

Figure Drawing

Note: To Love and to Loathe takes place from July to September 1817; this bonus scene is set two months later, in November 1817 (soon after the events of To Marry and to Meddle, for those who like to keep track of timelines). Happy reading!

“I’ve been thinking I should paint you naked.”

Jeremy choked on his port. Diana, who had uttered this with no forewarning, without even looking up from her book, as nonchalantly as she might mention an intention to go on a walk, looked at him with mild concern as he coughed violently until his lungs were clear.

“Are you all right?” she inquired when his coughing at last subsided. She was still wearing the gown of crushed red velvet she’d worn to dine that evening; there had not been much in the way of entertainment of late, in the wake of the death of Princess Charlotte, and they’d been dining at home more often than not. Jeremy would not have admitted it, but he rather enjoyed the excuse to remain at home with Diana. That he, the infamous rake, should discover at the age of twenty-eight that he really required no one’s company other than the honey-haired minx blinking innocently from an armchair, should be astonishing to anyone who knew him—and yet to him, it merely felt . . .

Right.

“Am I having some sort of stroke?” he at last managed to ask.

“I’m sure I couldn’t say. Shall we ask Belfry to don his false whiskers again and come conduct an examination?”

“I do not think we’ll have much luck prying him away from his bride.” Emily and Belfry had been a bit scarce of late, and Emily was prone to blushing furiously whenever Diana remarked upon this fact. “Regardless, I do not think I am in need of medical assistance—merely wondering if my ears were functioning properly.” He paused, and when no elaboration was forthcoming from his wife, he added, “You want to paint me—er—”

“Don’t tell me you’ve decided *now* to become missish at last,” Diana said with an eye roll, setting down her book, as if belatedly realizing that this conversation might be one that merited her full attention.

“Not missish, merely conscious of the scandal that will erupt if visitors walk into our drawing room to find a portrait of me in all my glory,” Jeremy said. He dropped his voice conspiratorially. “It would cause mass hysteria, Diana. I wouldn’t be safe from the prying hands of any woman who walked through our doors—nor from a fair portion of the men, either,” he added thoughtfully.

Diana arched a skeptical brow. “I believe you are overestimating your physical merits.”

“Do you? I do not recall you expressing that opinion this morning before breakfast—nor last night—nor yesterday afternoon—”

He broke off at this point because Diana employed the expedient technique of shrugging her shoulders in such a way that ensured that her breasts did extremely distracting things. She had used this method of silencing him in the past, and he was furious (in an appreciative sort of way) to discover that it had not lost any of its effectiveness along with its novelty.

“If you’ll let me explain,” she said pleasantly, “I can tell you that I’ve not recently sustained a head injury, and therefore have no intention of hanging a nude portrait anywhere that anyone can see it.” She leered a bit. “Except for me, of course. I was thinking in the bedroom—behind a curtain, perhaps, so we don’t shock the maids.”

“It would put them off their work, poor things,” he said gravely. Diana rolled her eyes heavenward.

“Is that a yes, then?” she asked.

He paused to consider. Modesty had never been a particular virtue of his, and it wasn’t as though he minded the idea of Diana having a private painting of him to sigh over on the rare evening that they might be apart. He could just imagine her, clad in a thin chemise, lying on her bed, gazing at his unclad form, her breaths growing increasingly rapid as her hand slid—

“It’s a yes,” he confirmed, even as he rose from his seat, crossing towards her with quick steps and lowering his mouth to hers.

They didn’t discuss it further for the time being.

“Are you certain you can’t make that fire warmer?” Jeremy asked for at least the third time.

Diana sighed, and leaned round her easel to fix him with a stern look. “You’re being hysterical—it’s perfectly warm in here.”

“For *you*,” Jeremy said, a martyred expression upon his face. “You’re wearing *clothing*. I’m certain *you’re* as cozy as a . . .” He floundered momentarily, clearly casting around for something suitably warm, before concluding, somewhat inexplicably, with, “. . . piece of toast.”

“I’m beginning to feel as tortured as if I were stuck on a toasting fork,” she shot back. “If I’d known you were going to complain this much, I wouldn’t have suggested this in the first place.”

“If I’d known there was going to be such a draft, I wouldn’t have agreed!”

“If you would *be still*, this would go more quickly,” Diana said peevishly, and he subsided with ill grace, muttering darkly about the sort of nursing he expected when he inevitably took to his bed with a chill.

Diana spared a moment to take an appreciative look at her husband, currently reclining on a settee in the sitting room attached to her bedchamber; she had repurposed a room on the third floor for a studio, and never painted in here, but for obvious reasons this particular undertaking required more privacy than her other work, and so they’d agreed to have him model for her at night, after the servants had retired for the evening. Despite Jeremy’s complaints, the room was indeed quite warm, Diana having instructed the maids to build a larger fire than usual; she was actually growing a bit overwarm, as the luxurious dressing gown she’d tossed on over her nightgown was rather heavy, and was contemplating discarding it. At the very least, any sign of disrobing on her part would likely distract Jeremy to the point of stopping his whinging for a few minutes, which could only be a positive development.

She cast an appreciative eye over him; she'd had him stretch out in a lazy, casual sort of way—one leg dangling over the arm of the settee, one arm crossed behind his head, his face turned towards her. The angle at which he lay offered an extremely nice glimpse of his abdominal muscles.

Along with . . . other attributes.

“You look positively lecherous.”

Diana blinked, wrenching her eyes back to Jeremy's face; he was regarding her with an expression of tolerant amusement. “Pot, kettle.”

“It wasn't a complaint.” He paused, looking thoughtful; Diana's pencil had slowed and she lowered it, abandoning any pretense of sketching him. “You can leer all you like. I like when you look at me like that.”

This was uncommonly sincere for him; for all that they often teased each other, whenever they caught the other gawking, these moments often quickly devolved into situations in which very little speaking was done at all.

“It's rather difficult to resist the impulse, when you're stretched out before me on display like that,” she said, quite honestly, casting him another appreciative glance. “And—” Here she hesitated, the old impulse to guard her feelings rising to the surface; she was learning to push it down, however—learning that Jeremy was a safe shoulder to turn to with whatever emotion coursed through her.

“And . . . ?” he prompted.

“And,” she said, knowing perfectly well that he was going to be insufferable about this, but deciding she didn't care, “I like the chance to . . . ogle you, a bit. When we're alone.”

A smile, wide and satisfied, began to stretch across his face. “*Do you?*”

Diana, deciding that she may as well finish what she'd started, despite how irritating he was going to be for at least the next week, continued, “When we're in public, there are always other ladies staring at you—they try to be discreet, of course, but I'm not an idiot. I notice. And who can blame them?” she added huffily. “It's not as though I would have agreed to marry you if you didn't look . . . like that.” She gestured with her pencil at his unclad form.

“Liar,” he said softly. “I’m beginning to think you’d have agreed to marry me even if I were a hideous troll.”

Diana very much feared that he was correct, but naturally had no intention of agreeing with him.

“But it’s nice, to be able to look my fill,” she finished in a rush. “When I don’t have to compete with anyone else.”

A brief silence fell; Jeremy was gazing steadily at her from his spot on the settee, his blue eyes burning in that perfect face, and slowly, he sat up, then rose to his feet.

“You never have to compete with anyone else,” he said as he walked slowly towards her; Diana flung down her pencil and rose to her feet before he could catch a glimpse of her aborted sketches. “Because I don’t see anyone other than you.”

Diana swallowed around a sudden lump in her throat. She was not unaccustomed to compliments from men—she’d been the recipient of them for the entirety of her adult life. Why, then, was it that a few simple words from Jeremy could threaten to turn her into a watering pot?

“If you’re trying to flatter me into abandoning your portrait, I should warn you it won’t work,” she said a bit breathlessly as she slid her arms around his neck, very conscious of all of his warm, bare skin as she pressed herself against him.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he said innocently, one of his hands already busy at the knot on her dressing gown. “But I thought we might, perhaps, call for a bit of an . . . intermission?”

To this proposal, Diana had no objections.

“A little to the left.”

Jeremy shifted.

“Not that far—back to your right, perhaps a half-inch.”

He shifted again.

“Not *that* far—do you not understand measurements?”

He huffed out an exasperated breath. “When was the last time someone asked *you* to shift your bare arse half an inch on a scratchy bit of fabric? I’m risking *chafing*.” He stared mournfully at her. “I won’t be able to sit properly in a chair for a week.”

His wife stared back at him, unmoved. “That settee is covered in silk. Your delicate nethers are being lovingly embraced.”

“I’d rather *you* lovingly embrace them,” he muttered, but shifted in the direction she indicated until she was at last satisfied; another week had passed, and they had moved to the painting portion of the agenda. He’d absolutely no idea how the portrait was progressing—she resolutely refused to allow him so much as a glimpse at it—but she seemed pleased enough, even occasionally breaking into a smug, satisfied smile that made him immediately want to press her against the nearest flat surface. (To be fair, he nearly always wished to do this when he was in her presence.)

Violet and James were due to dine with them this evening, and Diana had suggested an afternoon painting session to while away the hours before they needed to dress for dinner. It was a dreary, grey afternoon; rain tapped against the windows, and it would soon be dark, despite the fact that Jeremy felt as though he’d just awoken. England in November was *grim*, he thought darkly—and yet, tucked away in Diana’s warm sitting room, a tea tray steaming invitingly on a table, the lamps engulfing them in their cozy glow, he couldn’t bring himself to feel terribly grim at all.

Until Diana started bossing him about, that is.

“Now lift your arm,” she instructed.

He obeyed.

“Lower. Now higher. A bit higher. A *bit*—what is wrong with you? Are you listening?”

“I didn’t join the military for a reason, you know—I’m delicate. I’m not constitutionally suited to terrifying people barking orders at me. I’m at risk of cracking like an egg.”

“Do not tempt me with such an appealing prospect, and *lift your arm*.” A terrifying gleam came into her eye as she spoke, and Jeremy thought it best not to antagonize her further.

Ten minutes later, however, he felt compelled to note, “My arm is sore.”

“You’ll live.”

“*Will* I, though? Did you miss the bit where I’m delicate?”

“Jeremy.” Diana set down her paintbrush very deliberately, a menacing expression crossing her lovely face. “Just last night, you achieved an acrobatic contortion that I frankly thought would result in some sort of lasting injury, and you appeared none the worse for it, so forgive me if I am unmoved by the condition of your arm at the moment.”

Jeremy smiled fondly at the memory. “That was nice.”

Diana smiled back at him. “Rather.” They locked eyes for a moment, engaging in a shared, slightly lewd reminiscence, but before Jeremy could begin to hope that he might once again take their portrait session in a more recreational direction, the steely glint in her eyes reappeared.

“Now, for the last time, *raise your arm.*”

He thought it was probably a sign of some sort of fatal brain malady that, not only did he cheerfully oblige, but he felt his cock stir a bit at the commanding note in her voice.

Marriage, he thought happily. It was rather grand.

Diana liked to think that she was not terribly excitable—excitability was a trait she occasionally scolded Violet for, in fact—but she found herself, at the moment, perilously close to cackling. It was, truthfully, a bit alarming.

“Why do you look like that?” Jeremy asked warily, walking into his bedroom, where Diana had innocently suggested they meet. They generally slept in the marchioness’s suite of rooms—Diana had wasted no time in redecorating them, so they were elegant and rather cozy, while the marquess’s room was still a bit formal and imposing—with Jeremy usually retreating to his rooms only to bathe or change clothes. Occasionally, Jeremy would sleep here if he was out late at his club and didn’t wish to wake Diana upon his return—but those occasions were rare. She could not help noticing that he spent considerably fewer evenings at the bottom of a bottle of brandy

with his friends these days, and that he and said friends were more likely to gather here, or at Audley's house, rather than haunt whatever seedy venues had been Jeremy's stomping grounds during his unmarried days.

She would not admit to being pleased about this—he could do whatever he wished, she had informed him more than once, so long as it didn't involve another woman sitting on his lap—but . . . she was.

She liked when he was home—even if she was tucked away painting while he and Audley and her brother had deep discussions about whatever men discussed when women weren't present (she could not imagine such discussions were terribly stimulating, given her knowledge of the woolly-brained men in question), she liked knowing that he was in the house, that at the end of the night he'd crawl into bed with her and tuck her against his side and press a kiss to every single one of the freckles on her nose. (He was perverse about her freckles, as she often liked to tell him. But she liked it—so she supposed she was a bit perverse, too.)

"I don't know what you mean," she said now, turning to him, her hand tight on the knot of her dressing gown. It was wrapped more tightly around her than usual, but he didn't seem to notice. His gaze immediately caught on the spot above the mantle opposite the bed, where there had previously hung a beautiful but not terribly lively painting depicting Elderwild, but which now was obscured from view by a thick velvet curtain.

"What's this?" he asked slowly, lifting a brow. He was dressed for bed—she'd deliberately decided to save this surprise for the evening, after they'd dismissed the servants, when she knew there was no chance of them being interrupted. She'd had to enlist Jeremy's valet, Snuffgrove, for assistance in getting the portrait and curtain hung, but had carefully kept the portrait wrapped in cloth until after it was mounted on the wall, to ensure that no eyes other than hers would see it.

Hers, and now Jeremy's.

"I wanted to unveil your portrait," she said, walking towards the mantle, allowing her hips to sway a bit; a quick glance over her shoulder confirmed that Jeremy's eyes were glued to this movement, her words evidently taking a moment to register.

“The—wait. Diana. Have you lost your mind? I don’t want to stare at *myself* when I’m sleeping.” He paused to consider. “I mean, it doubtless *is* an appealing sight, and anyone should count themselves lucky to bear witness to me in all of my glory, but—”

Diana cut off what would have undoubtedly been a lengthy monologue along these lines with the expedient measure of tugging the cord on the curtain, and unveiling the portrait.

Jeremy, satisfyingly, went silent, his jaw slack. He looked like an extremely handsome fish, she thought cheerfully.

“I—but—that—you—”

“Indeed,” she said, stepping back so that she might survey the portrait in question from his vantage point. “Me.”

And it was: Diana, in all her naked glory (if she did say so herself). She’d posed herself before a mirror in her bedroom to make the preliminary sketches—standing upright rather than reclining, her hair pulled all over one shoulder, obscuring the view of one breast but leaving the other gloriously visible to the viewer’s eye. Her legs were crossed coyly, but not enough to obscure a glimpse of what lay between them, and she had turned just slightly, enough to offer a hint of the curve of her bottom. She stared directly at the viewer, unabashed and inviting.

Next to her, Jeremy seemed to be trying to work out how to breathe.

This was all entirely satisfying, she thought, pleased.

“I wanted to surprise you,” she said. “I take it it worked?”

“But,” he said, then gaped at the portrait for a moment longer. He finally wrenched his gaze away from her paint-and-canvas depiction to stare at her. “But *why* did you have me pose for you, if you were painting yourself all along?”

“Because I thought it would be entertaining,” she said cheerfully. “And I assure you, it was. To see you stretched out there like a juicy pig, ready for the roasting . . .” She trailed off, her eyes misting nostalgically at the memory. “It was *thoroughly* enjoyable.”

“Diana.” He seemed to be attempting sternness, but couldn’t quite manage it, considering his gaze kept flicking to the portrait, seemingly against his will. “This is—”

“A wedding present,” she said. “So that on the rare night we sleep apart, you won’t forget what you’re missing.” She paused, then added, “I think it goes without saying that the curtain is to remain in place during the day.”

“I should bloody well hope so,” he said fervently. “I don’t want anyone else catching a glimpse of this.” He turned to face her fully, a warm gleam in his eye. “It does give a man ideas, though—of how he might thank you properly.” He dropped to his knees before her. “I think I’ll start from this position, if you’ve no objections?”

Diana’s hand went to the knot on her dressing gown, loosening it enough that the garment might drop from her shoulders, revealing that she wore nothing underneath.

“I was hoping you might suggest that,” she said, her breath already beginning to quicken as he reached out to grasp her bare hips in his hand.

And then, some time later—by which point she was on her back on the rug, and his mouth was very much occupied—she asked breathlessly, “Does that mean you like it, then?”

His reply, as all the best replies to such queries are, was entirely nonverbal.