at his lip. “Mayhap I went too far,” he muttered.

“She lost a bairn,” Margaret whispered.

He cleared his throat and spat to the side. “She struck the first blow. And how was I to know she was breeding? Besides, I’ve paid for that, haven’t I? Marked as a common criminal for the rest of my life by my accursed brother!” His hand fluttered up to cover his metal nose.

“So has he, so many years lost to him.”

Luke’s eyes narrowed into slits. “It’s not enough,” he hissed.

Margaret set spurs to her mare and galloped straight out into the waterlogged moss. Behind her he called her name, but she didn’t stop, leaning forward as she urged Desdemona to go even faster. It will never end, she thought, and God help me but it’s my fault!